‘May You Live Normally Ever After!’¹ —

Popular Film as Pedagogy: Youth, Subjectivity & Australian Cinema

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at

Charles Sturt University

by

Kristina Gottschall
BA (Hons) USyd.

Faculty of Education
March 2011

¹ A quote from the Australian ‘coming-of-age’ film Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger, an analysis of which appears in Chapter Eight.
# Table of Contents

**Certificate of authorship**

v

Acknowledgements

ix

Abstract

viii

‘May you live normally ever after!’ – Popular Film as Pedagogy: Youth, Subjectivity and Australian Cinema

## Chapter One

Introduction

2

(i) The Theoretical Frame/s

7

(ii) A Question of ‘Youth’

8

(iii) What this Study Does – An Overview

10

(iv) Composition of the Study

11

(v) What This Study Does – Significance

16

## Chapter Two

Film as Teaching Machine?: Pedagogy, Popular Film & Subjectivity

19

(i) Popular Culture and Education: An Introduction

20

(ii) Education Meets Cultural Studies

23

(iii) Giroux, Public Pedagogy and Popular Culture

28

(iv) Giroux’s Film as Teaching Machine

35

(v) ‘It’s been hard to turn off this way of seeing’: Ellsworth on film and pedagogy

40

(vi) Film as a technology/pedagogy of the self?

42

## Chapter Three

Questions of Method or Confessions of a Cultural Studies Junkie

47

Introduction

48

Part I Confusion Over Method?

49

(i) Post-Structuralism and Method

53

(ii) Cultural Studies and Method

51

Part II Why Method?

53

(i) The Text

53

(ii) Discourse Analysis

54

(iii) Film as Discourse?

56

(iv) Social Semiotic Analysis

58

(v) The ‘How To’?

59

Part III Constructing the Data

64

(i) How These Films Became Data

66

(ii) Methods in Coming to Choose my Data

70

(iii) The Films or Creata Selected

74

Part IV Reflecting on the Research(er)

75

(i) Writing as Method

77

(ii) Writing About Film?

78

(iii) Reflexivity?

81

(iv) The Research(er) as Performative?

82
### Chapter Four
Larrikin Pedagogue: Ben Mendelsohn and Young Aussie Manhood  
| Part I | ‘I’m an Aussie, and I’m a Bloke!’: The Cinematic Larrikin | 87 |
| Part II | ‘Mate, I Don’t Really Think About That Kind of Stuff’: Ben Mendelsohn in the Extra-Cinematic Material | 90 |
| Part III | ‘For Fuck’s Sake, I Thought We Got Rid of Him for Good!’: How the Cinematic ‘Pedagogue’ Works? | 104 |
| (i) | ‘Hello, here’s trouble!’: Visualising Mendelsohn | 109 |
| (ii) | ‘Who’s that bloke!?’: talking about Mendelsohn | 118 |

### Chapter Five
‘Old Enough to Know Better’: Learning to Become Men in *Idiot Box*  
| Part I | ‘It’s Piss Easy!’: Becoming Men in the Australian Suburbs Circa 1996 | 129 |
| (i) | ‘Blue Denim in His Veins’: The Place of Work for the Working-Class Man | 134 |
| (ii) | ‘Oh I’m Gonna Vomit!’: Girlfriends, Mothers and Violence | 140 |
| (iii) | ‘Let Me Show You a Trick!’: Mateship, Larrikinism and Youthfulness | 147 |
| Part II | ‘Beetroot’s Crook’: Mode of Address in the Pedagogies of Young Manhood | 154 |
| (i) | Calling All Idiots: Generation X as the Ideal Audience | 154 |

Coda – The End of the Larrikin?

### Chapter Six
‘On the Brink’: Learning Lessons about Becoming a Woman in *Caterpillar Wish, Peaches & Somersault*  
| Introduction | 171 |
| Part I | 172 |
| (i) | Troubled & Troubling Subjects: The Young Female Subject | 173 |
| Part II | 177 |
| (i) | Storm and Stress: Technologies of Place, the Weather & Soundscape | 183 |
| (ii) | Emily, Heidi and Steph Do Girlhood ‘On the Brink’ | 191 |
| (iii) | On the Brink of Womanhood/On the Brink of Madness | 196 |
| Part III | Care for the Self/Care for Others | 205 |

Conclusion

### Chapter Seven
‘You Just Can’t Get Clean Water from a Dirty Tank’: The ‘Bad Girl’ of *Suburban Mayhem*  
| Introduction | 211 |

| Introduction | 212 |
Certificate of authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgment is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with the normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services or nominee, for the care, loan and reproduction of theses.

Signature: _______________________________ Date: ___________________________
Acknowledgements

It seems, over the last few/long years, that there was not one night’s sleep,
not one shower, not one weekend that went by without the thought of The
Thesis. Be it creativity, anxiety, guilt or angst, a lot of intellectual and
emotional energies were fired up in the act of trying to make this thing. It
was tough, monotonous, lonely, exhilarating, disheartening and rewarding.
I’ve learnt a lot about myself in this process.

My heartfelt thanks must go to:

Professor Bill Green, who convinced me that this project had to happen in
Education. For your bibliographic brain, your flair with the semi-
colon, your unrelenting knack for always asking the difficult
questions and for not making this easy for me;

Professor Jo-Anne Reid, for your close and incisive reading of my final draft
and for your consistent infectious positivity and dedication;

Associate Professor Sue Saltmarsh and Dr Rob Parkes, for your respective
seemingly inexhaustible energies, for reading the final draft of my
thesis and for always getting right to the heart of the matter;

Professor Jennifer Sumsion, for your invaluable guidance, care and
concern;

the SiTE group — Professor Bill Green, Professor Jo-Anne Reid, Dr Wendy
Hastings, Dr Rob Parkes, Dr Eva Bendix-Petersen and Dr Gabrielle
O’Flynn, for the influential debates and support;

my unofficial supervisor, Dr Gabrielle O’Flynn, for your provoking
conversations early on in my research, and for never doubting I
could do this thing;

the always friendly and always efficient CSU Library Bathurst staff;
especially Ms Kirrane Ianson who handled my bizarre, obscure and
sheer number of interlibrary loans with good humour and grace;
The Ophir Tones and The CSUkes — for the creative distractions;

Dr Bronwyn Ledgard, who knew more than most what I was going through;

my corridor crew — Dr Peter Wilson, Dr Julie Martello and Master Bob Hill — for asking me everyday how it was going and for actually caring what the answer was;

my Precious Postgrad Peeps — Stevie G, Kath, Clare, Tash, Rach, Bec, Chris G-F & C-Dog — for your comradeship, support, love, critical eyes and shoulders to whinge/cry on, through all the tears, tantrums and triumphs (ok so the first two were just from me) — you guys kept me (in)sane. I love yous! I’m already looking back and saying — this was a golden time.

Mizz Lisa McLean — fabulous creature and fabulous friend! Thank you for your fonts and keen design eye! Thank you for your support, love and much needed champagne uke nights. You won’t believe this but you are a gem!

My Mum, Dad, Nanna and Aunty Krisz who didn’t really understand but loved me anyway, and who’d give me the shirts off their back and practically did; Aunty Kati for our *Dallas* nights; Madame Haricat for the soft and calming cuddles. You Cadia Rd crew always kept me grounded;

Frankie and Mr Wilson, who, more than anyone else loved me wholeheartedly and unconditionally, made me laugh until I cried and literally sat by my side through it all;

And finally,

Swerenger, DCI Gene Hunt, Dr Sheldon Cooper, Jane Eyre, Don Draper & the rest of Madison Avenue, Bowie, Mumford & Sons, Leunig and the Piled Higher & Deeper crew — you didn’t know it but you were a major part of this project too.
Now off to kick my heels up and kiss complete strangers in the street, as if the war is over! ...

This research was supported by an Australian Postgraduate Award — for the most part. There were a few months where this project was supplemented by funding from my parents. My research was also enriched by a trip to the UK (in Europe, don’t you know!), Hong Kong and several national conferences. Funding for these came from the Mitchell Travel Scholarship, the Centre for Research & Graduate Training, and the Faculty of Education at Charles Sturt University respectively.

Kristina Gottschall

August 2011

Bathurst, New South Wales
Abstract

‘May you live normally ever after!’ — Popular Film as Pedagogy: Youth, Subjectivity and Australian Cinema

This thesis is part of a move to rethink the normalising subjectivating processes that constitute the ‘youth’ subject. Through a conceptualisation of popular film as pedagogy and feminist and post-structuralist theories on subjectivity, popular film culture is considered as being profoundly geared towards the practices of subject formation and (self-)governmentality. As a context where we learn about the self, our culture and our place within it, popular film is understood as a profoundly pedagogical space and complex set of relationships where subjectivities are made and remade. Far from a simple act of transmission, film’s knowledges and forms of address meet its audience but ‘misfire’ due to the indeterminate and unpredictable encounters between film/makers, audiences and cultural politics.

The study begins by returning to key work on pedagogy and popular culture, by engaging in key debates between cultural studies and education. Drawing attention to pedagogy as modes of production and conditions of learning, this thesis asks how film as pedagogy might work and how such learning might occur. Reconceptualising Henry Giroux’s notion of film as teaching machine through a ‘post-critical’ sense of pedagogy as relational, contextual and indeterminate (after Elizabeth Ellsworth and others), the dissertation mobilises a more nuanced pedagogy than is usually found in public pedagogies’ scholarship from a critical theory perspective. Further, the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler are drawn on to argue that popular film is a technology of the self, geared towards subjectification.

Progressing through questions of method, a confessional move occurs that accounts for the researcher’s shifting understanding of method(ology). Through an emergent methodology, methods including discourse analysis (broadly conceived), social semiotic analysis and writing are discussed.
Ideas about reflexivity, the nature of research and researcher performativity are considered.

Focusing on the youth subject of Australian film post-1980, a range of Australian films and film culture is analysed to think about the discursive and semiotic formations of age-based, gendered and sexed subjectivities. In a critical exploration of the ‘quintessential’ youth(ful) figure of Australian film, Ben Mendelsohn, a range of his films are considered along with a whole host of public data including interviews, reviews and promotional material. What is argued is that ‘Ben Mendelsohn’ is usefully conceived as a pedagogical text, a ‘spectacular pedagogue’, blurring worlds on and off the screen, inciting us to revisit a kind of young, masculine, roguish, destructive subject.

Next, a close reading of one of Mendelsohn’s films, *Idiot Box* (1996), is conducted to consider pedagogies of youthful masculinities, ‘Generation X’ and complex modes of address in a more focused way. Ideas relating to suburbia, work, girls, love and sexuality, motherhood and mateship are explored.


The study continues by focusing on how audiences might come to know the ‘bad girl’ in and through the film *Suburban Mayhem* (2006). How pedagogy might work through an ambiguous and demanding mode of address is examined through the film’s protagonist, Katrina, and the (non)didactic, ironic and outrageous (mock)documentary testimonials of the other characters. A range of filmic designs and practices are analysed as they are linked to potential learning about the young female subject and the costs of forming the self in particular ways.
Lastly, questions of ‘generation’ and how it is constructed as a commonsense battle between ‘young’ and ‘old’ are explored through analyses of The Rage in Placid Lake (2003), Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger (2008), Crackers (1998), Spider & Rose (1994) and Blurred (2002). Various film designs and practices are considered that, as is argued, pedagogically invite spectators to play along with these particular age-based games of subjectification.

The study closes with a reflection on the filmic readings offered here and on the central thesis of film as pedagogy. Conclusions are drawn on the significance of film as a form of pedagogy and the implications of film in the processes of knowledge production and subject formation. It is argued that the post-critical concept of pedagogy that is mobilised here is generative in terms of rethinking the normalising subjectivating regimes located within and through engagements with popular film and beyond. This is done so with the view of opening up different and diverse ways of thinking, learning and being.
Chapter One
Just how is it possible to know that, to think that, to say that — these are the questions that we should be asking.
(Threadgold, 2000, p. 49)

Introduction

On the 12th November 2008, Margaret Pomeranz, long-time and well-respected film critic on ABC-TV’s At the Movies, reviewed an Australian film called Newcastle (2008) about a bunch of young mates going on a surfing weekend up the coast. She remarked:

What I think this film does well is accurately create the world of young men: the wildness, the aggro, the stupidity, the lust and the frustrations ... They’re all extremely beautiful and the camera lingers over their lithe, tanned, minimally-clad bodies.

It was one of those comments that make you sit bolt upright on the couch. The passing comment seemed to capture why I felt compelled to do this research. I was convinced I had to rethink these ‘commonsense’ ways of thinking about young people, and to account for young people’s identities and cultures beyond the stereotypes. Incensed, the first thing I did in the morning was access the full transcript of Pomeranz’s review online and examine the way she positioned these young screen men: unquestionably ‘masculine’ (the ‘wildness’, ‘aggro’, ‘lustful’), problematic (‘aggro’, ‘stupidity’) and ‘sexy’, sexualised objects (her eyes, as well as the camera’s, lingering over their ‘lithe, tanned, minimally-clad bodies’). I felt as if I needed to defend ‘young men everywhere’ from this representation, as if it were accurate, when it was clear to me that this was about ugly stereotypes that keep on being recycled, with detrimental effects on real young men in the real world. But then the more I reread Pomeranz’s review and thought more deeply about it, the more I became convinced not that Pomeranz (or the filmmakers) got it wrong, or even that it was a matter of right or wrong, or of ‘accuracy’ per se. What this film review

1 And formerly of SBS-TV’s The Movie Show.
began to suggest to me was the ambiguity within which we interact and understand popular film and the ways we come to recognise ourselves and others through it. Far from being clear about when something in the film is ‘real’ and when something is ‘fiction’, Pomeranz highlighted the blurring of on-screen and off-screen worlds and yet simultaneously reaffirmed the common sense notion that popular film is a fictionalised account different from the ‘real’ world.

I might have disliked her interpretation of the film, and the way Pomeranz articulated young masculinity in her interaction with its signifiers, but this is not to say that her interpretation was false or that she had misunderstood what the film was attempting to communicate. Indeed, her comments were arguably a very familiar way of understanding young men — both on and off the cinematic screen — and she picked up on the ‘clues’ embedded within the film as ‘spectator’. Following this, a more intriguing question began to emerge for me, one that aspired to acknowledge and keep in play the complexity with which we make sense of cultural meaning and ‘identities’. To bend Threadgold’s (2000) prose here: how is it possible for Pomeranz to know that, to think that, to say that, and not only with a great sense of ‘legitimacy’ but with a deal of ‘truth’? How did the film work on this film viewer in the way that it did in order for her to come to make sense of the film, and then communicate this to her audience in ways that were understood?

These questions are about what knowledge is of most worth and how we come to learn such a thing. They are questions about how we engage with popular culture, how we (re)create knowledges and subject-positions and how we understand ourselves and our place in the world. Studies of popular film culture and ‘identities’, or subjectivities3, are not uncommon. With regard to studies on youth, scholars most commonly focus on a selection of films they identify as ‘teen’ or ‘youth’ films and, to varying

---

3 ‘Subjectivity’ is the term used in this thesis as distinct from psychological or socio-historical discourses of ‘identity’. ‘Subjectivity’ connects with key post-structuralist work and emphasises the processes of subjectification that are important to the work of this research. A further discussion of this appears later in this Introduction.
degrees, link these to youth (sub)cultures, youth markets and young people’s subjectivities (for instance see: Lee, 2010; Hanson, 2002; Shary, 2002; Bernstein, 1997; Lewis, 1992; Doherty, 1988; Considine, 1985). While Lee’s (2010) project stands out among those listed here due to the complexity with which she demonstrates key links between popular films and the popular memories of youth audiences, this thesis seeks to destabilise the approach where a selection of films, themes or generic narratives come to be identified with a youth audience as if this is a matter of commonsense. Lee (2005, p. 13) writes that ‘[y]outh cannot be demarcated from popular culture’, and she suggests that this is because young people come to find identification with filmic representations so that the fictionalised stories come to speak for them. However, I argue here that youth cannot be demarcated from popular (film) culture because popular culture speaks them as subjects into existence; their subjectivities are performative, conducted through these popular spaces. In this sense, the discursive practices at work around popular (film) culture, including realism, fantasy, fiction, regulation and persuasion, come to constitute what is possible and acceptable as ways of knowing and being in the world, predicated on markers such as ‘age’.

Following this, this thesis provides an alternative approach to these studies by looking at a selection of films that are about the subject that is arguably recognisable as youth, without necessarily binding them to a specific youth audience or their related cultures per se. While an argument could be had about a selection of films speaking for a specific audience (like Lee’s work on Generation X), particularly in the Australian cinema context, this was not the project envisaged here. Instead, the dissertation explores how contemporary Western societies (notably ‘Australia’) might come to know (Lusted, 1986, p. 3) the youth subject, looking at a selection of Australian films as if ‘evidence’ of this. While focused on the subjectivities that are on the cinematic screen, the analysis constantly refers to the possibilities of subjectivity off the screen to illustrate how these on-screen knowledges frame understandings of young people in society more broadly and vice
versa. Although primarily concerned with youth subjectivity, this dissertation is also, consequently, a study of subjectivity more generally, an inquiry focused on the production of knowledge in regard to the formation of subjects in relation to popular film culture.

Where the study differs crucially in comparison with many other studies on youth film is in its attention to films about youth in terms of theories of learning or ‘pedagogy’. While there is a distinct body of literature in regard to popular culture as pedagogy (Giroux, 1994a; 1997; 2000a; Buckingham, 1998; Daspi & Weaver, 1999; Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010; Hickey-Moody, Savage & Windle, 2010), popular film as pedagogy (Giroux, 2002a) and even youth film as pedagogy (Giroux, 1994c; 1998; 2002b), a more specific and nuanced theory of pedagogy is utilised in this study. This dissertation mobilises a fluid, multi-directional and multi-dimensional theory of pedagogy that is beyond notions of pedagogy as transmission or simple dissemination. It is the conviction of this thesis that pedagogy is best understood as a complex encounter between knowledge and the ‘learner’ (see: Lusted, 1986; Ellsworth, 1997, 2005). Such a hypothesis places emphasis not only on the pedagogic modes or forms that film might take but on the ‘technologies’ employed in its operation (that is, cultural, discursive and pedagogic knowledges and practices of governmentality [Foucault, 1988; McWilliam, 1996]) and the particular practices of representation and ‘the structures within which we encourage people to engage in them’ (Simon, 1992, p. 39). How such learning might occur, how film as pedagogy might work and how we are invited by the film text to learn are the questions that this study will consider. It is this sense of pedagogy that becomes crucial to creative, imaginative and politically-charged moves to rethink that which we think we know and thus how we can be.

While there would undoubtedly be much value in thinking about specific audiences and how pedagogy occurs through engagements with popular film culture to provide a close reading of the particular selected film, the thesis focuses on a broader sense of audience. Rather than working with
empirical’ accounts of real audiences in real spaces, I explore questions of audience and mode of address in theoretical and speculative ways. In particular, I focus on how the film might work as pedagogy, how it incites audiences to specific knowledges about young people, and the possibilities for meaning that might be had. In this sense, the audience is both imagined and real, a performative audience that a film seeks to address as if determined, coherent and stable. Specific and individual audiences will come to the film in their own unique ways and pedagogy is an intersubjective relationship where meaning is made and negotiated. However, film frames the meaning that can be had as a result of its particular textual qualities. The specific design choices that are made in any given film, at every level of its making (conception, production, distribution and reception), is a question of the difference between all that it is historically and culturally possible and intelligible to say and visualise — and what is actually said and visualised (Ellsworth, 1997; Cranny-Francis, 1992). It is these choices that are examined here, conceptualised as both enabling and constraining.

This thesis deliberately avoids entering into psycho-analytic debates about film spectatorship (see for instance: Kristeva, 1982; Mulvey, 1975; Silverman, 1988; de Lauretis, 1984; 1989; Creed, 1993; Cartwright, 2008), the production of subjectivity, and how pedagogy might work (Ellsworth, 1997; 2005). Much important work has been done in this regard, particularly in the areas of feminist film theory, and it was felt that, since my aim is to problematise the developmental/psychologised roots of subjectivity, youth, gender and sexuality, employing psycho-analytic methods and theories would be disingenuous (see: Søndergaard, 2002). This conviction highlights the strong Foucauldian underpinnings of this study and Foucault’s convincing criticisms of the ‘psy’ disciplines in regards to the formations of subjectivities and selves (Foucault, 1973; 1976). While this move is deliberate, it is not altogether a total or dogmatic position and the work of Judith Butler, Elizabeth Ellsworth, Teresa de Lauretis and others are crucial to the project, in spite of their psycho-analytic
tendencies. Thus, a debt is owed to psycho-analytic traditions, even though they do not feature here in any predominant way. I also attempt to do justice to the work of these scholars, even while departing from them from time to time.

(i) The Theoretical Frame/s

The theoretical frames that I draw on to inform this research are broadly feminist and post-structuralist in orientation. Central to my way of seeing is Foucault’s notion of the constitutive force of discourse (Foucault, 1972; 1976; 1980). Discourses not only describe or represent who we are and how we act, but discourse speaks us into existence as beings, as social actors (Foucault, 1972). In this sense, discursive practices are performative and constitutive, making and remaking objects, texts and subjectivities, and that ‘include[s] all the things that we see, refer to and take for granted as actually existing “out there’”’ (Parker, 1999, p. 3; original emphasis). The assumption that discourses are outside or detached from the real world, real subjects and real bodies is crucially contested here, where both reality and fiction are seen as always already discursively constituted. In this sense, we have no pre-discursive access to a reality that exists untouched by discourse. The objective here is not to scratch the discursive surface away to find a true metaphysical reality or ‘ontological thereness’ (Butler, 1993, p. 8). Rather, the interesting question becomes how we discursify reality and realisations of subjectivity into existence (Potter, 1996); how it is spoken, written, visualised, auralised, affected or practised into existence. As people ‘construct, present and engage’ with popular film, for instance, and participate in the pedagogical processes of meaning-making, they are ‘informed by the positions made available within particular discursive regimes’ (Simon, 1992, p. 42). The popular film contains, reiterates and orientates us toward the ways our society feels about, thinks about and comes to know certain subjects and in the various ways they refer to the ‘immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 212). Popular film, then, constructs subjects, but not in a structuralist way where Discourse or Power as Ideology constructs
subjects or structures and obscures a real identity, but rather, construction is a process of ‘reiteration’ and ‘citation’, copies without an original (Baudrillard, 1993). As Butler (1997, p. 2) argues:

We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from outside ... But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbour and preserve in the beings that we are.

As constituting knowledge, discourse as ‘social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations’ (Weedon, 1987, p. 108) enables and constrains our ‘bodies’, ‘thoughts’, ‘feelings’ and ‘lives’, not only giving them meaning but reiteratively and citationally producing them and making them meaningful in the process of naming them (Butler, 1993).

(ii) A Question of ‘Youth’

The discursive subject under analysis in this dissertation is the youth subject. Historically, the term ‘youth’ has been constructed as subjects who are no longer children-but-not-yet adults. Positioned as a time of disorder, youth is synonymous as incompleteness, a ‘becoming’ personhood, while adulthood is equated with full, finished personhood (Lesko, 2001; Blatterer, 2007; 2010; Kenway & Bullen, 2001). While the term adolescence grounds the youth in developmental discourses, and the term teenager locates youth in specific Western markets of consumption, the term youth subsumes both without necessarily going down the same path; furthermore, it points to other possibilities. Feminist and post-structuralist frames offer alternative ways of thinking about the youth subject other than through psychologised/developmental models or socio-historical approaches, which in distinct and often interrelated ways assume that youths are ‘fundamentally different, developing beings based upon their age’ (Lesko, 2001, p. 7). Feminist and post-structuralist frames enable problematisation of an essential and naturalised youth undergoing physical and psychological growth on their way to maturation; they also potentially destabilise an essentialised youth that is said to be found under layers of
social and historical context. In one respect, this approach illustrates a shift from an actor-centred to discourse-centred analytic; a shift from studying youth to studying youth-hood (Lesko, 2001). In another sense, though, in recognition of the enunciative force of discourse, both the age-based subject position and the subject upon which age-based discourse does its work are seen as constitutive of performative practice. Not only is there no essentialised youth outside youth-hood discourse but there is no essentialised subject without subjecthood (see: Foucault, 1976; 1982; Butler, 1993; 1997; Rose, 1996; 1999).

Youth-hood, like other forms of age-based subjectivity, is performative and this subject position is further complexified by discursive categories such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ableism and place. While this study touches on all of these through the course of the analysis, either in detail or through passing observation, it is the question of gender as it intersects with age that features most prominently. Foucault has often been criticised for his lack of attention to gender (see: Driscoll, 2002). As such, the work of Butler is recognised as complementing and adding to the Foucauldian theoretical frame of this thesis. Of note is Butler’s attention to gender not in terms of ‘performance as act’, where, for instance, layers of ‘femininity’ and its bandedness to hetero-normativity mask a true gendered or sexed being. Rather, ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ are carefully regulated ‘corporeal styles’ (Robinson & Davies, 2008), which constitute the ‘effect [in] the very subject it appears to express,’ (Butler, 1991, p. 1). As discursive practices that (self-)constitute subjects, gender and sexuality are regimes that work as ‘truth which hides the fact there is none’ (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1).

The norm of youth-hood has been historically positioned as rational, white, male, Western and middle-class (Lesko, 2001; Walkerdine, 1997). While much of the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham in the 1970s and 1980s (Willis, 1977; Hebdige, 1979; Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Cohen, 1973) attempted to rebalance this through their research on black and/or working-class youth subcultures, masculinist tendencies still dominated, with the exception of McRobbie’s (1980).
ground-breaking work on girlhood (also see: McRobbie, 1994; Buckingham, 1993). While this thesis owes a great deal to this foundational work, much of its Marxist underpinnings are no longer viable, particularly in regards to post-structuralist reconfigurations of power. Far from being simple receptors or ‘docile bodies’ with regards to the effects of disciplinary power, I understand young people as desiring subjects, ‘voluntarily’ involved in their own subject formation and self-constitution (to varying degrees, however, and relative to opportunity). Foucault’s (1988) notion of technologies of the self allows for an understanding of the different and diverse ways young people might come to engage with meanings and practices of youth-hood, as both constraining and enabling of their (self-) production, (self-)constitution and (self-)government.

(iii) What this Study Does — An Overview

The study analyses a selection of Australian films post-1980 and related film culture including interviews, reviews and DVD extras to consider how contemporary youth come to be known in contemporary Western (or Australian) societies. Through a conceptualisation of popular film as pedagogy, and feminist and post-structuralist theories on subjectivity, popular film culture is considered as being profoundly geared towards the practices of forming youth-hood and producing knowledges about the way youth can be known. Bringing together and looking across youth subjectivity, pedagogy and popular film in a rigorous but exploratory way, several different orientations and key themes emerge, including: larrikinism, masculinity, the (un)spectacular, ‘becoming-manhood’, Generation X, pastiche, girlhood, psycho-sexuality, emotionality, femininity, motherhood, (mock)documentary, coming-of-age, old age, (ab)normality and adulthood. As a context where we learn about the self, our culture and our place within it, popular film is understood as a profoundly pedagogical space and complex set of relationships where subjectivities are made and remade. Far from a simple act of transmission, film’s knowledges and forms of address meet and provoke its audience in complex and contradictory ways, enabling and constraining ways of being
in the world. Popular film works to form subjects but it also potentially works as a pedagogy orientating us towards how formation as a subject might take place and the costs and/or benefits of such.

A ‘post-critical’ theory of pedagogy (that is, relational, multidirectional and unpredictable) is used to rethink the normalising subjectivating processes that constitute the youth subject through popular film texts, to open up multiple and different possibilities of being more broadly. This ‘rethinking’ is a profoundly ethical, political and personal move, one that has a long history in feminist, post-structuralist and cultural studies’ circles (see for instance: Youdell, 2006; Ellsworth, 1989, 1997; Lather, 1991; McWilliam, 1999; McRobbie, 1994). Such a move ideally enables us to confront questions that ‘otherwise remain unasked’ (McRobbie, 1994, p. 2), to reconsider entrenched knowledges and to think anew. By engaging with them, we potentially challenge our social practices and politics (not to mention our academic work) towards ‘some degree of transformation and change’ (McRobbie, p. 2).

(iv) Composition of the Study

I begin in the following chapter by situating the study across the broad fields of education and cultural studies, looking back at the history and importance of dialogue between each. Engaging with the debates in education and cultural studies over the last two decades regarding informal learning and popular culture, Chapter Two returns to key work on pedagogy, notably through Giroux’s notion of ‘public pedagogy’ (Giroux, 1994a; 2000b). It revisits Lusted’s powerful 1986 article, which argues for a rigorous and broadly-conceived notion of pedagogy that highlights the processes through which we ‘come to know’ (Lusted, 1986, p. 3). Moving on from Lusted, consideration is given to the popular culture studies of critical theorists and continues through to the work of key post-critical and post-structuralist feminist educators. Through a theory of pedagogy that is relational, contextual and indeterminate, Chapter Two reconsiders Giroux’s notion of *film as teaching machine*. Using key ideas from Ellsworth, I
outline a more nuanced pedagogy than is usually found in the public pedagogies scholarship. Finally, the work of Foucault and Butler are mobilised to draw attention to pedagogy as mode of production and incitement towards meaning-making as a social practice that produces subjects.

Progressing through questions of method, the study then outlines the struggles in attempting to account for how analysis is conducted in the pursuit of film as pedagogy, in a way that I hope will make a contribution to key debates in the in-between space of education and cultural studies. Chapter Three discusses how I came into education from the humanities without having previously encountered methodological debates in an explicit way, so that arguments about methods were largely foreign to me. In the course of this project, I have learned how not only to articulate the methods I have used but how a critical and ‘reflexive’ use of them was absolutely vital to my research. I go on to discuss the process of ‘selecting data’, citing key post-positivist theorists who stress that selection and use of data is far from an innocent or objective process. I discuss and problematise my choice of ‘post-1980 Australian film’ and related film culture sources including interviews, reviews, promotional material and DVD extras. I outline my use of methods utilised in the study including discourse analysis and/as film analysis, social semiotics, writing and other practices not so easy to account for. Importantly, these methods are reconceptualised after, and are inextricably linked to, post-structuralist theories that suspect the truth claims of data and analysis. In the final section of this chapter, I examine the position of the researcher, the challenges of reflexivity and the nature of research(er) as performative.

Chapters Four to Eight form the substantive content of my argument and focus on the youth subject in a selection of Australian films and related extra-cinematic material. My goal here is to articulate and argue the discursive and semiotic formations of age-based, gendered and sexed subjectivities. Specifically orientated towards how pedagogy might work through these films to interrogate how the youth subject comes to be
known, a whole host of design features and practices are considered in terms of potential learning. Some of these include genre, repetition, intertextuality, narrative, imaging, editing, framing, aural soundscape, ‘affect’, caricature, parody, pastiche, voice-overs and other characters’ comments about the protagonist in each case. Each chapter also refers to specific bodies of literature that are of relevance to the concern of the particular chapter.

I begin in Chapter Four with a critical exploration of the arguably quintessential youth(ful) masculine figure of Australian film, Ben Mendelsohn. An analysis of Mendelsohn’s films is undertaken, along with a selection of related extra-cinematic data. What is argued is that ‘Ben Mendelsohn’ is usefully conceived as a pedagogical text, a ‘spectacular pedagogue’ (Dyson, 1993; Morris, 2001) in effect, blurring worlds on and off the screen and inciting us to revisit a kind of young, masculine, roguish and destructive subject. Through ideas of larrikinism, nationalism and Australian film, I consider Mendelsohn as he appears on the screen and how he appears in ‘real life’ interviews and a documentary. I engage with literatures on masculinity, Australian cinema history and key work on the ‘pedagogue’. In the second half of the chapter, I focus my analysis on a range of Mendelsohn’s films, including various design features that potentially prompt audiences to learn about young Australian masculinity.

Whereas Chapter Four looks across Mendelsohn’s filmic catalogue, in Chapter Five I undertake a close reading of one of Mendelsohn’s films, *Idiot Box* (1996). Reflecting on the pedagogies of contemporary young masculinities and referring to key literature in regards to masculinity in Australian cinema and popular culture more broadly, I consider the male protagonists of the film in light of pedagogies that encourage spectators to (re)consider young male subjecthood. Discursive signifiers such as work, girls, love and sexuality, motherhood, mateship and youthfulness are explored. In the second half of the chapter, I argue that through the devices of complicity and parodic reference to the American film *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the two male protagonists orientate audiences towards
specific ideas about ‘generation’. I show how the film potentially addresses a particular imagined Generation X spectator, through its pedagogic mode of address, orientating audiences towards complicity with the protagonists’ age-based subjectivity.

Chapters Four and Five are intended as companion chapters focused on ideas of young masculinity while Chapters Six and Seven are chapters broadly concerned with issues of ‘girlhood’. Chapter Six reviews the literature on contemporary ideas of girlhood and conducts close readings of three ‘coming of age’ films, Peaches (2004), Somersault (2004) and Caterpillar Wish (2006). In the first of these chapters, I analyse the way the three female protagonists of these films are constituted. Ideas of place, the landscape, the weather and the musical and aural soundscape intersect with key discursive technologies including femininity, coming-of-age and psycho-sexuality. How the young female protagonist is positioned as a ‘psycho-sexual’ subject, and how she becomes a pedagogical object doing ‘rational’ and ‘normal’ womanhood, is taken into account. How pedagogy might work here in terms of constituting the girls as psycho-sexual subjects, with complex emotions and ‘inner lives’, and how spectators are arguably invited to be emotional through complex modes of address, are key considerations here. I note that there are potential key lessons to be had around the care of the self and care for others (see: Foucault, 1988; 1976) and this potentially positions audiences to learn in particular ways about how one becomes a ‘fully-fledged’ woman and ‘feminine’ figure of social cohesion.

Chapter Seven focuses on the various ways of coming to know the young female protagonist in the film Suburban Mayhem (2006) through key filmic design features as discursive and pedagogic practices, including genre, suburbia, feline motifs, V8 ‘muscle’ cars, sexuality and the mobile phone. The pedagogy that potentially occurs here is far from mechanistic or straightforward; rather, ways of coming to know the female youth subject are multiple and often contradictory. I frame this work through key literature from feminist cultural scholars on the ‘mean girl’, the ‘grotesque
woman’, the ‘maternal monster’ and ideas of (non) transgression. Through ideas about the contemporary understandings of the ‘bad girl’, the ‘Gothic’ tradition of Australian filmmaking and elements of (mock)documentary style, the ‘bad girl’ protagonist is positioned as a figure of both ‘celebration and savage critique’ (Turnbull, 2008, p. 23). How pedagogy might work through an ambiguous and demanding mode of address is examined through the (non)didactic, ironic and outrageous (mock)documentary testimonials of the other characters. In addition, practices of distancing, non-empathy and contradiction will be explored as they are linked to potential learning about the young female subject and the costs of forming the self in particular ways.

The final data chapter thinks about ‘generation’, age-based subjectivity and ‘becoming-youth’ in more detail. It engages with literature across contemporary youth-hood, gerontology and ‘quirkiness’ in the Australian cinema and the contemporary discursive practices of ‘otherness’ more broadly. Beginning with an analysis of The Rage in Placid Lake (2003) and Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger (2008), Chapter Eight considers how ‘generation’ is constructed as a commonsense ‘battle’ between ‘young’ and ‘old’. The youth protagonists here are seen to be struggling over and playing with their ‘becoming-subjectivities’ as (ab)normal subjects (see: Lesko, 2001; Blatterer, 2007; 2010; Kenway & Bullen, 2001). It is argued that the protagonist learning through rites-of-passage potentially provokes audiences to learn along with them. The comedies Crackers (1998) and Spider & Rose (1994) are then examined as examples of when the youth subject meets its old-age counterpart. These films enable theorisation of age-based categories constituted in relation to other categories and the complexities of generation and adulthood as if ideal. In the final section of the chapter, one key scene from the comedy Blurred (2002) is analysed where three Schoolies encounter a middle-aged authoritarian bus driver. Various devices are employed by these films, such as play, empathy,

---

4 ‘Schoolies’ is the popular term used in the Australian media in reference to groups of young people who have graduated from high school who attend week-long celebrations, usually in coastal cities and towns of each Australian state.
sentimentality, humour, caricature and irony that, as is argued, pedagogically orientate audiences towards generation as a key practice of age-based subjectivity. Potentially, we are invited as spectators to play along with these particular age-based games of subjectification.

In Chapter Nine, I conclude the study with a reflection on the filmic readings offered here and on the central thesis of film as pedagogy. Conclusions are drawn on the significance of film as a form of pedagogy, the implications of film on the processes of subjectification and what this might mean for a revisioned youth-hood.

(v) What This Study Does — Significance

This is, like all studies, partial. It is not my intention to outline and analyse all possible ways in which pedagogy works or how knowledge is made and subjects formed, as if this were possible. I select certain themes and issues to consider and examine while ignoring others. The choice of films and the textual analysis that is undertaken here are wholly constrained by my own knowledge and the discourses that I see and name. This study does not go out into the ‘field’ to gather ‘empirical’ accounts, nor does it attempt to find out the ‘actual’ effect of films in the lives of youth or the way specific and individual audiences might come to understand these films. Further, the study does not locate the selection of films under analysis in terms of markets of consumption, box office takings or levels of classification and circulation. Instead, the films selected here for analysis were done on the basis of what they potentially offered the researcher in terms of rich and complex examples of the youth subject and its related narratives, images and discourses. Narrowing the analysis to films post-1980 was done to observe those films in the ‘social landscape’ tradition of Australian film, where stories about youth emerged and became common (see: Morris, 1989, p. 132; also see Dermody & Jacka, 1988).

Despite its boundaries, the study also contributes to the relatively small field of like-minded academics and critics passionately writing about and debating the intricacies of Australian film and the Australian film industry. I
have found that there is, relatively speaking, a gap in the research on Australian film from feminist post-structural perspectives in particular and, certainly, there is little work on Australian film in education research from any perspective. Additionally, the thesis brings together theories of subjectivity and youth-hood, pedagogy and popular film through feminist and post-structuralist frames, mobilising them in an analysis of Australian film post-1980. It does so in a unique and challenging way, creating new knowledges, revisiting established knowledges and rethinking ‘how is it possible to know that, to think that, to say that’ (Threadgold, 2000, p. 49). I aim to extend current conceptualisations in the fields of cultural studies, education and film studies in various ways. Firstly, the study contributes to, and renews, the importance of theories of pedagogy for cultural studies and the importance of popular culture for education research. As noted, the study posits and defends a theory of pedagogy that is dynamic and is fundamentally different from most public pedagogy scholarship from the critical theory perspective. It is this sense of pedagogy that is crucial to understanding the way we learn about ourselves and our place in the world. It offers a distinct approach to film studies, conceptualising film as pedagogical, as discourse and as reiterative and citational, or as ‘performative’.

As research that is decisively political, ethical and personal, this investigation rethinks this question of youth in theoretically rigorous and methodologically creative ways, with the aim of destabilising what we think we know about youth, youth-hood and, indeed, all forms of age-based subjectivity. My thesis is that popular film is pedagogic. It is not enough to say that film ‘teaches’ us or is, in a broad way, ‘educative’. Rather, film is pedagogic in that it potentially incites us to learn but, importantly, this is far from a predictable or quantifiable process and nor should it become one. Film analysis positioned in these terms becomes a key site to observe and rethink how it is we come to learn about ourselves, our society and our place within it. ‘Rethinking’ is essentially a theoretical and methodological practice and an exploratory process of (re)viewing and
(re)writing. As a textual production of my engagement with a range of texts, be they filmic (film as text), subjectificated (youth as a text), academic (scholarly texts) or pedagogic (texts that incite learning), I explore through writing, to ‘learn something that I did not know before I wrote it’ (Richardson, 2001, p. 35). The dissertation attempts to share what I have learned through the process of analysing a selection of Australian films framed through theories on youth subjectivity, pedagogy and popular film through feminist and post-structuralist orientations. As I undertake practices of discourse and semiotic analysis, writing and other research practices, this dissertation makes moves towards different ways of proceeding and knowing, rather than aiming at a ‘fixed systematicity’ (Sundholm, 2002, p. 115). It aims to do this in such a way as to connect with its readers (Stern & Kouvaros, 1999, p. 2), sometimes addressing them as ‘we’, as if ‘we’ share a system of meaning and a more or less stable boundary between this ‘cultural domain’ and another (Petersen, 2003, p. 29). I write to question, to convince, to engage and to capture texts, objects, practices and subjectivities within this textual analysis, the academic dissertation. I write with the hope of new imag(in)ings, different ways of knowing and multiple ways of being.
Chapter Two

Film as Teaching Machine?: Pedagogy, Popular Film & Subjectivity
Simply put, films both entertain and educate (Giroux, 2002a, p. 3).

(i) Popular Culture and Education: An Introduction

This thesis argues that the ways in which we learn about the self, our culture, our place within it and the possibilities for social knowledge and ways of being should be understood as pedagogic processes. A focus on pedagogy and, crucially, a pedagogy that is open-ended, places emphasis on how social knowledge comes to matter and how certain subjects come to be included and excluded. That we can say that sites beyond formal schooling are important spaces of teaching and learning, and that perhaps they are some of the most influential (for instance see: Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010), is a result of a variety of key scholarship within education, media and cultural studies over several generations. That popular culture is ‘pedagogic’ is, on one hand, a concept that has a long and complex history, going back to the origins of public schooling itself, where suspicion was cast over school as being equipped to engage, excite and teach young people. On the other hand, popular or public pedagogy is a relatively recent discursive formation, emerging in scholarship from just over two decades ago. Although not in a coherent or linear way, the early forms of the popular culture and/as pedagogy debate were evident in the work of early education reformers in one way or another, continued through the curriculum debates of the 1970s and beyond and are evident in contemporary public pedagogy studies (see for instance: Dewey, 1916; Williams, 1958; Rugg, 1963; Illich, 1970; Pinar, 1975; Cremin, 1976; Schubert & Lopez Schubert, 1980; Giroux & Simon, 1988, Giroux, 1994a; also see: Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010; Schubert, 2010).

Key concepts like mis-education (Dewey, 1938), where schools were seen to be far from conducive to learning, engagement and, ultimately, equality (see: Schubert, 2010), germinated various fundamental understandings

---

6 Albeit through concerns of ‘curriculum’ not ‘pedagogy’ per se (see: Pinar, 2008; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman [eds.] 1995; also see Alexander, 2008; 2000).
upon which contemporary curriculum and public pedagogy theory rests. Emphasis placed on the difference between schooling and education, and the specificity of different kinds of learning (Cremin, 1976), emerged in the early 20th century in education research to recognise, firstly, that students learned more than what their educators intended in terms of power and their place in the world (‘collateral learning’ [Dewey, 1938], a ‘harbinger’ of later ideas about ‘hidden curriculum’ [Schubert, 2010, p. 12; Jackson, 1968]); and, secondly, that the experiences and contexts outside of school were important spaces of learning. Some called for a radical de-schooling of society (Illich, 1970; Cremin, 1976) due to what they saw as the entrenched constraints of institutionalism. Others concerned with democratic education began to see popular culture as educative (for instance see: Williams, 1958; 1989). Over time, key concepts, such as outside curriculum (Schubert & Lopez Schubert, 1980), out-of-school-learning, informal learning, popular pedagogy (Giroux, 1994a; 2000b) or cultural pedagogy (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998), came to have credence in particular circles. Two broad contemporary strategies (not to mention two distinct, but often related, inferences of pedagogy) are arguably the result of these historical debates: firstly, the bringing of popular culture into school to support ‘pedagogy’ (understood as the act of teaching); and secondly, the study of popular culture as ‘pedagogy’ (commonly understood as the act of ‘teaching’, or as ‘educative’ in a broad sense, but often, and particularly in the critical pedagogy circles, as both the act and its socio-cultural contexts [see: Alexander, 2008; 2000]). This thesis enters into these debates by focusing on the latter strategy of popular culture, notably popular film as pedagogy, and this is understood as how film works as pedagogy, together with the socio-cultural and discursive contexts that inform and shape it.

In historical terms within education, two broad fields have been concerned with the spaces outside of school in terms of learning: curriculum studies and public pedagogy studies. Fundamentally, outside, informal or out-of-school spaces, including the home and family, (popular) culture and
community, are believed to shape the individual in complex and formative ways and play a crucial role in their learning. After key curriculum theorists (Pinar, 1975; Schubert & Lopez Schubert, 1981), curriculum came to represent much more than a program of study or syllabus in a classroom. Curriculum came to be understood as the cultural, social, political and economic dimensions of ‘society writ large’ (Schubert, 2010, p. 13; also see: Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995). What emerged was the concept of curriculum as analysable text (Pinar et al., 1995), the need for a curriculum attuned to students as active social learners (Tyler, 1977; Schubert & Lopez Schubert, 1981) and, significantly, the out-of-school realm as curriculum in this sense (see: Schubert, 2010; Pinar, 2008).

This study could have made a case for popular film as curriculum, as indeed two contemporary scholars, Dalton (2004) and Cary (2006), have done. However, wanting to move away from the tendency in such studies to remain focused on formal schooling and its institutional identities (also see: Pinar, 2006; Reynolds, 2006), I make a case for a broader understanding of pedagogy, contributing to debates within the popular and public pedagogy field. Sharing much of the same theory, but distinct from concerns regarding curriculum per se, is an increasing number of education scholars interested in learning and out-of-school spaces like the popular cinema, the Internet, museums, parks, buildings and social movements as sites of pedagogy (see for instance: Giroux, 2004b; Ellsworth, 1997; 2005; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998; Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010; Hickey-Moody, Savage & Windle, 2010). This vast range of scholarship often draws upon what is termed popular or public pedagogy (Giroux, 1994a; 2000b) and/or cultural pedagogy (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998) to describe various diverse sites as educative.

Robin Alexander (2008; 2000) argues that British, American and Australian education scholarship tend to engage with ‘curriculum’ more than ‘pedagogy’ per se, while Europe is the opposite of this. Also see Alexander for an account of different understandings of ‘curriculum’ and ‘pedagogy’ based on global location. In general, Alexander argue that in Britain, America and Australia, pedagogy is understood as the act of teaching, while in Europe ‘pedagogy’ is that act and theory of teaching. Public pedagogies scholarship maybe the exception to Alexander’s theory here, although, not necessarily so. Thus, analysis is required of how scholars use this notion of pedagogy, be they from any locale or in any context.
However, popular, public or cultural pedagogies have historically been used in a variety of ways and contexts, often contradictorily (notwithstanding the inconsistencies of work from individual scholars like Giroux, as highlighted later in this chapter). Thus a singular definition of the term/s is problematic and requires analysis (Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010) and the use of public, popular and pedagogy require similar problematisation (see for instance: Savage, 2010; Hickey-Moody & Savage, 2010). While I go into Giroux’s concept of public pedagogy in more detail later in this chapter, the volume edited by Sandlin, Schultz and Burdick (2010) shows that what generally characterises public pedagogy scholarship is the theorisation of popular culture and/or the public realm as pedagogy in ways that potentially offer critical and ‘(counter)hegemonic’ possibilities for diverse kinds of teaching and learning (for a critique of this position, see: Pinar, 2006). Through the conceptualisation of public pedagogy in one way or another, key scholars have been working to show the importance of cultural studies for the project of education and vice versa to interrogate the educational aspects of culture in a rigorous sense. These include Giroux and others (notably critical theorists like McLaren, Aronowitz, Best, Kellner and Kincheloe); the reconceptualised work on the multiplicity of pedagogies (or ‘post-critical pedagogy’ [Green, 1995, p.399]) by feminist educators such as Ellsworth (1989; 1997; 2002; 2005), Luke and Gore (1992) and Luke (1996); and media scholars such as Buckingham (1998) and others.

(ii) Education Meets Cultural Studies

For over 20 years, for instance, Giroux has been lamenting why few have incorporated cultural studies in their critical work within and on education (Giroux, 1994b; also see: Weaver & Daspit, 2000). The familiar trope is that, as distinct ‘disciplines’, education and cultural studies have traditionally ignored each other. Wright & Maton (2004) argue that education, as a field, has been particularly wary of cultural studies, marginalising it as ‘too leftist’, too abstract and not pragmatic enough for the classroom. But at
the same time, cultural studies is either seemingly ‘switched off’ from education or disinterested in it as if banal:

What we have in the relationship between cultural studies and education is a situation characterised originally by strong, productive links, and later, by mutual exclusion at worst and mutual wariness at best, and presently, by ferment and foment — a situation in such flux that Larry Grossberg (1994, p. 374) has described education as ‘one of the most pressing, promising, and paradoxical sites of cultural studies to have emerged recently’ (Wright & Maton, 2004, p. 79).

The recent work of Wright and Maton (Maton & Wright, 2002; Wright & Maton, 2004; Wright, 2001a; 2001b; 2000; Maton & Moore, 2009) has drawn on and entered into debates articulated by, for instance, Giroux (1994b) and Grossberg (1994), where, as a way of bringing cultural studies and education together, it is argued that education was foremost in the minds of the founders of cultural studies. Going back to the educational foundations of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS) (and even earlier to Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thomson [see: Steele, 1994; Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010]), through to cultural studies’ vexed institutionalisation in the academy and to the contemporary globalisation of cultural studies, Wright and Maton position their argument through key interviews with Michael Green (Wright, 2001a; Wright, 2001b) (a BCCCS alumni) and American media scholar Larry Grossberg (Wright, 2000). Citing key reasons as to why contemporary cultural studies appears to be implicated in the marginalisation of pedagogy and the field of education more broadly, Wright and Maton claim that tropes about the origins of cultural studies stemming from the ‘crises’ in the social sciences in the 1960s are false, when the origins of the BCCCS were firmly situated within adult education (also see Giroux, 1994b; Grossberg, 1994; Williams, 1989). Firstly, they argue that cultural studies has forgotten that it was a project primarily about social change through education. Secondly, they argue that education is often simply absent from discussions of the disciplines contributing to or influencing the field (including the general exclusion of education theorists from cultural
studies’ anthologies) and often cultural studies’ work on pedagogy is marginalised within the larger field of cultural studies.

In his key introduction to *Bringin’ It All Back Home — Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, Grossberg (1994) reminds us that the BCCCS was not the only site of cultural studies where important work on education, ‘albeit often scattered’, was done (p. 4). He includes the pioneering Ideology and Consciousness Collective and important publications like the journal *Ideology and Consciousness* (later *I & C*) and the influential text *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity* (Henriques, Holloway, Urwin, Venn, and Walkerdine, 1984). Here, pedagogy connected questions of ‘form and content’, demonstrating how teaching, learning, knowledge and the text could be addressed as a politics foregrounding issues of power and social agency (Grossberg, 1994, p. 4). Grossberg also notes the influential work organised ‘by and around’ the journal *Screen Education* and the Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT in association with the British Film Institute) (p. 4; also see: Alvarado, Buscombe & Collins, 1993). It was from *Screen* that media scholar David Lusted, notably in his paper ‘Why Pedagogy’ (1986), demonstrated why a focus on pedagogy was urgently needed. While I focus on Lusted later in the chapter, it is pertinent to note here that Lusted’s rigorous and broadly conceived theory of pedagogy was ground-breaking, bringing together key concepts from media/cultural studies and education in a unique and timely way.

In spite of recent collections on public pedagogy scholarship from a wide range of contexts, disciplines and viewpoints (for instance Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010; Hickey-Moody, Savage & Windle, 2010), and cultural studies’ concern with its project as education (see: Turner, 2009; Canaan & Epstein, 1997), questions of pedagogy in cultural studies research is still in many respects a marginalised orientation. However, it is to the work in education and cultural studies that this thesis owes a great debt and, although summarised in a truncated way for the purposes of this chapter, it is to the dialogues produced within the in-between space of education...
and cultural studies scholarship that my project contributes. Particularly important is work on popular pedagogies from a post-critical or post-structuralist perspective and, notably, ways of understanding popular culture, pedagogy and disciplinarity in ‘postmodern’ contexts (see: McRobbie, 1986, 1994; Lusted, 1986; Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1991; Luke & Gore, 1992; Green, 1995; Buckingham, 1998; St Pierre & Pillow, 2000). Here, in a broad sense, particular paradigms are employed that reconceptualise power, knowledge and the subject through plurality and uncertainty in a generative sense.

This project is a contribution to public pedagogy scholarship; however, crucially, its post-structuralist theoretical position questions public pedagogy scholarship’s conceptualisation and mobilisation of ‘pedagogy’. As the key post-critical, feminist and post-structuralist education scholars have shown, simplifying pedagogy to a ‘lesson delivered’ or ‘some content that is conveyed’ (Hickey-Moody, Savage & Windle, 2010, p. 232) severely underplays pedagogy as a dynamic theory of teaching and learning. Likewise, no matter how much credence is given to views that ‘pedagogy engages learners and teachers with content through process’ (Hickey-Moody, Savage & Windle, p. 233), if little attention is given to these differentiated processes or how this pedagogy might work, then such proclamations fall short. As I go on to argue, it is not enough to say that popular culture is pedagogic and thus it ‘teaches’ us or is, in a broad way, ‘educative’. Rather, a much more nuanced sense of pedagogy is needed here. That popular culture is pedagogic is about popular culture potentially inciting learning but this is far from a predictable or quantifiable process. Popular culture does not cause learning; rather, it is the context in which learning may occur. So, as it is argued here, a dynamic, contextual and post-critical sense of ‘pedagogy’ is invoked in this study. Indeed, such forms of pedagogy must be defended from current reform discourses and practices that are attempting to reduce, regulate and dehumanise our education practice, research and scholarship (see: Green, 2010a; 2010b;
1998; Sellar, 2009; Weaver, Carlson & Dimitriadis, 2006; Reynolds, 2006; Lather, 2006).

Following this, this thesis is another ‘voice’ from ‘elsewhere’, a contribution to the in-between space of education and cultural studies, from a place that is not necessarily ‘the centre’. While the ‘origins’ of cultural studies is normatively located to the BCCCS, the contemporary dominance of work on public and popular pedagogy is largely from the Northern American context (for example see: Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010; also see Grossberg, 1994) and arguably directed at North American audiences (Hickey-Moody, Savage & Windle, 2010). Despite the dominance of Anglo-American authors in major anthologies (see for example: During, 1999; Storey, 1996; Grossberg, Nelson & Treichler, 1992), cultural studies is not a singularly ‘Northern affair’ (see: Frow & Morris, 2000; 1993). Frow and Morris (2000) illustrate the complex international or transnational contexts in which cultural studies has developed since the 1970s, outlining key work in Australia (also see: Frow and Morris, 1993; Turner, 1993; 1992). Chen’s (1998) alternative (Inter-Asia) mapping of the field, for instance, and multiple geographic formations of cultural studies from Australia, New Zealand, Africa, Asia and South America (for references see: Frow & Morris, 2000) demonstrate different and diverse ways of thinking about the project/s of cultural studies.

Arguing that in spite of itself, British cultural studies has become an ‘orthodoxy’, Turner (1992, p. 640) argues that Australian cultural studies constitutes itself ‘through its critique of the often unacknowledged national positions from which the theoretical orthodoxies speak’. He highlights the ambiguous way of relating to the colonising and ‘universalising momentum’ of the ‘export’, that is, British cultural studies, and to the benefits, but also the potential negatives, of the kind of nationalising visions that can result (Turner, p. 640). In terms of cultural approaches towards the Australian cinema, for instance, Turner argues that:
... [it] requires a degree of subtlety. In criticising [national cinemas] one does not want to support the elitism and internationalism of either the right or the left; yet, in supporting them, one does not want to simply recycle the dominant discourses of a strident, chauvinistic nationalism (Turner, p. 647).

Despite the inherent risks of asserting a distinct ‘Australian cultural studies’ and the possible narrow visions that can result, Turner argues that ‘marginality’ is potentially a generative position that can provide alternative and critically different accounts from that of ‘the centre’. In terms of Australian public pedagogy studies, despite cognisance of recent collections to assert different ‘southern perspectives’ (Connell, 2007, as cited in Hickey-Moody, Savage & Windle, 2010, p. 232), further research on the Australian scene is needed, particularly the work of key cultural and feminist educators in this field, including Carmen Luke, Jenny Gore, Patti Lather and Erica McWilliam.

(iii) Giroux, Public Pedagogy and Popular Culture

Whereas education scholars from various fields have discussed the confluences of cultural studies and education, American scholar Henry Giroux (1994a; 2000b) has been particularly prolific in terms of work on popular culture as public pedagogy to describe the intersection. Arguing that pedagogy is more than just classroom practice in a narrow sense, Giroux stresses the importance of popular culture as a pedagogical site:

... it is precisely in [popular culture’s] diverse spaces and spheres that most of the education that matters today is taking place on a global scale ... images that inscribe themselves on us everyday ... and have drastically altered how identities are shaped, desires constructed and dreams realised (Giroux, 1994a, p. x).

Public pedagogy in this context recognises social contexts as cultural and pedagogical practices deeply bound to the political, in that the ‘social contexts of everyday life [are] lived relations of power’ (Giroux, 2000a, p. 355). For Giroux, popular films are ‘vehicles of public pedagogy’ (Giroux, 2002a, p. 13) and ‘powerful teaching machines’ (Giroux, p. 3), which intentionally try to ‘influence the production of meaning, subject positions, identities and experience’ (Giroux, p. 6). Films do more than entertain, he
argues, they educate audiences about ‘how to act, speak, think, feel, desire and behave’ (Giroux, p. 3), giving ‘meaning to our lives’ (Giroux, p. 9).

For Giroux, in simple, almost commonsense ways, popular films both ‘educate’ and ‘entertain’ as products of powerful consumer markets and their related capitalist ideologies, which, he argues, are intentionally designed to influence our identities, desires and mores as ‘consumers’. In Giroux’s analyses of films (for instance, Larry Clark’s Kids, Dead Poets’ Society, 187, Dangerous Minds, Pulp Fiction, Fight Club, River’s Edge, My Own Private Idaho, Slacker and a selection of Disney films), Giroux ‘exposes’ cinema’s (particularly Hollywood’s) inherent racist, ageist and violent lessons, which he understands are a part of the struggle over the cultural and social realm. At the same time, Giroux (2002a, p. 7) idealises popular film as a ‘public’ and ‘democratic’ site of ‘dialogue, criticism and solidarity’, where a pedagogical space is opened up in which to potentially critique and challenge oppressive ideologies. Although scholars have problematised and complexified the idea of a ‘public’ in public pedagogy scholarship (Savage, 2010; Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010), Giroux’s ‘public’ is asserted as if obvious and coherent. It is to this ‘public’, and for this ‘public’, that Giroux offers a vision of ‘liberatory’ and ‘democratic’ pedagogy through specific critical intervention and (re)interpretation. Valorising the practice of seeing through film (after Snead, 1994), Giroux asserts a critical pedagogy that is understood as the critical skills to ‘think seriously’ about how films ‘mobilize’ viewer desire in ‘powerful ways’. How film frames ‘particular ways of viewing the world in ways that come to matter to individuals and groups’ (Giroux, 2002a, p. 9) is a key concern of Giroux’s:

We have to be ready, as filmgoers, not only to see films, but also to see through them; we have to be willing to figure out what the film is claiming to portray, and also to scrutinize what the film is actually showing. Finally, we need to ask from whose social vantage point any film becomes credible or comforting, and ask why? (Snead 1994, p. 131, 142 as cited by Giroux, 2002a, p. 281).

---

8 See: David Buckingham (1998) for a critical appraisal of both positions in media research.
For ‘progressive’ educators and others, seeing through films means educating their students to ‘scrutinize what the film is actually showing’, as if the film is hiding its ‘true’ and ‘actual’ lessons from us and as if this was possible. Additionally, it also means identifying the already and always ‘bad’ lessons film teaches in spite of our individual investments and pleasures. The job of the ‘critical’ film viewer, then, is to recognize that film is a ‘teaching machine’, reproducing social inequalities, but with the power and democratic appeal to interrupt broader sets of ‘ideas, discourses, and social configurations at work in the larger society’ (Giroux, 2002a, p. 7).

As several scholars remind us, the root of such a position is the understanding that popular culture can ‘only be corrected from without, by intellectuals’ (Hartley, 2009, p. 8). This view implies that popular culture audiences are incapable of being critical in their own right as if what popular culture gives them is always and already ‘bad’. In this sense, then, the film as ‘popular’ is not so much the cause of celebration, but rather the enactment of critical theory that Giroux offers in light of his political and moral world view. As well as the implication that popular culture is suspect (as a legacy of high culture/low culture divides or as a result of critical pedagogy’s mistrust of the visual9), clear power imbalances are inherent in such a position. Over twenty years ago, Ellsworth (1989) argued that such ‘emancipatory authority’ felt far from ‘empowering’ in the classroom and, in fact, it perpetuated inequalities:

Critical pedagogy has failed to launch any meaningful analysis of our program for reformulating the institutionalised power imbalances between themselves and their students, or of the essentially paternalistic project of education itself. Strategies such as student empowerment and dialogue give the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian nature of the teacher/student relationships intact (p. 305).

The problem, according to Ellsworth and other key feminist educational scholars like C. Luke, Lather and McWilliam, lay in espousing that all

---

9 Brian Goldfarb (2002) argues that since critical pedagogy’s beginnings with Paolo Freire in the 1970s, the visual has been regarded as a ‘more base, even primitive and also untrustworthy form of knowledge transmission and production’ used as a technique of institutional and bureaucratic control (p3). Visual Studies scholars such as W.J.T. Mitchell (1996; 2005) have long argued that, as a reaction to the visual turn, ‘moral and political panic’ was shifted onto images and the visual media.
‘voices’ were equally valid, while embarking on a moral and political agenda that promoted one critical vision of the world as irrefutably better than another (Luke, 1998; also see Pinar, 2006; 2005). Luke (1992) notes the absurdity of critical pedagogy’s endeavour in regards to intervening in the pleasures of popular culture in the classroom:

... the transformative task was for teachers to enable students to name and give voice to their experience and then transform and give meaning to those experiences by critically examining the discourses that give meaning to those experiences (p. 35).

Teaching that positions the student as unknowing and in need of intervention in their engagement with popular culture undervalues the student/viewer and denigrates their investments in the popular culture text. As Ellsworth (1989) put it: it unproblematically posits a ‘teacher who knows the object of study “better” than do the students’ (p. 308; also see: Turnbull, 1998). Further, this approach is far from emancipatory, preserving inequity in pedagogical relationships (between the student and teacher and between institution and subject). The teacher who does not admit to the role they play, here, enacts a pedagogy that ‘risks deceit’:

... embodied difference and differential power access are camouflaged under a false pretence of allegedly equal subject positions (Luke, 1992, p. 31).

Using the experiences of their own classrooms, Ellsworth (1989), Luke and Gore (1992), Gore (1993), Lather (1992) and Luke (1996; 1998) demonstrate their concern with the role they play in the attempt to enact critical pedagogies, noting their uneasiness in this emancipatory authority role. Drawing on examples from her anti-racism course at a Northern American university, Ellsworth (1989) noted that in practice the ideals of critical pedagogy actually served to silence real difference, as the approach ignored student knowledges and experiences. In the end, rather than seeing students’ reluctance to embrace the pedagogy offered as a problem or failure of the students, these teachers questioned their approach, turning ‘the gaze upon myself as well as others, as I look at the sins of imposition that we commit in the name of liberation’ (Lather, 1992, p. 129). How ‘self-proclaimed emancipatory discourses can still have
dominating effects’ (Gore, 1993, p. 4), was key to this self-reflection and to a ‘post-critical’ shift in regards to reconceptualisations of pedagogy (also see: Buckingham, 1998).

The position highlighted by these post-critical feminist scholars and educators demonstrates a distinct attitude towards knowledge, power and politics as a result of the so-called ‘postmodern turn’ or as a result of working in the ‘ruins of modernism’ (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; also see: Lather, 1991; Green, 1998). Destabilising ideas about knowledge, power, textuality, agency and desire was part of the same shift in regard to recognising pedagogy as more than merely classroom practice. Defamiliarising, destabilising and thinking differently about pedagogy in this way ‘goes against the grain’ (Popkewitz, 1999) of typical notions of pedagogy, ‘flying’ in the face of much of the current logic about best pedagogical practice’ (McWilliam, 1999, p. ix). Here ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ are taken as complex, relational events, as crucial a concept today as then. In the often cited paper ‘Why Pedagogy?’, the introduction to an 1986 edition of Screen, Lusted called on those working across television/media studies, cultural studies and education to seriously (re)consider pedagogy. For Lusted, pedagogy was a profoundly relational and contextual process, a conscious-changing experience that ‘...takes place in the interaction of three agencies — the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they together produce’ (Lusted, 1986, p. 3). What is significant here is that knowledge is produced between the teacher and the learner, and thus, knowledge formation is ‘interactive productivity’ as opposed to ‘merely a transmissive act’ (Lather, 1991, p. 15). This understanding of pedagogy rejects ‘any tendency to instrumentalise’ the ‘substance’ of these relations or to ‘disconnect their interactivity’ (Lusted, 1986, p. 3).

Emphasising what the learner brings to the pedagogical encounter, Green (1998) considers this relational aspect in Lusted’s work, highlighting a semiotic turn in his rethinking of pedagogy where teaching is ‘understood as the context for learning and not its cause’ (p. 179; original emphasis).
Bringing together and interrogating theories of teaching, learning, power, knowledge and the subject through post-structuralist theory, Green offers an appreciation of pedagogy as ‘teaching for learning’. While the practices of ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ remain in focus, this is a pedagogy that does not guarantee learning in a quantifiable sense, as if this were possible. Here teaching and learning are dynamically interrelated, ‘although necessarily not identical or isomorphic activities’ (p. 197), and it is the unpredictable in-between space between them that comes to take on particular importance. Rather, this is reconceptualised pedagogy that ‘invites learning’ (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 1), and, while it is ideally designed in such a way that learning can occur, it is ultimately a pedagogy that acknowledges the unpredictability of the encounter.

Taking into account teaching as a practice that ideally ‘recognise[s] the plurality of learners in any classroom, learner heterogeneity and situated embodiment in time and space’ (Ellsworth, p. 180), Green calls for a re focus on the relational aspects between study objects (texts) and study subjects (students, learners); that is, what is taught and to whom (also see: Simon, 1992). ‘Teaching for learning’, notes Green, needs to be understood as ‘teaching for difference’, in the sense that pedagogical work as meaning-making is ‘best conceived of as always and necessarily “future-oriented”’ (Kress, 1995, as cited by Green, 1998, p. 184) or probabilistic (Green, 2003), contextual and inherently, unavoidably, ‘unpredictable’ (p. 18; Green 2010a; also see: Ellsworth, 1997; Morris, 2001). In this sense, pedagogy is not simply a description of teaching practice. It is a matter of ‘how participants experience the process of teaching and learning and how this experience feeds back into the unfolding process’ (Sellar, 2009, p. 351; my emphasis).

Reconceptualising pedagogy in this way places emphasis on not only the modes or forms it takes but on the technologies employed in its operation, and the ‘particular practices of representation and the structures within which we encourage people to engage in them’ (Simon, 1992, p. 39; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003). A turn to pedagogy in this sense, as
material and semiotic cultural and identity work, signals a shift from concerns with content to questions such as who engages with it, ‘how, why and with what consequences’ (Simon, 1992, p. 46). Lusted’s (1986) classic call to interrogate this pedagogy through its mode of production and the conditions of this learning are profoundly methodological questions:

Why is pedagogy important? It is important since, as a concept, it draws attention to the process through which knowledge is produced. Pedagogy addresses the ‘how’ questions involved not only in the transmission or reproduction of knowledge but also in its production. Indeed, it enables us to question the validity of separating these activities so easily by asking under what conditions and through what means we ‘come to know’ (pp. 2–3; my emphasis).

The ‘how questions’ are key here: focusing our interrogation on how pedagogy might work; how we are mobilised by the text to learn; and how the text (be it curriculum, film, etc.) is designed to provoke learning. Far from simplistic concepts of teaching as ‘delivery’ and learning as ‘transmission’, such a reconceptualisation of pedagogy sees pedagogy as complex, indeterminate, unpredictable. In this pedagogy, contexts, relationships, subjectivities and texts are all inextricably bound and remain in focus, while remaining, crucially, unquantifiable.

In regards to popular film as pedagogy, the inextricably bound practices of ‘production’ and ‘reception’ are seen as complex and often contradictory pedagogic enterprises. Ellsworth (1997) focuses on how film’s mode of address, the ‘call and response’ core of the film, might work. She asks with whom, and for whom, identification is occurring, and how:

Who does this film think you are? It’s a question about how dynamics of social positioning get played out in film viewing — who does this film address you to be within networks of power relations associated with race, sexuality, gender, class, and so on? And what difference does it make to how you read and use a film? What difference does it make, even, to historical dynamics of social ‘control’ and ‘change’? (pp. 1–2; my emphasis.)

Highlighting questions of knowledge and being, the mode of address is mobilised by Ellsworth (1997, p. 6) to hold up to the light the intimate pedagogical relationships and contexts that ‘shape and misshape’ who we
think we are. Film as pedagogy is about how we learn our culture and our place within it (Chouinard, 2009; Todd, 1997), a space where meaning is made between the filmmaker’s desired audience, the filmic text and the spectator’s experience. As a double-hermeneutic in play, film pedagogy incites learning about subjectivity and what is at stake in forming or not forming oneself as a subject in particular ways. The space or relationship where this knowledge-making occurs, as argued here, is far from being easily observable, controllable or wholly knowable. As Ellsworth (1997, p. 7–8) observes, while the terms of address are aimed ‘precisely at shaping, anticipating, meeting or changing’ who someone thinks they are, all modes of address (film, teaching, curriculum etc.) ‘misfire’ in one way or another. For Ellsworth this is because ‘I never “am” the “who” that a pedagogical address thinks I am. But then again, I never am the who that I think I am either’ (p. 8):

No matter how much the film’s mode of address tries to construct a fixed and coherent position within knowledge, gender, race, sexuality, from which the film ‘should’ be read; actual viewers have always read films against their mode of address, and ‘answered’ films from places different from the ones that the film speaks to (p. 31).

This concept of the spectator ‘answering’ films from multiple and different positions other than those envisaged by the film/ maker throws into question those critiques that rely on fixed ‘lessons’ in a film, coherent reading positions, a direct and clear impact on the viewer, and a pedagogy regulated towards producing set outcomes.

(iv) Giroux’s Film as Teaching Machine

Before considering Giroux’s notion of film as a teaching machine in closer detail, it is necessary to turn attention to the way he discursively employs pedagogy. Looking across Giroux’s vast body of work (for instance 2001; 2002a; 2003b; 2004a; 2004b), his use of pedagogy is contradictory or polyvalent in that he uses the term in several different ways, with several different implications. It must be noted that Giroux does not reflect on these different usages; rather, he continues as if these usages are self-
explanatory, seamless and unchanging. Firstly, pedagogy for Giroux is clearly something that educators do, an all-encompassing term to describe their practice. In the same vein, pedagogy is used to describe what popular film does — its teaching of its audiences as social practice. Pedagogy is also connected to something seductive, something insidious: the potential corruption of individuals and groups, be it by formal education institutions (with their ‘force-feeding methods’ (Giroux, 1994a, p. ix) or by informal popular cultural institutions (‘commodified, ubiquitous, and increasingly abstracted from serious forms of critical analysis’ [Giroux, 2002a, p. 5]).

Critical pedagogy, a liberal-attuned pedagogy, is something that ‘critical’ teachers and scholars must employ to effectively intervene in these potential ‘bad lessons’. In the public pedagogy sense, pedagogy becomes key to a political and social project primarily concerned with democracy and social equality. In regard to popular film as public pedagogy, film is shown to ‘both entertain and educate’ (Giroux, 2002a, p. 3), potentially dangerous but ultimately and idealistically held up as a pedagogical space (or as providing this space) for critical viewers to undertake ‘interpretation as intervention’ (Olson & Worsham, 1999; as cited by Giroux, 2002a, p. 7), thereby engaging in the pleasure of ‘political agency’ (Giroux, p. 13).

As noted by critics of critical pedagogy such as Ellsworth (1989), since Giroux’s pedagogy is focused on broad visions of ‘educative forces’ in the cultural sphere, specific forms of pedagogical address or ‘micro’ pedagogies (see: Gore, 1993) are neglected. While Giroux does consider individual films, and thus a specific form of pedagogy, or a film as one example of many possible public pedagogies (see: Savage, 2010), his focus still lies in broad sweeping concerns of pedagogy as a product of the ‘greater (negative) educative force of American culture’ (Savage, 2010, p. 108). For all of Giroux’s materialist ambitions, concern about practices and this view of the material effects of pedagogy, his work ultimately does not explore how pedagogies may work in relation to specific contexts and audiences, either in an empirical or speculative way. Despite convictions that ‘audiences mediate such films rather than simply inhabit their
structures of meaning’ (Giroux, 2002a, p. 11), Giroux makes no reference to the possibility of alternative readings, alternative engagements or differentiated investments (Weaver & Daspit, 2000). Nor is film as pedagogy presented potentially as inciting complex and contradictory lessons. Lacking a dynamic, not to mention adequate, theory of learning, the concept of film as a ‘teaching machine’ is thus rendered ineffective.

For instance, if the intellectual/teacher must intervene between the text and the (young) viewer to expose its ‘oppressive’ knowledges, pedagogy is then merely a transmissive act, the lessons of the film transferred to an audience conceived of as undifferentiated blank slates. Giroux has argued that a critical approach to media and film requires an understanding of film as neither ‘an unchanging, monolithic bastion of corporate culture and ruling-class power’, nor its audience as ‘passive dupes’ (Giroux, 2002a, p. 11). He has argued that he makes no claims that there is a ‘direct correlation between what people see, hear, and read and how they act; between the representations they are exposed to and the actual events that shape their lives’ (Giroux, p. 11). He has also warned against ‘denying voices, experiences and histories’ of audiences/students that ‘give meaning to the world’ and refuses a simple notion of pedagogy as ‘transmission’ or ‘imposition’ (see: Giroux & Simon, 1988, p. 10). However, crucially, his analyses of actual films fail to live up to these claims. The crisis-driven nature and sense of urgency in his work precisely depend on a vision of pedagogy as ‘bad’ lessons transmitted to innocent/uneducated audiences by monolithic corporate powers, with direct and disastrous consequences.

In particular, Giroux is concerned with the ‘easily led’ and ‘impressionable’ youth audience; and the titles of his works are most telling in this regard: Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture (1994a); Channel Surfing: Race Talk and the Destruction of Today’s Youth (1997); Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture’s War on Children (2000a); The Abandoned Generation:

---

10 Disappointingly, the latest public pedagogy scholarship follows Giroux’s lead in this regard (for example see: Hickey-Moody, Savage & Windle, 2010; Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010).
Moreover, Giroux’s lack of attention to the possible ways in which a film can be interpreted and experienced, or a ‘misfiring’ mode of address, reaffirms the ‘legitimacy’ of his own (paternalistic) reading at the cost of alternative visions. Giroux’s definitive interpretations of a film, the mode of address as determined and uniformly accepted, make it next to impossible for alternative readings to exist precisely because, in his particular political world view, they are positioned as being at best ignorant of, or duped by, Hollywood, or at worst, a willing participant of the ideological machine. As Ellsworth (1989) so astutely argues:

Giroux leaves the implied superiority of the teacher’s understanding and the undefined ‘progressiveness’ of this type of pedagogy unproblematised and untheorized (p. 306).

Disappointingly, for all the claims of progressive politics, Giroux’s analyses of popular films and his narrow view of pedagogy are surprisingly conservative and reactionary. His view of teaching and learning is tied to deterministic or quantifiable ideas of how learning occurs. For Giroux, knowledge, objects and Others are seen to be ‘known or ultimately knowable’ (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 321), in the sense of being ‘defined, delineated, captured, understood, explained, and diagnosed’ (Alcoff, 1988; as cited in Ellsworth, 1989, p. 321) at a ‘level of determination never accorded to the “knower” himself or herself’ (Ellsworth, p. 321).

Most importantly, in Giroux’s analyses of popular films, attention to how such pedagogies might work, and/or how the specific text is designed in terms of pedagogy, are absent from his accounts. Giroux’s film analyses are thusly content-focused (such as how youth is portrayed and how the film relies on ‘mindless’ violence) and then concerned with broad-sweeping politics (‘circuits of power in the political economy’ and ‘material and power-saturated relations’ [Giroux, 2002a, p. 11]). In Giroux’s work, and in other public pedagogy accounts like his:

---

11 Also see McLaren, 1995, 2003; Best & Kellner, 2003; and even Grossberg (1992), to a lesser degree.
Questions of textuality are relatively weakly represented: representation is shown in its political rather than textual sense; textual making is represented as production, emphasising the political economy of the media rather than its semiotic function; audiences are termed consumers, again underlying the economic rather than interpretive function (Burn, 2009, p. 7).

Following this, what is missing from accounts such as Giroux’s is attention to the film’s form or design, and how it might work as pedagogy depending on different contexts, different audiences and different relationships. The pedagogical question of import here is not that this film means ‘this’, but that this film has multiple (but not infinite) meanings and pedagogical implications in different contexts. The content of the film does not make it pedagogy; rather, how it seeks to work as pedagogy is what matters here, and this is understood as a complex, differentiated, contextual and relational process.

In the introduction of *Breaking into the Movies: Film and the Culture* (2002a), an important introduction that (re)frames his work on film since 1976, Giroux notes several ways in which film might work, sporadically referring to ideas that films: ‘entertain’, provide ‘pleasure’, ‘relief’, ‘escape’, ‘spectacle’; that they ‘mine the twin operations of desire and nostalgia’ (p. 6–7); or that filmic images are particularly ‘powerful’, ‘pervasive’, ‘seductive’, ‘inviting’ or that they ‘demand attention’ and ‘gain consent’ (p. 11). He also notes that there is some inherent quality within film that connects to the everyday lives of (for instance) his students or that film is somehow plugged into their sensory and everyday experiences, ‘allowing them to enter its discourses intertextually’ (p. 8). How the pleasure, entertainment and seduction that film gives is pedagogy, or how it works pedagogically, is unclear. He also argues that popular film is ‘unlike ordinary consumer items’ such as TV or popular music since film ‘travels’ more as a ‘pedagogical form’, has more ‘pedagogical weight’ and reaches a ‘deeper pedagogical register’ (p. 7):
Films allow their ideologies to play out pedagogically in a way that a three-minute pop song or 22-minute sitcom cannot do, and by doing so offer a deeper pedagogical register for producing particular narratives, subject positions, and ideologies. In addition, young people inhabit a culture in which watching film demands a certain degree of attention, allowing them to enter into in its discourse intertextually in a way that they cannot or refuse to do with television programs and other electronic media.

Apart from what appears to be the need for sustained ‘attention’ and an ‘intertextual engagement’, how film is more ‘deeply pedagogical’ is unclear. Ultimately, it is disappointing that the operation and relationships of film as pedagogy are left rather vague, both within Giroux’s introduction and throughout this book as a definitive collection of his work on film for the last 30 years. For all this talk of a film as a ‘teaching machine’ of limitless pedagogical possibility, in the film analyses themselves, and as implied through the view of film as a ‘teaching machine’, pedagogy is reduced to: a simple ‘transmission’; a ‘machine’ that ‘delivers content’; a corporate machine churning out racism, sexism and violence; a human-less machine whose meaning is far from context-dependent in specific, differentiated or relational terms; and a pedagogy far from complex and ‘messy’. Although Giroux states that films entertain and educate as if this is a simple, straightforward process, simply put, there is nothing simple about how films do entertain and educate.

(v) ‘It’s been hard to turn off this way of seeing’: Ellsworth on film and pedagogy

In *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy and the Power of Address*, Ellsworth (1997) discusses her learning while she was a student at film school. She notes that she was taught that film’s mode of address was always ‘disingenuous’, the film’s realism hiding ‘crimes’ like ‘racism, sexism, heterosexism or exploitation’ (p. 79). Along with her fellow students, she was encouraged to ‘force’ these films to ‘give up their secrets’, forcing them to:

---

12 We also need not look far to cultural scholarship that recognises the importance and powerful role popular music, video games and television has on the lives of its audiences, a point that Giroux severely underplays here.
... show how they hid the evidence of their crimes under a mode of address that spoke to their audience as if they were simply showing the world the way it was (p. 79).

After spending many of her ‘intellectually formative years’ learning to look at films this way, she argues that, ‘It’s been hard to turn off this way of seeing’ (p. 79). This is where Ellsworth’s approach to film as pedagogy dramatically differs from that of Giroux’s. For Ellsworth, ‘rethinking pedagogy’ is a process framed by a reflexive sense of ‘knowledge’, ‘teaching’, ‘learning’ and the ‘self’ as radically under erasure, incomplete and undetermined. Rather than trying to pin down meaning and subjecthood as if ‘real’ and complete, for Ellsworth, meaning is always in the making (never ‘made’) and subjects are always multiple and in-process (p. 1). Embracing knowledge as unpredictable and subjectivity as fluid and shifting ‘... does not, for those of us operating within post-structural and feminist discourses, mean we cannot know nothing’ (Lather, 1991, p. 166). Such a position means treading a precarious line between pedagogy as an intimate, unique and unrepeatable encounter (see: Ellsworth, 1997) and, simultaneously, recognising the limits of meaning-making and engagement. It is about considering the specific oral, aural, visual and affective discursive choices that have been made:

... between all the other lines that could have been spoken and have been spoken in other movies, soap operas, news stories, romance novels, sitcoms — and the one that got spoken here. [It’s] the difference between what could be said — all that it is historically and culturally possible and intelligible to say — and what is said (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 40, original emphasis).

In this sense, the lessons that can be had are framed but not determined by the pedagogical design features and practices of the film. In regards to film as a pedagogy understood in these terms, film culture is not so much representational practice as a performative act (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 16). Films address us as if knowledge was known and subjectivity was fixed, as if the lessons that were to be had were straightforward and coherent. Likewise, spectatorship is also performative in that we respond as if the mode of address worked on us, to varying degrees. Our response both enacts and reworks all the ‘pregiven norms and prescriptions called up by
the question “How will you respond [to the film]?” (Ellsworth, p. 137). There is a ‘performative aspect to any response I give, and that prevents my response from being an answer, from being settled’ (p. 137). Film, then, is not (re)presenting the world to us or holding up a mirror to the way things really are; it is also not lying to us, as if the real is outside what it represents. Rather, film is performative, constituting us not as a ‘ground or a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process’ (Butler, 1992, p. 3). The spectator-subject is always ‘imagined’ but not imaginary as if fictional; rather, it is in a performative sense where we are constituted ‘not in advance of, but within discourse and cultural practice’ (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 6–7).

For Ellsworth (1997; 2002; 2005; 2010), popular film is only one of the dynamic spaces where important learning occurs and her work considers learning between numerous complex entities including bodies, media, buildings and affects. This thesis owes much to Ellsworth’s dynamic understanding of pedagogy, to the understanding of various contexts where knowledge can be made, and creative and reflexive understandings of a dynamic theory of teaching and learning. However, rather than following Ellsworth into psychoanalytic (Lacan, Felman) territory in an attempt to shed light on the unpredictable nature of ‘learning’, this thesis looks to the complex discursive formations of pedagogy, popular film and subjectivity as social practice. This move is a particularly generative one, I argue, as one that avoids necessarily entering into normative and conventional understandings of learning and learner subjectivities notwithstanding ‘commonsense’ ideas of the unconscious. By contrast, the discourse-analytic approach places emphasis upon certain truth regimes that work to privilege specific knowledges, pedagogies and subjectivities, including the psycho-analytic.

(vi) Film as a technology/pedagogy of the self?

The challenge of understanding film as pedagogy in this way is to gain perspective on how film might operate as discursive practice. Semiotically, discourse is understood as always presenting simultaneous practices of
‘images, sound, text and talk’ (Simon, 1992, p. 41) and more than just a narrow linguistic mode. In a Foucauldian sense, constructions of meaning come about through relationships between power, discourse and the subject. Patrick Fuery (2000) sees the value of Foucauldian notions of discourse for film analysis, on one hand utilising Foucault’s sense of how discourses are ‘formulated, operate, and collapse in understanding the film’s discursive practices’; while on the other hand, considering the ‘relationship of film to other discourses’ (p. 61). Focusing on Foucault’s work on ‘statements’ as elementary units of a discourse that work to make certain signs seems ‘more meaningful, more truthful, more substantial’ (p. 66), Fuery argues that despite difficulties with ‘what a statement is’ or ‘what its constitutive elements are’ in regards to film, Foucault’s strategy is a useful one because its forces us to focus on how discourses function and how they are bound to the production of knowledge. Fuery argues that Foucault does not seek a theory of discourse or categories but, rather, to understand the modes of their production. Exploring and challenging different ways of thinking about the discourse of film, Fuery demonstrates the possibility of mobilising Foucauldian theory in the analysis of like-objects (or elements), styles (or genres), formulas (or repetition), themes, and the gaps within such seemingly coherent groupings:

In other words, this is a theorising about how, and possibly why, the formation of discourses takes place, and what relationships this has to the ways in which the cultural, epistemological, political and textual forces are involved (p. 63: my emphasis).

Highlighting Foucault’s ‘enunciative’ ideas of how discourse functions, Fuery explores the concept of cinematic statements (or discursive groupings), how they come to be cinematic truths, and how enunciative functions operate to form them. He notes that wider social (or external) statements make their way into cinema texts, that cinematic statements can have effect beyond the experience of film and that statements operate within and across films. Foucault’s hypothesis that discourses not only describe or represent who we are and how we act, but discourse speaks us into existence as beings, as social actors (Foucault, 1972), is key here.
Popular film, then, is fundamentally ‘productive’ in that it produces knowledges and forms subjects, governing and presenting ways of being. In this sense, rather than seeing popular film as ‘repressing’ true subjectivities and desires (as Giroux might, for instance), we can see film as a socio-cultural practice that constrains and enables multiple ways of coming to subject formation, to varied effect. As a social and cultural practice, film seeks to govern the subject and, simultaneously, incites self-governmentality, inciting us to learn about subjecthood and how to form the self as a subject in various ways. Making and remaking subject positions through its knowledges, truth claims and imaginaries around subjectivity, film is a technology of the self (Foucault, 1972; 1982). But it is more than this too, more than a set of cultural and discursive mechanisms and practices that allow individuals to act on themselves, by themselves or with others, so that they might transform the self and the other into a particular sort of subject/s (McWilliam, 1996). Popular film is a pedagogy of the self, a cultural and discursive practice and set of technologies keyed into learning and expressing learning about subjectivity, selfhood and our ‘place’ in the world (see: Chouinard, 2009; Todd, 1997). Film potentially works as pedagogy concerned with inciting learning about how forming oneself as a subject might take place, and also about what is at stake in forming or not forming oneself as a subject in particular ways. As pedagogy that potentially forms subjects, film is thus a potential technology of learning and transformation. How such learning might occur, how film as pedagogy might work, how we are mobilised by the film text to learn, and how the film provokes learning, are the questions that matter in light of film as pedagogy/technology.

In 1986 Lusted asked, ‘under what conditions and through what means do we “come to know” (p. 2–3). This in turn enabled us to explore the nature of knowledge itself, forms of meaning-making, and the ways we understood ourselves and our world — as all profoundly pedagogical. The work of Foucault, and feminist post-structuralist educators like Ellsworth,  

---

13 Also see bell hooks, 1993; 1996.
adds to Lusted’s *how we come to know* thesis, putting greater emphasis on how we are formed as subjects by multiple knowledges and practices. The following chapter continues to pursue this question of *how we come to know*, how this knowledge is possible, and how such learning might occur through questions of methodology. ‘Just *how* is it possible to know that, to think that, to say that’ (Threadgold, 2000, p. 49; my emphasis) are the questions being asked here, not only of the object of study of this thesis, but of the knowledges and methods of the inquiry as well.
In the first year of my PhD, my supervisor would pass me articles, some of which immediately ended up in the unread pile. “Boring!” I thought, “what the hell IS this!” “What does he want me to do with this!” “How can this have anything to do with my work?” I mean, why would I want to spend valuable reading and thinking hours with these dry and uninspiring accounts of ‘data collection’ and ‘methods of analysis’ when there was amazing stuff to get into like Foucault and Butler, and great films to watch!? Coming from a humanities and cultural studies background, I had never encountered ‘methodology’ before, at least not in these direct, ‘disciplined’ terms. In retrospect, it was like I had been trained to switch off to questions of methodology, my eyes unable to focus. It was as if I wasn’t able to speak the language ....
Despite its inflation in some of the more militant branches of twentieth-century science into epistemological technique, method is more richly understood as an existential, even an ethical problem of how to enter into relations with one’s material … Method is too interesting a topic to abandon to those who see it only as a set of techniques (Peters, 2006, p. 54).

**Introduction**

That this dissertation would contain a ‘methodology chapter’ was something that came later in the course of this project. While methodological accounts are commonplace and even *de rigueur* in certain research ‘fields’, including education (see: Petersen, 2003), other fields like the humanities and cultural studies, until very recently, did not widely debate their research methods (Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram, and Tincknell, 2004). In a ‘traditional’ sense, these ‘disciplines’ were not necessarily forthcoming or concerned with explorations into research methodologies:

> There was no sense that you needed to know about the process of conducting research, or that how you did it might influence the outcome … the ethos remained that research methods — more properly, ‘skills’ — were divorced from the academic enquiry into the subject (Griffin, 2005, p. 2).

As noted in Chapter One, this study is situated between education and cultural studies, and thus in a key position from which to address questions of method. In a gradual way, what has been forged is the understanding that how we conduct our research is as important as, and bound up with, the why. Methodological questions are about how the inquirer seeks their knowledge, their relationship to such practices and also to what can be known (see: Gough, 2002). Organised into four sections, this chapter attempts to account for the analytical strategies and practices employed in the research project. I endeavour to account for what and how I went about this inquiry into how film might work as a pedagogy bound to subjectification. Through a selection of films, film culture and related discursive practices, I read data through particular positions in regards to theory and theories about pedagogy, ‘scratching over’ and again the texts under analysis (Foucault, 1998/1971, p. 369) and, indeed, the text created
by this analysis. This analysis tries to avoid deterministically naming ‘the pedagogy’, where it was located and how it worked (as if this were possible); rather, it poses the question: if film is pedagogic, how might it work as pedagogy, while remaining open to the contradictions that might surface? Taking me in various directions, I attempt to account for and ‘rationalise’ the processes undertaken in this regard.

The first section of this chapter charts the shift from inarticulation to discursive ‘competency’ in regards to my methodology. Some ingrained theoretical and methodological practices of post-structuralism and cultural studies are considered. Moving on to consider issues of data, specific methods will be noted and discussed through some of the methodological and epistemological assumptions of this study. Finally, the chapter will reflect on research and my subjectivity as researcher through questions of representation, reflexivity and performativity.

**Part I — Confusion Over Method?**

**(i) Post-Structuralism and Method**

Part of this ‘blind spot’ or, in other words, what I didn’t ‘know well enough to even ask or care about’ in regards to method (Wagner, 1993; as cited in Gough, 2002, p. 4) has to do with the study’s post-structuralist underpinnings. Arguably, post-structuralist modes of analysis have, by their very nature denied the possibility of a ‘how to do’ due to the understanding that theory and data were already an ‘impossible separation’, and that theoretical frames do more than analyse the ‘data’ — they construct it (Threadgold, 2000, p. 40). Inheriting the idea that ‘theory’ and ‘method’ were so dependent upon and inextricably bound to the other, I saw no clear separation between them and thus, could not clearly delineate the ‘how to’ (see: Harding, 1987). Although dynamically interrelated, the work of theory and method are not, however, identical or isomorphic practices. Following this, a new appreciation of this difference frames this chapter through a double-focus: a ‘how so’ and also a ‘how to do’. A second point of confusion over methodology can be attributed to
post-structuralist petitions to distrust method (see: Richardson, 2000; Lather: 1991; Cherryholmes, 1988). Traditionally, and particularly in science and logical empiricist paradigms, to have a method implied that you:

... know what you are about, that your work will not be undermined by accident, digression or irrelevance. To possess a method assumes a kind of reassurance about the future, even an insurance against it. Method promises results (Cook, 2005, p. 202).

Methodology, in a historical sense, has acted as a kind of ‘rhetorical guarantee’, persuading the reader of ‘systematicity’ and trustworthiness: guaranteeing that the work has been done, and that the work is ‘adequate to the claims being made on behalf of method to have accounted for the text in the manner indicated’ (Lee, 2000, p. 198). As a practice of legitimation in research (Lather, 1991; Cherryholmes, 1988), method was meant to ‘unlock the truth’, a formalised strategy for ‘convincingness’ through the force of its textuality and claims (Lee, 2000, p. 198). In the postmodern or post-positivist climate of research, method’s claims and the privileged status it had been given were to be held as suspect. What came to be recognised was the end of research as ‘master narrative’ (and researcher as ‘master’) and the end of method as straightforward, unproblematic practice. Stronach & MacLure (1997) teach us that we can never unearth ‘real reality’ no matter how much we try, no matter how ‘good’ our methodological tools are, and so, for post-positivist researchers, our methodology is a ‘methodology of disappointment’ (p. 4). Only more recently has this non-methodology position of disappointment been mobilised in this project as a way to engage with methodology. This ‘disappointment’ has become a strategic politics of methodology, and a commitment to interrupting the ‘certainty and clarity’ of ‘vision’ (Stronach & MacLure, p. 4–5; also see Richardson, 2000; Lather, 1991; St Pierre & Pillow, 2000).

Post-structuralist theory was further implicated in my inability and reluctance to consider methodology. Radical, urgent and paradigm-shifting feminist post-structuralist theories seemed antithetical to the methods encountered, many with structuralist origins and reductionist
epistemologies. At one stage of this project, discourse analysis appeared to be the only method compatible with the theoretical frame employed. However, as Threadgold (2000) notes, those of us conducting post-structuralist research:

... inevitably need to do some of the same things that older structuralist and linguistic methodologies also do, albeit with a different understanding of why we do them (p. 40).

What has occurred in the course of this project is therefore recognition that it is not particular methods that are necessarily compatible or incompatible with certain research epistemologies. Rather, whatever methods are mobilised need careful evaluation by the researcher in terms of how the particular method makes elements of the research im/possible and un/productive in light of the research’s theoretical groundings.

(ii) Cultural Studies and Method

As a field, cultural studies was also not particularly forthcoming in regards to providing methodological direction for this study. Cultural studies’ claims of being multi-, cross-, inter-, post-, trans- or anti-disciplinary (Wright & Maton, 2004), and a radical, eclectic, non-discipline, has ensured that methodology has been ‘something of a structuring absence’ in the field (White & Schwoch, 2006, p. 2). When considered in cultural studies, method is usually broadly understood as a kind of ‘bricolage’ (Nelson, Treichler & Grossberg, 1992, p. 2) or ‘toolbox’ where any and every practice is potentially available to the cultural studies’ researcher (Frow & Morris, 2000, p. 325–6). For Frow and Morris (2000), cultural studies’ multifarious methodological orientation is particularly interesting because it arguably makes greater use of techniques of analysis and greater use of diversity of sources from multiple disciplines. On one hand, cultural studies’ multi-disciplinary methods enable a freer, potentially more dynamic research process, which is far from a general, singular or narrow method. In this view, then, attempts to generate or point towards an overall unified theory of method for cultural studies, are not ‘possible or desirable’ (White & Schwoch, 2006, p. 2). On the other hand, though, this
rhetoric of every and any method is potentially no methodology at all, and runs the risk of a general inarticulation of a ‘how so’ and a ‘how to do’ of cultural studies research. If cultural studies’ methods are like large ‘spreadsheets’ of many possible ‘cells to activate’ (White & Schwoch, p. 5; also see Lister & Wells, 2001), then it is precisely the activation and articulation of this activation that matters. Yet, the question of method is sometimes overlooked and too often generalised in cultural studies research.

This kind of simultaneous celebration of, and over-shadowing of, ‘method in cultural studies’ scholarship points towards the impossibility of method in the field. While debates long had are about the nature of what cultural studies is (as Stuart Hall (1992) writes, ‘it does matter whether Cultural Studies is this or that’ [p. 278]), debates about how cultural studies does what it does, are less common. Maton and Wright (Maton & Wright, 2002; Wright & Maton, 2004; Wright, 2000; 2001a; 2001b; Maton & Moore, 2009) argue that what has for so long been the hidden work of cultural studies should be brought into the open and reassessed by its practitioners in ways that strengthen our research and unite the field. The concern here is about the methods of cultural study as implicit, thus functioning as a form of ‘intellectual privilege’ or ‘cultural capital’ including and excluding those from the ‘cultural studies’ club’ (Johnson et al., 2004, p. 3) This concern is also about a collective failure to emphasise ‘intention over effect’, a focus on commitment to a project of social change over a focus on the methods, and the consequences of attempts to carry out such a project (Maton & Wright, 2002, p. 380). Cultural studies has always focused on ‘who’ questions rather than ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions, meaning that it has long been more important to stress:

... who it hopes to empower or ‘give voice to’ rather than epistemological and methodological questions of what and how’ (Maton & Wright, p. 382–3).

For Maton and Wright, being able to engage with those questions is vital to being active in key debates and concerns of the field, and crucial to the creation and maintenance of scholarly and institutional discursive
legitimacy, especially at a time when discourses about ‘quality’ and ‘innovation’ are at risk of being dominated by neoliberal rhetoric. Indeed, as Maton and Wright contend, the future project of cultural studies, and its place in the academy, depends on our methodological reflexivity and transparency (also see: Johnson et al., 2004).

Inspired by this debate, this chapter attempts to pin down the methodological practices of my cultural studies (within education) project. I argue against a ‘methodological pluralism’ in place of a ‘conscious combination of methods’ (Johnson et al., 2004, p. 4; original emphasis). As well as addressing discourse and semiotic analysis, I consider what I do when I analyse film and write about it, trying to pin down multiple and shifting practices so as to be ‘reflexive’ and ‘transparent’. In the light of post-positivist understandings of research, these attempts are understood as only ever being partial and indeterminate. I attempt to account for my methodology, with the understanding of methodology as being far from simple, rational and coherent. Methodology is a:

... disposition rather than a procedure — a reflexive process of continually situating, framing and characterising the procedural status of your inquiry: how is it going? Is it ok or not ok?’ (Gough, 2002, p. 8.)

Entering the politics of reflexivity and transparency, this chapter attempts to address the ‘how so’ and the ‘how to do’ of research (sometimes differentiated as ‘methods’ and ‘methodology’ [see: Usher, 1997]), while taking stock to ask ‘how is it going’?

Part II — Why Method?

(i) The Text

The broad methodological orientation in this study is textual analysis. The text in this context is popular film and selective extra-cinematic texts (such as interviews and DVD extras) but also a much broader idea of the text, where ‘the text’ can potentially be anything and everything connected to and surrounding film, including elements of production, reception and specific social and cultural contexts and subjectivities. The text is more
than what can be read (writing, statistics) and heard (interviews, conversations) but what can be seen and felt as well (Silverman, 2006). But far from the text existing in a pre-discursive realm waiting to be deciphered and critiqued, the text is an object of symbolic meaning for researchers and readers (Parker, 1999). Thus, it is the textual analysis, rather than the text, that poses the questions that research sets out to answer (Belsey, 2005, p. 167). Textual analysis is challenging since it depends on a ‘grasp of how meaning works’; what is knowable, the relationship between the knower and the known; and how such knowledge is sought (see: Belsey, 2005, p. 163; also see: Gough, 2002). Interpretation is thus understood as the effect of a relation between reader and the text:

Meaning is not at the disposal of the individual, and not, whatever stout common sense may indicate, a matter of intention, an isolatable ‘idea’, fully formed to its inscription. We learn to mean from the outside, from a language ... Ideas do not come first and cast around for a means of expression. On the contrary ... [m]eaning, then, subsists in the relations between people, inscribed in sounds or images (Belsey, 2005, p. 163).

Since textual meaning comes about through interaction between the ‘text’ and the analyst as ‘reader’, meaning is inevitably plural — not infinitely plural, because meaning is made at a particular historical and cultural moment, but plural nonetheless (Belsey, 2005). Specifically, the approaches of discourse analysis and semiotic analysis are useful methods in drawing attention to the way texts are formed and meaning is made. Instead of trying to find the ‘correct’ or ‘real’ meaning of the text or a ‘kind of textual innocence’ (MacLure, 2003, p. 103), this project traces the text through contexts of discursive and semiotic systems, asking ‘questions about its contradictions, how it is constructed and what it does’ (Parker, 1999, p. 5).

(ii) Discourse Analysis

There are a ‘bewildering variety’ of approaches to the study of texts that go under the heading of ‘discourse analysis’ (Parker, 1999, p. 3; also see: Lee, 2000; MacLure, 2003). Ten years ago, Lee & Poynton (2000) noted that there was very little literature available to support researchers to develop a
repertoire of techniques, or an actual ‘how to’ do discourse analysis. Now there is a growing body of such literature (mostly inspired by Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis [see: Fairclough, 2003; 1995]) within the education, social science and cultural research fields. In general, discourse is widely understood as primarily being about language, statements that structure the way a thing is thought and ‘the way we act on the basis of that thinking’ (Rose, 2007, p. 142). In other words, discourse is a particular knowledge through ‘language with its own rules and conventions and the institutions within which the discourse is produced and circulated’ (Nead, 1988; as cited in Rose, 2007, p. 142). However, it is important to emphasise a Foucauldian way of understanding discourse. While a ‘how to’ of this Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis is less common, there is a growing body of literature in this regard (in education specifically, see: Walshaw, 2007; Kendall & Wickham, 1999). Foucault (1972, p. 49) writes that discourse is not restricted to language, as discourses are ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’. In this sense, discursive practices are performative and constitutive, making and remaking objects, texts and subjectivities that ‘may be visual or spatial, that may comprise face-to-face interactions … [and] include all the things that we see, refer to and take for granted as actually existing ‘out there’ (Parker, 1999, p. 3; also see Gee, 1999). As Stuart Hall argues:

... a thinking of discourse as both what is said and what is done, which breaks down the distinction between language (discourse in the narrow sense) and practice, is much closer to what I think [Foucault] intends than just language, but this is not always how he uses the term himself. Unfortunately, most people who use the word discourse think he is talking about what people say. For me, the only function of discourse is to end the action/language distinction (Hall interviewed in Osborne & Segal, 1999, p. 398).

A particular knowledge about the world, discourse shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it. A study of the production of discourse is a study of how we know what we know or how knowledge comes to be legitimated. As Ian Parker (1999, p. 1) observes, not confining discourse to speech and writing means ‘discourse may be studied wherever there is meaning’.
Semiotically, discourse is understood as always presenting simultaneous practices of ‘images, sound, text and talk’ (Simon, 1992, p. 41). Through a turn towards the visual, or ‘taking images seriously’, Gillian Rose (2007) argues for a visual methodology, where the visual is acknowledged as expressly ‘discursive’. A visual orientation in our research, as she writes:

... will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable, for example, and subjects will be produced and act within that field of vision (p. 143).

Following this, such a method is useful to rethink the social conditions, constructions of difference, and the possible effects of the image, not only in terms of what the research analyses, but as embodied in the research itself. Visual methodology calls us to reconsider how we look at the image, the film and/or any visual text, but it states that all ways of seeing are historically, geographically, culturally and socially specific. For de Lauretis, ‘imaging’ is a practice, a process of articulation of meaning to images, and the express engagement of subjectivity in that process. The visual, then, can be understood more specifically as a kind of ‘mapping of social vision into subjectivity’ (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 8), a performative practice of making (research) subjects and research(ers).

(iii) Film as Discourse?

In this sense, film, its visual, aural and affective techniques, its texts, elements, practices and relationships, are all ‘discursive’. As noted previously, Fuery (2000) analyses film through Foucauldian ideas of discourse, considering the discourses within the film, and in the discursive structures of film culture more broadly (p. 61; also see: Cary, 2006). Such a double-focus approach echoes Rose’s (2007) visual methodology, where she explores how knowledge is constructed as real, truthful or natural through regimes of truth as they are located in any one film; and also in the wider cultural and social context. Broadly, these two separate but interrelated discursive contexts suggest two distinct kinds of discourse analysis. In terms of film, this requires, on one hand, a focus on a particular film or selection of films and their specific practices and conventions. On
the other hand, what is required is a consideration of institutional, social and cultural practices and conventions that surround these films, and also the potential interactions with these films, as significant to the meanings made. It is rare to find work that conducts both forms of discourse analysis, and usually two very different types of research work are produced as a result (N. Green, 1990; also see: MacLure, 2003). This thesis is concerned with both types of analysis, focused on individual and grouped films, and also the place of these films in their wider discursive socio-cultural context. This study looks closely at the cinematic screen, but also beyond it to think more broadly in terms of the ways that contemporary Western societies practice subjectivity.

The following chapters, however, do not separate the text from the context (as if this was possible), nor are these two different approaches conducted under separate headings or in separate ways. Since text and context are tightly bound, the analysis addresses both simultaneously, at times drawing out one of these focal points, then drawing out the other as the analysis ‘requires’. A text never exists separately from its context (Dalton, 2004). When a reader engages a text, the act is never separated from other (and possibly competing) texts that the reader had engaged with, nor from the reader’s own lived experience:

Because of their incompleteness, all popular texts have leaky boundaries; they flow into each other, they flow into everyday life ... Popular culture can be studied only intertextually, for it exists only in this intertextual circulation. The interrelationships between primary and secondary texts cross all boundaries between them; equally, those between tertiary and other texts cross the boundaries between text and life (Fiske, 1992, p. 126; also see: Brabazon, 2005; Dalton, 2004; de Lauretis, 1984).

Following this, the world created on the cinematic screen, the act of engagement with it, and the world off the screen, are all ‘texts’, flowing into each other so that clear distinctions are impossible.

Popular films circulate and (re)create the discourses of social life into cinematic narrative. Rather than reflecting a reality external to the on-screen world, films transfer from one discursive field to another. Social life,
as performative, as constituted in this blurry intertextual space are *simulacra*, ‘technologies’ of ‘truth’ that ‘hide the fact there is none’ (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1). Thus, distinction between ‘real life’ and the text is invalid, since the way ‘real life’ comes to be known is through textuality, through discourse.

(iv) Social Semiotic Analysis

Initially, my concern with semiotics was that it could not surrender its structuralist roots in that it needed to pin down the ‘dominant codes or myths or referent systems that underlie the surface appearance of signs’ (Rose, 2007, p. 144). Semiotics has made assumptions that images were ‘directly absorbed’ by viewers, that each image is ‘immediately readable and meaningful in and of itself’, regardless of context or the ‘circumstances of production, circulation and reception’ (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 380). It was as if the viewer was simply ‘historically innocent and purely receptive’ (de Lauretis, p. 380). However, after taking onboard Threadgold’s (2000) notion that those of us working in post-positivist paradigms must utilise structuralist methodologies (‘albeit with a different understanding of why we do them’ [p. 40]), semiotics was reconsidered as a potential generative approach to the film analysis conducted here. It was the work of Simon (1992), Green (1995) and Burn’s (2009) reading of Green that enabled a way into the semiotic tradition through the social semiotics proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996; 2000) (also see: Hodge & Kress [1988]; de Lauretis [1984; 1989]). Here, while semiotics offered a ‘very full box’ of analytical ‘tools’ for analysing texts (Rose, 2007, pp. 74, 76), the benefits of a post-structuralist emphasis on ‘fluidity and contingency of meaning’ was maintained (Burn, 2009, p. 3). Green’s (1995) ‘critical-postmodernist pedagogy’ articulated a dynamic way of coming to popular culture, textuality, rhetoric and representation as primary foci in critical, creative and semiotic terms. Convincingly calling for the bringing together of social semiotics and cultural studies in contemporary (education) research, Burn argues that social semiotics’ ‘strong idea of textual structures and social meanings’, and cultural studies’ attention to ‘contexts, cultures and
lifestyles’ (p. 21) would be useful here. A move to broaden the notion of the semiotic (as discursive, as social/cultural and as questions of design, production, distribution and interpretation) while also conducting a close textual analysis would ideally prove invaluable in this regard (for example see: Cranny-Francis, 1992; Bal, 1999).

This social semiotic or cultural-semiotic studies approach enables a close analysis of the text (such as its designs and discursivity) while potentially exploring how the text might work in relation to broader systems of meaning (Rose, 2007, pp. 74, 76). In terms of effect, the social semioticians observed ‘affordances’ or the different interpretations and relationships to the image depending on spectator needs, interests and the specificities of any given situation (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Van Leeuwen, 2005). This sense of semiotics is useful here as a way to consider film, particularly its close attention to the text, connecting to but going beyond conventional meanings of the sign. Thinking of film in terms of codes and signs is also useful in a genealogical sense where meaning is not essentialised at the site of the image but, rather, as a result of historical and changing contexts.

This semiotic turn suggests a shift from seeing cinema as an apparatus of representation per se or ‘an image machine developed to construct images or visions of social reality and the spectator’s place in it’ (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 37). Since cinema is directly implicated in the production and reproduction of meanings in both sociality and subjectivity:

... it should better be understood as a signifying practice, a work of semiosis: a work that produces effects of meaning and perception, self-images and subject positions for all those involved, makers and viewers; and thus a semiotic process in which the subject is continually engaged.... (de Lauretis, p. 37).

(v) The ‘How To’?

A discursive analysis of film that pays attention to the semiotic, for instance, places focus on how discourse produces effects of truth. Specifically, in this study, this kind of analysis required the employment of a number of different practices and techniques. Deconstruction was utilised, understood as a method of ‘making foreign’ (Derrida & Caputo,
the troubling of binaries and ‘making strange’ the discourses that have become commonsense, including a teasing out of incoherencies and contradictions within those discourses (Belsey, 2005, p. 170; also see Søndergaard, 2002). As Rose (2007, p. 164) writes:

Discursive formations have structures but that does not necessarily imply that they are logical or coherent. Indeed part of the power of a specific discursive formation may rest precisely on the multiplicity of different arguments that can be produced in its terms.

Following this, careful exploration of potential interpretive repertoires and contexts is required through what is largely complex, conflictual and contradictory discourse. Deconstruction not only describes, but consciously disturbs existing regimes of truth, potentially rethinking ‘again and differently’ the normalising subjectivating processes that work to constitute subjects (Youdell, 2006, p. 519). Problematising the normative, conventional and collective ‘storylines’ that work to privilege certain practices, categories and subjectivities, is another useful orientation of the discourse analytic (Søndergaard, 2002). Focused on process rather than just narrative or plot in simple terms, this dissertation scrutinises the (un)familiar and (un)repetitious storylines that appear on the film screen and frame the way we know ourselves and our place in the world off the screen. How available but heterogeneous storylines can support or challenge each other in, for instance, coming-of-age stories about the youth subject, stories about young ‘emotional’ women or the relations between the ‘generations’, are considered through this focus on well-established storylines. Erica McWilliam (1999) suggests that thinking differently about entrenched knowledges is often impossible, difficult or even dangerous. Questions about ways of knowing, and the possibilities of being, are questions about power and subjectivity, notably with regard to whose knowledge is made and legitimitated and with all the ‘ambiguous costs and benefits’ that this entails (N. Rose, 1996, p. 17). ‘Details matter’ in this form of analysis, ‘close readings’ are necessary and the researcher must also ‘keep an eye to what is not seen or said’ (G. Rose, 2007, p. 164). This type of analysis involves a prolonged engagement (‘the long preliminary soak’ [Hall, 1975 p. 15]) with the chosen text using semiotic,
narrative, genre or rhetorical approaches to textual analysis. Key practices here include asking questions, interrupting, contending, supposing and other linguistic, literary-critical, rhetorical and semiotic interpretive strategies (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240–1; also see: de Lauretis, 1984).

Involving a complex immersion in the data to make connections, genealogy or the ‘history of the present’ (Foucault, 1975, p. 31) was another method employed in this dissertation. A method of historical analysis where ‘history’ is not taken as a smooth, stable or progressive process (see: Scheurich, 1997; Tamboukou, 1999), genealogy takes into account the historical underpinnings of present-day ‘truths’ and how they come to be constituted and understood (see: Foucault (1972) and his genealogical work on madness (1973) and sexuality (1976); also see the genealogical approaches of N. Rose (1996, 1999) on subjectivity; Lesko (2001) on adolescence). ‘Truth’, conceptualised as constituted and contextual, destabilises meaning and signals that it ‘emerged from somewhere, that it was created’ (Harwood & Rasmussen, 2007, p. 36). To analyse the objects or texts of study, the research must first ‘reconstruct them as an object of knowledge in historical context before interpreting them’ (Ashplant & Smyth, 2001, p. 5). Beginning with a single text, object or practice, a genealogical analysis quickly leads to the inclusion of a ‘vast accumulation of source materials’ (Foucault, 1998/1971, p. 370). Through various practices such as rupturing of ‘apparently continuous truths’, genealogy problematises the very terms and concepts through which we know and understand a topic, making connections and highlighting how and why certain discourses emerged and became popular (Harwood & Rasmussen, 2007, p. 35; also see: Lesko, 2001; Fuery, 2000). Describing that which is being researched, this method enables the context within which the research is being carried out to be assessed.

Avoiding formal attempts at a narrowed genealogical methodology, N. Rose (1999) identifies a number of general practical orientations, for instance problematizations (how certain social ‘problems’ emerge as a problem), explanations (the explanations and operative concepts that
makes them possible), technologies (the techniques and apparatuses used to establish this problem and related discourses) and subjectivities (as coherent, fixed and knowable). In various ways this thesis is a ‘history of the present’, seeing contemporary contexts, texts and practices as products of historical formations. It attempts to acknowledge genealogies of various discourses that are significant to this particular study on Australian films about youth, including youth as age-based, gendered and sexed subjectivities. The study also analyses the technologies of film as it establishes (youthful) subjectivities. As well as drawing from the work of Foucault, N. Rose and Lesko, I refer to key socio-cultural literature that addresses particular historically contingent discursive formations that are revisited in this study, including ‘the larrikin’, the ‘scrubber’, the ‘bad girl’ and the ‘outsider’. How is it possible to ‘know that, to think that, to say that’ (Threadgold, 2000, p. 49) in ways that make the youth subject intelligible? These are the questions that are important here. The difficulty with textual analysis, argues G. Rose (2007) (and something certainly experienced in this study), is that since texts are so interconnected with other texts, discourses and contexts, the researcher has a difficult task of knowing when to stop making those links. Nonetheless, choices were made for the purposes of this study and limits to what could be said here were put in place.

In Chapter Three (Larrikin Pedagogue: Ben Mendelsohn and young Aussie manhood), a range of films and extra-cinematic material relating to actor Ben Mendelsohn was analysed with regard to discourses about being young, being male and being Australian vis a vis Mendelsohn’s reiterations of the masculine, roguish, destructive ‘larrikin’. Multiple, complex and contradictory discursive filmic techniques and social practices were also considered. Expanding on the Mendelsohn chapter, Chapter Four (‘Old Enough to Know Better’: Learning to become men in Idiot Box) explores the discursive signifiers of work, girls, love and sexuality, motherhood, mateship and ‘generation’. Chapters Five and Six consider the discursive practices of the performativity of girls’ ‘coming-of-age’. ‘On the Brink’:
Learning lessons about becoming a woman in Caterpillar Wish, Peaches and Somersault addresses the filmic and narrative technologies that work to position girl protagonists through ‘psycho-sexual’ discourses, analysing, for instance, values of place, landscape, affect and musical/sound score. These technologies intersect with wider social discourses notwithstanding femininity and developmental adolescence. In its companion chapter, ‘You Can’t Get Clean Water from a Dirty Tank’: The ‘bad girl’ of Suburban Mayhem, the discursively formed ‘bad girl’ is observed through the tensions of femininity, youth-hood, working-class life, suburbia and sexuality. Issues of production and reception are also considered. In the final data chapter, ‘May You Live Normally Ever After!’: Youth-hood, ‘generation’ and pedagogy, a number of key scenes from a selection of films are considered. The way in which discursive formations of the normative self are played with, challenged and reinscribed by key outsider characters, both ‘young’ and ‘old’, is observed. Analysis occurs across all the chapters of this dissertation in terms of the youth subject of Australian film post-1980. This thesis rethinks the discourses that work to constitute the youth subject within the film texts, but does more than this, it can be argued, in that these filmic constitutions are understood as just one of the ways contemporary Western societies practice subjectivity, governing subjects and inciting the government of the self. Such practices have potential effects off the screen and so looking across all the chapters of this dissertation also means looking beyond the selection of films to the wider socio-cultural context to broad practices of subjectification.

Although the study evaluates the data in a ‘patient and meticulous’ way, ‘scratching over’ and again the texts under analysis (Foucault, 1998/1971, p. 369), its explanations, while generative, are only ever ‘tentative’ (Foucault, 1981, p. 4). Although rigorous and methodical, the analysis above is not quantifiable in the sense that the interrogation, or its results, can be measured and assessed in a straightforward, deterministic way. What has emerged out of this discursive analytic is a range of varied, localised activities, with differentiated results. At times the design
elements of the film are in focus, including an analysis of semiotic features, composition, lighting, camera techniques, special effects, framing, costume, set, design, narrative and characterisation. Here a character’s gesture, a flick of the hair, a sigh, sad piano music or an impatient stare might become significant to the analysis. One key scene or an isolated image can potentially be a rich source of ‘data’ while at other times a whole host of films or practices are generative. Other films, related practices and key discourses also enter into the analysis, sometimes through engagement with secondary literature and/or through the intertextual act of film-viewing/analysis itself. In the Mendelsohn chapter, for instance, the actor’s discursive on-screen and off-screen personas are considered alongside each other, whereas in the ‘bad girl’ chapter, traditional ideas of femininity meet contemporary notions of ‘Girlpower’. Although connected through theoretical and methodological direction, the practices of analysis employed here are particular to the individual chapter and analysis itself. As seen in this study, there is no standard or set way in which discourse analysis can be enacted but the way it is conducted and the particularities of the approach, as mobilised here, are important. There is no single formulae that can be applied in regards to discourse analysis and the analysis itself is not an encounter that is necessarily repeatable. Certainly the chapters contained here look different, even though discourse analysis was applied within all.

**Part III — Constructing the Data**

The data of my thesis is a selection of Australian films post-1980 that are concerned with the youth subject and, in addition, relevant extra-cinematic material including interviews, reviews and DVD extras. But as Petersen, following Stainton-Rogers, argues:

... ‘data’ is not something lying independently out there waiting to be ‘gathered’ or ‘collected’, but rather, it is material, ‘text’, generated and used by researchers who are, perhaps not consciously or reflexively, but nevertheless, (theoretically) informed and positioned in various ways (Petersen, 2003, p. 71; Stainton-Rogers, 2000 as cited in Petersen, 2003, p. 71).
While Australian film, for instance, may appear as an independent collection of coherent objects or texts available for analysis ‘out there’, in a post-positivist sense this particular set of data has been constituted by the research process. This intentional ‘gathering’ of ‘data’ occurs through the researcher’s epistemological and theoretical perspectives, knowledges and biases. For post-structuralist researchers, an examination of the constitution of data must occur to interrogate the materials and methods of research. Simply put, this data, like all data, are empirically unverifiable, a product of ‘fictions which function in truth’ (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 60).

Replacing the term and concept of ‘data’ with ‘creata’, as Petersen (2003) proposes, highlights that data is a creation, a post-positivist attempt to disrupt historically powerful commonsense ways of thinking about research:

The point of ‘creata’ is that data are generated, and generated from (multiple and changing) somewhere(s), rather than innocently gathered from the pre-discursive reality and only become discursive the moment they are read and re-presented (p. 71).

The textual knowledges generated as a result of the research endeavour occur in relation to the practices of analysis, be they social, cultural, political and/or personal. The constitution and analysis of data occurs through engagements with secondary sources and encounters with other scholarly and popular culture texts. ‘There is no such thing as a ‘pure’ reading’ (Belsey, 2005, p. 160) and research neither ‘speaks itself nor disappears in favour of a master decoder. The codes of the world are not still, waiting to be read’ (Haraway, 1991, p. 198). In this sense, the way texts, objects and practices are constructed as data, and the boundaries drawn around the data as ‘evidence’, must be interrogated in terms of the role the researcher has played in their constitution and in the agency of the researcher’s interpretation.

Questions about which data should be expanded to what counts as data and how it comes to matter as data. ‘Research’ is a way of seeing and doing a range of discursive practices whose boundaries shift in relation to its meaning-making processes, the positioning of the research and the
positioning of the researcher. McLeod and Thomson (2009) argue that theoretical and methodological paradigms produce the realities we come to depend on and which we attempt to capture. Key concepts, significant to many research endeavours like continuity, change and generation, are all ‘perspective[s] brought about by our gaze and identification’ (p. 123). Haraway’s situated knowledges is about recognising how researchers are implicated in their own representational practice, not as if they have a ‘conquering gaze from nowhere’, but are never innocent in their seeing (Haraway, 1991, p. 188; also see G. Rose, 2007). Being aware of the discourses created and maintained in any given study becomes key, as is the problematisation of common research tropes such as ‘the data suggests’ or ‘as evidenced in the data’ (Petersen, 2003). This emphasises the agency of the researcher and underscores the research project as fiction — ‘creata’. Simply put, our research practices are thus positioned (constituted by historically contingent structures), as well as positioning (constitutive of constructions) and both the positioning and the positioned should be considered in post-positivist analysis (Petersen, 2003).

(i) How These Films Became Data

The symbolic structures of this thesis, ‘Australian film’, ‘popular film’, ‘post-1980’ and the ‘youth subject’, must be understood as categories as a result of perspective and positioning. As highlighted above, data does not exist as a bounded and coherent set of texts but ‘gathered’ as ‘texts’, constructed and delimited as the object of analysis. This set of texts comes to hold symbolic meaning to the researcher and/or its reader (Parker, 1999, p. 4). The ten-plus films analysed in this dissertation are all full-length feature films, Australian in origin, post-1980 and are concerned with the youth subject. However, these are leaky boundaries placed upon these texts for the purposes of this research. The choice of films and the textual analysis that will be undertaken, are wholly constrained by my own knowledge of films that represent the youth subject, the discourses that I see and name, and my capacity to represent them. ‘Australia’ is taken as a cultural-symbolic, a discursive understanding of a national trope that potentially
holds meaning for ‘the Nation’, film institutions and individuals (see: O’Regan, 1996; Turner, 1992).

Giving an overview of Australian film history, Turner (1994/1995) argues that Australia as a national identity was initially radical in that fledging Australian films in the 1970s attempted to define themselves in opposition to conservative English culture. In the late 1980s, however, Australian identity became linked to nationalist ideologies marked by conservatism and ‘official process[es] of nation formation’ (Turner 1994/1995, p. 32; also see Dermody & Jacka, 1988). By the 1990s/2000s, so heterogeneous had Australian identity become that a clearly defined and monocultural notion of Australian was highly problematic. Taking this filmic and discursive history of Australian (film) identity into account, Australian is used in this dissertation to stress its performativity as a historical discursive technology (that is, discursive and pedagogic knowledge and practice of (self)government [see Foucault, 1988; McWilliam, 1996]), which works to constitute objects, texts, practices and subjectivities in particular ways and, furthermore, as a value that cannot be replicated. The positivist implications of Australian must be problematised (in either and all radical/conservative forms), even while these Australian films are, in a sense, taken as not only having something in common, like a ‘social imaginary’ (Dermody & Jacka, 1988), but as speaking in a coherent manner and within a particular time and place. Even while there exists a rationale in doing so, that these Australian films can talk to and against each other and can be grouped together is by no means ‘natural’ or inevitable. Here the cognisance of Australian film as a collective body of work (and as against non-Australian contexts) is a generative, albeit problematic, way to proceed.

The ‘popular’ in ‘popular film’ is also problematic in that it refers to a ‘populace’ as if essentialised and homogenous.14 ‘Popular’ is clearly a

14 I acknowledge that there many other definitions of ‘popular’ in ‘popular culture’ than the one recognised here. However, my interest is not to catalogue them in a fixed way, but rather, to consider the constructed nature of the ‘popular’, and in what sense it is mobilised in this dissertation.
construction, then, but rather than arguing that it is artificially placed upon complex and diverse audiences who should be recognised individually and specifically, this study uses ‘popular’ as a way to think about practices of audiencing, a way of addressing and producing texts with imagined/ideal/‘real’ audiences in mind. In this sense, discursive formations of the ‘popular’ are performativé, constituting and speaking to a mass audience as viewers of these films and others like it. While such hailing practices attempt to identify audiences this way, and limit their ways of engaging, they by no means determine the interaction that is possible. ‘Popular’, then, signifies the complex relationships that popular audiences may have with the popular culture text: the conservativeness of consumption and market practices and, simultaneously, the particular investments of agentic audiences (see: Brabazon, 2005; Lee, 2010). ‘Popular’ also suggests something about circulation, in that the film is in relatively widespread or mass circulation (without necessarily dwelling on ideas of box office takings). Here the form of the film (as distinct from documentaries or art films, for instance) and the various production practices bound to it, are significant. Furthermore, both Australian and popular implies a generic audience as if well-versed in Australian films (Collins & Davis, 2004, p. 25), and as if this audience shares a system of meaning and a more or less stable boundary between this ‘cultural domain’ and another (Petersen, 2003, p. 29).

‘Post-1980’ is an arbitrary classification; however, what is recognised here is a historical location, a period in Australian filmmaking, commonly referred to as the ‘revival’ (see: Dermody & Jacka, 1988; McFarlane, 1987; Stratton, 1980; Turner, 1994/1995), where, with government funding, Australian films began commercial production in the mid-1970s. This thesis selects key films as data from a period immediately after this initial flourish of filmmaking activity in particular to observe those films in the ‘social landscape’ tradition of Australian film (see: Morris, 1989, p. 132; also see Dermody & Jacka, 1988). Here, amongst other things, children and young people were often the focus of subject matter (often referred to as youth
cycle films [see: Dermody & Jacka, 1988; McFarlane, 1987; Stratton, 1980]). Analysis could have as justifiably been conducted on films made at other times or in other contexts (UK, USA or non-Western, for instance) and more could have been made of box office takings, film industries, specific film audiences or particular youth markets. However, these possibilities were marginalised in order for a rich textual analysis of specific films to occur and also due to other pragmatic constraints such as time restrictions upon the project and spatial limitations to the thesis text.

A case could be made for a selection of films as being ‘youth films’ in the Australian context (see: Gottschall, 2010; Speed, 2006; Moran, 2006; Caputo, 1993; Cogan, 1993; Stratton, 1990; Dermody & Jacka, 1988; McFarlane, 1987). The films themselves could be grouped according to similarities in theme or narrative, particular markets targeting youth and/or specific engagements by youth audiences. But I wanted to avoid demarcating a selection of texts in this way, and the possible over-determination that could result. Rather, these texts are recognised as films about youth (rather than for youth per se [see: Stratton, 1990]), which places focus on the discursive production of the youth subject within (and beyond) the popular culture text. I also wanted to avoid making assumptions about youth markets, youth culture or the way youth audiences consume or resist youth films, as if these films automatically meet the youth audience. This shift places emphasis on popular film as subjectification, as pedagogical, as performative; a (self)governing and reiterative practice by which objects, texts and subjectivities come to be known through the truth regime named ‘youth’. In this regard, it turns attention to the way popular audiences, not just the popular youth audience, might come to understand these films about youth, and further, what the possibilities might be for how contemporary Western societies come to know youth.

In regard to the extra-cinematic materials considered in this study, they are recognised as data that complicates the primary film texts under analysis, complementing and/or problematising the stories that emerge in and
through the film. Locating this material required systematic searches in library and newspaper databases and internet searches for promotional materials, interviews and reviews. The DVD extras also proved useful, in that directors, cinematographers and costume designers, for example, are often interviewed, (re)constituting their relationship to the film and discussing its meaning/s. This collection of materials provided me with useful insights into for instance, filmmakers’ visions, the way the film was received by critics and general audiences, and so on, and was a key space in which to consider some elements of production and reception. However, this data should not be accepted as more truthful versions than the films they go about cataloguing. Like the selection of films in this thesis, this extra-cinematic material is also constructed through social discourse and the research endeavour. Indeed, another researcher working in the same area would undoubtedly have another selection, and thus the idiosyncratic nature of all research is highlighted.

(ii) Methods in Coming to Choose my Data

While close readings were conducted of ten films, many more are referred to in the dissertation and many more provided a context for the films under analysis. The activity of reading/spectating involves intertextuality in that the spectator continually responds to a film through a variety of other films and textual knowledge (see: Fuery, 2000; Brabazon, 2005). De Lauretis (1984) takes this intertextuality further, understanding that spectators are themselves intertextual constructions, not merely ‘in the film text or simply outside the film text’; rather, ‘they intersect the film as they are intersected by cinema’ (p. 44) and the discursive formations that make meaning possible. Cinema’s images affect the spectator as a subjective production and so ‘the movement of the film actually inscribes and orients desire’ (de Lauretis, p. 8). Following this, ‘[c]inematic representation can then be understood more specifically as a kind of mapping of social vision onto subjectivity’ (de Lauretis, p. 8). As Claire Johnson contends, film can:

... no longer been seen simply in terms of the affectivity of a system of representation, but rather as a production of and by subjects already in social practices which always involve heterogeneous and
often contradictory positions ... [They are] more than mere subjects of a single text (Johnson, 1980; as cited in de Lauretis, 1984, p. 44).

How we see and how we come to know, then, depends on the capacities of the spectator/researcher to recognise references and make connections. Clearly different and multiple meanings result, according to the connections made (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 54). Reading intertextually means noting moments in the films that felt familiar, were repetitious or had particular resonance with the researcher as a spectating subject (see: Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul, 1997). Certainly the content of the film influenced the final selection more than any other factor, including date released, box office takings, critical acclaim (or not), funding bodies, etc. In this thesis I do not seek to count, measure or make quantifiable particular filmic elements. Rather, interpretive methods are used to evaluate sources qualitatively. Theoretical and purposeful sampling (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; also see: Silverman, 2006) was employed throughout this process, constantly narrowing down and short-listing the final selection of films. The benefit of theoretical and purposeful sampling is that the:

... researcher manipulates their analysis, theory and sampling activities interactively during the research process, to a much greater extent than in statistical sampling (Mason, 2002, p. 138).

Interactive searching, watching, categorising and short-listing were only a part of the many methods and practices employed in the selection of data, including continual watching and rewatching of scenes and whole films; reading reviews, synopses and secondary accounts; description, interpretation, explanation; writing and rewriting the films into thesis form; and a whole host of practices, frustrations and thought-processes that are not so easy to ‘document’ or assess.

While I might draw boundaries around and fix the data and research findings to demonstrate the knowledge ‘found’, I am simultaneously trying to be sceptical about the claims of this research, the ‘empiricist and realist semiotic “technologies” and rhetorics and subject positions I invoke’ (Petersen, 2003, p. 72). There is, nonetheless, the concern that more needs to be captured and more effectively. While only (why ‘only’?) ten films
Chapter 3: Questions of Method

were analysed, I attempted to view every film made in Australia from 1970 to the present day concerning the youth subject. This is not only an ambitious task, but an impossible one. Time, volume and cost were all determining factors here, as was accessibility. While making use of university libraries including interlibrary loans, several local city libraries, commercial video stores in the region and online DVD stores, many Australian films from the 1970s and 1980s simply were not released on video or DVD. Furthermore, those that are available on video are rare and many libraries have a no-lend policy. In the end, about 260 Australian films were watched. While these other films provided me with valuable context, it is appropriate to question why it was felt necessary to see them ‘all’. The satisfaction gained from making lists and consulting catalogues felt like ‘real’ research, like real ‘discoveries’ were made, and such practices were also undertaken with the intention of being more ‘thorough’, more ‘expert’ and as a means to legitimate my claims. Again, though, it must be stressed that this project is partial and anti-essentialist. Even if every Australian film from 1970 to the present day has been viewed, this would not mean a greater, truer or necessarily more valuable project. How quantification can be seductive in this context is significant here. Instead, the ‘quality’ of texts, understood as how the researcher found them generative, should be the focus here; ‘what matters is the richness of textual details, rather than the number of texts analysed’ (Tonkiss, 1998; as cited in G. Rose, 2007, p. 150).

Still, I am particularly regretful of the absences in this study. For instance, films looking at the Indigenous youth subject did not make the final edit of this dissertation even though work was carried out in this area. But these are the choices that are made, often for pragmatic reasons like spatial restrictions and coherency. While I understand the films chosen in the context of the normalisation of whiteness and Australian cinema after Mabo (that is, in a post-colonial context of Australia as occupied territory [see: Collins & Davis, 2004]), this is still a political and personal disappointment. Post-structuralist scholars remind us that tendencies to
present the research as over-determined and finished must be avoided. The thesis cannot be taken as if it speaks with such great authority that it needs no further consideration, or that the selection of data did indeed hold the truth to be discovered, or that the diligent researcher uncovered and ‘solved’ it (Belsey, 2005). As Søndergaard argues:

Even though post-structuralists attempt to develop forms of knowledge which avoid essentialism, there is a sense in which essentialism cannot be avoided. One cannot avoid speaking things into existence [and] the way we speak things into existence creates a discursive essentialism. One can, as many modernist researchers have done, attempt to canonize one’s own essentialisms as the truth. Or one can, as a post-structuralist, define one’s own essentialisms as constructed and situated statements undergoing constant change (Søndergaard, 1999 as cited in Petersen, 2003, p. 4).

What this thesis represents, then, is a collection of analyses that has ‘reduced [some] ignorance’ (Gough, 2002, p. 3) and, ideally, generated more questions than answers. Absences in the research ideally point out, rather than ignore, the number of different possibilities that could have been had. These weaknesses and ‘failures’ are potentially generative in that they point towards further study in the future. This thesis is a conventional analysis, a piece of a prose that I play a part in as ‘researcher’, positioning myself as ‘expert’, performing rigour and knowingsness. Although it remains an object of desire of the intellectual endeavour, there is no one final signified — either in the text or the textual analysis (Belsey, 2005). As I have stressed above, post-positivist research understands that all products of research, and all representational texts that try to account for the research endeavour, are only ever partial and unfinished. They are not products of truth, but rather representative of partial knowings. Although in social and cultural research we may experience the need to know and the need to present a product that is authoritative, for those of us in post-positivist paradigms, we are ideally released ‘from [the] pressure of having to say it all in a single text’ (Richardson, 2000, p. 929).
The film analysis is covered in the following five data chapters. A range of Ben Mendelsohn films form the focus of the first data chapter. *Idiot Box* (with reference to *Pulp Fiction*) is prominent in the second data chapter. *Caterpillar Wish, Somersault, Peaches* and *Suburban Mayhem* are the films under analysis in the two chapters on girlhood. Finally, *The Rage In Placid Lake, Hey Hey it’s Esther Blueburger, Spider & Rose, Crackers* and *Blurred* are the films that feature in the final data chapter. Pinning down exactly how these films, and not others, were selected is not an easy or straightforward task. Indeed, much still remains unaccounted for and unaccountable. As noted above, textual knowledges generated in the course of research occur in relation to the practices of analysis amidst a whole host of cultural, historical, personal and prosaic factors.

The figure of Ben Mendelsohn was identified or, more accurately, constituted in this study as the quintessential youth(ful) subject, ‘pedagogue’ (Dyson, 1993; Morris, 2001) and pedagogic text of Australian film. That no other Australian actor has embodied or reiterated his roguish masculine trope in such a way for such a sustained period became a significant justification for the choice of ‘Ben Mendelsohn’ as textual data for this study. As a result, Mendelsohn’s complete filmic catalogue became justified as being significant. In addition, Mendelsohn’s ‘real life’ persona was positioned as informing his on-screen persona and vice versa and thus a host of extra-cinematic texts was ‘reasonably’ analysed.

Wanting to then focus in on one of Mendelsohn’s films in more detail, *Idiot Box* was selected as the focus for the next chapter about youthful masculinities. This film was already well known to me, as a favourite of mine. Through the course of analysing the youthful masculinities constituted in *Idiot Box, I ‘discovered’* that this Australian film was drawing from the American film *Pulp Fiction* in various ways, notwithstanding its practices of audiencing. This intertextual reading was justified as being significant to the exploration of the way the film text was designed to
pedagogically constitute ‘Generation X’ subjects, both on and off the screen.

The films selected for the girlhood chapters were specially chosen to highlight the literary practice of ‘compare and contrast’ as a way to show that the researcher had thought through the contradictory discourses that form contemporary notions of femininity. *Caterpillar Wish, Somersault* and *Peaches* were recognised as doing similar things at the same time, dealing with the girl subject ‘becoming a woman’ in a rural, moody setting. All three were released within a year of each other and thus they can be constituted as speaking in a kind of unison. *Suburban Mayhem*, as well as being another personal favourite, provided further contrast to these films. Its positioning of suburbia, ‘working-class’ subjectivity, crime, gender and sexuality provided additional links to *Idiot Box*, which gave a rationale of significance to the coherency of the thesis text.

Finally, the films *The Rage In Placid Lake, Hey Hey it’s Esther Blueburger, Spider & Rose, Crackers* and *Blurred* were all regarded fondly in various ways. The youth subjects seen in *The Rage In Placid Lake* and *Hey Hey it’s Esther Blueburger* were explored in terms of being (ab)normalised outsiders. *Spider & Rose* and *Crackers* were positioned as providing key insights into the youth subject in the process of ‘young’ meeting ‘old’; again these films were recognised as if speaking coherently as data sources. *Blurred* captured one scene in particular that I believe illustrates superbly the argument I wanted to present about the youth subject ‘self-reflexively’ playing with youth-hood and the constitution of ‘generation’.

**Part IV — Reflecting on the Research(er)**

What I have attempted to address in this chapter are questions of method, articulating the theoretical and methodological choices made, and practices involved, in the course of this research project. Transparency, truthfulness and coherency were primary concerns, albeit in the light of a ‘methodology of disappointment’ (Stronach & MacLure, 1997) that highlights these practices as problematic. Nonetheless, Lather (1993, p.
Chapter 3: Questions of Method

675) argues that research and knowledge after the advent of the crisis of representation is not the end of representation altogether. Rather, it heralds the end of representation as neutral, transparent or as representing the absolute reality of social life and experience. Engagements in writing, thinking and representing the world can continue but with the understanding that it is not, nor can it be, a truth exercise. As explicit contextual and relational engagements between analysis and writing as cultural production, research practice should be engaged in the conditions of its own ‘production, its assumptions and ascriptions of agency’ (Lee, 2000, p. 201).

Discourse analysis is most often conceived of in terms of what someone does to a particular site or text, for instance, particular tools applied to an outside text or site (Lee & Poynton, 2000). This analytical practice is also accepted as the production of an authoritative account about the text or site, as if it is somehow exterior to the discourse, able to look in and be critical of it from an isolated position due to the ‘privileged’ role of research/er (Lee & Poynton, 2000; Rose, 2007). Rather than a commentary on the relation of power-knowledge between the analyst and the object of analysis, discourse analysts usually continue as if they ‘strip away’ the ‘false consciousness’ to ‘reveal a better truth’ (Lee, 2000, p. 188; also see Hodge & McHoul, 1992). Rather than positioning the text in opposition to the object under analysis, ‘[d]iscourse analysts need to be able to account reflexively for the textuality of their own texts’ since the discursive reading is also a text (Lee, 2000, p. 202). All forms of discourse analysis generate texts about texts (Luke, 1997; Lee, 2000). Post-positivist, particularly post-structuralist, ways of accounting for methodology should problematise the researcher’s analytical authority:

Instead of fictions of representativeness, shielding a will to mastery in commentary, it is important to ask, following Foucault, under what institutional and historical conditions do writers come to be authors? Under what constraints is a particular speaking and writing taking place? (Lee, 2000, p. 196.)
Subsequently, this research attempts to locate its own representations within a ‘politics of text and commentary’ (Hodge & McHoul, 1992), placing its analysis and representational strategies under examination.

(i) Writing as Method

Understanding this thesis text as a deliberate fiction, an act of story-telling in response to the norms of science and logical empiricism and not a factual narrative that reflects certain phenomena and experiences (Tierney, 2002, p. 385; also see MacLure, 2003; Gough, 2003; Lee, 2000; Scheurich, 1997), I seek an end to the oppositional binaries between analysis, method and writing. Writing is usually regarded not as a research method but as a means to present the results of the research, an act that marshals an argument and captures the creative/work done beforehand. But far from the ‘writing up’ or a ‘mopping up’ activity at the end of a research project, writing is the creative and analytical work (Lee, 2000; Richardson, 2000; Cook, 2005; Colyar, 2009). It is a place, a method of discovery and inquiry, a way of:

... finding out about yourself and your topic ... a way of knowing ... a research practice through which we can investigate how we construct the world, ourselves and others and how our practices enable and constrain us (Richardson, 2000, pp. 923–924).

Writing, imagined as ‘foundational, as underlying and shaping research approaches and investigative tools’ (Colyar, 2009, p. 433), places the onus on how the written product of the research is assembled. Making how we write a priority means being modest about its claims and acknowledging that the author is situated within particular discourses and discursive frames. Such an inquiry seemingly contains a paradox: writing is a process of analysis and also a product of the analysis (Cook, 2005). Both process and product, then, are 'deeply entwined' so that writing-as-a-method-of-inquiry (Richardson, 2000, p. 930) is a ‘becoming’ methodology, ideally reflexively taking shape as it continues to be shaped.
(ii) Writing About Film?

Writing creates something new (a *poesis*), a making-meaning practice (Lee, 2000; following Threadgold and Kress; also see Stewart, 2005). In terms of analysis, the method of writing does not merely document, it performs, makes a spectacle, draws in the audience and entertains (Hodge & McHoul, 1992; Lee, 2000; Stewart, 2005; Colyar, 2009). Two problems arise in the analytical practice of writing about film: firstly, conversion of a visual and aural text into a written one; and secondly, the selection of a section of film to write about while keeping it meaningful to the film as a whole (Durmaz, 1999). How to write about cinema is an ‘old problem’ and also one that cinema studies, compared to other disciplines, ‘appears remarkably and surprisingly unreflexive about [as] a methodology’ (Stern & Kouvaros, 1999, p. 6). But, nonetheless, it is a problem that, within the institutional context, can be revisited with renewed rigour (Stern & Kouvaros, 1999). Writing about a film is far from an elementary, self-evident or simple exercise; rather, the positioning that the viewer/researcher/author experiences in coming to the film is central to the critical practice of writing about and analysing it. Authorship is ‘a question of how to bring into existence, how, in the course of analysis, to evoke for a reader that lost object’ (Stern & Kouvaros, p. 7). Questions about how the writer/researcher/analyst brings film into ‘imaginative being’ for the reader, highlights literary description precisely as a methodological problem (Stern & Kouvaros, p. 12).

In the introductory chapter to their book *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* (1999), Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros claim that writing about cinema is a performance, both textual (semantic) and corporal (affective or ‘somatic’ [see: Novas & Rose, 2000]), in that through writing, the writer connects with (and seeks to connect with) an audience of readers:

> You wanted to understand how this scene moves, how bodies move with the frame, the shots, how they are moved — by the camera, editing, music. And you wanted to convey the way in which, as a viewer, you (and others in the room) were moved, how you
experienced the fall as a sensory effect registering somehow in your body. To do this you wanted to write in such a way as to move your reader (p. 2).

In the act of writing, the writer/analyst conceivably desires to convey several things. Firstly, they wish to capture the magic and presence of cinema and the moving image in their writing, even though the film is absent and can no longer be seen. Secondly, they wish to convey delight at spectating, how they felt in the presence of the film or a key moment that registered in their body somehow (this corporeal response is referred to as ‘the fall’ by Stern & Kouvaros [1999] or ‘the jump’ or ‘surge’ by Stewart [2005]). Finally, they want this semantic act of writing to connect in a corporeal way with the reader, in a theoretically, emotionally and almost physically illuminating manner where the writing touches the reader in the same way the author was moved by the film. This descriptive rhetoric of making-the-film-come-alive-for-the-reader is referred to as *ekphrasis*, often used in art history or literary studies, where one art form (poetry, writing) is used to discuss another art form (art, film) (see: Stern & Kouvaros, 1999; Mitchell, 1996; Bhabha, 2008).

My work of fiction, the writing that I have conducted in/as this inquiry, the analysis of the film culture data, exhibits the kind of performance noted above. My writing is sometimes a set of deliberate provocations that calls attention to itself by being playful and irreverent (see: McRobbie, 1994). Specific statements, words and literary techniques were chosen that aim to entertain, arouse and convince. The specific data chosen is sometimes the most spectacular, dramatic, humorous or controversial scenes of the film. There might be sex, violence and/or swearing. On the other hand, quiet, ‘unspectacular’ scenes might be chosen as the data for the close reading. The style of writing varies too. Generally the conventional prose of qualitative academic writing is employed: forming arguments, summarising ideas and citing key secondary texts. Sometimes film is read through (poststructuralist, feminist) theory, articulating a problem and engaging in key critical debates (see: de Lauretis, 1989, p. iv). Sometimes more informal or less ‘scholarly’ styles of writing are engaged. Even though the third-person
voice is employed frequently in the dissertation, it was revealed to me as a ‘hiding place, not as a guarantor of objectivity at all’ (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 59; also see Gannon, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Denzin, 2003), and so I may use the technique of ‘first person’ or write a vignette to make visible the hand that does the writing/researching/spectating (as if this were possible). I include preludes before most chapters that contain selected meaningful quotes or self-authored narratives that deliberately go unclarified, to tease the reader and get them thinking about what the subsequent chapter might be about. Rich description dominates my writing. I describe many things: the plot, the action, the way the character looks or moves, the mise en scène, the moody music and/or a bit of dialogue. Generally this work of ‘fiction’ tries to convince the reader that it is coherent and complete, without making visible all the false starts and edited drafts.

Pictures accompany the written text in my representational piece. With such a visually-orientated study, there are, perhaps, some things that writing cannot ‘capture’. Still, I try to evoke film’s corporeal presence and its movement as if this were possible. I want to make the film vivid for the reader, as if they are seeing it for themselves. I capture texts, objects, practices and subjectivities within my textual analysis and try to track their emergence if only partially and fleetingly. The text here is one that tries to mimic ‘felt impacts’ and ‘half-known effects’, as if the writing were itself a ‘form of life’ (Stewart, 2005, p. 1016). But my writing does more than perform, it is performative, not capturing but, more accurately, constituting. It constituted the subjects that it speaks, the subject it speaks to and, finally, the speaker herself. This thesis writes the ‘I’ into existence, systematically forming the figure of ‘me’, the author of this piece; the analyst who does the film viewing, description and explanation; and the historically and institutionally conditioned ‘I’, who ‘does’ the work here. ‘I’ am written into its pages and beyond the bounds of the thesis text, as if an embodied, speaking subject, as if rational and coherent. This dissertation often refers to a ‘we’ and at other times merely implies the existence of
the reader, conceitedly assuming that the reader agrees with the positions presented here and is on the author’s side. It does more than attempt to convince the reader as film-viewer that the reading presented is an accurate one. It also goes beyond asking the reader to:

... read actively — to follow along, read into, imagine, digress, establish independent trajectories and connections, disagree (Stewart, 2005, p. 1015).

My writing is performative in that it does more than merely communicate with the imagined reader who is also imagined as a film-viewer; it constitutes the reader-as-film-viewer in the very act of writing/reading. It writes them into existence (see Stern & Kouvaros, 1999). As it attempts to describe how I am/they are/we are ‘quite literally charged up by the sheer surge of things in the making’ (Stewart, 2005, p. 1029), this analytical text constitutes me/them/us as these ‘charged up’ and affective subjects, as if evidence of our true embodied capabilities. Understanding this performativity means understanding writing ‘not as a singular or deliberate “act,” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produces the effects that it names’ (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Reiterations of ‘I-as-author’ and the ‘we-as-author-and-reader’ cite and recite these analytic/subject positions as if I am/they are known, as if I know them/me, when it is more likely that we are ‘wild assemblages’, moments of ‘fiction and fantasy, regulation and persuasion’ (Gonick, 2006, p. 3), points of impact that are fluid and surreal and the product of various influences and relationships (Stewart, 2005).

(iii) Reflexivity?

And so understanding our research fictions as writing and our researcher subjectivities as writers hailing from particular positions at specific times and places is key to reflexive practice (Richardson, 2000). But accounting for our situatedness, our positions and our biases, is far from an easy prospect, as full undisclosed access is never possible. Such self-disclosure or reflexivity also does not set us free or absolve us from the implications of our research practices and epistemologies (Pillow, 2003) or its totalising
tendencies. Being reflexive about our own writing, practices, knowledges and subjectivities is not, as Wanda Pillow (2003) suggests, a confessional cure or catharsis. Rather, the politics of reflexivity is about disappointment: the acceptance of the limits of our work and its inherent failures. Reflexivity does not get to the root of something, like the Truth. It is not a tool to ensure validity, or to legitimize our claims as if the knowledge we present is knowable and contained, as if our subjectivity is coherent and complete (also see: Scheurich, 1997). We cannot admit our biases and positions and be absolved from them. Likewise, our confessional acts should not comfort us. Rather, reflexivity should be an ongoing process that destabilises the knowledge produced, the representations made, and our subject positions. Reflexivity is about questioning, and questioning again, our methods and the objects we have constituted in our study. It is about acknowledging the limits of ourselves, our knowledge, our presentations and our research. A reflexive turn is about taking on the messiness and uneasiness of these practices and to recognise their faults in spite of all our attempts for it to be coherent, over-determined and complete. We must make our practices unfamiliar (Pillow, 2003). Our reluctance to engage this way and, rather, make reflexivity synonymous with transparency, is another lure of positivism, which asks that we know — not that we are in the process of knowing (Colyar, 2009; Pillow, 2003; Ellsworth, 1997).

(iv) The Research(er) as Performative?

Understanding research as praxis is understanding research and researcher subjectivity as self-creative activities ‘through which we make the world’ (Lather, 1991, p. 11). Not only do we perform our research as if it were ‘knowing’, ‘coherent’, ‘legitimate’ and ‘competent’ but we perform the researcher-self in this way as well (see: McWilliam, 2004; Petersen, 2003). In this sense, research is performative, a reiterative and citational practice by which discourses produce the effects it names. This account of methodology is a form of signification that ‘itself gives shape to the reality it implicates’ (Henriques et al., 1984, p. 99; also see Parker, 1999). In this
study, there have been many of these citational practices and forms of signification, many discursive positions problematised and recited, such as Ben Mendelsohn, the bad girl, the youth subject and Australian film. Much has been done to position this thesis as ‘good research’; numerous citational and discursive practices that aim to convince the reader that this was worthy and legitimate research. Research as praxis is a continuous process of doing and becoming in relation to historically pre-existing forms across matrices of cultural intelligibility. I end this chapter with a point about the possibility of ‘unfinishedness’; that this thesis, this chapter, this research(er), is unfinished, or in a ‘permanent movement’ of searching, thinking, writing and learning (see Colyar, 2009). As Freire (1989) suggests, in the space of unfinishedness, what is created is ‘the very possibility of learning’ (as cited in Colyar, 2009, p. 434). This instability, this ‘undecidability’ (Derrida, 1997), is not just endless instability, but also the space in which writers (re)think their knowledges and production of texts that:

Should be difficult … should seem like drudgery sometimes. It should require several drafts, false starts … It should challenge me to articulate: ‘Why?’ I should watch this paragraph change shape on my computer screen, literally, as I add words and sentences, searching for the right way to end. How can I conclude when what I mean is a beginning? I should feel the weight of undecidability and unfinishedness: these are the garments of my text (Colyar, 2009, p. 435).

This chapter started as a confession about not being able to articulate my methodology. It was as if some aspects of my cultural studies and post-structuralist ‘training’ did not adequately equip me to engage in the discourses of research method. Then, through an awareness of the importance of method and of the rigorous engagement in such debates, I attempted to pin down my methodologies, to demonstrate the boundedness but also the differences between theory and method. This chapter contributed to the debate about the need for a multiplicity of methods and a dialogue and exchange between them (Johnson et al., 2004). Trying to be transparent and reflexive, the confession was then about the role I played in the gathering and analysis of data and the politics
of positionality in the formation of knowledge. I tried to account for the analytical strategies and practices employed in this research project in a rational, coherent and determined way.

But this chapter is potentially ‘evidence’ of unhindered disclosure not being entirely possible. There are, it would appear, many practices and persuasions that go unaccounted and perhaps there is no accounting for them. But this does not mean we stop trying or avoid the hard questions of method. Remaining open to different ways of knowing, seeing and doing from the ways taken up in any one study is a generative way to think about what we do when we do research, and to explore the relations and connections that methodological inquiries pose (Johnson et al., 2004). Far from confession, catharsis or cure, then, questions of method hold us to account about our research’s limitations, making us continually resituate, reframe and re-characterise the ‘procedural status’ of the inquiry, that is, a ‘how so’ and a ‘how to do’ as always and unavoidably open-ended questions.
Prologue

What is a larrikin? Certainly not an eccentric. Eccentrics are vague, unfocused and expect to be indulged. A ratbag is not the same thing. Ratbags lack the cunning calculation that distinguishes the true larrikin. Bohemians are more concerned with defiance for its own sake: iconoclasm is their badge not their tool. Delinquents may be larroes in the pupae stage. A no hoper does not qualify ... Lairs are not larrikins but exhibitionists. Larroes may love an audience, but there is more to them than that ... Ockers are different again. The term was coined by the media for beer-swilling, bare-bellied barrackers. Galahs are mug lairs without the intelligence. Bodgies are posers. Hooligans were claimed by the Russians and the Irish ... Soaring over them all is the larrikin; almost archly self-conscious, too smart for his ... own good, witty rather than humorous, exceeding limits, bending rules and sailing close to the wind, avoiding rather than evading responsibility, playing up to an audience, mocking pomposity and smugness, taking the piss out of people, cutting down tall poppies, born on a Wednesday, looking both ways for a Sunday, larger than life, sceptical, iconoclastic, egalitarian yet suffering fools badly, insouciant and, above all, defiant (Gorman, 1990, p. ix–x)
Chapter Four

Larrikin Pedagogue: Ben Mendelsohn and Young Aussie Manhood
Luke: When I talk to her she’ll change her mind, you know why?

Helen: Why?

Luke: Two things, you’re a wog and sheila, right. I’m an Aussie and I’m a bloke. So when she talks to me, she’s going to pack shit!

(Mendelsohn as Luke in *Nirvana Street Murder*, 1990.)

Since the late 1970s in Australian cinema, there has been a kind of quintessential stock character that continues to haunt the screen, perhaps more heterogeneous by the late 1990s, but nonetheless remaining: masculine, roguish, destructive. Actor Ben Mendelsohn has become synonymous with this kind of standard role, having played them for most of his career. Around for so long it is ‘almost as if you grew up with him’ (Elliott, 2006), it seems that all we need do is take one look at Mendelsohn’s ‘most recognisable’ face, his ‘powder-blue eyes, bullfrog mouth and hair like a rumpled doona’ (Elliott, 2006) to understand what Mendelsohn represents (also see Pedley, 2001). He has a certain look in the eye, a ‘suggestion of danger, an uncompromising state, a glint of mischief’ (Biber, 1999b, p. 301). But more than his face, it is his body and manner too: unhandsome, unrugged but athletic, oddly charming; a slow swagger or no movement at all, but with the potential to be suddenly physical, violent even. He is stern-faced and impatient, displaying a cocked smile, and rarely does he speak, but when he does, with that slight lisp, his broad Australian accent is prone to slang and swearing. Sometimes he laughs — a devious, high-pitched, childish cackle.
Ben Mendelsohn is quite simply, yet most complexly, an Australian cultural icon. The *Oxford Companion to Australian Film* (McFarlane, Mayer & Bertrand, 1999) argues that Mendelsohn has honed a particular ‘authority’ over consecutive films, discriminating between a range of:

... late teenagers/twenty-somethings [with] gangly, good-natured persona[s] [that] can give way to darker possibilities ... an attractively ingenious figure ... [a] somewhat inarticulate young man on the brink of serious adulthood (p. 312).

Over time, long-standing performers assume an ‘iconic status’, notes Craven (2001, p. 12), the result of their star images and screen narratives built around them. This allows particular performers to ‘come to embody sets of values, whose significance may certainly be ‘national’ (Craven, 2001, p. 12; also see Dermody & Jacka, 1998; O’Regan, 1996; Turner, 1993; Moran & O’Regan, 1985). In this sense, then, in his unique and iconic way, Mendelsohn captures and embodies something about being young, being male and being Australian.

This chapter considers the public meaning of Australian actor Ben Mendelsohn, his potential as a ‘pedagogue’ or a figure that embodies
particular lessons about young manhood, and how he might work as pedagogic text. Divided into three parts, the first part looks at Mendelsohn’s enactment of larrikinism on the cinematic screen, part two analyses the off-screen persona of Mendelsohn and its intersections with his on-screen projections and the third part considers how Mendelsohn potentially works pedagogically.

**Part I — ‘I’m an Aussie, and I’m a Bloke!’: The Cinematic Larrikin**

In her critical homage to the men of Australian cinema, Katherine Biber locates Mendelsohn as ‘the ‘new larrikin’ of Australian cinema’ (1999b, p. 34). More larrikin than rugged, he nonetheless carries the baton for that generation of manly Anglo-Australian ‘cinematic forefathers’ (Biber, 2002), the likes of which include Bill Hunter, Jack Thompson and Bryan Brown; those men who defined the 1970s ‘revival’ of the Australian cinema. The Australian ‘larrikin’, brash, iconic, egalitarian, outspoken and macho, goes back cinematically to the first screen larrikin, Chips Rafferty, and culturally, even further to bushman stereotypes, long-held in the Australian imaginary (see: Rayner, 2007; Dermody & Jacka, 1988; Ward, 1958). The larrikin as type continues to make an appearance on Australian screens well into the 2000s through Mendelsohn films but also, for instance, through the croc-wrestling antics of Steve Irwin, the ‘earnest’ fisticuffs of Russell Crowe and the ‘blokey fun’ at the hands of footballer Matthew Johns. This contemporary national figure shares continuities with earlier representations but as Butterss (2001) notes in his article ‘Becoming a Man in Australian Film’, since the 1990s there has been a break away from established stereotypes in several important ways (also see Turner, 15). Matthew Johns is an Australian rugby league football TV-commentator and former professional player. In May 2009 allegations arose that Johns and 11 of his Cronulla Sharks’ team mates had gang raped a 19-year-old woman while on a pre-season tour of New Zealand in February 2002. While Johns made formal apologies to his wife and fans for his behaviour, the incident was largely dismissed by Johns and his supporters as a bunch of larrikin mates blowing off some steam. No charges to date have been laid. Amidst the controversy, Johns was sacked as rugby league commentator and co-host of Channel Nine’s *The Footy Show* and as assistant coach of the Melbourne Storm. However, by 2010 Johns had his own show, *The Matty John’s Show* on Channel 7, a program that comments on the week’s football and sees Johns playing on his popular larrikin appeal in the guise of several characters who carry out pranks.
1994/1995; Lucas, 1998). On one level the Aussie ‘larrikin’ continues to be reaffirmed and perpetuated as if ‘unchanging, genuine and seamless ... [a] ‘rather outdated ... formal and ideological conservativism’ (Rayner, 2007, p. 110). On another level, as complex discursive subjectivity, the contemporary larrikin displays himself as ‘self-conscious ... unwitting parody or even self-parody’ (Rayner, p. 110; Thomas, 1996). Arguably the first larrikin of this type, Mick, played by Paul Hogan in *Crocodile Dundee* (1986), like the contemporary larrikins above:

... tames the unappealing facets of the iconic, disruptive Australian male. His violence is now perpetrated in acts of gallantry; his misogyny becomes defused into shyness with the opposite sex; and his homophobia and racism are portrayed instead as ignorance and innocence (Rayner, 2007, p. 110).

Remaining a popular yet conservative image of masculinity, the cocky, self-assured and anti-authoritarian larrikin becomes likeable, even lovable, as a particular Australian brand of the masculine ideal. As an ambiguous blend of irreverence and anti-authority, this popular masculine type nonetheless works as patriarchal authority in its own right, establishing itself as ‘recognisable, natural ... inevitable and unquestionable’ (Rayner, 2007, p. 110). The contemporary larrikin as patriarchal discourse, then, mobilises masculine and destructive behaviour, a devious sense of humour and youthful spectacle — all as a kind of affable ‘contemporary nostalgia’:

[He] is an endearing collection of all the most general Australian-male attributes. Equally, he is riven by its contradictions and failings. He has the statue of its heroism in full measure, and the full tragedy of its failure as a way of being in the world (Dermody & Jacka, 1998, p. 98).

For those actors who incarnate this national type full of ‘anxiety and ambivalence’ (Collins & Davis, 2004, p. 7), a particularly ‘limited cultural and ideological meaning’ is placed upon them as a heavy ‘burden’ (Rayner, 2007, p. 110). But at the same time, the repetition of this character, and the way in which they are portrayed by the particular actor, verifies and legitimates the larrikin’s existence on the screen, a compulsive retelling of the ‘same old stories’ with the same set of ‘stereotypes’ (Bhabha, 1992, p.
This provides the national cinema with a celebratory ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (Rayner, 2007, p. 109):

Ben Mendelsohn has pretty much cornered the market in loveable Aussie rascals. “I do seem to be the ‘go to’ guy for that sort of role,” admits the 37-year-old actor (Mendelsohn quoted in Roach, 2006).

In 25 years since his debut in The Still Point (1986), Ben Mendelsohn has made 28 feature films to date\(^\text{16}\). All but a handful are Australian. In all the Australian films (and two of the non-Australian ones\(^\text{17}\)) he has played the larrikin as: the **hero** (The Big Steal; Spotswood; Cosi; Amy, Vertical Limit); the **joker** (The Year My Voice Broke; The Big Steal; Map of the Human Heart; Idiot Box; Sample People; Vertical Limit); the **emotionally inarticulate and volatile** (The Year My Voice Broke; Idiot Box; Mullet, Beautiful Kate); the **criminal** (Loverboy; Nirvana St Murder; Animal Kingdom); the **psychopath** (True Love & Chaos; Prime Mover); the **car hoon** (Return Home; Metal Skin); and the ‘**lady-killer**’ (Sirens; Metal Skin; Vertical Limit; $9.99). He is almost always shown as ‘working-class’ and/or as a kind of classless ‘common man’, as if the ‘last bastion of ‘real’ Australian virtues and vices’ (Dermody & Jacka, 1988, p. 59; original emphasis). He is a **farm-hand** (The Year My Voice Broke; Sirens); **car-garage attendant** (The Big Steal); **apprentice mechanic** (Return Home); **abattoir/factory worker** (Nirvana St Murder; Spotswood); **supermarket-shelf stacker** (Metal Skin); **repo man** ($9.99); **truck driver** (Prime Mover); a **university drop out** who lives next to a piggery (Cosi); or **unemployed** (Amy; Idiot Box, Mullet). On the whole, he lives out his larrikinism not in the bush like many of his forebears but in the dark inner city or industrial

---

\(^{16}\) A full list of Mendelsohn’s films and their release dates are found in Appendix I. I have focused on the filmic work of Mendelsohn for the purposes of this thesis; however Mendelsohn’s work in television should not be forgotten, including roles on A Country Practice (1985), The Henderson Kids (1985), Neighbours (1987), The Secret Life of Us (2005); Love My Way (2006-2007), Tangle (2009) [see: Appendix I]. Although out of the scope of this thesis, the relationship between the cinematic and television screen in the constitution of Mendelsohn as cultural text is an important one.


\(^{18}\) Being deliberately provocative here, I position Mendelsohn as a ‘lady-killer’ to stress his ‘ladies’ man’ reputation but also the blatant misogyny which underlies all but a handful of his roles. At best, he is gynophobic, chronically misunderstanding women; at worst, his brand of young masculinity seeks to eradicate the feminine (see Biber, 1999b).
(usually Melbourne) areas of urban decay (Loverboy; Nirvana Street Murder; Metal Skin; Spotswood; Cosi; Amy; Sample People; $9.99) or in suburbia (Return Home; The Big Steal; Idiot Box, Animal Kingdom) often depicted as a kind of wasteland.

The range of Mendelsohn’s roles are varied and numerous. In one sense, comparing them, and his various on-screen personae alongside each other, is problematic. However, Richard Dyer (1998) notes that actors are often seen as ‘auteur’ figures, made representative as a kind of ‘author’ to the meaning of the text. This ‘star’ approach is useful in that the figure of actor-auteur limits the possible interpretations of the text through the ‘always-already-signifying’ nature of their own image (Dyer, 1998; also see: McKee, 2001). This is ‘structured polysemy’ (Dyer, 1998), tied to audience response as collective and stable, all the while acknowledging that individual audiences will come to a film in their own way.

Following this, contemporary Australian film audiences have come to expect certain things from Mendelsohn, for instance, as a kind of ‘authentic’ expression of a familiar kind of larrikin masculinity that is forever at the centre: fun-loving, reckless, dangerous and rebellious. Not all audience members will recognise Mendelsohn this way but this does not mean that such an observation can not be made. Indeed, there is much value in recognising Mendelsohn as cultural text, a text that provokes particular knowledges about youth, masculinity and nationhood. In this sense, Mendelsohn is particularly significant because while he invokes the qualities of past screen fathers, he possesses something within his larrikinism the forefathers did not: he is an enduring symbol of ‘youth-hood’. Mendelsohn represents masculine youth-hood that is ‘suddenly out of control’ (Biber, 1999b, p. 34), his mischievous pranks quickly becoming unpredictable, dangerous and violent. Mendelsohn will be forever synonymous with the young reckless men he portrays, like the charismatic but destructive teen Trevor in The Year My Voice Broke.

19 For instance, Cliffhanger (1993) is a Sylvester Stallone film; Mullet is a Ben Mendelsohn film.
In similar fashion, American actor Molly Ringwald became widely known through a succession of American teen films in the 1980s, so much so that she embodied the ‘gravity of a brief moment in time’ (Lee, 2007, p. 98) and became bound to a collective consciousness of her generation:

Each generation is remembered via seminal icons seen to embody the ‘essence’ of an era with youth culture (Lee, p. 89).

Through the ‘common threads’ within consecutive John Hughes’-directed movies starring Ringwald, the pale, pretty redhead became a ‘vessel for an impossible vision of social order’ (Lee, 2007, p. 96). She was sweet, good and remained strong at a time haunted by conservativism (Reaganism), the Cold War, the paranoia of AIDS, widespread divorce and family breakdowns and the mantra ‘greed is good’ (see: Lee, p. 96). But so iconic was Ringwald, that she was forever typecast, never allowed to grow up and leave the 1980s, and her career eventually stagnated. Not only was she type-cast, but more significantly ‘timecast’ (Lee, p. 101), stuck in the 1980s by audiences with a nostalgic fixation or fear that their youth will be lost. As a result, Ringwald as cultural text remains ‘firmly and problematically entrenched in the past’ (Lee, p. 101).

Like Ringwald, Mendelsohn became known through a succession of films as particular teen characters. He was (and in a sense, continues to be) typecast, symbolic of those kind of youth(ful) stories. However, he is not ‘timecast’ in the same way Ringwald is and he is not stuck in an era that won’t let him go. Firstly, while Mendelsohn is still known for those teen roles, he continues to make films well into his 40s. Less of an icon for a youth audience per se, Mendelsohn was an icon of youth. His popularity was not contingent on a youth market in the same way Ringwald’s was, and arguably he was designed less for a youth audience and more for a broader ‘national audience’ fascinated with this concept of ‘youth’. In one sense, Mendelsohn marks not so much a moment in time or expression of contemporary manhood, but something more enduring: iconic Australian masculinity as if timeless and unchanging. Like Ringwald, he represents an ‘impossible vision of social order’ (Lee, 2007, p. 96), a ‘magical’ time when
'men were men', women knew their place and Australia was for ‘Australians’ (i.e. white Australians) (see: Connell, 2000, p. 6; also see White, 1981). In these post-industrial, post-feminist, post-Mabo times (see: Craven, 2001; Collins and Davis, 2004), Mendelsohn is the great white Aussie hope that nothing will ever change:

... the repetition of the larrikin ... works to strengthen the impression of an unchanging, genuine and seamless persona, which exhibits no alterations over time (Rayner, 2007, pp. 110–111).

This kind of nostalgia is about a fear of losing something or someone. Rather than an individual identity or self that will be lost, Mendelsohn embodies a concern for a collective identity, the disappearance of the ‘authentic’ Australian man. Mendelsohn represents the ideal of a myth, a fantasy of a ‘typical’ and ‘ideal’ kind of man in a time and place that never was (see: Biber, 2002). While Ringwald’s significance as icon came and went, Mendelsohn as larrikin lives on.

At the same time, however, Mendelsohn is an expression of contemporary masculinity in unique times. While Mendelsohn is framed by a nostalgic notion of manhood that he embodies on the screen, he continually reworks the larrikin trope. In Australian films post-1990, there has been a radical break in regard to masculinity (Lucas, 1998; Thomas, 1996). In films like The Big Steal, Flirting (1990), Death in Brunswick (1992), Proof (1991), Strictly Ballroom (1992) and The Heartbreak Kid (1993), more complex demonstrations of becoming and being a man are seen, including: alternative paths to manhood; a reconsideration of mateship; ethnic characters as a norm; more equal relationships between men and women; ripples of homosexuality; and harsh criticisms of the brutish aspects of the traditional Anglo male (Butterss, 2001). However, it would be naïve to think that the ‘worst excesses’ of the ‘anchoring Anglo-Celtic core’ (Collins & Davis, 2004, p. 43) of ‘hegemonic’ masculinity have disappeared all together. Rather than a ‘radical break’ per se, I argue that these filmic young men constitute contemporary masculinity in all its ambiguity. Along with the male leads in this list of films above, Ben Mendelsohn embodies the contradictory post-1990s young man; however, it is Mendelsohn who
most convincingly revives the national manhood of the cinematic forefathers, evoking the masculinity of the past while reworking it within present day nuances. In this sense, Mendelsohn is always-already-signifying, ‘a design effect so delicate as to be imperceptible’ (see: Morris, 2001, p. 843).

An ambiguous blend of past and present ideas of young manhood, Mendelsohn is not contingent on a particular era per se. Whereas Ringwald was a creation of and for the 1980s, Mendelsohn played characters growing up in several eras. He is also not as emblematic of one particular generation in the same way as Ringwald. He was never a pin-up boy for ‘Generation X’ per se. As noted above, Mendelsohn is a unique expression of the Aussie larrikin precisely because he is an *enduring* symbol of youthhood. Unlike Ringwald, Mendelsohn has never lost his ‘youth’, even as he reaches ‘middle-age’. Nonetheless, there *is* something to be said of his membership to a post-1970s generation. His ability to be an enduring symbol and also a contemporary one, an icon of youth, as well as something much broader, is perhaps unprecedented in Australian film culture:

> Nothing stays the same. But for Aussie kids who were born in the ’70s and ’80s, there has always been one constant — Ben Mendelsohn. Turn on the TV — there he was, causing trouble ... Go to the movies — there he was capturing our growing pains. And he's still there today ... Yup, Ben Mendelsohn has been there forever, and everyone has their favourite Mendo moment (Johnson, 2009).

Cultural sociologist Harry Blatterer (2010) argues that the particular phenomenon of remaining ‘youthful’, despite chronological age, is most notably associated with the post-1970s generation and more broadly with contemporary Western society’s fascination with youth as a lifestyle choice. Here it is possible to remain ‘young’, irrespective of age. Even though Mendelsohn is currently in his 40s, his characters are interpreted as ‘youthful’ in their ‘larrikinisms’. The ‘Mendo moment’ is precisely what this is about, and Mendelsohn will be forever synonymous with these kinds of mischievous, womanising, ‘legendary’ roles. Such roles, while ensuring the
longevity of Mendelsohn’s icon status, are important in two respects. Firstly, his brand of larrikinism, chronically linked to his youth-hood, differs in comparison to his cinematic forefathers in that their goal was to become men and constantly prove their manhood (see: Biber, 1999a: 1999b). By contrast, Mendelsohn represents a refusal of ‘manhood’, at least in this traditional sense. If being a husband and a father is a traditional sign of growing up, then Mendelsohn is the ‘Peter Pan of Australian cinema’ (Hart, 1998), the ‘Dorian Gray’ of the post-1970s generation (see Brabazon, 2002), who is always the son rather than the father, always single and refusing to ‘settle down’.

Blatterer (2010) notes that ‘adulthood’, what it means to be a ‘grown-up’, is entrenched in the social imaginary. Classic markers of adulthood after the Second World War included ideas about stability, maturity, biological development and self-realisation: in other words, marriage, parenthood, independent living and gainful employment (Blatterer, 2007, p. 65). Frequently positioned as a ‘normative lag’ and derogatorily called ‘prolonged adolescence’ or ‘structured irresponsibility’ within the literature, Blatterer and others problematise this developmental rhetoric. Blatterer argues that the post-1970s generation ‘have grown up differently, and in so doing have forged a ‘new adulthood’ of their own’ (p. 67. Also see: Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Wyn, 2004; Maguire, Ball & Rae, 2001). Changes in context, including new notions of intimacy or relationships, economic instability, and new patterns of consumption have required more fluid and flexible ways of being ‘adult’. Blatterer (2010) notes a profound change in the semantics of ‘youth’, where ‘youth’ as a value is liberated from biological, age-determined delimitations, recast as a select, desirable and profitable characteristic or lifestyle for people of all ages. Undermining the validity of ‘standard adulthood’, this idea of ‘youth’ challenges the concept of ‘settling down’, embracing mobility as something good, desirable and as key to success (p. 64–5). Once upon a time Mendelsohn was a ‘youth’ and an emblem of youth-hood. Now he is post-youth but remains forever ‘youthful’, asserting an enduring youthful larrikinism or ‘cool’ that is all is
about style and attitude, rather than something based on chronological age or sociological categories. In this sense, then, Mendelsohn does mark a contemporary moment in youthful masculinity, one that demonstrates that ‘adulthood’ (in a traditional sense) is no longer the final destination.

In the context of Australian cinema, the Mendelsohn figure is more than a collection of characters, more than the sum of his parts. He is symbolic of a ‘moment of masculinity, movement and meaning’ in all his contradiction, complexity and ‘combustibility’, carrying with him potential lessons about sex, colonialism, race, gender and nation — and more besides (see Brabazon, 2002, p. 46). Through him as important cultural text, masculinity is reasserted as ‘convoluted, fragmented and emotionally complex’ (Brabazon, p. 56). The figure of Mendelsohn is the screen upon which national desires are projected about being young, being male and being Australian. He is a bearer of ‘fictions, fantasies, regulations and persuasions’ (Gonick, 2006, p. 3) that are larger than him but are nonetheless embodied by him. He is a pedagogical symbol of youthful larrkinism, an attitude, a presence, potentially and immediately communicated by the site of his face on the film screen. As cultural, political, popular text, the Mendelsohn figure is used by filmmakers, within narratives and by the national film industry and audience to fuel the collective and intimate imagination regarding young manhood. But more than this too. He is a history lesson about the past and present, constantly looking backwards and looking forwards to incite us toward mythic manhood, ‘always-and-already-signifying’ (McKee, 2001, p. 191).

In a key article from almost two decades ago, Michael Eric Dyson (1993) suggests that basketballer Michael Jordan is a spectacular ‘pedagogue’, a ‘figure of estimable public moral authority’ (p. 64). Greater than the parts of his persona as an athlete, celebrity, personality, family man and marketing creation, in his view, Jordan is a ‘seminal’ cultural text: produced, packaged, marketed, distributed and commodified to teach people be like him, to ‘live the dream’, to be a success, to use one’s own talents to get it all including influence, prestige and wealth. Jordan
embodies a ‘pedagogy of desire’, argues Dyson, a bearer of meanings about black athleticism, youth cool and all-American heroism, which makes him the symbol of a ‘pedagogy of style, presence and desire that is immediately communicated by sight of his black body’ (p. 71). Able to embody the conflicting desires of so many cultures (African-American, white American, youth, masculine, sports and market forces), Jordan is a powerful and ‘supremely instructive figure for our times’ (p. 71).

While not using the term ‘pedagogue’ per se, Meaghan Morris (2001) argues that cinematic icon Bruce Lee, as exemplary film star and martial arts teacher, teaches, represents and embodies a ‘pragmatic aesthetic pedagogy’ that incites masculine bodies to ‘get into shape’ and fight to be the winner. Unlike Dyson, whose theory of pedagogy lacks a dynamic theory of learning and the text, Morris remains open to the differentiated ways in which spectators can ‘take this message or leave it’ (p. 179). Morris thus asserts a filmic pedagogy where the way individuals engage with, ‘learn’ and intimately connect to films is far from a simple matter of transmission or didacticism. Whereas Dyson’s study suggests that Jordan is the agent behind the learning that occurs and thus that learning occurs simply through a straightforward, goal-directed process that simply requires application of a pedagogy as if coherent and quantifiable, Morris’s study of Lee considers the teaching that he incites as the ‘context’ for learning and not its cause’ (Green, 1998, p. 179; original emphasis). ‘Pedagogue’, as discursive formation, is mobilised in this thesis not as the Teacher that determines the learning and merely transmits the lesson; rather, the ‘pedagogue’ here is a complex figure that incites potential lessons (not necessarily agentically or intentionally) as they move from film to film as ‘teacher’ and ‘text’. More than just a text, though, the pedagogue, as popular and public figure, embodies potential lessons, inciting specific knowledges. What is communicated and the lessons that might be learned are not necessarily those intended by the film/maker and in this sense, meaning can be attributed to the ‘pedagogue’ (albeit not absolutely or finitely).
While clearly not as commodified or global as either Jordan or Lee, within the realm of Australian cinema, Mendelsohn is similarly regarded a spectacular ‘pedagogue’ in this sense. In the broadest sense of the term, he is a ‘public pedagogue’, a popular culture icon and public figure who works to legitimate ‘truths’ about contemporary manhood. Embodying and inciting certain meanings about being young and being male, Mendelsohn moves from film to film, holding a unique and privileged position as actor-auteur, as ‘pedagogue’ and as pedagogical text. Importantly, though, he does not work in a didactic way (as Dyson assumes in regards to Jordan); rather, he limits but does not determine interpretation. His connection to spectators in the process of making meaning is much more fluid and indeterminate. Like Jordan and Lee, Mendelsohn embodies a ‘pedagogy of desire’ (Dyson, 1993:71) but this desire is about being forever masculine, larrikin and youthful. Whereas Jordan and Lee appeal to cross-cultural, subcultural and even global groups, Mendelsohn’s success is largely built on a defiant and parochial monoculturalism. However, for better and for worse, the larrikinism Mendelsohn represents is a monoculturalism recognised globally.

For example, in one of Mendelsohn’s films in particular, Hollywood blockbuster Vertical Limit, being an Australian male becomes synonymous with being a larrikin. The film sees Mendelsohn as one of two young brash larrikin Australian mountain-climber brothers. They are the popular jesters of the film and of the Himalayan base-camp where they are right at home: sunbaking nude on the snow, distilling their own firewater on the ice, sexually harassing the female climbers and occasionally climbing the odd mountain.
When a crack team of climbers get stuck in a collapsed ice cave up on K2, the brother of one of the climbers appeals to base-camp to join him in a rescue mission. Since the trapped climbers are above the risky 24,000 feet and the climbers will carry some highly unstable nitro-glycerine on their back to blast their way through the ice and rock, the plan is branded as a suicide mission:

Skip: How about it Mal — you and Cyril have been up there before?

[Malcolm and Cyril look at each other and shake their heads]

Malcolm & Cyril: Nah!

Malcolm: I mean, why would we want to leave this place?
Cyril: ... Luxurious accommodation, fine cuisine ....
Malcolm: ... Sultry weather, frostbite’s off my dick.
Cyril: You know mate, I reckon we should wait until they chuck in a ski-lift, aye?
Malcolm: Damn good idea. Imagine coming to the Himalayas and actually having to do some climbing!
Cyril: [shakes his head] Imagine.
Malcolm: Especially when you have to complete your autobiography ....
Cyril: And rustling up those all-important endorsements, [yelling to the crowd] you wankers!! Hey!? ... What’s bloody wrong with ya!?
Malcolm & Cyril: [to Skip] We’re in!
Arguably, the Hollywood (and global) audience recognise the brothers as a familiar type, where this kind of irreverent attitude and behaviour is tantamount to being male and being ‘Australian’. Their flippant jibes quickly become impassioned and they turn their criticisms onto the crowd (of mainly Americans), judging them harshly for not volunteering to rescue their colleagues. Calling them ‘wankers’, they expose the crowd’s pretentiousness in regards to their conduct, where they feign being real mountaineers, all the while avoiding real climbing for a sanitised experience, including the glamorisation and commercialisation that can come with it. Needing capable, honourable and brave go-getters, crazy enough to join the rescue mission, of course the Australian brothers volunteer. That the leading larrikin of his generation, Ben Mendelsohn, is one of these heroic jokers may be a fact lost on a non-Australian audience. But what won’t be lost is what he embodies. What is particularly significant for an Australian audience who recognise Mendelsohn’s face is that he stays true to his particular brand of cocky ‘Australianness’ (coloured by a particularly satisfying derision of Americans), especially in the most sensational Hollywood-ised narrative.

Signs of ‘authenticity’ matter a great deal in regards to the Aussie larrikin and all forms of pretentiousness, corruption and mindless conformity are to be stamped out. This is a theme repeated in Mendelsohn films, some of which include The Year My Voice Broke, Amy, Cosi, The Big Steal, Spotswood and Return Home. Indeed, there is something very ‘Australian’ about ‘being authentic’, ‘down-to-earth’ and having a ‘healthy dose’ of critical irreverence:

Ben Mendelsohn is our one end-of-the-century link to that icon of the knockabout Australian persona, Chips Rafferty. It’s not that Mendelsohn gads about in a slouch hat, chewing gum and spouting, ‘Strewth!’ at every opportunity. He simply exudes an economical poise and honesty that is always affecting, never affected. That’s about as Australian as you’ll get in our homegrown movies these days (Paatsch, 1996; my emphasis).

As highlighted above, key to this authenticity is a consistency of character from film to film. Even in those films where he is most unlike his standard
type, there are still ripples of his ‘true’ character. For instance, in *Amy* and *Cosi* (two titles that risk his emasculation), Mendelsohn is reduced to being a character who must act as carer to ‘helpless’ females. In *Amy*, he must look out for the welfare of a ‘damaged’ little girl who is traumatised into deafness and muteness after witnessing her father’s spectacular death. In *Cosi*, he must look out for the welfare of a ‘disturbed’ young woman who is an inmate at a mental asylum. But rather than a sign of weakness, in both cases it appears as though there is something particular about Mendelsohn’s character, something ordinary but off-beat, that makes him the ideal companion to the powerless, the insane and the ‘underdog’. He is the perfect choice to accompany them on their strange and often surreal ride (see: Hessey, 1996; 1997). In *Cosi*, for instance, Mendelsohn is shown ‘fighting the good fight’, actually enabling the inmates of the asylum to defy the authorities and subversively live the lives they want to live.

In *Sample People* and *Knowing*, Mendelsohn seems far removed from the iconic Aussie male in his portrayal of an effeminate bi-sexual cross-dressing party-boy and an American Professor respectively. However, both roles reveal his rebellious roguish streak as if something he cannot leave behind. The role most against type is ironically in Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia* (2008). Rather than challenging authority figures and pretentiousness of all kinds, Mendelsohn is the straight-laced, pompous, toffy-accented Captain Dutton, the officer in charge of livestock purchases for HMS Armed Forces, stationed in Darwin. Instead of his larrikin capers and wilful disobedience, Mendelsohn is the model of discipline and conservativism. However, Luhrmann’s *Australia* is a film full of extreme stereotypes (such as the fragile English rose; the rugged outback drover and the Indigenous mystic) and so full of myths, fantasies and parodies that casting Mendelsohn in this role, *so against type*, is in itself a mischievous, potentially subversive act. It is as if Mendelsohn satirises this kind of role by playing it straight, with the uniform, accent, slick hair, Clark Gable moustache and sharp, exaggerated gestures adding to this sense of perversity, hyperreality and the cartoonesque. So it is in this act of parody that Mendelsohn stays
'authentic' to the 'loveable Aussie rascal' (Roach, 2006) and the roguish larrikin he embodies. Because Mendelsohn is ‘pedagogue’, his ‘ideal’ manhood and its associated ‘learnings’ are taken from film to film. He incites a certain kind of masculine subjectivity, including an attitude, a sense of humour and a presence that is at once ‘intimate’ and ‘collective’ (Collins & Davis, 2004, p. 8). In this sense, Mendelsohn’s subjectivity is outside or not limited to the individual or the singular; rather, he is symbolic of and connected to our popular imaginary, the collective, the national and he represents, embodies and provokes learning about who we think we are or who we want to be (see: Rayner, 2007). He is the locus for our ambivalent national imaginings somewhere between nostalgia for past as if shared, pleasure at self-recognition and endemic self-deprecation and self-loathing (see: Turnbull, 2008).

**Part II — ‘Mate, I Don’t Really Think About That Kind of Stuff’: Ben Mendelsohn in the Extra-Cinematic Material**

During the promotion of *Vertical Limit* in 2000, Mendelsohn joked in an interview that only one aspect of his personal experience was useful playing the role of a ‘hard-drinking and smoking larrikin’ in the American blockbuster: “The mountain climbing” (Holder & Casamento, 2000). The actor was joking because within the popular media, the actor is known for precisely his hard-drinking, smoking, and wild-partying. The celebrity or star whose on-screen and off-screen persona is blurred has been well-documented (Dyson, 1993; Dyer, 1998; Morris, 2001; McKee, 2001; Brabazon, 2002; Lee, 2007; Rayner, 2007; De Angelis, 2008). These studies show that how the audiences understand the star in their screen roles is inextricably bound to their ‘real life’ personas portrayed in the media. The roles assumed and the performances given by film stars are generally seen to be framed by inter-and extra-textual considerations:
... the degree of ‘fit’ between an intended role and the established screen persona of a particular star, form the parameters of the performance, the determinants for its acceptance by an audience, and the viability or credibility of its characterisation. At the same time, the consistency of roles, and concomitant continuity of the persona, suggest or actively insist upon a lack of difference and distinction between the star and the characters s/he plays (Rayner, 2007, p. 108).

While the film actor is called upon to elicit the ‘truth’ and ‘meaning’ central to the function of the film, they also must carry the ‘burden’ of representing ‘clearly articulated personal identities’ (De Angelis, 2008, p. 52).

Extra-cinematic material (such as interviews and promotional material) captures and creates this phenomenon. More often than not, these texts purport to represent the ‘real’ actor as different from and/or coinciding with the fictional characters portrayed on-screen. This pairing, as if commonsense, can be read as a validation of authenticity for the on-screen character and the ‘reality’ of the film star guaranteeing an ‘authentic’ experience. That Mendelsohn is ‘always affecting, never affected’ on the screen (Paatsch, 1996) depends on the way he is seen off the screen and vice versa.

In an analysis of 40 newspaper and magazine articles that contain interviews with Mendelsohn and promote/review his films, what becomes clear is a blurring of his on-screen personas with his off-screen or real life persona. Firstly, what keeps being reiterated in this extra-cinematic material is that Mendelsohn, just like his on-screen characters, has a reputation for being difficult and volatile. He can have a joke but he can suddenly be abrasive and is ‘easily bored’ (Hudson, 2001; also see Devlyn, 2007; Elliott, 2006; Hallett, 2005). His awkwardness and tendency to bristle in interviews is often noted:

Questions about his career are brushed off like hovering blowflies — “Mate, I don’t really think about that kind of stuff” — as are queries about his recent decision to appear in advertisements for Foster’s — “It was just another shoot, that’s all” (Hart, 1998).
The Mendelsohn of interviews often avoids questions, changes the subject and, above all, remains economical with his words, the latter being so much like his on-screen characters. The impression that is given is that Mendelsohn off the screen is a bit of a loner, avoiding the celebrity circus, preferring a low key, ‘ordinary’ life where all forms of pretentiousness are shunned. He rarely confirms rumours about his reputation for partying and drug-use (not even as something long in the past) and rarely reveals details of his private life. When his private life is mentioned, it is usually in connection to his family’s past and his childhood (both positioned as ‘difficult’), where news of his being bullied and shifting schools are equated with his on-screen ‘outsider’ roles:

“I always seem to play an outsider and in many ways that is me,” said Mendelsohn, 31, who dropped out of school at 15 to start acting (Rocca, 2001; also see: van den Nieuwenhof, 2001).

There is a kind of mystery surrounding the actor, exacerbated by Mendelsohn remaining at best aloof, or at worst hostile, within the interview situation. Reports that he has written novels under a pseudonym go unconfirmed. He categorically refuses to talk about other celebrities like his mate Russell Crowe. Rather than speaking at length about the processes he must go through to prepare for a role (in the way Crowe does, for instance, around method), Mendelsohn downplays the process of acting and how he is just happy being a ‘jobbing’ actor, going from one job to the next:

It’s interesting to note the words he uses to describe his chosen career: work, job, shift. He's dressed for the part, too, in old jeans, a denim shirt and runners. “Look, some days I just think of it like painting a house,” he says. “You paint this one and you paint the next one and if the one after that happens to be overseas I have no qualms about that” (Romei, 2005; also see: Hallett, 2005, Devlyn, 2007).

As if careful not to seem too ambitious or too ‘pretentious’, Mendelsohn remains quite flippant about his cultural significance and his future career and, like his on-screen characters, is seemingly directionless and carefree. His laconic tendencies result in a kind of mystery around who he ‘really’ is and this, with suggestions of him being ‘bad’, constitute Mendelsohn as
simultaneously ordinary and extra-ordinary. Feeding his legendary status of the Aussie everyman, he is positioned as the larrikin who is consistent off the screen as well as on.

In the second season of the Australian version of documentary series *Who Do You Think You Are?* (2010), Mendelsohn searches out his family tree. In it, references to his on-screen characters come to stand in for the actor’s ‘real life’ character and family situation:

Over the past 25 years we’ve watched Ben Mendelsohn grow up to be one of Australia’s leading character actors. Throughout his career, he’s had a tendency to play the bad boy larrikin or a man burdened with the baggage of a fractured family.

Suggestions as to why Mendelsohn’s family are dispersed are only alluded to by the interview subject and simply echoed but not clarified by the voice-over’s suggestion that the family has ‘baggage’ and is ‘fractured’. Even though the voice-over speaks as in reference to the on-screen characters played by the ‘Aussie’ actor, it comes to have meaning for Mendelsohn in ‘real life’. Additionally, similarities between Mendelsohn’s ‘creative juices’ and roguishness are positioned as something handed down through the generations. When he discovers that a distant relative was a convict, transported to Australia for stealing horses, it is implied that this is evidence of Mendelsohn’s own irreverent and rebellious ways, not to mention his ‘authentic’ Australianness. Likewise, when he discovers that his working-class great, great, great grandfather was a popular amateur actor, who had a propensity, just like Mendelsohn, to play the villain, Mendelsohn smiles wryly to suggest that ‘That could be a template for my good self!’ The historian who provided the historical account to Mendelsohn states: ‘So there it is, in your DNA. He’s an improvident, reckless actor’. The ‘Aussie’ actor at first says not a word but then he replies in agreement (‘... Seems to have come through rather strongly!’).

Like his interviews, this documentary episode blurs lines between on-screen and off-screen, fantasy and fiction, reality and construction. This deliberate blending ensures a particular authenticity and consistency
around Mendelsohn, as an (extra)ordinary figure, ideal and legendary. In his very veins is the authentic Aussie character that is masculine, roguish and destructive: so familiar, yet so elusive. The stories of his forefathers, like the stories of his cinematic forefathers, are primarily stories about men and masculinity, mothers and the maternal rendered invisible and conspicuously in absentia (see: Biber, 1999b). Watching Mendelsohn grow up on the screen becomes shorthand for how familiar he is to us as a national audience, almost as if he is one of the family or, at the very least, a good mate. Mendelsohn as cultural and pedagogical text in this sense has been drawn on to sell Foster’s beer and promote NRL football. As one marketing executive said at the time: ‘Ben is the kind of guy anyone would love to have a drink with’ (Hallett, 2005; also see: Nicholson, 2007). What is made commonsense is how ‘anyone’ and ‘everyone’ would like to join him in two of the most masculinist symbols of Aussie mateship: having a beer and watching the footy. The masculinity Mendelsohn embodies as an ‘obvious, inevitable, consensual Australia-ness’ constitutes a ‘textual assurance’, an authenticity and accessibility that confirms that he never performs ‘anything other than his real self’ (Rayner, 2007, p. 115). Yet, it is clear such correlations are carefully constructed, inextricably binding the on-screen and off-screen worlds and the on-screen and off-screen persona (for another example, see: De Angelis (2008) on Russell Crowe).

The always-already-signifying nature of the popular star also makes for a certain indefatigable intertextuality. Morris (2001) asks us to consider the ‘complexity of vast cultural networks in which ... pedagogy thrives’ (p. 176), highlighting the intertextuality between films that ‘teach’ lessons ‘taught’ in other films by cannibalising certain design effects. The multifaceted and complex intertextual learning Mendelsohn incites is provocative and complex: a friendly 20-something bloke in a beer commercial; a rebel actor on Who Do You Think You Are?, from a long line of rebel outsiders; a laconic violent criminal in an Australian movie; the difficult and chain-smoking interview subject; and an emotionally oppressed 40-year-old with
a love-hate relationship with his screen father, the iconic Bryan Brown, in *Beautiful Kate*:

If any Australian actor is going to be the one, it’s him ... someone on the screen you can’t take your eyes off. Whether you call it charisma or magnetism or star quality, he’s just got it...[laughs] I don’t even know what it is about him (Director David Caesar in Mordue, 1997, p. 8).

Arguably, part of Mendelsohn’s enduring, even ‘cult’, appeal and the legitimacy of his character is bound to the many contradictory, and complementary, lessons that he potentially carries with him and embodies. Mendelsohn will always be this character, the fun-loving but slightly dangerous, often aggressive young man who can’t sit still, raging against the world. It is this character that is evoked in watching his films and his face reconnects us to each of his past on/off screen roles. Mendelsohn does more than merely capture or embody something about being young, being male and being Australian. As (extra)ordinary ideal, he makes his subjectivity a matter of our social imaginary, orientating us towards certain lessons about the way we understand ourselves: as if we are a nation with a collective identity with the same patriarchal lineage.

**Part III — ‘For Fuck’s Sake, I Thought We Got Rid of Him for Good!’: How the Cinematic ‘Pedagogy’ Works?**

In this section of the chapter, I consider how ‘Ben Mendelsohn’ might work pedagogically, highlighting the techniques, practices and ideas through which this learning potentially occurs. How he is constituted through a range of complex and sometimes contradictory discursive features, how his trope comes to make sense and how certain aspects of his subjecthood come to matter, and are replayed again and again, is of interest here. In particular, I focus on Mendelsohn’s ‘ordinariness’, a familiar everyman in everyday, unspectacular scenarios who works at his ‘working-class’ job, has a beer with mates in the pub, watches TV or has an argument with his father. But this banality, this ordinariness, ‘coupled with the intensity and intimacy of the big screen’ (Lee, 2007, p. 94), transforms Mendelsohn into
something quite extraordinary that is connected to his on-/off-screen persona and the audience’s identification with his performance and familiar scenarios. This ordinariness, and audiences’ identification with him, are the ‘common threads’ (Lee, p. 94) that run through his films. Following this, Mendelsohn’s enduring appeal, peculiar charm and magnetic ‘cool’ is magnified by the ‘big screen’, pointing towards the extraordinariness of his character. But more than the ordinary made extraordinary, Mendelsohn also lives a remarkable screen life. Captured in moments of destructive car chases, incidences of extreme violence, monumental demises and spectacular endings, he is the powerful young masculine focal point. Made an extraordinary legend and ideal, he is normalised as the archetypal young man. Through these repetitions of (extra)ordinary masculinity, Mendelsohn embodies a pedagogy where being young, being male and being ‘Australian’ is idealised and mythologised. These ways of being are also made ‘true’, irrefutable facts of young manhood, as if commonsense.

In what follows I limit my analysis to Mendelsohn films, including key opening scenes or spectacular climactic moments, to consider how his iconic pedagogy might work. How he might come to be seen, how he is constituted as (extra)ordinary and how audiences are potentially always asking ‘who is he?’ will be the focus here. I think about various filmic techniques, including the construction of the gaze, costume, sound/music, lighting and shadows, framing, lack of dialogue and a laugh. Lastly, I consider the way he is spoken about by other characters in the films, how he is positioned by them as (extra)ordinary and I analyse elements of his own dialogue or lack thereof.

(i) ‘Hello, here’s trouble!’: Visualising Mendelsohn

In almost all of Mendelsohn’s films, the first scene in which he appears is constructed in such a way that it emphasises his (extra)ordinariness. We see him in ‘everyday’, unspectacular situations: mopping the floor of the school toilets (Loverboy); working at the abattoir amongst bloody animal parts (Nirvana Street Murder); and looking in at the local dance from the
darkness of outside (*Spotswood*). Yet, various film techniques like the music, the soundscape, the framing, the lighting and the dialogue (or, often, the lack of dialogue) work together to frame the actor in such a way that he stands out, inciting the audience to sit up and pay attention to him as if something special. In *Return Home*, the main character, high-flying executive, Noel (Dennis Coard), returns to his hometown of Adelaide after being away a long time. Noel waits to be picked up; bags by his feet, he stands in the airport lounge. The sliding doors open with a swoosh. A blinding white light streams in from the outside. The outline of a man can be seen. It is the young Mendelsohn. Pausing by the door in a wide stance, he looks around and then strides forward, swaggering over to Noel.

3 Ben Mendelsohn as Gary in *Return Home*

His unsmiling face is covered in grease, his hair is tussled and he wears grease-covered orange overalls. For a brief moment Noel looks unsure but then Mendelsohn steps forward, arm outstretched to shake hands and he breaks a smile: ‘Ah G’day. Noel? Remember me? I’m Gary.’

Appearing silently through the bright light, Mendelsohn, albeit briefly, is a mystic, a kind of luminous figure of young manhood caught in the spotlight. His speech and ‘ockerisms’, however, bring him crashing back down-to-earth as familiar archetype. ‘Petrol-head’ Gary carts Noel off in his classic V8. Driving too fast and recklessly, he yells at other drivers on the road, swearing over the loud music blaring from his car stereo. He mocks Noel as
they talk about what kind of music Noel listens to (classical), what kind of car he drives (non-Australian) and Noel’s reluctance to join him in ‘perving’ at a pretty woman crossing the road. Gary exclaims, ‘What’s wrong with ya mate!?’, self-assuredly weighing Noel’s manhood and finding it wanting.

Mendelsohn usually always enters the screen as if hero/villain of a Hollywood Western: ominous music plays, centre of frame and his arrival promises something dramatic to come. Questions surround his subjectivity, notably: who is this young man and why is he so special? His very presence triggers upheavals, rebellion and destruction. His characters are ‘ordinary guys’ but, clearly, he has unspoken (extra)ordinary abilities. Indeed, even when he is not the centre of frame or the leading actor, his character ‘steals the show’. As hero, he ‘saves the day’ and ‘wins the girl’. As prankster and villain, he commits ultra-violent and destructive car crashes, punch-ups and kills other men. Or sometimes he dies. These scenes are carefully and deliberately crafted to surround Mendelsohn with a kind of intrigue that incites the audience to focus on his subjectivity and its meaning as (extra)ordinary. For instance, in *The Big Steal*, Mendelsohn as 18-year-old Danny Clark: beats the dodgy macho car salesman, Gordon Farkas (Steve Bisley), who sells him a dud; avoids being killed by his would-be girlfriend’s snobby father for catching him naked in his house; and wins the girl of his dreams. After a dramatic, yet rather slow car chase (since Danny and ‘his girl’ are in Danny’s parents’ Nissan Pintara with the family caravan hitched to the back), Danny out-thinks rather than physically dominates the slimey Farkas and his bumbling henchmen, who represent the ‘worst excesses of the traditional Anglo male’ (Butterss, 2001, p. 84). At the end of the car chase, Farkas and his entourage are defeated, trapped in their cars that have been wedged together in a narrow laneway:

Danny: You got a bit of battery problem Gordon?
Farkas: I’ll get you Clark! And your mate Johnson!
Danny: Good luck sucker! [sticks up his middle finger and drives off]
Danny’s mates [in a car behind]: On ya Clarky! Whoooo! [Stick up their middle-fingers as they drive off too.]
On one level, *The Big Steal* is just the story of an ‘average’ young man in the ‘working-class’ suburbs of Melbourne with simple pleasures and a determination to get what he desires. He lives with his eccentrically good-natured parents, in their simple house, next to the railway line. He has a crush on the most popular girl at high school. He works a part-time job parking cars with his two daggy but loyal mates, one who is Greek and the other a geek. On another level, though, he is far from ‘average’. As larrikin hero, he saves the day, wins the girl and defeats his enemies.

As the underdog, he is praised by his mates as a suburban legend, held up over them as the masculine ideal. The final iconic shot of the film ensures Mendelsohn’s rite-of-passage as Danny is complete, elevating him to heroic masculine status, where, as ultimate hetero-fantasy, the best-looking girl in school is his ‘prize’:

[Sun rise. The docks. The family car and caravan is framed with the city skyline lit up in the background. Danny and Joanna sit on the bonnet of Danny’s parents’ Nissan Pintara with the family caravan still hitched at the back].

Joanna: I wish we didn’t have to go back.
Danny: Yeah. It’ll be ok though.
Joanna: Yeah I know it will be....
[looking into each other’s eyes and smiling]
Joanna: ... Do you want your birthday present now?
Danny: Ah I think I’ve probably had about enough of this birthday.
[Joanna leans over and kisses him]
Joanna: Are you sure?
[Danny shakes his head. Joanna takes Danny by the hand and leads him over to the caravan. They climb in and shut the door. The credits rolls.]
In *Metal Skin*, Mendelsohn’s status is elevated even further as he is shown to be absolutely irresistible to girls and worshipped by other young men. At work in a large supermarket warehouse where he stacks shelves, a mate of his pushes him on a trolley loaded with merchandise. Mendelsohn, as local stud Dazey, sits in the lap of a young woman and, as she brushes his hair, he grabs blocks of chocolate off the shelf and bites into them. As anti-hero he is the epitome of arrogance, vanity and sex appeal. Later, Mendelsohn sits cross-legged and smoking on a stack of pallets while he charms another young woman at the supermarket. His mate drives him around with a forklift, raising him up over the heads of everyone else in a slow motion dance while a guitar solo plays. In his ‘designer’ pants, his leather jacket, biker boots and curly mullet, he is raised up, both literally and metaphorically, to a heightened status, beyond ‘mere man’. *Metal Skin* is a dark film, both metaphorically and literally. The lighting is dark and everything appears through a kind of gritty haze. That is, all except Mendelsohn, whose face, as this shot below shows, is always brightly lit as if the light radiates from him.
A young alienated man, Joe (Aidan Young), wishes he was Dazey, able to charm the girls and be the King of the illegal street racing scene. Whereas Dazey wins his race to the cheers of the crowd, Joe’s tyre blows out before he even takes off and he is ridiculed and beaten up. In the end it is Dazey who is held up as the ‘winner’ in spite of his arrogance, selfishness and blatant misogyny. Joe, far too uncharismatic and unpopular, and without the Mendelsohn charm to sustain him, is eventually obliterated. Mendelsohn walks away from the spectacular vehicular carnage to presumably carry on as normal, as the ideal. He has survived another car crash, another ‘legendary’ tale, one that will no doubt impress the boys.

Not always in the spot light, Mendelsohn often emerges from the darkness or remains in half shadow, both literally and metaphorically. In *Prime Mover*, he casts a looming shadow over the action as truck driver and part-time crim Johnnie, emerging from time to time to taunt the hero; embodying the devil he can be. In one scene he addresses Thomas (Michael Dorman), whose dream it is to own his own ‘prime mover’, although he doesn’t have the funds to purchase one. While the gaze is constructed so that the audience focuses squarely on Thomas, this scene is all about Mendelsohn as enigmatic and devious. Far left to the screen and
completely blurred, Mendelsohn is on the edge. We can not see him but we hear his familiar lisp, his voice doing his calculated bidding for him:

  Johnnie: Hey I heard you been uh...looking at getting a truck.
  Thomas: Yeah. Yeah I want to.
  ...
  Johnnie: [sucks teeth] How are you going to pay for it?
  Thomas: Oh I got it sorted. With the bank.
  Hey well if that doesn’t work out [pause] I might know someone.

When Mendelsohn’s Johnnie says ‘Hey well if that doesn’t work out ‘, there is a dramatic pause, getting Thomas’ attention and ours. As he delivers the line ‘I might know someone’, the camera frames him, still to the left side of the screen but he is in focus now. Stepping out the shadows, he is bathed in a golden light. He wears classic sunglasses, a cool bike jacket, stubble and styled back hair. Mendelsohn is faux friendly but clearly malicious. His clothes, his stance, his sarcasm, the way he sucks his teeth, what he says and how he says it — all constitute him as the iconic villain. He’s just an ordinary truck driver from Dubbo but an extraordinary devil in disguise.

---

6 Mendelsohn as Johnnie in *Prime Mover*

By the end of the film, Thomas has been gradually worn down trying to make repayments to Johnnie and Johnnie ‘owns’ him. His marriage, health and truck are wrecked. The final scene of the film where Thomas finally gets his revenge, the narrator says, ‘Thomas walks away from Johnnie’
house, Johnnie’s world and his truck’. Thomas may be the main character of this film but right up to the end it is all about Mendelsohn’s Johnnie.

Like Prime Mover and Metal Skin, many of Mendelsohn’s films have spectacular endings, inciting us to know the young man through damage and death. Mendelsohn is almost always the centre of these destructive, violent, mythical endings and he embodies a ‘mythic masculinity that is suddenly out of control’ (Biber, 1999b, p. 35; original emphasis). Sometimes he is caught and sent to prison; sometimes he slaughters someone or is slaughtered himself. In True Love & Chaos, Mendelsohn’s Jerry is no ordinary criminal. He demands and is given legendary status. Usually calm and silent, he spouts Buddhist affirmations and meditates but then he is ‘suddenly out of control’ (Biber, 1999a, p. 35; original emphasis), threatening to kill people and slamming his girlfriend’s head against the car window (‘Stop fucking with my inner peace!’). The other characters constantly ask where Jerry is, and, as an audience, we sense that all the other characters are in a kind of stasis until Jerry arrives: Jerry is ‘the man’.

In this film Mendelsohn is in another epic car chase. In this one he chases his brother, his mate and the mate’s girlfriend across the Nullarbor into Western Australia to get back his stolen drugs and seek retribution. Finally catching up with them, Jerry mounts the curb and attempts to run down the trio who are on foot. With his daffy girlfriend in the passenger seat screaming at him to stop, Jerry laughs like a madman, eventually hitting one of the pedestrians. Fast and furious, Jerry hops out of the car to beat him bloody. After a fast-paced and violent confrontation with his brother, his mate and the girlfriend, both Jerry’s brother and Jerry lie bloodied and dead.

In her chapter in Playing the Man (1999b), Biber argues that the death of the Aussie hero is an essential and necessary ‘culturally resonant locus’ of national masculine identity. The male lead’s death is not a ‘tragic waste’ because although they lose, they become heroes and legends in the process (p. 28). Death saves the masculine protagonist from the emasculation of ‘corporal disappointments’ (like ageing and feminisation).
In death, the mythical manhood they represent is preserved (Biber, 1999a, p. 28, also see Biber 1999b). In pedagogical terms, the frequency with which Mendelsohn’s characters die is implicated in and feeds into fictions, fantasies, regulations and persuasions about youthful masculinities. Worth considering here because of his ‘impeccable larrikin credentials’ (Biber, 1999b, p. 34), Mendelsohn is like a contemporary reworking of the Anzac myth. These spectacular endings incite us to consider him as a ‘legend’, provoking us to realise his embodiment of the ideal national subject: young, masculine, epic. Representing, embodying and asserting ideal young manhood, Mendelsohn, as constituted within these spectacular endings, provokes particular lessons about young men in our popular ‘imaginary’, our ‘fantasies’ and ‘realities’. Our ‘best’ men are: magnetic, doomed, deadly.

(ii) ‘Who’s that bloke!?’: talking about Mendelsohn

Talk about Mendelsohn’s characters by the other characters in the film positions Mendelsohn as (extra)ordinary: an everyday bloke and yet somehow something more than that. Accompanying characters frame the way audiences see Mendelsohn and potentially come to understand him. On one level Mendelsohn’s characters are unremarkable, a collection of ‘working-class’ Aussie blokes. But on another level, they are almost always objects caught in the gaze, figures that fascinate but remain at a distance from us. Many of the characters in these films struggle to understand the character embodied by Mendelsohn and, potentially, so does the audience. Voice-overs as filmic shorthand for a kind of intimacy with the audience expose the emotional truth and motivation of the character. It is not surprising, then, that Mendelsohn never gets a voice-over of his own. We are virtually never privileged to his inner thoughts or machinations, no closer to understanding who he is and no closer to dispersing some of the myths of his character. In The Year My Voice Broke and Mullet, there are voice-overs; however, they are voiced by other characters about Mendelsohn. Arguably this ‘helps to establish [a] safe but sympathetic vantage’ (Dermody & Jacka, 1988, p. 172). As strategic design features,
these voice-overs do not reveal Mendelsohn’s inner thoughts or emotions; instead, they are other people’s responses to Mendelsohn’s puzzling but alluring nature.

In The Year My Voice Broke, for instance, it is close to fifteen minutes into the film before we even see Mendelsohn’s character, the impulsive and reckless teen Trevor Leishman, the boy other boys want to be and all the girls want. It is a hot summer day, the yellow of the paddocks as yellow as the sun shining down on a group of people at work on a rural property. The workers pick up hay bales and hand them to two men on the back of a truck, which drives slowly. The voice-over of protagonist, 15-year-old Danny Embling (Noah Taylor), narrates the scene:

> Every year we used to earn pocket money helping with the hay baling at some of the nearby properties. That’s when Freya got to know Trevor Leishman for the first time. He was a fullback in the school football team. Pretty big deal. Everyone round town knew him ‘cause he was wild.

As Danny talks, we see Mendelsohn as Trevor on the back of the truck, again raised up over everyone else, his sleeveless top revealing his brown athletic arms.

The girl of Embling’s dreams, the pretty and spirited Freya (Leone Carmen), hands Mendelsohn’s Trev a bale and we see him smile in that familiar cheeky way, ‘How you goin’ Frey?’ As Trev and Freya share a moment,
smiling into each other’s eyes, the young Danny watches on enviously. His voice-over continues:

[Trev was] always getting into trouble at school or with the police. People said he was hyperactive — whatever that meant.

So along with iconic images such as these, it is through other characters like Danny that we learn about what Mendelsohn embodies: the kind of young manhood that is dangerous and destructive but also alluring. The scene is set for something spectacular to come from Trev and he doesn’t disappoint, eventually dying in a ‘blaze of glory’ like the outlaw he becomes. But we get no closer to understanding why he is the way he is. The damage Trev inflicts on Freya’s life and on his own, climaxing with his own death and Freya’s miscarriage and near death, becomes the (extra)ordinary stuff of legend. Why Freya loves him even when he brutishly almost drowns her in a prank, and how he becomes synonymous as a ‘legend’, is all presented as commonsense, something intrinsic to his particular brand of captivating young manhood.

In the majority of Mendelsohn’s films, supporting characters in the narrative demonstrate that they are fond of Mendelsohn’s character, even loving and worshipping him against their own better judgement. It is as if they cannot help themselves, his allure too great, even in the face of many of his unappealing qualities. Rayner argues that the contemporary larrikin tames the ‘unappealing facets of the iconic, disruptive Australian male’ (2007, p. 110) including violence, misogyny, homophobia and racism. While this observation is key to many contemporary larrikins, some contemporary larrikins in no way ‘tame’ these facets. Indeed, they relive them in a kind of nostalgic salute to their (cinematic) paternity. A major reason for these men being constituted as legendary and infamous is that they are almost universally revered by the other characters in the film and this arguably serves to frame the way audiences ‘should’ come to understand them too.

In David Caesar’s Mullet, everyone loves Mendelsohn’s Eddie ‘Mullet’ Maloney. He is a legend, a rambling rogue, the local larrikin. After leaving
abruptly three years earlier without a word to anyone, he one day emerges from the shadows and returns home to his New South Wales coastal town. From the beginning of the film Mullet is positioned as an iconic specimen of young manhood. A voice-over, provided by the barmaid of the local pub, tells us about the magnetic Mullet from her point of view:

... This isn’t my story. I’m in it, but it’s not about me ... Most of this town’s stories are about people getting married and having kids, or they are about petty scandals and people leaving. This one’s about someone coming back.

Like the masculinist cinema of the past, Mullet as young male ideal is positioned at the centre while it is women who are relegated to the sidelines. We first see Mullet standing by the side of a country road, back-pack in hand. Due to the voice-over, we know he is important. We don’t yet know why he is so notorious but there are clues, including his costume, which is the costume of all ‘cool’ young men: jeans, boots and a leather jacket. He is expressionless, his scruffy hair and rose-coloured glasses cover much of his face.

The music, soft wails of a country slide-guitar, underlie the image of the man at the side of road, the guitar lying low until the real action occurs. A truck comes. He throws his glasses in the grass (too ostentatious for his country town, perhaps?) and sticks out his thumb. The truck pulls over, a big burly man with a bushy beard and cap says ‘Going to Coollawarra?’ to
which Mullet mutters ‘Yeah’. ‘Hop in the back if you want’ replies the man. ‘Ta’ says Mullet in typical laconic fashion and he hops in the back of the truck with the man’s angry dog and a bloody pig carcass. The very next shot shows Mullet, arm around the dog as if old mates, charming him with a sad old country love song. When they arrive in town the driver talks to Mullet, looking up at him as he stands on the back of the ute, as if he is on show:

    Mullet: Where is everyone?
    Burly man: The Crows are playing. Hey aren’t you Col’s kid?
    Mullet: As far as I know.
    Burly man: Don’t they call you Mullet?
    Mullet: That’s what some people call me.
    Burly man: Footy star, right?
    Mullet: [Smiling] Nah mate.
    Burly man: You didn’t go up the city to play first grade?
    Mullet: Nah I didn’t. Hey listen is the car yard open?

The driver attempts to figure Mullet out, asking after him as if he is a celebrity, a star. In his familiar way, Mendelsohn’s slippery Mullet avoids the questioning, deflecting the man’s attempts to know him. Like the way the other characters are always asking after Jerry in *True Love & Chaos*, the characters in *Mullet* are always asking about the engaging Mullet.

Mullet’s brother, Pete (Andrew S. Gilbert), is playing in the game. As soon as he sees Mullet he is immediately out of sorts, committing a high-tackle, causing a punch-up and being sent off the field. The way Mullet has the ability to destabilise everyone’s lives is a familiar motif repeated throughout the film. After the game, Mullet’s mates flock to him, tackle-hugging him in their blokey way, ‘Fuck me dead, Mullet you mongrel! Where you been?’ Over the other side of the oval another footy player asks Pete ‘Who’s that bloke?’, to which Pete unceremoniously replies ‘Just a bloke’. We feel, though, that Mullet is more than ‘just a bloke’. Later, drinking with his mates at the local pub, one of Mullet’s mates leans against Mullet with his arm around him:
Mullet’s mate: Nah it’s good to see you, you ugly bastard!
Mullet: [smiling] Yeah well I wish I could say the same about you.
Mullet’s mate: Now, now, now I heard yous were a big movie producer over in Hollywood.
Mullet: Oh yeah, who told you that?

Getting drunker and louder, a male voice behind the bar reacts to the ruckus created by Mullet’s welcome home party:

Publican: What’s going on out there?
Kay: Oh it’s just the Malonesys, Dad Eddie’s back.
Publican: Mullet?
Kay: Yeah.
Publican: Oh for fucks’ sake, I thought we got rid of him for good! Tell ‘em to behave or they’re out the bloody door!

Mendelsohn does very little as Mullet in these opening scenes, as the laconic and emotionless stereotype he embodies. The other characters do the work for the audience, framing Mullet as an average bloke, just ‘one of them’, but simultaneously the town legend. From the initial reaction of his brother, the antics of his mates at the pub and the words of warning from the publican, Mullet begins to live up to his (extra)ordinary entrance. In spite of himself, and the love others have for him, it doesn’t take long and Mullet ends up insulting everyone: Kay the barmaid, his mates and his family. He stays in an old caravan outside of town, like the outsider he is, and he tries to get a bit of money from catching mullet. But nobody wants ‘his fish’ since they ‘taste like shit’ and are ‘no good for anything’. This metaphor that mullet/Mullet is no good for anything is one repeated throughout the film to great effect. Soon people are asking ‘Why’d you come back for!?’. As his brother says, ‘It’s always been easy for you. The sun has always shone out your arse! What are you doing here?’ Even though they want him to stay, they don’t want ‘the shit’ that goes along with having him. The antagonism he instils in people, just by his very presence — his childish antics, his drunken punch-ups, his impatience and arrogance and his self-centred way of going through life — are not easily overcome. Even though he is trying to change, he seemingly cannot move
past his inherent and ‘impeccable larrikin credentials’ (Biber, 1999b, p. 34), his ‘mythic masculinity’. It is far too ingrained within him and in the way he relates to the world.

The unseen publican exclaiming ‘Oh for fuck’s sake, I thought we got rid of him for good!’ is arguably the most significant line of the film. Supplied by cinematic forefather Bryan Brown, this line highlights that this mythic larrikin masculinity was ‘gotten rid of’ a long time ago, a relic of a different era. But here it is again, going through the same motions: the son destined to repeat the mistakes of the father. The very presence of Bryan Brown and, to a lesser extent, Tony Barry as father figures to Mullet (not to mention Mendelsohn’s ‘fathers’ in his other films) highlight the patriarchal lineage on show.

Through this repetition of this brand of masculinity, Mendelsohn incites learning by borrowing from his (cinematic) forefathers and adding his unique contemporary stamp to the mould. His representation and embodiment of a pedagogy where being young, being male and being Australian is normalised and idealised becomes an (extra)ordinary truth about young manhood. The younger generation of larrikin may not be exactly the same as the father but nonetheless the (sub)conscious
reiteration of unanchored male characters, directionless and volatile, anticipates, perhaps without ever fully delivering, a fundamental change of character (see De Angelis, 2008, p. 54). So it seems the young masculine larrikin will live on in some form or another even in spite of himself and in spite of a nation that, as Kay the barmaid proclaims, ‘...love[s] him but don’t like him’.

The next chapter focuses in on just one of Mendelsohn’s films, *Idiot Box* (1996), exploring its male protagonists in terms of pedagogies that potentially incite spectators to (re)consider contemporary young male subjecthood in particular ways.
Prologue

Late at night. Mick is watching TV, drinking a long neck of VB. He snorts, slaps Kev dozing on the couch. Kev wakes with a start and sits up.

Mick: Did you see that!?
Kev: What?
Mick: [laughs] The idiot!
Kev: Who!?
Mick: That bloke. Doing that. What he did.
Kev: Doing what?
Mick: Told his Missus. He’s fucked now.
Kev: Yeah, you’d know.
Mick: Yeah every fucking movie. There’s five things they do when they’re robbing a bank.
Kev: And you’d know!
Mick: I’d fuckin’ would. They tell their Missus; or they fucking piss off some crim who goes to the cops; they don’t have a proper plan; [Kev burps] or they get on the piss; or they get all fucking emotional. Five!
Kev: You know why they get caught? Coz they’re all fucked in the head, that’s why.
Mick: You’d do better!?
Kev: Piss easy mate. I mean it’s all about just getting in and getting out — maximum fear, minimum time!
Mick: Do it then!
Kev: I’m not going to do it just because you said to do it.
Mick: [laughs] Coz you’re full of shit.
Kev: Mate I would do it. I would.
Mick: Go on then.
Kev: Well I couldn’t do it by myself, could I?
Mick: I’d do it.
Kev: Pig’s arse!
Mick: Why not?
[gun fire sounds on the TV]
Chapter Five

‘Old Enough to Know Better’: Learning to Become Men in *Idiot Box*
Unless a man has a story to tell about his attainment of manhood, he has not in fact attained it. And even if he has a story, it has to be told more than once (Kramer, 1997, p. 146).

... What distinguishes the film is Caesar’s decision not to pull any punches. His honesty is at times mind boggling. Politicians should rush to see the film, because of its unblinkered vision of suburban life today is surely the way it really is (Stratton, 1997).

... playing the Aussie bloke is like doing drag. They have to bung it on a bit (Hessey, 1997).

The spectators of David Caesar’s *Idiot Box* (1996) learn about young masculinity in time and place. In similar and different ways to those men in the male ensemble films in Australian cinema (Rayner, 2000; Dermody & Jacka, 1988), the two protagonists of *Idiot Box*, Kev and Mick, are ‘pedagogues’ (Dyson, 1993; Morris, 2001) and pedagogical tools, (re)working what it means to be young, male, Australian. As texts they incite key lessons about young manhood, and as cinematic figures embodying this gendered subjectivity, they are ‘pedagogues’ that potentially locate intertextual lessons about masculinity in the contemporary Australian popular culture context.

The boys watch a lot of TV, argue over various images and conventions, and articulate how they understand the world. Living in the western suburbs of Sydney, 20-something Kev (Ben Mendelsohn) and Mick (Jeremy Sims) are long-term unemployed. Connecting to ‘classic’ representations of a particular ‘brand’ of masculinity highlighted in the previous chapter, Kev and Mick do not walk, rather they strut, promenade and perform down the suburban streets, often mock-fighting as they go. They are loud and obnoxious and get into all sorts of trouble. They wear the quintessential Anglo working-class boy costume of the 1990s — a rock band or offensive t-shirt20, with a ‘flanney’ tied around the waist. They drink a lot and often (to point of passing out in the toilet). They ‘bullshit’, ‘big note’ and tease each other. Kev is quick to anger and is often aggressive. Sometimes they

---

20 For instance, Kev wears a t-shirt which reads ‘Get a Dog Up Ya!’ (see: Appendix II)
are sexist and racist. They are pathologically bored. Although in their 20s, they are still very much ‘boys’:

[loud rock music plays] Don’t have no money/Can’t pay no rent/Last week’s dole cheque/already spent....

[Mick and Kev in the lounge-room playing air guitar to the track and thrashing about wildly. Kev pushes Mick]

Kev: What you doing?
Mick: [pushing back] I’m playing bass!
Kev: [pushing and shoving] I'm playing bass! [tackles Mick to the couch]
Mick: You’re not playing bass — you're playing your dick!!
[the boys wrestle]

One hazy and drunk late night, Mick and Kev argue over the rules of how not to rob a bank, rules that they have learned from a life-long consumption of cop shows and crime movies. In a fit of drunken passion and bravado, they hatch a plan to rob a bank, albeit ‘not with any grand end in mind’ (Goldsmith, 2001, p. 125). The robbery is simply something to do, something to ‘break the monotony of their lives’ (Goldsmith, p. 125).
More than breaking this monotony, though, robbing a bank becomes a symbol of their manhood, their ‘coming out’ or ‘coming-of-age’, and a test to prove they have what it takes. Robbing a bank becomes a refusal to lie down and be defeated by boredom, inertia and a growing sense of redundancy, as a supposed result of: being located in the ‘suburbs’ (positioned as ‘feminised’ and deficient\textsuperscript{21}), being a particular generation (lawless and irreverent) and contemporary life in general (positioned as unstable). As their ‘Gallipoli in the suburbs’ (Goldsmith, p. 124), robbing a bank is constituted as the thing that will make them ‘real men’ and ‘legends’.

The legacy of larrikin masculinity and the masculinity of certain cinematic forefathers are firmly imprinted on Kev and Mick. But they add their own particular stamp to the mould as members of the post-1970s (or ‘Generation X’) generation. Kev in particular personifies the ‘worst’ characteristics of the Anglo-Aussie man: sexism, racism, homophobia, violence, anger and stupidity. But so extreme, horrible and absurd is Kev that audiences of Idiot Box are arguably meant to recognise him (the character/actor/design effect) as playing on and criticising these aspects he embodies. Sensitive, smart and caring, Mick serves as contrast to Kev, and he critiques Kev’s brutish masculinity, inasmuch as he joins in on the youthful misadventure. Frequently positioned to laugh at these ‘silly boys’, we cannot take them seriously. The more physical, opinionated and loud they are, the more ridiculous and repetitive they become (see: Thomas, 1996). From the moment they decide to rob the bank, they go about defying the five rules Mick outlines above (in the Prologue to this chapter), and are thus, in classic style, set up to fail. In addition, certain attributes linked to their subjectivities and certain discursive signifiers are destabilised and made uncertain. As ‘pedagogues’ embodying potential lessons and pedagogical texts that are used to make meaning about manhood, Kev and Mick signify a contemporary moment of masculinity, in

\textsuperscript{21}As the city detectives drive out to the Western Suburbs we see the expansive highway and hear the female detective say, in her deadpan way: ‘Well if it isn’t the arsehole end of the world, you can smell it from here.’
In the previous chapter I focused on actor Ben Mendelsohn as a (extra)ordinary ‘pedagogue’ and pedagogic text. Symbolically embodying knowledges about a certain way of doing young Aussie manhood, Mendelsohn is a public figure who legitimates this gendered ‘knowing’ as ideal. The previous chapter considered the on-screen/off-screen reach of Mendelsohn’s pedagogy across his film catalogue as a whole, and in addition, a range of extra-cinematic material. This chapter is framed by the previous chapter, extending on the work conducted there by focusing in on one of Mendelsohn’s films, *Idiot Box*, while looking outwards to youthful masculinity more broadly. Rather than concentrating on Mendelsohn as pedagogic per se, I consider how the male protagonists of the film might incite spectators to learn about and (re)consider young male subjecthood. Divided into two sections, the first section of this chapter considers this contemporary representation of young men as (re)working masculine tropes in complex and contradictory ways. Kev and Mick’s ambiguous relationships towards the discursive signifiers of work, girls, love and sexuality, motherhood, mateship and youthfulness will be explored. The second section of the chapter shifts attention from these 20-something boys as pedagogic, instead considering them as only one of the many pedagogical objects used to orientate us towards knowledges about ‘masculinity’. Looking more broadly at the text as a whole, I reflect on how the film is designed and constructed as pedagogic, and how it potentially addresses a particular imagined ‘Generation X’ spectator, orientated towards Kev and Mick’s ‘Generation X’ subjectivity.
Part I — ‘It's Piss Easy!’: Becoming Men in the Australian Suburbs Circa 1996

(i) ‘Blue Denim in His Veins’: The Place of Work for the Working-Class Man

Director David Caesar notes that his film *Idiot Box* is largely a response to the crisis of working-class masculinity in these ‘late capitalistic times’:

... working-class men over the past thirty years have become redundant and marginalised ... [W]ithin urbanised, suburbanised society, the things that men were traditionally good at — and whether they were biologically good at them or not, I don’t know — are useless. There are no sabre-tooth tigers outside the door that men have to protect people from. There are no woolly mammoths to hunt down and celebrate afterwards (Greenwood, 1997, p. 15).

In this sense, Kev and Mick, as victims of economic downturn and post-industrialisation, are ‘working-class’ men without the prospect of work. Caesar argues that current trends in increasing ‘humanistic’ and ‘service-orientated’ type jobs are ‘much more suited to women’ (Evers, 1997, p.10), and so the frustrations at being rendered marginalised are felt more profoundly by working-class men. It is these men, argues Caesar, who do not have the financial means to direct those frustrations into something productive or creative (Evers, 1997; Mordue, 1997). Ferres (2001) agrees that the ‘materialisation of masculine identities is context-dependent’ and without work, Kev and Mick are ‘deprived of a proper arena, a space of legitimisation’:

Work spaces (except those associated with women) are not accommodated by the suburban sprawl; in the film they are replaced by the CES²² and the endless recycling of an empty rhetoric of skills (p. 187).

However, this ‘crisis’ of masculinity is problematised by Connell (2000), who notes that such a conservative response is, in part, a reaction to ‘new feminism’, as if a threat to traditional gender systems and conventional ideas of masculinity. Connell highlights the nostalgia of such a position:

---

²² Commonwealth Employment Services, the contemporary equivalent being Centrelink.
... a persistent belief that solutions to the problems of men can be found by looking backwards ... [idealising] a pre-industrial past (a mythical one, in fact) when men knew how to be men and women knew how to be mothers, and there was no homosexuality or equal legislation to muddy the waters (p. 6).

Certainly this nostalgic look backwards is evident in Caesar’s films (and in Caesar’s comments in interviews), as is a blatant celebration of the ‘worst excesses of the traditional Anglo male’ (Butterss, 2001, p. 84). But so colourful and controversial are Caesar’s films, and talk around his films, that Caesar’s work is perhaps precisely meant to be taken ‘tongue-in-cheek’. As a kind of ‘cult hero’ of the cultural intelligentsia of the time, Caesar arguably sets up his filmic men to be controversial so that he can then step in and defend his characters as his ‘working-class mates’ and as ‘authentic’ expressions of young masculinity. Caesar makes it clear that he knows the male subjects of his film intimately, as they are just like him and the mates he knew in his younger days, and he celebrates the idiosyncrasies and foibles of the masculinities they embody. While Kev is a reiteration of the ‘worst’ aspects of stereotypical Anglo-male culture, he

---

23 For instance: ‘I always perceived the film to be about how men, working-class men, are becoming increasingly redundant. They always had spaces for their heroism in the past, whether it was droving, the bush, or their labour to support their family. That energy and aggression could be a positive, but it is a major negative now’ (in Mordue, 1997, p. 9). And also: ‘So, a lot of men are out there alone with their cable sports stations and their video tapes of blokes with big dicks and satisfied women, hiding from real women, scared of them, and scared that they won’t measure up’ (in Biber, Sear, & Trudinger (eds.) 1999, p. 22).

24 Rebecca Johnike’s (2003) compelling ‘ficto-criticism’ on Idiot Box includes comments between an ‘editor’ of a faux magazine Campus Lite and its student-interviewer. After one of Caesar’s notorious comments about men’s lack of purpose because there are no more woolly mammoths to kill in this contemporary feminised world, Johnike includes this mock up:

*Editor:*...Honestly, the man is a Neanderthal...Does he really think it was fabulous to wake up to a spot of mammoth killing before breakfast everyday? Did the FFC give this idiot public monies? I’m unsure about the validity of engaging him in this debate anyway, isn’t he famous for slagging off academics and the intelligentsia? Perhaps Campus Lite should consider an interview with Jane Campion instead?*

*Student:* Calm down and don’t be such a snob. Remember this bloke loves playing the fool for the media (and they’ll eat up the mammoth line), but he’s a very smart bloke.

What is revealing here is that Johnike, in the guise of the student, has recognised that Caesar is not so much a ‘fool’ (or misogynist) but ‘very smart’, and his outrageous comments are understood as a performance for the benefit of the media.

25 Caesar gave the opening address to the Playing the Man conference held at the University of Sydney, 1999.

26 ‘...two young boofheads called Mick and Kev who lived in a world that didn’t really make room for them, so they made room for themselves. They did this by robbing a bank. As far as they were concerned they were doing something positive...The concept of ‘masculinity’ itself brings to mind ideas like doing instead of discussing’ (in Biber, Sear, & Trudinger (eds.) 1999, p. 21-22).
is an (extra)ordinary parody that Caesar and actor Ben Mendelsohn clearly have fun with. Importantly, Caesar provides us with Mick, a key pedagogical tool and counterpoint to Kev, who illustrates a very different way of doing young masculinity. It seems probable then that *Idiot Box* is, from the outset, a complex satire full of contradictions.

Work, and the traditional place of work, haunts Kev and Mick, framing the way others come to see them. Their own relationship towards work, however, remains ambivalent. Without work, Kev and Mick scrounge for money for their beer, sometimes lament not having a car and are often bored, but otherwise, being unemployed enables Kev and Mick to indulge in their youthful misadventure. They might be recognised as ‘the young and the bloody useless’ and ‘slack bastards’ by Kev’s Mum and Mick’s brother respectively, but generally Kev and Mick enjoy being on the dole. They are rendered by others as ‘boys’ in a negative sense, emasculated and insignificant as long as they remain failed consumers and failed men. However, far from being victims, Kev and Mick actively resist getting a job and doing work. In the film the suburban jobs are not all ‘taken’ by women. In fact the workforce still remains clearly delineated by gender: Kev’s mum is a cleaner; their girlfriends are check out ‘chicks’; Mick’s brother is a plumber, as indicated in the scene showing him next to his white work-van; the local drug dealer is employed full-time, albeit in illegal activity; and the police (bar one female detective) are male. So it would seem that while there are options for working-class men in terms of employment, Kev and Mick demonstrate that they don’t want this kind of work. Possibly, unlike others of their ‘generation’, Kev and Mick refuse what they see as ‘low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity’ jobs (Lee, 2010, p. 17); instead, they are dreamers and rebels who long to be fashion photographers or poets:

> [At the CES office. Kev sits across from the CES man behind the desk. Kev stares straight at CES guy. The CES man reads a form.]
> 
> CES man: Under ‘special skills’ you’ve got ‘fashion photographer’?

[27] In his 1991 book *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, Douglas Coupland follows the lives of three 20somethings who are over-educated and underpaid, taking up ‘low-pay, low prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no future, ‘McJobs’’ since no other jobs are available to them. Apparently a main trait of this Generation is wide-spread cynicism about the future.
Kev: Yeah?
CES man: How many interviews have you had?
Kev: [defensive, rocking on chair] None.
CES man: But you've put in applications?
CES man: But you didn't get any interviews?
Kev: Nup. [standing] Can I go now?
CES man: [reluctantly] Yeah alright.

But, of course, Kev and Mick don’t really want to be fashion photographers or poets; rather, this is their way of ‘taking the piss’. An anti-work stance is important to Kev and Mick’s young masculine subjectivity, based on anti-authority and anti-responsibility. Above all else, this youthful ‘rebellion’, as performative, defines their way of ‘doing masculinity’. The attitude of Kev above, echoed by Mick in his own visit to the CES, mocks bureaucratic attempts to regulate them and registers their frustration and condemnation in trademark style. It is only when Mick begins a relationship with a girl (as if her very presence seeks to ‘domesticate’ him)

28 Although, Mick is already a ‘poet’, often spouting gritty, urbane poems about despair, boredom, love and hope.
that he feels the pull towards having a ‘successful’ working-class life, which he equates with a job, a car and an expendable income. On his first date with Lani (Robyn Loau), because he has no car and ‘nowhere’ to go, he walks Lani to the pedestrian overpass above the busy highway, which serves as his place of escape and contemplation:
Mick: Why do you like me?
Lani: [snorts] Who says I do!?
Mick: Maybe you don’t.
Lani: Why not?
Mick: Could do better.
Lani: And what’s better?
Mick: Someone with a job and a car maybe.
Lani: Why would I want that?
Mick: Christ, who wouldn't want a car? You could just go pffft. Like see that one there, vrooooom, it’s going to Queensland. He's just packed up his stuff and just fucked off.
Lani: How do you know?
Mick: I don’t, just made it up.
Lani: Why?
Mick: For fun.

Even though Lani questions the value of a job and a car, Mick uncharacteristically dismisses this line of thinking, since for him a car represents freedom of mobility. Cars are particularly symbolic in terms of Kev and Mick’s ‘working-class’ subjectivities. Rebecca Johinke (2003) recognises the importance of cars to how working-class masculinity is performed, arguing that ‘the car is a symbol of freedom and consolidates a man’s adulthood and masculinity’ (p. 150; also see Lucas, 1998). According to Biber (2001), cars encapsulate the ‘recklessness, impatience and irrationality of contemporary masculinity’ (p. 26). That Kev and Mick strive for but spend almost the entire movie carless is, in a sense, indicative of their masculinity and pedagogic in this sense. They have a love-hate relationship with cars, desiring them while detesting them. Kev’s contempt and fetishisation of cars is clear: he plays chicken across the highway, walks over parked cars denting roofs and bonnets, sets off car alarms and joyously does donuts in a stolen car. But they never have a car of their own and they can never hold on to one for long:
They understand society wants them off the roads and streets, and out of sight ... Even when they manage to steal a car it is an ancient mustard-coloured station wagon. The car’s owner reclaims it easily and treats them like naughty boys rather than dangerous armed robbers. Despite their posturing, the lads do not have the agency to be on the roads, and this reduces them to the status of perpetual boys (Johinke, 2003, p. 150).

That the car they steal is an ‘ancient mustard-coloured’ station wagon, complete with beaded seat covers, ridicules Kev and Mick. Indeed, while Kev attempts to show his prowess at breaking into the car and hot-wiring it, Mick finds the keys under the sun-visor and laughs that the door was probably already open (much to Kev’s anger). The presence or absence of cars is a pedagogical tool in terms of orientating us towards young masculinity in this time and place. The ambivalence the boys have towards them, and the ‘working-class’ life they potentially represent, reveals a moment in contemporary masculinity full of contradiction and complexity. Such scenes also work to establish the general tone of the film where humour critiques and challenges traditional Aussie masculinist imaginary. The mustard station wagon mocks Kev and Mick, and potentially, young Aussie males and their car culture more broadly.

(ii) ‘Oh I’m Gonna Vomit!’: Girlfriends, Mothers and Violence

Kev and Mick’s relationships with women, and the presence and absence of women, reveals the ambivalent position these boys have towards heterosexuality. Writing about love and sexuality in Australian cinema, Katherine Biber argues that:

Love places heavy demands on these masculinist texts; the films are required to reflect a ruggedly heterosexual hegemony, but without the expressive resources of intimacy, sexuality, or even language. Australian cinematic men are gynophobic and taciturn ... Discourses of love in Australian cinema are usually disguised, deflected, or else shown to go horribly awry (1999a, p. 223).

In Idiot Box, this heterosexual ‘hegemony’ is maintained by Kev without discursive or sexual intimacy with women, and with practised homophobia in his relationships with men. Kev embodies gynophobia most
spectacularly, approaching women with an ‘adolescent combination of awe and revulsion’ (Biber, 1999a, p. 245)\textsuperscript{29}. In one scene in the film, while Kev is waiting for Mick to show up at the mall, he ‘pervs’ at women passing by and comments to himself about what he considers to be their level of attractiveness:

[Kev stands still in the mall watching women walking past and riding the escalators]

Kev: Dog ... hmmm ... yeah, spunk. Dog ... dog ... spunk [Mick shows up] Oh hello here’s trouble ... see that? [pointing out one particular woman] I’d fuck her.

Mick: [smiling] You’d fuck anything!

Kev: [seriously] I wouldn’t fuck you!

Kev is also shown harassing a young woman in the line at Pizza Hut by trying to look under her skirt, sniffing her hair and invading her personal space. Significantly, Mick chastises Kev for his behaviour and we begin to see how Mick’s engagement with heterosexuality and women contrasts that of Kev’s. However, Kev’s performance is also largely for the benefit of

\textsuperscript{29} The use of ‘adolescent’ is of course used in a negative sense here, as if a man in his 20s should know better, should be more mature. This blurring of youth-hood/adulthood is precisely the source of much of the humour of the film, as well as satire.
Mick precisely because he knows he will get such a reaction, and so from the outset Kev is playing the fool, ‘bunging it on’ (Hessey, 1997).

(Un)surprisingly Kev has a girlfriend, although he can barely be bothered with her, and when he can, it is usually to insult her. Kev and Betty (Susie Porter) communicate through arguments over videos or Kev’s reluctance to do anything, especially his unwillingness to grow up and move out of his mother’s home. He is continually irritated by Betty, and she is perpetually unsatisfied, criticising his sexual performance (‘I’ve had a longer piss than that!’). But so silly, humorous and exaggerated are these scenes with Betty, and so blatantly misogynist are Kev’s remarks, that the ‘rugged’ male Aussie lover is exposed as ridiculous and deficient. There are several elements that play on this sense of the ridiculousness. Kev and Betty only ever have sex on the couch. With her teased hair, heavy make-up, constant gum-chewing and crassness, Betty the check-out ‘chick’ is positioned as ‘grotesque’\(^{30}\). In one scene she looks like a blow-up doll on the couch with her legs in a ‘V’ straight up in the air, while Kev lies on top of her, holding a lit cigarette in one hand and watching TV out the corner of his eye. On the whole, Kev remains largely indifferent to Betty, that is, until her presence comes in between him and his best mate Mick:

[In the lounge-room. Mick puts down a video]

Betty: I’ve seen that — why’d you get that for?

Mick: Well we thought you’d seen it so we got it to give you the shits!

Betty: Piss off!

Mick: How was I supposed to know you’ve seen it?

Betty: Everybody’s seen it!

... 

Mick: We going to watch this video or what?

Betty: I’ve already seen it.

Kev: And why do you think anything you have to say makes any difference? Have you seen it Mick?

Betty: Why you asking him for?

\(^{30}\) Thus criticising this kind of woman, positioned as the ‘scrubber’ so familiar in the Australian cinema (see Waddell, 2003). For more detail on this stock character, see Chapter 7.
Kev: Shut up!

Betty: Oh what, he's an expert on everything is he?

Mick: Ohhhh Bette... I wrote a poem about ya - You’re an idiot/You’re a bitch/You shit me to tears/I’m goin’ down to the pub....

[pause]

Betty: Is the pub bit part of the poem?

Kev: [to Mick] She'll shut up mate.

Betty: That’s unlikely.

Mick: I’ll leave you to it.

[Mick exits]

Kev: [to Betty] You fucking spastic in the head? Like, are serious parts of your fucking brain missing or what?

We see that women are still a threat to the bonds of mateship (Dermody & Jacka, 1988; Morris, 1989; Biber, 1999a, 1999b), ‘fucking spastic in the head’ for getting in the way of true mateship. Biber notes that while talking about girls is a central component of boys’ group behaviour, actually having a girlfriend serves to split group allegiances (Biber, 1999a, p. 172) and thus women are always a threat to male groups. Girls might be needed to diffuse any homoerotic elements between ‘good mates’, but girls like Betty are a constant source of irritation. The quick repartee here, Mick’s witty responses and avant garde poem serves as sources of humour in spite of, or because of, the misogyny directed towards Betty. ‘Sensitive’ Mick composes a poem and exits the scene, while Kev remains to viciously criticise Betty. But the extremity and hilarity of the ‘rugged’ Aussie bloke again exposes him as deficient, sexist and ugly.

Significantly, Mick serves as a key counterpoint to the way Kev engages with women, and his attempts at romantic ‘poetry and imagination are applauded’ (Biber, 1999a, p. 264). After a night of heavy drinking, Kev’s mother comes home from work to find Mick passed out in the toilet:

[pushing the toilet door and hitting Mick] Kev's mum: Oh shit! KEV!

Mick: Sorry Mrs Madden, is it morning already?

Kev’s mum: Oh come on move!
[emerging from his bedroom in only his undies, he scratches himself] What?!

Kev's mum: Boofhead was asleep in the toilet again!

[Mick stumbles into hallway, encounters Kev and Kev mimes punching him]

Kev: [lighting a cigarette] Yeah and?

Kev's mum: Well he's your bloody mate!!

Kev: He's no mate of mine.

[in the kitchen Mick fills the jug with water]

Kev: [to Mick] What are you doing?

Mick: Well thought I’d make your mum a cup of tea.

Kev: Why don't you go down on her while you’re at it.

Always respectful, calling her ‘Mrs Madden’, Mick feels remorseful and apologises by way of making Kev’s mum a cup of tea. Kev’s response to this, ‘Why don’t you go down on her while you’re at it’, jolting in its sudden extremity and disarmingly funny, ultimately reflects on Kev's brutish masculinity as absurd. We laugh at his hostility because it does seem to come from nowhere and echoes a previous (imagined) era when ‘men were men’. We also laugh at Kev’s declarations of disgust at Mick’s romantic endeavours when Mick coyly begins a relationship with Lani, the checkout ‘chick’ from the bottle-o. By contrast to Kev, Mick is sensitive and caring, he communicates openly with Lani and his happiness and enthusiasm is undisguised. In one scene in particular, Kev responds viscerally to Mick’s open-minded and adventurous sexual encounters with Lani:

[Morning. Kev arrives at Mick’s place. Mick is on his knees scrubbing sheets in the bathtub. Kev enters and stands looking in the bath]

Kev: Is that blood?

Mick: Well ... I don’t know ... I thought she was trying to get out of it.

Kev: You rooted her when she was on her rags — you dirty cunt!

Mick: [defensive] It was alright!

Kev: What — you go the growl on her too did ya!?

[pause. Mick begins to snicker]
Kev: Oh! Oh no! ... God! ... [swaying] Oh I’m gonna vomit! That’s wrong!!

[Keve exits quickly. Mick laughs]

Mick merely laughs at Kev’s disgust at him having sex, including oral sex with his girlfriend when she was menstruating. It is perhaps predictable, given Kev’s desire for (hyper) heterosexual display, including a rampant misogyny, that he is particularly critical of Mick’s interactions with women. But undeterred by Kev and his regulations of him, Mick continues his relationship with Lani on his own terms. In fact, Mick’s relationships with women expose Kev’s interactions with women as highly problematic. One key scene with Kev and his mum demonstrates the difficulties they have as a result of Kev’s masculine enactment. On the whole, Kev is dismissive of his mother and often irritated by her nagging. He agrees with Betty that she is an ‘old bitch’. But, interestingly, he also genuinely listens to and tries to appease her, although this never goes according to plan:

[Kev comes in and puts a TV in front of his Mum who sits at kitchen bench, smoking and watching a small TV]

Mum: What’s that?
Kev: Now this is a telly!
Mum: Where did it come from?
Kev: I got it for ya.

[pause]
Mum: I don’t want it. I don’t want it in the house.
Kev: I got it for ya, it’s a present.
Mum: I don’t want it in the house!
Kev: It’s a present!
Mum: Don’t treat me like an idiot! I don’t want it in the house!!
Kev: I paid for it!
Mum: You promised me, you promised you wouldn’t do anything stupid! You’re as bad as he is!!
Kev: I paid for it!! [Mum looks away] I fucking paid ... [Kev’s voice cracks, he is teary. He grabs the TV and exits]

Thinking that the TV is stolen, Kev’s mum shows her disappointment and anger with her son, criticising him for being ‘as bad as he is!’.
reasonably assumed that the ‘he’ Kev’s mum refers to is Kev’s absent father, who is never referred to again in the film but who haunts all of Kev’s actions. That Kev is like his father, a ‘bad’ and ‘stupid’ man, that he has inherited the deficits of the (cinematic) father, is another criticism of the masculinity Kev embodies. After leaving his mother’s house dejected and upset, and after not being able to sell the TV to anyone at the pub, he smashes it into little bits in typical aggressive fashion. Still enraged, he encounters petty-crim Jonah (John Polson), and responds to Jonah’s faux bravado in the same way: smashing him to bits. Leaving Jonah bloody and shaking, Kev walks away and raises his arms in a ‘V’, yelling ‘Fuck yooooo!’ with a smile.

This is the only act of physical violence committed by Kev in the film and it is positioned as problematic, an act by a young man who is emotionally stunted. Most significantly, Mick is not present when Kev beats Jonah. Given Mick’s peace-maker role, his propensity to make a cup of tea rather than get into a fight, we understand that Mick would not approve of such acts of violence against anyone. As noted above, Mick is the all-important counterpoint to Kev as the masculine trope of a bygone era who keeps resurfacing in one way or another. Mick’s sensibilities, his deep thinking,
spontaneous poetry, reflexive thought and positive relationships with women do not emasculate him:

Mick is a communicator, a peacemaker, forever making cups of tea and spouting poetry. In many ways, his role could be seen as feminine — unemployed and therefore constrained to the domestic, a pedestrian rather than a driver, a talker who relates well to women ... and he even wears a type of apron or skirt in the form of a flannelette shirt. Nevertheless, Mick performs the masculine, just as Kev does; he struts and parades, he claims the public domain of the streets (even if only on foot) and he utilises the male gaze to perform that most masculine of pursuits (Johinke, 2003, p. 155).

But Mick’s differences from Kev do matter. Even-tempered and kind, Mick emphasises Kev’s volatility and brutishness. He serves as a kind of pedagogical tool that incites the spectator to assess Kev’s masculinity just as he does. Frequently Mick asks Kev why he is so angry, or why he is the way he is, and points towards a different way of doing things. This is a reflexivity that men like Kev do not seem to share.

The presence or absence of women and acts of misogyny and violence, then, are pedagogical in terms of inciting spectators to (re)consider young masculinity in this time and place. Kev as the stereotypical and quintessential misogynist, and Mick as the sensitive new age guy, show how young men might do relationships with women, and also what might be the consequences of forming the self in particular ways. Kev’s misogyny and violence, often the source of much drama and humour, parodies traditional Aussie masculinist imaginary in all its spectacle, absurdity and magnetism.

(iii) ‘Let Me Show You a Trick!’: Mateship, Larrikinism and Youthfulness

The antics of these boy-larrikins are the source of much of the film’s humour and light-heartedness, and pedagogically frames them. As noted above, even though Kev and Mick are well into their twenties, they are almost without question accepted as ‘lads’, young men still revelling in
youthful misadventure. For instance, Kev and Mick scrape together their coins for their beer like kids buying lollies from the corner shop:

Mick: How much will $13.80 get us?
Lani: Of what?
Kev: Duh — beer!
Lani: 750s are $2.50 and the 350s are $1.40
Mick: Five long necks and a stubby.
Kev: Righto VBs then.
Mick: Hey why don't we get something else?
Kev: We always get VBs.
Mick: I know, exactly, so why don't we get something different?
Kev: What for?
Mick: A change.
Kev: What for!?
Mick: I don't know, for a change.
Lani: You just let me know when you have made up your mind, alright?
Mick: Oh get the VB.
Kev: No we'll....
Mick: ... We'll get the VB!
Kev: Oh well that's what I wanted in the first place!
[Lani brings over beers. Kev takes beer and exits]
Mick: [handing over money] Cheers. We're 10 cents short.
Lani: Don't worry about it.

Kev and Mick’s constant arguing, wrestling and video gaming position them as ‘child-like’. Even when they case the bank to check out its access, security cameras and getaway routes, they do so riding kids’ bikes because they are carless. When they do steal a car for the getaway, it is easily taken off them by the owner of the car, ejecting them like naughty kids. So amateurish and bumbling is their attempt to rob the bank, the city detectives call them ‘pathetic amateurs’ and ‘stupid kids’. Indeed, the boys of *Idiot Box* need taking care of. Ferres (2001) notes that when the boys

---

31 In the final scene of the film, Lani storms into the bank to drag her brother out by his ear before they have a chance to go through with this stupid bank heist. Even the local heroin manufacturer and dealer, Colin, is brought tea and biscuits by his mum.
get the guns, it is a critical turning point in the film, from lads playing games to them becoming criminals capable of real violence. Yet while Kev beats Jonah badly over a squabble about the guns, the very next scene shows Kev, Mick and Lani’s brother playing with the guns, like ‘boys with their toys’.

Kev often performs ‘risky’ acts or what he calls ‘tricks’ as a way of asserting himself and performing for Mick’s benefit. Ferres (2001) writes that Kev is ‘never happier’ when he can act out mateship in the ‘dynamic of larrikinism’ and claims that calling these acts ‘tricks’ may have been innocent but is not without (sexual) significance. Both Ferres (2001) and Butterss (2001), respectively, write about Kev’s tricks of (hyper) masculine performance as having an erotic element. The most important relationship, even a kind of suburban love story, is the relationship between Kev and Mick. Goldsmith (2001) argues that there is always a rippling undercurrent of sexual desire between Mick and Kev. Kev exudes ‘simmering aggression and sexual tension … [he is] noisy, unstable on the verge of eruption’ (p. 127; Biber [1999a] agrees). In Kev’s ‘desperation’ to counteract the boredom of suburbia, he desires thrills, acts of:

... bodily pleasure … in the slow motion of ecstasy which Kev experiences after his most excessively wild or violent behaviour. These brief snatches of release are the only times when he experiences peace (Butterss, 1998, p. 40).

We see Kev repeating key lessons that define his masculine subjectivity: trying to look up a girl’s skirt, nicking some chips from the bottle-o, playing chicken on the highway, stealing the coin bucket from a charity worker in a koala suit, setting off the whole streets’ car alarms, teasing a neighbour’s dog, doing ‘donuts’ in a stolen car, smashing the lights of a stranger’s car who had his high beams on and other such acts. We are perhaps meant to take these tricks relatively light-heartedly, as ‘larrikin’ acts that are just a bit of fun and as the normative stuff that lads do. Kev and Mick’s youthfulness is fundamentally linked to their rebelliousness, a refusal to ‘grow up’ and be ‘responsible’. They represent a refusal of manhood, at

---

32 ‘Tricks’ is slang for the acts a prostitute performs.
least in this traditional sense. Kev performs for Mick and Mick always saves Kev. Kev calls Mick his ‘Skippy’ as he is loyal to his mate and always gets him out of trouble33. After one of Kev’s tricks that went wrong, Kev and Mick sit at the pub. Mick nurses his wounds and sulks:

Kev: [laughs] Ah what’s wrong mate — you a bit sulky in the old head?
Mick: How come I always have to get you out of the shit?
Kev: [sarcastically] Yeah you saved my life, mate. I’m not going to forget that.
Mick: And what, for a couple of bucks in change?
Kev: You’re a ranger mate.
Mick: Yeah right-o!
Kev: You’re Skippy the Bush Kangaroo [whistles Skippy theme]
Mick: [smiles] Shut-up!
Kev: [coming in closer] Do you want some money? [puts arm around Mick]
Mick: Don’t start talking shit.
Kev: [pulling Mick closer and talking softly] We’ll get it from the bank.
Mick: Yeah, you’re talking shit.
Kev: You said five rules. It’d be easy.
Mick: You’re talking shit.
Kev: No I’m not I’m serious. It’d be easy. Let’s do it. Piss it in. Piss it in!

---

33 This is a reference to the Australian TV series from the late 1960’s, Skippy, which saw a kangaroo protect and save a family from various dilemmas. Skippy was essentially the Australian version of Hollywood’s Lassie.
Goldsmith (2001) notes that, unlike other Australian movies where men must give up their mates to enter into a union with a woman to be considered real men, Mick and Kev ultimately choose each other over family or their girlfriends. Mick, in particular, sticks by Kev’s side all the way to the final and climactic scene of the film. Mateship and youth-hood are celebrated, but they are also constituted in such a way that it is highlighted and critiqued. Certain strategic elements draw our attention to particular scenes and larrikin acts as constructed, parodied and performative. For instance, during Kev’s tricks, the scene plays out as if aware of what it plays on and plays up to. Like the scene where Kev and Mick set off all the car alarms down the street, the soundtrack from the popular 1980’s *Wide World of Sports* TV show plays as accompaniment: boys at their ‘sport’. The scene in the picture above parodies the bloke and his mate at the pub, slightly drunk, arms around each other, ‘talking shit’ and talking up their homosocial bond. The only time and place the Aussie male can espouse his love for his mates, it is a familiar scene and lesson played out on the Australian cinematic screen.
We could see Kev and Mick as subjects of a study by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies on ‘working-class lads’: they are often on the street; make spectacles of themselves in public; are often aggressive, rebellious, and criminal; and ‘youthful misadventures’ are ritualistic in their mundane repetitions. Like the way Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson in *Resistance Through Rituals* (1976) understand male ‘misconduct’ as the norm for young males, Kev and Mick’s ‘bad’ behaviour seems a ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’ expression of their masculinity. They are disenfranchised, and so make their own culture, one bound to popular culture and firmly anti-authoritarian in nature. But Kev and Mick’s play also self-consciously performs this misconduct. In a key scene after one of Kev’s loutish outbursts, Mick tells Kev to ‘get a hobby’, to which Kev replies ‘It is my hobby!’ In another scene, late one night Kev throws the remote at the TV, dissatisfied with the choice of TV shows (‘I hate being bored. I fucking hate it!’). As sardonic as ever, Mick, reclining on the couch, pipes up: ‘In my day we made our own fun, we were never bored’. Self-reflexively pointing towards their generational performativity, Mick highlights the familiar young masculine role they play, exposing its problems and pitfalls.

Sitting on the couch, drinking, watching television and arguing defines their youth-hood and their masculinity, and they embody this role par excellence. In his key study, Paul Corrigan (1976) observed young men ‘hanging out’ and ‘doing nothing’ as one of the activities of youth-hood. Kev and Mick ‘do nothing’ together quite regularly and it is one of the fundamental components to their mateship: they spend their days sleeping off hang-overs and their nights drinking VB and watching TV at Kev’s mother’s house, much to her displeasure. In one sense, Kev and Mick are the ‘idiots’ of *Idiot Box*, ‘braindead’ young men who watch too much TV, bickering and criticising the ‘superficialities’ of popular culture, like an Australian version of Beavis and Butthead.
On another level, this ‘doing nothing’ is performative. Kev and Mick are idiot savants, habitual, self-conscious watchers, connoisseurs of screen culture and proficient in knowledges that are important to their ‘generation’ and their sense of self. The boys ‘... understand their surroundings and they know how to negotiate their relationships because they have seen it all before on the box’ (Johinke, 2003, p. 154). Able to critically engage with the content they see on the telly, the boys argue and exchange comments and criticisms, critique each other’s position, and demonstrate their acute sense of the world constructed around them. Youthfulness, constituted as a finely honed larrikinism and wilful refusal to abandon one’s youth, is key to their particular brand of masculinity. While positioned as deficient by others and as a ‘failure’ to grow up, it is a source of exaggerated celebration and defiance for Kev and Mick. As illustrated above, the light-hearted acts of larrikinism acted out by Kev are often parodically highlighted as the youthful fun and frustration of becoming a man, a birthright of a particular gender: ‘natural’ and inevitable.

The unstable discursive signifiers of mateship, larrikinism and youth-hood potentially incite spectators towards the young masculinities (extra)ordinarily embodied by Kev and Mick through their (different)
affordances. Kev and Mick are ‘pedagogues’ and pedagogical tools illuminating the complexities and the inherent contradictions of ‘doing’ young masculinity in the suburbs of western Sydney circa 1996. They are key embodiments of youthful masculinity, discursive and semiotic formations that have effects beyond the cinematic screen, potentially framing the way the film/audience come to know young manhood more generally.

Prom Politics and mallrat musings have a cultural currency that speaks in the literacies of its audience (Lee, 2010, p. 2).

Part II — ‘Beetroot‘s Crook’: Mode of Address in the Pedagogies of Young Manhood

In his chapter on the dissonance and disruptiveness of Australian cinema in the 1990s, Ben Goldsmith (2001) suggests that Idiot Box ‘seeks complicity’ with a particular audience who understands the ‘ream of in-jokes and sly references to other texts this generation has in common’ (p. 124). In this section of the chapter I draw out this notion of ‘complicity’, asking what might ‘the audience’ be complicit in. I explore the imagined audience of Idiot Box as a particular generation that the film seeks to connect with and address. How this mode of address might potentially work, and how it is inextricably linked to the pedagogic aspects of the film’s design features and practices, will be the focus here.

(i) Calling All Idiots: Generation X as the Ideal Audience

Idiot Box was released in 1996, two years after Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction. We know that David Caesar (writer and director of Idiot Box) was influenced by Tarantino’s quintessential ‘Generation X’ film, because not only does Caesar’s mode of address ‘equate gangster violence with burgers’ (Bertelsen, 1999, p. 29), but Caesar directly parodies a scene from Pulp Fiction as a kind of Australian flavoured homage: Colin, a local
suburban drug-dealer, debates the finer points of a hamburger with the detectives in the back of the police car as he is being taken in for questioning (‘Pineapple I don’t mind. Beetroot though! Beetroot’s crook!’). This echoes *Pulp Fiction*’s Vincent and Jule’s pop-culture banter about what a McDonald’s ‘Quarter-Pounder with Cheese’ is called in Paris (‘A Royale with Cheese’), and what they put on French fries in Holland instead of ketchup (‘Mayonnaise!’). There are many other characteristics *Idiot Box* shares with *Pulp Fiction*, including a creative blending of genres, rapid-fire dialogue, multiple sub-plots, popular culture and music references, blatant stereotypical characterisations, irony and pastiche. According to Christina Lee, recognising these cues requires a particular ‘sensibility’:

The postmodern sensibility of Generation X, with its self-referentiality, irony, and pastiche, finds heightened expression in Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* ... [as] a product of its times (2010, p. 22).

Rather than a simple sociological or market demographic, Brabazon (2005) and Lee (2010) point out that ‘Generation X’ is an elastic category with no coherent genealogy or single set of characteristics. Rather, ‘Generation X’ is understood here as a collection of representational practices that arose in the 1980s, which possess particular strategies of identification. ‘All communities are imagined,’ writes Brabazon (2005, p. 14), so rather than Generation X films, for instance, revealing or reflecting the values of a generation, these texts actively negate a:

... coherently performed self, hailing an audience with references to other films, other fictions and other views of the world ... Popular culture is inadequate, but provides an iconic database that builds banal, superficial, but satisfying literacy (p. 22).

In its various (dis)empowering ways, popular film ‘may create identification, leading to the building of a community’ (Brabazon, 2005, p. 23). This community or generation is thought to have a unique sensibility, a unique engagement with the screen, a unique ‘literacy’ (see: Bertelsen, 1999).
In her article on *Pulp Fiction*, Eve Bertelsen notes that an ironic film text is already ‘doublevoiced, complicitous and compromised’ (1999, p. 29), never denying that it is a product of, and produces, consumer culture. Rather, such a film communicates to its audience that it plays a game, a game that ‘exploits to the full the film literacy of its viewers’ (Bertelsen, p. 24). Ambivalent as a metafictional, metacinematic text, such film is ‘wilfully compromised’, already a ‘complicitous critique’ (see: Bertelsen 1999, p. 9; Hutcheon, 1989 as cited in Bertelsen, p. 18). Thus a certain recognition is required, that is, an awareness of distance from ‘the real’, or code of ‘authentic inauthenticity’ (see: Grossberg, 1989; as cited in Lee, 2010, p. 21):

Generation Xers possess a media literacy which allows a celebration of an investment in the images that is not linked to the real. For this process to work, an ironic stance must be maintained (Brabazon, 2005, p. 21).

Following this, irony, performativity and ambiguity speak to a Generation X audience, who may ‘of necessity, be more comfortable with uncertainty in both cultural and personal narratives’ (Wark, 1999, p. 74–8; as cited in Hopkins, 1995, p. 3), and who could allow themselves to be absorbed because they were ‘equally capable of detachment’ (McRobbie, 1986, p. 113; also see Sontag, 1967). Accelerated editing and plot, a text with multiple reading options, ruptures in political correctness, avoidance of closure, and self-reflexive strategies are ‘appropriate and necessary’ to a ‘Gen X literacy’ (Brabazon, 2005, p. 171), luring such an audience into ‘awkward, if thoroughly enjoyable, decoding predicaments’ (Bertelsen, 1999, p. 9). Defined and potentially defining themselves by their relationships to media discourse (Hopkins, 1995, p. 2; Lee, 2010, p. 18), especially popular culture and the language of popular culture, the screen becomes Generation X’s ‘shared sense of reality’ and ‘identity’. Not so much ‘appropriate’ or ‘necessary’, rather, these textual techniques hail their audience, constituting their viewing practices and viewing positions. An audience defined by its relationships to media discourse watching characters like Kev and Mick in *Idiot Box* who are, in turn, defined by their own relationships to media, is a celebratory self-fulfilling prophecy. The
repetition and deferral to this ideal ‘Generation X subject’ verifies and legitimates Generation X’s existence on and off the screen, blurring the ‘fantastical’ with the ‘real’.

Like *Pulp Fiction*, we come to know *Idiot Box* through other films, TV shows and popular culture. Genre frames our expectations, the pleasures that are to be had. The specific genre knowledge of the audience, which enables them to ‘infer, hypothesise, make narrative projections and anticipate guaranteed pleasures’, are depended on in order for the film to be understood or read (Neale, 1980, pp. 49–51; as cited in Bertelsen, 1999, p. 11). But operating as metatext, the film at once sets-up, inhabits and dismantles these conventions (see: Bertelsen, 1999, p. 10). As an eclectic narrator who shifts between genres, Caesar (like Tarantino) sets up his stories within the regimes of crime fiction and then overwrites this with conventions from the TV suburban sitcom, parodying both, seducing and teasing viewers into simultaneous celebration and mistrust (see Bertelsen, 1999). *Idiot Box* is a gangster film, a plot-driven crime narrative, which builds in action, intrigue and tension. But it is also a comedy, exploiting sitcom’s dialogue-driven, verbal play, including running gags and the circular frustrations of being stuck in the same situation. Bertelsen (1999)
argues that when oppositional narrative systems collide, conventional forms of identification and interpretation are destabilised and problematised for the audience. Such stratagems deny viewers the single, settled viewing position and identification with character and plot events ideally afforded by fixed genres. The idealised audience of *Idiot Box* is arguably already familiar with this kind of address, since the film is certainly not the first of its kind. In a post-*Pulp Fiction* world, such audiences are already well-versed in the jarring mix of crime and comedy, violence and humour, seriousness and kitsch that is readily employed here.

The main narrative of *Idiot Box* follows Kev and Mick in their daily lives and as they plan to rob a bank. Interspersed are several sub-plots, and while they are told in a straightforward linear way (unlike *Pulp Fiction*), it is like ‘channel surfing’, switching from scene to scene, several stories taking place at once. These sub-plots include the story of the junkie nurse and her caring boyfriend who, as Laughing Boy, robs banks to feed his girlfriend’s habit; the story of suburban drug-dealer Colin and his wired and wiry henchman Jonah; and the city detectives trying to catch the notorious bank robber Laughing Boy. At first the plots seem not to be connected, but gradually the links are shown. The serendipitous meetings of key characters are a kind of running joke, teasing the audience and their ability to understand what is going on in each scenario and in the plot as a whole: the junkie nurse crosses Kev’s path (first at the mall and later at the pub when she tries to hock her TV); Laughing Boy is one of Mick’s brothers’ mates; the nurse’s dealer is Colin, the crim who sells Kev some guns; the city detectives are trying to find Laughing Boy and mistakes Kev for him; the city detectives knock on Colin’s door just as Lani’s brother knocks on Mick’s; the bank Kev and Mick plan to rob is also the bank Laughing Boy has his eye on. Scenes jump from story to story, frequently joined together by a split-second novelty shot like an explosion or the ‘Ka-Wham!’ and ‘Pow!’ of a TV cartoon. This playful technique exacerbates the rapid-fire scene changes, the dialogue as action, and general heady pace of the film,
while drawing attention to the constructedness of the film as a text and its broad sense of play.

Intertextuality takes on two broad forms in *Idiot Box*, testing the audience’s screen knowledges: popular culture references made by the characters and popular culture references in the construction of the film. For instance, the basis of characters’ interactions is often around arguments about popular culture and consumption: Kev and Mick over TV cop shows, Colin and the detectives over pineapple on hamburgers, Colin and the junky nurse over the wonders of TV and the detectives over chocolate sprinkles on cappuccinos. These petty arguments echo *Pulp Fiction*, which is in turn an ‘intoxicating [bit of] nonsense and a knowing, [a] seductive and ‘back-talking’ text’ that references multiple films, TV shows and popular culture itself in classic self-referential style (Bertelsen, 1999, p. 9). These scenes are what Bertelsen (1999) refers to as *mise en abyme* or scenes that are in themselves performative, where nothing is as it seems and there is, from the outset, overt signs of the constructedness of the film and the overt ‘fictionalisation’ of its characters. For instance, as the police cars pull up outside Colin’s mother’s modest suburban house to arrest Colin on suspicion of manufacturing and distributing narcotics, the theme to Australian TV’s *Homicide* plays in retro tongue-in-cheek style. Later at the
police station in a holding cell, Detective Eric (Graeme Blundell) interviews drug-dealer Colin (Stephen Rae):

Detective Eric: Just try and understand what I am trying to say to you now. There are colleagues of mine, other members of the policing fraternity have what you might say is a less flexible attitude when it comes to what could be called ‘hard drugs’. You understand what I’m saying to you?

Colin: Yeah ... is this the ‘good cop/bad cop’ routine?

Detective Eric: You been watching too many cop shows, Sunshine!

[Colin laughs. Detective Eric exits and talks to his partner out in the hallway]

Detective Leanne: Did you do the ‘colleagues’ thing?

Detective Eric: Yeah.

Detective Leanne: ‘Other members of the policing fraternity’ thing?

Detective Eric: Yeah!

Detective Leanne: It’s good that one. [pause] You mind if I have a go?

Detective Eric: Go for your life.

[Detective Leanne buttons up her suit, clears her throat and enters the holding cell].
Like an ideal Generation X subject, Colin feels like he’s witnessed this scene before, making reference to the ‘good cop/bad cop’ routine played out in every cop show he’s watched on his telly. Detective Eric tries to persuade him that this is real, not like those cop shows he’s watched too many of. But then, Eric and Leanne’s (Deborah Kennedy) conversation in the corridor, discussing strategies and roles to play in the interrogation of their subject, suggests that it is all performative. On one level, the audience understands this scene in the context of all the other cop shows they have seen and all those scenes where the cops try to ‘shake down the crook’. At the same time, the film text draws attention to the design of this scene and the deliberate reference to this convention of ‘shaking down the crook’, so that we recognise and enjoy it as parody and play.

With their wise-cracking, dead-pan delivery and grey suits, the Homicide-like detectives seem like they are from another era. Indeed, a kitsch and nostalgic ‘cool’ is created throughout the film, which pokes fun at various filmic and social conventions: Colin’s loud shirts, the 1980s mustard station wagon, a 1980s TV show theme and a 1970s wah-wah guitar soundtrack. Frequently Kev refers to Mick as his ‘Skippy’. Kev often whistles the Skippy theme, known to Kev and his generation who grew up watching Skippy, and at one point hops like a kangaroo, teasing Mick. There are also references to popular culture in the way the film is constructed; for instance, as noted above, when Kev carries out one of his acts of masculine larrikinism, the theme to the 1980s Wide World of Sports plays in the background, again an iconic musical theme that members of that generation would immediately recognise. In one of the early scenes where we see Kev’s house in the daylight, the background music is the cheery whistling and wobble-boarding of kitsch king, Rolf Harris. While owning your own home in the suburbs was a dream of a particular era, the same era perhaps when Rolf Harris was on Australian TVs, the contemporary shell of a house and a ‘plastic’, tree-less suburb, mocks this great Australian dream (see: Caesar in DVD extras on ‘controlled ugliness’). In this context, we learn to see suburbia and listen to Rolf with ironic ears.
An ironic stance is also needed when watching the scenes in the film that are overtly racist, sexist and violent. Frequently, the dialogue is harsh and the violence is intense. But often these same scenes are some of the most humorous in the film. In response to the critics of *Pulp Fiction* condemning the film’s humour as treating violence, racism and obscenity too lightly, Bertelsen defends *Pulp Fiction*, arguing that it is transgressive humour precisely because it is unPC (1999, p. 17). A rupture with political correctness hyperbolically performs itself, ‘exposing its own devices and our viewing habits to comic scrutiny’ (Bertelsen, p. 23). In the same way, the ideal Generation X audience understands *Idiot Box*’s ‘unPC humour’ as ironic, among other things, criticising our love of violence in popular culture. It has us critically reflect on the ridiculousness of the young Aussie masculinity that Kev embodies. Deliberately anti-authority in nature, this politically incorrect rupture is most (un)spectacularly embodied in the message on Kev’s ‘offensive’ t-shirt, which, as we have seen earlier, reads ‘Get a dog up ya!’ Kev’s response to Mick making Kev’s mum a cup of tea (‘Why don’t you go down on her while you’re at it!’) or Kev’s response to Lani’s brother who wants to have a go shooting a gun (‘No way Coconut, you’ll go mad in the head if you get a gun!’) is precisely this kind of humour, highlighting the absurd ways that Kev functions. Unlike *Pulp Fiction*, there is violence in *Idiot Box* that is distinctly unfunny (the scene where Kev beats Jonah for instance). But the scene where Jonah returns to Colin after being badly beaten by Kev is particularly *Pulp Fictionesque*, in that it marries violence and humour most effectively:

[In Colin’s garage. Colin watches the cartoons on the TV]

Colin: You gave him the guns!?
Jonah: How was I ‘sposed to know he was going to go crazy?

Colin: [standing] I just want to be clear about what happened, you know. I just want to know. [He punches Jonah, Jonah falls back and hits the wall]. Is that what happened?
Jonah: [moving his jaw in pain] I dunno.

---

34 See Appendix II
35 A racist slur.
Colin: Well you were there. I wasn’t there, right. You were there [the scene flashes to a cartoon shot that reads ‘BAM!’ then flashes back to Colin punching Jonah in the gut]. Is that what happened?

Jonah: I dunno!

[Colin knees him in the guts. [the scene flashes to a cartoon shot that reads ‘BLAM!’ then flashes back]. Look I’m not angry with you. [grabs Jonah by the nose and drags him across the room]. I’m just a bit disappointed. [Throws him back against the wall. Flash to a shot that reads ‘Ka-Wham!’]

Colin: God you gave him my fucking guns!

[Jonah cries. Colin rings the Detectives on the phone] G’day, you know who it is. [to Jonah] can you be quiet for a minute please....

Several key elements work together to make what is quite a brutal scene funny: the ‘dagginess’ of Colin’s garage and the fact that he operates his drug manufacturing and dealing from his mother’s house (a mother who brings him tea and biscuits as he discusses his criminal activities with his cronies); the flashes of a cartoon ‘BAM!’ and ‘WHAM!’; Colin’s ‘is this what happened’, beating Jonah for being beaten up; how Colin’s voice remains calm, while physically he’s fired up; Jonah whimpering and crying, the antithesis of a ‘hardened criminal’; and Colin asking Jonah politely to be quiet. This scene between Colin and Jonah is classic crime film, replete with its profanities, violence and gruesomeness, but it is also sitcom at its best. Petty bickering and complaints flout and reframe the gangster-style. Far from frivolously ‘citing’ macho and criminal behaviour and violence, the film destabilises them in the ‘system of genre’, exposing them to scrutiny (Bertelsen, 1999, p. 29). It does not simply repeat violent acts, masculine bravado and ‘vulgar’ speech; it makes them ridiculous. To borrow from Bertelsen here: If the film’s ‘cool’ mode of address appears at times to equate gangster violence with pineapple on burgers or TV cartoons, perhaps this is a ‘fair comment on our unthinking consumption of the ‘branded’ tropes of popular film’ (Bertelsen, p. 30), and the way we come to know young masculinity.

Idiot Box performs the process of filmmaking/viewing as a game, an act of seduction and a joke (see Bertelsen 1999, p. 15, 18). Its abundance of overblown generic cues is dependent on cultural clichés, ‘hackneyed’
stories and the ‘proud exploitation’ of stereotyped characters (see Bertelsen, p. 22). Bertelsen argues that the characters of this kind of film are ‘avatars of stock genre’ exposed as ‘synthetic products’, ‘hyperbolically constituted’ by TV and consumer culture (1999, p. 20), and its various filmic and narrative codes and conventions. Constituted in language and visual style through colourful and uncouth debates and displays of popular culture, these characters are, however, radically layered and intertextual. Just like Samuel L. Jackson as the loud-mouthed black gangster or Harvey Keitel as the shady but cool crim, Ben Mendelsohn as Kev is a proud exploitation of the ‘worst excesses’ of the Anglo-Australian male (Butterss, 2001, p. 84). As a contemporary ‘Generation X’ reworking of larrikin and brutish (cinematic) forefathers, ‘Kev’ is strong characterisation, (extra)ordinarily comic and wilfully stereotypical. Drawing on the ‘star system’, Caesar exploits the cinematic authority of ‘Ben Mendelsohn’, signalling that:

... characters are first and foremost filmic tropes, and any attempt to identify with them or take them seriously is immediately ambushed by an excess of subversive cues (Bertelsen, 1999, p. 21).

An ideal Generation X audience, well-versed in global and in local Australian screen cultures, wilfully celebrates and suspects Kev and his rejection/embodiment of the young Aussie man (Thomas, 1996). The Generation X spectator understands Kev and Mick as Australia’s answer to Beavis and Butthead, loveable losers and idiot savants, a unique example of a ‘male ensemble film’ that ‘celebrate[s] male Australianness as essential, recognisable, likeable Australianness’ (Dermody & Jacka, 1988, p. 61). As seasoned watchers of Australian TV and cinema, we love Kev in spite of (or because of) his brutishness, sexism, racism, violence and homophobia. Far from taming his brutish ways (although Mick counter-balances Kev’s somewhat), Kev plays up to and upon this ‘protest’ masculine subjectivity; spectacularly, performatively and unapologetically. In this sense, this is an embodied pedagogy we willingly and easily accept; as the ideal spectator, we recognise Kev’s masculine display as a kind of
affable offensiveness, stylistic edginess, and as recognisable gendered and age-based subjectivity:

I love the energy and the masculinity of [Idiot Box]. It’s certainly not sensitive and new age. Actually I find it refreshing. It’s unapologetic. It’s coarse. It’s very coarse, very funny but ultimately extremely moving (Producer Glenys Rowe on the DVD extras).

Mode of address is key to the pedagogical design choices of Idiot Box, which incites us towards this kind of young manhood. However, it is also inextricably linked to ourselves as spectators. Kev’s (un)spectacular (re)workings of young manhood invite us to consider this subjectivity, as ‘ideal’ spectating subjects we are hailed through the particular mode of address. The camerawork, editing, dialogue, characterisation and even the star system work together to engage us in a reflexive way about him and about our hate/love for him. From a technical and thematic standpoint, Kev functions as an organising sensibility in Idiot Box, arguably serving to show that his masculinity is extreme and absurd. We gain pleasure from Kev, precisely because we know he’s ‘wrong’. Kev’s larrikin is loveable, a ‘legend’, we forgive and revere him despite his deficits, despite his complete lack of redeeming features, or more correctly, because of them. The masculinity that the film at once sets-up, inhabits and dismantles is the pedagogy of young manhood, the particular games of age-based and gendered subjectivity that we, potentially, become complicit in.

Coda — The End of the Larrikin?

At the bank in the final scene of the movie, Kev and the boys’ day has come. In position, sweating and with itchy trigger-fingers, their ‘thunder’ is suddenly stolen by the real bank robbers (Laughing Boy and his crew) who burst in from a back door. The SWAT team are ready to go and arrest the bank robbers, dismissing Kev and Mick as silly boys in the wrong place at the wrong time. As Kev and Mick stumble out the front of the bank, they meet a sea of police and roof snipers with their guns cocked. Kev gets a certain look in the eye. The star of his own standoff, just like all those he has seen on TV, he smiles and pulls his gun out.
The cops tell him to drop it. He doesn’t and is shot. Falling backwards, his arms are raised in a ‘V’ (just like all those other times after his larrikin tricks), but this time he lands on the ground hard. Blood pools around his body and comes out of his mouth. Mick runs to his side and leans over him:

Mick: You mad bastard!
Kev: [smiles. He laughs but bloods spurts from his mouth] Am I dead yet?
Mick: [half laughing, half crying] Nah not yet mate, not yet.
[Kev laughs and dies]

Most critics see Kev’s death as a morality tale, noting that Kev’s masculinist shortcomings lead to his downfall. Wark (1999; as cited in Hopkins, 1995, p. 3) focuses on Kev’s failure to successfully rob the bank and get away, putting it down to Kev’s amateurish lack of skills. He dies because he has to — there is no place for him and his offensive manhood in this contemporary world. The comical bad luck of the bank robbery gone wrong and the circumstances around Kev’s death serves as a metaphor for this boy’s attempts at becoming a man — anything but ‘piss easy’. The story of Kev and Mick add to a long list of Australian films that encourages learning about how ‘bad’ mateship can be (Collins & Davis, 2004). Kev may desire to be a hero but he is a ‘silly boy’, dying unnecessarily and senselessly. Morris
(1989) and Biber (1999a; 1999b; 2001) would see Kev’s death as a part of a long tradition of tragic national heroes who embody a ‘culturally resonant locus’: although he loses, he becomes a legend. At every turn, Kev is threatened with emasculation and various obstacles prevent him from the unambiguous attainment of full adult manhood and heroic status: economically he is threatened and marginalised, as he is constantly without money or a car; his girlfriend criticises his sexual prowess; his mother chastises him as though he were a child; Mick criticises his anger and recklessness; and even the neighbour’s dog tries to intimidate him. In death he is saved from the emasculation of ‘corporal disappointments’, an enduring specimen of mythical manhood (Biber, 1999a, p. 28, also see Biber 1999b).

Other critics like Butterss (1998) argue that in the end we hate the self-destructive masculinity Kev embodies, rather than Kev per se. Taking all these accounts into consideration, the ‘problematic aspects’ of Kev’s subjectivity are clearly not erased by his death, but highlighted as all the more complex. The ideal Generation X spectator furthermore sees Kev’s death as the final and ultimate parody of the film. As noted in the previous chapter, Mendelsohn’s characters have a tendency to be killed off. Like John Travolta’s character Vincent, who is appalled at the prospect of a dance competition at Jack Rabbit Slims in Pulp Fiction (Is it his character Vincent or John Travolta who is appalled? [see: Bertelsen, 1999, p. 21]), Mendelsohn asks if he is dead yet because his characters frequently die. Cunningly attuned to the mind and manner of his viewers in its constitution of them, Caesar through Mendelsohn arguably anticipates our every move, confident that we will recognise the Mendelsohn iconography and respond on cue. Performing his own pre-fabricated image, Mendelsohn catches the audience ‘with their pants down’, winking at us that we will ‘get’ the joke, reminding us that it was all a joke. Perhaps he reminds us not to take all this too seriously, not to take his death too seriously. This is, after all, just a good yarn. Far from making fun of the audience, Caesar/Mendelsohn ‘welcomes us as co-conspirators’ in his pedagogic cinephiliac project. He
obtains our complicity in the pedagogical practice and discursive production of the ‘worst excesses’ of the young Aussie male, testing our knowledge in regards to popular youthful masculinities.

What this chapter has argued is that popular film potentially incites learning about young masculine subjecthood in the contemporary Australian context. Kev and Mick illustrate what is at stake in forming/not forming the self as a subject in particular ways, the possibilities of being young, being male and being Australian. I have considered Idiot Box in terms of pedagogy, indicating that through such a lens, insights could be gained in regards to the formation and intelligibility of young manhoods that, in turn, potentially frame the way we can come to know the young masculine subject. Additionally, I also considered the film’s address in regards to an ideal Generation X audience, constituted through specific discursive and semiotic devices such as irony, parody and ambiguity. How this mode of address might be connected to our ‘complicity’ in the perpetuation of this kind of national manhood was considered in the light of pedagogy, and in light of the contradictions of contemporary young manhood.

Shifting the focus from youthful masculinity to youthful femininity, the next two chapters consider technologies of ‘girlhood’. The section begins with close readings of three ‘coming of age’ films, Peaches (2004), Somersault (2004) and Caterpillar Wish (2006), in terms of how the girl protagonists of each film might work pedagogically, inciting particular ways of coming to know the girl subject on her way to becoming a ‘rational’, ‘full-fledged’ woman.


Prologue

A storm is coming

A lone piano softly plays, a rhythmic melody is repeated. It is ‘emotional’ music and it makes me quiet, reflective and ... sad. Shots of the landscape and the town fade in and out, sun rising over a sleepy sea-side village. Each shot is like an old slide show, brief scenes full of information and ... feeling, transitioning slowly like time hangs in suspension. I wonder what happens here in this place. A lighthouse, a weathered dock being lapped by dark grey moody seas. The sound of the ocean; the sad piano music continues. It’s hypnotic. It makes me focus inward, on my senses. Each frame like an art canvas. I can hear the ocean. I can almost smell it. I notice my breathing has slowed down. The sky on the screen is grey, cloudy. I think a storm is coming. Bubbles froth and gurgle over rocks, an old weathered boat bopping in choppy little waves. A close up of some weathered ruddy-coloured wood so we can see all its lines and wrinkles, like the face of an old man. The lighthouse, the sea, the dock — masculine imagery I think. Conjuring up ideas of brave, lone adventurers out to sea, battling the elements. A cello joins the piano and builds on the sad, dramatic, solemn tune, adding intensity and a sense of urgency. I lean in closer to the screen. An image of a cliff, looking down over it to the jagged rocks and ocean below, suggesting danger and drama. The sound of the ocean louder. An image of an intricate web of red and yellow sea plants just under the surface of the water, a tangled web of mysterious tentacles. I wouldn’t want to swim there, I think, I feel I would get dragged down. But there is a wild, strange beauty about it, a seductiveness. The indescribable things that are just below the surface ... And then a change; there is sun, shining over houses in a quiet neighbourhood. Not a person is in sight. A bird twitters. A caterpillar’s cocoon hangs in the tree, swaying in the breeze. A butterfly: becoming, metamorphosis, maturation. The cello leaves the piano and the music softens. The faintest tinkle of wind-chimes.

A butterfly wind-chime casts its shadow on fine, flimsy curtains inside a room. A close-up of ornate, fancy wallpaper, a sheer green curtain, a string of seashells and a wooden window frame. Beauty, delicateness, grace, gentleness, earthiness. Pale bed covers. A close-up of a young woman’s smooth forehead, sculpted eyebrow and closed eye are seen out from under the covers. A close-up of a delicate glassy bracelet on her thin wrist. A close-up of her face in full. The
sculpted eyebrow, the full lips, the prominent beauty-spot. Beautiful, young, white, smooth skin. A clear, open and intelligent face: embodiments of young feminine beauty. Kissing her cheek, the sun wakes her, gently and beautifully. She blinks a few times. The wind-chime tinkles. Without lifting her head off the pillow she turns to look at it hanging in her window. The music fades. The girl sighs softly. Just the sound of the chimes ... the wind ... a bird. She smiles a tiny smile at some private thought. What is she smiling about? Perhaps at the sweetness and delicate beauty of the chime, or some other deep secret. A close-up on the delicate, jewelled butterfly with the words ‘Caterpillar Wish’ in scripted font appears on the screen....

What does this caterpillar, soon-to-be a glorious butterfly, wish for?
Chapter Six

‘On the Brink’: Learning Lessons about Becoming a Woman in *Caterpillar Wish*, *Peaches & Somersault*
Our intimate lives, our feelings, desires and aspirations, seem quintessentially personal (Rose, 1999, p. 1).

... ‘Coming-of-age’ makes adolescence into a powerful and uncontrollable force, like the arrival of spring that swells tree buds (Lesko, 2001, p. 3).

Introduction

In this chapter I continue to think through how popular film might work as pedagogy. As a technology (that is, a cultural, discursive and pedagogic practice), popular film is profoundly geared towards the making of cultural knowledge and the making of subjectivities. The focus remains on the constitution of gendered, sexed and age-based subjects, and the ways in which they might come to be known. Specifically this chapter considers three young female protagonists in relatively recent Australian ‘coming-of-age’ films, Emily in Caterpillar Wish (2006), Steph in Peaches (2004), and Heidi in Somersault (2004). These screen girls are understood in the light of truth-games regarding the being and doing of the young feminine subject. Like the previous chapters on youthful masculinities, I engage with the ways the film text might work pedagogically and discursively to constitute subjects. How these young girl protagonists come to make sense as complex ‘psychologised’, ‘feminised’ and ‘sexualised’ (referred to from here on as ‘psycho-sexual’) subjects is the focus here. As ‘pedagogues’ (Dyson, 1993; Morris, 2001) they embody what it means to be Girl, inciting potential intertextual lessons as key figures that do ‘girlhood’. As texts they are pedagogic, contemporary sites for ongoing and complex negotiations and meanings about ‘girlhood’. Such pedagogy evokes female coming-of-age as a transformative ‘psycho-sexual’, ‘interior’ and ‘affective’ process: turbulent, emotional, difficult, deeply personal and relational. As they undergo their own ‘life lessons’ and ‘come-of-age’ through emotional and developmental (ir)rationalities, these pedagogic subjects arguably draw out affective responses from audiences, convincing them that such ‘emotionality’ is not only required but normative in regards to the formation of ‘feminine adolescence’. Clearly, then, the pedagogy that occurs here is far from mechanistic or didactic; rather, ways of coming to...
know the female youth subject (and subjectivity) are complex, relational and profoundly ‘subjective’.

Divided into three sections, the analysis begins by reviewing the literature in regard to a genealogy of psycho-subjectivity and contemporary ideas about girlhood. The second section considers the opening scene of Caterpillar Wish with reference to both Peaches and Somersault, to analyse how pedagogy might work here in terms of constituting the girls as psycho-sexual subjects that potentially incite spectator ‘emotionality’. Various filmic and narrative techniques, as incitements to psycho-sexual knowledge about girlhood, are noted, specifically focusing ideas of place, landscape, the weather and the musical/sound score. The chapter continues by considering the girl protagonists through discursive formations like coming-of-age, femininity and girlhood, primarily noting how the ‘emotionality’ of the girl is capitalised on through certain techniques in the attempt to depict complex ‘interiorities’. In the final section, the conclusions of the films and the reconciliations experienced by the girl protagonists are examined, along with how audiences might ‘come to know’ (Lusted, 1986, p. 3) these girls-becoming-women, thereby learning about how girlhood is understood and conducted in Western societies.

Part I

(i) Troubled & Troubling Subjects: The Young Female Subject

While our feelings, desires and actions may appear as the very ‘fabric and constitution of the intimate self’, they are historically and socially organised and ‘managed in minute particulars’ (Rose, 1999, p. 1; also see Rose, 1996; Foucault, 1997). Playing a constitutive role in shaping contemporary subjects as subjects and selves, with a clearly delineated ‘psychology’, ‘sexuality’ and ‘emotionality’, the ‘psy’ disciplines and their related cultures have convinced Western societies that ‘selfhood’ is a normal, natural given, but also, significantly, a main aim and something

36 Rose (1999) spells these out as psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis (p. 10).
one must continually strive for. To do this successfully, we must aim for a complete, determined, contained, rational, adult subjectivity, and then constantly maintain the self in these terms. The ‘psycho-sexual’, then, has become one of the primary means by which we come to know ourselves, and also the primary means by which we experience ourselves as selves. Being ‘normal’ means being ideal ‘psycho-sexual’ subjects, in-tune with our ‘inner self’, undertaking steps to ‘discover our self, be our self, express our self, love our self, and be loved for the self that we really [are]’ (Rose, 1996, p. 4). By means of governing techniques like (self)inspection, (self)disclosure, (self)problematisation, (self)monitoring and (self)care, we are invited to evaluate ourselves through all sorts of practices including confession, therapy, diary writing, techniques of body alteration and calculated reshaping of speech and emotion. These practices have become key to realise one’s ‘potential, gain happiness, and exercise one’s autonomy’ (Rose, 1996, p. 17). These devices appear more profoundly ‘subjectifying’ because they seem to ‘emanate from our individual desires to fulfil ourselves in our everyday lives, to craft our personalities, to discover who we really are’ (Rose, p. 17). So then, ‘we have become intensely subjective beings’ (Rose, p. 3), inventing ourselves with ‘all the ambiguous costs and benefits that this invention has entailed’ (Rose, p. 17).

Psycho-sexual subjectivity:

... accords humans all sorts of capacities, endows us with all sorts of rights and privileges but it also divides, imposes burdens and thrives upon the anxieties and disappointments generated by its own promises (Rose, p. 3).

As feminist scholars have long observed, the female subject has been positioned as far from ‘ideal’, historically represented as prone to disorder, passion and strange shapeless feelings (see: Gatens, 1991; Henriques et. al., 1984; Walkerdine, 1988; Burman, 1994, 2005). Compared to that of the male subject as the ‘centre’ and ‘the norm’, the female subject has been made synonymous with irrationality and overt sensitivity. The young female subject through such technologies as ‘adolescence’ was constituted as doubly ‘unstable’ due to what was understood as the ‘limitations’ of her gender, but also her volatile pathology and under-developed age-based
stage of subjectivity (Johnson, 1993; Lesko, 2001). Since the advent of the ‘psy’ disciplines, women and girls have been central to practices of pathology, where their stories, secrets and sexual urges were extrapolated and held up for public examination. Recent feminist scholarship has noted that contemporary popular culture is focused on, even obsessed with, the stories of girls and young women (see: Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001; Driscoll, 2002; Burman, 2005; McRobbie, 2000; 2004). The contemporary post-feminist female subject is understood as being free from restrictions and now successfully able to ‘have it all’ (Walkerdine, 2003; Gonick, 2006).

Considered ‘ideal’ subjects of a society that demands self-regulation and self-accountability, the current interest in letting girls ‘speak out, to be seen and heard, can operate as a strategy of governmentality’ (Harris, 2004, p. 185). While this attention has come with great costs to contemporary girls and young women, this visibility and disclosure should be recognised, in Foucauldian terms, as both enabling and disenabling (also see Sedgwick [1991] on the ambiguous costs of ‘coming out’).

Gonick (2006) argues that contemporary understandings and popular cultural representations of new femininities are linked to shifting cultural ideals of ‘personhood’, ‘individuality’, and ‘agency’, as a reflection of neoliberal social, economic and political changes (also see: Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2004, 2007; Walkerdine, 2003; Driscoll, 1999). Two main ways of thinking dominate contemporary understandings of girlhood, and although contradictory in many respects, work together to constitute the female subject in a ‘non-unitary way’ (Gonick, 2006, p. 1): ‘Girlpower’, positioning girls as self-determined, self-made, enterprising and capable; and ‘Reviving Ophelia’, traditional ideas of femininity, which mark girls as special, moral, naïve, vulnerable and at risk. These discursive formations function together to articulate a complexity of ‘fiction and fantasy, regulation and persuasion’ (Gonick, p. 3), framing the way we can come to know the ‘girl’. In a Foucauldian sense, these discourses circulate as powerful contemporary truths about feminine subjects, and about the way girls and young women can legitimately come
to know their selves. While the contemporary rhetoric is that girls can do and be anything, they are simultaneously positioned as being ‘at risk’ of failing to secure stable subjecthood precisely because their gender and age are understood as impediments. On one hand, contemporary girls and young women are celebrated as free from the restraints of women of previous generations, while on the other hand, they are positioned as ‘troubled’ and ‘troubling’ subjects, never able to be the ‘right’ kind of subject despite renewed and urgent attempts at self-regulation (also see: Burman, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Lesko, 1996; McRobbie, 2004; 2007). Bound to complex and contradictory notions, contemporary girls and young women, either as powerful or powerless, are made and remade as ‘a site around which many culture’s concerns and anxieties cohere’ (Bavidge 2004 in Jackson, 2006, p. 474; also see Gonick, 2006). As social and cultural subjects, girls and young women have come to personify contemporary concerns around health, risk, law and order (Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004).

One of the complex effects of this incitement to neoliberal notions of individuality and individual responsibility has been to usher in a ‘covert psychologisation’ in particular regard to the young female subject (Burman, 2005, p. 356; also see: Gonick, 2006). Incitements to the ‘feminine’ self include the central task of self-regulation, where the subject must address ‘dissatisfactions, realise potential, gain happiness, achieve autonomy’ (Gonick, 2006, p. 18; also see Rose, 1999, 1996). ‘Successful’ feminine selfhood becomes measured through a proliferation of psychological knowledges centred on discursive incitements towards ‘healthy’ and ‘successful’ intimate lives, relationships, feelings, desires and aspirations. Having to be accountable for one’s ‘emotional intelligence’, or what has been referred to as ‘emotion literacy’, and ‘soft-skills’ in important socio-educational scholarship (see: McWilliam & Brannock, 2000; Meadmore & McWilliam, 2001; Meadmore & Meadmore, 2004), has resulted in what Burman (2005) calls a feminisation of the neoliberal subject. Meadmore and Meadmore (2001) note that emotions, so often assumed to be the antithesis to rationality, are subsumed within the rationalist framework,
where ‘emotions become skills to be learned and practised’ (p. 36). Current depictions of girls and young women as quintessentially moral and feeling subjects and as anxious and anxiety-inducing subjects can thus be understood as a way gendered subjectivity is practiced and functions as a cultural dynamic. Following this, the ideal girl-subject is an agent of social order and cohesion (Harris, 2004). In popular culture the girl is thus represented and positioned as needing to self-regulate as an ethical, caring, emotionally intelligent subject, not only able to manage herself but manage and take responsibility for the problems of others, of family, of friends, of lovers and of their communities. The anxiety surrounding girls growing up extends to all girl-subjects, not only around those girls who are understood as unsuccessfully producing themselves as these ideal self-made subjects, but also those girl-subjects deemed ‘successful’ (see Walkerdine, 2003; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001; Walkerdine & Ringrose, 2006; O’Flynn & Petersen, 2007). Knowledges about the young female subject circulate and converge most powerfully here as ‘truth’, so that coming to know the girl-subject in any other way is difficult. ‘Coming-of-age’ discourses and themes around ‘emotional’ development makes this form of female adolescence into something natural, normal and inevitable, ‘a powerful and uncontrollable force, like the arrival of spring that swells tree buds’ (Lesko, 2001, p. 3).

Part II

(i) Storm and Stress: Technologies of Place, the Weather & Soundscape

Place is important to the pedagogical practice of (re)making the girl as a young, feminine, psycho-sexual subject. Indeed, there is something significant about the three films under analysis in this chapter as serious studies on girls’ coming-of-age, and the corresponding settings chosen in which to tell these stories. The way landscapes and spaces, like the girl’s bedroom or the country town, are isolated and emphasised in still and concentrated ways, encourages the spectator to come to ideas of the protagonist in the same careful, measured and serious way. The
construction of landscape as gendered (Dermody & Jacka, 1988, p. 105), and place as complex and full of meaning, are pedagogical devices that potentially orientate the spectator towards the protagonist as feminine, emotional and an individual being with a complex ‘inner’ subjectivity. More than just a setting or background for the action to occur, place acts as a metaphor for the girl undergoing a transformation into adulthood (Chouinard, 2009; Makeham, 1999). It is as if the sleepy seaside village and moody ocean in Caterpillar Wish, or the quiet peach groves in Peaches, or the frozen wilderness of Jindabyne (in Somersault), mirrors the kind of change and volatility traditionally expected of the girl ‘on the brink’ of womanhood. The stormy skies, the waving trees, the wild winds, the fog rising off the ground, the breath escaping from someone’s mouth into the cold night, the movement and changeability of ‘nature’, echo and bind the girl protagonist to her physical environment (see: Wiles, 2007; Simpson, 2008) as if part of her ‘natural’ yet mysterious transforming subjectivity.

The sparsely populated and relatively remote country towns in each of the films are significant to the girls’ coming-of-age, enabling and necessitating retreat into the self, in solitary, but not lonely self-reflection (see Simpson, 2008). Rather than being trapped in the town, like so many other Australian films about the rural37, the girls are mobile, using bicycles and buses to get to where they want to go. Chouinard (2009) highlights the ways in which ‘cultural constructions of otherness help to render people in and out of place; as belonging or not belonging’ (p. 792). These girls are shown to be capable, independent and self-determined in the places that their stories occur. Recent shifts in Australian films show that, rather than being hostile to women, the country town is undergoing a feminisation (Simpson, 2008). Far from being alienated, screen women in the rural sphere draw ‘agency from this familiarity and knowledge of place’ (Simpson, p. 49). Nonetheless, while the girl forging off alone is key to her independence as a kind of go-getter adventurer or model of Girlpower,

---

these films also reaffirm the vulnerability of the girl who is out there all on her own.

The opening scene of *Caterpillar Wish* (see the prologue to this chapter) begins with intimate shots of the landscape, and ends with intimate shots of the body of a girl. The preceding ‘serious’ and ‘emotional’ landscape shots firmly situate Emily (Victoria Thaine) in this kind of space, both literally and metaphorically. The sea, the lighthouse, a weathered boat, the dock and the rough sea are all images full of meaning. These particular ‘masculine’ images, viewed as pedagogic, potentially equate elements of danger, drama and wildness with ways of coming to know the young female subject on the brink of womanhood. Masculine ideas of adventurers out to sea are reclaimed then, as a site for a female quest for self-determined individuality and womanhood as fully-fledged subjectivity (see: Zonn & Aitken, 1993; Wiles, 2007). The girl protagonist is moral, heroic and at the centre of the narrative. Danger or risk, drama and instability, beauty and wildness work as familiar and normative ways of accounting for her.
The frequent filmic and narrative techniques of still and focused shots or the ‘creeping beauty’ (McFarlane, 1979, p. 221) and the time spent lingering over elements of her environment, her house, her bedroom and her body enable and constrain viewing in particular ways. The precise attention paid to the ‘earthy’ and ‘sensual’ features outside her bedroom (the water, the sea plants, the butterfly cocoon), elements within her room (the shells, the sheer curtains) and her body (the glass bracelet on her thin wrist, the beauty-spot, manicured brows) all arguably denote her embodiment of a kind of girlhood that is designed to be looked at. In this sense, focusing on the girl in fragmented close-ups positions her as a complex ‘emotional’ being. Her silence and the careful attention given to her silent thoughts are signs of her seriousness and intelligence, and her youth-hood is positioned as far from frivolous or superficial. Her beauty and whiteness, as the normative of the feminine, also becomes synonymous with intelligence and individuality, a particular kind of understanding of youthful girlhood. Her smooth, white-skinned face, her open, clear eyes, the beauty-spot above her full pink lips, her thinness — all work together to privilege this kind of reading. As a result, this scene is a particularly powerful and timeless image, even in its banality. Waking up in the morning has never looked so beautiful, so peaceful, so purposeful, so ... ‘feminine’. (No annoying alarm to shock her from her slumbers, no whirring lawnmower outside, no banging of cupboard doors coming from the kitchen.)
The private space of the bedroom, the intimate, secret space of the becoming-girl, in all its ‘mysteriousness’ is exposed to the public eye. As a metaphor for the girl’s secret, inner life, the bedroom is a common choice in popular films about young girls and is linked to femininity more broadly (see: McRobbie, 1991; 2000). (Un)willingly, audiences are turned into voyeurs, taken into the girls’ interior life, in the act of being taken into Emily’s bedroom while she sleeps, or like when we become witnesses to the psycho-sexual subjectivities of girls ‘on the brink’ of womanhood.

More than just providing some ambience for the girls’ stories to take place, storms have long been metaphors for the unstable and unpredictable nature of youth (the legacy of ‘storm and stress’ in G. Stanley Hall’s 1905 *Adolescence*), and the moodiness and changeability often associated with adolescent girls and women. In all the films analysed here, almost in a Romantic, Brontesque way, as the complexity of the girls’ emotional lives come to be known, the skies becomes greyer and the wind blows. Like a semiotic system for the irrational, a storm signifies the girl’s emotional state (Ferrier, 2001, p. 69; Wiles, 2007), and is a filmic device that has long attempted to depict psycho-sexual life. For Emily, storms are forecast right at the beginning of the film and manifest at key scenes in the character’s development. In *Somersault*, one of the most crucially intense and pedagogical moments in terms of Heidi’s (Abbie Cornish) romantic

---

22 The sleeping ‘beauty’ in *Caterpillar Wish*

---

*As in the common representation of the heroine, raging against blighted love on the wild moors, such as in Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. Romantic, Victorian (pre-Freud) psychology linked woman’s moods, demeanours and (mental) health to nature, and the weather.*
relationship occurs for her when it becomes so cold it turns into a blizzard. For Steph (Emma Lung) in Peaches, a key pedagogical moment in terms of learning about her self occurs when the steamy rain beats down heavily, in contrast to the rest of the film when the weather is clear. Significantly, at the end of each film, when the young female subject has successfully demonstrated that a transition from girl to young woman is being made, when the emotional turmoil that has marked her coming-of-age has subsided, the weather responds accordingly. Emily now rides down the roads of her sleepy sea-side town in her singlet-top, freely enjoying the summer sun, resolved from her conflicted state. It is as if the weather is a ‘reflection and judgement upon human affairs’ (Rayner, 2000, p. 50), and a pedagogic cue to pay attention to the changes occurring both in the weather and in the girl.

The ‘natural’ landscape as ‘feminine’ equates a mythic and mystic dimension to the girl coming-of-age (Wiles, 2007; Zonn & Aiken, 1993). Like visual technologies, specific ‘aural images’ (Collins & Davis, 2004, p. 41), for instance, frame these young protagonists and the ways we can potentially come to know them. In the opening titles of all three films, evocative music and sounds of the ocean or wind constitute Emily, Steph and Heidi as ‘serious’ and ‘significant’ and as enduring elements of beauty. For instance, in Caterpillar Wish, the sad piano and cello music, rhythmic ocean sounds, and airy winds contribute to the way we might come to know Emily in a serious, close, empathetic and perhaps emotional way. Emotional or sad music arguably invites reflection, spinning ‘a suggestive web’ (Dermody & Jacka, 1988, p. 106). The rhythmic ocean sounds potentially searching for a ‘visceral’ and ‘emotional’ response, incite the viewer to turn ‘inwards’, to respond with emotion. In Somersault, the music, created by a synthesiser, is moody, emotional and serious, but like the light tinkling of a music-box, is delicate, pretty, ‘childlike’ and ethereal. Rather than loud raucous rock music that personifies the girl-subject under analysis in the next chapter, the music and aural choices in these films potentially and pedagogically
work to constitute these girls, and how we come to know them, through technologies favouring the emotive and the emotional.

As devices that frame and potentially incite learning about the becoming-girls in these films, the construction of place, the weather and music/soundscape are merely a few of the ways pedagogy might work. While they do not determine what can be learned, such techniques constrain what can be known. Different readings of these elements can be had, of course; however, my focus is on the effects of these particular knowledges as pedagogy geared towards subject formation.

(ii) Emily, Heidi and Steph Do Girlhood ‘On the Brink’

Just as the girl protagonist is positioned as ‘emotional’, the viewer is arguably positioned to come to know the girl ‘emotionally’ through various techniques that induce ‘emotional’ responses. In these popular films, the girl as psycho-sexual subject is ‘capitalised on’ through filmic techniques that ‘privilege moments of pensive contemplations and confusion’ (Lee, 2007, p. 99). Here, a gesture, a beauty spot on the cheek, a flick of the hair, a sigh, sad piano music and staring off into space become well-versed ways of representing girls coming-of-age (see: Lee, 2007). All of these cues work to constitute Emily, Steph and Heidi and they do so in multiple ways, as naïve, innocent, vulnerable, sensual, earthy, smart and strong, but always as ‘deeply thinking’ subjects with rich psycho-sexual lives. Following this, the visual, aural and affective cues that constitute Emily, Steph and Heidi potentially orientate us towards girlhood, becoming familiar and normative techniques as if the only rational way that such subjects could be represented and known.

In his work on how we come to subjectivity, Rose (1996) notes that the ideal subject is interpolated as the beneficiary of a unique biography. Practices like confession work to legitimise the subject as profoundly individual, the ‘locus of thought, action and belief, the origin of its own actions, and the beneficiary of a unique biography’ (Rose, 1996, p.3). Self-regulating practices such as confession, diary writing and self-reflection are
historically the gendered practice of girls and women (Hunter, 1992; Bernstein, 1997). For the girls in these three films, the focus is on private/public displays of complex, ‘mature’, emotional lives, played out through such confessional practices. Emily, Steph and Heidi demonstrate that they are deeply thinking beings with complex inner lives through the practice of having, and being seen to have, time out for quiet (self)reflection. Staring off into the distance, deep in thought, with furrowed brow and pout, are powerful symbols of this way of being.

Neither Emily, Steph nor Heidi have siblings and they are all raised by single mothers. Both points are deliberate choices by the respective filmmakers of each film, and I outline the possible significance of this later in this chapter. This home-life arrangement, along with the physically open spaces of their sparsely populated country towns, sees the girls ideally placed to sit alone and do work on the self. Rather than being lonely (except perhaps in Heidi’s case), isolation is sought and indeed necessary to the production of a particular gendered and age-based subjectivity.

In one short yet significant scene in *Peaches*, Steph sits in the long cool green grass next to a shady peach orchard, the sun glistening through the trees. She has ridden some distance on her bike to get this alone time. She leafs through the pages of her mother’s diary and we magically hear her mother in a voice-over, evoking her future dreams and future subjectivity.
With a warm, sweet ‘feminine’ voice, she sings-songs about Steph’s soon-to-be father:

I’m never leaving Johnny. We are going to live to a great old age. We’ll have a tribe of kids, who’ll grow up warm and tanned; loved. [pause] And then we are going to die together in our sleep [giggles].

Steph does not literally hear her mother’s voice, but the voice-over as pedagogic device invites us to accept that, through learning about and thinking through her mother’s coming-of-age, Steph thinks about her own. The deeply thinking and emotional girl sits quietly as gentle music plays. The use of soft focus, close-ups on the girl-subject and the sweeping camera as it pans up over the orchard has a (day)dream-like quality about it. The idyllic and child-like naivety of Steph’s mother’s hopes and dreams for her future life, grounded in heterosexual romance, is the personal fantasy of a girl soon-to-be a woman. More than a personal fantasy though, this ‘desire’ is socially constructed and de rigueur for this kind of girlhood, and she passes this knowledge down to her daughter (Robinson & Davies, 2008; Walkerdine, 1997). That her father is a Vietnamese refugee with a traumatic and secret past, adds to the ‘exotic’ and ‘mythic dimension’ (Wiles, 2007, p. 182) of this feminine coming-of-age (in as much as this subplot is marginalised) (see: Speed, 2006). However, it is the intergenerational learning of women that matters here.

Angela McRobbie (2000) has long noted that ‘romantic individualism’ is an ethos ‘par excellence’ (McRobbie, 2000, p. 114) for the teenage girl or girl coming-of-age, where her emotional life is ‘defined and lived in terms of romance which is in turn equated with great moments’ (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 81), like the first kiss or the wedding day. Here the stories told to girls, and that girls tell themselves, must ‘elevate to dizzying heights the supremacy of the heterosexual romantic partnership’ (Walkerdine, p. 86). Walkerdine notes the power of fantasy and fiction in girls’ heterosexual subjectivities, particularly in the girl who is meant to have it all, ‘winning’ all the ‘glittering prizes’ such as ‘the man, the home, the adventure, and so forth’ (p. 90). The ‘excessiveness’ of the intense moment in the girl’s life, like the ‘ecstasy of the first kiss’ (Lee, 2007, p. 99), is played out and over
again in popular cinema. Strategically and intertextually reappearing, these intense moments are stressed as if a kind of emotional ‘money-shot’ (see: Dubrofsky, 2009), framing the girl-subject and potentially inciting viewers to respond in emotional ways. These pedagogical technologies become the ‘truth’ of representing girlhood, whether it be an intimate close-up, sad musical accompaniment, lingering shots of girls staring off into the distance or high-drama moments.

Signs that the girls have rich and active fantasy lives, are romantic dreamers in a sense, are important to the pedagogies of psycho-sexuality. The girls are constituted struggling to be in tune with, and managing, feminine, emotional and heterosexual subjecthoods. Each of the girl protagonists in the three films has an object that is a particularly important and ‘intimate’ symbol of the work they do on their selves in this regard. For Emily it is a photo-album, for Steph, her dead mother’s diary, and for teenage runaway Heidi, a scrapbook-cum-diary. These objects document, enable and constrain the girls’ psycho-sexual subjectivities, doing work on their developing desires, biographies, secrets and fantasies, as if evidence of a ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ self. Each of these objects, the album, diary and scrapbook-cum-diary, are all initially private, yet eventually become public in one way or another as evidence of their work on the self. For instance, for Steph, a diary is significant to her journey towards the self, although the diary is not her own. On her seventeenth birthday she is given the diary of her mother, who died the night she was born. The confessional book becomes a proxy for Steph as she is unable to write her own, due to dyslexia that renders her virtually unable to read or write. The diary brings her and the brooding Brian (Matthew Le Nevez) together, as she employs him to read it to her, thus making what would be a private reading and private journey (of biography, family, identity, the self) into a public one.
The diary, then, becomes the catalyst for Steph to discover and manage the self as a self-determined individual with a unique biography and complex psycho-sexual subjectivity. It is an evocative symbol for the audience, potentially engaging us in a pedagogic way to learn about Steph as a becoming-subject developing and recognising a rich history, biography and complex ‘emotional’ life.

In Somersault, 16-year-old Heidi documents and works through the experiences and emotions of her young life, and she does so in the form of a scrapbook-cum-diary. We never really learn about its actual contents per se, but we recognise it as a book filled with hopes, dreams, desires and musings of a deeply ‘emotionally intelligent’ girl. On one level, the diary could be understood as containing the innocent and possibly silly musings of a girl-child. However, the images of unicorns, or the use of glitter, coloured pens, stuck-in lolly wrappers and mementos, do not necessarily mean that the work on the self occurring here is not serious, thoughtful work. On the contrary, this book is full of complex and concentrated romantic desires and aspirations, all required to be a good subject of this kind of psycho-sexual girlhood in transition. Such practices are uniquely feminine and heterosexual (see: Hunter, 1992; Bernstein, 1997). For instance, Heidi reuses a glossy porn magazine picture of a naked woman in such a way that it reclaims her nudity as a feminine, heterosexual image of
desire embodying the beauty and maturity that the young woman seemingly aspires to. Heidi often plays serious games like these, both in private and in public, like when she poses in the mirror, role-playing meeting a man who wants to kiss her. These acts then are understood as legitimate ways of improvising young feminine subjection, albeit within the constraints of normative gender and sexuality (see: Butler, 2004).

Emily, Steph and Heidi all demonstrate that they are deeply thinking beings with complex inner lives through the practices of alone time, staring off into space, diary-writing and practicing romantic reflection. These knowledges and related technologies are significant ways of doing the kind of girlhood that is undergoing a ‘transition’ into womanhood. As ‘pedagogues’, the girls embody this girlhood, inciting lessons about feminine adolescence. As pedagogical tools, the girls are used to show the ‘emotionality’ of the girl-subject, potentially inciting emotional investments from the audience.

Another reading of this alone time and staring off into space is that these girls ‘on the brink’ of womanhood are also ‘on the brink’ of the margins of society, alienated as a result of their ‘strangeness’ or difference. Burman (2005) argues that the girl protagonist in the French film Amélie (2001) is a wide-eyed innocent, essentially a ‘good’ girl, but due to ‘traumatic childhood experiences including emotional neglect and loss’ (p. 361), she is now, as a young woman, alienated and fairly disconnected from the social world around her. Seeing the psycho-sexualised aspects of this girl protagonist, Burman argues that Amélie is positioned as having to make the transition from ‘autistic isolation’ into ordinary ‘normal’ social contact (p. 361). In coming-of-age films, developmental discourse joins traditional psychotherapeutic notions, demonstrating the success, or otherwise, of the youth’s attempts to overcome their ‘abnormalness’. In many respects, then, the three girl protagonists in the films under analysis in this chapter can be understood similarly. Emily, Steph and Heidi are all ‘child-like’ (see: Cenere, 2004), wide-eyed innocents, intelligent, curious and isolated in their own ways, as kind of ‘emotional savants’. They could be understood
as introverted, neglected by their parents each in their own way (although the mothers bear the brunt of this blame in light of absent fathers), so that now they are socially ‘dysfunctional’ or ‘strange’. Emily’s secrets and spying on men, Steph’s dyslexia and Heidi’s estrangement from people, hypersensitivity and promiscuity could be ‘evidence’ that supports such a proposition. That the girls are socially dysfunctional (albeit temporarily due to the changes they are undergoing) works alongside adolescent metaphors of ‘inner turmoil’, confusion and rebelliousness. It seems, then, that the legitimate space for girls’ coming-of-age is ‘abnormality’; however, it is made clear in the course of the films that the transition from ‘dysfunctional’ adolescent to fully-functional, ‘normal’ adulthood is the only ‘valid’ and ‘rational’ path (see: Stephens, 2003).

Various pedagogical clues, for instance, are given to Heidi’s estrangement and hypersensitivity as a kind of ‘autistic’ disorder. Arguably audiences are meant to draw comparisons between an autistic boy in the film and Heidi. Describing the boy’s condition, Bianca (Hollie Andrew), the boy’s sister, says:

Do you know what empathy is? ... It’s like if you feel pain, I can understand or if I am happy, you can tell. He can’t tell, so he can’t make friends ... He just says exactly what he is thinking. He doesn’t know how it’s going to make the other person feel.

Heidi, like the boy, has a kind of emotionless, wide-eyed, disconnected way of interacting with people, and when men in particular take her openness as sexual availability, it often takes Heidi by surprise. Frequently Heidi is suddenly hyper-emotional and hyper-sensitive, completely naïve to the effect she has on some people and they way they respond to her. The colour red is significant here as a potential pedagogical clue to link Heidi (who is obsessed with the colour) to the autistic boy (who wears a red jumper). The rest of the film’s colour palette is blues and whites, and so the few moments where there is a splash of red can be read as significant in understanding this girl protagonist. Heidi’s fixation on red objects and on banal, everyday objects and elements, like a crystal charm around a rear-view mirror, the world through red-coloured ski goggles, warm breath in
the cold air and leaves being blown in the wind can, on one level, denote a kind of mature, feminine appreciation of aesthetics. On another level, though, it can signify a kind of childlike, innocence, simplicity, even ‘autistic’ subjectivity\(^{39}\), where the audience sees the world through Heidi’s rose-coloured glasses, sharing her naïve, yet ultimately optimistic, approach to life (Starres, 2008, p. 2). In one notable scene, Heidi is rugged up against the windy, cold Jindabyne weather in a hooded jacket.

She has just bought a pair of red woollen gloves from the local servo and she walks along the banks of Lake Jindabyne, lost in a child’s clapping game (‘Miss Mary Mack’) she plays with an imaginary friend. The landscape, her jacket, even her skin are strange, ethereal white/blue colour tones and the only colour in the scene is the red of her gloves and the faint pink of her lips. Adding to a sense of otherworldliness is the swoosh of the water, her repetitive song and images of Heidi, looped over each other in a non-linear or abstract way. The eerie, ephemeral sounds of Decoder Ring (an Australian musical group renowned for synthed airy and moody tunes) then join the scene. Looking over a wall, Heidi stops, transfixed at brown dry leaves blowing aimlessly around. Here Heidi is positioned as a child through several key elements, including the clapping game she plays, the

\(^{39}\)By no means do I want to equate ‘autism’ with being simple or childlike, or indeed childhood as being simple. Rather I wish to highlight that Heidi can be read as simultaneously embodying all these traits in complex, complementary and contradictory ways. ‘Autism’ is a point raised by the filmmakers, hence this focus here.
joy over the new gloves, the insistence on purchasing the red ones and the little hood over her head. In many respects she is the Little Red Riding Hood of popular memory, at risk in a cruel and dangerous world full of masculine wolfish threat. The kind of visual and aural repetition is demonstrative of a kind of ‘immature’ unthinkingness or purposelessness, or even an ‘autistic’ sensibility. At the same time, however, the still, deep and concentrated look at the leaves is evidence of Heidi’s ‘mature’ thoughtfulness, an awareness of the place around her that echoes her (becoming) ‘sophisticated’ inner subjectivity. Simultaneously she is naïve, curious, feminine, a wide-eyed ingénue, otherworldly, like a gnome or fairy, yet also deeply feeling, a profoundly ‘emotional’ subject with a complicated inner life, self-determined and resilient as she learns to manage the self. As Heidi shows us, alienation, emotional turmoil, madness and ‘hysteria’ ripple just below the surface, in the psyche of the girl-subject. As she stands on the banks of Lake Jindabyne, this girl on the brink of womanhood, this pedagogic text, is on the brink of madness. Just like the dry brown leaves, she could blow up(wards) unpredictably and wildly at any moment.

(iii) On the Brink of Womanhood/On the Brink of Madness

As Kerry Mallan (2002) suggests, the woman who rants and raves has been traditionally positioned as having lost the ability to discipline her body and voice, so that the:

... association between woman and hysteria is a pervasive one and is often used as proof of woman’s emotional proclivity (p. 27; also see Hopwood, 2006).

So familiar is this way of understanding the girl-subject that it is as if commonsense. Here, Emily, Steph and Heidi intertextually embody such potential meanings, inciting key learnings, reaffirming and enabling audiences to indulge in this idea that being on the brink of womanhood is also about being on the brink of emotional turmoil and a kind of temporary ‘madness’. As pedagogical objects and sites, these on-screen girls are the locus of contemporary Western societies’ ongoing and complex
negotiations about feminine adolescence. In regard to children and young people, biology is often linked to psychology, and emotions linked to physical growth (Lesko, 2001; Harwood & Rasmussen, 2007). Following this, ‘mood swings’, ‘raging hormones’, and ‘puberty’ are linked to the maturation (physical, emotional, sexual) of young people as subjects. That young people (as ‘adolescents’, ‘teenagers’ or ‘youth’) are ‘... emotional, unpredictable and often confused’, and are also ‘rebellious and natural challengers of authority’ (Lesko, 2001, p. 3), is offered as fact, as science, and thus beyond social intervention. As Gonick (2006) notes, the very ‘well-travelled territory’ of biology and developmental psychology advances the notion that ‘something catastrophic’ happens to girls when they start to go through puberty (p. 12). Mild-mannered, authentic, happy childhood selves suddenly, and often violently, erupt into confusion and anger. In many respects, contemporary ways of representing and understanding adolescent girls are hangovers from modernist psychological notions of ‘hysteria’ where the root of the turmoil is the female’s untamed reproductive organs (Mallan, 2002; Waddell, 2003). In popular films, like the three under analysis in this chapter, depictions of ‘female’ ways of relating through emotional turmoil, and girls’ struggling with their coming-of-age and being ‘rational’, are commonplace scenarios that potentially translate beyond the cinematic screen.

For Emily, Steph and Heidi, silent ‘inner’ self-work eventually ripples to the surface in the form of moodiness, unpredictability and self-destructiveness. These practices are strategic ways of doing this becoming girl-subject, as if evidence of a ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ self. When Emily’s search for her father, and search for her ‘true self’, becomes muddied and jumbled, she races to a cliff overlooking the ocean and throws her camera off the edge, the camera that was symbolic to her searching. Potentially audiences might have thought she was going to throw herself off too, the seductiveness of such an idea encouraged here. Mild mannered Emily has suddenly become grumpy, moody, argumentative and unpredictable, all as evidence of her inner self-work erupting into the light. Likewise, Steph becomes
argumentative and unpredictable, revealing private ‘inner turmoils’ by eventually ‘acting out’ in public. She drinks a row of alcoholic shots in rapid succession and spins in a trance on the dance-floor until she passes out unconscious. Heidi, too, drinks too much, takes drugs, and in an act that we are meant to understand as a kind of ‘madness’ or self-destruction, she takes two young men home with her for sex. As noted, Heidi’s ‘autistic tendencies’ can be read as a kind of ‘madness’, as she acts out in ‘strange’ and hyper-emotional ways.

For instance, after Bianca tells Heidi that she doesn’t want to be her friend anymore, Heidi wails uncontrollably and lashes out, scaring Bianca to tears. Likewise, when her new boyfriend Joe (Sam Worthington) appears embarrassed by Heidi in front of his friends, Heidi acts out strangely by ‘madly’ swallowing a whole bowl of freshly chopped chillies. Not so much these acts themselves, but rather, public displays of irrationality and madness, are specific pedagogies that work to legitimate the notion that acting out is key to the formation of the gendered subject. Notably, female aggression, which ‘turns inwards’ into self-destructive behaviour, is de rigueur here. As several feminist scholars have pointed out, contemporary society positions only the truly delinquent and irredeemable girl-subject as one who directs this aggression outwards into physical violence.
All the girl protagonists display a kind of hysteria or madness in key scenes where their angst-ridden, inner emotional subjectivities bubble to the surface. Secret, intimate, ‘true’ feelings are confessed and come to be known publicly in high-drama scenes as technologies privileging psychosexual ‘disorder’. For Emily and Steph, this means confronting their mothers (and for Emily, her grandparents too), who on some level are understood as impeding the girls’ transition into independent rational women. Alongside contemporary culture’s penchant for mother-blame is the normalisation of youthful rebelliousness, where rebelling against mother figures is understood as the ‘natural’ and inevitable state of youth (see: Lesko, 2001). As noted, a familiar trope in ‘serious’ coming-of-age films is the high-drama, high-emotion scene when young women eventually challenge their mothers and/or lovers. These confrontations serve to reveal, often spectacularly, the girls’ secret, intimate, ‘true’ feelings.

In Somersault for instance, Heidi is (literally) stripped bare, and lays her soul open for (self)inspection. As she ironically sits on the couch, the confession begins. It is a difficult, ‘painfully emotional’ scene, but it is necessary so that Heidi can reveal the ‘truth’ of her inner turmoil, and thus the catharsis of her ‘conflicted’ self. This scene occurs when Heidi takes two young men back to her room for sex, as noted above, in a kind of ultimate act of ‘madness’. Joe storms in and throws the men out, rescuing her:

[Heidi and Joe sit in silence. Joe cannot look at her]
Heidi: I just want to tell you that if you ignore someone, and if you don’t call them, you can really hurt their feelings.
Joe: Is this what happens when someone hurts your feelings? Jesus Christ, it’s a slight overreaction isn’t it? You go out, get drunk and fuck anything that moves! You think that’s normal?
Heidi: [crying and shaking] No.
Joe: Then why did you do it?
Heidi: I didn’t want to be by myself.

Joe: Do you know how fucked up you are? It’s like you have a problem, a big fucking problem. If I were you I would get some kinda help.

Heidi: And you don’t have any problems do you?

Joe: Do you think I am going to sit here and tell you about my problems?

Heidi: No! You’re too scared! If you’re close to people, then, that’s what you do. You tell them things, and [crying] no matter what, you know they are still going to love you!

The confession as a scene that capitalises on emotionality begins with Heidi saying that she ‘wants’ to tell Joe about her ‘true’ feelings. Positioning himself as some kind of authority or moral guardian (a privileged position perhaps as a result of his age and gender), Joe questions Heidi, pathologising her problems, positioning her as abnormal, even saying she should seek expert help. He is verbally quite violent with Heidi, his harsh words shocking her to tears and uncontrollable shaking. So Heidi confesses voluntarily, but also forcibly. Involved totally in the confession, Joe, as witness and participant, exits when the confession turns on him and requires him to reveal his inner state. Heidi, the pathologised, the one with the ‘big fucking problem’, turns the tables on Joe, exposing his own ‘problems’, his inability to be truthful and to communicate his inner emotional state, to take care of and know his inner self. The image of the naked Heidi pleading to Joe in the snow as he takes off in his ute, vulnerable, exposed and desperate, embodies her inner madness, and seems like a familiar way to depict ‘mental disorder’ in the cinema. After this spectacular confessional scene, however, Heidi takes one more long solitary walk, and as the snow falls, Heidi decides to say goodbye to the ‘childish’, ‘autistic kid’ that she was, that is, far too insular and alienated from society. As if her ‘true’ and better self has emerged, she confesses one last time, this time to Irene (Lynette Curran), the nice lady who owns the hotel where she has been staying, and this enables her to reconcile with her mother and go home. The development of the self through confession, catharsis and cure in this film, and the others under analysis, potentially positions the spectator to ‘empathise’ with the girl protagonist.
Like the other pedagogic practices that privilege the emotionality, femininity and youth of Emily, Steph and Heidi, ‘empathy’ works to position girlhood more broadly as psycho-sexual subjects, initially struggling to, but eventually effectively managing and regulating the self as if coherent and unambiguous.

**Part III — Care for the Self/Care for Others**

As Foucault (1988; 1976) problematises, care for the self, that is, knowing and managing the self, requires the management of others. For the feminine adolescent subjects in *Caterpillar Wish, Peaches* and *Somersault*, the pursuit of selfhood is inextricably bound to others. Girlhood-in-transition-to-womanhood requires particular kinds of ‘emotional’, ‘moral’ and ‘empathetic’ identifications with others, but more than this, other people, as participant-witnesses to the girls’ ‘true confessions’ and self-work, are necessary to legitimize the girls’ claims to subjecthood and to adulthood. Be they mothers, (absent) fathers, grandparents, friends, neighbours or lovers, other people (un)intentionally enable and endorse the girls’ transformations to a ‘coherent’ self, and a self concerned with social cohesion. Rose (1999) writes that individuals must have a ‘meaningful life’ as if it were ‘the outcome of individual choices made in furtherance of a biographical project of self-realisation’ (Rose, p. ix). For girls under this regime of truth, family bonds, including family history as a main part of the biographical project, play a primary discursive role in their constitution (see: Walkerdine, 1984, 1997; Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Davies, 1993; Driscoll, 2002). While some Australian films in recent times have positioned ‘teen mobility’ in terms of them wanting to escape history and place and its ashamed subjectivities\(^{40}\), for the girls in these films, asserting their ‘becoming-subjectivities’ included seeking out history, biography and family (see Lesko, 2001; Blatterer, 2007; 2010; Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Collins & Davis, 2004). The importance of others to the formation of the girls’ subjectivity highlights the relational aspects of the

\(^{40}\) For instance see: *Beneath Clouds* (2004); *Australian Rules* (2002); *Blessed* (2009); *Samson & Delilah* (2009).
production of knowledge and the formation of a gendered and sexed subjectivity orientated towards care and social cohesion.

All the girls in the three films under analysis demonstrate their problems with the adults in their lives, notably their parent(s). A common coming-of-age scenario within popular film, it is almost impossible to account for the youth subject in any other way other than as being at odds with the adults in their lives\textsuperscript{41} (this theme is more fully addressed in Chapter Eight). Families full of secrets, lies and messy lineages add fuel to an already turbulent coming-of-age. As noted above, Emily, Steph and Heidi have absent fathers and are raised by single-mothers; thus, as if commonsense, family, but particularly mothers, are catalysts to the girl protagonists’ ‘problems’.

This (un)intentional choice by the filmmakers has, pedagogically, two broad possible meanings. On one hand, these single-parent, single-child families are positioned as ‘normal’ and make for a close and loving bond between mother and daughter. On the other hand, these families are positioned as

\textsuperscript{41} See: Other Australian coming-of-age films where the youth protagonist is in conflict with parents and adults around include: The Fringe Dwellers (1986), Hightide (1987), The Year My Voice Broke (1987), Flirting (1991), Muriel’s Wedding (1994), Shine (1996); Head On (1998); Australian Rules (2002), The Rage in Placid Lake (2003), Hating Alison Ashley (2004), Clubland (2007), The Black Balloon (2008), Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger (2008), and Blessed (2009). While several of these above films have been given much attention by critics and film scholars over the years, the selection for this Chapter was of deliberately less well-known films. In addition, as noted previously, the three films under analysis in this Chapter were positioned together here due to their similar treatments of place/rurality, femininity and emotion.
deficient, feeding into contemporary mistrust regarding families that are not nuclear, conventional or ‘middle-class’ in their make-up (Tyler, 2008; Walkerdine, 1997). Here the close bond between mother and daughter is problematic, the daughter having to break away from the mother in one way or another, as all the girl protagonists do. For instance, Emily is very close to her mother, but she has problems with her, and she is the main catalyst for Emily’s angst-filled, (ir)rational coming-of-age. Her mother (notwithstanding her estranged, cold-hearted grandparents and her unknown, absent father) works as a kind of metaphor to Emily’s ‘madness’. When family relationships are in turmoil, so is the girl protagonist. For instance, Emily is prevented from the ‘truth’ of her biography and family history, understood as necessary for her to know her ‘true self’ and where she has ‘come from’. Continuing a common theme in Australian cinema (McFarlane, 1979), Emily searches for her missing family, pining for a father she never knew and secretly looking for her estranged grandparents. There are suggestions that Emily’s mother’s youthful recklessness, unconventional job, unconventional mothering and ‘emotional problems’ are to blame for this, and she is positioned as a major impediment to Emily’s happiness. More moral and honest than the adults around her, Emily’s struggles (like Steph’s and Heidi’s) highlight the inadequacies of the adult world.

As with Emily, too, something is ‘not quite right’ in Steph’s and Heidi’s households. The violent deaths of both of Steph’s parents on the night she was born and the smothering care of her over-protective foster mother Jude (constantly warning Steph about the risks of cancer, AIDS and backpacker murderers) suggests this. As Steph demonstrates, ‘problematic’ families are hurdles the girl-subject has to overcome to reach her ‘full potential’. Heidi, like Emily and Steph, has a ‘problematic’ family, with the suggestion of a very young and emotionally distant mother, who would rather be out drinking with friends than at home with her daughter, as evidence of her ‘bad’ mothering. Heidi also has no father, and her mother’s live-in boyfriend is far from a caring parental figure to the young Heidi.
When Heidi’s mother catches Heidi and him kissing, there is an ugly confrontation causing Heidi to run away from home. So it is the combination of these ‘problematic’ families and ‘difficult’ coming-of-ages that plunge the girls into ‘risky’ (psycho)sexual situations, one with a hated married man (Steph), one with a string of unknown and brutish young men (Heidi) and the other with ‘messy’ relationships with all men (Emily)(see: Speed, 2006).

Rather than pointing to any ‘true’ state of adolescent girlhood, Gonick (2006) notes that cultural representations of girls in crisis embody adult anxiety about young girls growing up, and such narratives serve as warnings specifically for mothers of young girls. As well as drawing on discourses of feminine subjects as moral and caring, filmmakers and film-viewers potentially draw on discourses of children as ultimately ‘good’, and childhood as being a time of innocence (Burman, 2005; Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004). In this light we can see that it is the girls’ mothers that are the most harshly reprimanded when their girls ‘go off the rails’ in terms of their psychologies and sexualities. Nothing might potentially speak so powerfully and so pedagogically to mothers of girls who may watch the film than the problematic and abusive relationships the on-screen girls are at risk of at the hands of men who ‘befriend’ the girl in ‘crisis’. The absence of fathers is positioned as the fault of the girls’ mothers, not the fathers who have left. Rather, it is due to the mothers’ own ‘emotional problems’, ‘selfishness’ and ‘bad’ mothering that their daughters are plunged into dangerous situations and relationships, notwithstanding sexually abusive father-figures in all three films.

What is evident across all three films, too, is that the girls are positioned as essentially ‘good’, caring and empathic subjects, who in spite of their ‘unstable’ upbringings, eventually transition to ‘moral’, ‘responsible’ adult subjects. These girls, then, become vessels for an ‘impossible vision of social order’ (Lee, 2007, p. 96), and their stories as morality tales or redemptive tales are pedagogic. For Emily, Steph and Heidi, the ‘successful’ management of their subjectivities and intimate emotional lives is
positioned as crucial. But more than this, management of their selves requires the management of others. As a result we often see the girls acting as their mothers’ moral and psycho-sexual guardians, in lieu of the mother’s ability to look after herself. In many respects, the girls parent their parents, as they are more competent than the adults around them. The girls demonstrate that when they eventually reconcile with their mothers, as they all do, ‘emotional turmoils’ for the girl (and the mother) subside.

For instance, as noted previously, Emily’s mother’s independence (she has raised Emily alone and is not looking for a monogamous relationship) and ‘unconventionality’ (she works in a topless bar and is promiscuous) is positioned as a kind of disorder, one that impedes Emily’s ‘happiness’. It is Emily who is her mother’s most vocal critic, disapproving of her job and her relationships. Emily tells her mother over the breakfast table, in reference to her latest boyfriend, ‘If you keep giving him treats, he’ll just come back for more,’ implying that promiscuous, unserious relationships are not desirable to be a good (conventional, feminine, maternal) subject. Emily’s coming-of-age and resolution of her own self seems to have a similar effect on her mother who, by the end of the film, ‘grows up’, begins a reconciliation with her parents, and enters into a serious, monogamous relationship at Emily’s instigation. Emily’s mother’s psycho-sexuality is ‘problematic’ and not dissimilar to a common trope in Australian film and TV, a figure of pity and abjection dubbed the ‘scrubber’. Waddell (2003) notes that the ‘scrubber’ is revisited frequently as a warning to young women that indulgence in sex has negative consequences (also see: Jackson, 2006). Even though Emily’s mother is not desperately helpless and dependent on men like Waddell’s ‘scrubber’, she is still a figure of pity and thus is a contemporary pedagogic reworking of the modern woman who is independent and capable, but also ‘lacking’ without a male partner. The representation of the mother as embodying abject elements of femininity as an ‘undesirable’ form of woman-/mother-hood arguably serves to enable key learning about the costs of being and becoming a particular
gendered and sexed subject, and so the mother is a warning that potentially resonates beyond the screen (see Chapter Seven on motherhood in more detail.) As each of the girl protagonists faces the past and transforms her subjectivity, the older generations must take responsibility for their actions and secrets (see: Collins & Davis, 2004, p. 158), and thus, they learn from her how to transform their subjectivity accordingly.

The girls have various ‘problems’ with their lovers that they must overcome before transforming into women, and in this sense men are ‘both a threat and a lure in the story’ (Dermody & Jacka, 1988, p. 115). The level of intimacy each girl has with her lover, for instance, is indicative of the girls’ journey into their changing adult selves, but more than this, the girls’ self-management requires the regulation of their lovers too. Just as ‘psycho-sexual’ developmental discourse states, and most coming-of-age films show, sex is a key marker of transforming youthful, adolescent subjectivities. The girls’ struggles with their sexual identities are core technologies in doing this kind of girlhood. For instance, like numerous screen teens, Steph would like to lose her virgin status as she sees it as something that marks her as a girl and not yet a woman. Her relationship with the older, married Alan (Hugo Weaving) enables Steph to transform her sexual subjectivity, but more than this, Steph’s assertion of her sexual subjectivity also changes Alan, and she makes him less of a heartless, uncaring, unsympathetic boss and man.

42 Including Australian films such as The Devil’s Playground (1976); The Night, The Prowler (1978); Puberty Blues (1981); The Still Point (1985); The Year My Voice Broke (1987); Flirting (1991); Norman Loves Rose (1992); The Nostradamus Kid (1993); Love in Limbo (1993); The Heartbreak Kid (1993); Looking for Alibrandi (2000); Clubland (2007); The Black Balloon (2008).
Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) suggest that a current and persisting norm, as a legacy of traditional romantic discourse, is that girls are meant to become sexually active only within a monogamous romantic heterosexual relationship. On the whole, then, sex is a serious matter for the three girl protagonists in the films under analysis, not about fun or pleasure, but about a ‘deep’, ‘inner connection’ with one male lover. In this sense, the ways in which sex is framed can also be considered as pedagogic. Emily and Heidi are already shown to be sexually active at the beginning of the film, and rather than it being the sex per se that marks their ‘burgeoning’ womanhood, it is the level of sexual intimacy with one partner that denotes the level of their psycho-sexual maturation. When relationships do not work, or when the partner is ‘unsuitable’, it is the mark of a ‘mature’ woman who walks away from them, and both Steph and Heidi learn this ‘valuable lesson’.

Referred to as ‘a bit of rough trade’ and as a ‘cheap fucking slag’ by Joe’s jealous best-mate, Heidi, like the youthful version of a ‘scrubber’, is in crisis due to her ‘problematic’ psycho-sexual subjectivity. Like other narratives about young women who change their ways, Heidi’s story is also a redemptive story, where the ‘troubled girl-subject’ comes ‘good’, but not without ‘turning sad’ first (Jackson, 2006, p. 482). Through much ‘trauma’ (Speed, 1998, p. 25) and eventually ‘self-realisation’ that she needs to
‘grow up’, Heidi learns that ‘rational’ women do not have sex indiscriminately with, as Joe says, ‘anything that walks’ and learns that sex without intimacy is not desirable. Strickland (2005) notes that by act three Heidi has learned that sex does not simply equate with love:

When she picks up the city slickers, she mocks their sarcastic toast ‘to them’ as a couple — this, she knows, ain’t love. ‘Does she’, one of them asks, ‘bring home strange men all time [sic]? ‘Only rich, fucked-up ones with dope,’ comes her catty reply, before she yields blearily to their desires (p. 100).

The relationship with Joe is important to Heidi’s transition to womanhood, although it is a complicated and often messy affair mainly due to what is represented as Joe’s inability to articulate his ‘emotions’. Nonetheless, the intimacy and sensuality experienced with Joe is a catalyst to her ‘development’, and enables Heidi to realise how to manage her love more ‘appropriately’. In the end, Heidi, once so desperate and lonely for intimacy, walks away from Joe when he eventually reaches out to her, because she has recognised him as ‘unsuitable’. This realisation sets her well on the path to becoming a ‘rational woman’, and as she drives home in silence with her mother, we see the calmness and ‘self-assurance’ that has come over her. More than this, too, Heidi’s coming into womanhood is a catalyst for Joe to grow up by opening up and to realise and account for his ‘inner self’ and feelings as a psycho-sexual being. Heidi, like the other girl protagonists, heals others. The care for others is bound to the care of the self (Foucault, 1976; 1988), and we see this here through particular transitioning feminine (hetero)sexed practices. These girls’ comings-of-age equate with learning about their ‘true’ selves, but is also a reconciliation and rationalisation of the self where crisis is averted, other subjects brought in line and social cohesion occurs. As the girls learn these lessons, they potentially provoke learning, embodying the lessons that can be had, that is, how ideal feminine subjecthood should be conducted.

There are many potential ‘lessons’ that could be had here: girls should be agents for social cohesion; female sexual desire is potentially risky but also mysterious and alluring; the best relationships are heterosexual and
monogamous; women should walk away from a ‘bad’ partner; that to indulge in sex equals negative consequences; that ‘bad’ mothers cause psycho-sexual crises in their daughters; that girls are sexy and sexual even if they don’t know it; and that relationship with self and other is always emotional. These films could be analysed in terms of being warnings to girls and their mothers as morality tales and/or redemptive texts. While specific audiences will come to know the girl protagonists, and understand the film in their own ways (for instance, one could make the argument that these films are made for middle-aged women with daughters), it is the film’s broader audience that I wish to highlight here. Modes of address, as key to how these ‘interior films’ (Dermody & Jacka, 1988, p. 73) work pedagogically, incite the audience towards ‘emotionality’ as key to the feminised coming-of-age. It presents girls ‘doing girlhood’, inviting us to consider this subjectivity as psycho-sexual, interior and relational. Various techniques like place, the weather, the music/sound score and familiar tropes like staring off into space, high drama and confessional scenes and ripples of madness work together to engage us on an ‘emotional’ level as if we were ‘psycho-sexual’, ‘gendered’ and ‘empathetic’ subjects ourselves. As subjects, both the girls on the screen and ‘us’ as the audience are historically and socially organised, having our psycho-sexual subjectivities ‘managed in minute particulars’ (Rose, 1999, p. 1) through our engagement with the film. Various filmic, narrative and affective techniques encourage learning in these terms. Not every spectator will respond this way because pedagogy is not a simple act of transmission, but through the complicated relationship between text and viewer, and on-screen girl and spectator, we potentially learn how ideal feminine subjectivity should be done.

In engaging with these films we learn about the young female subject, and through Emily, Steph and Heidi we learn about psycho-sexual girlhood on the brink of womanhood. We learn from them as they do girlhood that feminine adolescence is about doing work on the self in gendered ways, and of the need to be ‘emotionally attuned’ subjects. We can see what happens when we do this successfully, the resolution and ‘happy ending’
that comes in engaging fully in coming to ‘know the self’, succeeding in accordance with rules that constrain us (whether they be individualism, femininity, sexuality or romance). The pedagogy of these films arguably invites us to respond in ‘empathetic’ and ‘emotional’ ways. Different audiences will of course respond differently, but what is in-built in the coming-of-age genre is arguably incitements towards learning our ‘intimate lives’, again and anew, doing feelings, desires, aspirations and emotions in specific ways. These are carefully produced and strategic design-effects that potentially (re)make psycho-sexual subjects of us all.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have considered the way popular film works as pedagogy geared towards the formation of cultural knowledge about girlhood, and specifically the young girl-subject ‘on the brink’ of womanhood. This chapter took into account the girl protagonists of *Caterpillar Wish*, *Peaches* and *Somersault*, thinking about them as ‘pedagogues’, intertextual figures embodying lessons about how to do girlhood. As objects and subjects of girlhood discourse, they are key pedagogical sites for ongoing and complex negotiations about meaning in regards to feminine adolescence. The analysis included an exploration into the ways these girls might come to be known, and various intersecting film, narrative, affective and socially discursive techniques at work in constituting the young female protagonist were considered. Additionally, here, I have examined the pedagogical practices evident in the way audiences were positioned in their learning about the girl-subject, and how audiences’ incitements toward the girl protagonist were mobilised by feminised and psycho-sexualised practices in each case. How the techniques noted here enable and constrain the ways we can come to know subjects, legitimising them as normal and abnormal, is the concern at the heart of this project.

Specifically, this chapter has examined the way in which the girls in the films were positioned as having ‘serious’ and complex ‘inner’ lives as psycho-sexual individuals. Through examples where the girls were seen to
be working on and struggling over their subjectivities, audiences may have been incited towards knowing them ‘emotionally’. I provided a ‘personal’ response in the prologue to this chapter in regard to a key scene in one film, not as a subject outside these gendered and sexed regimes of truth, but as a subject unavoidably located within them. I progressed by suggesting how practices such as having the girls shown commonly staring off into space, deep in silent thought, and practices that showed the girls carrying out various acts of romantic individualism, diary writing and biographic work were pedagogical. Such devices make and mark the subjectivity of the girl-subject as the legitimate way of ‘doing’ a certain type of young female subjectivity, for instance. How the girls in these films, like in so many other films about youth, suddenly, and often violently, erupt into confusion and anger was problematised as the ‘natural’ and inevitable state of girls ‘on the brink’ of womanhood. This concept of ‘on the brink’ of womanhood being ‘on the brink’ of madness was highlighted, and this in light of traditional and progressive impulses that equate the female subject (especially the young female subject) with ‘madness’, once again as if something naturally inherent with the feminine subject. I have argued that the reconciliation of this ‘madness’ and various related turmoils demonstrates the success of transitioning from ‘irrational girl’ to ‘rational woman’, thus privileging the self as coherent, unambiguous and contained. The happy endings of each film arguably facilitate learning in audiences as ‘emotional’ subjects themselves, that desirable female subjects are ‘nice, kind and helpful’ (see: Walkerdine, 1990, p. 49) and ultimately, agents of social cohesion (see: Harris, 2004), whose successful self-management requires the successful management of others.

Having established this as a background and frame for the general position of films about young-girls-becoming women, the inquiry continues into the pedagogies of contemporary girlhood in the next chapter. Offering an interesting counter-point to the ‘nice, kind and helpful’ girl (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 49), the girl-subject of the next chapter conceivably illustrates what happens when the girl refuses to be caring, empathetic and a
feminine subject of social cohesion. In similar and different ways, Chapter Seven continues to explore how film works as pedagogy that forms knowledge about subjecthood, but also how the formation of the self as a subject might take place and what is at stake in the process. The following chapter considers the constitution of the classic ‘bad girl‘ subject.
Prologue

Suburbia’. A young woman opens the screen door of a weatherboard house. She looks at all the cars parked on the front lawn and yells ‘Oh Rusty move your fucking cars!’ The screen door slams as she disappears back in the house. She continues to yell and swear inside. A baby cries. A few moments later she storms out of the house. The screen door slams. Her black knee-high high heel boots angrily click along the footpath. She heaves open a garage door. A few moments later she pulls out of the garage in a yellow and black muscle car, revving the engine, and she takes off fast. A young man in his boxer shorts runs out of the house. The screen door slams. ‘Fucking bitch!!’ he screams. She drives straight past him with a smile on her face. He angrily kicks over the garbage bins on the footpath, shaking his head in her direction. The V8 engine grows distant. She’s already a few blocks away.
Chapter Seven

‘You Just Can't Get Clean Water from a Dirty Tank’: The ‘Bad Girl’ of Suburban Mayhem
I met the Grandmother. She was mad. I knew the mother. She was madder. It’s genetics I reckon. That’s the only thing I can come up with. You just can’t get clean water from a dirty tank (Aunty Diane in *Suburban Mayhem*).

**Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the young female protagonist in the film *Suburban Mayhem*, 19-year-old single-mother, Katrina Skinner (Emily Barclay). As a ‘pedagogue’ (Dyson, 1993; Morris, 2001), Katrina embodies what it means to be the ‘bad girl’, inciting potential intertextual lessons as she does ‘girlhood’. As pedagogic text, Katrina is a contemporary site for ongoing and complex negotiations and meanings about ‘girlhood’. *Suburban Mayhem* is not the same kind of film as *Caterpillar Wish*, *Peaches* or *Somersault*. It is not a ‘serious’, dramatic portrayal of the ‘becoming’ girl-subject. We do not see Katrina struggle over her ‘conflicted’ subjectivity, learn how to manage the self, or reconcile her ‘messy’ youth-hood on the way to becoming a ‘fully-fledged adult’. Nor is *Suburban Mayhem* the kind of film where the audience comes to know the ‘inner’ emotions and deep desires of the becoming girl in an ‘intimate’ and closely studied way. Rather than being taken on the young woman’s personal and emotional journey by being privileged to the private spaces of the girl-subject, film audiences can only learn about Katrina from a distance as she puts on a fast and furious show. Unlike the ‘nice, kind and helpful’ (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 49) Emily, Steph and Heidi, the protagonists observed in the previous chapter, Katrina is ‘hedonistic, vain, greedy and self-centred’ (see: Mallan, 2000, p. 34). Unlike the last three films focused in the previous chapter, *Suburban Mayhem* is much like a music video or cartoon, capitalising on highly-styled scenes with saturated, intense and vivid colours and action to present an over-the-top snapshot of a ‘bad girl’. Katrina is a wild, outrageous, enigmatic and dangerous character who shows no restraint and flouts ‘the boundaries’. In many respects, Katrina can be viewed as the classic ‘bad girl’, a model for what happens when the ‘mean girl’ subject refuses to discipline herself in normative and sanctioned ways. Yet, arguably, Katrina
is positioned much like Emily, Steph and Heidi as a ‘troubled’ and ‘troubling’ subject, a figure where contemporary culture’s concerns and anxieties cohere around ‘gender’ and ‘age’ (Gonick, 2004; 2006).

Divided into three sections, this chapter begins with a review of the literature on contemporary understandings of the ‘bad girl’ and the Gothic tradition of Australian filmmaking. Focusing on Suburban Mayhem, the second section considers how pedagogy might work through key technologies in terms of constituting the girl protagonist, including ‘genre’, the production of suburbia, feline motifs, V8 ‘muscle’ cars, sexuality and the mobile phone. The final section of the chapter explores the mode of address as (non)didactic, ironic and outrageous through the (mock)documentary testimonials of the other characters. How pedagogy occurs here through practices of distancing, non-empathy and contradiction will be explored. Katrina, as a pastiche of ‘fiction and fantasy, regulation and persuasion’ (Gonick, 2006, p. 3), potentially frames the way we can ‘come to know’ (Lusted, 1986, p. 3) the young female subject.

Part I

(i) Bad Girls, Mean Girls and Maternal Monsters

Gonick (2003; 2004; 2006) notes that public anxiety and cultural fascination with girls, and girlhood more generally, has seen the shift from the dominant discursive model of the ‘vulnerable girl’ to the ‘mean girl’ figure in ‘public consciousness’ (Gonick, 2004, p. 395; also see: Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005). ‘Mean’ or ‘bad’ girls are a particularly evocative cultural symbol of ‘disorder, moral decay and social instability’ (Gonick, 2004, p. 395) in society more broadly. Such discourse is articulated in complex individualised and individualising terms, pathologising some girls and young women as ‘mean’ or ‘bad’. As a result, such young women are invariably cast as deficient and problematic, while these discursive regimes become ‘truth’ about the way young women are meant to be. Medicalising and psychologising discourses are frequently and alarmingly accepted as scientific fact in contemporary Western societies (Harwood & Rasmussen,
circulate in one form or another in popular cultural practices. Focused on aggression, the discourses of pathology have historically positioned any girl that is ‘aggressive’ as ‘problematic’ and ‘other’ than feminine (see: Walkerdine, 1993; Mallan, 2000; Collins, 2003). Drawing from both Gonick and Walkerdine, Ringrose (2006) notes that ‘meanness’ discourses have become universalised, the new normal of feminine, and everything outside this developmental path is constituted as deviant. In the contemporary climate where girls’ behaviour is increasingly becoming criminalised, certain girl-subjects are pathologised as inherently and inevitably ‘mean’. Other girls (usually those socially marginalised) are then ‘held up as a dangerous risk of uncontained feminine aggression’ (Ringrose, 2006, p. 407). Understood as being prone to more than mere meanness, these ‘other’ girls are often constituted as pathologically violent and criminal. Recognised by feminist cultural scholars as figures serving as warnings about failed, deviant femininity, these bad girls demonstrate the consequences of radically transgressing normative repressed meanness.

Far from being unfeminine or boyish, this ‘bad girl’ is often noted for her hyper-feminised ‘slutty’ appearance, and is also seen as a threat in terms of her blatant slutty sexual behaviour (Jackson, 2006, p. 477; Waddell, 2003). Anti-caring and anti-domestic, she apparently disturbs gender, psycho-sexual and social order. Waddell (2003) argues that the ‘loose’ woman, or in the Australian context, the ‘scrubber’, is represented as untamed, animalistic, culturally linked to notions of pollution, poverty, wantonness and dis-ease. Evocatively, Waddell’s ‘scrubber’ is:

... a ‘straddler’ with ‘one leg fixed over the rim of social order, the other swinging ambivalently, unsure of its position or future direction (p. 186).

In Australian films, ‘scrubbers’ are often positioned as abnormal psycho-sexual subjects, portrayed as ‘mad’ and uncontrollable as the price of an

---

43 Often defined loosely, anything from ‘assertiveness’, to ‘cattiness’ or even physical violence and ‘bullycide’ according to Ringrose (2006).

44 In the Australian vernacular, ‘scrubber’ also denotes the ‘feral’ or ‘bush’ pig that runs wild in the bush.
‘active libido’, as if ‘madness’ is the only subject position left after conventional feminine roles have been flouted: ‘The inherent message is that to debunk the rules of official reason is to be mad’ (Waddell, 2003, p. 193). Hopelessly dependent on men, she is addicted to them as ‘sexually excessive’, often a single mother of numerous children fathered by several men: ‘an immoral, filthy, ignorant, vulgar, tasteless, working-class whore’ (Tyler, 2008, p. 26). Whilst young unwed working-class mothers have always been a target of ‘social stigma, hatred, and anxiety’, the teenage mother has contemporary specificity in popular culture, a figure generating and locating a ‘new outpouring of sexist class disgust’ (Tyler, 2008, p. 26). Suburban Mayhem’s Katrina embodies the ‘moral obsession historically associated with young, white working-class mothers in one iconic comic body’ (Tyler, 2008, p. 28; also see Skeggs, 2006, 2005).

Many feminist film scholars account for the ‘bad’ girl and ‘maternal monster’ in terms of the abject (after Kristeva, 1982; Creed, 1993) and/or through ideas of the carnivalesque (Bahktin, 1968). As an uncontained, unregulated, unclean and improper social subject, she is positioned as ‘the grotesque woman’ of excess who makes a spectacle of herself in all things — clothing, appearances, sounds, movements, behaviour and sexuality. The abject grotesque woman is understood here as ‘anarchic’ and subversive towards patriarchal claims (see: von Kurnatowski, 2005; Collins, 2003). Discursive subject positions such as the bad girl, mean girl, scrubber, slut, witch, bitch, femme fatale and mad woman are often critically seen as attempts to control girls and women through censure and marginalisation (see: Mallan, 2000). As many feminist scholars have noted, there is great transgressive potential in the grotesque female. It is argued that due to the characters’ hyper-feminine excess, over-the-top-ness, absurdity (or carnivalesque) and their embodiment of irony and kitsch, the artifice of femininity is exposed (see: Mallan, 2000; Doane, 1991 in Mallan).

45 This is not to argue that Kristeva and Creed use ‘abjection’ in exactly the same way. A fuller account of this, and indeed, of the differences between Deleuze’s use of the ‘abject’, would be a generative exercise for future study.
What this chapter highlights is that ways of coming to know the young feminised subject are complex. A post-structuralist reading of the literature enables an interpretation of the mean girl as not a replacement of the vulnerable girl in popular imagination or the grotesque woman as replacement for her ‘normative’ counterpart. Instead, each informs the production of ‘girlhood’ in fluid, unstable and indeterminate ways. The grotesque woman is not always and only ‘subversive’. Rather, she may embody subversive elements, rupturing some normative discursive regimes, but she may also reinforce others. Mallan (2000) notes an ambivalence in popular films where the female subject can defy patriarchal values; however, this does not mean that she is free of them altogether. In Suburban Mayhem, Katrina Skinner is in many respects the classic ‘bad girl’. She cheats, steals and lies and is loud, slutty and a bad mother. She is also exciting, vulnerable, loyal and loves deeply. How we come to know Katrina is a profoundly pedagogical question that implicates us in the knowing: how is it possible ‘to know that, to think that, to say that’ (Threadgold, 2000, p. 49) about the girl-subject in the act of coming to know Katrina?

For instance, Katrina can be viewed as an embodiment of girlhood as pathologically problematic (‘hysterical’, ‘mad’, promiscuous, drug-taking, aggressive, murderous, a ‘bad’ mother), as a patriarchal stereotype (cold-hearted, mean, dependent on men, a man-eater, manipulative, murderous, hyperfeminine), as a pin-up girl for ‘Girlpower’ (enterprising, capable, assertive, sexy) and as a subversive figure (hyper-sexual, garish, grotesque, perverse, malevolent). A consideration of subjecthood in this particular gendered, sexed and age-based way recognises that the ‘subversive woman’ does not expose the artifice of femininity; rather, she revisits a carefully regulated ‘corporeal style’ (Robinson & Davies, 2008), which constitutes the ‘effect [in] the very subject it appears to express’ (Butler, 1993, p. 1). So then, traditional, progressive, patriarchal and feminist discourses work alongside each other in tension, framing contemporary understandings about girlhood, constraining and enabling possible ways of
knowing the young feminine subject. A reading of *Suburban Mayhem* in these terms reveals contradictory cultural narratives and complex pedagogical practices, which simultaneously unsettle and reinforce ideas about the ‘bad girl’.

(ii) **Gothic Traditions: ‘Celebration and Savage Critique’**

Over twenty years ago, Dermody and Jacka (1988) noted that a ‘Gothic aesthetic’ was at work in Australian cinema in that some films rendered the familiar ‘uncanny’ or strange and perverse in some way. Everyday stories, ‘average’ people and ‘ordinary’ places were revealed on-screen as ‘having a stubborn bias towards the perverse, the grotesque, the malevolent’ (Dermody & Jacka 1988, pp. 30, 51; also see Landman, 1996; Mortimer, 2000). The brash vernacular of 1970s ‘ocker’ films such as *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972) heralded the emergence of an irreverent style of filmmaking (O’Regan, 1989), including themes such as a bad-taste aesthetic, an ‘uneasy edge’, problematic families and relationships, a certain sadness or sense of loss, profound irony, and a ‘crude and energetic fight by the underdog’ (see: Mortimer, 2000, p. 118). Key post-1990 films (such as *Muriel’s Wedding*, 1994; *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, 1994; *Strictly Ballroom*, 1992; *Bad Boy Bubby*, 1993; *Spider and Rose*, 1994; *Love Serenade*, 1996) draw from the 1970s as a kind of ‘stylistic nostalgia’ (Quinn, 1995, p. 23) or as part of a ‘retrospective idolisation of 1970s glamour’ (Rayner, 2000, p. 21). Reappropriating elements of the perverse and the tasteless, such contemporary films arguably refuse to ‘take themselves too seriously’ (see: Quinn, 1995, p. 23), utilising an exaggerated ‘cool irony’ (Collins, 2003) and ‘black humour’. Celebrating the ‘Australian’ kind of humour ‘… known in the Australian vernacular as “taking the piss” out of something and celebrating at the same time’ (Mortimer, 2000, p. 117; original emphasis), these films are meant to signal to the audience that as a ‘Nation’, a film industry and a cinema-going audience, we have learned to ‘laugh at ourselves’ as a sign of our ‘collective maturity’ (see: Rayner, 2000; Quinn, 1995; Collins, 2003; Mortimer, 2000).
However, far from straightforward or clear, the meaning of an ‘irreverent’ film is complex, precisely because there are multiple meanings and multiple positions both in its production and reception. (Neo)Gothic in style, *Suburban Mayhem* is ambivalent, ‘being at once both celebration and savage critique’ (Turnbull, 2008, p. 23; also see Mortimer, 2000; McCallum, 1998; Rowse, 1997); it is a meaning-making practice focused on the young feminine subject as both repulsive and alluring. How pedagogy might work here when meaning is ironic and perverse, and when spectating is an ambiguous proposition, is a complex and demanding matter. Firstly, the positioning of the girl-subject is neither clear nor coherent so that multiple modes of meaning and address are available to the audiences. Coming to know the girl-subject, then, could potentially be about abjection and/or celebration, and/or something other. Secondly, where audiences are situated, who gets the joke, ‘who is left outside on the margins’ (Campbell, 2007, p. 53), is precisely the issue here.

Armstrong (2005) and Charles (2010) have astutely argued that satire can operate as a critical pedagogy that engages learners in learning about political and/or cultural contexts. However, how this occurs is left untheorised in these accounts. What I argue in this chapter is that film as pedagogy is not a simple act of transmission, with the origin and effects of such being easily traceable. Framed by an interest in popular films that do ‘not take themselves too seriously’, while at the same time conceivably legitimating certain claims about youth-hood, in this chapter I explore the ambivalent, pleasurable and discursive spaces offered, hypothesising how we might come to know Katrina. The ambiguity that ‘lies at the heart’ of satire (see Turnbull, 2008), its mobilisation in the film, and its other design features, arguably orientate audiences to learn about the young female subject and the costs of forming the self in such ways.
Part II

(i) ‘In Your Face’: Styles and Genres in the Making of Katrina

*Suburban Mayhem* employs elements of black humour, camp and (anti)glamour. On one hand, the film is a celebration of a:

... transgressive female character who tears up the rule book, trashing the suburban streets of [our] childhood (our great Australian heartland), trashing all those phoney, sentimental, oppressive family values everyone is trying to peddle us (Goldman, production notes, unpaginated).

In this sense, like other Australian satire, it attacks the ‘politics of niceness’ and the supposed gentility of the ‘feminised suburbs’ (see: Turnbull, 2008). On the other hand, the film is a ‘savage critique’ of the ‘bad’ girl and suburban life (Turnbull, 2008, p. 23; Byrnes, 2009), albeit a highly stylised and caricatured one. The film’s styles and genre, including particular narrative, editing, photographic, visual and audio choices, come together to constitute a young woman from the suburbs. For instance, some scenes resemble a heightened, hyper-real, comic-book style, with a ‘... gutsy, direct, raw, muscular quality ... saturated, intense [and] vivid [in colour]’ (Cinematographer Bob Humphreys, DVD extras). The comic book theme arguably works pedagogically to establish Katrina as being a larger-than-life character: direct, intense, muscular and aggressive. But as comic and caricature, she is also a subject the filmmakers play with stylistically, inciting us to not take too seriously. Non-realist editing, strange camera angles and a choreographed repertoire of images often give a unique, distorted appearance that emphasises movement, colour and a kind of headiness. In key scenes, for instance, several shots are cut together in rapid succession and the timing is increased to speed up the action. Stylistically much like a music video, loud rock music with female vocals, full of aggression and high-energy blasts loudly as Katrina enters the screen or takes off in her powerful V8 car.
Alongside this hyper-real comic book look, ‘realist’ aesthetics are sometimes privileged, including documentary conventions including direct-to-camera interviews, hand-held cinematography, linear editing and an absence of special effects. Such stylistic choices as pedagogical devices potentially signal to the viewer that these scenes are ‘serious’ and not to be laughed at, while reinforcing the ‘badness’ of Katrina’s subjectivity. As if live on the scene, key characters are interviewed and accompanying
flashbacks show the events surrounding Katrina’s involvement in her father John’s (Robert Morgan) death. Both devices work as a form of ‘true’ confession, inciting audiences towards knowing Katrina, or engaging with her particular subjecthood as if knowable. Yet, the documentary-style employed is also a ‘mockumentary’, a genre that deliberately employs irony, satire and critique to ‘undermine documentary’s claim to objectively tell the truth’ (Campbell, 2007, p. 53). Infused with black humour and camp, these ‘realist’ scenes are precisely the source of much of the film’s fantastical and lighter moments. Mortimer (2000) discusses an ‘uneasy edge’ in recent Australian ‘suburban grotesque’ films where everyday ‘perversities’ appear as a kind of ethnographic hyperbole. The (mock)documentary style employed in Suburban Mayhem documents the life of a young single mother in the suburbs, but with much hyperbole. Combining both contempt and sympathy, mockumentary is fundamentally ambivalent and ambiguous (Roscoe & Hight, 2001; as cited in Davis, 2008, p. 357).

What this eclectic and ambiguous mix of film styles and genres means in terms of how pedagogy might work is a complex proposition. Firstly, the positioning of the girl-subject is neither clear nor coherent, so that multiple modes of meaning and address are available to audiences. Arguably, however, techniques like distancing, humour and disgust are generated, framing the way the bad girl is ‘brought to life and endowed with affect through mediation’ (Tyler, 2008; also see Ngai, 2002 in Tyler, 2008). As a figure communicated in highly ‘emotive’ ways she is the material and semiotic signifier of a set of specific practices and design effects. For example, a key scene in the film demonstrates this complexity of pedagogy through practices of production and potential reception: Aunty Diane (Genevieve Lemon), Katrina’s father’s girlfriend, talks directly to the unseen

---

interviewer about Katrina. As she boils the kettle in her suburban kitchen, Diane positions her as a selfish and spoilt child:

If Katrina didn’t like the car that John got her, it’d be straight into the Trading Post and she’d have a new one by the end of the week. You see, Katrina changed cars like you and I change our undies.

The interview format, the ‘everyday’ actions, the kitchen location and Diane’s direct address to the camera work as a form of ‘realism’ that privileges what Diane says as ‘truth’: this is the way Katrina really is. Unlike the ‘nice, kind and helpful’ girl (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 49), Katrina is an ultimate ‘bad girl’, ‘hedonistic, vain, greedy and self-centred’ (Mallan, 2000, p. 34). But so camp and darkly satirical is this scene that both Katrina and Diane are arguably positioned as ridiculous, extreme and objects of ridicule. Social class is emotionally mediated through techniques like disgust and mockery, coalescing around the figures of white suburban working-class women (Tyler, 2008). As the camp Diane speaks, the filmmakers play on this effect of the ridiculous and ‘unreal’. On the screen in full is a still image of Katrina’s father John’s ‘modest suburban house’, complete with green manicured lawn, homemade birdbath and tall palm trees.

To the sound of engines revving, a number of cars and motorbikes, single snapshots as if cut-out from the newspaper, fly-in over the still shot of the house, one after the other in quick succession until a collage is made. The
shot then zooms out and Katrina’s smiling face is formed from the hundreds of tiny images, an abstract portraiture. Pretty as a pin-up with blonde hair and red smiling mouth, a sparkle twinkles in the corner of one of Katrina’s eyes, as if she winks at the audience.

Far from a superficial or silly scene, this sequence is complex. The potential ways audiences could come to Katrina here are multiple: as selfish and manipulative; as a spoilt child; as object of ridicule; as a harsh comment on young suburban womanhood; as light-hearted silliness; and as a combination of many things. We are perhaps invited to take up the subject position of the middle-age woman who sits in judgement of the selfish young woman (see: Tyler, 2008). Winks, nods and ‘come-hither looks and gesturing’ (Mallan, 2000, p. 26) have often been read as ironic, parodic and ‘complicitous’ ruptures. In terms of pedagogy, the who that does the winking, and how it is understood by audiences comes to matter. On one level, Katrina could be credited with the winking. She winks because she knows that we know that underneath this beautiful, smiling, ‘sweet’ image of Daddy’s little princess is a raging, selfish, nasty ‘bitch’. We are arguably seduced by the blonde hair, pretty face and red lips as if they belie the ‘heartless’ young woman she is, a ‘truth’ about the ‘deceptive core’ of femininity (see Woodward, 2002). Thus, this scene and our interpretation could be understood as ‘cynical and hard-hitting’ (Byrnes, 2009, unpaginated), making harsh judgements about young, pretty, ‘working-
class’ girls as selfish, superficial, manipulative and dangerous. But on another level, the filmmakers could be seen to be winking at audiences through their creation, aware of their complicity at how they constitute Katrina, and how she might come to be known. They wink at this well-rehearsed representation of young womanhood that they ‘play’ with, indicating to audiences that they are being ironic, critiquing this all-too-common way of positioning the young working-class woman, particularly the single mother (see: Tyler, 2008). Reading the wink this way suggests that the audience gets the joke, are situated in the ‘privileged position of knowing’ (Campbell, 2007, p. 54; my emphasis) and are complicit in these games of subjectification.

(ii) Putting Katrina in Her Place: Suburbia and the Girl

The fictional/hyperreal working-class suburb of Golden Grove is key to the way Katrina is constituted, but pedagogically, it is far from coherent or without contradiction. Actually filmed in the New South Wales city of Newcastle, Golden Grove embodies a generic suburbia we are perhaps meant to recognise as a familiar subject of the popular imaginary. Ironically named, like Kath & Kim’s Fountain Gate, this suburb draws from and adds to (anti)suburbanism long demonstrated in Australian popular culture (see Turnbull, 2008). Frequently understood as ‘the worst of urbanisation’ (Turnbull, 2008, p. 18), suburbia is commonly understood as a stifling, man-made ‘cultural and spiritual desert’ (see: Enker, 1994 in Simpson, 1999; Turnbull, 2008; Turner, 2008). On one hand, pedagogy about the suburbs is marked with distaste and mockery, positioned as fundamentally dysfunctional; a ‘grotesque’ place where ‘anarchy, murder and mayhem’ lurk beyond the ‘manicured green lawns’ (Goldman, production notes, unpagedinated). Katrina’s suburbia is full of rows of similarly ‘ugly/banal’ houses, kitschy cement bird-baths, V8 cars parked on front lawns and concrete shopping malls. The people who live there are shrill and selfish single-mothers (Katrina), dumb men (Rusty, Kenny, John), dodgy cops (Sergeant Andretti), hopeless criminals (Danny, Kenny), seedy drug dealers (Random Guy), murderers (Rusty, Kenny, Katrina) and mean-spirited
middle-aged conservatives (Diane). Positioned in such a way as to potentially incite an emotive response (one of disgust and abjection), the filmmakers’ presentation of the suburbs in *Suburban Mayhem* is:

... a fairly savage attack on the mean-spirited, double-fronted, brick and tile mediocrity of the great Australian suburbs — somewhere between the happy idiots of the TV comedy *Kath & Kim*, and the murderous dynamics of *The Boys* (Byrnes, 2009, unpaginated; also see Turnbull, 2008).

In this sense, Katrina is something that emerges from the conditions of life in this *place*, ‘... the killer they had to have because they live barren lives without culture, beauty or a sense of the spirit’ (Byrnes, 2009, unpaginated). We are encouraged to know Katrina through specific ideas about suburbia as abject (Speed, 2006), and we see Katrina committing many ‘abject’ actions: she does drugs in the toilet at the mall; shop-lifts and bag-snatches at the shops; brags and preens at the local beauty salon; ‘picks up’ at the traffic-lights; has sex with a random guy in his truck at the lookout; and argues with her dad in their kitchen.

But it is also possible for viewers to alternatively (or simultaneously) enjoy the ‘mayhem’ one can get up to in the suburbs. Katrina and her suburb become a powerful symbol of transgression (see: Goldman, production notes, unpaginated). Over the last decade in particular, cultural scholars have reclaimed suburbia from historical criticisms and cultural cringes. Simpson (1999), for instance, argues that key Australian films from the last two decades represent suburbia as far from ‘strangling a spirit of independence’ (p. 25)\(^\text{47}\). She argues that women in particular have transformed the character and pattern of suburban culture to one of heterogeneity (also see Craven, 1995). Here it is possible to see that *Suburban Mayhem’s* suburbia (like *Idiot Box’s*) fosters idiosyncratic characters and is far from ‘cultureless’ (see Simpson, 1999). The suburban streets become a dynamic and hedonistic playground, where Katrina’s anti-maternalism and anti-domesticity is a defiant celebration.

---

Like choices of style and genre that work to constitute the bad girl, historically situated notions of suburbia frame the positioning of the protagonist in particular ways, constraining but not determining the pedagogies on girlhood. Suburbia, as a cultural way of seeing the world, and as a technology used in *Suburban Mayhem*, constructs ways of being in the world, ‘demarcating appropriate and inappropriate spatialities’ (Chouinard, 2009, p. 801) for the young female subject who embodies and performs bad girl-subjectivity in complex and multifarious ways.

(iii) **A Revved-Up Nightmare on W/Heels: Feline Motifs & V8 Muscle Cars**

Through pedagogical techniques of framing, close-ups and the ‘politics of staring’ (Chouinard, 2009), we potentially learn that Katrina is *where it is at*, that she is both spectacular and a spectacle, and arguably designed to be looked at. On several levels, she is positioned as animalistic, monstrous and sexually aggressive through the way her body is displayed, including movements and words, the repetition of feline motifs and her close association with V8 cars. Often referred to by the other characters in the film as ‘Kat’ or ‘Kitten’, Katrina wears a short black t-shirt dress with a tiger on it, visible leopard-print bras and undies, long and very pointy red fingernails, red lip-stick, black eye-shadowed eyes and black shiny knee-high boots with a high heel. Pedagogically this costume potentially works to stress her (un)manicured wildness and killer-potential. In the DVD extras, the director refers to the long red nails as being weapons, as if in one ferocious flick, they could bring about death.

Feline characteristics, long associated with the *femme fatale* (Davidson, 2006), position Katrina as a contemporary teenage femme fatale, luring stupid men into deadly and dangerous traps. The female protagonist’s body and sexuality is implicated here as a possible pedagogical cue to her ‘badness’ and ‘meanness’. Her legs, breasts and lips are emphasised through costume, colour and camera angles. In this sense, Katrina is portrayed as literally and metaphorically a ‘bitch’, much like the subject of Mallan’s (2000) paper, Cruella DeVil:
... her bifurcated hair colour and clothing in black and white are metonymic of her split subjectivity — as a woman and as a hybrid form of both animal and human. She is both literally and metaphorically represented as a bitch in the ways she transgressed female decorum and in her physical similarity to, and passion for Dalmatians. Even Creuilla’s DeVil’s name is a less-than-subtle reference to her cruel, demonic nature (p. 28).

As hybrid of girl/feline/animal, Katrina has a cruel, monstrous nature. When she is angry, smoke explodes through her mouth and nose, and like a dragon she puffs and sighs through her packet of cigarettes. In a flashback scene where her brother is sentenced to life in prison, Katrina storms out of the courthouse, and in an aggressive wide-legged stance, she angrily smokes. The filmmakers deliberately speed up this shot and accentuate the noise of breathing, potentially encouraging us to learn that Katrina is some kind of a demon or dragon. The words from interviewees Lilya (Mia Wasikowska) and Sergeant Andretti (Steve Bastoni) serve to legitimate this reading.

Lilya: Katrina couldn’t believe it. She became so angry.

... 

Andretti: Mate, Katrina was angry before but this took angry into overdrive ... [it] triggered something inside her ... it lit a fuse!

Katrina is the classic ‘hysterical’ women who ‘rants and raves ... [losing] the ability to discipline her body and voice’ (Mallan, 2000, p. 27; also see Driscoll, 2002; Johnson, 1993). Through the repetition of key visual, aural
and verbal discursive metaphors, Katrina can be understood as symbolic of uncontained deviance, disorder and dis-ease, in need of urgent policing. She is the ‘unruly’ and ‘high-sexed’ young woman, or the ‘scrubber’, so popular in Australian cinema (see: Waddell, 2003).

But only seeing Katrina in these narrow terms does not recognise the contradictions at the core of such knowledge formation and subject production. Katrina’s embodiment and costume potentially work pedagogically on many levels, only one of which could be a comment on her hysteria or ‘deviant’ sexuality. Equal possibilities are that Katrina’s embodiment symbolises her transgressiveness, her power, and/or her hyper-femininity. In many respects we could consider Katrina as ‘camp’, a figure of satire. She is a mocking figure, inasmuch as she is potentially mocked by viewers in terms of her ‘trashiness’ (see: Hartigan, 1997; Tyler, 2008). Hyper-femininity deliberately uses camp and elements of excess to expose femininity as artificial (Mallan, 2000). Demanding the viewer’s gaze through her ‘transgressive’ feminine acts and costume, Katrina does not dismantle gender identity; rather, her embodiment reveals her willingness to ‘play the gender game to achieve [her] own desires’ (Mallan, p. 33; see also: Doane, 1991 in Mallan). The ‘bad girl’, then, as sexy and dangerous is no mere stereotype; rather, she is arguably a carefully constructed pedagogical device.

The V8 car is another pedagogic metaphor linked to Katrina. Potentially we learn that behind the wheel of a car Katrina is a wild, furious beast. In a scene at the lookout over-looking her suburb, a familiar make-out spot, Katrina has to make a quick get-away in a V8 muscle car that arguably embodies her aggression, energy and reckless bravado. She is in her element here: smoking, nursing a beer in between her thighs, snorting coke off a CD cover, listening to loud rock music, driving fast and living dangerously. Like the scene where the filmmakers turn Katrina into a dragon, the timing in this scene is sped up, and shots are cut together to increase the tension through movement and frenzied pace. Film editor Stephen Evans makes specific reference to this scene, estimating that the
15 second scene has 25 different shots in it, pedagogically inciting ‘sensation of speed, damage and excitement’ (DVD Extras). And potentially this ‘speed, damage and excitement’ is not only about the car but also about Katrina, Katrina plus car. Timing is important here, each shot fast and furious, all except one brief half-second shot of Katrina as she looks in the review mirror and then slams the car into gear and, gravel flying, takes off.

Sound is important in constituting the female subject. However, rather than ‘moody’ orchestral music and sounds of ‘nature’ highlighted in the film discussed in the previous chapter, in Suburban Mayhem, loud screechy rock music and screeching tyres merge to add excitement. Katrina’s fast and furious escape is a heady blur that is so hot it burns up, the shot dissolving into what looks like celluloid film melting.
Through editing, framing, music, sound, narrative and the V8 muscle car, the metaphors of Katrina as wild, animalistic and monstrous are continued. Viewed as a metaphor for Katrina, the presence of the car literally shows her constantly revved up, reckless, impatient and potentially dangerous. The car is also linked to her pleasure — she likes to drive fast, dragging-off at the lights, having sex with random men in the back seat, doing donuts in the carpark and terrorising the suburban streets. We can understand the car as a kind of extension of Katrina’s body where Katrina/car becomes a hybrid being, possibly promising a ‘rabid freedom’, a ‘manic’ masculine subjectivity (Morris, 1989, p. 124). The ‘recklessness, impatience and irrationality’ the car provides (Biber, 2001, p. 26) puts Katrina behind the wheel, and she is always, conceivably, the one with ‘mastery, agency, power’ (Morris, 1989, p. 122) despite her femaleness. Young men like Rusty (Michael Dorman), Kenny (Anthony Hayes) and her gang are always rendered passengers as a result. Taking masculinity as if it is inextricably bound to the car, Katrina can then be understood as emasculating these men in the subversive act of being behind the wheel, and particularly behind the wheel of such a powerful ‘hyper-masculine’ V8 car.

Clearly, though, Katrina is also positioned as ‘mad’ and ‘bad’ behind the wheel, and so she is far from a purely radical, subversive female figure as driver. Instead, she could be recognised as just another ‘sick, unstable,
fragile, infantilised’ female, a ‘passenger’ in a masculine narrative (O’Sullivan, 1999, p. 48). Pedagogically, the car is a potential dis/abling mechanism, allowing the female driver to travel through life as she wants, but perhaps at the cost of being pathologised as abnormal, crazy and unfeminine. In one key scene, Katrina’s voracious sexuality, psychopathology and skills at ‘feminine manipulation’ are tied to the emasculation of Rusty and the acquisition of a particularly special V8 car: Rusty’s Charger. The scene begins with Katrina and Rusty having sex in Rusty’s bed. The tiger-print blanket, Katrina’s physical vigorousness and heartless, feline-rich discourse suggest her ‘wanton’, animalistic nature again, as does her insatiability:

Katrina: Oh Rusty, you can’t even fuck me properly anymore. I need someone that will fuck me like a tiger and who cares for me.
Rusty: But I do, I really do. I want you to be happy. I want Bailee to be happy.
Katrina: And I need to find someone who isn’t a little pussy like you.
Rusty: Kat….
Katrina: Everyday you’re hassling me about Bailee and about being a family. We need stability Rusty. We all need stability. And I really need to find someone who understands me.
Rusty: Fuck you Katrina. You’re a fucking psychopath.
Rusty: You’ll regret that Rusty.

Like the ultimate ‘mean girl’, Katrina’s aggression is ‘delivered not through physical violence but through manipulation’ (Woodward, 2002 p. 313), so much more manipulative, according to mean girl discourse, precisely because of her ‘femaleness’ (Woodward, p. 313; also see Gonick, 2004). She mocks Rusty for what she sees as his sexual failings, he is only a ‘little pussy’ when she needs a ‘tiger’ to match her own fierce sexuality. But Rusty recognises her manipulations (inasmuch as he is seduced by them, later murdering Katrina’s father for her) and he pathologises her as a ‘psychopath’, arguably inciting audiences to do the same. Like the mean girl, or ‘fucking psychopath’ she has been positioned as, Katrina threatens Rusty, telling him he’ll regret his words. These words and other scenes in the film show what she is capable of, and Sergeant Andretti’s reminder to
‘never underestimate Katrina’, potentially incites audiences to believe that Katrina makes no idle threats.

After threatening Rusty, Katrina then dresses and leaves through the front door, discovering that her car is blocked in by two of Rusty’s cars parked on the front lawn. Furious, she turns on her heels and goes back inside to confront Rusty:

Katrina: [screaming] Oh Rusty move your fucking cars!
Rusty: Later. [Bailee starts to cry. Rusty grimaces and goes to the cot and picks up Bailee] Why don’t you think about feeding your little daughter before taking off? Might even want to give her a bath. Then I’ll think about moving my car. [He hands Bailee over to Katrina and she takes her reluctantly].

After Rusty returns to bed, Katrina walks out in the lounge room and places Bailee in a cot, and grabs a key that is hidden above the front door. As before, this scene occurs at a fast pace, many short shots are edited together to tell the story, create tension and quicken the action. Loud rock music with a female vocalist, a common technique, is employed again. Key to the construction of the scene and to Katrina’s constitution are the following shots: a low shot of Katrina’s black, buckled, high-heel boots clicking on the footpath as she strides over to the garage.

Next, a close-up shot of Katrina’s pointy red nails as she heaves open the roller-door of the garage; the strange yet apt tiger-like ‘roar’ as she whips
the cover off the car (a ‘tiger’ who can finally match Katrina’s ferocity?); the half-second pause of Katrina smiling at the car; she discards the protective cover on the floor; a close-up of her red, long finger-nailed hand opening the car door; a bare leg exposed as she sits in the seat; a close-up of her red, long finger-nailed hand turning on the ignition; a grimace as she puts the car into gear and rolls out of the garage; and her smile as Rusty races out and yells at her. A voice-over is employed: Rusty inciting audiences to believe that, like the wildness of nature, the unpredictable weather or untamed animals, Katrina is out of control. But far from a ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ young woman, who should be ‘nice, kind and helpful’ (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 49), ‘mean’ girl Katrina hurtles rapidly though the suburbs brandishing her own particular form of terror on anyone who gets in her way.

Cars further implicate Katrina’s subjectivity in the film. One of the men beguiled by Katrina, even though he knows she is ‘bad’, is Sergeant Andretti, a local policeman who watches Katrina with much interest:

Have you met her? [smiling and nodding] Well, the boys and I like to say she carries a mirror around with her. She’s got this attitude, this ‘I know you want to fuck me’ attitude. Oh she looks after herself. Yeah, Katrina keeps herself in pristine condition, just like that car she drives.

The character of Andretti highlights the metaphor of the V8 car and/as Katrina’s sexuality; however, rather than ‘as aggressive’, this example highlights the vehicle and Katrina as ‘pristine’, ‘well looked-after’, a beautiful and attractive piece of ‘machinery’. Morris (1989) makes key links between ‘woman’ and ‘car’ as interchangeable objects of male [heterosexual] desire, and this concept is employed pedagogically in the film. But like her body, Katrina uses cars to lure men as a weapon for ambush and seduction to get what she wants. ‘Female sexual desire’ is often explored or satiated within the sphere of the car (Simpson, 2003). Pedagogically, ideas about cars, desire and sex converge, influencing our learning, and ultimately, how we come to understand Katrina.
In a particular climactic scene from the film, Katrina appears through the star-filter glow of headlights like some Rev-Head Goddess or scantily-clad trashy auto-show. In her tiger-dress that barely covers her backside, Katrina sits on the bonnet of a V8 car and raises a bottle of celebratory bourbon. Reeling in a dim-witted man to do her bidding, Katrina is the ‘Siren of the Suburbs’ (Davidson, 2006), a nightmare on wheels who lures men to their downfall. The high-fuelled, rock music with vocals from 70s ballys rock queen Suzi Quatro blasts the audience, taking over all other sound from the scene, and potentially taking over the audiences’ senses. Reworking Dermody and Jacka’s (1988) formulation (car + man + outback = spectatorial bliss), V8 car + Katrina + suburbia = spectatorial bliss. Through emotional incitements including desire, disgust and derision, this scene potentially invites the viewer to take up a particular position/s in regards to this bad girl. In a pedagogical sense, we are incited to sit back in judgement of Katrina and her actions, distanced from her as a figure of attraction and repulsion. While the three films under analysis in the previous chapter often employed an inside mode of address to bring the audience into the ‘inner’ lives of the girl-subjects, Suburban Mayhem only employs an outside mode of address, which arguably distances us from the girl protagonist (see: Dermody & Jacka, 1988, pp. 41–2). As noted previously, the mode of address is key to the way film as pedagogy works (see: Ellsworth, 1997), framing the way we can come to know the youth subject.
Maybe, though, since it is also hyper-feminine and fantastical, this scene may be ironic or playing upon and exposing the ‘artifice’ of woman as ‘sex object’. Again, Katrina takes delight in her own spectacle, at her own ‘being-looked-at-ness’ (Mallan, 2000). In either respect, the filmic and narrative techniques and various cultural discourses evoked here potentially make us pay attention to Katrina because there are important lessons to be learned here about young women out of control, sexy young women who cannot be trusted, bad working-class girls, abject teenage mothers and rebellious youth. Like a music-video, short, loud and strategically crafted, this scene crafts key knowledges about the bad girl. This pedagogy not only forms Katrina, the classic ‘bad’ girl subject, but it also orientates us towards learning about what might be a stake in forming or not forming oneself as a particular subject in these ways.

(iv) Instant Gratification: Sexuality and the Mobile Phone

The mobile phone, like the car, is potentially linked to learning about contemporary young women like Katrina, notably around ideas of aggressive and seductive sexuality. The mobile phone, placed in the bad girls’ hands, becomes a ‘weapon of choice’ (Starrs, 2006, p. 22), and Katrina
is the ‘mistress of the SMS’ (Hall, 2003, unpaginated). Far from a harmless social media, the SMS text message allows Katrina to summon a lover, destroy Sergeant Andretti’s marriage, terrorise Lilya, contract a killer and declare war on Rusty and her father. Scenes in the film show how Katrina’s use of the mobile phone is as frequent, superficial and instant as the boyfriends she uses, graphically linking sex, aggression and even death to girls’ ‘risky’ use of the mobile phone. As a pedagogic device, then, the mobile phone intimates particular kinds of ways of understanding contemporary young womanhood. It limits (but does not determine) the way Katrina is understood as: risky, brazen, overtly sexual; threatening, predatory, destructive; and seemingly innocent, but ultimately deceptive. It conceivably plugs into a construction of the contemporary girl-subject as if something to be fearful of, as if she is a ‘new horror ... the twenty-first century techno-savvy teenage femme fatale’ (Starrs, 2006, p. 22).

For instance, in one scene where teen beautician, Lilya, is interviewed, we see that ‘[Katrina] always had a lot of guys chasing her. Her phone would ring all the time!’ A flashback scene works to confirm this: Katrina lies back in the salon chair getting her eyebrows waxed, and ‘cold-heartedly’ exclaims: ‘The way to a man’s heart isn’t through his stomach, it’s in his pants!’ The scene flashes back to the interview with Lilya, where she confesses, ‘I can’t remember all of their names, but there is probably one for every letter of the alphabet!’ As Lilya speaks, the screen shows a cartoonesque snapshot of many different unknown young men, one literally for every letter of the alphabet from ‘A’ for Andy to ‘W’ for Wayno.
The young men appear as if they are video footage on a mobile phone, and they flash past in rapid progression, only to stop briefly to say things like:

- **Eddy:** Hey kitten, remember me? From the weekend? Eddy?
- **Lachy:** Pussycat! It’s me — Lachy.
- **Roland:** Hi Katrina — it’s Roland.
- **Wayno:** Katrina. Remember me? Wayno? I met you last Saturday — at the lights.

Loud rock music, once again with a female lead vocal, musically constitutes Katrina. The female ‘rock chick’ sings *about* Katrina, describing her character, but in another sense, she lyrically constitutes her into existence as a ‘sucker’ for love, a sexy ‘babe’ who ‘just can’t get enough’[^48].

Background sounds of ringing and beeping sound along with this song, and the sound-scape and the visual, works pedagogically to constitute a particular kind of gendered subjecthood. This boy-as-toy/mobile phone-as-toy scene is fun and does not ‘take itself too seriously’, mocking the masculinist ‘little black book’ trope that has become a classic symbol of the ‘man about town’. On one hand, it is fun and funny, reclaiming the little black book for the contemporary young female. On another level, though, it strikes comment on Katrina’s sexual subjectivity (rather than any of the men she encounters), maybe as ‘celebration’, but maybe as ‘savage

[^48]: Magic Dirt’s *Sucker Love*, lead vocals by Adalita.
critique’. Again a scene invites the viewer to potentially sit back in criticism of Katrina, using ‘emotive’ incitements like humour, mockery and disgust to account for this bad girl (see Tyler, 2008). When the ‘flashback’ ends, we are back with Katrina lying in the salon chair. Lilya notes that: ‘Wow I think he really likes you’, to which Katrina as ultimate ‘mean girl’ laughs and directly instructs her on the issue of her sexual subjectivity:

Guys like that will do anything for a girl like me. Maybe when you get some tits, you’ll know what I’m talking about!

So then while it is fun and funny, it is also quite harsh too, damning in its judgements in regards to the sexuality of this young woman, and thus it makes it hard to celebrate this sexually voracious female subjectivity except ironically. So horrible and hateful she appears that it is perhaps difficult not to stand at a critical distance from her. As pedagogic device in this sense, the mobile phone is used to show how easy it is for Katrina to carry on the way she wants to, highlighting how we should account for her through ideas of self-centredness, promiscuity and manipulation. The mobile phone is a metaphor that constitutes Katrina, but it is also a pedagogy that positions the spectator to learn about how the formation of the self as a subject might take place and what might be at stake in forming the self in particular ways.
This image encapsulates Katrina: a mirror for her vanity, but also as a device allowing her to observe; long red nails as potential weapons, tapping impatiently; a mobile phone at the ready to do her bidding; the V8 car enabling her to pounce. She is predatory, aggressive, dangerous and sexy.

This film incites key knowledges about the ‘bad girl’ through many technologies including genre and style, suburbia, cat motifs, V8 cars, sexuality and the mobile phone. But since meaning and modes of address are plural, pedagogy is not a simple act of transmission from text to audience. Coming to know the bad girl, then, is a complex and profoundly relational and contextual process in that individual audiences will account for the girl-subject in their own ways. Like all pedagogical encounters, what we learn about girls like Katrina largely depends on what we already know. While the meaning that is made is dependent on what the audience brings to the encounter, the film text, nonetheless, does constrain what can be known. While different readings can be had, there are not endless possibilities. Some readings may be more easily available than others due to their discursive dominance, a particularly ‘persuasive’ mode of address, and/or the way in which society more broadly accounts for girlhood.
Part III — Everyone Has a Story to Tell: Learning About Katrina Through Key Characters

Rather than seeking the opinions of individual and specific audiences, this chapter explores the film’s mode of address or how the film might address the audience as if collective. In this final section of the chapter I focus on a particularly convincing technique of the film: the didactic mode of address through the talk of other characters on Katrina. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Suburban Mayhem utilises a (mock)documentary style where key characters discuss the events around Katrina’s father John’s death. Katrina is constituted through these interviews, as a form of personal and collective testimonial. Arguably, through devices like an outside mode of address (Dermody & Jacka, 1988, pp. 41–2), we are prevented from engaging with the girl protagonist in an ‘empathetic’ manner and we do not come to know her through privileged access to her ‘private’ inner thoughts and emotions. Instead, we come to know Katrina from a critical distance, incited by the other characters to feel disgust and sit in judgement of her. In Chapter Four, where I focused on Ben Mendelsohn’s characters as ‘pedagogues’ (Dyson, 1993; Morris, 2001) and pedagogical tools, influencing and agitating the audiences’ understandings of the young male protagonist, Mendelsohn’s character, as young masculine ideal, is always spoken about in revered terms by the other characters in spite of (or because of) his legendary ‘badness’. In Suburban Mayhem, the young girl is consistently condemned by the other characters, a technique repeated within and across popular culture in regards to the figure of the ‘bad’ white, working-class (young) woman (Tyler, 2008; Skeggs, 2006, 2005). In this sense, then, secondary characters are ‘pedagogues’ and pedagogical objects, working as intermediaries between the film text and the audience to convince us that Katrina is (comically) ‘bad’.

The ‘realism’ of the interviews as didactical positions Katrina in ways that are hard to refute, and the accompanying flashbacks always back up the interviewees’ claims. For instance, one character in particular legitimises
knowledges about Katrina with great ‘authority’. Aunty Diane is like a chorus or narrator (see Goldman, DVD extras) commenting on the action, a convincing ‘teacher’ who sneeringly positions Katrina as irrational, immoral and abnormal. We are often invited, as viewers, to take up the subject position of this exasperated middle-aged woman, endorsing her feelings of disgust and outrage by our own. From the kitchen of her house, Aunty Diane attempts to explain why Katrina is wild, reckless and criminal:

John was forever making things for those kids. He built the house they lived in. Turns out, the house he died in. Oh, he was especially proud of that bloody birdbath. If he known then what I know now, he might have made himself a couple of gargoyles…

The scene that accompanies Diane’s words shows a portrait of a loving, ‘normal’, ‘working-class’ family, working together to secure a birdbath on a cement slab in their front yard. What is a smiling snapshot of father, son and daughter is turned into a disturbing and yet humorous image where two cartoonish and grotesque faces of gargoyles or monsters are superimposed onto the faces of the young kids.

But we do not only need to take Aunty Diane’s word that Katrina and her brother are ‘gargoyles’. An accompanying flashback scene depicts a man from the neighbourhood roughly marching the young siblings home after they caused the man’s son to go to the hospital. He angrily tells their father, ‘Keep your kids inside John, fucking little monsters!’ This scene, the
combination of interviews direct to the camera and accompanying flashbacks work to validate Diane’s opinion of Katrina as being unnatural, monstrous and a bad seed.

Throughout the film Diane talks to the interviewer. While she talks, she carries out her domestic chores, making a cup of tea, cutting a home-made cake, peeling potatoes and preparing a roast. In contrast to herself, her ‘competent’ domestic skills, and her suitability as a partner to John, Diane smugly notes that the underlying root of Katrina’s bad behaviour is Katrina’s now absent mother:

[Diane shows John’s wedding photo] A child needs its mother. Indeed, I am a strong believer that Angela ... was a child bride in the true sense of the word. Already a mother and a drug addict. No surprises, after Kat was born, she abandoned [John] and her babies. Soon the only time the kids saw their mother was when she turned up on John’s doorstep asking for money. She looked like death warmed-up you know. Looked like a zombie....

As she spouts ‘middle-class’ moralistic values and pop-psychology, the filmmakers illustrate Diane’s commentary with an image of Katrina’s mother: skinny, straggly and strung-out, pleading at the front window of their house for money. Employing particular film techniques, the filmmakers play up and play upon a sense of the disturbing and the harrowing by superimposing many images of this woman on the screen in a kind of abstract and terrifying collage. The accompanying sound here is also foreboding, eerie and nondescript, much like a horror movie.
Arguably these ‘technologies’ incite feelings of unease, and the faces of the young Katrina and Danny highlight this unease, and even fear, at this ‘zombie’, this ‘maternal monster’ pleading at the door with arms outstretched (see: Creed, 1993; Starrs, 2006). The repetition of the image of the woman on the screen in the single shot perhaps emphasises how many times Katrina’s mother came and how it was a familiar scene. Much like a horror movie where the zombies are beating down the door, this surreal scene depicts Katrina’s mother’s ‘monstrousness’ and ‘grotesqueness’. Potentially this scene invites the viewer to feel these feelings of unease, fear and disgust (even while they may laugh), stressing Katrina’s mother’s ‘monstrousness’. That she is a monster is seemingly irrefutable, evidence of this given by Diane as she notes that she was a child bride, a teenager already with one child (from another man) and another on the way. Riddled with drugs and with a scrubber’s ‘insatiable sexual desire’, she abandons her husband and children. Again, through techniques of distancing and mockery, we sit back in judgement of the white, working-class woman and bad mother. What is potentially highlighted in this treatment of Katrina’s mother is Katrina’s own (maternally) ‘monstrous’ qualities. Aunty Diane works to show that it is ‘inevitable’ or ‘natural’ that Katrina would turn out ‘bad’, as a product of her ‘bad’ maternal heritage:
I met the Grandmother. She was mad. I knew the mother. She was madder. It’s genetics I reckon. That’s the only thing I can come up with. You just can’t get clean water from a dirty tank.

‘Clean water’ from a ‘dirty tank’ evokes contamination, pollution, dis-ease, firmly individualised upon the subjectivity of the young woman. In this example, disgust is directed at several generations of ‘mad’/‘bad’ white, working-class women. It also highlights Katrina as a ‘bad’ mother, which is confirmed through scenes that show her smoking marijuana next to her baby’s crib, dumping her on Rusty or Lilia, darkening her baby’s hair with mascara to pass her off as Sergeant Andretti’s love child and doing burn-outs and having sex with a stranger in the car while the baby is strapped in the back seat. Drawing on viewer emotion as a specific pedagogic technique, we arguably end up hating Katrina, as a completely irredeemable and awful figure. She is ‘ordinary’ in her suburban banalities, but also ‘disturbingly horrific and other’ (Chouinard, 2009, p. 800). Scenes that include baby Bailee are arguably designed in such a way as to draw out an ‘emotional’ response from the audience, including humour, disgust and discomfort. Baby Bailee is strategically used within the film to condemn Katrina, making it more of a challenge to accept Katrina as a transgressive and celebratory figure when she is so consistently places her child ‘at risk’ and so systematically neglects her. More than once, scenes with Bailee encourage audiences to think about how this little girl will grow up, and this theme of a ‘dirty tank’ and bad girl lineage are hard to shake off:

Aunty Diane: We all know the only reason little Bailee has nightmares is because she sleeps in the same bed as a monster.
But maybe there is more going on here than just identifying with Diane against Katrina. Arguably, even though Aunty Diane is positioned as an authority ‘legitimately’ informing the interviewer and the film viewer about Katrina and the events surrounding her father’s death, so mean, petty and excessive is Diane that we might come to dislike her too. Diane’s pop psychologising, contemptuous nasally drawl, outrageous dialogue, blue eye-shadow and parodic domestic activities arguably exposes Diane as camp and grotesque.
On one hand, then, Diane is another figure mocking the white working-class woman. On the other hand, though, the filmmakers appear aware of the figure they are evoking here.

Known for her portrayal of the protagonist in Jane Campion’s film *Sweetie* (1989) (the story of a ‘vile’ yet transgressive, ‘mad’ and ‘over-sexed’ young woman in suburbia who manipulates her father to get what she wants), Australian actress Genevieve Lemon plays Aunty Diane, and thus is an ironic casting choice. That ‘Sweetie’ has now turned into a middle-age, moralising conservative, a ‘genteel homemaker’, who sits in judgement of young women who refuse normative regulation, is potentially the film *winking* at their audiences again. A kind of intertextual pedagogy is occurring here, where Diane’s comments are irrefutably didactic, when actually it is meant to be taken as ironic, as ‘taking the piss’ (Mortimer, 2000). In her over-the-top and perverse way, what Diane says cannot be trusted because, in a sense, *she was once just like Katrina*. When Diane comments, ‘[Katrina’s] not invincible. She’ll get old too, she’ll sag just like the rest of us’, audiences could conceivably see this as Sweetie lamenting the loss of her ‘transgressive appeal’ precisely because she got old and conformed to normative expectation.

In terms of the politics of such camp testimonials, spectacular flashbacks and the related distancing techniques employed in *Suburban Mayhem*, a relationship is created between spectacle and spectator, where elements of the extraordinary, the realist, the camp, and the ironic are mobilised. Perhaps we accept what we are told and what is shown to us. Perhaps we recognise it is irony and caricature. Maybe there is both ‘gleeful recognition’ and ‘ironic detachment’ (Turnbull, 2008, pp. 27–8). As an uneasy relationship (see Chouinard, 2009) where meaning is contradictory and multiple, the pedagogic mode of address is ambiguous. This may result in an uncomfortable and untenable viewing position. Perhaps, though, these multiple ways of accounting for the young female subject as ‘deliberately pathological’ (Dermody & Jacka, 1988, p. 51) and problematic, as a patriarchal stereotype, as a pin-up girl for Girlpower, as a subversive
figure and as humorous, disgusting and ironic are now familiar practices in coming to account for the young female subject, particularly in the Australian suburban comedy genre. As the material, symbolic, semiotic and discursive effect of specific practices, the figure of the 'bad girl' works pedagogically as both 'constitutive effect and generative circulation' (Castaneda, 2002 in Tyler, 2008, p. 18), a figure of repetition across popular media that brings together making-meaning and ways of being in the world that potentially have lasting effects beyond the cinematic screen.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the Australian film Suburban Mayhem and its young female protagonist, this chapter has considered ideas of subjectivity, gender and pedagogy. As filmic techniques and discursive metaphors, aesthetic styles and genres, ideas of suburbia, feline motifs, V8 cars, sexuality and the mobile phone potentially provoke particular ways of understanding young womanhood as: alluring, threatening, destructive, abject, camp, fun and silly. But in terms of pedagogy, coming to know the young female subject is a complicated affair. This chapter highlighted various possible meanings and ambiguous modes of address available to film-viewers, and this, in conjunction with the heterogeneous nature of film-viewers more generally, illustrates that the issue of pedagogy is not simply an act of transference. Rather, the making of knowledge and the production of the subjectivity of the young female subject with/through popular film means knowing her through complex and ambiguous pedagogical cultural practices of ‘fiction and fantasy, regulation and persuasion’ (Gonick, 2006, p. 3), somewhere between ‘celebration and savage critique’ (Turnbull, 2008, p. 23). Nonetheless, the meanings that are possible, and their related ways of being, are not infinite. Repetition and circulation constrain how it is that we can come to know the social subject. Clearly some meanings and practices are more dominant than others, and the ways of knowing the figure of the white working-class teen mother are still, in many respects, limited and limiting.
Sixty or so guests are milling around a marquee garden party in an affluent suburb of Adelaide. A waiter comes around with a silver platter and offers it to the bat mitzvah’s honouree, Esther, and her new cool friend from the other side of town, who has gate-crashed the party.

Suni: [taking an hors d’oeuvres] What’s this?

Esther: Poo on toast.

Suni: [Suni eats it and nods] Yum! [she grabs two champagnes and gives one to Esther] I’ve never been to one of these. What’s it for?

Esther: My coming-of-age ceremony.

Suni: What does that mean?

Esther: I’m a wo ... woman ... I think.

[a middle-aged well-dressed lady approaches]

Suni: [shaking hands] Hi I’m Suni.

Lady: Hello. [looking Suni up and down] How do you know Esther?

Suni: Our parents are friends.

Lady: Really. I’m sure I don’t know them. What do they do?

Suni: [straight-faced] They deal drugs.

Lady: Pharmacists?

Suni: Sort of.

[the lady looks confused. Esther just smiles.]

Suni: [to the lady] Um what do your parents do?

[the lady looks at Suni with shock and disapproval]
Chapter Eight

‘May You Live Normally Ever After’: Youth-hood, Generation, and Pedagogy
We keep hoping that identities will come our way because the rest of the world is so confusing: everything else is turning, but identities ought to be some stable point of reference which were like that in the past, are now and ever shall be, still points in a turning world (Hall, 1991, p. 22).

**Introduction**

Age is ‘a shorthand’ code for thinking about subjectivity as age-based and developmental (Lesko, 2001, p. 4). At the ‘threshold’ and in ‘transition’ to adulthood, the youth subject (in the form of the ‘teenager’ or the ‘adolescent’) is constituted as naturally emerging and outside social influence (Lesko, 2001, p. 3; James & Prout, 2003a; James & Prout, 2003b). Positioned as a time of disorder, youth is synonymous with incompleteness, a ‘becoming’ personhood, while ‘adulthood’ is equated with full, finished personhood (Lesko, 2001; Blatterer, 2007, 2010). ‘Generation’, then, emerges out of this age-based discourse as if ‘natural’ and obvious. On one hand, ‘generation’ is positioned as cyclic, a product of the ‘life cycle’, yet simultaneously it posits a binary between generations of ‘young’ and ‘old’ (see: Gullette, 1997; 1999; 2001; Grossberg, 1992). In-built into the generations are tensions between members of an age cohort as distinct from another age cohort (McLeod & Thomson, 2009). Having the effect of strengthening age as a category and as a discursive legitimacy or ‘truth’, the youth and the adult are constituted as ‘naturally rivalrous’ (Gullette, 2001, p. 152). In this regime of truth, the young need to rebel against adult authorities, nuclear families are positioned as authentically at war within themselves, and particular subjects on the basis of their age come to be framed as (ab)normal, (in)capable and (un)acceptable. As a cultural and discursive category, age acts as a force field, a ‘difference-dynamic’ (Green, 1995, p. 394), while generation makes it hard for anyone not to ‘know’ their age (Aries, 1973; also see Hartley, 1998; Lumby, 2001).

Thinking about generation, age-based subjectivity and becoming youth as perspectives ‘produced by the directions of our gaze and identifications’
(McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p. 123), in this chapter I continue to consider film as pedagogy through a selection of films about youth. As ‘pedagogues’ (Dyson, 1993; Morris, 2001), these screen youth are contemporary intertextual figures embodying youth-hood as subjects coming-of-age. As sites for ongoing and complex knowledges and ways of being regarding youth-hood, they are key pedagogic texts, contemporary sites for ongoing and complex negotiations about age-based subjectivity. Focusing on constructions of age-based subjectivity, notably through questions of generation, this chapter investigates how pedagogies regarding the youth transitioning to adulthood might work. Particular orientations include ideas of otherness/(ab)normality, empathy and sentimentality, and the use of play, humour, caricature and irony.

Divided into three sections, the chapter begins with an analysis of these above elements through examples from *The Rage in Placid Lake* (2003) and *Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger* (2008). How generation is constructed as a binary and a commonsense battle between ‘young’ and ‘old’ will be explored through these two films in terms of pedagogy. The second section remains focused on otherness, play and sentimentality through the comedies *Crackers* (1998) and *Spider & Rose* (1994). Here the youth subject meets their ‘old-age’ counterpart, further complexifying this question of generation and adulthood as if ideal. In the final section of the chapter, one key scene from the comedy *Blurred* (2002) is analysed. The parodic play of three becoming characters from the film, Pete (Craig Horner), Danny (Kristian Schmid) and Lynette (Veronica Sywak), and their encounter with a middle-aged authoritarian bus driver, is examined. This chapter aims to show how ideas about generation frame filmic pedagogies geared towards youthful subjectivities, particularly those constituted through the ‘coming-of-age’ trope. Further, I argue that generation, as presented by the films under analysis, potentially invites spectators to play along with games of age-based subjectification.
Chapter Eight: Youth- hood, Generation and Pedagogy

Part I — ‘I’m Trying to Play the Game Between the Lines, By the Rules, In the Groove!’: Becoming ‘Youth’

Australian comedies about young people coming-of-age (much like the American teen comedies) see the protagonists obsessed with fitting in, being ‘normal’ and belonging (see: Gottschall, 2010; Speed, 2006; Moran, 2006; Caputo, 1993; Cogan, 1993; Stratton, 1990; Dermody & Jacka, 1988; McFarlane, 1987). Where Australian comedy might differ (although not exclusively) is where, for the protagonists of these films, ‘being different’ is also, significantly, key to their ‘authentic’ self, and thus attainment of their adulthood. The ‘oddball’ who searches for a ‘valid and tenable identity’ (Rayner, 2000, p. 25) and a place where they might be accepted and belong is de rigueur in the Australian cinema. Films such as Malcolm (1986), Proof (1991), Strictly Ballroom (1992), Muriel’s Wedding (1994), The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert (1994), Cosi (1996) and Shine (1996) position their (‘youthful’) protagonists as ‘different’ and working to ‘stand out from the flock’ (Verhoeven, 2000, p. 31). As well as having a protagonist who remains ‘eccentric’, films within the ‘quirky’ convention (Verhoeven, 2000) often have similar narrative structures. Common themes within these films are the questioning of the established order and a general disillusionment with the social reality that maintains that order (Rayner, 2000).

Australian cinema post-1990 is synonymous with (anti)heroes/heroines who are ‘soft’ and ‘passive’ (sensitive, vulnerable, artistic, individual), and who succeed in spite of their ‘strangeness’ and marginalisation. They transcend their ‘oddness’ or ‘disability’ whether it be physical, mental or social (Rayner, 2000; Ferrier, 2001; Gillard, 2002, O’Regan, 1996). The comedic protagonist is stigmatised by their ‘difference’ or their ‘otherness’, but it is important to their talents, their ‘success’ (Ferrier, 2001; Hopwood, 2006), and importantly, key to their adult development. Whereas Emily, Steph and Heidi in the films considered in Chapter Six attempt to overcome their ‘abnormalness’ to become agents of social cohesion, the protagonists in The Rage in Placid Lake (2003) and Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger (2008)
largely stand firm in their difference, and are more or less validated for it in the end. Placid (Ben Lee) and Esther (Danielle Catanzariti), the respective protagonists of these films, energetically resist the way they are produced as different, weird and other by those around them, but they also revel in difference and take steps to ensure they remain so. As noted previously, far from needing to come out of a kind of ‘autistic isolation’ into ordinary ‘normal’ social contact (Burman, 2005, p. 361), the youth subject is often astutely connected to the social world around them. In fact, through their humour and playfulness, they come to understand those around them with great insight and honesty, deliberately mocking the failures and inadequacies of adults and authority figures through games of sarcasm and parody. Firmly positioning themselves against the conventions of the adult world, they become our comic hero(ine) rebels, fighting inauthenticities as classic youthful outsiders.

The rite of passage narrative (the Australian genre, argues Rayner, [2000]) often becomes synonymous with coming-of-age stories, rhetorically making the young protagonist’s adult development a quest: something that must be worked on, strived for and ‘achieved’. Shown comically and warmly succeeding in their quest within these films, the protagonists decisively develop in ‘directions which deviate in some way from the “restriction and entrapment” of the norm’ (Rustin, 2001, p. 133; original emphasis; also see Speed, 1998). Although vulnerable to the ‘scathing and cruel judgements’ of society as portrayed in the film, marginalised characters are portrayed as having the power to change their lives within the comedy genre (Rustin, 2001, p. 133). Importantly, the (adult) society and individuals who mock them are positioned as narrow-minded, hateful and repressive (see: Craven, 2001; also see Ferrier, 2001).

In many respects, *The Rage in Placid Lake* and *Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger* are films within this genre, and they are familiar and deliberate caricatures of this genre in both their narrative and characterisation. The young person coming-of-age through comic misadventure and personal torments is a familiar trope in popular culture, arguably so familiar, in fact,
that the filmmakers of the above films address the audience as if already well-versed in these kind of stories. Highlighting their use of caricature and parody, the film-makers ‘wink’ at the audience as they revisit the trope. For instance, a common technique in coming-of-age film is the othering of the masses and the normalising of the other. Due to their ‘strangeness’, Placid and Esther are both victims of bullying, but so accustomed are we to the bullying subplot, the filmmaker’s play with these scenes and the protagonist’s ‘otherness’ by presenting them in a parodic and often ironic way. Placid, for instance, criticised his bullies for not being more imaginative and exposes their insecurities (‘Look, I understand, school’s over and you’ve suddenly realised you’ve peaked….’). That the ‘norm’ or the masses are positioned as actually more ‘abnormal’, ‘strange’ and ‘abject’ than our quirky hero(ine) is captured most poignantly in the opening scene of He Hey It’s Esther Blueburger, a key pedagogic scene.

Esther, super-smart, ‘braided, spectacled, tinsel-toothed … [and] a good foot shorter than her contemporaries’ (Book, 2000, p. 29), must put up with bullies at her school in the form of teachers, prefects and the bitchy clique, the ‘Ribbons’. High up in what looks like an attic in one of the school buildings, Esther overlooks the scene unfolding below, and she is spatially and ethnically distanced from the upper-class, white girls with blonde hair, living their strange lives (this technique is employed again at the bat mitzvah garden party). Here, Esther observes several rows of girls in school uniform doing cartwheels in straight formations on the green manicured lawn. Like automatons the girls suddenly stop and sit down in groups in close circle formation.
Each of the girls has a lunch box and drink bottle in front of her, identical to the other girls in the circle. Again in unison they open the lid, take a bite of an apple and a sip of drink. Esther is framed looking out the window from her sanctuary, and the lyrics of a bitter-sweet pop song frame the scene:

So why does it always feel like I’m the only one
The lonely one
And everybody else is insane?

What is highlighted is Esther’s difference from ‘the norm’ and these girls’ abject otherness, as representatives of a corrupt and ugly world of conformity. Techniques that work to construct this scene potentially work pedagogically, bringing the audience ‘empathetically’ closer to Esther, ‘engag[ing] audiences in a collaborative role’ (Stephens, 2003, p. 133; also see Hopwood, 2006). The mode of address is pertinent in this regard, positioning the audience as if standing next to Esther, as if on her ‘side’, able to look out down at the girls in the same way Esther does. This inside mode of address arguably brings us closer to Esther, having us ‘empathise’ with her position (see: Dermody & Jacka, 1988, pp. 41–2). However, this collaboration is not straightforward since the strange behaviour of the ‘aliens’ below is a highly stylised and choreographed hyperreal parody. In

49 The Only One composed by Paul Mac, sung by Bertie Blackman.
this sense, the act of drawing attention to the technique employed in the
collection of ‘othering’ and the positioning of the spectator in this
regard highlights the performativity of youth-hood through ‘otherness’ as if
natural and commonsense.

Elsewhere I have noted that the contemporary or post-modern aesthetic
that is deliberately playful or self-conscious (see Landman, 1996; Mallan,
2003; Stephens, 2003) makes for an ambiguous mode of address and
complex set of practices in regard to how pedagogy might work in such
films. Here the film-makers play with their audience, addressing them as if
well-versed in parody and caricature in the context of contemporary films
about youth. This pedagogic ‘wink’ is the film’s strategy to include, entice
and seduce the ideal audience into thinking along with the film rather than
against it. However, where audiences are situated and if they pick up on
the filmmakers’ cues is precisely this issue of film as pedagogy that is
understood not as a simple act of transmission.

Along with the filmmakers’ winking at their audiences, a similar technique
is employed in the films considered here, where the protagonist is
sometimes shown to ‘wink’ too. It is as if the protagonists of these films, as
pedagogic, encourage audiences to question how the youth subject is
being constructed, and they do so by drawing attention to their youth and
otherness as if well aware of this role that they are meant to play in the
narrative. While they do not address the screen directly, they play games
and indulge in fantasies and various absurdities that problematise
genерational binaries and throw their youthful subjectivities into question.

Placid Lake and Esther Blueburger stand at a critical distance from their
worlds, able to astutely see through the façades, insecurities and social
games of adults and their role in ‘the game’. Like other young people who
struggle with self-absorbed parents in recent Australian films (and
American films from as far back as the 1950s [see: Berry, 1999]), Placid is
scathing of his suburban hippy parents whose ineffectual liberal mantras
about calmness and forgiveness are masks for neuroses, selfishness and
‘bad’ parenting (see: Speed, 2006). Winking at the audience, the filmmakers defy expectation by bending the conventional narrative. Placid, for instance, rebels against his parents as all youth are ‘meant’ to do. However, his rebellion is not a conventional one, in that what upsets his suburban hippy parents most is him getting a George Bush-hair-cut, buying a suit and getting a conservative white-collar job. In a playful fantasy sequence, Placid considers the role he is meant to play and who he should be, visiting with ‘Dr S. Mind’ (himsself as a Freud-type character complete with three piece tweed suit, bow tie and round spectacles). Sitting across from Placid as ‘Dr S. Mind’ is Placid the patient in hospital gown, and together they consider the benefits of changing the self to suit the norm:

Dr S. Mind: You can’t change who you are. You have to learn to love yourself.

Placid the patient: Blah, blah, blah. Come on, can’t you do better than that?

Positioned as astutely attuned to these games of subjectification, and society’s expectations of him, Placid works pedagogically: in the act of problematising his becoming youth-hood, he arguably incites us to do the same. As caricature and ‘pedagogue’, he embodies this lesson, and as pedagogic object, he arguably orientates us towards youth-hood in terms of specific themes such as crisis, becoming and self-realisation. Clearly, then, this post-modern play is far from a superficial technique, and it is more than just the film trying to be quirky; it is a pedagogic tool that is performative, making and remaking the youth subject in key ways.
Vital to Esther’s coming-of-age are the adults in her life, notably how she is seen to position herself in relation to them. The point that is stressed is that the adult world is not compatible to the protagonist’s becoming-selves, and that the youth must be at war with the adults around them. For instance, Esther and her twin brother Jacob (Christian Byers) subvert the rules of their restrictive private schools by painstakingly recording the institution’s governing procedures like uniform inspections. They are critical of their encounters with other adults, singing swear words in place of the correct pronunciations during their bar/bat mitzvah lessons with the Jewish elder in the synagogue; silently defying the psychiatrist their mother makes the family see; mocking their parents’ snobby, rich friends (as does Sunni [Keisha Castle-Hughes], who gatecrashes the bar/bat mitzvah party); and all these examples reinforce that youth must resist the ‘acceptable’ and ‘normal’ behaviours of the adult community. As Stephens (2003) argues, in order for them to have some kind of subjective agency, the youth subject has to choose non-conformity and alienation from the adult world as a result. It is parents in particular that represent the corrupt adult world and thus all of the protagonists have problems with their parents. For instance, Esther’s conservative mother ignores Esther’s attempts to communicate her unhappiness and ‘true’ self, instead focusing on Esther’s ‘abnormalness’ (‘Esther! Why must you always slam the door!? Why can’t you just close the door like a normal person!?’). Through techniques like humour, play, sarcasm and irony, pedagogies about generation are repeated and visualised as binaries between ‘young’ versus ‘old’ and ‘rebellion’ versus ‘convention’. Significantly, in these films, these techniques are shown to be the sole domain of ‘youth’:
Morning. Breakfast table. Esther’s mother reads a magazine and drinks coffee. Esther eats breakfast cereal]

Esther: Mum?

Mother: Hmmmm [looks up from magazine]

Esther: Were you cool when you were young?

Mother: [pause] Yes of course.

[pause]

Esther: [leaning in to her mother] Bullshit.

In her smart, fun and making fun kind of way, Esther astutely sees through the lies of the adult world as represented by her mother. As ‘youthful rebels’, Esther and her brother subvert their mother’s authority. It is an unspoken agreement that this is how to deal with their critical, conservative and tightly-wound mother, and the siblings support each other in this unquestioningly. The film shows a special connection between Esther and her brother Jacob, but it is also a connection she instantly has with cool friend Sunni, and so this fun-making and making-fun-of adults is shown to be a kind of rebellion peculiar to the youth subject. Much like the scene where Placid and his best friend Gemma mimic being a married couple, Esther and Jacob ‘play house’ when their parents go out to the opera and they are left alone:

[a long dining room table. The table is set. The lights are dimmed. Classic music plays. Jacob sits at one end of the table as Esther brings in their dinner. Esther puts a plate in front of Jacob and then puts her plate down at her end of the table. Esther sits and they both put their napkins on their laps. They pause, look at each other. Esther picks up her plate full of food and tips it over her head. Her brother copies her. They remain straight-faced.]

Esther: [reaching for the tomato sauce] How was the office love?

Jacob: Most productive ... [Jacob shakes salt and pepper on his head as Esther squeezes sauce on her head] I stabbed Henry Duff through the hand with a compass.

[Jacob slides the salt and pepper shakers across the table to Esther, as Esther slides the tomato sauce across to Jacob]

Esther: How interesting ... [she salt and peppers her head]

Jacob: Yes it was interesting. [He sauces his head]. His splayed fingers made a perfect semi-circle.
In their ‘youthful’ irreverent way, Esther and Jacob parody clichéd gender roles; sexual stereotypes; suburban, middle-class married life; and these ways of being an adult. As they play, they critique adulthood through some light-hearted, yet pretty dark and mean-spirited, humour and ironic repartee. In subtle and obvious ways these games work to undermine adult attempts to control them, irreverently ‘taking the piss’ (Mortimer, 2000) out of all authority figures.

Techniques of play and parody are common to these two films, and these are pedagogic in that they frame the relationship between the (young) individual and the (adult) world and incite us to see the ‘youth’ and the ‘adult’ as binary opposites. On one hand, these unconventional films bend the genre and show us different stories about coming-of-age through quirky techniques. They also exhibit a postmodern sensibility where the film, through its characters, exposes youth-hood as a construct, parodying its way of being as it celebrates and critiques it. On the other hand, though, the films maintain a youth/adult divide as if natural and commonsense. The protagonists’ sense of humour and witty social critique arguably makes them likeable and surely more likeable than the protagonists’ adult-enemies. The choice to conform, then, or a move to be more ‘adult’, is
presented as an unwise and illogical choice, since the adults are so corrupt and ugly. Being like them is shown to result in the loss of self as unique, gifted and authentic. Films about youth — their problems, characteristics and needs — have arguably always been central arenas for talking about the social expectations for the production of adulthood as rational and independent (see: Lesko, 1996). In this selection of films, like in so many others, as much as the young people are shown to ‘resist’ everything about adulthood, they learn lessons, develop towards adulthood and come-of-age, albeit on their own terms. What happens is that the world shifts slightly to make space for the youth transformed into young adult, and importantly, the adults (largely positioned as to blame for their child’s ‘problems’), eventually become allies and friends. For instance, Placid’s parents snap out of their passive neglect and put Placid’s needs first, and Esther’s mother loosens up and accepts Esther as an individual.

In the end, the protagonists learn about their selves, reach a kind of self-awareness and reconcile with their parents. The subjectivity of the protagonist that emerges at the end of the film as ‘individual’, ‘coherent’ and ‘happy’ can possibly be understood as a metaphor for reconciliation with the adult self and the adult world. Following this, the games, sarcasm and fantasies employed here can be understood as socially sanctioned ways of performing the ‘outsider’ (Chouinard, 2009), an outsider that eventually conforms in more or less socially sanctioned ways. While these narratives are arguably created in ways that incite audiences to question the formation of youthful subjectivities and thus, pedagogically (re)make meaning in this regard, they also work to ensure generation as divide.

In this sense, such films seem to ‘express a desire for moral and ideological security’ (Speed, 1998, p. 25), not to mention the subject as stable and coherent.
Placid’s parents Doug (Garry McDonald) and Sylvia (Miranda Richardson)
Rites of passages ... [are] process[es] of personal transformation, sometimes revelatory, sometimes agonising, sometimes fun, sometimes requiring a prolonged period of preparation of endurance more like a campaign than a rite of passage, sometimes a lonely personal experience but sometimes one experienced in the company of another or others (Teather, 1999, p. 14).

... Rose: Twenty-two! You’re only a baby!
Spider: To you maybe. If you were nineteen you’d think I was a spunk.
Rose: What’s a spunk?
Spider: What’s his name ... Julio Iglesias — you’d like him. He’s a spunk to anyone over one-hundred and thirty!
Rose: I see. A bit like Axel. [Spider looks at her surprised]. He’s a guitarist I think. Guns ’n’ Roses. Oh you haven’t heard of them? They’re a rock group!

Part II

(i) ‘Jesus! A Geriatric — That’s All I Need!’: The Young Versus the Old

This section continues to explore how pedagogy might work in regard to how ‘generation’ is constructed as a binary and a commonsense battle between the ‘youth’ and the ‘adult’. In the film comedies Crackers (1998) and Spider & Rose (1994), the youth subject and the old-age subject are quite randomly (yet conventionally) thrown together as the ‘odd couple’, representative people of each generation, and as different from each other as is possible (O’Regan, 1996). In many respects, the focus on the old subject in coming-of-age stories is relatively rare in the Australian cinema, although the ‘odd couple’ trope is not uncommon. Through sentimentality, empathy, parody and critique, the old person comes to work pedagogically on several levels whereby the age-based positions of young and old are repeated and left (un)challenged in several ways. Initially, Albert (Warren Mitchell) and Rose (Ruth Cracknell) as the old person in the respective films are positioned as intrinsically different from the youth protagonist in all respects, and thus the young subject and the old subject clash head-to-head. Subsequently, however, Albert and Rose are shown to be by no means ‘normal’ adults and as outsiders they join the young protagonist in
rebellious adventure that defies the conventions of the adult world. Through elements of camp, irony, anger, grief, fear, fun and sentimentality, the young protagonist and their old friend learn from each other and learn about their commonalities, notably, their exclusion from ‘adulthood’. As pedagogical texts, the old person embodies ‘valuable’ lessons about life, enabling the young person to mature into adulthood. However, the encounter with the young person also enables the ‘development’ of the old person too, and so these two disparate subjects learn ‘valuable’ lessons from each other. Constituted as key to learning ‘key’ lessons about the world and their place within it, this otherness, heroism and rebelliousness mark these coming-to and passing-of age-based subjectivities, which incite learning about age-based subjecthood, and also what is at stake in forming or not forming the self as a subject in particular ways. Defying caricatures while embodying them, these age-based subjects potentially work as pedagogical objects orientating us towards a re-assessment of adulthood as central, normative, coherent and fully-fledged.

From the beginning of *Spider & Rose*, clear divisions are set in place between the ‘young’ and the ‘old’ protagonists. Positioned as reckless, superficial and ‘only interested in getting pissed and getting laid’, 22-year old paramedic, Spider (Simon Bossell), needs to ‘grow up’ according to his boss. Recognised as uncommitted and immature, his colleagues tell him on his last day, ‘We’re going to miss you Spider — like you would miss a malignant carcinoma!’ The real reason Spider is quitting is because he can’t deal with the carnage of his job and its emotional toll. As a parting ‘gift’, Spider is given one last assignment: taxiing a ‘geriatric’ from Sydney to Coonabarabran in his ambulance.

Rose is fearful about her drive to Coonabarabran for her 70th birthday because, since her husband died in a car crash only a year ago, she is anxious about being in a car and convinced she will die in a spectacular road accident. A young, spritely nurse who pushes Rose down a hospital corridor where Rose has been recovering from angina patronises her patient, commenting on her age in an uncaring way (‘Wow, seventy! That’s
pretty old!). The frail and scared Rose is still sharp as a tack and responds by asking the nurse how old she is with dry distain that goes unrecognised (‘Twenty. Wow that’s young’). The nurse pushes Rose out the door to the waiting ambulance. Loud rock music plays and we see two legs out the driver-side window, twitching to the beat of the music. Rose grips her wheel-chair and gestures for the nurse to stop:

Spider: [sitting up] Hi! I’m Brad. I’m your chauffeur.
[camera zooms in fast to a close-up of Rose’s face in horror]
Rose: I am not going in that ambulance!
Nurse: Don’t be a silly old sausage! [the nurse pushes her over to the ambulance]

Standing eye-to-eye, locked in a battle of wills, a heated exchange between the ‘young’ subject and the ‘old’ subject ensues when Rose refuses to lie in the back of the ambulance:

[Spider opens the back door of the ambulance and pulls out a stretcher. Rose and Spider stand eye-to-eye]
Spider: [patting the stretcher] Come on Gran, hop on!
Rose: Alright, but I sit in the front.
Spider: Sorry Gran, you’ll do as you’re told! Them’s the rules!
Rose: Them’s your rules! I am not going to spend the next four hours lying in the back like a cadaver in a hearse, it’s undignified.

Spider: Actually it’s six.

Rose: What?

Spider: Don’t say what, it’s rude. I said it’s six hours. You’ll have the pleasure of my company for six hours, now hop on before I get ugly!

Rose: Before you get ugly!? Alright but I should warn you — I get motion sickness. You put me in there [points to the back with her walking stick] and I’ll vomit everywhere. And I had eggs for breakfast. Scrambled eggs.

[Pause. They stare at each other.]

Spider: We’ll put her in the front. [They stare at each other. Spider turns to leave. Rose smiles.]

Dismissing her, calling her ‘Gran’ and mocking her manners, all while ‘youthfully’ chewing gum, Spider attempts to hold on to the authority his position supposedly gives him. But not one for backing down, and particularly not to this young ‘hooligan’, Rose demands to sit up the front. She doesn’t ask, or beg, she tells him. She is not dead yet. When that doesn’t work, however, she feigns sickness, ‘old-age’ and frailty, blackmailing him with promises of eggy vomit. Winning the battle, Rose smiles, using whatever ‘old’ trick she has up her sleeve. Far from the
maternal and kind grandmother ideal (Walz, 2002), Rose is feisty, argumentative and manipulative.

The young and the old-age subjects sit in the ambulance. Playful music accompanies their serious faces. A sequence of well-rehearsed shots frame the youth as icon: a close-up of Spider’s hands putting on black, leather, fingerless gloves; a close-up of Spider’s eyes, he puts on sunglasses; and a close-up of Spider’s lips saying ‘Buckle Up Gran!’ Spider kisses a skeleton token hanging around his rear-view mirror. Rose looks worried. He waves to the nurse on the curb out the window, his youthfully ‘cool’ face framed in the side-mirror and he takes off, tyres screeching. His driving is a metaphor for his masculine youth — fast and reckless. As if the gloves, sunnies, chewing gum and attitude weren’t enough, the filmmakers stress the two protagonists’ differences further by emphasising their feelings of revulsion for each other (‘Let’s just get our roles straight ok. I’m the driver, you’re the patient — I drive, you dribble’). Through a range of techniques, then, including humour, fast-paced dialogue, music, framing and narrative, Spider and Rose pedagogically demonstrate and embody generation as difference and conflict. As they each playfully and astutely mock each other (‘You’re awfully young to be driving an ambulance ... You haven’t begun to shave yet!’), they revisit and reinscribe the rules of being ‘old’ and/as compared to being ‘young’. Misunderstanding and hostility become the modus operandi in showing how the youth and the old-age subject interact, marking such a relationship through comedy and drama. This initial reaction between Rose and Spider is key to the developing story-line and also key to the production of knowledges about subjectivities undergoing transformation.

(ii) ‘I Look at You and Believe in Euthanasia!’: The Young and Old as Outsiders

Joey (Daniel Kellie) in Crackers is also chronically misunderstood by all the adults in his life — his mother, her boyfriend, his grandparents and his Aunty, finding more empathy with his grandfather’s Blue Heeler, Bomber. Expelled from another school for jumping off the roof, Joey’s mother (who
swears she is going ‘bald and crazy’ and at her wits end with Joey’s destructive behaviour) decides to take him to his grandparents’ place for the Christmas holidays — much to Joey’s dread.

The adults in Joey’s life have no idea how to respond to Joey’s distress after the unexpected death of his father, the catalyst for his ‘strange’ behaviour. All ‘crackers’ in their own way (Grandad Jack [Terry Gill] and his ocker brutishness; Grandma Vi’s [Maggie King] dottiness; Aunty Dot [Valerie Bader] as lush shrew; Joey’s mother’s [Susan Lyons] manic energy and her boyfriend Bruno’s [Peter Rowsthorn] uselessness), they provide more than enough torment for Joey, who is locked in a constant generational battle with them all:

Joey’s Grandad Jack: Is he still seeing that bloody quack?
Joey’s mum: [sighs] Yes, yes he is.
Jack: There’s the problem. I thought you were finished with all that bullshit.
Joey’s Grandmother: Maybe it’s all for the best?
Jack: Rubbish ... there’s nothing a stiff kick up the arse wouldn’t solve! [he kicks Joey].
Joey: Ow!
The film’s promotional poster

Joey is certainly ‘out there’ on his own. During a tense Christmas lunch, Joey’s estranged great-grandfather Albert (Warren Mitchell) arrives unexpectedly on the doorstep. Willing to do anything to escape from the disparaging dinner conversation, Joey jumps up to answer the doorbell. As soon as he opens the door, bags start flying in his direction and a small man with a large trench coat, bright beanie and a white beard stands grinning manically. The first words he says, in a broad Scottish accent (to further stress his ‘difference’?) are ‘Give a tug, Jimmy’, and as Joey pulls on his finger he farts loudly, cackles and pushes past him into the house.
Given Albert’s chequered past of criminal activity, his philandering and child abandonment (of his son, Joey’s grandfather Jack), Albert is almost run off the property by Jack, who goes for his shotgun. Placated by Jack’s wife Vi (‘He’s your father and it’s Christmas!’), Albert is allowed to stay, but since there is no room for them all, he is banished out to the back shed, with Joey as his companion.

In terms of pedagogies regarding generation, Joey and Albert, like Spider and Rose, are banished from the mainstream adult world because of their ‘difference’: because one is ‘too young’ and the other ‘too old’, they are rendered ‘outsiders’. Alone in the shed, Joey checks out strange Albert’s possessions: an old suitcase full of old black and white photos, mementos, tokens and a faded passport, all arguably pedagogic metaphors of a life well-lived. Albert suddenly enters, stares wildly at Joey and limps forward on his walking-stick. Joey, intimidated and afraid, steps backwards, falls on his bed and almost sits on Albert’s pet rooster. ‘You look out for that wee bird. Took a man’s eye out he did — and ate it!!’, Albert threatens as he rolls up his pants leg and pops off his artificial limb, freaking Joey out. Leaning towards Joey as if he is going to grab him, he instead farts loudly and sing-songs ‘Where’er yea be — let your wind go free!’, and promptly listens to the dog races on his transistor radio. Albert plays ‘crazy old man’
to camp perfection, and is a well-recognised caricature that encourages key learning about masculine ageing. Like the youth subject, the old-age subject is commonly divorced from the adult norm as their old age marks them as faulty, incapable and dependent. In this sense, the old subject, even though they are recognised by others as being ‘adult’, is constituted as the same as the youth protagonist, symbolically embodying a kind of deviance. Thus, the youth subject and the old-age subject are positioned as different together, ‘difference’ here being predicated on age and the ‘norm’ being adulthood as if fully-fledged and rational.

Spider and Rose have a rather wild adventure out on the open road, including singing, dancing, getting drunk, break-and-entering, stealing, hitch-hiking and a spectacular crash in the ambulance. Joey and Albert get up to all sorts of mischief, too, including stealing the family silver, hot-wiring Jack’s car, visiting a pawn shop to sell the silver to bet on the dog races and starting a bar-room brawl with a bunch of crazed neo-Nazis. Hockey and James (1995) argue that becoming adult means leaving behind ‘childish’ activities like, for instance, running, jumping, twirling, silliness and games. When adults do such things outside of specified contexts, they are condemned as ‘childish’ if not insane. In terms of old-age being a ‘second childhood’, the old-age subject is given licence to be mischievous, eccentric and ‘childish’ (Featherstone & Wernick, 1995; Hockey & James, 1995). Old-age is thus commonly associated with childhood, in that the apparent ‘limitations’ of childhood are ‘mapped on to a parallel series of “inadequacies” believed to characterise old-age’ (Hockey & James, p. 137; original emphasis). On the one hand, in terms of these films as pedagogy, the behaviour of the ‘crazy old man’ defies convention. On the other hand, his presence and constitution maintains social distances between the worlds of childhood and adulthood, and old-age and adulthood, so that old and young are linked together in ways that leave the hegemony of adulthood unchallenged (Hockey & James, 1995; also see Lesko, 1996). Embodiments of young and old as anti-adult, Joey and Albert and Spider and Rose are pedagogic devices to (re)legitimate this age-based discourse
and to illustrate how forming the self as a subject along these lines might take place.

Tied to ideas of ‘lack’ and ‘need’, old age is traditionally synonymous with fears of failure, sickness and death (see: Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Constituting older people as ‘past it’ both in production and reproduction (Hugman, 1999), biological ageing and loss of bodily control have long been positioned as eventual decline, decay and decrepitude in Western societies, all of which equals the loss of personal attributes (Hugman, 1999) or capacities (Featherstone, 1995), which would count the person as a ‘competent adult’ (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1989, p. 148). At best laughable, at worst disgusting, bodily betrayals of old-age can therefore result in stigmatising processes. However, over the last few decades, old-age has become increasingly positioned as ‘aspirational’, a ‘golden’ time of life. Embodied by stars and celebrities who are shown to adopt a ‘positive attitude’ towards ‘the ageing process’, old-age is equated with the need to be ‘forever youthful’ in work, body and general demeanour (Featherstone, 1995, p. 228; also see Gilleard & Higgs, 2000; Blatterer, 2010). In this climate, to ‘age well’ means to be ever youthful, including being healthy, sexually active, engaged, productive and self-reliant. Here then, old-age is about avoiding ageing for as long as possible. Ideal contemporary old-age identities, therefore, are anti-ageing identities who conduct age-resisting practices (Blakie, 1999; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000).

As films that are products of their times, Crackers and Spider & Rose can be said to be examples that refer to these social changes and transforming notions of the meaning of ageing. Albert embraces a fervent anti-ageist and anti-dependent way of being, to the point of asserting a ‘childish’ and eccentric kind of frenetic ‘madness’. He refuses to behave ‘appropriately’ for his age or even slow down when his heart shows signs of failing, and he remains ‘youthful’ to the end of the film and, indeed, right until he passes away on a sea adventure with Joey, tipsy and laughing at his own joke. By contrast, Rose learns to age ‘disgracefully’, kicking up her heels and refusing to be positioned as old and weak any longer. Throughout the film,
everyone is trying to make Rose old, and Rose herself feels old in the beginning, so much so that she becomes expert in ‘being old’. But through her journey with Spider (and her encounter with love-interest Jack [Max Cullen]), she learns to be more ‘youthful’ and independent, where illnesses like angina and arthritis are only states of mind. At first she does this head-to-head with her young friend, and later, hand-in-hand.

(iii) ‘She Could Have a Doozey At Any Time!’: Friendship and Intergeneration Learning

The young and the old subject are constituted as reckless, incapable and incomplete by the adults around them. However, gradually they demonstrate their capabilities and expose the corruption of the abject adult world. In comparison to the selfish, ugly and hateful adults in the films, our heroes/heroines are ‘good’, honest and intelligent. As subjects positioned as downtrodden, exploited and excluded, they unite together in a kind of rebellion, resisting the way they are policed by the adults in their lives on the basis of their age. Again as per the odd couple trope, the young subject and the old subject are as different from each other as possible and at first relate to each other only through confusion and conflict. But as is expected of the genre, Joey and Albert, just like Spider and Rose, begin to learn from each other. Alone together and united in a kind of deep-seated intergenerational alienation from the adult world, the odd couple eventually come to respect one another and become friends. Their coming-of-age and passing-of-ages are caricatured, embodied in the metaphorical journeys they take and the ‘transitions’ they make. For Rose and Spider, it is the actual journey, a road trip, during which several key incidents occur that bring Rose and Spider together. Rayner (2000, p. 149) notes that the road movie is a metaphor for life travelled where it can offer ‘freedom and mobility’. What occurs in Spider & Rose is healing — Rose over the death of her husband and Spider’s trauma due to his ambulance work. A particularly significant moment occurs when, after the ambulance hits a kangaroo, Rose gives Spider her walking-stick to help him with his fractured leg, and she takes the wheel. Putting on Spider’s sunglass and chewing his gum,
driving fast now becomes the domain of the ‘old woman’, newly capable and energetic.

In the previous chapter I considered the importance of the female subject as driver, and certainly the reversal of roles between Rose and Spider is not just incidental. This transformation blurs ideas of ‘old’ and ‘young’, ‘competent’ and ‘incompetent’, and is key to the protagonists’ intersubjective learning, which depends on their individual subjective ‘developments’. While Rose becomes more independent, strong and ‘youthful’, Spider slows down and ‘matures’, showing genuine care for someone other than himself. Rose teaches Spider how to be less selfish, more responsible and more mature, and as a result he finds a new appreciation for his estranged mother, whom he seeks to reconnect with. Again, intersubjectivity (particularly with parents and family) is shown to be the ideal. Given a new enthusiasm for life and living after her journey with Spider, Rose gains the ability to assert her new-found self and live life according to the way she wants to. She rejects her son’s assessment of her as old, ‘pig-headed’ and needing a nursing home, and never again picks up the walking stick. Faking a heart-attack at her 70th birthday celebrations as a way to escape the masses assembled for the celebrations — the ultimate
‘subversive’ play — Spider quickly rushes her away in the back of a station wagon. Pulling over some distance up the road, Rose hops out of the car and says goodbye to Spider, driving off into the sunset. Music blares from the car stereo, and Rose sports a smile from ear to ear, not only ‘free’ of ‘old-age’ but finally living life on her own terms, completely independent and fearless.

McCallum (1998, p. 41) notes that popular media frequently shows the importance of intersubjective relationships, thus parallelling what might otherwise be thought of as ‘quite disparate cultural groups’ coming together. Here, for instance, the ‘old lady’ and the 20-something young ‘spunk’ bridge their differences, just like the ‘mad’ great-grandfather from Scotland and the ‘disturbed’ adolescent boy. For Joey and Albert, their ‘journey’, like Rose and Spider’s, is through the transition from ‘abjection’ to ‘affection’ for each other. Albert teaches Joey how to box and defend himself from bullies, his growing competency at this echoing his ‘developmental’ coming-of-age journey. Additionally, Albert and Joey (and later Bruno) work together to restore an old sailing boat as a Christmas present for Jack that, sentimentally, Albert used to race with Jack when he was a boy. Making the boat seaworthy (like making the old productive again) heals the intergenerational relationships between the men in the family: Joey with Bruno, Albert with Jack and Albert with Joey.
Like his suitcase full of stories and lessons to be learned, the sailing boat is a container for important lessons to occur. Sentimental lessons about life and death help Joey come to terms with his father’s death and consequently, at the end of the film, Albert’s:

Joey: Aren’t you afraid?
Albert: Of what?
Joey: Dying. I mean, well, when you’re dead and then there’s nothing — just black.
Albert: How do you know? Have you seen it?
Joey: Nope.
Albert: See that ship over there?
Joey: Yeah.
Albert: Well when that sails over the horizon how do you know it’s still there?
Joey: Just is.
Albert: Can you see it?
Joey: No.
Albert: But you believe it’s there?
Joey: Yeah of course.
Albert: Well it’s the same with [points to heaven]
Joey: What do you reckon it’s like?
Albert: Oh I know. It’s a big old noisy pub in Glasgow with all my mates and free grog. And no bloody karaoke!
Rayner (2000) notes that the opinions and experiences of one generation throw the assumptions and lifestyle of the other generation into perspective. In *Crackers*, Albert is the link to the past, an ‘old person’ who symbolically gives a sense of continuity, history, tradition, life and death (see: Hugman, 1999). But Albert is also key to the future, particularly Joey’s future. Because of his relationship with Albert, Joey comes out of his alienated childhood, begins to deal with the grief and trauma of his father’s death and finally stands up for himself against bullies — all of which are positioned as important milestones on the way to manhood. The presence of an old man implies lessons about subjectivity in terms of transition, progress, time passing and a developing maturity (Biber, 1999a), and in this sense, the presence of the old man is a pedagogic device for the protagonist and arguably the audience. Just as Spider and Rose and Albert and Joey are important for each other’s learning and ‘development’, the young subject and the old subject provoke learning about what might be at stake in terms of embodying or not embodying a particular age-based subjectivity. While they are risky and at risk subjects as outsiders to the normative adult position, ultimately the old and the young subjects work together to enable more conventional coming-of- and passing-of-ages in each other, the ‘madness’ of their particular age merely temporary.

Techniques that work to construct these scenes potentially work pedagogically, engaging the audience through ‘empathy’ and ‘sentimentality’. As they learn about whom they are and their place in the world, audiences accompany them as companions, seeing, experiencing and feeling from their point of view.
Like the sentimental feel good finale of *Spider & Rose*, the final scene of *Crackers* shows Christmas the following year. Joey plays Albert’s hurdy-gurdy at the church’s nativity play and smiles proudly while Albert’s rooster sits near him. In the audience are his family, all smiling and happy, and his mother holds her and Bruno’s baby. Slapstick and mayhem ensue when the rooster takes flight and Joey tries to grab him, knocking over sets, family members and fellow performers. Rather than looking at Joey accusingly as they have done in the past — they all laugh. Joey is no longer an outsider. A ghostly Albert, complete with angel wings, looks over the scene from the roof, free of illness, making gags and cackling as usual. It is a happy and sentimental ending, pedagogically working to potentially show a future of hope, happiness, love, growing up and growing wiser, a place where the past is reconciled and the ‘cycle of life’ continues.

In *Spider & Rose* and *Crackers*, pedagogy potentially occurs on several different levels. The old subject and the young subject come to represent lessons that are learned from each other, and are thus vital to their respective ‘transitions’. Through various elements of play, parody, caricature and sentimentality the old person and youth embody the meanings of ‘generation’, inciting audiences towards key knowledges in regard to these particular age-based subjectivities. These ‘abnormal’ age-
based subjects conventionally work as pedagogical objects orientating us to adulthood as the centre and as desirable. It is significant, given that mainstream adulthood is positioned as abject and ugly, that our protagonists ultimately still embrace this subjectivity and transform into ‘socially-sanctioned’ subjects. Another element in the pedagogies of generation is the specific way ‘the adults’ are constituted in this regard and how they specifically work in the construction and maintenance of the norm in the pedagogies of generation. It is to this point I turn to now.

Part III

(i) ‘I Won’t Tell You Again — Switch It Off!’: The Performativity of Age-Based Subjectivity

Travelling to Queensland’s Surfers Paradise by bus to celebrate their graduation from high school, Pete, Danny and Lynette in the film *Blurred* are Schoolies in motion through a ‘space of transition’ (Grossberg, 1992), becoming different (maybe adult) subjects. They sit up the back of the bus, having fun, talking and gesturing in rapid exchange about who they are and who they are going to be. The scene begins with Pete playfully hailing his friends, asking if what they are currently doing and have always done (sitting at the back of the bus, being loud, having fun) is still acceptable as Schoolies, or as subjects on the way to something post-youth, potentially ‘adulthood’: ‘Oi, is it still cool to sit at the back of the bus?’ Danny queries Pete’s thinking through a wide smile, which in turn begins his own hypothesising about how they should be conducting themselves: ‘What, d’ya think we’re not meant to sit at the back?’ Lynette has already thought about this and begins teaching the boys her rationale: ‘I think when we start uni we should stop sitting at the back of the bus.’ It is interesting that the Schoolies never verbalise exactly where the journey will take them or who it will make them, or indeed, when this need to transform will end. Nonetheless, there is, however, something about a predestined path that echoes through Lynette’s playful and rapid philosophising. Pete begins to challenge this, but is quickly put in his place by the other two Schoolies:
Pete: Well ok, what if I don’t go to uni?

Lynette: Do you want to sit at the back of the bus all your life? ... That’s your funeral.

Danny: [makes an ‘L’ sign on his forehead with his thumb and forefinger] Loser!

This playful conversation seems like the first time they have talked about this important issue, but at the same time it seems well-rehearsed:

Lynette: When I start uni I’m not sitting at the back anymore. I’ll sit somewhere in the middle being annoyed by the kids up the back. Then when I’m old I’ll sit at the front of the bus remembering the times when I was in the middle which is now occupied by the kids who used to be in the back who are going to uni ... That’s why this week is important. Can’t you see? It’s our journey from the back seat to the middle of the bus.

Pete: Oh my God!

Playfully and nostalgically fantasising about the way things will be, Lynette highlights the relational, intersubjective and intergenerational aspect to being social subjects, that is, the formation of the self in relation to others, predicated largely on ‘age’: the loud kids up the back will annoy the uni students in the middle, who are in the middle because they can no longer sit up the back, expected to be beyond that kind of silly subjectivity; the old people up the front — too old and too averse to noise to shuffle down the back of the bus — see the uni students in the middle and think of them as ‘just kids’, not yet fully-fledged adults; and all of them annoyed by the kids up the back about to make the transition from the back to the middle of the bus. And so the age-based life-cycle continues, as if natural and inevitable.
The Schoolies of *Blurred* embody key lessons that potentially orientate audiences to questions of age-based subjectivity. As youth in a state of ‘becoming’, they are literal and metaphorical students and novices, learning about life and socially sanctioned ways of being. As they learn about who to be and how to conduct themselves on the way, they arguably incite audiences to learn how it can and should be done. As ‘learners’ they embody this knowledge while learning this knowledge from each other; thus, they work pedagogically by framing the way the film’s spectators can come to ‘youth-hood’. Their play and reflexive games are parodic and performative. In the context of the narrative, Pete, Danny and Lynette, like Placid and Esther, are smart and switched on to social convention to the point where they can criticise it with sarcastic insight.

On another level, though, they stand outside their particular on-screen world, winking at us as if aware that the youth-hood they are playing with and embodying is a construct. Thus they simultaneously problematise and critique this subjectivity as if positioned outside of its discursive reach. The ironic mode of address destabilises youth subjecthood, indicating that the formation of youth-hood is a game we (un)wittingly participate in, inasmuch as it reaffirms the normative developmental path. The (re)production of age-based subjecthood by Pete, Danny and Lynette reworks a carefully regulated ‘corporeal style’ (Robinson & Davies, 2008).
which constitutes the ‘effect [in] the very subject it appears to express’ (Butler, 1993, p. 1). In this sense, then, the (self)governing and reiterative practices of Pete, Danny and Lynette make them performative texts: they work through this constituted subject position called ‘youth’ in the very act of embodying it. While it is fun, parodic and a game, it is also a mechanism of governmentality, constraining the ways subjects can be known on the basis of ‘age’.

(ii) The Bus Driver

While the youths are conducting games of self-government, the bus driver, a middle-aged man, observes them with a fixed gaze in the rear-view mirror and he looks, disapprovingly, at the spectacle on the back seat — the loud music, the loud discussion, the animatedness, that youthful energy, their cliquey hopefulness, excitement and silliness — that representation of youth. With a few judgemental looks and some well-chosen disciplinary words, the driver of the bus tells our Schoolies that their behaviour is unacceptable. His choice of words reveals how they are different from the other passengers on the bus, and how their difference, their unpredictability, their ‘youth’, is a potential threat:

Bus driver: For the comfort and safety of the other passengers on this coach, can we have the radio in the back seat switched off please?

56 The adult framed as he surveys the young
Two key frames are repeated here to tell this familiar story of ‘youth’ versus ‘adult’. The first shot is seemingly a still shot of the stern bus driver framed as a reflection in the rear-view mirror. The second shot is the Schoolies on the back seat, amidst the colour, noise and movement. This technique underscores the sense that the bus driver, from his privileged ‘panopticon’ view (Foucault, 1975), always monitors the Schoolies, and he keeps them in check with his powerful gaze. The composition of the shot of the bus driver framed in the rear-view mirror enables the film audience to see what the bus driver sees, as well as seeing him watching the subjects on the back seat. Simultaneously, the audience is positioned from the bus driver’s point of view, participating in governing the Schoolies, while also being located outside of it as mere observers. What is stressed visually is that the bus driver is up the front, and the Schoolies are way down the back, highlighting their difference and playing on this reconstruction of the ‘war’ between ‘youth’ and ‘adult’.

The bus driver is in uniform, accentuating his authority and again contrasting with the individualism and colourfulness of the Schoolies. The uniform and sunglasses, along with his greyness and sternness, suggest something other than, older than and different from the vibrant, fun, youthful Schoolies. He looks like a policeman and is, by virtue of his adulthood, an authority that polices these youths. This representation, a caricature of adulthood as authoritarian, enables the youth to fulfil their role as age-based rebels. That they are under constant surveillance by the guard in the panopticon-like mirror ensures that they will regulate themselves in the games of self-government (see Foucault, 1975). But more than this, the figure representing adult authority is visible to the Schoolies and they survey him as he is trapped behind his steering wheel, and thus — notionally — in his own ‘adulthood’ and in the role he must play\textsuperscript{50}.

\textsuperscript{50} Acknowledgement must go to Harry Blatterer for this keen observation.
As such, the bus driver is also the Schoolies’ plaything, and in typical over-the-top, (un)serious fashion, Danny, Lynette and Pete respond to the bus driver’s instructions with mocking criticism. Danny demonstrates his (faux) outrage by standing up from the back seat as if he is going to march down the aisle to the front of the bus to confront the bus driver. This scene feels well-rehearsed and Danny knows the role well, precisely because it is a familiar scene being replayed. Lynette becomes the responsible adult, if only for a brief moment, and puts the youth back in his place (‘Hey what are you doing, sit down young man!’) and they all continue to laugh and mess about. An unspoken agreement between them is that Lynette is joking, parodying ‘the adult’ role to a kind of camp perfection. Pete, Lynette and Danny do not turn off the music or quieten down, instead adhering to the rules of Schoolie conduct, which is precisely about a kind of noisiness and public celebration. The bus driver, getting more agitated by the minute, addresses the Schoolies in his loud speaker again, ‘I won’t tell you again! You hoons turn that music off or you walk!’ A bearded, middle-aged passenger smiles, as if on the side of the bus driver. The ‘hoons’ on the back seat respond to the bus driver as they have done before, with playful outrage but without adjusting their behaviour:

Danny: He did it again!
Lynette: Do I look like a hoon to you!?
Danny: [to Pete] She does have a hoon hair cut.
Pete: [sitting up smiling] Yes, yeah!
Lynette: What hoon hair?

And they continue the game about ‘who they are’ if they aren’t ‘hoons’, in a playful, anxious and (non)serious way. When they turn the music up and cheer at Lynette dancing in the aisle, the bus driver breaks suddenly. He turns the ignition off, stands and slowly walks down the aisle, like a sheriff in a Western. He is framed from below as if he towers over the passengers in the back seat like a giant. They are in ‘big trouble’, anticipating their punishment as the bus driver takes each step. No-one makes a noise except a kind of pretend nonchalant whistling from Pete.
As noted, this scene of the ‘rebel youth’ feels well-rehearsed, and crucial to this ‘performance’ is the presence of the disciplinary adult authority who seeks to regulate the ‘bad’ youth subject. The bus driver takes off his sunglasses with a gesture full of gravitas, but also with much flamboyance:

Bus driver: I warned you hoons already. This is the last time I’m going to tell you.

Danny: [eating Twisties and smiling] We’re not hoons, we’re nerds [does the Vulcan peace sign]

[Lynette and Pete snigger softly]

Bus driver: [leaning in to Danny so that he is inches away from his face] Listen smart-arse. You want me to kick you off right now?

In the DVD extras, the commentary between the writer, director and producer of the film note that the character of the bus driver is a ‘Great Little Nazi’, and they note that when this actor came to auditions (‘... short and with that moustache’), they just had to have him in that role. That shortness in stature and a moustache signify and embody what the filmmakers were attempting to signify in terms of authority, in terms of hardness and in terms of ‘adulthood’ is a question of how pedagogy works. How film-viewers pick up on these symbols and techniques as clues to this anti-youth character, and thus, pedagogies of age-based subjecthood, is of significance. For instance, how a large, bushy, greying moustache embodies
a kind of masculine and aged subjectivity may be easily, and even unconsciously, accepted by audiences. Perhaps this moustache, in combination with other signs, denotes a kind of uptight, outdated or old-fashioned subject position. Arguably, the filmmakers were having fun here, reveling in the familiarity of this scene, as played out and played over in films before. Here, then, the bus driver’s moustache signifies a kind of comical and even camp subjectivity, one which allows audiences to laugh at and enjoy the scene, which is not to argue that important work on ‘adult’/‘youth’ subjectification is not occurring here.

### Conclusion

I want to argue that an analysis of the ‘youth’ subject should carefully consider the way ‘adulthood’ is constituted, and in particular, how ‘the youth’ and ‘the adult’ are constituted in relation to each other in terms of pedagogies about generation. Like the adults in *The Rage in Placid Lake, Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger, Crackers* and *Spider & Rose*, this adult in *Blurred* continues to work with the youths to maintain generation as divide. But unlike the adults in the above selection of films, the representation of adulthood in *Blurred*, and particularly the bus driver’s campness in the parodic adult versus youth trope, is about ‘adulthood’ itself as performative. From this selection of films, *Blurred* is unique in that both the ‘youth’ and the ‘adult’ are shown to be reflexively and parodically rehearsing the particular age-based subjectivity they are meant to embody. *Blurred* provides a carefully regulated set of characterisations and practices that constitute the age-based subject it ‘performs’ in the act of performing it. As performative and pedagogic text, it demonstrates some of the ‘costs and benefits’ that being a particular subject entails (Rose, 1996, p. 17). Of significance beyond merely ‘youth’ and ‘adult’ subjectivities, films like these enable and constrain the ways all subjects can be known, and thus, in this sense, the film incites us to learn how to ‘do’ subjecthood through well-rehearsed discursive regimes including but not limited to ‘age’. More than just ‘engag[ing] audiences in a collaborative role’ (Stephens, 2003, p. 133), in terms of the coming-of-age journeys’ of the young protagonist,
these films potentially engage us in a collaborative role in the pedagogic games that are subjectification.

As argued here, film potentially works as pedagogy to form subjects, but it also works as a pedagogy that provokes key lessons about how forming the self as a subject in particular ways might take place, and what might be at stake in forming or not forming the self in these ways. Concluding the study, the following and final chapter reflects on the significance of this study and the implications for film conceived as a pedagogy inextricably bound to the processes of subjectification.
Chapter Nine

Conclusions and (Re)Visions
The formal reading of a text has to be as open and multilayered as possible, identifying preferred positions or frameworks certainly, but also alternative readings and subordinate frameworks, even if these can only be discerned as fragments, or as contradictions in the dominant form (Johnson, 1986/1987, p. 74).

**Introduction**

On the 3rd August 2009, American filmmaker Quentin Tarantino was interviewed by James Tobin from the Australian TV morning show *Sunrise* about his soon-to-be-released film, *Inglorious Basterds*:

Tobin: Do you ever consider ‘I want the audience to feel this’? Or are you just going out there to make what’s fun for you?

Tarantino: Well it’s a combination of both. I’m making a movie that I want to see and betting there are a whole lot of people out there like me, but no, I’m a conductor of the audience, you know, when I want them to go ‘ooh’, I want them to go ‘ooh’, and when I want them to jump in their seats, I want them to jump in their seats. When I want them to lean forward because they are more intrigued by something, I want them to do that. I want to get them to laugh ... laugh, laugh, laugh, (clicks fingers) stop laughing, stop laughing, stop laughing, laugh.

It was another one of those comments that make you sit bolt upright on the couch. The passing comment seemed to capture for me a moment that crystallised what I was trying to theorise in my research. Tarantino’s statement highlighted the space between film(maker) and film viewer where meaning is made and remade, but rather than as a complex, contextual and relational space, the filmmaker imagined this as a simple act of transmission: when he wants his audience to ‘go “ooh”’, jump up in shock, to lean forward, to laugh or stop laughing — they do. I felt as if needing to defend film-viewers everywhere; they were/we were not mindless dupes or passive masses being ‘conducted’ and manipulated as to how to ‘act, speak, think, feel, desire and behave’ (Giroux, 2002a, p. 3) by the film(maker) as if all-powerful. Watching the clip of the interview on YouTube more closely and several times over, however, I was alerted to how many times Tarantino said ‘I want’: he wants his audience to ‘go

---

51 James Tobin interview with Quentin Tarantino. Aired on Channel Seven’s Sunrise program, Mon 3rd Aug, 2009. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xHtLrMDosU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xHtLrMDosU); retrieved 4/8/09.
“oooh”, he wants them to jump, he wants them to lean forward, he wants them to laugh. The filmmaker may ‘want’ a certain reaction from the audience, they may design their film to elicit that response; however, just as in every pedagogical interaction, there are no guarantees that this will happen. As Ellsworth (1997, p. 31) writes:

... viewers have always read films against their mode of address, and ‘answered’ films from places different from the ones that the film speaks to.

So maybe some audiences don’t go ‘oooh’ or laugh when Tarantino wants them to. Maybe they ‘oooh’ where they are meant to laugh, and laugh where they are meant to ‘oooh’. Maybe they respond in their own individual ways.

Wanting to overcome this notion that popular media simply ‘do[es] things to people’, this thesis sought to acknowledge that ‘people do things with the media’ (Turnbull, 2003, p. 22), or in other words, that audiences actively and critically engage with and produce mediated meaning. Using a relational, multidirectional and emergent concept of pedagogy, I argued that film/viewing is a profoundly pedagogical encounter and a complex set of relationships where knowledge is made and remade.

(i) An Overview

It is the ambiguous, ‘messy’ and in-between space in which pedagogy occurs that this thesis has considered and attempted to shed light on. The focus on how film might work as pedagogy became a question of how we learn about the self, our culture and our place within it (Todd, 1997; Chouinard, 2009). Far from a simple act of transmission, film’s knowledges and forms address its audience in complex and contradictory ways, potentially enabling and constraining ways of thinking about and being in the world. An orientation towards theories of pedagogy became a useful way in which to articulate what might be occurring here, and popular film in this light was understood as an interrogation of the conditions of discursive knowledge-formation and the production of subjecthood as performative. While interested in popular film and subjectivity more
broadly, this study focused in on the ‘youth subject’ and ideas about youthhood in a selection of contemporary Australian films post-1980. Through an analysis of these films and related extra-cinematic material, I have presented an account of how contemporary youth might *come to be known* in contemporary Western (or Australian) societies. Feminist and post-structuralist theories on subjectivity framed the inquiry, and a range of methodological approaches attempted to destabilise the normalising subjectivating processes that constitute the youth subject, with a view to opening up new ways of thinking. As a space profoundly geared towards, for instance, the practices of forming youthhood, and the production of knowledges about the way youth can be known, these popular films were examined in terms of their design features and practices that incite audiences towards key lessons. As noted in the Introduction, this thesis did not intend to provide a definitive answer to the question of how film works as pedagogy, as if it could be pre-determined or quantifiable. Nor did this thesis seek to reduce the potential meanings of any one film down to a single, ‘real’ meaning or effect. Rather, I have aspired, here, to open up a dialogue about how film might work as pedagogy geared towards the making of youth discourse and youthhood.

I began by situating the study within, and as a dialogue between, education and cultural studies, arguing for the significance of theories about pedagogy for popular film analysis. Asserting that film works as a pedagogy that is profoundly relational, contextual and indeterminate, this thesis challenged Giroux’s notion of ‘film as teaching machine’ as if a simple act of transmission or film as a ‘machine’ that merely ‘delivers content’. Through the work of Lusted, Ellsworth and other feminist educators, it was argued that the question of how we ‘come to know’ (Lusted, 1986, p. 3) should frame the approach to this inquiry. This, then, placed emphasis on the *processes* of pedagogy, orientations towards meaning-making, and thus the imagined/real audiences’ role here. Such a position meant treading a precarious line between pedagogy as an intimate, unique, unrepeatab;
much as by the film, and simultaneously, recognition of the way meaning is already constrained.

Through questions of method, the study outlined the struggles experienced in an attempt to account for how the analysis was conducted in the pursuit of film as pedagogy, showing that such practices are far from innocent or objective. It demonstrated the use of discourse analysis, broadly conceived, for the practice of analysing films, revealing a range of varied, localised activities, with differentiated results. Within the course of this study, the design elements of the film, as pedagogic technologies, were in focus including an analysis of semiotic features, composition, lighting, camera techniques, costume, narrative and characterisation. The smallest detail and/or the most spectacular element of the film were shown to have potential significance. A whole host of discourses, including ‘larrikinism’, ‘girlhood’ and ‘coming-of-age’ wove their way through the argument, and were problematised and examined in account of how the youth subject might come to be known. The Australian films I selected were noted for their pedagogic practices of forming and inciting key knowledges about the youth subject, some of which included genre, repetition, intertextuality, an aural soundscape, a girl staring off to space, humour, play, parody, voice-overs or other characters’ comments about the protagonist.

Chapters Four to Eight were the conceptual space in which this thesis was illustrated, each chapter providing some more depth and nuance to the central question of how film might work as pedagogy. Chapter Four argued that ‘Ben Mendelsohn’, the ‘quintessential’ youth(ful) masculine figure of Australian film, is usefully conceived as both a pedagogical text and a ‘spectacular pedagogue’ (Dyson, 1993; Morris, 2001), inciting us towards familiarity with a young, masculine, roguish, destructive subject. Looking across Mendelsohn’s filmic catalogue, ‘real life’ interviews and a documentary, I considered ‘Ben Mendelsohn’ as text and his ‘compulsive retelling’ (Bhabha, 1992, p. 323) of the larrikin as national, youthful and masculinist type. As pedagogical text, Mendelsohn legitimates ‘truths’ about contemporary manhood, embodying and inciting certain meanings.
about being young, being male and being Australian. I considered the way
various filmic devices (the opening scene, framing, the voice-over and talk
about him by other characters) emphasise him as (extra)ordinary,
normalised and idealised as a particular ‘truth’ about young manhood.

Chapter Five continued to consider contemporary young Aussie manhood
through a close analysis of a particular Mendelsohn film, _Idiot Box_. First, it
positioned the two protagonists of the film as pedagogical tools inciting
spectators to (re)consider young male subjection due to their parodic,
complex and embodied positions towards markers of manhood, work,
women, mateship and youthfulness. Secondly, it was argued that, through
the devices of ‘complicitness’ and parodic reference to the American film
_Pulp Fiction_, the two male protagonists and mode of address orientated
audiences towards key lessons as ‘Generation X’. I argued that this made us
complicit in the games of age-based subjectivity.

In Chapter Six I continued to explore questions about the youth subject by
conducting close readings of three ‘coming of age’ films, _Peaches_,
_Somersault_ and _Caterpillar Wish_, to examine how we might _come to know_
contemporary ‘girlhood’. It was argued that the girl protagonists become
pedagogical figures embodying lessons about doing ‘rational’ and ‘normal’
womanhood as psycho-sexual subjects, with complex ‘emotions’ and ‘inner
lives’. I observed elements within the films, including ideas of place, the
landscape, the weather and the musical and aural soundscape, as devices
framing the feminine coming-of-ages seen here. It was argued that these
devices orientate spectators to an ‘emotional’ engagement, and
potentially, a way of knowing these ‘becoming’ young women as gendered
figures of social cohesion.

Chapter Seven contrasted the ‘nice, kind and helpful’ (Walkerdine, 1990, p.
49) girls of Chapter Six with an analysis of the contemporary representation
of the ‘bad girl’ in the film _Suburban Mayhem_. It demonstrated that key
practices and metaphors as discursive and pedagogic practices, such as
genre, suburbia, feline motifs, V8 ‘muscle’ cars, sexuality and the mobile
phone, frame the way we can know Katrina, the young single mum from the suburbs. However, it also demonstrated that through the (non)didactic, ironic and outrageous (mock)documentary testimonials of other characters in the film, the meanings to be made are both ironic and perverse, and thus, the question of pedagogy and the involvement of the spectator is complex and demanding; somewhere between ‘celebration and savage critique’ (Turnbull, 2008, p. 23). I argued that while there were many ways to come to know the girl protagonist, there were limits in this regard, and so film works as pedagogy to form subjects, but also as a pedagogy concerned with how the formation of subjecthood might take place and what is at stake in this regard.

Chapter Eight considered how ‘generation’ is constructed as a commonsense battle between ‘young’ and ‘old’ in the comedies The Rage in Placid Lake, Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger, Crackers, Spider & Rose and Blurred. I argued that the young/old, youth/adult characters work pedagogically to orientate us toward generation as a ‘truth’ about subjecthood. Through key techniques and discourses like (ab)normality, play, empathy, sentimentality, humour, caricature and irony, it was argued that, as spectators, we are invited to play along with these particular age-based games of subjectification. The question of ‘adulthood’ was also highlighted, likewise destabilising its discursive hold in the formations of youthhood.

Bringing together theories of subjectivity and youth-hood, pedagogy and popular film in a unique and challenging way, I have considered the formation of youth subjectivity through popular film culture. What was learned from working through each of the above chapters was a complex and rich sense of how pedagogy works in and through a selection of films about the youth subject. In interrogating the formation of knowledges in regard to subjects as age-based, gendered and sexed, I attempted to destabilise that which is ‘normalised’ or ‘commonsense’. By tying popular film culture and practice to regimes of subjectivity, I considered how learning about the self and the other might occur.
My aim has been to extend current conceptualisations in the fields of cultural studies, education, film studies and Australian cinema scholarship. This thesis has ideally offered a distinct approach to film studies, conceptualising popular film as pedagogical, as discourse and as reiterative and citational or ‘performative’. It also contributes to work on Australian film from a unique position, using contemporary post-structuralist theories on gender and subjectivity. By focusing in on the film text as ‘data’, it demonstrates the importance of in-depth, close analysis, framed by wider contextual concerns like social subjectification, cultural learning and meaning-making. I have analysed selected films in terms of its practices and designs, looking to how learning might occur and how the imagined audience (the audience the film envisages) might be invited to respond and might learn.

(ii) So What? The Study and its Significance

The objective of this study has not only been to explore different, multiple and contradictory knowledges and practices through popular Australian film culture in regard to the formation of youth-hood, and in that way, call attention to the potentially pedagogic work of these filmic texts; I have also aimed to use these texts themselves to generate questions. Pillow (2003) reminds us that being reflexive about one’s work is about being disappointed, accepting its limits and inherent failures. Reflexivity is about questioning, and questioning again our methods and the objects we have constituted in our study. I hope the readings I have offered and text I produced generates questions and debate, not essentialisms. I hope it destabilised binaries and boundaries instead of reaffirming them. Yet I accept that this research is partial, and that I am still, and will always be, in a process of knowing (Colyar, 2009; Pillow, 2003; Ellsworth, 1997). It is on this note that I now turn attention to the gaps in my research.

Firstly, I wonder if readers of this dissertation are calling for attention to be turned to the spectators of these films as individual and as ‘real’ people in the ‘real’ world, rather than as the imaginative and speculative audience the films/the research potentially envisages and considers. Some reviewers
of a journal article I submitted for peer review were not convinced that a film is pedagogical unless it aims for a direct and clear impact on the viewer. The question that was of interest to them was how the individual film came to have particular significance and impact in the lives of an actual viewer as evidence of their learning. For example, if I read the protagonist as a ‘bad girl’ and the suburbs as exciting, what does that mean for me? Which viewers are being taught which regimes of knowledge? How do we know they are the ones targeted? To my mind, these questions are concerned with the effect, impact or ‘force’ of pedagogy in specific learner lives as if a predictable, coherent process. Such an approach requires a ‘lesson’ — contained, transmittable, tangible — and as clearly located within the film text that identifies its specific ‘target’, and thus has a direct ‘effect’ on this audience. It also suggests a clear ‘teacher’ with agency and intent, who teaches and thus, has taught.

However, this kind of approach is problematic in that, as this thesis has asserted, pedagogy is complex, indeterminate and unpredictable, far from a simple ‘delivery’ or ‘transmission’. Such an approach is also a ‘political trap’, placing the teacher at the centre of, and ‘locus of responsibility’ for, the learning that occurs (Pinar, 2005, p. 79). Hence I could have made a case about the pedagogical effect for actual ‘bad girls’ (as if the authority was there to name them) who might see Suburban Mayhem, and how their identities are validated by Katrina’s embodiment of the ‘bad girl’; or I could have argued that the film misread its audience and thus its pedagogy ‘misfired’. However, I deliberately avoided this kind of analysis because I wanted to keep the film’s complexity, multiple meanings and multiple ‘lessons’ in play, and thus, I was reluctant to pin the film down to a single meaning or effect. I also did not want to assume that ‘bad girls’ or youth necessarily engaged with these films or that the selected films held any meaning for them. This project was never envisaged as a study about what the youth viewer might learn about youth-hood for instance, and I deliberately avoided categorising these films as ‘youth films’. Rather, this project was about how ‘we’, as viewers, critics, academics, members of
contemporary western societies, come to know ‘youth-hood’, the normative regimes of ‘youth-hood’, and how these knowledges and practices circulate in popular film culture in various ways. While the question of how young people might come to these performative on-screen youths in terms of their own subjectivities is a compelling question, it is one that remains, at this point, merely implied and open-ended. In a focused way, then, I explored how the film text works as pedagogy through its design features and practices, while in a broad and conceptual way I theorised its impact on ‘audience’ in terms of (re)citation practices of subject formation.

At one point early on in the research I carried out an auto-ethnographic analysis of my own reading of Suburban Mayhem in an attempt to account for the way an individual viewer might learn through an engagement with the ‘bad girl’. However, it was decided that this study, being partial, would not include an ethnographic approach and would instead remain focused on textual analysis primarily concerned with how film as pedagogy works. While the effect of such knowledges about youth is of key concern to this research (particularly in regard to what this might mean to those subjects [self]interpolated through youth discourse), the effects of the particular film on the audience was speculative, and thereby not ‘actual’. In this way, popular film was conceptualised as potentially inciting but not determining learning, a key idea in regards to the theory of pedagogy that this study was emphasising. The question here, then, was how film works as pedagogy, not identifying what was the film’s pedagogy or what was its effect (as if singular and determined). In this regard particular statements such as ‘the film teaches’ and notions of ‘teaching’ were circumvented in place of phrases such as ‘inciting learning’. This placed emphasis on learning as agentic, emergent and differentiated rather than on ‘teaching’ as if the cause of learning and not its context (see: Green, 1998).

What I perhaps did not address adequately was the notion of ‘intent’, and in many respects, it is an issue that still requires further exploration. To argue that a film works pedagogically, and that its particular design
features and practices orientate audiences towards learning, implies that the film/maker has intent of some kind, and that they intentionally seek to communicate some thing and impart knowledge in this respect. However, a post-positivist view of power and pedagogy refuses the idea that Discourse or Ideology, or indeed the Film as ‘all-powerful’, determines what can be learned. In this light, we have learned that pedagogy is not a simple act of transmission and so potentially many different things (although not infinite) might be learned from our engagements with film, some of which have nothing to do with original ‘intent’. While I looked at elements of production in terms of filmic design and discourse, and also discussed some elements in relation to the filmmakers David Caesar and Quentin Tarantino, this was not a study on the intentions of particular filmmakers per se. Although work was carried out early on in this regard, the final version of this thesis has moved away from the question of the filmmaker to overcome the idea that the filmmaker is the origin of, or could determine, what was to be learned from their film, and thus, I avoided over-investing in their importance in this regard. What was lost in this move was in-depth debate about how a particular filmmaker might work as an ‘authority’ to teach specific lessons, and/or how a body of films by the same director might work pedagogically. However, this was deliberate in an attempt to move away from a conceptualisation of pedagogy as determinate, coherent and knowable in advance. What was ideally gained by such a move was an in-depth discussion and exploration of how an individual film and/or along with other films in its genre might work to encourage learning about subjectivity, while placing emphasis on learning as largely unpredictable.

(iii) In Defence of Textual Analysis

This inquiry has always been envisaged as a textual analysis of film texts, rather than an analysis of contexts of ‘production’ or ‘reception’, even though these contexts frame the study and enter the analysis from time to time. Textual analysis is often criticised for engaging with the text in an isolated and closed way, and thus not properly understanding and
integrating these production or reception contexts. The findings of textual analysis are often positioned as ‘incompetent’ (Fürsich, 2009), which still:

... have to be substantiated or even authenticated by audience reactions or production context. However, this assumption shortchanges the central contribution of textual analysis (Fürsich, 2009, p. 244).

The denigration of textual analysis over audience studies or ethnography has long been a part of debates in the humanities, the social sciences and cultural research about which site (‘production’, ‘text’ or ‘audience’) is more important in the construction of meaning. Such arguments often set up a problematic dichotomy of perspectives: the active/passive audience (the ‘cultural studies’ perspective) or the hegemonic/polysemic text (the ‘semiotic-post-structuralist’ perspective) (see: Fürsich, 2009, p. 243; also see Ang, 1996). Fürsich (2009) argues that, as a subject of research, the text is unique, and only the ‘independent’ textual analysis is able to ‘elucidate the narrative structure, symbolic arrangements and discursive potential of the media text’, showing how ‘meaning can be fixed, if only momentarily’ (p. 239). A well-executed textual interpretation, for Fürsich, is not an account of how closely the text represents the producers’ intentions, nor how accurately it records the audience interpretation of the text; rather, the textual analysis needs to establish the ‘ideological potential of the text between production and consumption’ (p. 249). As a distinctive discursive moment between production (‘encoding’) and reception (‘decoding’), the prolonged engagement of the textual analysis is a ‘creative moment’ in its own right, which necessitates and justifies its own special scholarly engagement (Fürsich, p. 244). Therefore, beyond the mediated role of the producers’ and the audiences’ intentions, the textual analysis can ‘take on a life of its own’ (often in ambiguities, unresolved dichotomies or contradictions) where the textual critic ‘finds crucial insights’ (Fürsich, p. 245).

Following this, textual analysis potentially goes beyond the question of how a specific audience member may read/misread or analyse/appropriate the text’s message (not to mention the ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘it’ of teaching and
learning relations more broadly). It questions how the specific content under investigation constitutes various subject positions, and which ‘life stories’ and subjectivities the ‘current cultural sensibilities (as expressed in this text) encourage, and which ones they exclude’ (Fürsich, 2009, p. 247). The question here is not how accurately the text reflects reality, but what version of ‘reality’ is normalised and as a consequence what might be at stake? (Fürsich, 2009). In this sense, then, rather than showing how the message changes in circulation or how it is ‘authenticated’ by ‘real’ audiences where audience voices take priority over an analysis of the text, textual analysis as method can provide multilayered, contradictory and alternative interpretations that potentially leave open the possibilities of the text, and recognise meaning ‘in the making (never “made”)’ (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 1; also see Fürsich, 2009; Johnson, 1986/1987).

(iv) Where to from Here? Reflections and Further Research

While there is much to take on board in Fürsich’s argument, particularly in the social science-dominated education field, which often finds it difficult to envisage research without grounding it in the ‘empirical’, it is important to acknowledge that textual analysis may not be the only site that is able to ‘elucidate’ the discursive potential of the media text. It must be stated (and Fürsich would not disagree here) that neither ‘textual studies’ nor ‘audience studies’, for instance, present ‘better’ or ‘more empirical’ evidence, because in all methodologies, the meaning and value of these contexts depends on the interpretative and constitutive actions of the researcher. In one sense, textual analysis is a unique site between production and reception, or ‘coding’ and ‘decoding’, but in another sense, textual analysis is another form and set of practices of ‘decoding’. As noted in Chapter Three, the text studied here is the set of films under analysis but also, potentially, the many other elements surrounding the film itself, including elements of production, reception and specific social and cultural contexts and subjectivities. So this constructed division between ‘production’, ‘the text’ and ‘the audience’ is not particularly useful here (see: Burn, 2009). Furthermore, far from any text existing in a pre-
discursive realm waiting to be deciphered and critiqued, ‘the text’ is an object of symbolic meaning for researchers and readers (Parker, 1999). Thus, it is the textual analysis, rather than the text, that poses the questions that research sets out to ‘answer’ (Belsey, 2005, p. 167), and all meaning is mediated in this regard.

As a researcher, I have always been critical of the ‘vulgar empiricism’ (Ang, 1996) of the social sciences and related fields that value the ‘empirical realm’, the ‘real’ world and the ‘voice’ of interview subjects as if real, true and of greatest consequence. Positioning the knowledges of ‘real’ people in ‘real’ places over those generated within and through the media text, these research traditions have a ‘built-in’ conservativism that takes ‘reality-as-it-is for granted’ (Ang, 1996, p. 187). Such empiricism, common to some reception studies’ scholarship, also denies the historical context of reception as well as the social context, in that new meanings surface each time the ‘reader’ re-views the text (Lesser, 2003). As a result of all of this, I was convinced that textual analysis was the only way to proceed, and the only method that could ensure the problematisation of ‘reality’ — not as real and true — but the ‘reality’ that is normalised as ‘true’. However, I now realise that this was a ‘blank spot’ (Gough, 2002) in my understanding, and possibly even a part of an elitist tendency to constitute popular culture as a problematic that could only be ‘corrected from without, by intellectuals’ (Hartley, 2009, p. 8). Reading Valerie Walkerdine’s Daddy’s Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture (1997) was the first academic work that convinced me that perhaps textual analysis did not ‘hold’ all the answers, nor that it could anticipate all possibilities. Walkerdine provided provocative, politically-charged and particularly effective readings of popular films about gendered working-class hero(in)es as a way to discuss young, working-class girlhood. But it was this textual analysis in conjunction with observations of two young girls’ (and their families), and in particular, their interactions with these films, that enabled Walkerdine to make key discoveries that she would not have made otherwise if she had just undertaken textual analysis or had just conducted interviews. What the
researcher learned was through a combination of these approaches, both ‘textual’ and ‘empirical’, the popular film text became a way into talking about issues that were ‘very painful’ and ‘difficult’ for the girls and their families, discussions that would not have occurred otherwise (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 115). This was key to understanding the conditions of the girls’ subjectification, and how a film like *Annie* (1982) was mobilised by the girls in the ‘living’ of their subjectivity (Walkerdine, 1997) in various ways.

Walkerdine’s approach could be conceptualised as ‘radical empiricism’ (Ang, 1996), which questions the taken-for-grantedness of ‘reality’, precisely because it:

... fully engages itself with the messiness of the world we live in and, as a result, forces us to confront the limits of this ‘reality’ (p. 187).

In this way, argues Walkerdine, the researcher can potentially ‘elide other aspects of subjectification which cannot be spoken within that discourse’ (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 112). This is particularly pertinent to my research, concerned as I am with the aim to rethink normalising subjectificating regimes. The ‘personal interpretative horizon’ (Bowles, 2007, p. 256) may not be assumed from the analysis of the content of the film the person is watching, but then the personal, the idiosyncratic and the ‘empirical’ might mean ‘missing out on the more systematic parameters of subjectivity that structure, enable and refract our personal engagement with the film’ (Hansen, 1994, p. 146). As a result, popular film is both ‘intimate’ and ‘impersonal’, paradoxically an ‘individual’, unique, unrepeatable (pedagogic) encounter, *and* simultaneously, a form of government through (pedagogic) discourses and practices of social predictabilities. Following this, much can be enabled and constrained by these ‘textual’ and ‘empirical’ approaches in the research venture, with neither methodological tactic being ‘better’ that the other or more ‘real’ or ‘true’.
In reflecting on the objects and methods of this research, I have challenged my own perceptions and current conceptual limitations to a certain degree. Clearly, there is room to consider the above in more detail, and ideally, the research that will occur in the future will extend on the work of this thesis in this regard. Likewise, future research will ideally wrestle with a concept intimated in this thesis, a concept that Walkerdine found indispensable in her research, and one that will be generative to my research in the future, notably, Foucault’s (1972; 1982) *technologies of the self*. As noted in my discussion of methodology in Chapter Three, part of the challenge of understanding film as pedagogy in a post-critical sense is to gain perspective on how film might operate as discursive practice. Taking Foucault’s hypothesis about how discourses *speak us into existence* as subjects (Foucault, 1972) into an analysis of popular film recognises popular film as ‘performative’, enabling and constraining the knowledges and formations that make subjection. As a social and cultural practice, film seeks to govern the subject, and simultaneously, incites self-governmentality, potentially inciting us towards certain subjecthoods. Making and remaking subject positions through its knowledges and ‘truth’ claims, film is a *technology of the self*, one profoundly geared towards making meaning or pedagogy. As a *technology of the self* or *pedagogy of the self*, popular film is a practice, object and space in which key learning occurs about our selves and our place in the world (see: Todd, 1997; Chouinard, 2009). The thesis text has explored how film might work as pedagogy and how such learning might occur. It has attempted to account for how the audience is addressed and mobilised to learn through engagements with film. The questions that may now be crucial to future research conducted, and which extend upon those questions here, is how might popular film work pedagogically as a *technology of the self*, how might ‘individual’ subjects use popular film in the formation of their own subjectivities and what might be the possible ‘effects’. The employment of both ‘textual’ and ‘empirical’ methods may also be a generative way forward here.
A Closing Note...

In 1986 Lusted asked, ‘under what conditions and through what means do we “come to know”’ (pp. 2–3, original emphasis). This turn encourages us to explore the nature of knowledge, complex forms of meaning-making, and the ways we understand ourselves and our world — and all as profoundly pedagogical. This study pursued the question of *how we come to know* the youth subject, and more broadly, ourselves and others as social subjects. It did more than implicate popular film practice in the processes of subjectification; it used film to rethink these processes and knowledges, hopefully, in creative and meaningful ways. In doing so I argued for a revisioned ‘youth-hood’, one that challenged the normalising subjectivating regimes located within and through the engagements with popular film, with the view of opening up different and diverse ways of being. The concept of pedagogy that was mobilised (as relational, multidirectional and unpredictable) was vital to this engagement in deconstructing and reconstructing readings of cultural texts, subjectivities and knowledges. This study continued to ask ‘how is it possible to know that, to think that, to say that’ (Threadgold, 2000, p. 49), rather than claiming it had all the answers. In this sense, this research is ‘blue skies’ research (Whitty, 2006, p. 165; also see Green, 2010b), defiantly exploratory, multidisciplinary and open-ended. This approach to research, like the concept of pedagogy it advocates, seeks to complicate the conversations surrounding the discourses and practices that define it, as key to its defence against current reductionalist and rationalist reforms in education and research (see: Green, 2010a; 2010b; Weaver, Carlson & Dimitriadis, 2006; Reynolds, 2006). Indeed, how we can be open to other ways of knowing, a kind of knowing that accepts the gaps of its own knowing, and maybe, even, that there are some things that cannot be ‘known’ — and all of this as generative and enriching — is something definitely, and most defiantly, still worth pursuing.
References


References


Pearce (Eds.), *Youth Cultures: texts, images, and identities* (pp. 123–139). Westport, CT: Praeger.


Filmography


Appendix I — Ben Mendelsohn —
Filmography


Appendix II

Source: Urban Dictionary

1. **Get a dog up ya**

   have an alcoholic beverage.
   an Australian expression derived from "hair of the dog that bit you," "get a dog up ya" is a jovial instruction to take your alcoholic beverage and drink it, similar to *cheers*.
   "I am experiencing a hangover from last night's frivolities."
   "That’s a shame. Why don’t you get a dog up ya? It’s bound to set you straight."
   "Let’s both get some dogs up us."
   "Let's"

2. **Get a dog up ya**

   To go get fucked.
   Bloke: fancy a drink treacle?
   Bird: no way you slime!
   Bloke: Ah! get a dog up ya!

3. **Get a dog up ya**

   Piss off
   get a dog up ya!

4. **Get a dog up ya**

   An Australian expression which really doesn't mean anything much at all. Often said whilst being drunk and yelled at high volume at the footy.
   Drunk Aussie Yobbo A: Stone the flaming crows mate, Essendon are losing this game
   Drunk Aussie Yobbo B: yeah this is fucked
   Drunk Aussie Yobbo A (Yelled out in the crowd): Come on bombers, GET A DOG UP YA!!