chapter 8

conclusion

She 'ad three clothes-pegs in 'er mouth,
an' washin' on 'er arm — ¹

This intertitle, from the 1920 Raymond Longford film, *Ginger Mick*, the sequel to *The Sentimental Bloke*, perfectly describes the mother of early films. One of the scores of missing Australian feature films, *Ginger Mick* carried on the tale of Doreen's life with her husband, the Bloke, and their baby son, who is born at the close of the earlier film.² The words of the intertitle in *Ginger Mick* are accompanied on screen by a line drawing in order to make the meaning quite clear. In the foreground is a large, round, wooden tub. A washboard is perched on the shelf behind it, close to a bottle of Lysol. The figure of the hard-working mother is in the background near a clothesline, where enormous sheets blow in the wind, dwarfing her. Bent almost double over her washing basket, she labours beside a long prop which rests on the ground, ready for her to lift the heavy line into the wind. The film has been lost and we really have no idea who the woman was supposed to be, although the drawing invites speculation. Could she possibly be the lovely, desirable Doreen, the apple of the Bloke's eye, now a housewife and drudge? Perhaps, on the other hand, it is just a generic sketch of motherhood. Either way, the words and the drawing illustrate the stereotypical mother of the early days of cinema, who was constantly occupied with the family's washing.³ The activity is a visual metaphor for her diligence, her uncomplaining care of the family and her regard for cleanliness.

The Good Mother

³It was not limited only to the early days, as it was used as a sign for good mothering as recently as the 1980s, in films like *Cool Change*, *Hightide* and *The More Things Change...*
Images of the good mother provided the mainstay of family films in each decade from 1900 to 1988, except during the 1970s, which has been shown for various reasons to be an aberration in the trajectory of the Australian film. The mother's devotion to her children was depicted in early years by her embraces, particularly those with her son, which, often quite oddly, were more exuberant than decorous. She was a matronly woman with adult children, although in later decades, younger mothers with younger children filled the maternal role. Motherhood was tantamount to sacrifice and although only one film mother gave up her own food and water for the sake of her family, the inference was that any good mother would have done so, should it be required. The raison d'être of motherhood was illustrated by her perpetual preparation of meals and unending cleaning. These activities were the symbols of her primary concern which was the nurture of her family.

Unselfish to a fault, the mother in films appeared to have no desires which were more important than the family's well-being. With few interests outside her domestic duties, she found fulfilment in life through the experiences of others. Even if she had felt deprived or disconsolate that she was always left out of the action which went on around her, there was no space for her to voice her dissatisfaction. However, although the film mother rarely took part in the exciting activities which were the focus of the narrative, she was never idle. So as not to be shown unoccupied, in any precious moments away from household chores, she could be seen industriously knitting or sewing. Unlike other members of her family, she never read the newspaper, or enjoyed a book. Truly 'tied to the house', she did not even venture into public areas such as the markets or to the riverside to do the washing, as in the cinema of other countries. Even in the few films which told of families travelling in the outback, the mother was the camp cook, connected by some invisible cord to her camp oven and fire. No wonder that she was always available to the children, as most often she could be found within the home, in

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4See for example Ma Galloway with her son Gilbert in Franklyn Barrett's The Breaking of the Drought (1920) and Ellen Kelly with Ned in Tony Richardson's Ned Kelly (1970).
the kitchen preparing food, in the backyard hanging out the washing, or somewhere within the house, folding clothes, sewing or ironing.

Not all the films, of course, had all these elements. Some highlighted alternatives to the mother's performance because of their great acting, inspired direction or female contribution to the filmmaking process. These maverick films, however, emphasised in their difference, the taken-for-granted aspect that was part of mothering roles in other films. A typical example of what was considered normal behaviour can be found in *Bushfire Moon*, a film made in 1987 by George Miller. It shows a rural family returning from town to find a bushfire burning out of control, close to the homestead. The father orders his wife and teenaged daughter to go inside. He takes his eight-year-old son off with him to put out the blaze. The wife retreats to indoor safety, shuts the windows and takes out her needlework, apparently not disconcerted that her small son was considered a more able person in an emergency. Others also did not find the husband's behaviour unusual, as critic, Suzanne Brown, in a review of the film, noted that the film was 'natural and believable'.

Cinema does not offer an ineluctable recipe for life and the audience is not a passive recipient of its message, though the manner in which mothers have been portrayed is important. While the opportunity to reject, negotiate or accept the representation of the perfect mother in films is undeniably available, many of the women in the audience would have found the representations depressing and difficult to connect with. Their confidence may have been undermined by the on-screen depictions and they may have been puzzled or irritated by the difference in their own experience. In the films, although the families were often beset with problems, the mother acted in an exemplary manner, effectively denying her emotional reaction in the face of difficulties. Those mothers in the audience that were unable to reconcile the image with their own experience, perhaps, should have been assured that 'there are no perfect mothers on this earth', as

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psychologist, Jane Swigart observed. Hopefully, they understood that perfect motherhood, based on 'sacrifice and altruistic surrender', was unachievable, as sociologist, Jessie Bernard, indicated. If, however, they accepted the 'natural' role of the good mother as she was represented in most films, as one who instinctively knew what was best for the child, who never became angry and was content to subordinate her own life for others, they could possibly begin to feel their own skills were inadequate.

As Ann Phoenix and Anne Woollett wrote, 'what is widely accepted as "good mothering" by "good mothers" is socially constructed and has political implications and consequences'. The introduction of malevolent or bad mothers in films of the 1970s had a surprising and certainly unintentional bonus for women. These film mothers were so much worse than most mothers could imagine, that by comparison, some women might have felt that they were doing quite well within their own families. Perhaps, the spectator mothers saw a way to change expectations about maternal duties in their own families, as these images offered an alternative to the normative portrayal of the perfect mother. On the other hand, the mothers in these films might not have offered much solace, as their actions were so far from most mother's experience. They were often too bad to be a reflection of society and hopefully, they did not influence mothers to malevolent behaviour. Rather, they resulted in part from the anxiety about the changes to the family structure in that particular decade. The importance of the depiction of non-traditional mothering was contained in the Freudian subtext of the films, which pointed to mothers as responsible for children's problems. While few in the audience would have accepted the depictions of the mothers' behaviour as realistic, the harm they did to their children could not be so easily forgotten or disregarded.

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From the 1980s, while the inadequate mother still appeared in some films, her representation was more capable of varying interpretations and the narrative allowed her a redemption of sorts. The issue of the mother moving from the domestic to the public sphere, and the subsequent elevation of her social power and economic independence, had an influence on her role in films. Many mothers in the new films were well-meaning and more interesting characters, who worked outside the home and had relationships with people other than the family. For the first time since the 1920s, a significant number of mothers became the actual subject of the film narrative. The perfect self-sacrificing mother and inattentive or malevolent mother were replaced by a less extreme character. The guidelines for mothering had changed and mothers were depicted as good, nurturing individuals, who were not as devoted — or demonic — as in earlier decades.

While her portrayal was certainly more sympathetic in the 1980s, the mother's involvement outside the home was not celebrated. Apparent independence was not a sign of happiness or stability. The situation was exacerbated by the relative youth of her offspring. While in earlier decades, the mother's main concern was with her adult daughter and the requirement to make her a suitable wife and mother and find her a suitor, the 1980s mother in films had a teenager on her hands. This added a dramatic note to the mother's life which meant that she had to incorporate her own new-found interests with the care of her child. The mother's dissatisfaction with life was a remarkable trademark of films of the decade. Her discontent was articulated, not as a cri de coeur for assistance. It was, perhaps, more a kind of warning to women not to attempt to stray too far from their traditional domestic pathway.9

Birth

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9This hegemonic pattern was supported by the representation of daughters who were both nurturing and contented, unlike their mothers. See conclusions about the mother/daughter relationship, this chapter, below.
A surprising revelation about Australian films came from the investigation into the context of births and their effect on the mothers within the diegesis. The birth was significant in the story, even when the child was not the subject of further narrative interest. The expectation for men to prefer sons and for women with sons to be envied, was found to underpin films in a pervasive and, perhaps, previously unexamined manner. It was discovered that the narrative incorporated certain assumptions about the sex of the neonate. If the child were a boy, the mother's lifestyle improved and she found happiness, if a girl, the mother was more or less doomed.

The importance of this aspect of Australian film narratives is not negated by the acknowledgment that the decision by the filmmaker was probably subconscious. The point remained that most likely it was deemed more appropriate, given other circumstances of the plot, to make the choice of either baby girl or boy. When the child was destined in the script for a good life with loving parents, a boy was chosen, when gloom was predicted, the child was inevitably a girl. That the choice did follow a pattern, yet was seemingly inconsequential, was its most important aspect. The acceptance of images that show from birth, the association of good fortune with sons and its opposite with daughters, is a crucial concern in identifying the underlying sexist premise.

While some theorists have insisted that the girl's maternal caring nature is instinctive, others have argued, in my opinion more persuasively, that it is learned behaviour. Images in society can be an important influence on the way we think about differences between men and women. Those which relate to birth are most crucial because of their significance as a starting point in acceptance of male's superior status. In the late twentieth century, Australian society has attempted to ensure equality in the child's early influences. This can be seen in the way many parents try to offer their daughters opportunities previously denied them and in changes to education and children's literature by encouraging girls, for example, in mathematics and science. Perhaps, in the
light of an even earlier cultural influence, films might be re-ordered in a more equitable way. It is to be hoped that 'Congratulations it's a girl' could be meaningful and not signify merely a comic catchcry in films of the future.

**Mothers and Daughters**

Perhaps, the mother's most fully outlined relationship on screen was her connection to her daughter. In films of the early decades, the mother was a vital part of the daughter's life, providing companionship as well as guidance. Her main role was to find a suitor for her daughter and to prepare her for marriage. The women loved each other and conflict between them was unthinkable. It was not until films of the 1970s, and the introduction of Freudian sub-texts in films, that the association between the women soured. This was precisely the time that motherhood was being questioned by daughters in the women's movement, some of whom blamed, or at least reproached their mothers for female subordination in society. Representations of the relationship changed again in the 1980s, when a few women moved into feature film production and become mothers themselves. Possibly as a consequence, although women's contribution to films was still minimal, the relationship was depicted in a more ambivalent manner, the mother's position was more kindly evaluated and across the generations the women were once again close. In an interesting departure from previous representations, although the daughter had often been shown as more educated and technically advanced than her mother, the youthful daughter of the 1980s was frequently more emotionally stable and wise.

Throughout the century, daughters on screen were generally compassionate and kind, despite the mothering they received. The maternal cycle was apparent in early cinema, as devoted mothers appeared to be passing on their maternal skills. In later decades, mothers were often inept and offered a poor maternal role-model for the girl. All the same, daughters of bad mothers frequently were shown to be caring and selfless. Even, in the 1970s, when the bad mother was portrayed as psychologically damaging, her daughter's capacity to mother was not impaired. In depicting daughters as inevitably
nurturing and devoted, the films supported the notion of an instinctive mothering skill or, perhaps, one learned in the society. In effect, they denied a maternal cycle wherein the daughter's mothering was dependent on the girl's own mother.

Theoretical discourses which encompassed sociology, psychoanalysis and feminism have provided the foundation of much knowledge of the mother/daughter relationship. The most influential and salient research, perhaps, came from Nancy Chodorow, who related women's subordination in society to their bonding with their mother and subsequent imitation of her behaviour. She maintained that the closeness of the daughter to her mother resulted in her difficulty in separation which subsequently hindered her autonomy. Chodorow argued that the solution to the women's dilemma was for the father to share in parenting.\(^{10}\) Her plan received widespread interest and acceptance as it was meant to undermine patriarchal strength and open the way to a more egalitarian society. While only one of the films portrayed Chodorow's recommendation for shared parenting,\(^ {11}\) there was a sense that some fathers in later films, were interested in their child's welfare. This could, perhaps, have been motivated by the change in the structure of the family, as their interest was manifested as a claim for custody for the child.\(^ {12}\) The representation in no way reflected the men's undertaking of traditional maternal roles of nurturing, sacrifice and selflessness that had been expected of women in films over the decades.\(^ {13}\)

Because Chodorow's work focused on the mother/daughter relationship and was such a cornerstone in making sense of the way women mother and why they mother, it was


\(^{11}\)See chapter 6 for an analysis of Tim Burstall's *Duet for Four* (1982).

\(^{12}\)There were custody battles fought by the fathers in *Cathy's Child, My First Wife, Jenny Kissed Me* and *Short Changed*.

\(^{13}\)Two films of the 1920s, *The Dingo* and *The Dinkum Bloke*, which can be analysed from the synopses, told of a father's sacrifice so that his daughter could have a better life. Recent films where the father took over maternal duties from the mother were not construed as sharing, but indicated her ineptitude. See for example, *Petersen, Duet for Four* and *Jenny Kissed Me*. The only recent film where the father brought up the child, was the father of a dying boy in *The Fourth Wish*. In this film also, the wife was depicted as uncaring and inadequate. *The More Things Change...* depicted a role-reversal father, but he was inadequate to the task.
interesting to see how the maternal bonding she described fitted into the particular cultural images found in Australian feature films. The films, which at least on some level reflected society, followed the Chodorow model in the early years. The closeness and easy communication of the pair were structured as inevitable and in some films a special, spiritual bond was hinted. Just as Chodorow had proposed, though, girls in early films were shown to be dependent and unable to cope with the situation when their lives did not mirror the mother's example. The example of bonding as a reason for restricted autonomy, however, was turned around in films in later decades, when although the women were close, daughters were depicted as emotionally secure and independent. Representations of these strong daughters worked against Chodorow's theories. Significantly, they subverted the notion of powerful mothers who had the capacity to ruin children's lives. They allowed the mother her own space away from the family without appearing to harm her daughter forever. They also, by showing her self-confidence, removed the daughter from a 'victim' role.

Sexuality
The representation of the mother's sexuality in films, to a large extent, depended on historical and cultural changes in society. Prior to World War Two, film censorship limited displays of sexual activity and the mother was more a nurturing angel than a passionate woman. A few films, however, mainly in the 1920s, hinted at a sexual relationship of husband and wife, while those in the 1930s, perhaps, in a reflection of the hardship of the Depression economy, depicted the mother as an asexual creature. After the War, the mother's sexuality became confused with desire for possessions and she instigated sex for some ulterior motive. She was seen to be glamorous and desirable, though her own desire was distanced from carnality and closer to an appetite for possessions. It was as though the filmmakers transformed the mother's corporeal desire into something with which they could more easily contend. In the 1970s the woman's sexuality was at last recognised, although most images were of a mother who was either repressed or a nymphomaniac. In representing the mother's sexuality as aberrant, male
filmmakers may have been reflecting the fear and uncertainty in society about changes in the family caused by women's demands for equality. Even in the 1980s, the mother's sexuality was rarely 'normalised' or portrayed within her marriage. If her desire was recognised at all, it was more often seen as deviant, out of control and damaging to the family. The 1980s was supposed to be the decade of the superwoman, who according to Gloria Steinem, dressed for success, raised perfect children, cooked gourmet meals and had multiple orgasms.\(^\text{14}\) Her image was not found in films where the combination of motherhood, work and sexuality signalled disharmony.

Although there were fluctuations in the depictions of the mother's sexuality, there was a presupposition that remained constant in the films over the decades. This was an ideological position about the institution of marriage, which insisted, in a taken-for-granted way, that a woman should be married to have sex. Sexuality outside marriage was a signal for unhappiness and despair. This was most apparent in portrayals of unwed mothers who only found contentment when they were able to marry. At the same time and revealing an amazing, insupportable contradiction, once the woman married, her sexuality within marriage was rarely represented. The paradox was, perhaps, particularly obvious in the 1980s, when explicit sexuality was commonplace on screen.

In films, as in other media, the object of desire for the male protagonist was typically a young, glamorous, unmarried, and childless woman. Her capture and marriage was the aim of the narrative. Films often ended in scenes of a marriage and explicit references or subtle hints of the requirement of children to complete the union. In situations when the narrative opened on an established family, the mother, a good woman, was depicted as pure and virtuous. Sexuality in the family in these films rested with the daughter. Where the mother's sexual desire was shown, it was depicted as the cause of marital dissolution and until the 1980s, her desire was a cinematic signal that she was a bad mother. Apart from a few exceptional examples, films rarely portrayed the mother as a sexual being.

within the structure of her natural family life. In the main, Australian feature films showed that in a cinematic fairytale transformation, the mother's desire and desirability was sacrificed at the altar. From the moment of this much celebrated occasion where she was led by the patriarch of her birth family to the patriarch of her adopted one, she was depicted as assuming the mantle of the good, chaste, asexual mother.

The Mother in the Bush

The search for the mother in bush films, perhaps, the most significant genre in Australian feature film production, was revealing. Investigation found her metaphoric presence within the landscape to be stronger and more meaningful than her actual presence in the narrative. Her physical representation was largely trivialised or ignored, and in its place, the land, which formed a major part of bush films, was used to provide a substantial impetus for the men's activities. Men explored, conquered, tamed, overpowered, used, dominated, looked for and expected nurturance from the land. It in turn was structured as barren, virgin, fertile, inviting, beautiful or impenetrable. Men's relationship to the land was echoed perfectly in their relationship to women.

The mother's presence in the landscape in bush films provided more than just a way to find a place for the her in representations of early colonial life. Her metaphorical presence was a vital and revealing insight into a system which was at the foundation of the Australian culture. The landscapes were feminised and the intruders were depicted as aggressive and not peaceful, separatist and not communal, essentialist and not welcoming. Colonial settlement, at the heart of the masculine identity even in the late twentieth century, was represented in this model as an invasive, aggressive and damaging operation.

Summary
Australian feature films followed the Hollywood classical narrative style, which aimed at realism, however, problematical and tied to subjectivity and history that term can be.\textsuperscript{15} The films worked, not like German Expressionist cinema for example, with its distorted viewpoints, but as realistic representations. Films in the main attempted to follow a logical cause and effect pattern which was constructed on a beginning, middle and end. While family sagas were rare in Australian films, the narrative trajectory at least allowed the possibility of determining if the mother was punished or rewarded for her mothering capabilities and if her children benefited or were disadvantaged.

My research examined representations on screen to determine how motherhood was depicted in a medium that reflects and influences human behaviour in Australian society. It used an eclectic framework which considered psychoanalytic, sociological and feminist research to explicate the mother's role on the Australian screen. The mother's experience was placed in historical context, with reference to constraints such as economic hardship and war, and the benefits of affluence and technological inventions. Ultimately, the findings demonstrated that there was no coherent, unambivalent continuum of representation of motherhood in Australian feature films. Each decade followed a pattern which indicated that the maternal role was constructed as a matter of expediency. The investigation found that rather than the mother's role being securely fixed, the images were governed by the economic or political necessities of the time, perhaps reflecting state requirements, community opinions or an amalgamation of these in the individual anxieties and beliefs of the mostly-male filmmakers.

Overall, there was no evidence of overt ideological interference in the manner in which motherhood was represented in films. It could be argued that national concern in the early years of the century about the falling population was translated into screen presentations which exhorted mothers to be clean and care for their infants. Undoubtedly

the reward in the films for mothers who followed this path had the effect of reinforcing the government agenda. It would have been counterproductive to the narrative, however, bearing in mind her usual meagre role, to show her as other than nurturing. More obvious rhetoric, for instance, the pressure to sacrifice sons to war, was left to the documentary films and the attempt to incorporate such pressure into one feature film was greeted with derision.¹⁶ The depictions of the maternal role in Australian feature films usually were more subtle: they reinforced the 'natural' order in a hegemonic manner.

While the media's stereotypical representations of women in television and print frequently have been challenged, the nuances of the portrayal of motherhood on the Australian screen have, more often, been overlooked. Perhaps, this results from the pervasive, and as the study has shown, mistaken idea of the immutability of representations of the maternal role. My research challenges this belief when it points out the way the images of motherhood have fluctuated in accord with various influences. Additionally, the research calls into question the 'taken-for-granted' representations of the role. For instance, it notes depictions of the good, selfless and devoted mother, who, in spite of often unendurable circumstances, is accepting and passive. Concentrating on the importance of the moment of birth, it reveals that the superiority of males is reinforced on screen from the child's earliest moments. The mother's relationship to her daughter, which in some cases is the most enduring and crucial of her life, is found frequently in films to be distorted into one of conflict or cloying dependence. It is argued that traditional depictions of the mother as virtuous and chaste serve to suppress her own sexual desires and needs. Finally, it observes that against the evidence of historical record, in films of the bush, the mother is nowhere to be seen. Her absence permits and legitimates aggressive images of the subjection of women and of the landscape.

¹⁶The film was T.O. McCreadie's *Always Another Dawn*, (1947). See chapter 3 for review.
It is appropriate to evaluate the findings and implications of the research in terms of its psychoanalytic, sociological and feminist framework. Pointing out the limitations of representations of mothers on screen has the potential to increase women's self-awareness. In a social sense, it may broaden women's understanding of their own capabilities and provide a means to examine their maternal lifestyle and contribution to the family and community. Finally, feminists may use the conclusions to challenge previously unquestioned cinematic concepts of men's superiority in society.