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ADAPTATIONS:
AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE TO FILM
1989-1998

DENISE FAITHFULL

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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Adaptations: Australian Literature to Film
1989-1998

This thesis explores the processes of adapting Australian literary and theatrical texts for the cinema during 1989-1998. The introduction sets out the main aims of the project, the general approach chosen, and briefly refers to the four different types of adaptations to be discussed. Chapter One gives an overview of the debate about adapting literature to film, covering various historical and contemporary theoretical and ideological views concerning cinematic versions of literary and theatrical works.

Chapters Two, Three, Four and Five discuss selected texts as examples of a particular type of adaptation. Chapter Two examines “faithful” adaptations, with Hotel Sorrento (1995) chosen an example of a “dutifully faithful” adaptation as against The Well (1997) which is a “skeletally faithful” adaptation of a literary text. Chapter Three looks at the “variation”, arguably the most controversial kind of adaptation because of the significant changes made to the ancestral text. Cosi (1995), Blackrock (1997) and The Boys (1998) are used as examples of this category. Chapter Four explores Blackfellas (1992) and Death in Brunswick (1991) as examples of the “appropriation”, a type of adaptation radically different from the antecedent text. In Chapter Five Dead Heart (1997) is discussed as an example of an “intersection”, the fourth type of adaptation.

The overall argument throughout, summarized in the conclusion, is that “intersections” are fundamentally cinematic while at the same time make no significant changes to the source, preserving the
integrity of both the source and the film, while “faithful” adaptations are essentially uncinematic because they privilege the literary text. “Variations” and “appropriations”, however, are the most controversial kinds of adaptations because of the changes made in the film versions. A secondary argument woven throughout the thesis is that critics and other audiences too often, and mistakenly, use “fidelity” to the source as the main aesthetic criterion when discussing an adaptation, rather than discussing the film that was actually made.
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My thanks to all those people who encouraged me to begin and complete this study. In particular I am grateful to Jenny Day and Brian Hannant, who were always ready to share their encyclopaedic knowledge of the Australian film industry and their resources. Thanks also to my colleagues Dolores Creevey, Wendy Mathers, Ian McNeil and Wendy Zammit for their unflagging interest in the project; to Pam Perrin for her warm support; and to Faramarz Abdollahian for his interest during the early stages.

A special “thank you” also to Christopher and Sebastian for their constant encouragement, and to James for his goodwill and assistance with Photoshop.

Finally, I am very grateful to my supervisor, Professor Elizabeth Webby, for her patience and careful readings of the various drafts. Without her, I could not have completed this project.
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INTRODUCTION

This study deals with Australian literary texts which have been adapted to film during the decade 1989-1998. It explores the adaptations that have been made, what this might suggest about our times, and how audiences, including critics, responded to the films. It also examines the processes filmmakers used to adapt literary and theatrical texts, and the kinds of adaptation made. While occasionally I have discussed how effective, in my view, a film was in terms of its formal and aesthetic codes and conventions, my primary aim is to explore the process of adaptation rather than to judge the film.

Chapter One, Literature and Cinema: An Overview, attempts to outline in very general terms some of the theoretical concerns regarding adapting literature to film and some of the reasons why adaptations are done in the first place. There are also observations on the process and types of adaptations made. Later chapters explore particular kinds of adaptations. While other films of the same type of adaptation are referred to, close analysis is confined to selected texts in each category.

This study is not concerned with the Australian film industry itself, that is, financing of films, industrial practices within the industry, tax incentives, marketing, distribution, exhibition, copyright and moral rights, or other non-text related issues. Although I accept that these things influence the making of, and response to, a film, they have been often discussed, and continue to be discussed, by others far more
qualified than I in these areas. Much less frequently explored in
Australian screen culture are theoretical issues concerned with
“reading” film and the actual process of adapting literature to film.
While Brian McFarlane has contributed significantly to this debate, his
latest work *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*
(1996) does not deal with Australian texts. No-one else has seriously
examined or discussed in any real depth the more recent adaptations
of Australian literature to film, something which I hope this study will
begin to rectify.

I have confined my discussion to film adaptations of published
material, written by an Australian, a migrant to Australia, or a
permanent resident. For these reasons, I have not discussed, for
instance, *Dead Calm* (1989) which, although it had Australian
characters played by Australian actors, is an adaptation of the novel
*Dead Calm* by the American author Charles Williams.¹ Furthermore,
the films discussed here all conform to the generally accepted notion
of an “Australian film”; that is, they were “produced...in Australia
using significant levels of Australian participation in cast and key
creative production roles, and/or Australian facilities”. These are the
general guidelines issued by the Australian Film Institute by which a
film is judged to be eligible for an AFI Award, and are similar to the
Australian Film Commission’s definition of an Australian film for funding
purposes. Many of the adaptations discussed in this study were
nominated in one or more categories for AFI Awards and many actually
won awards, as noted in the relevant section of the discussion of a
particular film.

¹ Neither have I included, for example, the film *Life* (1996), an adaptation of John
Brumpton’s unpublished stageplay, *Containment*. 
There is a convention in the film industry, certainly not accepted by everyone, that the director of a film receives the possessory credit. Thus, when referring to films, an accepted practice is to state the title of the film followed by the director’s name and the year of release, e.g., Cosi (Mark Joffe, 1995), or to refer to the film as Mark Joffe’s Cosi. In either case, the director of the film is seen as the “author” of the film. In their article “How Directors Contribute to the ‘Big Lie’ of Filmmaking”, Simon Lake and Ian David claim that:

The possessory credit is so ingrained in film culture that it dictates the way in which we talk about film...It’s a lazy and it’s an inaccurate way to discuss film.²

Cherry Potter, Canadian screenwriter and academic, elaborates further on this argument:

In the theatre...it’s normal for the theatre writer to initiate and develop the play...The theatre director’s job is then quite clear; his task is to realize the writer’s play. The writer is traditionally present at the first read through and main rehearsals of the first production of a new play and the final refinements to the text are made as a result of seeing how the play is working in performance — but each re-write can only be made at either the initiative of the writer or

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² Cinema Papers, April 1997, p.30
with the writer’s permission. It is also usually
clear to a theatre audience what should be credited
to the writer, and what is to the director’s credit.
Such clearly defined norms for the roles of writer
and director don’t exist in the film industry, which
tends to give the director the major credit for
the film, irrespective of whether or not he
wrote the script. This is mainly due to the
hybrid nature of the film medium. It is the
director who draws together all the different
artistic contributions: writing, directing,
acting, art-direction, camera, sound, editing
and music. But how much credit this final
level of authorship should be given...is an
ongoing debate in film history. The argument
for director’s authorship, or the ‘auteur theory’
says that the same screenplay if made by
two directors would result in two quite
different films because the meanings and
the themes communicated through film
language would take predominance over those
communicated through the script. Personally
I’m not convinced by either argument. Making
a film is always a team activity and so true
credit for authorship will vary from project
to project.³

³ Cherry Potter, Images, Sound and Story: The Art of Telling in Film, Secker &
In the light of these comments and many others made in the various and continuing debates about possessory credits and "authorship", and especially in view of the extraordinarily collaborative nature of film, I am on the side of those who, for the most part, reject the "auteur" theory. Of course, I accept that some directors are able to infuse a film with a visual style, to put their "visual signature" on it, as it were, but this can only be done with the help of a very large team, including producers, cinematographers, designers and editors. In the case of adaptations, there is the additional problem of moving from source to script to film.

It might also be worth pointing out that the auteur theory is particularly difficult to apply to a discussion of Australian films in general, since there is a tendency for funding bodies to favour first-time directors. "Some call it the Peter Pan syndrome. Others talk about the cult of the new," writes Garry Maddox. He goes on to point out that more than 55 percent of Australian films in the period 1994-1999 were directed by newcomers and in "two of these years, 1995-96, and 1997-98, about two-thirds of our films were made by first-timers." He believes this is because the Australian film industry has a "continuing enthusiasm for new directors as it chases the next Strictly Ballroom, Shine, Muriel's Wedding or The Castle." Maddox goes on to argue that

the departure of a new generation of successful directors to Hollywood and the relentless drive to unearth 'the next big hope' often on the basis of a short film or two, have contributed to the number of first-timers at a time when
Australian films are struggling for commercial success.⁴

There are probably those who, despite this phenomenon of “first-timers”, would argue that the auteur theory might still be applied because of the director’s distinctive use of *mise en scène* and also because, in some cases, the director wrote the script. In reply, one might quote Andrew Sarris whose inquiry into the auteur theory describes three premises upon which the theory rests. The second premise, I would argue, is the most convincing claim that a director could be called the author of a film. Sarris claims that:

The second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels. This is an area where American directors are generally superior to foreign directors. Because so much of the American cinema is commissioned, a director is forced to express his personality through the visual treatment of material rather than through the literary content of the

Sexist language aside, Sarris's succinct definition is worth applying when tackling the difficult question of authorship of a film. The key phrase in his definition is "over a group of films". If the director is a "first-timer", it is very difficult to claim that the director is an "auteur". Sarris sums up this view when he writes that "single works" do not "matter much". Since few Australian directors receive the opportunity to make more than half a dozen feature films in Australia in a lifetime (many make less), and many of the film adaptations discussed or cited in this study were directed by "first timers", there is little point in arguing here on behalf of the auteur theory.

Because of these complexities, and also because of film's essential collaborative essence, I have chosen to cite films by their title followed by the year of their copyright in parentheses, e.g., Cosi (1995), and refer to the director only when it is relevant to analysis.

The types of adaptations I explore are: those "faithful" to the original source; "variations" which seek to comment on, or vary, the source for particular reasons; adaptations which "appropriate" and sometimes subvert the original text and, in the process, significantly alter the source, and those which "intersect" with the original work. During the decade under scrutiny, all four approaches have been adopted by Australian filmmakers, although there has been a

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6 Ibid. p.588.
preference for the "faithful" adaptation and the "variation". Of the twenty-four adaptations made during the years 1989 to 1998 (10 plays, 12 novels and two collections of short stories), eight could be classified as "faithful" adaptations, about half were "variations", two were "appropriations" and two were "intersections".7

The "faithful" method of adapting a literary text to the screen attempts to reproduce essential features of the original, such as narrative, characters, structure, themes, and settings. More importantly, however, in these adaptations the filmmakers hold the original uppermost in their minds as they work; they try to "measure up" to the original text, believing they have a duty, for the most part, to be "faithful" to it. These kinds of adaptations seek to transform the words of the precursor text into images and sounds with a minimum of interference. The adaptations of Hotel Sorrento (1995), The Sum of Us (1994), The Well (1997), Brilliant Lies (1996), and The Sound of One Hand Clapping (1998) are examples of this type of adaptation. I have chosen to concentrate on the filmic versions of The Well and Hotel Sorrento because they are very good examples of the process and consequences of trying to produce a faithful adaptation of a novel and a play.

A second commonly recognized method of adapting a literary text to film is the "variation", or "commentary". This approach retains the core of the source's narrative and much of the other essential features of the original, but emphasizes, de-emphasizes or re-arranges certain aspects of the original text. Variations engage in a subtle,

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7 See Appendix A for the list of films categorized by type of adaptation.
often critical, “conversation” with their source. While following the antecedents’ structures and content in a similar way to “faithful” adaptations, the filmmakers nevertheless want to show some elements of the source in a slightly different light. Some critics view this method as an outright infringement on the original work. But there are others like Brian McFarlane, who consider that to “comment” on the original text is “surely one of the functions a screen adaptation of a novel, especially a well-known one, might fulfil.” In his discussion of the adaptation of Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, McFarlane argues that “Emma Thompson’s writing gives the narrative a feminist thrust: it’s not that she distorts Jane Austen, but that her screenplay (and the film as a whole) provides a critical commentary on the antecedent text.” Many of the adaptations produced in the 1990s fall into this category, including *Turtle Beach* (1992), *The Heartbreak Kid* (1993), *Cosi* (1995), *Blackrock* (1997) and *The Boys* (1998). The texts discussed here are *Cosi, Blackrock and The Boys*, chosen because not only are they characteristic variations but because they are all variations of stageplays. I hope to show that, while there are some common techniques used when adapting theatrical texts, the individual choices made for each project influence both content and *mise en scène*, resulting in varying degrees of cinematic impact.

The third type of adaptation discussed here are those films in which the makers deliberately appropriate, or “subvert”, the original literary text. The concept of appropriation, or subversion, is defined by Keith Cohen as “a more radical response from filmmakers to literary

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9 Ibid.
material". These films carry in them, he argues, "a hidden criticism of [their] model". Film adaptations which appropriate their source are a deliberate attempt on the part of filmmakers to criticize or deconstruct the original, even to the point of altering it entirely. It could be argued that adaptations of this type, which purloin their original's title yet are in many significant ways unlike their source (for example, Death in Brunswick), are arguably more adventurous films than those adaptations which seek to remain "faithful" to the original. In general, the makers of appropriations are not cautious adaptors, disregarding the original completely when it suits them. The two appropriations made in the decade covered in this study, and discussed in some detail, are Blackfellas (1993) and Death in Brunswick (1991). Blackfellas, based on Archie Weller's novel The Day of the Dog, is an example of a filmic text different enough from its source for the filmmakers to give it another title. In contrast, Death in Brunswick retains the original title, even though it is quite different from the novel. Death in Brunswick is also an example of the way in which a film adaptation can be a better creative text than its source.

Finally, there are those films which attempt to "intersect" with the original; that is, they are the original "as seen by cinema". In What is Cinema? André Bazin explains that these kinds of adaptations are in no sense

a translation, no matter how faithful
or intelligent. Still less is it a
question of free inspiration with the

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intention of making a duplicate. It is a question of building a secondary work with the [original] as foundation. In no sense is the film 'comparable' to the [original] or 'worthy of it'. It is a new aesthetic creation; the [original] so to speak, multiplied by the cinema.... The resulting work is 'more' than the book... [including] all that the [source] has to offer plus, in additon, its refraction in the cinema.\textsuperscript{11}

French scriptwriter Jean-Claude Carrière puts it more simply. He claims that:

There is a special way to read a book when you think about making a film...it's to try... a transparent reading to see if there is a film waiting for you behind the book... [you need to see] if there is a possibility for a writer and a filmmaker to tell the same story using the means of action, scenes and acting...the main thing to do when [writing an adaptation] is not to illustrate the book, to be faithful to the book doesn't mean a thing — the main thing is to make a film.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} Interview with Jean-Claude Carrière, \textit{Masterpiece}, SBS, July, 1995.
I argue that this focus on making a film which cinematically "matches" its original, as opposed to striving to re-present, in audio-visual language, a literary text on the screen, is the primary difference between faithful adaptations and intersections. I hope to show that faithful adaptations always privilege the written text they are based on and too often are cinematically dull, in contrast to intersections, which seek to reflect, match, or intersect with the source in creative and fundamentally cinematic ways. Arguably there are only two film adaptations made in Australia in the last ten years which intersect with their original sources: these are Dead Heart (1997) and Head On (1998). I have chosen to discuss Dead Heart in some detail, not only because it is a fine example of an intersection, but also because it explores what I consider to be a crucial issue for the twenty-first century: that is, the complex relationship between two vastly different cultures, white Anglo-Celtic and the Indigenous. Dead Heart also provides a contrast with the appropriation Blackfellas (1992) in that it never seeks to impose a "whitefella" solution to the problems that exist, neither does it favour one view of the world over another, whereas Blackfellas sets out to do both.

At the heart of this study is a general argument that adaptations which are "faithful" to the original provide the least satisfying cinematic experience because the films are deliberately subordinated to literature, whereas adaptations which intersect with their original are the most satisfying because they are made with cinema and source as equals in the minds of the filmmakers. Films which are a variation on, or which appropriate their sources, may or may not be cinematic, depending on the filmmakers' skills, but are, arguably, the most controversial from an audience's point of view.
because of the significant changes made to the original when translating it to the screen.

These, then, are the four types of adaptations discussed in this study. I have not mentioned the other commonly recognized category, referred to as "borrowing", in which aspects of the original are used as an inspiration to create an almost completely different text, since I do not consider these films to be adaptations proper; rather they are films only loosely based on elements from another source, too different from the original to be considered adaptations. An Australian example from the last decade of a "borrowing" is the film Traps (1994) which was "inspired" by Kate Grenville's novel Dreamhouse.

The adaptations included in this study have been confined to adult texts (classified M+ or above), all of which are full-length narrative feature films (i.e. dramas of more than 60 minutes shot and/or projected on 16, 35 or 65/70 mm film) which were released in a theatre before going to video, as opposed to going straight to video. Childrens' films, short films and documentaries, therefore, have been excluded.

My method of analysis is similar to George Bluestone's in his study of adaptation of novels to film, i.e., repeated viewings of the films with both the script, where available, and the original literary source at hand, making notes about omissions, additions, or alterations before beginning categorising or discussing the selected films referred to above. In my discussions of films I have also generally applied Dudley
Andrew's four categories to "interrogate" a film, although I have concentrated less on categories one and two than on three and four.\textsuperscript{13}

Apart from a long-held fascination with the process of adapting literature to the "big screen", I undertook this study because I believe that the value of having a national cinema which reveals to its audiences their own stories, and explores what it means to be Australian and to live in Australia, is incalculable. The "cultural capital", to use a common phrase, in supporting a national cinema and its accompanying culture is immense. Tom O'Regan notes that:

At best Australian film supplement the audience's and the exhibition and distribution industry's mostly Hollywood diet. National cinemas are structurally marginal, fragile and dependent on outside help. In their own domestic market and internationally, they are often structurally dispensable in that exhibitors, distributors and audiences can make do without their product, though they cannot do without international product...The aim of a national cinema in this market is not to replace Hollywood films with say Australian films so much as to provide a viable and healthy local supplement to Hollywood cinema... National cinemas provide a means to identify, assist, legitimate, polemicize, project and otherwise

\textsuperscript{13} For a full discussion of these categories, see J. Dudley Andrew, \textit{The Major Film Theories}, Oxford University Press, London, 1976, pp.7-8.
create a space nationally and internationally for non-Hollywood film-making activity...[they] work to be local while streamlining themselves to be of interest to audiences outside Australia.\textsuperscript{14}

Another reason for undertaking this project is that I believe, along with many others, that films, and especially television, have now overtaken print literature as the primary means by which most Australian audiences access stories, and yet for the most part audiences continue to discuss these stories without making any distinction between the "language of literature" and the "language of film" (or television). Encouraging audiences to debate audio-visual stories, whether or not they are adaptations, using the basic "language of cinema" is one of the aims of this study, along with my desire to add to and reinforce what little serious study there is available on Australian films.

CHAPTER ONE
LITERATURE AND CINEMA
AN OVERVIEW

André Bazin, in his much-quoted essay “In Defense of Mixed Cinema”, comments that “critics are apt to view with regret the borrowings made by cinema from literature”. He goes on to argue that:

It is nonsense to wax wroth about the indignities practised on literary works on the screen, at least in the name of literature. After all, they cannot harm the original in the eyes of those who know it, however little they approximate to it. As for those who are unacquainted with the original, one of two things may happen; either they will be satisfied with the film which is as good as most, or they will want to know the original, with the resulting gain for literature. This argument is supported by publishers’ statistics that show a rise in the sale of literary works after they have been adapted to the screen. No, the truth is, that culture in general and literature in particular have
nothing to lose from such an enterprise.¹

Bazin’s view is reinforced by more recent film theorists, such as John Tibbetts and James Welsh, who in their discussion of the adaptation of Tom Wolfe’s novel The Bonfire of the Vanities, argue that the filmmakers’ intention

was merely to exploit the novel and its popularity, not to replicate its satiric substance. Watching the film, one might reasonably conclude that the filmmakers were not clever enough to determine what the novel was truly about....The film trivializes the novel and misunderstands the novelist’s method and intent. It was a terrible adaptation that deserved to fail, and it did. Can one say, however, that it ruined the book? No, the book survives in its own medium.²

Similarly, Helen Glad, Norman Lindsay’s granddaughter, in response to worries that the film adaptation of The Magic Pudding would “undermine the integrity of Norman Lindsay’s original creation”, argued that:

² John Tibbetts and James Welsh, Novels Into Film: The Encyclopedia of Movies Adapted from Books, Checkmark Books, New York, 1999, p.xx
The classic Magic Pudding is quarantined...
It's only the story of the pudding which has been given away. The book will always be there. For generations to come.³

Béla Balázs, one of the earliest theorists to write about adaptation, claims in his study *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art* that it is

an accepted practice that we adapt novels and plays for the film; sometimes because we think their stories “filmic”, sometimes because the popularity they have gained as novels or plays is to be exploited in the film market.
Original film stories are very few and far between, a circumstance which undoubtedly points to the undeveloped state and imperfections of script-writing.⁴

Arguably, the “state” of “script-writing” is somewhat better some thirty years on, although, as Brian McFarlane claims:

It has become a cliché to say that the recurring weakness of the new Australian cinema is in its screenplays, but as with most clichés, there is an element of truth in it.⁵

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On the other hand, Louis Nowra, an experienced screenwriter, comments that while Australian scripts are in general “not good on sub-plot” and that in many films there is “not much going on” in terms of the narrative, the difficulties screenwriters face have far more to do with “interference” than with development or technical skills. He claims that Australian scriptwriters usually end up with hundreds of pages of notes, sometimes from various sources. Producers, producers’s boyfriends or girlfriends, the grip — everybody thinks they know what makes a good script and they’re constantly interfering, so that by the time you’ve done twenty drafts, which is usual, you actually think — that is not my film. There’s this filter, everybody’s fingerprints, over that film. But that’s the nature of screenwriting. You provide a blueprint, and you just send this blueprint out, waiting for the director to take hold of it, the producer to take hold of it and maybe badly cast. There’s all these things, and sometimes it does give me the shits — it’s this constant thing about Australians having bad scripts. Actually when you look at the scripts — a lot of scripts —

that is not the problem. The problem is the interference of producers too early, and...other associated problems that actually go with the whole notion of film business.⁶

This so-called “interference” seems particularly relevant to adaptations because of the inherent difficulties of dealing with various interpretations of an antecedent text.

There are many, especially young filmmakers, who scorn adaptations completely, viewing them as an unoriginal and unimaginative approach to filmmaking. Others, like Balázs, discount the opinions of all who object to adapting literature to film on principle, especially if the objection is based primarily on the theoretical reason of an organic connection between form and content. Balázs points out that “opponents” of adaptations are simply “wrong” and that their theoretically impeccable thesis is contradicted by such realities as these: Shakespeare took the stories of some of his very good plays from certain very good old Italian tales and the plots of the Greek classical drama were also derived from older epics.⁷

Balázs concludes that, anyway,

there is little point in discussing the practical aspects of this question. Shall we demand original film stories when even all the adaptations taken together are insufficient to satisfy the demand? In practice the law of supply and demand decides the issue.²

Balázs also passionately argues for the right, even the necessity, to re-interpret literary works through film. He notes that:

It may at first sound paradoxical to say that it is often a respect for the laws of style that govern the various art forms which makes adaptations justifiable and even necessary. The severe style of the drama, for instance, demands the omission of the multiple colours and changing moods of real life. The drama is the art form suited to great conflicts and the wealth of detail which a novel may contain finds no room in its severe structure. But sometimes the author is loath to let all the wealth of mood and detail go to waste and so he puts it into a novel rather than impair the pure style of the drama. And if an author wants to pour into a film the colours of life which are barred by the severe style of the drama, he does so not because he does not

² Ibid.
respect the style of the various art forms,
but because he respects them absolutely.\textsuperscript{9}

On the other hand, as far back as the 1950s, Francois Truffaut argued against screenwriters’ views, in particular those of Jean Aurech and Pierre Bost, that they need be faithful only to the “spirit” of the source, because certain scenes in the original were “unfilmable”. Aurech and Bost invented “equivalent” scenes to replace those they considered “unfilmable”. For Truffaut:

What annoys me about this famous process of equivalence is that I’m not at all certain that a novel contains unfilmable scenes, and even less certain that these scenes, decreed unfilmable, would be so for everyone.\textsuperscript{10}

He goes on to point out that French adaptors usually work according to a “literary tradition of quality”, and are thus “contemptuous of the cinema by underestimating it...moreover...they believe [they] honour the cinema by using literary jargon”. Truffaut, however, considers “an adaptation of value only when written by a man of the cinema and not by ‘literary men’.”\textsuperscript{11} He also rightly claims that the process of transferring a literary text to the screen should always be undertaken with an eye on cinematic mise en scène, and not on the literary ancestor.

\textsuperscript{9} ibid. p.265.
\textsuperscript{11} ibid. p.229.
Stanely Kubrick, when discussing the challenges he and his crew faced in making 2001, claimed that, "If it can be written, or thought, it can be filmed". James Griffith, quoting Kubrick, argued that this statement “could equally apply to the challenge of adapting novels to the screen”, but “might be altered to: If it can be thought, it can be written and filmed.”¹² This would seem to support Francois Truffaut’s claim that no part of a written text is “unfilmable”; it is simply a matter of getting the right people to do the job. James Griffith views the novel as an aesthetic problem to be solved and communicated; in adapting a novel for the screen, it is up to the filmmakers to solve the aesthetic problems so that the two texts “match”. The ability to match in cinema a literary text is limited only by the filmmakers’ imagination, he argues. “Talented” filmmakers, if they choose, can more than adequately “serve the works” of authors on the screen. He cites the adaptation of Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird as a film which “recreates the powers and pleasures of an excellent novel [in a film which] is a minor masterpiece.”¹³

Griffith’s argument that talent and imagination are the most important factors when reconstructing a written text for the screen echoes André Bazin’s:

The more important and decisive the literary qualities of the work, the more the adaptation disturbs its equilibrium, the more it needs a creative talent to reconstruct it on a new

equilibrium not indeed identical with, but the
equivalent of, the old one. To pretend that the
adaptation of novels is a slothful exercise from
which the true cinema, ‘pure cinema’, can have
nothing to gain, is critical nonsense to which
all adaptations of quality give the lie.\(^{14}\)

There have been thousands of words written about the
limitations of adaptations and the differences between film and the
printed word, most of them by materialist theorists or critics who
believe film versions of literature cannot, or probably should not, be
done, and that, when they are, they are ultimately deficient.
Materialists believe the medium itself is unable to capture the nuances
of literature, that there is an organic connection between form,
medium and content or, as George Bluestone would have it, because
"what is peculiarly filmic and what is peculiarly novelistic cannot be
converted without destroying an integral part of each."\(^{15}\) Dudley
Andrew, on the other hand, claims that the "image versus word
controversy...has provoked so much theory but so little sense".\(^{16}\)
James Griffith sums up the debate when he argues against deductive
propositions about film adaptations, pointing out that when "tested
inductively, broad premises ruling out effective adaptations...do not
merit validation".\(^{17}\) It needs to be remembered that each film

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\(^{14}\) André Bazin, 1967, p.68.
adaptation, like each novel or play upon which the adaptation is based, should be approached as a unique text.

Griffith also notes that many contemporary theorists tend to agree with George Bluestone that “The rendition of mental states — memory, dream, imagination — cannot be as adequately represented by film as by language”. He goes on to argue that Bluestone’s sample of films “does not represent film’s potential, and, therefore, does not warrant theoretical conclusions about all films.” He also describes how Bluestone has influenced many structuralist critics who argue that narrative *qua* narrative is structurally equivalent in writing and film, but the method of presentation remains as an all important feature that cannot be equivalent. In their own terms [structuralists] see writing as more internal and mental, film as more external and physical — the marks of Bluestone.

He points out, I think correctly, that “This separatist view has gained such predominance as to be accepted uncritically and taken as a given of popular film criticism.” The arguments of “separatist” critics and reviewers can be summed up by the American critic Pauline Kael’s straightforward view: “Movies are good at action; they’re not

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18 ibid.
19 ibid. p.29.
20 ibid.
good at reflective thought or conceptual thinking.”

Griffith concludes that these opinions have such power that even the entry under adaptation in popular reference books such as Ira Konigsberg's *The Complete Film Dictionary*...reiterates the dictum that 'Great novels have always been more resistant to adaptation because film cannot sufficiently depict their internalization of character or the richness and suggestiveness of their language.' Bluestone must have been right; you could look it up.

Like James Griffith, I do not accept this argument, neither do I agree with the practice of examining a film adaptation from a position which privileges the literary source over cinema and quibbles about how “different” the film was from the book, instead of discussing the film actually made. Griffith rightly notes that these arguments are simplistic. Of course “we read books and see and hear films”, he writes, but do these theorists “teach us about the aesthetic possibilities open to both arts or merely elaborate the obvious?” He argues that when these “purists” assert that

one cannot film the line ‘It is raining outside.’

I would answer, so what? The line hardly tells an interesting story anyhow. Within a narrative context, however—say a plot in which rain should evoke sadness, or cause comic complications—any filmmaker

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21 Quoted in James Griffith, 1997, p.29.
could arrive at that point in the plot and make it rain outside appropriately.\textsuperscript{23}

He concludes that, unfortunately, Virginia Woolf’s “assertion that some written works are beyond adaptation to the screen has virtually become a given of film criticism”.\textsuperscript{24}

Ultimately, along with Griffith, and despite my deep admiration for Virginia Woolf, my critical sensibilities lean toward Tolstoy and away from Woolf. Tolstoy’s excitement with cinema is clear when he writes that:

It is a direct attack on the old methods of literary art...But I rather like it. This swift change of scene, this blending of emotion and experience — it is much better than the heavy, long-drawn-out kind of writing to which we are accustomed. It is closer to life.\textsuperscript{25}

I would argue that, ultimately, what is really going on in these often irritating debates about the limitations of adapting literature to film is a general reluctance on the part of audiences who quibble about screen versions of literature to grapple with the film as cinema, preferring to fall back on the traditional “lit.crit.” approaches to the filmic text or, more often, on materialist theories concerning the limitations of the medium. Like James Griffith, it is worth going back

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. p.44.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. p.16.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. p.16.
to André Bazin who approaches the phenomenon of film adaptations quite differently from the materialists. Griffith argues that:

Bazin realizes the material differences, but he does not make the mistake of turning those differences into evaluative criteria or prescriptive rules. Rather, he sees in the differences — matters that other critics view as insurmountable barriers to adaptations — a challenge to filmmakers who would like to bring about growth in the art. In this way, Bazin...has already tried to set the particular issue of adaptation in relation to its proper variable: not the either-or, concept-percept variable of the medium, but the infinite variable of individual artists solving individual aesthetic problems.\textsuperscript{26}

Griffith, I think, is correct to argue that the filmmakers’ skills and imagination count far more than the medium itself. He goes on to quote Seymour Chatman’s view that:

What a medium can ‘do’ narratively depends very much on what its creator wants it to do, on the genre that he works in, on the kinds of conventions she [sic] can persuade her audience to accept, and so on.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. p.32.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
Griffith also notes that

a logical corollary concerns the big
question of fidelity for critics too
often blame weak adaptations on ‘inadequacies
deriving from the medium’ when they should
examine ‘those deriving from the artistic
infelicities of specific filmmakers.’ That is
to say, perhaps *The Sound and the Fury* can
be made into a great film, but somebody other
than Martin Ritt will have to do it.\(^{28}\)

Ultimately, I would agree with Bazin, Chatman and Griffith that
the main problems in adapting literature to the screen have to do with
filmmakers’ aesthetic and technical choices, not with the medium, and
that the “proper variable” to use when exploring the process of
adaptation is not the George Bluestone “either-or, concept-percept
variable of the medium, but the infinite variable of individual artistis
solving individual aesthetic problems.”\(^{29}\) It is perhaps worth noting
here that, like Bazin, Griffith also seems to prefer a particular kind of
adaptation, which he refers to as “reflections” and “imitations”; they
are films which “match” their literary ancestors. Dudley Andrew refers
to this approach to adaptation as an “intersection”\(^{30}\), a term I have
used in this study for adaptations which seem to me to be precisely


\(^{29}\) *Ibid.* p.32.

the result of this methodical process of “individual artists solving individual aesthetic problems” and discovering ways to “match” texts in the different media.

Those who oppose adaptations on the theoretical assumption that there is only one true form that fits the artistic content are arguably far less vociferous, however, than the fidelity brigade. At the heart of the fidelity argument is the critical assumption that film adaptations are hardly worth the effort, since they can almost never “measure up” to the literary ancestor. However, given that film versions of literature have always been and are still very much a part of the film industry, even the fidelity brigade must learn to accept their continued existence. The theoretical problem these critics choose to focus on is the extent to which the film adaptation is “like” the original. James Griffith accurately points out that “the possibility of faithfully transferring a work from one medium to another remains an issue” and has been “an issue...since nearly the beginning of film production.” Thus, fidelity critics will either trumpet that the film should never have been made, or use sayings like “they butchered the book”, “the film betrays the novel”, or “the book is better than the film”. As Imelda Whelehan argues:

For many people the comparison of a novel and its film version results in an almost unconscious prioritizing of the fictional original over the resulting film, and so the main purpose of comparison becomes the

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31 James Griffith, 1997, p.16.
measurement of the success of the film in its capacity to realize what are held to be the core meanings and values of the original text. [They apply] intensely subjective criteria... in order to determine the degree to which the film is ‘successful’ in extracting the ‘essence’ of the fictional text.32

As early as 1957, however, George Bluestone was arguing, rightly, that

it is as fruitless to say that film A is better or worse than novel B as it is to pronounce Wright’s Johnson’s Wax Building better or worse than Tchaikowsky’s Swan Lake. In the last analysis, each is autonomous, and each is characterized by unique and specific properties.33

Yet more than forty years later, remarks such as “The film isn’t as good as the book”, or “They ruined a good book”, are still frequently made, suggesting that Bluestone’s (and others’) message has not influenced the way some audiences, including many film reviewers and academics, automatically respond to adaptations. As Whelehan points out:

33 George Bluestone, Novels into Film, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1973, pp.5-6.
Although the study of literary adaptations on film and TV is becoming more common and indeed more ‘acceptable’ as a feature of English and/or Media Studies in higher education, it is still surrounded by knee-jerk prejudice about the skills such study affords, its impact on the value and place of the literary ‘original’ and the kind of critical approach it demands....Studying both fictional and filmic sources can be fraught with problems — particularly in making decisions about giving the ‘appropriate’ amount of attention to each medium, and fostering the skills specific to each form; but perhaps the chief problem lies in teasing out our own and others’ conscious and unconscious prejudices about this kind of ‘hybrid’ study.34

Brian McFarlane has also expressed his “dissatisfaction” regarding “the writing about films adapted from novels” because much of it “tends to spring from perceptions of ‘tampering’ with the original narrative”. McFarlane argues that the process of adaptation is often surrounded by “an air of deeply sinsiter molestation” and points out that these views resonate with a complex set of misapprehensions about the workings of narrative in the two media, about the irreducible differences between the two, and from a failure to distinguish what can from what cannot be transferred.

34 Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, 1999, p.3.
from one narrative medium to another... and what
necessarily requires adaptation proper.35

McFarlane also argues that "the insistence on fidelity has led to
a suppression of potentially more rewarding approaches to the
phenomenon of adaptation", and that fidelity criticism
tends to ignore the idea of adaptation as
an example of convergence among the arts,
perhaps a desirable — even inevitable — process
in a rich culture; it fails to take into serious
account what may be transferred from [literature] to film
as distinct from what will require more complex processes
of adaptation; and it marginalizes those production
determinants which have nothing
to do with [literature] but may be powerfully
influential upon the film. Awareness of such issues would
be more useful than those many accounts of how films
'reduce' great novels.36

McFarlane is also right to emphasize that any "true reading" of a
film adaptation must "depend on a response to how the cinematic
codes and aspects of the mise-en-scene work to create this particular
version of the text",37 rather than insisting upon its being faithful to
its source.

35 Brian McFarlane, Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation,
36 Ibid. p.10.
37 Ibid. p.22.
A second assumption fidelity critics make is founded on the cliché that "the better the book, the worse the movie adaptation; the worse the book, the better the movie". This is perhaps why the fidelity brigade is most shrill when it comes to discussing the "classics". Even Geoffrey Wagner, who is acutely aware of the processes and types of adaptations filmmakers produce, criticises the 1939 film version of *Wuthering Heights* because of its lack of fidelity to Bronte's novel. In this respect, though, he falls into his own trap of railing against the "ignorance" of filmmakers because of the changes they made in their adaptation, rather than accepting the film that was made and dealing with it on its own terms. After all, he himself acknowledges that the (still) frequent practice of re-shaping a text to emphasize the love story was the preferred method of transposing a literary source into a film during the 1930s and 1940s in Hollywood. Rather than accusing the studios of "ignorance" and crying out for fidelity to Bronte's novel, Wagner should have done what he cautions others to do: look carefully at the film and examine what you have before you. Had he done this he would have had no trouble placing *Wuthering Heights* (1939) into the category he calls "commentaries" (referred to in this study as variations) which, given the kinds of changes made in the novel's transference to the screen, is exactly where it belongs.

As pointed out earlier, the practice of "borrowing" from literature continues unabated, and adaptations are still very much a part of the international and Australian film industries' desire to exploit on the "big screen" for a large audience significant stories which, in print, would probably reach a relatively small one. It is worth reiterating that adaptation from one medium to another is not a new
phenomenon. The Ancient Greeks and Shakespeare drew on previously existing plays and stories for their plays, and fairytales have been widely transformed into pantomimes, plays and ballets, *Cinderella* being a particular favourite. Novels have frequently been adapted for the stage as ballet and opera (*Don Quixote* and *Voss* immediately spring to mind). As James Naremore argues, the "enterprise" of adaptation is "founded on the hypothesis of narrative transmutability". He rightly notes that

stories (and popular stories in particular) depend for their legibility on codes, conventions, connotations, topoi, and tropes that similarly migrate from medium to medium — in short, on an intertextuality that includes not only film and literature, but all other media as well. As Roland Barthes described this process, "The cultural codes [deployed by any single story]...will emigrate to other texts; there is no lack of hosts".\(^{38}\)

Yet rarely do reviewers of these performances spend any time whatsoever trying to establish to what extent the adaptation was "like" the source. After seeing Robert Helpman in *Don Quixote* many years ago in San Francisco, for instance, and later browsing through the reviews, I cannot recall a single critic discussing the degree to which the ballet mirrored the book; they discussed the ballet as a ballet, not as a version of Cervantes' novel.

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It is perhaps worth noting here that not only critics and reviewers consistently use fidelity to the source as a yardstick to measure the worth of a film adaptation. Often filmmakers themselves raise the issue of fidelity by referring to the extent of their film's faithfulness to the original. Thus Rowan Woods, director of *The Boys* (1998), argues that “people who saw the play do feel that the film is like the play, that it has the core elements, invokes some of the feelings that they had in the play.” Rachael Perkins, who directed *Radiance* (1998), made a point of telling the audience at the 1999 Sydney Film Festival that she had “purposefully penned a happy ending”, and Gillian Armstrong claimed that she and her crew had always tried to be faithful to the spirit of Peter Carey’s novel, *Oscar and Lucinda*. Much of the film, however, in particular the ending, is in no way faithful either to the spirit or the letter of the novel. Moreover, there seems to be an expectation, even by the author of the original text (if they are alive, of course) that a film adaptation will “look like” their work. Thus Gordon Graham, author of the play *The Boys*, can write that:

Somehow there’s an expectation that the translation from stage to screen will be a seamless, relatively painless process....If I ever subscribed to that view, I’d well and truly stopped by the end of the long process that saw my play end up on screen....I can live with

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it, though. What would have been harder to live with would have been if they had produced a bad film.\textsuperscript{41}

Hollywood’s Robert Wise admits that he has always insisted that my movies remain as faithful as possible to the spirit of each novel or story. ...I believe in putting the spirit of each story first and my own approach second...That’s the way it should be.\textsuperscript{42}

James Griffith, however, rightly argues “fidelity” to the source is a “poor criterion on which to base evaluative judgments of an adaptation”,\textsuperscript{43} concluding that:

> The discussion of adaptations will remain at loggerheads if the language of the discussion [continues to emphasize] ‘concept’ versus ‘percept’ [which] offers critical certainty and shuts off discussion...I would like [critics to discuss] what...filmmakers have done, rather than...what they may do.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{42} John Tibbetts and James Welsh, 1999. p.vii.  
\textsuperscript{43} James Griffith, 1997, p.193.  
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. p.230.
A final point worth mentioning is that the fidelity brigade generally assume that audiences know the original, whereas they often do not. In my survey dealing with adaptations of Australian literature in the decade 1989-1998, administered at random over several years to respondents of various ages, less than 5% had read, or, in the case of plays, seen, the source for the film version they had watched. In the case of students, my suggestion that they might one day wish to read the original text was usually greeted with a shake of the head, accompanied by statements like “I haven’t got time”, or “I’d rather watch a film”. To be fair, I recall one young female student who steadfastly refused to watch the film version of Sense and Sensibility because she was convinced it would “ruin her memories of the book”, and more recently two students told me they were reading Chopper but had no intention of seeing the film because “they’d rather read a book.” In her discussion of tie-ins, Imelda Whelehan, however, points out that it is well documented that more people who have enjoyed a film/TV adaptation will buy the literary version than will actually read it, but there is little research on how this potential new readerly community treat the novel or why they often never finish it. Another largely uninterrogated assumption is that film-goers seek out the authenticity of the original, recognizing that the visual interpretation cannot do justice to the depth and substance of the novel. But what if they find in the experience of reading the novel
a sense that it is merely a failed ‘version’
or a pale shadow of the film/TV series?
If we hold on to the ‘literary’ model of
reading as the ‘norm’ in these cases, we
are unable to account for those thousands
of unfinished copies of Middlemarch, unless
we take the pragmatic view that people
have more problems finding the time and
leisure to read a novel than they do to
view one.45

Another debate which has concerned some theorists and critics
is whether plays are easier to adapt for film than novels. Arguably, the
novel has more in common with film, although there has long been a
tendency for filmmakers to adapt stageplays. However, in contrast to
the screen version of novels which, often simply because of their
length, require robust and imaginative reworking, filmmakers have
mostly opted for “faithful to the letter” film versions of the plays.
André Bazin points out the pitfalls of adapting theatrical texts to the
screen. He argues that:

It has always been a temptation to the
film-maker to film theater since it is
already a spectacle; but we know what
comes of it. And it is with good reason
that the term ‘filmed theater’ has become a
commonplace of critical opprobrium. The

45 Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, 1999, p.18.
novel at least calls for some measure of creativity, in its transition from page to screen. The theater by contrast is a false friend; its illusory likeness to the cinema set the latter en route to a dead end, luring it onto the slippery slope of the merely facile.\footnote{André Bazin, 1967, pp.54-55.}

He further claims that the best kinds of adaptations of plays are not those which “imply respect for the theatrical character of the model as an inviolable principle” but those I have called in this study “variations” or “appropriations”, in which often quite radical changes are made to suit the filmmakers’ purpose and \textit{mise en scène}. Bazin argues that:

If the dramatic repertory of the boulevards...has occasionally been the source of a goodish film, that is only because the director has taken the same kind of liberty with the play as he would with a novel, retaining in fact only the characters and the plot.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.} p.55.}

His argument, however, is clearly based upon the belief that a stageplay’s theatrical features, apart from “characters and the plot” \textit{should} be altered in order to succeed cinematically, whereas, as I argue in my discussion of intersections, this is not necessarily so. Given the right combination of skills and the ability to visualize, imagine, or “see”
a film behind words on a page, arguably any written text can be successfully and cinematically adapted to the screen with a minimum amount of changes to the source. To repeat James Griffith’s dictum: “If it can be thought, it can be written and filmed.”

Why Adapt?

Filmmakers have always used literature as the “ore” to be “minted by story departments.” Adaptations of published Australian novels, short stories, plays, and even poems have been a consistent feature of the Australian film industry, beginning in 1907 with Robbery Under Arms. Of the eighteen or so feature films made in Australia every year since 1978, about four have been adaptations of literature (although, inexplicably, there was none in 1990). In a 1996 survey, industry professionals were asked to rank their 100 “key” Australian films. Almost one-third of the films listed were adaptations, and of the top 20 films, seven were adaptations. Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975), an adaptation, received first place.

As has been pointed out, adapting literary texts has always been done in the world of drama, from the earliest Greek plays, to Elizabethan England, and on up to the present. Despite much criticism of the process, adaptation was a natural thing for cinema to do. Virginia Woolf once argued that all “which is accessible to words and

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to words alone, the cinema must avoid."⁵¹ George Bluestone claimed that the “fitful relationship” between literature and film was “overtly compatible, secretly hostile”.⁵² Closer to home, Australian scriptwriter Michael Brindley, who wrote the screenplay for the film *Shame* (1988), while pointing out the value of original screenplays, referred to the process of adaptation as “parasitic”.⁵³ Helen Garner, in her review of the film *Short Cuts*, argued that the “world weariness” in the film was “utterly foreign to Carver’s tonal universe”, though claimed she did not want her review “to turn into another whinge about adaptation”. In her conclusion, however, she could not resist hoping “the great Raymond Carver...on whose back [Altman] is riding...is not turning in his grave.”⁵⁴

Some also argue that film adaptations deprive audiences of the literary experience because they do not allow for private, imaginative visualization and discourage audiences from reading. It is worth noting that some young audiences actually believe they have “read the book” if they have seen the film, especially if the title includes the author of the literary work, as in, for example, *William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet*, *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, and *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*. This practice of including the literary author’s name often, justifiably, results in angry outbursts from some audiences, especially young ones, who feel they have been deceived. Consider, for instance, the

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⁵³ Short Course, Screen Adaptation, Australian Film, Television and Radio School, 27-31 May 1996.
following dialogue I once had in class with an HSC student while we were studying the novel *Frankenstein*.

**Student:** The monster rips Elizabeth to bits — blood everywhere. Her eyes are hanging out. It's a really violent scene.

**Teacher:** Yes, that happens in the film, but have you read the book?

**Student:** No, but I saw the film.

**Teacher:** The film is not the same as the book.

**Student:** Yes it is, it's called *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*.

**Teacher:** Yes, but the film is not the novel.

**Student:** Well, they shouldn't have called it *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, then.

While not entirely against adapting literature to film, many nevertheless have mixed feelings about the process. In his review of the film *Smoke*, José Borghino argues that this "merging of the media", while not always to be encouraged, does have a "positive side [because] it may allow a few more writers to make real money and it may result in films with believable dialogue and well-crafted plots."\(^55\)

Brian McFarlane rightly points out that those who "argue that making film versions of literature...is to take an unadventurous approach to filmmaking" are expressing a view which is "probably nonsense". He goes on to say that "there are exciting and

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dull adaptations, which may or may not be true to the ‘spirit’ of the original". 56 The type of adaptation made is what is worth noting, not the fact of adaptation itself.

Indeed, there are many who enthusiastically support adaptations. Book publishers, for example, clearly have no objection to the process, often splashing across the cover of their tie-ins phrases like “Now a major film” (even if it was a small, low budget affair), in an attempt to increase sales. Some tie-ins do increase sales: it was widely reported that Sydney publishers Allen and Unwin, for instance, who produced the tie-in of Sense and Sensibility with a still photograph from the film on its cover, sold more than 20,000 copies of Austen’s novel in only six weeks. Similarly, there are often “spin offs” from a film which are sometimes useful in education, such as sell-through videos, screenplays, study guides and CD-ROMS.

Some see adaptations as a sensible approach to the paucity of strong, original screenplays. Film reviewer Peter Castaldi, for example, believes that “adaptations are the way to go, especially with plays...because after all the dynamics and characters are already all worked out.” 57

It is also a long-held belief that adapting books to film is acceptable because it increases the cultural prestige of the film, especially if the source is a literary classic. As Geoffrey Wagner has

57 Peter Castaldi, Forum on Australian Film, University of Sydney, 26 July 1997.
argued “when the source of a film is a prior work of art, perhaps a well-known novel, there is an extra-curricular meaning to start with.\(^{58}\)

Morris Béja, in his *Film and Literature: An Introduction*, points out that

some of the important impulses toward adaptations may not be, strictly speaking, ‘literary’ at all; they are financial, perhaps, or derive from the sheer need to come up with material to be filmed.\(^{59}\)

It needs to be recalled that film, probably more than any other artform, because of its commercial nature, must reach large audiences to recoup even part of its budget. Predictions about what films mass audiences might choose to see have always influenced the type of films made and the way they are produced, marketed and screened. As George Bluestone rightly points out:

*Just a step behind the artist, and sometimes overtaking him, has been the shaping power of censor and audience. In the film, more than in any of the other arts, the signature of social forces is evident in the final work.*\(^{60}\)


\(^{60}\) George Bluestone, 1973, p.35.
In the Australian film industry, some believe that adaptations are a producer-driven phenomenon. Producers choose adaptations because of their commitment to managing financial risk, preferring to make films based on a book which sold well, or on a play that audiences liked. Some producers push adaptations for no other reason than that they themselves enjoyed the book or the play and thought it would make a good film. Many directors are also in favour of screen versions of literary and theatrical texts. In a survey of Australian directors in which they were asked to name books they would most like to film, Roger Donaldson nominated Beryl Markham’s West with the Night, Geoff Burton claimed he was “desperately keen to film Bruce Chatwin’s The Songlines”, and Philip Noyce wanted to do another film version of The Quiet American by Graham Greene. For many producers (and directors) the desire to see and hear “a good story” on film is often a “happy meeting of commercial and artistic interests”, and if adaptation is a way of meeting that desire, then so be it.

Then there are those who believe that film adaptations have actually “in some crucial ways...liberated [literature] by [taking it] out of the solemn and self-important hands of the syllabus-makers” and putting it into the domain of large audiences, most of whom will never read the book upon which the film was based, and so, without the film, would have been deprived of the story. This is usually deprivation by choice, however, in contrast to those who will never read the book because they are illiterate. Thus Alice Walker reluctantly agreed to Steven Spielberg’s adaptation of her novel The Color Purple because

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61 “Books I’d Like to Film”, Independent Monthly, November 1995, p.82.
she believed that “many of the people she wanted to reach could not read books, but might watch a film.” Bertolt Brecht also believed in the value of adapting literature to the screen for a range of different audiences. As long ago as the 1930s, he pointed out that film adaptations were an important social as well as cultural phenomenon. He argued that:

Literature needs the film not only indirectly but also directly, [because film] provides (or could provide)...conclusions about human actions in detail. Its splendid inductive method...could be of infinite significance to the novel. [Film] can be used better than almost anything else to supersede the old kind of untechnical, anti-technical ‘glowing’ art, with its religious links. [These] so-called ‘sacrosant works of art’ [should not be shut off] from every process and influence of our time.65

The interdependence of literature and film is also discussed by Graeme Turner, who points out that:

The limitations on the comparative analysis of literary fiction and the feature film are dominated by the socio-political situation of the two forms and the disciplines which examine them.

Literary fiction is an elite, privileged form, — one which is

legitimated by its commitment to an objective of excellence, however that is defined; while the feature film is produced by a commercial industry which is unable to survive without creating a popular audience...The discomfort of the literary critic with popular cultural forms has a long and distinguished history, where all sorts of arguments have been advanced about the survival of ‘minority’ culture against the threats of ‘mass civilization’ right from Matthew Arnold, through Leavis and Eliot...the limited degree of intercourse that occurs between the two disciplines has to deal with suspicions of elitism and imperialism on the one hand, and accusations of ‘trendiness’ on the other.66

In his study of film adaptation, James Naremore also argues that “the study of English literature in... universities owes its very existence” to Matthew Arnold’s view that “culture is synonymous with great works of art” and that

the best that has been thought and said can have a civilizing influence, transcending class tensions and leading to a more humane society [...an argument] more subtly elaborated by such later figures as T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis.67

He goes on to claim that because of this view:

> English professors have traditionally been suspicious of mass-produced narratives from Hollywood, which seem to threaten or debase the values of both ‘organic’ popular culture and high literary culture.\(^{68}\)

Managing financial risk, a producer’s or a director’s personal interests, and the increasing, though still controversial, acquiescence to the convergence of print with audio-visual texts are all sound reasons for adapting a novel or a play to film. However, while trying to establish the main impulses for adapting a text to the screen is an interesting exercise, it is ultimately of no real importance, since adapting literature to film is a practice which has been done since cinema began, continues to be done, and surely will continue to be done. The Hollywood Oscar and the AFI Award for Best Adapted Screenplay are hardly likely to be abandoned in the near future. As mentioned in the Introduction, far more interesting questions to ask about the phenomenon of cinema adaptations are: When was the text adapted and what does this suggest about our times? What kinds of audiences (box office as well as reviewers and critics) were interested in the film and why? How did the filmmakers go about adapting the literary text? What kind of an adaptation did they choose, and how did this influence the writing of the script, the film’s narrative, structure and *mise en scène*? These are the kinds of questions I will be trying to answer in some detail in the following chapters devoted to

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\(^{67}\) James Naremore, 2000, p. 2.
\(^{68}\) *Ibid.*
analysing specific texts as well as to exploring some of the theoretical issues surrounding the kinds of adaptations made. It is perhaps also worth noting here that the act of adaptation is, ultimately, an important contribution to the aesthetic and cultural project, not only because of the fact of converging technologies and the burgeoning study of intertextuality, but, because of the increasing reluctance of many, particularly young audiences, to read literature in print.

Cinematic Literacy

In 1970, Béla Balázs asked what is still a fair question: “Why are people not taught to appreciate films?” He goes on to point out that

the aesthetics of the film are nowhere included in the official teaching of art appreciation...At our universities there are chairs for literature and all arts except that of the film...Millions hear about the aesthetics of literature and painting who will never make use of such knowledge because they read no books and look at no pictures. But the millions who frequent the movies are left without guidance — no-one teaches them to appreciate film art...

The most important art of our time is that about which one needs know nothing whatever. And yet it is an urgent need that we should cultivate enough discrimination to influence the art which shapes the popular taste in the
highest degree. Until there is a chapter on film art in every text-book on the history of art and on aesthetics; until the art of the film has a chair in our universities and a place in our curriculum of our secondary schools, we shall not have firmly established in the consciousness of our generation this most important artistic development of our century.\textsuperscript{69}

Not a great deal, in Australia at least, has changed in the decades since Balázs argued for cinema’s rightful place in educational circles, although there are now numerous Australian institutions and organizations involved in varying degrees and at varying levels in cinema studies. The Australian Film Institute’s Research and Information Centre claimed in its 1999 Annual Report that “media, communication and cinema studies” are the fastest growing tertiary courses “in the country”.\textsuperscript{70} Yet it is also true to say that film and media studies are still marginalized. In his discussion of media education in New York, Michael Dezuanni notes that in Australia despite twenty years of engagement with critical pedagogy and the development of media education policy documents in most States, media education continues to reside at the periphery of the curriculum.

\textsuperscript{69} Béla Balázs, 1970, pp.18-19.
\textsuperscript{70} Ruth Jones, “Chief Executive Statement”, 1999 Australian Film Institute Annual Report, p.01.
in many of our schools. The Australian media education cause is advanced by dedicated classroom teachers and the occasional educational policy maker or academic.71

While the Australian film industry's revival began in the 1970s, there continues to be a paucity of screen culture outlets and only a token, and often optional, nod to film and/or television studies in schools and TAFE colleges. This means that, for the most part, audiences interested in film, apart from buying or borrowing books concerned with the cinema, must still rely upon reviews and reports in the mainstream media to "educate" them about film. In the case of adaptations, very rarely do the authors of these reviews or reports discuss the process of adapting literature to film. When they do, the discussion generally centres around the degree to which the film was "faithful" to the original. Space is devoted to comparing and contrasting the two texts, often at a simplistic level, by pointing out differences in character and narrative usually using the "language" of literary criticism rather than the "language" of cinema. Invariably the film is found wanting in its ability to measure up to the literary source and provocative views, such as that the film version "should never have been made", or "the book is better than the film", are often put forward. The notion that there are at least four different kinds of adaptation, and the reasons why the filmmakers may have chosen a particular type of adaptation, as discussed in this study, are rarely explored by critics.

Another reason, perhaps, why the study and appreciation of cinema adaptations (and indeed, cinema in general) is, to a large degree, neglected in many educational institutions in Australia is because there still seems to be a tendency to see films as merely part of “popular culture”, or as “lowbrow” art forms, too easy, and too superficial, to be worth studying. In his National Fictions, Graeme Turner rightly points out that while film generates widespread popular interest and discussion in the popular press as well as in more specialist journals such as Cinema Papers72 there is not a large body of academic criticism on Australian films, nor a wide spread of analysis of individual films outside the the review pages of the popular or industry press. Having gained respectability only recently, film studies are thus still to emerge from the marginalised position which they have held in Australian academia... Australian film — even more so than Australian literature — is often seen to be beneath consideration.73

It could be argued, however, that those who hold these kinds of opinions about film simply do not understand the “language” of cinema

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72 At the time of writing, Cinema Papers is still struggling to get back on its feet, having lost some of its funding.
73 Graeme Turner, 1993, pp.3-4.
or refuse to acknowledge how complex and difficult it is to "read"; nor do they have a real grasp of the production and industrial environments in Australia which influence the construction of the cinematic texts which end up on the screen. Turner argues that one of the main problems is that film theorists usually have a literary background and that historically film has been treated as a literary text. This is why, he reasons, when it comes to theoretical discussions of adaptations, the critics' approach frequently "intuits an 'ideal' version of the literary source...[and] tends to privilege the literary text — by valorising those of its functions which are difficult to duplicate on the screen."\(^{74}\)

James Griffith, however, rightly cautions critics and academics to avoid focusing on the "thing". He argues that

the physics of light does not compose,
the chemistry of emulsion does not speak,
and the persistence of vision does not intend...
they just are. Behind these things that are sit filmmakers who mean. In order to discover what they mean, either in original screenplays or adaptations, we must use a manner of speaking that will account for their aesthetic choices and intentions.\(^{75}\)

Christian Metz, in his *Language and Cinema*, was one of the earliest theorists to attempt to deal systematically with the

complexities of cinematic meanings. In contrast to the "language" of literature, Metz points out, the "language" of cinema is an "ensemble of codes". He claims that one of the main difficulties with "reading" cinema is that it is "not arbitrary", in contrast to "phonetic writing" (or simply "writing", as the word is generally understood). While "writing" and "cinema" are both processes of "duplication", or "substitutes", he argues that

the process of obtainment of the transmission
does not follow the same paths in the two
cases. The cinematic substitute, in order to
exist, needs all the codes — psycho-
physiological, like perception itself; socio-
cultural codes, like judgements of ‘similarity’;
socio-linguistic codes, like the codes of
iconic designations...which together produce
analogy, the "iconicity" of American
semioticians...and the impression of a
perceptual similarity felt by each and every
one. The substitute, here, is coded without
being ‘arbitrary’. In phonetic writing it is
arbitrary...There is...no perceptible similarity
between the signifier, always visual, and the
signified, always auditory, while the cinema
represents the visual by the visual
and the sonorous by the sonorous.76

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In this respect, Metz seems to concur with George Bluestone's often quoted dichotomy of concept vs percept; i.e.,

word-symbols must be translated into images of things, feelings and concepts through the process of thought. Where the moving picture comes to us directly through perception, language must be filtered through the screen of conceptual apprehension.\textsuperscript{77}

Bluestone, however, uses these differences in language to conclude that the “cinema exhibits a stubborn antipathy to novels, the novel...emerges as a medium antithetical to film”\textsuperscript{78} thereby disputing the effectiveness and even the value of adaptations. As a semiotician, Christian Metz believes that the difficulty in studying adaptations really lies with the lack of a true “cinematic language system” which can be used in the serious study of film. This “grammar of film”, Metz claims, is yet to be invented “because cinematic studies are not yet developed enough; one is not able to seriously advance an explicit list of all the codes and sub-codes”\textsuperscript{79} of cinematic language, which makes film difficult to discuss at a formal level. Christian Metz himself asks “Is or is not the cinema a language system?”, and points out that “This is a debate which is already traditional”\textsuperscript{80}, but one by no means settled.

\textsuperscript{77} George Bluestone, 1973, p.20.
\textsuperscript{78} ibid. p.23.
\textsuperscript{79} Christian Metz, 1974, p.286.
\textsuperscript{80} ibid. p.288.
Essentially, along with other semioticians, Metz would like to
categorize general codes, e.g., a pan, which can be used in any film;
and particular codes, e.g., those which appear in only some films,
particularly genre films. In the Western, for example, certain codes of
dress, landscape, and gestures are used which distinguish it from other
genres. Some twenty-five years after Metz's *Language and Cinema*,
this "grammatical" approach to the language of cinema is still
especially undeveloped and, indeed disputed, or at least criticized, by
many because, among other things, it ignores the "poetry" of cinema
by concentrating on "precise but dry formulations of semiotics." 81

It could be argued that the explicit nature of semiotics is a
doomed attempt to make cinematic language as arbitrary as our word-
symbols, since, as Jean Mitry claims, cinema is not a language we
speak but the language of poetry, which, although grounded in reality,

enriches this reality...The aesthetic process
of film joins a deep *psychological* reality
and satisfies our desire to understand
the world and each other in a powerful yet
necessarily partial way. The aesthetics
of film is based on this psychological truth
and need. And so cinema is the greatest
of arts because it meets this need by showing
us the *process* of the transformation of the
world. The other arts can show us merely
the end result of such transformation, the

humanized art world. In cinema human beings tell each other what reality means to them, yet they do so through reality itself, which surrounds their work like an ocean.\textsuperscript{82}

Similarly, phenomenologist theorists, including Henri Agel, argue that semiotic approaches to film "language"

tend to value only one strain of cinema, a cinema of ‘signification’ whose greatest exponent is Eisenstein. His films are based on a syntax of significant shocks and jolts which develop into a powerful human statement. But there is another kind of cinema...the cinema of contemplation...
[in which] the variety of meaning in reality [lives in the film and in which a] multitude of meaning congeals into powerful images which have the strength of transcendence about them.\textsuperscript{83}

This view is similar to Adrian Martin’s belief that cinema has always been “close to dance”. “Even in the days of silent cinema”, he argues, “this feeling of ever-potential dance existed.”\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{83} ibid. pp.245-246.
This “transcendence” of “powerful images” together with cinema’s lyrical and expressive qualities are partly why it is so difficult to systematize and make arbitrary the codes of cinema. Many would probably agree with Dudley Andrew that there is a “grave difficulty inherent in trying to discuss a liquid and physically multi-layered medium as if it were a digital, homogeneous system like language.” This kind of approach may, he argues, turn the filmmaking process into a “formula of ‘correct choices’, choices proper to the message at hand.”85 He goes on to point out that, after all:

Formalists have always been tempted to rank artworks bearing ostentatious technique above more subtle kinds of artworks. In effect formalism has been tempted to become a partisan of a particular style of art rather than a philosophy applicable to artworks of all styles.86

I am not arguing for a formalist approach, but I do think it would be helpful for audiences to be educated in the formal characteristics of a film by those who have a sound understanding of cinema (rather than, or as well as, literature or theatre) but who of course do not aspire to tell filmmakers how to make their films. This would be particularly useful when it comes to examining film versions of literature. A fair and thoughtful discussion, unprejudiced by the fidelity debate, and, where appropriate, referring to the codes and conventions of cinema to discuss the film as a film, rather than as literature, is hardly a radical suggestion and seems to be not too much to ask of those involved in the serious discussion of cinema.

85 Dudley Andrew, 1976, p.78.
86 Ibid. p.83.
In his *Major Film Theories*, Dudley Andrew calls for a “cinematic” approach to the critical discussion of films. He writes that

we must force [theorists to categorize their questions]. Every question about film falls under at least one of the following headings:
raw material, methods and techniques, forms
and shapes, purpose or value. These categories, adapted from Aristotle, divide the phenomenon of film into the aspects which make it up and which can be interrogated.\(^{87}\)

He goes on to list in some detail the kinds of things that should be discussed in each category, including questions about the medium and its relationship to reality, time, and space; the creative process; the kinds of films made or which could be made; and the value and significance of film in the “larger aspects of life”. While he argues that his breakdown may not be “perfect”, it is, nevertheless, “just and useful”, providing the constant perspective which will allow us to attain an overview of film theories, and it gives us the coordinates so we can begin to map those theories.\(^{88}\)

Arguably, most critics and reviewers spend much of their time discussing elements of a film in Andrew’s categories three and four.

i.e., the “forms and shapes”, particularly when it is a “genre” film, and the film’s “purpose and value”, but rarely mention those formal elements in categories one and two. While category one — the “raw material” — may be at times too technical for most audiences, including myself, in general the other three categories of Dudley Andrew’s method, it seems to me, are indeed “just and useful”, particularly when the film under discussion is an adaptation, and are well worth taking up, as I have tried to do throughout my analysis of selected films.

It is perhaps worth mentioning here that those contributing to the journals and study guides published by the Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) and Cinemedia Screen Education are clearly concerned that teachers and young audiences, in particular, be equipped with the ability to grapple formally with screen texts. A recent editorial in Australian Screen Education notes that:

> Research commissioned by the ABA last year found children spend nearly 50% of their leisure time engaged in the use of electronic media. In this context, it has never been so important for teachers and students to have a thorough grounding in screen literacy.⁸⁹

As indicated earlier, I believe many, especially young, audiences, now use film and television far more often than print media to access their stories. Encouraging audiences to discuss audio-visual stories,

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using, where appropriate, the basic "language" of mise en scène rather than the language of print literature is one of the main aims of this study.

It may also be worth pointing out here that, arguably, filmmakers themselves are partly responsible for their audiences’ ignorance of the "language" of cinema because of their frequent insistence upon vague views such as, "Films are magic", or "Films are like dreams", or even, "I don't know why the film worked, it just did. Audiences connected with it." Similarly, casting directors Ros Harvard and Faith Martin refer to the process of casting an actor to play a character in a film as "magic". Both agreed that they did not know exactly what it was they were looking for when casting, but when it happened it was "magical", and "sent a shiver down the back of the neck." This seems to be a rather vague, hit-and-miss approach to casting which, arguably, might confuse actors trying to get work. These and similar views are intoned repeatedly at many a forum on filmmaking and screen studies and are frustrating for those outside the industry who seek to understand the techniques and processes of filmmaking. Encouraging filmmakers to discuss their films using the "language" of cinema can surely only contribute to a wide-spread screen literacy. Knowing that audiences are beginning to understand a good deal about the procedures of making a film also might encourage the creators of a film to do their best possible work, despite, or perhaps because of, the many restraints they often face, not the least of which may be financial. Arguably, it is partly the responsibility of all filmmakers to help audiences comprehend the formal and technical

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properties of cinema, instead of falling into vague clichés about the "magical" nature of the medium. Public access to Masterclasses, directors’ screenings and film festival seminars goes part of the way towards educating audiences about film, but these occasions are rare and are usually attended by relatively small audiences with special interests.

The odd idea referred to earlier that watching a film is dreamlike is supported by some critics as well. Gerald Mast in his essay on projection notes that

an essential condition of the cinematic experience is viewing flickering light in an enveloping darkness. This piercing of darkness by projected light is the source of cinema's hypnotic power, paralleling the way that the professional hypnotist entrances a subject by focusing attention on a bright and rhythmically flickering source of light...we both sit in darkness and are bathed in light...the projected images both speak to our personal dreams and fantasies and seem to depict the most public and familiar realities. 91

Parker Tyler and Jean-Louis Baudry both compare the act of watching a film with dreaming. Tyler writes that

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the movie theatre rite corresponds directly to the profoundly primitive responses of the audience; the auditorium is dark, the spectator is relaxed, the movie in front of him requires less sheer mental attention than would a novel or stage play...the whole world moves around the spectator, who is a still point. From the capacity of the screen or trick illusion, plus the dark-enshrouded passivity of the spectator, issues a state of daydream...[a] daylight dream...It is in daydreams that magic seems to operate, in daydreams that things begin to seem rather than to be.\textsuperscript{92}

Jean-Louis Baudry supports Tyler's view, arguing that "movies...are dreamlike and fantastic" and that, like myths, are essentially symbolic. He goes on to explain that because

the darkness of the movie theater, the relative passivity of the situation, the forced immobility of cine-subject, and the effects which result from the projection of images, moving images, the cinematographic apparatus brings about a state of artificial regression...a phase which is barely hidden, as dream...Cinema offers a simulation of regressive movement which is characteristic of dream.\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{92} Parker Tyler, “From Magic and Myth of the Movies”, in Gerald Mast, et.al., 1992, pp.727-728.

Noel Carroll, however, takes Baudry to task, arguing clearly and powerfully that Baudry’s “arguments by analogy are woefully inept” and concludes, rightly, that films and dreams are “radically dissimilar imagistic media. They are too unlike to be treated as cognate phenomena.” Hugo Münsterberg also argues against this fanciful idea that films are like dreams. He believes a film differs from the dream mainly in completeness. Whereas the dream may arouse certain fantasies and emotions, leaving us bewildered or trembling on awakening, the film will dispel all the energies it calls into play. It will take appearances from nature, re-order them in the light of the mind, and, by doing so, stir our emotions. It will then neatly tie up those appearances, giving them a final order which at once asserts the priority of mental laws over chaotic appearances and at the same time completes the spectator’s experience in a way which leaves him lacking nothing.  

Carroll and Münsterberg are right: films are not like dreams and they are even less like magic although, arguably, they could be seen as poetic, or, as referred to earlier, like a dance. Like poems or the dance, however, they are highly contrived texts, some more carefully and more imaginatively contrived than others. Unlike poetry, however, cinema relies upon the collaboration of (often) an elaborate team and sophisticated technology for its existence. When Australian

94 Ibid. pp.708-723.  
95 Dudley Andrew, 1976, p.25.
filmmakers refuse to acknowledge and discuss in any real detail the plastic nature of cinema and the ways in which films are produced, particularly when the films are adaptations of novels and plays, they disenfranchise their audiences, ensuring that many spectators remain ignorant of mise en scène and the intricacies of cinematic creations.

There are, of course, some who would question the value of screen literacy, particularly in the area of adaptation. As Imelda Whelehan observes:

It is inevitable that with an increase in popularity of the study of the literary adaptations, there will be increasing laments about the ‘dumbing down’ (to use a debased Americanism) of culture expressing the fear that people will experience their literature at a ‘baser’ level. It is of course worth pointing out that effective textual comparisons across the literature/media divide demand skills of close reading and narrative analysis, as well as good acquaintance with the general debates about the interface between “high” and “low” culture.⁹⁶

The value of audio-visual literacy cannot be underestimated according to Lord Puttnam, who, in the 1999 Cinemedia Grierson Lecture, argued that:

Creative artists and those who work with them have, in my judgement, an unavoidable moral responsibility to challenge, inspire, question and affirm, as well as to entertain. Movies, television programmes, the new electronic media — they are all much more than fun, and far more than just so many new business opportunities; in reality they serve to reinforce or undermine most of the wider values of society...As a film-maker, the sheer responsibility of making films is awesome. You really are tinkering around in people's minds, and imprinting images, messages and thoughts which may well remain there forever. While our censorship laws may curb the worst, truly gratuitous excesses inflicted upon us in the name of cinema, in the end, individuals have only one means of protection against the power of the moving image: real and enduring awareness of the degree to which they can be manipulated, and some understanding of the techniques that can be used. That means creating an education system with screen literacy at its heart.  

While the extent to which we can be “manipulated” by the moving image can be endlessly debated, Puttnam’s argument that audiences need “some understanding” of cinematic techniques is important. It is part of this study’s aim to encourage audiences to put into practice some of the complex skills involved in “reading” films, especially when they are adaptations of novels or plays.

**Realism and Cinematic Visualization**

As I pointed out in the Introduction, the aim of this project is not primarily to evaluate particular films or to argue that this film is better than that one, and why, but rather to examine the different approaches and various processes by which filmmakers choose to adapt their literary sources to the screen. However, I also hope to show that intersections, in contrast to faithful adaptations, are arguably the best choice filmmakers can make when adapting a literary or dramatic text to the screen. In intersections, filmmakers attempt to “multiply” their written sources through systematic and careful cinematic visualization, rather than, as in faithful adaptations, pictorially illustrating their sources. While adaptors making a faithful version of the original always privilege the literary at the expense of the cinematic, intersections treat with integrity and equality the cinematic and the literary, seeking a balance between the two different forms and “languages” as they weave the texts together, matching the elements in the different media. In intersections, the original text, camera, and screenplay collaborate: words, sound and image are allies rather than antagonists or competitors, as they too often are in faithful adaptations. In particular, intersections are
characterized by the filmmakers' abilities to visualize cinematically, rather than simply to realize, the written word. By this I mean that filmmakers who merely attempt to realize literary sources make films which are mainly audio-visual pictures of the original text in the realistic tradition. Performance, décor, location, and movement are all subject to the view that they should be as "natural" as possible in their realization to the screen and as close as possible to the literary or theatrical ancestor. If, for example, in a play, an actor is required to stand before an imaginary door and peer inwards, when realizing this scene in the cinematic version it is easy enough to direct an actor to walk towards, and then open, a "real" door of a "real house" in a "real street". This is realization through opening out, but it is not necessarily cinematic.

The subtle but real difference between realization and visualization can perhaps best be summed up by referring to the French "realists" writing for Cahiers du Cinema in the 1970s. They argued against the Kracauer view of realism in film, claiming that "realistic cinema" is not equivalent to "highly visual" cinema; that "visually murky cinema" can still be essentially "cinematic", and that "reality is not equal to the visible". Visualized adaptations use realization, of course, but offer far more than mere realization and opening out: they are cinematic imaginings based on words transformed into a complex ensemble of image, sound and drama. They can be both "realistic" and "cinematic". As Linda Seger accurately notes "Most workable films are realistic. The realistic style

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is the most accessible to mass audiences, the most easily understood, and the clearest. It's like real life."

Almost all the adaptations discussed here could be classified as "workable", or "well-made" realist films. The exception is the artistically adventurous *What I Have Written* (1995), and there are individual sequences from various other films, including *Dead Heart* (1997), *The Well* (1997) and *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1998), which are non-naturalistic. But even within the boundaries — and they are wide — of this realism, certain stylistic choices made by adaptors shift the aesthetic emphases from simple realization to a fully developed cinematic visualization of the literary source. "Film", writes Seger, "builds up its detail through images...Film can give us story information, character information, ideas and images and style all in the same moment."

This liquid-like and iconic simultaneity of images and sound moving ubiquitously through time and space is what is frequently referred to as the essence of cinema. Julia Lesage, in an essay in which she applies Roland Barthes' method of analysing Balzac's *Sarrasine* to film, neatly summarizes the primary differences between literature and film. She argues that:

Language is symbolic representation; cinema
is primarily iconic. That is, the relation of word
to object in writing or speaking is purely

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arbitrary, while cinema is built on photography, which gives a two-dimensional representation analogously similar to its object. In literature the description of the human body depends on the fragmentation of a whole into its parts for the sake of metaphoric or connotative description in words: A photograph offers us its iconic codes and its connotations all at once. In feature films, once the subject has been established...the setting or specific objects in that setting can fully connote a character even though the character is not seen on screen. Metonymy or representation of the whole by one of its related parts is the major rhetorical device which carries symbolic...
coding in feature film.\textsuperscript{101}

The ability to “build detail through images” and to “offer us...iconic codes and...connotations all at once”, in a fluid-like, ubiquitous process, moving from long shot to medium to close-up; panning, or tracking or tilting within the shot; developing narrative by revealing, often intimately, particular elements and building on subtle visual clues, is, arguably, at the heart of cinematic visualization. Béla Balázs was one of the earliest film theorists to draw attention to the “visual life” of cinema, particularly in relation to the close-up. In \textit{Theory of the Film} he explains the significance of visualization in the cinema:

The first new world discovered by the film camera in the days of the silent film was the world of very small things visible only from very short distances, the hidden life of little things. By this the camera showed us not only hitherto unknown objects and events: the adventures of beetles in a wilderness of blades of grass, the tragedies of day-old chicks in a corner of the poultry-run, the erotic battles of flowers and the poetry of miniature landscape... By means of the close-up the camera... uncovered that cell-life of the vital issues in which all great events are ultimately conceived; for the greatest landslide is only the aggregate of the movements of single particles. A multitude of close-ups can show us the very instant in which the general is transformed into the particular. The close-up has not only widened our vision of life, it has also deepened it... The close-up can show us a quality in a gesture of the hand we never noticed before when we saw that hand stroke or strike something... A good film with its close-ups reveals the most hidden parts in our life..., and teaches us to see the intricate visual details.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{102} Béla Balázs, 1970, pp.54-55.
Although it is undeniable that cinema is a multiform medium, it is nevertheless easy to agree with Ingmar Bergman that "The primary factor in film is the image, the secondary factor is the sound, the dialogue, and the tension between these two creates the third dimension."\textsuperscript{103}

I would suggest that adaptations which set out to do more than simply realize and open out the written word for the screen manage to create this cinematic "third dimension" as they intersect with, "match" or even "multiply" the original. This requires imagination and a systematic transformation of the source through cinematic visualization.

This is why it is easy to disagree with those who believe most film adaptations should not have been attempted and carp about filmmakers continuing to produce filmic versions of written texts, although I would certainly agree that there are some which probably should not have been made. In her essay "Writer, Reader, Words", Jeannette Winterson, echoing Virginia Woolf who also disliked adaptations, writes:

\begin{quote}
The screen large and small can do perfectly what the ordinary Victorian novel could do, which is why adaptations of some work so well. Adaptations of Dickens do not work well because what gets lost is everything\end{quote}

that really matters: language.$^{104}$

While many would disagree with her regarding Dickens, and cite David Lean's version of *Great Expectations* as evidence, I would also argue that, in general, this is not the case with any adaptation which is an intersection. In an intersection, the thing that "really matters: language" is effectively transformed into cinematic "language" so that the essential nuances and literary tropes of the original are "matched" cinematically on screen. Again, I am not arguing that adaptations which simply realize, rather than visualize, their source are never workable films; I am merely trying to point out the different choices filmmakers make when adapting a literary text to the screen. What I do believe, however, is that the visualized text is essentially more cinematic than the realized, primarily because the realized text, particularly in the case of faithful adaptations, is more or less an audio-visual translation of the words of the literary ancestor. I would also argue that faithful adaptations deprive audiences of experiencing to the fullest extent what cinema is very good at: sweeping them off into another, larger-than-life world which, because of the immediacy of sound and sight, has a visceral impact that words rarely have. As Susan Sontag argues, when "reading" a film, the "reader" is "in permanent motion as his eye identifies with the lens of the camera, which permanently shifts in distance and direction."$^{105}$

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Hugo Münsterberg also comments on the sense of movement cinema audiences experience. He claims that cinema can, because of its illusion of spatiality, immerse us in
events which run parallel in different places...[it] can show in intertwined scenes everything which our mind embraces. Events in three or four or five regions of the world can be woven together into one complex action.\(^{106}\)

Arguably, it is these affective responses to cinema that filmmakers who produce faithful adaptations appear to forget. In contrast, intersections reveal the filmmakers’ conscious, concentrated and systematic transformation of the original to the screen using cinematic “language”, rather than merely transferring various elements of the original text to the screen. Intersections do far more than transfer: they are highly visual, cinematic transmutations of their source.

In the decade 1989-1998 in Australia, twenty-four published literary texts were adapted to film. Given the limitations of time and space, the following chapters discuss in detail only eight of these texts, but refer to the rest when necessary to support a point or extend an argument. Analysis primarily centres on the type of adaptation done, i.e., whether the adaptation strives to be “faithful” to the source, or a “variation” on it; whether it attempts to

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\(^{106}\) Hugo Münsterberg, “From the Film: A Psychological Study: The Means of the Photoplay”, in Gerald Mast, et al., 1992, p.35.
“appropriate” the original text, or “intersect” with it; as well, there is emphasis on the process of adaptation itself, i.e., the ways in which the filmmakers attempted to enunciate for the screen the features of the original. Audiences’ responses to the films, especially those of critical audiences, are also referred to in order to establish to what extent the films made an impact, positive or otherwise.

The following chapter will focus on “faithful” adaptations; film versions which seek to “remain true” to the source and where “fidelity” to the original text is uppermost in the filmmakers’ minds. The ultimate results are thus “literary” rather than truly “cinematic”. This is not to say that “faithful” adaptations are always poor films; they are not, although some, I would argue, are less successful than others. I have chosen to analyse in some detail two “faithful” adaptations. Hotel Sorrento (1995) is one of those film adaptations which, while well-crafted and workable, ventures into the world of cinema only rarely, retreating to a dutiful fidelity to the play at the expense of cinema most of the time. In contrast, The Well (1997), while striving throughout to be “true” to the essential thrust of the novel, and frequently suffering because of this approach, occasionally takes risks which, although not truly adventurous, are nevertheless very thoughtful in terms of the “language” of cinema.
CHAPTER TWO

FAITHFUL ADAPTATIONS

In her Masterclass on *Little Women*, Gillian Armstrong repeatedly stressed the fact that every time she ran into “problems” with the shooting or the script, she would “go back to the book...My duty was to the book...I wanted to be free from other [film] versions...I always went back to the book.” She concluded her talk with the claim that:

*Little Women* is a book known and loved by many generations of women and we had a responsibility to it. I felt my duty was to capture the spirit of the book...to capture the truth [of it] but not make it old fashioned and stiff.¹

Phrases such as “faithful to the spirit”, “faithful to the source”, “trying to capture the truth of the book”, are frequently used by filmmakers who wish to make faithful adaptations. Similar phrases also often appear in critics’ discussions of an adaptation. In reviewing *Eyes Wide Shut*, for instance, Louis Menand’s seems to have felt he had to make a point about the film’s fidelity to the novel. He observes that “Schnitzler’s story is set in turn-of-the century Vienna and Kubrick’s movie is set in

contemporary New York, but otherwise the adaptation is pretty faithful.²

The degree to which some audiences also expect a filmmaker to be faithful to the literary original is implicit in Jane Campion's admission that, when working on The Portrait of a Lady, she found adapting "James's novel for the screen was...at times scary,"³ because she was aware of expectations of fidelity. Including an author's name in the title of a film, such as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Bram Stoker's Dracul, as well as in the marketing of a film, for example, Jane Austen's Mansfield Park, equally reinforces an anticipation of fidelity.

Phrases like "faithful to the book" and "faithful to the spirit" are, in fact, used so frequently by both filmmakers and critical audiences that these terms have become almost habitual when discussing adaptations. Brian McFarlane notes that:

At every level from newspaper reviews to longer essays in critical anthologies and journals the adducing of fidelity to the original...as a major criterion for judging the film adaptation is pervasive. No critical line is in greater need of re-examination — and devaluation.⁴

This insistence on a film’s fidelity to the source can also be a factor in some teachers’ approach to exploring in the classroom a particular text. For example, recently I became involved in a debate about the extent to which the film \textit{Gladiator} was “faithful” to historical records. The film was lambasted for being historically inaccurate, and yet these same people would never take Shakespeare to task for the same reason.

Some audiences become rightfully angry with filmmakers and publicists who perpetuate this concept of “fidelity”, especially when the “fidelity” argument is used as the reason for including dialogue or a scene which, according to some, may not work well in terms of cinema, but is there because “that is the way it was in the book.” An example of this occurred at the director’s screening of \textit{That Eye the Sky} during the 1995 Sydney Film Festival when John Ruane was answering questions from the audience. One viewer said he was “uncomfortable with the ending...isn’t it trite?” Ruane nodded in agreement, but then replied, “But it’s true to the novel...that’s how it ends.” Interestingly, the director, undoubtedly aware of audience expectations of fidelity, felt compelled to claim that the film’s ending is “true to the novel” rather than choosing to discuss the reasons for the “trite” ending in terms of how he believed it helped make the film work cinematically.

It is worth noting McFarlane’s view that:

The issue of fidelity is a complex one but it is not too gross a simplification to suggest that
critics have encouraged film-makers to see it as a desirable goal in the adaptation of literary works.\(^5\)

Part of the reason, perhaps, for the continuing preoccupation with fidelity is because of the emphasis many place upon the script. Jean-Claude Carrière, in his book *The Secret Language of Film*, argues that too many filmmakers, particularly when adapting literature, are overly concerned with the "screenplay" instead of with the film. According to Carrière:

All over the world conferences are dedicated to the theme...of the screenplay. In particular...a thousand seminars bloom on the topic of the *adaptation*. Hence the danger: a return to the literary, a weakening of the image in favor of words. Images constantly falling into the pitfall of the tried-and-true, of the run-of-the-mill. The end of striving, of experimenting.\(^6\)

Carrière also argues that if filmmakers, including scriptwriters, become too concerned or preoccupied with words rather than with images and sound, the resulting film will be generally unsatisfying. He rightly points out that, after all, writing a script is not, in fact, "writing"; the script is merely a proposition for a film, it must be transformed into cinema. If

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“content” outweighs “form”, according to Carrière “the film would be made only to illustrate the screenplay, not the screenplay to allow the film to come to life.”

This may be perhaps why so many novelists and playwrights are unable to adapt their own work, and when they do the results are often literary, rather than cinematic. They believe that scriptwriting is still “writing” when really it is, for the most part, a set of guidelines for a cinematic text. This argument also holds true for any filmmaker who seeks to work from a screenplay that sets out to be faithful to the literary source and privilege, for whatever reason, the literary over the cinematic. The result is that frames are filled with images and sound that look and sound like scenes from a book or a play. Faithful adaptations are about audio-visual illustration and realization, rather than the transmutation and visualization cinematic adaptation requires. While faithful adaptations can be, of course, quite successful as audio-visual translations, they generally make only occasional concessions to the cinematic. A faithful adaptation’s main aim is to “measure up” to its source, thereby often becoming merely a skeletal substitute for the source, lacking in the creative use of cinematic tropes precisely because the filmmakers are always mindful of the antecedent text. Faithful adaptors also tend to favour the long-held view that “literature” is “better” than cinema, and therefore it is necessary, when adapting, to favour the source rather than the film based upon it. As Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelahan note: “Cultural assumptions about the relative worth of the

7 Ibid.
literary versus the film medium are still deeply entrenched enough to be likely to influence our approach to adaptation."\textsuperscript{8}

In short, as Lynden Barber would have it, faithful adaptations generally "sport the 'L' word, Literature" on their "forehead[s]."\textsuperscript{9} Of the four kinds of adaptations discussed in this study, I would argue that the "faithful to" films make the least interesting cinema precisely because, for whatever reason, the filmmakers have chosen to privilege the literary or theatrical over the cinematic.

A number of faithful adaptations were made during the period under discussion (see Appendix A). Of these, I have chosen to discuss Hotel Sorrento (1995) because it is, for the most part, a dutifully faithful film of the stageplay by Hannie Rayson, and The Well (1996) because, although this film is also faithful to Elizabeth Jolley's novel, it is not such a dutiful adaptation, has some interesting cinematic features.

**HOTEL SORRENTO (1995)**

In an essay comparing theatre with film, Susan Sontag writes:

> The history of cinema is often treated as the history of its emancipation from theatrical models...from theatrical 'frontality' (the unmoving


camera reproducing the situation of the
spectator of a play fixed in his seat) then from
theatrical acting (gestures needlessly stylized,
exaggerated—needlessly, because now the
actor could be seen ‘close up’) then from
theatrical furnishings (unnecessary ‘distancing’
of the audience’s emotions disregarding the
opportunity to immerse the audience in
reality). Movies are regarded as advancing
from theatrical static to cinematic fluidity,
from theatrical artificiality to cinematic
naturalness and immediacy.  

In other words, a sense of movement through space, a
different style of acting and the sense of seeing before us the
“real” and “natural” world are significant aspects of the
cinematic experience. When adapting a theatrical text to film,
these three things become absolutely crucial. In the theatre, the
actors are physically in front of us playing a “role”, the play
usually exists as a printed text (which we can buy and read)
separate from the performance, and the stage space is generally
static and fixed in some kind of architecture (a “fourth wall”
stage; a place with spatial limits). In contrast, in a film, the
actors are not there in the flesh before us so we anticipate their
seeming to “become” the character and are asked to identify with
them. We do not care about the screenplay’s existence outside
the film (unless we are studying it). Cinematic space is dynamic

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10 Susan Sontag, “Film and Theatre”, in Gerald Mast et al., Film Theory and
and without clear physical boundaries, apart from the screen itself, and even then there is always a sense of action occurring in the background as well as “off-screen” which influences the way we respond to a film.

The “faithful to” film adaptation of the play Hotel Sorrento by Hannie Rayson has been occasionally “emancipated” from its theatrical model, but for the most part the adaptation lacks the dynamic “fluidity” characteristic of the cinematic text. Most elements of the play have merely been “made real” on the screen, so that the film version of Hotel Sorrento remains tied to the stage rather than the cinema. We rarely get the sense of “cinematic naturalness and immediacy” Sontag refers to because we are continually forced back to the words, and involved with a story unfolding in a theatrical rather than a cinematic space. Jean Mitry explains the differences between the two approaches to “dramaturgie” this way:

The theatrical world is seen as...abstract, a world dominated by metaphysical speech, in which men play out their roles before other men...Theater décor is a key to this. It is always partial and privileged, a few special objects being lifted out of the undifferentiated mass of nature to aid man in his dramatic ritual...[whereas]...cinematic dramaturgy...integrates man and his speech within the natural world...cinema renders the drama of man and the world. This fact has enormous consequences. Not only
does it call for a reconsideration of the role of
dialogue in films; it suggests a dramaturgy
based on a...network of physical and social
contingencies...The breakdown of space within
scenes, the dynamic interweaving of time
through editing, and the use of the mobile
camera have all helped cinema free itself
from the tyranny of the all-powerful scene.\footnote{Dudley Andrew, The Major Film Theories, Oxford University Press, London, 1976, pp.206-207.}

At the outset it is worth noting that there have been three
published versions of Hotel Sorrento, the first in 1990, a revised
edition in 1992, and a tie-in to the film, (although not the
screenplay) published in 1995. The only difference between the
1992 edition and the 1995 tie-in is the inclusion of the essay
“From Stage to Screen”, by the adaptors, Peter Fitzpatrick and
Richard Franklin, in which they discuss their “process of
‘realisation’”. The version of the play adapted is, for the most
part, the 1992 edition. The 1990 version is longer: it has 43
separate scenes as opposed to 41 in the 1992 edition and includes
contemporary references to Gough Whitlam. The gender debate in
the 1990 version is also longer and more complex, with the
language more idiomatic and quite a bit bawdier. The filmmakers
have, however, occasionally gone back to the 1990 edition using
Scenes 17, 18, and, almost word-for-word, the dialogue in Scene
19, as the basis of the sub-plot concerning the accusation of
plagiarism against Meg (Caroline Goodall). The incorporation of
this slender sub-plot into the film is, however, under-developed and poorly integrated although it does allow Marge (Joan Plowright) to give her long and rather patronizing speech about how “beauty, profundity or passion” can be “essentially Australian”. This monologue was cut to only a few lines in Scene 17 of the 1992 edition, and delivered not just to Meg in the garden, as it is in the film and in the 1990 version of the play, but to Edwin and Meg on the jetty. While the speech is not out of place in terms of the theme of national identity, having the English actor Joan Plowright deliver it smacks of cultural cringe.

The structure of the film closely follows that of the play. The cross-cutting between London and Australia work particularly well in the film, especially during the exposition where there is a cut on a sound frame using the song “Jerusalem” to link the shots. There are some very minor changes. Scene 28 of the film, for example, where Pippa (Tara Morice) gazes out at the light on the pier, and a later scene in which Edwin (Nicholas Bell) discusses the book she has lent him, are re-writes and a re-structuring of Act 2, Scene 15 of the 1992 play. Scenes 14 and 15 in Act 2, in which Meg is referred to as a “pain in the arse”, are reversed for a more comic effect and some short scenes have been intercut with others to give the dynamic sense of movement characteristic of cinema, such as the scenes where Dick (John Hargreaves) and Marge stroll through the streets of Sorrento, which I shall discuss shortly.

As in both versions of the play, the dominant point of view in the film is Hilary’s (Caroline Gilmer) although Meg’s point of
view is set up in the cross-cuts to London and further developed throughout. Just as in the play, Pippa’s story is less significant than Hilary’s or Meg’s although, as the scriptwriters point out, in the film Pippa “gained some cinematic weight”\textsuperscript{12} because of the development of the American strand in the national identity debate. Marge’s dramatic function as a commentator and interpreter of the Moynihans and of Sorrento is also faithfully transferred to the film, as is Dick Bennett’s role of polemicist and cultural critic.

The co-writers of the screenplay are quite clear about why they decided to adapt \textit{Hotel Sorrento}. They write that

\begin{quote}
two or three years after the play’s first appearance, the spirit of the millenial republicanism had added a new urgency to the cultural debate. The subject of Australia’s independence...was suddenly very much on the agenda again. This time for an audience that was potentially much wider than the one which had responded so positively to \textit{Hotel Sorrento} on stage.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

The desire to make a film of a successful play and thereby reach a much larger audience is often given as one of the primary reasons for adapting a play to film. While it is true that generally speaking a film would reach a mass audience where a


\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}
play usually would not, it is also true that just because a play was successful on stage does not automatically mean that it would make a good film or do well at the box office. The film adaptation of Hotel Sorrento, along with the adaptation of David Williamson's Brilliant Lies, (1996) released around about the same time “received rather indifferent box-office and somewhat of a critical lambasting”. Significant, in both texts the filmmakers set out to be dutifully faithful to the source, and so the films' theatrical origins often became obvious and distracting.

Playwright Hannie Rayson admits to being “sceptical” about Richard Franklin's desire to adapt her play for cinema, but has been quoted as saying that her “fear of it being diluted” was “unfounded”: “It is a very careful, faithful, loving rendition”. With the playwright herself so concerned about the issue of fidelity, the filmmakers were under some pressure to remain faithful to the play, although they readily admit that, from the beginning, they willingly “set out” to “retain most of the intelligent conversation that Hannie Rayson wrote”.

The filmmakers, however, also point out that, even though Hotel Sorrento was meant to be faithful to its theatrical antecedent, the film medium required them to “shift the delicate balance slightly from verbal to visual.” This shifting only “slightly” from the “verbal to visual” is what binds the film

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16 Fitzpatrick and Franklin, 1995, p.91.
17 ibid.
to the theatrical world, rather than to the cinematic, even though Richard Franklin claims that the play was a “natural subject” for the screen. He goes on to argue that:

The episodice structure...lends itself well to cinematic cross-cutting...The characters were engaging and well differentiated, and the attractions of the coast and town of Sorrento as a ‘real’ location — the spaciousness and natural beauty which no theatre could do more than imply — offered wonderful possibilities for the camera and obviated the traditional somewhat erroneous notion of having to ‘open out’ theatre on film.  

The “notion” that having to “open out” theatre on film is “erroneous” is arguable; many would claim that opening out is fundamental and necessary to the adaptation of a play to the screen. In the film version of Hotel Sorrento it is during the scenes which do “open out” the play that the film works best. There are some fine cinematic moments in this film. The credit sequence, a “home movie” to the tune of “In the Summertime”, establishes the primary location, Sorrento, introducing, through scenes from past summers, the sense of nostalgic melancholy which pervades the play as well as the film. The opening shots effectively set out explore this “sweet pensive sadness” through

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18 Ibid.
the visualization of some of the significant locations of the play. The play's stage directions can only assert that:

Two figures sit on the end of the jetty. It is dusk. The man is fishing. There is [sic] remnants of fish and chips in white paper lying between them. She is reading *Melancholy*. He is staring out to sea.¹⁹

The film, in contrast, can *show*. Using the cinematic tropes of alternation and intercutting, along with the cut and dissolve, we see the Sorrento that is described in the opening passage of *Melancholy*. As the credit sequence ends, the first word, “Listen”, is delivered in voice-over during a fade to black, forcing us to “listen”. When sunset images of Sorrento fade in and the film proper begins, we soon realize that we do not really have to listen carefully at all, since the words become secondary to the visual image. By the end of these opening shots we also discover that the words we have heard were not merely voice-over to help us make meaning of what we have seen; they were part of the dramatic diegesis. Marge, we soon realize, has been reading the opening of Meg’s book to Dick, and what we have been watching are the visual and aural manifestations of the passage from *Melancholy*.

In this fundamentally cinematic exposition, long, wide shots are varied with medium shots, all warmly lit, of scenes of a Sorrento in an autumn dusk. There is a cut from a long wide

shot of gulls calling and flying diagonally across telephone wires as the dusk falls “gently”, to a tracking shot of a street-cleaning truck moving left to right across the frame as it sprays water. A dissolve to shimmering silver and bronze lights fills the frame, slowly revealing the water “lapping at the poles”. We see and hear, rather than simply hear about, how the jetty “creaked at the joints” and the boats “bobbed about”. In the next few frames, we watch as the town seems “to settle back on itself, to mellow”. A second dissolve suggests the steady “demise of summer” and we see a series of alternating shots which convey the “sense of quiet industry”: a shopkeeper sweeps; another hoses the footpath; a jogger runs upwards and out of the frame; a third shopkeeper stacks his fruit, and a cut-away close-up shows us the value he places on visual display as he re-stacks several pieces. These alternating shots, which illustrate “the business of getting on with things”, are intercut with long shots of the jetty. The first intercut is of the jetty itself; in an extreme long shot we can just make out two small, dark figures on the jetty, in the second we can see clearly that there is a man fishing and a woman reading, and finally we see a close-up of Marge reading *Melancholy*. As she reads about the “quiet little foreshore with its white bandstand framed by Norfolk pines” we are looking at these things through a series of point of view shots, suggesting Dick is actually looking at what Marge is reading and imagining. Unlike the play, where we can only listen as Marge reads to Dick about “A red, a green, a red” rooftop, in the film we see her in a close-up raise her eyes from the page and squint into the distance; a point of view pan shows us what she sees as she tries
to prove to Dick that Sorrento is the setting for Meg’s book, even though she cannot see the rooftops.

The ironic balance struck between the aural, printed and the visual languages in these opening scenes is finely executed, as are the framing, composition and alternation of the various long shots and close-ups which begin to establish the psychology of the characters and their relationship to the landscape. Close-ups in cinema, according to Béla Balázs, are not simply to give us details, but are

often dramatic revelations of what
is really happening under the surface
of appearances...The close-up will show
trembling fingers nervously fumbling
a small object — a sign of an internal
storm.²⁰

The close-up point of view shot of Marge squinting into the distance is all the more powerful and memorable when we discover towards the end of the film that this view from the jetty is the basis for the landscape she paints in her garden. The painting Meg and the audience see in a close-up contains the three rooftops, “A red, a green, a red” she has mentioned in the opening sequence (Fig. 2.1). By now deeply involved with the Moynihans and their “Hotel Sorrento”, Marge paints what Meg has written about, and thus expresses in her own way her “yearning for

Fig. 2.1 Marge’s painting reveals the power of the close-up in film.

Fig. 2.7 The zoom on the light of the pier triggers viewers’ expectations of a flashback.
something that she could not name". This device of a close-up on a painting to give narrative complexity and emotional intensity is also very effectively used in the film *Dead Heart* (1997) (see Chapter 5), where we are twice shown a close-up of Kate's drawing of the sacred site. Similarly, the various close-ups of black and white photographs used in the artistically adventurous adaptation of John Scott's novel *What I Have Written* (1995) compel us to focus, recall and predict. The close-up requires us to take notice, to concentrate and to remember, because what we see is, or will soon become, vital to the action unfolding on the screen.

These brief, carefully composed opening scenes in *Hotel Sorrento* are a fine example of the way in which a cinematic adaptation can speak to its source. The film's exposition transports us immediately from the confined space of the theatre and from the symbolic world of words where we are asked to imagine the jetty, boats, water into a "real" world of real boats, real water, real colours, real sounds. The sense of place is immediate and powerful. The mood, pace and rhythm of *Hotel Sorrento* are also set up in the *mise en scène* of these opening shots, in a lyrical and highly effective cinematic visualization of the play, representing the best of the few occasions on which making a film, rather than being faithful to the source, became the filmmakers' primary goal.

In her book *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film*, Linda Seger cautions adaptors to look for a play that "can work in a realistic context", one that can be "opened up" so
that "implied" settings can become "actual". This is what the filmmaker of Hotel Sorrento have done, although their "opening up" of the play is minimal, most probably because, as mentioned earlier, they believe the concept of "opening out" is "erroneous". The physical settings "made actual" include Sorrento's jetty (Fig. 2.2), the foreshore (Fig. 2.3), Marge's garden, the Moynihan kitchen, the cemetery where Meg and Troy discuss her book (Fig. 2.4) and the "London" flat and street scenes (shot in Melbourne). These settings follow the play's implied locations very closely, although the jetty is used far less frequently in the film and loses most of its symbolic value.

One of the best examples of cinematic opening out occurs later in the film where a series of tracking shots follows Marge and Dick strolling through the main street. In this particular scene a local resident offers Marge a sausage and she passes it to Dick without breaking stride. A visual contrast is carefully set up here between the two characters. Marge walks in a formal, rather stiff manner, her head and shoulders firm and straight and, for all her professed interest in Sorrento, seems uninterested in her surroundings. This is in contrast to Dick who strolls casually along the street, relaxed and curious; he seems aware of and interested in everything that is going on around him (Fig. 2.5). Béla Balázs points out the significance of "walking" in film. He argues that there is

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The film *Hotel Sorrento* effectively “opens out and “realizes” the stageplay’s settings.

Fig. 2.2 The jetty at Sorrento.

Fig. 2.3 The cemetery.

Fig. 2.4 The white bandstand on Sorrento’s foreshore.
scarcely a more characteristic and expressive gesture than the walk...
Actors on the stage rarely have an opportunity to use the walk as a characteristic gesture, because of the lack of space...it is only the film that can really exhaust all the expressive possibility of the walk.²²

The scenes in which Pippa and Hil walk casually through a park (in the play it is along the jetty) are also an example of how the filmmakers use the “expressive possibility of the walk” to open out the play. As the two women stroll across the grass and on up to the tearoom, their walk helps to reinforce and further develop their psychological make-up as well as the narrative. Hilary is shown to be steady, affectionate, vulnerable and cautious with her younger sister. Pippa is portrayed as defensive, talkative, rather intense, and equally cautious (Fig. 2.6).

A further very good example of opening out, highly cinematic in the same way as the opening shots, is the scene that closely follows Act 2, Scene 12 of the play, where Meg sits alone on the verandah at night and Troy joins her. In the play they remain on the verandah, but in the film they leave the house and walk together down the pathway to stand and look out at the light on the pier. As the camera unobtrusively tracks, their heads are back-lit by a warm copper light. When they reach the end of the path, Meg finally tells Troy the truth about his father. As she

Figs. 2.5 and 2.6. Actors in film "have an opportunity to use the walk as a characteristic gesture".
speaks, they gaze at the light on the pier and the camera zooms in on this light which shimmers out of focus in the dark. In this scene, the light seems to function as an editing device, similar to a dissolve which normally would introduce a flashback, although in this case there is none. The expectation of the conventional flashback to that night is, however, so strong that I have been assured by several people that there was indeed a flashback when they saw the film. Jean Claude Carrière tries to explain this phenomenon. He argues that audiences in a cinema are “on the verge of [plunging] into the unconscious...the ground seems ripe for hallucination...And it happens sometimes without warning.”

He goes on to point out that:

At the end of Rosemary’s Baby...many spectators saw the monstrous child, the Devil’s spawn, in his crib. Some, I remember, even described him in detail. And yet that image does not occur, not even fleetingly, anywhere in the film...[The] characters lean over the crib, look at the baby, talk about him. Our deep-seated perception, if we are among those who see the young monster, here goes further than the film itself: it opens up, turns itself inside out, and finally sees the unseeable.24

24 Ibid.
Similarly, in her study of audiences’ interpretations of what is in the frame, Deborah Tannen argues that audiences frequently “impose” their expectations on the “content” of a film. She concludes that her collected data revealed expectations not only about the objects and events shown in the film but also about the experimental situation, about watching a film, and about the act of retelling a story...watching a film involves much more than the passive reception of sound and image. The viewer’s expectations and other framing devices associated with the film medium constantly mediate...between a person and her/his perceptions, and between those perceptions and the telling about them.25

So it is with the spectators whose expectations of the conventional dissolve to flashback was so strong they claim to have seen the flashback after the slow zoom to the light in Hotel Sorrento (Fig. 2.7). In fact, what occurs after the zoom is a cut to an extreme close-up of Troy’s face as he attempts to come to terms with the fact that it was Pippa, not Meg, who had the affair with his father. This sequence is finely crafted and memorable for its fluid cinematography, its highly effective lighting, and its

ability to evoke unexpected responses in audiences familiar with formal conventions of the medium.

The alternation and variety of shots during the lunch sequence also work reasonably well in the film, although some might argue that this is one of the main scenes that ties the film too closely to its theatrical origins (Fig. 2.8). As the scriptwriters themselves note:

*Hotel Sorrento* ...holds seven characters around a lunch table for an uninterrupted 11 minutes, maintaining the sense of group presence by frequent cross-cutting and occasional group shots, but also focusing points of tension by shuffling through a number of pairings. Where so many personal and cultural conflicts rise to the surface, there are positive advantages in the limiting frame afforded by the scene. The full awareness of the group as a composite is, most of the time, only available to the cinema viewer by inference. The capacity to direct attention not merely to the speaker but to the most significant listener(s) gives great power to the camera, particularly during the eloquent silences between speeches. Shifting attention for instance from the initial points of natural
conflict between established ‘couples’ like
Meg and Edwin, and Dick and Marge through
the initial pairing in a two shot of the ‘writers’
Dick and Meg, then moving rapidly as they
do, into opposition and their own separate shots.²⁶

A similar technique is used in the scene where Troy reads
the newspaper clipping summarizing Meg’s book and noting its
nomination for the Booker Prize. We listen to Troy, but watch
Wal nod and smirk with satisfaction, and are visually cued
through cross-cutting and close-ups of Pippa’s and Hilary’s faces
to discern what they are feeling as they too listen to Troy.
Through their reactions, we sense Pippa’s guilt and Hilary’s
shame and embarrassment. Cinema, because of the way in which
the camera can focus on and frame a particular image, easily
captures the complexities involved in hearing one person speak
while we are watching and feeling for others. It also has the
ability to capture what Leo Baudry refers to as “a sense of the
mystery inside character”. Baudry argues that:

Films add what is impossible in the
group situation of the stage or the
omniscient world of the novel: a sense
of the mystery inside character, the
strange core of connection with the
face and body the audience comes to
know so well, the sense of an individuality

that can never be totally expressed in words or action...Character in film generally is more like character as we perceive it everyday than it is in any other representational art. 27

Caroline Gillmer, as Hilary, has a particularly expressive face, well suited to cinema because it gives us this “sense of the mystery inside”. The filmmakers have taken full advantage of her talent by giving us frequent close-ups throughout the film. In an interview with Scott Murray, Richard Franklin, the director, rightly claims that Caroline Gillmer brought “a warmth, a homeliness, to the house that I thought was essential. ... She just gave a fantastic performance, and, if the piece has warmth, it comes from her in particular”28 (Fig. 2.9).

One could also argue that, if the film has coldness, it comes from Joan Plowright. As Marge, we see her in close-up several times, but her gestures and expressions are too often wooden, static, and stiff. Only occasionally in a close-up do we see the tiny non-verbal nuances that film can capture so well. When, for example, in the play, Dick asks her “Is this before you went through the change, Marge?” in the play, she replies “Don’t be cheeky” (p.14). In the film, however, there is no need for a single word of dialogue; she simply raises an eyebrow and moves her head slightly to deliver her admonition. A similar shot occurs later in the film when she nods and smiles to herself, satisfied that she has finally located Wal Moynihan’s workshop. For the

most part, however, Joan Plowright seems to offer a style of acting more suitable to the stage than to film. Richard Franklin observed that

Joan was very easy to direct, but I suspect would be very difficult to push in a direction she didn’t want to go...She knew exactly how she was going to do it from the minute she arrived.\textsuperscript{29}

Her rather “stagey” performance certainly conveys this determination to play the play “exactly” as she planned it. Her performance has little of the spontaneity or the emotional intensity that cinema, a gentler medium for actors than the theatre, allows for, even in the scenes with Hilary on the beach which were clearly meant to be emotionally powerful.

During an actor-director workshop, actress Tar-Lee Burke argued that “the actor and director need to develop a synergy, where the outcome of their deliberations is greater than the sum of their skills.”\textsuperscript{30} Arguably, Richard Franklin and Joan Plowright were unable to develop this “synergy” during the shooting of Hotel Sorrento.

There are several frames in the film which do work effectively to help us interpret the interior “mystery” of character. Two high-angle shots of Troy in his bedroom, for

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Editorial, “From the 4th National ASDA Conference”, Screen Director, Autumn 2000, p.8.
example, give us much information about him as a character. The first is a pan which introduces us to the American iconography he has sprinkled about his room, which helps us better understand his fascination with Pippa and all things American. The second shot occurs much later when Hilary comforts Troy, a very moving scene where he tells her of his recurring nightmare about his grandfather's drowning. This shot reveals far more than words could the isolation and grief Troy feels over the loss of Wal; it also clearly conveys the future uncertainties that Troy and Hilary will face together.

Towards the end of the film there are also several significant high-angle shots of the three sisters together in the living room which help reveal their emotions and reinforce their brittle relationships (Fig.2.10). These shots are carefully composed into triangular shapes, showing each sister in her own corner, suggesting that the conflicts between them will never be resolved: they will part at odds as they have always been. As Hannie Rayson herself says of the three sisters: “families seem to have an astonishing capacity to endlessly postpone the settling of conflicts and old scores” (p.viii). As each sister circles another, paces back and forth and walks towards and away from the windows, there is a powerful sense that each is feeling bewildered, isolated and betrayed. The bronze light and images of the sunset recall the beginning of the film, except that in this final sequence the light does not signify a peaceful settling in of the autumn but rather a dull, hot burning, suggesting the sisters’ inner fury, disappointment and scorn. Scott Murray, in an interview with director Richard Franklin, noted that:
When the three sisters walk to the window at the end, it recalls a similar shot and end sequence in *Interiors* (Woody Allen, 1978). Is that intentional, especially given the film’s discussion of foreign influences?³¹

Franklin, however, claimed that this was “probably an unconscious borrowing”. What he really wanted to do at the end was to “return the audience to the play in the last scene”. He admits he wanted the film to feel like a Chekov play at the end. And, since we were on a (sound) stage, putting up some rolls of white paper and lighting them orange seemed to me to be something we could achieve simply...I saw it as a metaphorical sunset at the end...The picture begins and ends with a sunset, and I guess in one way that is a warning about our culture.³²

The filmmakers have, for the most part, successfully realized the location and settings of the play. They have also managed to capture the nuances of some of the characters’ emotional and mental states and in these respects the film works well as a piece of cinema. There is, however, the problem of

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³¹ Scott Murray, 1994, p.57.
transferring a great deal of dialogue from the play to the screen. It is generally accepted that film dialogue needs to be far more economical than in the theatre. Cherry Potter, screenwriter and academic, claims that

it is a rule of thumb that if you come across a section of dialogue and you can’t think of a single good reason for it being there, although it might, in itself, be wonderful, the script will usually benefit from cutting it out. Another thing you have to take into account is the overall rhythm of the screenplay. A dialogue scene may be beautifully written…but at the same time the scene may be so long that it breaks the rhythm of the developing film. It is as if you have slipped into a theatre play by mistake.\textsuperscript{33}

She goes on to caution scriptwriters to check to see “if what is being said in the dialogue could possibly be communicated in a more filmic way through image or action”, because they are working in the medium of “film not theatre, and what a character does often tells us more about them than what they say.”\textsuperscript{34}

In transferring much of the theatrical discourse to the film adaptation of \textit{Hotel Sorrento}, I would argue that the filmmakers


\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}
frequently “slip into a theatre play”, although this was by no means “by mistake”, since the filmmakers made a conscious decision to remain faithful to its theatrical origins. They claim that in their adaptation they “tried hard to retain most of the sisters’ speeches” and that they “were eager to prove that long dialogue scenes can work just as well” in a film as they do in a theatre. Many would disagree. Indeed, for some, even the play itself was slow and verbose. One reviewer, for example, claimed that: “Rayson committed the cardinal sin of boring her audiences and should have heeded Tennessee Williams’ advice that a gratuitous murder on stage was preferable to boredom in the stalls.”

Brian McFarlane rightly points out that the film is “essentially a conversation piece” whose “theatrical origins” are evident primarily because of the “quality and reliance on a great deal of talk.” He goes on to observe that Hotel Sorrento needed an audience which is prepared to listen carefully and to consider ideas presented with some complexity. Some will consider it a defect of the film that there is so much talk...There are occasions when this dialogue comes dangerously close to the didactic, but for the most part it is very good talk...When I

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37 Brian McFarlane, “Coming Home and Going On: Richard Franklin’s Hotel Sorrento”, Metro, No. 102, pp.6-8.
say that the film offers good talk, I don’t imply what everyone says is necessarily clever but that, through the talk, they try to sort out what they mean in ways that derive from and reinforce our sense of the characters they represent.\textsuperscript{38}

Even though the adaptors acknowledge that it is “almost axiomatic that...a picture is understood to be worth a thousand words”,\textsuperscript{39} and agreed to “sacrifice” some of the dialogue, they have nevertheless retained most of it, and what we hear too frequently are the words of Hannie Rayson’s play. Moreover, these words are generally delivered as theatre, not as individual expressions of uniquely cinematic characters. In his foreword to the stageplay, Aubrey Mellor argues that Hotel Sorrento is a “play of debate, with many speeches which could almost be called soliloquies”.\textsuperscript{40} In their desire to remain faithful to the play, the filmmakers have chosen to retain many of these long speeches which border on “soliloquies”, thereby privileging the original text and de-emphasizing the cinematic, particularly in the dialogue written for the “intellectuals” — Dick, Meg and Edwin.

More idiomatic, shorter, and far more convincing are the lines of dialogue written for Hil, Pippa, Troy, and, most of all, Wal. These lines and their delivery are more in keeping with the realism of cinema. Earlier I referred to an actor-director workshop in which actors and directors explored the “synergy”

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Peter Fitzpatrick and Richard Franklin, 1995, p.91.
\textsuperscript{40} Aubry Mellor, “The Quest for Certainty” in Hannie Rayson, 1995, p.vix.
between them. The main aim of the workshop was to “explore some...options for getting a believable performance.”\textsuperscript{41} During the workshop, tutor Tony Wickert

emphasised the importance of subtext in arriving at an understanding of the character’s motivation. What a character says often bears little relation to what the character needs or wants. The secret...
lies in what the character does.\textsuperscript{42}

I would argue that the actors who played Hil, Pippa, Troy and Wal in Hotel Sorrento were, in varying degrees, successful at “arriving at an understanding of the character’s motivation” in the original text and adapted this understanding to their acting in a cinematic, rather than theatrical, style.

Apart from dialogue, the ways in which the filmmakers chose to translate character are also somewhat problematic. The play has several examples of minor inconsistencies in narrative logic which have been transferred directly to the screen, where narrative clarity is so important, but Wal’s characterization in the film is particularly worth exploring. In both the play and the film, we are told (by Troy) that he used to read the Australian Voice, the “bi-monthly paper” about “contemporary Australia” Dick edits (p.69). When adapting the play the filmmakers, however, chose to create a newspaper called the Sporting Globe.

\textsuperscript{41} Editorial, Screen Director, Autumn 2000, p.8.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
From the two scenes in which we are given close-ups of this paper, we are meant to understand that Wal is a regular reader of this paper. He reads it as he strolls up to the verandah, muttering about “Golden Slipper stakes” and “two million dollars”, and there is a family joke about never betting on anything that “isn't in the Sporting Globe”. Most importantly, there is an early close-up of one edition of the paper being pushed through the letterbox to make way for the next, and later a dissolve of autumn leaves and water rippling into a close-up of the newspaper’s masthead signifies grief and a time of mourning after Wal’s drowning. There is nothing, however, in Wal’s dialogue or behaviour that suggests he is interested in social ideas or “contemporary” politics in Australia, and, while we have no difficulty accepting that he reads the Sporting Globe, it is hard to believe Wal would have read the Australian Voice. Simply transferring this information about Wal from the play to the film because the filmmakers wished to remain faithful to the play causes some confusion for the audience in grasping the character of Wal.

Ultimately, Hotel Sorrento is, for the most part, a dutifully faithful adaptation of the play with minimal opening out and cinematic visualization. The theatrical settings have been “made real”, the dramatic narrative is retained, and its themes are faithfully transferred to the screen, as are most of the dialogue, the characters, and their motivations. It did moderately well at the box office, making just over one million dollars, and received reasonably favourable reviews, although its “theatricality” was often commented upon.
As previously mentioned, Currency Press published a tie-in edition of the play and the video is available on sell-through. It is interesting to compare the covers of the tie-in and the video. The film’s tie-in has a cover with the conventional “Now a Major Film” banner across its bottom right-hand corner and reproduces a still from the film where Marge (Joan Plowright), in the foreground, sits on the jetty reading *Melancholy* to Dick (John Hargreaves) as he is fishing. It is intriguing that the publishers chose to feature these two “stars” on the tie-in’s cover, since both “stars” play only supporting (although significant) roles. This seems to have been a commercial decision, since many would recognize these two actors, and therefore possibly buy a copy of the tie-in, whereas they might not know the three other actors who play the sisters, even though the drama is mostly about them. Perhaps more importantly, the tie-in’s cover asks us to focus on the “national identity” debate centred around England versus Australia and metaphorically represented by an English “star” and an Australian “star”, rather than upon the drama within the family (Fig.2.11). The video’s cover, however, more accurately reflects the real focus of the text, featuring the three sisters standing together but at odd angles to each other on the jetty, a place of significance in both the play and in the film (Fig.2.12).

*Hotel Sorrento* is a good example of a film in which the filmmakers always had the original play uppermost in their minds. As the director Richard Franklin freely admits, he eventually discarded the script he and Peter Fitzpatrick wrote for the film as the actors “would tell me why they wanted to do this
Hannie Rayson

Fig. 2.11 The cover of the tie-in emphasizes the national identity debate between Australia and England.
CAROLINE GOODALL
CAROLINE GILLMER
TARA MORICE

and JOAN PLOWRIGHT as Marge

HOTEL SORRENTO
A Film By Richard Franklin

It was the perfect family home... until the family came home to it.

With RAY BARRETT and JOHN HARGREAVES

RECOMMENDED FOR MATURE AUDIENCES 15 YEARS AND OVER
LOW LEVEL COARSE LANGUAGE

Fig.2.12 The video cover focuses on the relationships between the three sisters.
line of dialogue from the play as opposed to the one in the script". According to Franklin as they "moved on through the shooting, the actors turned up more and more with copies of the play and we ended up shooting most of it."\textsuperscript{43}

This admission may perhaps demonstrate the lack of "synergy" between actors and director but it certainly reveals the strong commitment the cast and their director finally had to the play, rather than to the film.

\textit{THE WELL} (1997)

A dutifully faithful approach is rather more difficult to take when creating a film version of a novel but, nevertheless filmmakers often take a roughly equivalent path when adapting a novel for the screen. This approach may be referred to as a "skeletally" faithful adaptation: i.e., the bare bones of the narrative, characters and themes are faithfully translated to the screen without much of the flesh that constitutes the novel's body. While there may be some cinematic moments in this kind of adaptation, for the most part the filmmakers are more concerned with trying to show what the book "looks like", rather than with making a film.

It is probably true to say that the feature film, because of its emphasis on cause-and-effect narratives, variety of settings

\textsuperscript{43} Scott Murray, 1995, p.57.
and exploration of character, has more in common with novels than with theatre. Morris Béja notes that:

There is general agreement that novels are more successfully adaptable than plays usually are, since the play will seem deceptively close in form to the film and may, therefore, be slavishly reproduced; filmmakers adapting a novel, however, will not be able to yield to such a temptation and will be forced at least to try to be creative and imaginative. And they will do so in a form that...in many ways is fundamentally closer to the novel than to drama.⁴⁴

Similarly, Jean Mitry has argued that:

Structurally the cinema is much closer in nature to the novel. Many of the statements we make today about movies were made about the novel when it developed in the eighteenth century. It was from the outset considered a “profane” form which tantalized people’s natural curiosity about how things work. It treated ordinary people, characterizing them by ordinary speech...Furthermore its structure has always been a mixture of scenes, commentaries, and descriptions...Film and novel must create

⁴⁴Morris Béja, 1979, p.84.
human worlds but we must always be made to feel the chore of this creation, the emergence from the mud of inchoate experience.\textsuperscript{45}

Although, as I will argue in Chapter Five, the form of the original text is ultimately far less important than the aim and skills of the filmmakers, it is true, nevertheless, that the classical narrative feature film does seem to "work" more like a novel than drama. As Brian McFarlane observes:

The relentless linearity associated with the usual reading of a novel favours the gradual accretion of information about action, characters, atmosphere, ideas, and this mode of presentation, of itself, contributes to the impression received.\textsuperscript{46}

The film of \textit{The Well} retains the book’s basic structure, and alters the narrative only very slightly, omitting minor incidents and characters in an attempt to focus upon the relationship between the two women. Where in the book, for example, it is probable that Katherine will leave Hester as soon as Joanna arrives, by the end of the film we actually see Katherine (Miranda Otto) leaving Hester (Pamela Rabe). The loyal Harry Bird dies in the novel but not in the film, and the women’s shopping sprees to the city have been omitted, which helps keep the focus on their isolation. Also wisely omitted are minor characters like Mrs

\textsuperscript{45} Dudley Andrew, 1976, pp.207-208.  
\textsuperscript{46} Brian McFarlane, 1996, p.27.
Grossman and the customers who haunt her shop, including the writer who implicitly encourages Hester to begin re-telling her story about the “monster” she hit on the road “one dark night”. In the novel, however, there is no Molly (Kati Edwards) to shoot the dogs or do the “heavy work” Katherine was initially hired to do. Molly is a character created for the film to help develop the early relationship between the doting and obsessive Hester and the childlike, dependent but manipulative and lazy Katherine. Otherwise the characters and the narrative in the book and the film are essentially the same, the minor changes being not significant enough for this film to be categorized as a variation (see Chapter Three).

The “Problem” of Realism

In a feature film the medium’s relationship to an impression of reality is the basis for much of its power and impact on the “reader”. Cinema, perhaps even more than the traditional novel, depends upon, and has always depended upon, this illusion of verisimilitude.

Jean-Claude Carrière argues:

If at a given point in the Mahabharata an inspired actor says to us ‘I see the elephants in the plain, their trunks severed, spewing blood’ no spectator turns to look for the elephants at the back of the auditorium. He sees them, if all goes well, inside himself...
This is a process that would be almost totally unacceptable in film. Film has to show the elephants. It has no choice: it is part of the contract each spectator made when he paid for his ticket...Not to show the stricken elephants would almost certainly trigger a frustration which would cost the film’s creators and producers dearly, unless of course they made the elephants’ absence an exercise in style....Everything in the cinema happens in ways diametrically opposed to the ways of the theatre, where reality is never perceived as true...Film can...literally possess us, in the double meaning of the word: it takes possession of us, dominates and manipulates us; and it also takes us in, deceives us. ...it is an art rooted in reality.⁴⁷

Similarly, André Bazin claims that realism “is the problem we always end up with when we are dealing with cinema”, arguing that:

The realism of the cinema follows directly from its photographic nature. Not only does some marvel or some fantastic thing on the screen not undermine the reality of the image, on the contrary, it is its most valid justification. Illusion in the cinema is not based as it is

in the theater on convention tacitly
accepted by the general public; rather
contrariwise, it is based on the inalienable
realism of that which is shown. All
trick work must be perfect in all material
aspects on the screen. The ‘invisible man’
must wear pyjamas and smoke a cigarette.\textsuperscript{46}

Film’s natural affinity with “reality” because of its high
iconicity, however, does not mean that the medium is incapable of
complexity, metaphor or symbol. As discussed in the Overview
and again in Chapter Five, it is part of the challenge for
filmmakers adapting a literary or theatrical text to discover
cinematic signs which capture the source’s language, meanings,
tone and atmosphere. Arguably, however, there may be a
reluctance on the part of some filmmakers to abandon the
alliance between camera and reality, thereby choosing to “make
real” what was metaphorical, symbolic or ambiguous in the
source. This seems to be what has occurred in the adaptation of
Elizabeth Jolley’s novel, \textit{The Well}. As I will argue, what is
mysterious, ambiguous and strange in the novel is generally made
absolutely unambiguous and “real” in the film so that, in the end,
the film is a faithful, but literal and “skeletal”, audio-visual
translation of a non-realistic novel. Samantha Lang, the director
of the film, acknowledged this realism. She described the film
version of \textit{The Well} as “a mystery played out by two women in a
fragile relationship of dependence. It’s not a naturalistic film,

\textsuperscript{46} André Bazin, trans. Hugh Gray, \textit{What is Cinema? Selected Essays}, Vol. 1,
but there is a realism that evolves as a result of the characters."\textsuperscript{49}

Although perhaps slightly too harsh, Diane Cook's review of *The Well* makes a valid point about the filmmakers' overall approach to their adaptation. She claims that:

While the narrative holds some tension, the film hammers every thematic point with a directorial mallet; and in place of Jolley's wryness and sense of irony is a fashionable coldness and cynicism which is likely to leave audiences wondering why they went the distance...There's a slight edginess but it's largely due to the visual mood rather than the way the story's handled.\textsuperscript{50}

For the purpose of this study, it would have been interesting to read the script to see precisely how Laura Jones approached adapting Jolley's novel, particularly in the light of her claim that she found the book "very slippery material to adapt for a film"\textsuperscript{51} and Samantha Lang's admission that "All the script assessments [they] got were terrible".\textsuperscript{52} However, a spokesperson for Currency Press said that Laura Jones had refused to allow publication of her screenplay because she believed that "Elizabeth Jolley's

\textsuperscript{49} Richard Jinman, "Call to Cannes, is well, 'dizzy making'", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 April, 1997, p.3.
\textsuperscript{50} Diane Cook, "In Review: The Well", *Cinema Papers*, August 1997, p.36. David Stratton, on the other hand, gave this film a favourable review.
\textsuperscript{51} Southern Star Film Sales Production Notes, 1997.
version is the best".53 This strongly suggests that the primary goal of the scriptwriter was fidelity to, and a privileging of, the source. During an interview, Robyn Watts of Southern Star, the distributors of the film for overseas territories, promised to find out if I could gain access to a copy of the script54 but later wrote to tell me that she had been denied “permission to send [me] a copy,”55 and neither AFTRS in Sydney nor the AFI in Melbourne had a copy of the unpublished manuscript at the time of writing. It may be worth mentioning here that during my research for this thesis I found this coy reluctance on the part of scriptwriters in Australia to allow scrutiny of their work frustrating.56 For people genuinely interested in examining the process of making a film, particularly if the film is an adaptation of a published work, access to the script is invaluable.

While there is a reverence towards the source, the film version of The Well, in contrast to the novel, is, as referred to earlier, generally realistic in style. In contrast, the novel The Well is ambiguous, psychologically complex, and multi-layered, frequently working on the level of fairy-tale or romance. The film retains the basic narrative but, despite the oddness of the tale, rarely moves out of the realm of what David Bordwell refers to as the referential. Bordwell claims that there are four levels of meaning in films. The first is referential (that which gives information, e.g., “We are going to Parramatta”, and/or shows

53 Telephone Interview, 19 November 1997.  
54 Interview with Robyn Watts, 26 July 1997.  
56 This is in contrast to Hollywood scripts, most of which are readily and cheaply available from Cinestore in Sydney. I am, however, indebted to John Ruane who sent me his scripts of Death in Brunswick and That Eye the Sky, and to Steve Wright who willingly gave me a copy of his screenplay Lilian’s Story.
something many people would recognize, e.g., a freeway with a sign showing the way to Parramatta). Secondly, there are “explicit” meanings which “function within the film’s overall form” but are always “defined by context”. Thirdly, there are implicit meanings, suggested in the text and used by “perceivers” to interpret the film. Finally, there are repressed or symptomatic meanings, meanings which are not deliberately constructed but which surface with interpretation. These meanings are usually tied to public discourse, such as the political or social concerns of a society at a particular time. Bordwell’s general rule of thumb is that a “good” film works on all four levels, and that it will have “a multiplicity of relations among many of the separate formal elements and tends to create interesting formal patterns”.  

The film of The Well, for the most part, encourages us to view it almost entirely on the referential level, only rarely achieving any other level of meaning. It could be argued that this has to do primarily with the choices the filmmakers made throughout in their attempts to remain consciously loyal to the (skeleton) of the book.

Samantha Lang recognized the difficulties of trying to capture this novel on film. She observed that:

It’s quite a strange story and it asks you to suspend disbelief on a number of different levels. It’s hard

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trying to make something that can sustain that suspension of disbelief. Once the man is thrown down the well, Katherine’s saying he is alive is a very odd thing to happen.\textsuperscript{58}

Many parts of the novel are, however, effectively transferred to the screen, primarily, I would argue, because of the power of director of photography, Mandy Walker. The film was shot on location in New South Wales, and the ways in which the cinematography captures the landscape and manages to convey its atmosphere is responsible for creating much of the strangeness of the story on the screen. Elizabeth Jolley in her essay on landscape, refers to the way she tries, in her own work, to use the landscape to “heighten contrasts and to enliven scenes...to create parallels which reveal aspects of human behaviour.”\textsuperscript{59}

Mandy Walker, in many instances, manages to use landscape in a similar way. Although director Samantha Lang decided to change the physical location from the novel’s wheatfields of Western Australia to the barren outcrops around Cooma, New South Wales, as in the novel the “parallels” between the isolated landscape and Hester’s sense of personal isolation are clearly established. In the novel we are told that the landscape “could seem desolate and frightening”\textsuperscript{60}, that it is “stark, ugly even in


Subsequent references, except for long quotes, are to this edition and are cited in the text.
its bareness” (p.27) and that Hester often feels “the emptiness and isolation” of the land (p.159). The filmmakers early establish this sense of alienation and desolation as we watch Hester and Katherine turn off from the highway and disappear towards the distant horizon, engulfed by flat, parched plains. The barrenness of the landscape also functions effectively in the film as a metaphor for Hester’s own barrenness as a woman, as well as helping to reveal the emptiness of her relationships with other people, with the exception of Katherine and, possibly, Harry Bird (Paul Chubb). Samantha Lang claims that:

The landscape is supposed to reflect...
Hester’s inner world. It is quite isolating
and arid, rugged, with those strange
boulders, and should really underscore
Hester’s character, rather than being
a real place.61

Throughout the film we are urged to recall this “parallel” isolation through the repeated intercutting of master shots of the empty landscape (Fig.2.13). Thus, for example, we see Hester teaching Katherine a German song at the piano while Hester’s father dozes (we instinctively understand that Hester has spent many nights alone at the piano, just like this), then there is a direct cut to a master shot of the landscape. Another master shot of this metaphorical landscape is also used between the scene where Katherine “negotiates” the move from the old homestead

to the cottage, again during the move itself, and yet again, shortly afterwards, to reveal how even more isolated they have become by moving to the cottage on the boundary of the property. A similar shot is used later, this time from Hester’s point of view, as she gazes out of the window while Katherine brushes her hair. These shots, formal in composition and painterly in style, are for the most part visually appealing, and generally fulfill their function of establishing and re-establishing the emptiness and loneliness of the landscape which echoes the two women’s solitary existence. They are, however, often intercut rather clumsily, appearing suddenly on the screen and looking more like a slide or a still photograph which has been inserted into the narrative, halting the fluid movement we expect of the cinematic text. Samantha Lang says that this effect was deliberate: “We wanted to try and make the images like still photographs. An image wasn’t arbitrary: if you freeze-framed it, it would have a meaning on its own.”

The shots, however, bluntly seek to tell us the obvious rather than suggest ambiguity and psychological complexity. Even Mandy Walker admits that many of these static shots in the film are used to tell, not show. In an interview with Margaret Smith she states that:

Most of our influences were from still photography. We actually only moved the camera on a dolly two or three times...we tried to set up each frame so it was

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62 Ibid. p.58.
very particular in its composition and it was telling a story as one shot.\textsuperscript{63}

Overall, \textit{The Well} is a relatively, and surprisingly, fast-paced film, given its subject matter. It consists of about 112 separate scenes, with frequent quick and direct cuts on both sound and action. So this emphasis upon shots that recall “still photography” often disturbs both the pace and rhythm of the film, as well as attracting attention to them because of their uncinematic quality. This particular device would not be disturbing if the filmmakers were involved in cinematic experimentation, as in the film version of \textit{What I Have Written} (1995) which also played with the idea of using still photographs, but there is little indication that this was the filmmakers’ goal in \textit{The Well}.

More successfully enunciated for the screen are the two domestic settings. The homestead, in the novel described as “closed up and secretive...raised high on the slope facing west” (pp.25-26), in the film is a large old house with three roof peaks reminiscent of a castle in a fairytale, or of Hawthorne’s eerie \textit{House of the Seven Gables}. Arguably, much more could have been made in the film of the physical aspects of the house, since myth and fairytale are important aspects of the novel. The small cottage on the “Dog Leg”, with its dark corners and cold floors, its “kerosene lamps and...wood stove” (p.30) was a studio set so the cottage’s claustrophic atmosphere would have been relatively easy to manipulate and control. However, in the film there is

rarely a sense of the claustrophobia that Katherine must feel as she attempts to break free from Hester. Neither is there a real sense of the characters confronting each other, as the women often do in the novel, by moving furniture or objects, or urging the other into another room, or away from or towards the well, as they both square off and try to outwit each other.

Besides the two houses, other settings are also faithfully realized in the film. There is the small yard of the novel, with its clucking chickens, and the well. This yard, reminiscent of Grimm’s fairytales, is bounded by the fence with the well as its centrepiece, is close to the little cottage and at times we do experience the same eerie feeling that we get in the novel about this place (Fig. 2.14). It looks like a spot where strange things could happen.

The filmmakers’ attempts to capture the novel’s symbolism through the use of a bleached bypass process which gives the entire film a blue overlay are arguably less successful. This effect, which Adrian Martin referred to as a “ketchup approach to style”, does not always work because it seems to have been imposed upon the images, rather than appearing to emanate from them. According to Samantha Lang, she and Mandy Walker “did a lot of research in the beginning to try and come to a style.” Samantha Lang claims that:

When [Mandy Walker] first read the script, she felt it would be really good to do it in black and white. I said

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Fig.2.13 The landscape in The Well is a metaphor for Hester's isolation.

Fig.2.14 The cottage recalls a fairytale element in The Well.
'I really think it would be good to have a bit of colour in it.' So we then tried to develop a technique that had the feelings that we were both going for....I thought at the time, 'Oh, this is too self-conscious' there is nothing worse than watching a movie that is so self-conscious that you can't get into the story.\textsuperscript{65}

The decision not to make the film black and white was especially wise because the creators were then able to weave two significant colours — pink and yellow — into a visual motif which helps define the main characters and explain their actions. Pink is associated with Katherine, and her longing for the freedom and independence of the outside world. In both the novel and the film, for example, Joanna's letters are on pink paper, and Katherine often wears a pink jumper which, in the final scenes, is deliberately placed in the foreground, hanging out of the suitcase full of Hester's money. Yellow in the novel, as in the film, is associated with Hester's early childhood. In the film, soon after Katherine's arrival, we watch her prowling about the house; she wanders into Hester's bedroom and picks up a photograph of Hilde, Hester's beloved governess, and Hester, dressed in a yellow hat and dress. Later, we see Hester wrap the tin of money in a yellow hat. (In the novel the hat is red, but it is also associated with her childhood: "In those far off days she wore a red woollen hat knitted by her grandmother. This hat with its tassel Hester still had" p.46). In the film, when Hester drives into town to go shopping she wears a yellow blouse, and in both texts she makes Katherine a yellow dress to wear to the Borden's party. Using

\textsuperscript{65} Tim Hunter, 1997, p.58.
pink and yellow as a *leit motif* to help develop character and to underscore the narrative works particularly well in the film, given the visual nature of the medium.

Effective, too, is the use of music. As in the novel, music helps develop the characterization of the two women. The advantage in film, of course, is that audiences can hear the melodies, whereas in the novel we have to try to recall them if we know them. Samantha Lang comments on the significance music had in the film:

One of the first things I realized was that music would play a really important part in showing the balance, or imbalance, in Hester and Katherine’s relationship...Hester’s music is supposed to represent the only beautiful thing in her life, whereas Katherine’s music is about being physical and thrashing around, about something that was scary, kind of instant and not sweet or beautiful, but sensual or primal. In a way, it’s those elements, or those characteristics, in Katherine that Hester is attracted to; but also they are foreign to her because she has very little understanding of her own physicality or sensuality.66

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In both the novel and the film, Hester's music is the thing Katherine most despises: Katherine finally tells Hester that “More than anything....I hate your music.”

Many of the scenes in *The Well* are cut on sound or on a musical note, often bleeding into the next frame, helping to add depth and complexity to the narrative. This technique of cutting on sound also adds variety to what is otherwise a film which relies mostly upon simple direct cuts. The opening shot, for instance, has music over a black screen and the visuals suddenly burst through the sound frames. In a later scene there is a long pan of the exterior landscape to the tune of Hester's piano playing, a scene which is effectively cut and linked to the next by the smacking sound of a wet towel hitting the floor as a resentful Katherine, on her hands and knees, washes the interior entrance to Hester's house. When Hester and Katherine move into the cottage and begin to unpack their possessions, cross-cutting of images accompanied by each woman's choice of music helps establish the kind of relationship and household that is being set up. Where Katherine is secretive and narcissistic, hiding Joanna's photograph under a poster and posing before a mirror, Hester is more interested in creating comfortable, communal quarters. She puts up paintings in common areas and seems genuinely enthusiastic about setting up a home for the two of them to enjoy. The song Katherine sings as she hides Joanna's photograph is “Atomic Electric”, her theme song, which highlights her deceitfulness and dishonesty. We are frequently alerted to this aspect of her character through this song: she sings it at the well and it is played on the soundtrack of the penultimate scene in
which we are shown in a close-up the money she has stolen from Hester. “Atomic Electric”, and especially the line “One in a million”, functions diegetically in that it helps us understand Katherine’s personality and point of view. She has had a “one in a million” chance to dupe her benefactor and abscond without having to be held accountable.

Adrian Martin is correct, however, when he argues that the film version of The Well “spells out not enough and too much at once.” Although at times the film seems to be a mystery or psychological thriller (we are meant to ask: is the man in the well really dead? who took the money?) it ends in another genre altogether: that of the swindler who succeeds in a cheap confidence trick. While the basic narrative of the novel is retained, the story time is compressed for impact. In the novel Katherine is with Hester for more than three years; in the film only for a few months. It opens during summer when the characters wear light clothing and the nights are warm, and ends about the beginning of autumn when they put on jumpers at night and go inside because it is cold. This compression of time not only adds intensity to the relationship between Hester and Katherine, it also adds credibility. We are far more willing to accept that Katherine would diddle her benefactor after having spent only a few months with her than we would be if she has spent some three years with Hester, being indulged and, for the most part, very happy.

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67 Adrian Martin, 1997.
In the novel, Jolley chose a third person narrator but one which reveals a restricted consciousness, or what Henry James referred to as a “central intelligence”. This central intelligence is Hester Harper’s. We come to know and understand Hester very well in the novel — we are introduced to her thoughts, her feelings, her possessiveness over Katherine, her indifference towards Mr Bird and others, her arrogance and contempt towards the Bordens and the bourgeois world they represent. We are asked to explore her confused emotions surrounding her thoughts about her plainness, her lameness, her migraines, her childhood, her grandmother, and her father whom she has always believed rejected her because he had wanted a son. We learn of her love for her governess, Hilde, of her happy memories of the trip she made with her to Europe, and of her suppressed sexual yearnings for Katherine. We also learn of her many small cruelties: there is her childish betrayal of Hilde and her deliberate snubbing of the lonely young mother who once walked up to the homestead with her new baby in a pram to be admired. When we are told of the way she once poked her doll’s head down into the well of the old pram, we come to realize that her cruelty is bound up with her horror of sex and sexuality, and especially with her terror of men and childbirth. This is why in the novel it is easy to accept that she would play cruel little games with Katherine, not only in order to keep her for herself, but also to keep her away from sex, men, marriage and childbirth. Hester’s confused feelings and fantasies are, however, underdeveloped in the film, which limits our understanding of why she is so extraordinarily upset about Katherine’s relationship with the man in the well.
Hester's severe nature, which can quickly turn cruel, while often lacking in the nuances cinema requires of performance, is reasonably well conveyed on the screen through hand gestures and props. On the night of Katherine's arrival, for example, when Katherine wanders into the living room as Hester plays the piano, Hester beckons rudely to Katherine to come to her and points at her, commanding her to sing (Fig.2.15). Hester uses this pointing gesture frequently throughout the film. She points at the briefcase filled with money that Harry Bird delivers to her and ridicules him. "Stick 'em up", she laughs mockingly. She points at Harry again as she unpacks the money, telling him that one of the bundles is for New York and suggesting, through this same gesture, that New York is both exciting and dangerous. Much later, when she is struggling with Katherine over whether or not the man in the well is dead or alive, she tries to convince Katherine that the man is dead with the same gesture: the forefinger of each hand is pointed aggressively downwards, insisting that she knows what she put "down there". When she unpacks the white nightgowns, twice she points scissors at Katherine, snipping their blades near her face.

While the narrative and the characters undergo minor (but ultimately insignificant) alterations for the film, the filmmakers chose to remain dutifully faithful to the structure of the novel, even to the point of retaining its opening sequence, a flashforward in which Katherine and Hester Harper, returning from the Borden's party, hit "something" on the track. One reviewer complained that the film had "structural problems" because it "begins with the crime then recedes to flashback and
Fig.2.15 The literary Hester's severe nature is captured in Pamela Rabe's pointing gesture used throughout the film.
converges up to the climactic point.” This reviewer, who argues for a traditional linear approach to structure, goes on to claim that:

In *The Well* we get back to the crime within roughly thirty minutes and then sit through another hour or more of consequences, and it's quite jarring — it simply doesn't work, and the story would be more cohesive if it started from the beginning of the women's relationship and simply worked forward to the accident and a much quicker aftermath.\(^{68}\)

Apart from the fact that this reviewer mixes “crime” with “accident” (in both the novel and the film it is the covering up of the accident which is supposed to be the crime, not the accident itself), she neglects to point out that this sequence exists precisely because it is in the novel, and the filmmakers deliberately began their film this way because they wanted, above all else, to remain faithful to their source.

The games of wit and power the two women begin to play as soon as the man is supposedly dumped down the well are tense, ambiguous, strange and powerful in the novel; they are much less so in the film. The main reason for this lack of tension, arguably, is because the “something” they hit on the track which is later put down the well is made “real” in the film. In the novel, we simply never know if the “something” was a “roo”, a “man”, a treestump, a bump in the road, or something else. Only

\(^{68}\) Diane Cook, 1997, p.36.
Hester Harper ever sees this “something” in the novel, but in the film there is never any doubt that it is a man. In the novel, when Hester tells Katherine that it is not “a roo” they have hit, but that, “It’s horrible...it’s caught up on the bar. Its...” (p.80), we are still not at all clear what “it” is. It is Katherine and not Hester who almost immediately decides that “it” is a “he”. “Miss Harper! do you think he’s been to our place?... Is he hurt bad?”, Katherine sobs. We are immediately alerted to the possibility that Katherine has cunningly seized this opportunity to pin the blame on a mythical “he” for the theft of the money.

The filmmakers, however, made the decision to realize the man, and in making him real, avoided the ambivalence of his existence that exists in the novel. In doing so, they encountered a problem similar to the one Polanski confronted in his adaptation of Macbeth. In her discussion of this film, Sue Tweg argues that

*mise en scène* can externalise imagery in the text, often to stress the psychological situation of a character. Sometimes this works, sometimes it doesn’t...I think one of the poorer visual moments in the film is where the filmmaker has had to make a choice about a supernatural effect. It’s a version of the familiar ‘ghost in Hamlet’ dilemma: does the audience see what the character sees? Polanski’s Macbeth sees the dagger, and so do we, but did we need
to see it to get the point?"  

There are four significant shots in the film which clearly establish the "reality" of this man so that we "get the point". The first is a night shot in the opening flashback sequence where we see a figure of a man, wearing a balaclava, crouching on the road (Fig.2.16). In case we missed it in the opening scenes, we are again shown the man's shadowy figure when the sequence is repeated, reinforcing our assumption that there is, in fact, a "real" man.

The second shot which makes the man "real" occurs shortly after Katherine and Hester have moved to the cottage, and before the Borden's party. Kathy points towards the fence, claiming that "someone is there", moving about in the dark. Hester, reassuring Kathy "it is only the trees blowing", urges her to "come inside". As they go indoors, there is a travelling point of view shot suggesting that someone, unseen, is moving towards the well, so that we are clearly being asked to believe that Kathy did see someone or something. Because we have already seen the man in the opening sequence, we strongly suspect it is he who is lurking about the property.

The third shot establishing the reality of this man's existence occurs after Kathy has tried to convince Hester that the man is alive: that night she lies in her bed whispering and praying aloud that this man, whom she claims she now loves, will not

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leave her. At this point we are led to believe that she is, if not going mad, at least very confused, but there is little doubt about the reality of a man, dead or alive.

The most significant shot in terms of realism is the hand we see emerging from the well. In the novel we are told that Hester “was sure she saw a hand grasping the lowest metal rung” and that she

thought as the water slapped crazily against the stonework that she saw too a man’s head which, because of being drenched, was small, sleeked and rounded.\textsuperscript{70}

But Elizabeth Jolley, through her use of the word “sleeked” is careful to link Hester’s supposed vision of the man’s head with the “sleek shining paint” the young Hester’s doll “had for hair” (p.163). In the novel, Hester’s panic and desperate bid to push “the man” back into the well is similar to the way she had, as a child, “poked at the small round head of the doll” to make it become further wedged into “the deep well” of the pram. It is not too difficult to believe that she is merely re-living a memory and that there is, in fact, no man at all in the well. In the film, however, we clearly see a man’s hand lose his hold on the ladder’s rung after Hester viciously pokes at him, and he slips back down into the stormwater in the well (Fig.2.17). Whether Hester’s imagination is playing tricks is not the point: the point is that

\textsuperscript{70} Elizabeth Jolley, 1987, p.148.
Fig.2.16 The filmmakers decided to make the man “real”.

Fig.2.17 The man’s hand and the silhouette (Fig.2.16 above) makes “real” what is imagined in the novel.
the filmmakers have encouraged us to believe that the man is, or
was, real.

The filmmakers’ choice to “realize” the man profoundly
diminishes the relationship and the psychological power play
between the two women. Having made the decision to “make
real” the man, the only thing left to do is to explore whether or
not this man is dead or alive. If he is alive, then Katherine is
telling the truth; if he is dead, then Katherine is either mad or
playing with Hester. The real “mystery”, if it could be called
that, is not whether or not the “monster” Katherine hits on the
road is a man, a roo, or something else, but whether or not
Katherine will get away from Hester with the money. It is finally
made absolutely clear in the film, where it remains unstated in
the novel, that, no matter whether the man is dead or alive,
Katherine is a thief. Samantha Lang claimed that the shot in the
resolution where we clearly see the stolen money in the suitcase
was included for the sake of narrative closure, and it is a shot
about which she admitted to being “ambivalent” (Fig.2.18). After
her screening of the film at Sydney’s Chauvel theatre, she
commented that:

The use of the shot was put there in the editing
to give a sense of plot closure. The shot was
gratifying on the level of plot but on the level of
character the shot risks undermining what has
gone before...It was a decision that we all
Fig.2.18 The shot of the money - used for narrative closure - about which the director remains ambivalent.
made...I would say I felt ambivalent and I still do about it.\textsuperscript{71}

The film of Jolley's novel had a mixed reception. While it was the only Australian film chosen to screen in official competition at the 1997 Cannes International Film Festival, several of the reviews at Cannes were unfavourable and it won no awards. \textit{The Well} did better in the 1997 AFI Awards, however, where it was nominated in all the major categories and ultimately won three awards: Pamela Rabe for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role, Michael Philips for Best Achievement in Production Design and Laura Jones for Best Screenplay Adapted from Another Source. It has been sold to several international territories, including France, Japan and Spain, and had a limited release in the United States. It was also invited to screen, along with \textit{The Castle}, at the 1998 Sundance Festival.

It also had a mixed critical response. Film critic Lynden Barber referred to \textit{The Well} as having a "remote and mannered artiness"\textsuperscript{72} and in \textit{Cinema Paper's} "Dirty Dozen", the average rating from critics out of ten was only 6.6.\textsuperscript{73} A brief browse through the reviews on the Internet Movie Database after \textit{The Well}'s release in the U.S.A. also revealed mixed opinions, although given some of the puzzled comments about the strangeness of the

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{71} Samantha Lang, Director's Screening, Chauvel Theatre, 27 July 1997.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Lynden Barber, "True Criticism and hype", \textit{Weekend Australian}, 4-5 October 1997, p.23.
\item \textsuperscript{73} "The Dirty Dozen", \textit{Cinema Papers}, October 1997, p.64.
\end{itemize}
story, few critics, it seems, had read the book and so were unaware that they were dealing with an adaptation.\textsuperscript{74}

Elizabeth Jolley herself was not entirely satisfied with the film. In an interview on Radio National's \textit{Books and Writing} she argued that the filmmakers

couldn't see that Hester's epiphany—when she's reading Mr Bird's carefully kept account books—they couldn't see that that was the dramatic turning point in the novel. They wanted something different. But for me when she's reading those account books and seeing how carefully he's looked after her all those years and she's never thanked him once...It sounds very simple, but I believe that the very simple realizations are the very important ones.\textsuperscript{75}

But of course the filmmakers were clearly focusing on the relationship between Hester and Katherine and, in the film, Harry Bird plays only a minor role in that relationship.

The Australian box office receipts for \textit{The Well} were modest, but given the target audience this might have been predicted. At a forum on Australian feature film in July 1997, a representative of Southern Star, the film's overseas distributor


(which also contributed to some of the film's $3.5 million budget), claimed that from the very beginning The Well's target audience was to be

arthouse. We never wanted a cross-over to commercial mainstream. We wanted it in the official selection at Cannes...because it would be lost in the Marketplace; the core consumer audience is arthouse filmgoers; the secondary, women aged 22-55.\textsuperscript{76}

Two different publicity posters were designed for preview screenings of The Well. The poster for the Australian release concentrated on the relationship between Katherine and Hester and the words "Love, Death, Deception" divide the image of Hester in the lower right-hand corner of from the image of Katherine, who moves across the frame, upwards and above her, with the image of a vortex in the background, signifying her eventual freedom from and domination of Hester. The poster also makes it clear the film is an adaptation of the novel by Elizabeth Jolley, something Australian audiences would probably be interested in (Fig.2.19). However, in the poster designed for the European box-offices, there is no reference to Elizabeth Jolley, the image of Katherine is reversed and she heads downwards into the vortex, with the sentence "who knows what lies beneath the surface" printed underneath the title The Well (Fig.2.20). The European poster raises the central question of the novel, rather than of the

\textsuperscript{76} Forum on Australian Film, Chaired by Peter Castaldi, University of Sydney, 26 June 1997.
A stunner: A triumph of lean, spooky direction."

JANET MASLIN
NEW YORK TIMES

The most assured and remarkable Australian debut since Jane Campion's Sweetie."

SHANE DANIELSEN
VOGUE

THE WELL

Love
Death
Deception

Fig. 2.19 The poster designed for Australian audiences focuses on the relationship between the two women.
FOLLOWING ITS ACCLAIMED WORLD PREMIERE screening in competition at the 50th International Cannes Film Festival, The Globe Film Co is proud to present THE WELL. Directed by Samantha Lang, screenplay by Laura Jones (THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY, AN ANGEL AT MY TABLE, HIGH TIDE) from the award-winning novel by Elizabeth Jolley, THE WELL stars Pamela Rabe and Miranda Otto and is produced by Sandra Levy.

FROM THE DAY SHE BRINGS KATHERINE home to the isolated farm where she lives alone with her difficult father, Hester's life changes. Taken on as househelp, Katherine soon comes to mean something more to Hester.

SMALL INTIMACIES OFFERED BY HESTER are warily accepted by Katherine. As their relationship develops, something long-repressed in Hester is released as she discovers the giddy pleasures of friendship.

WHEN HESTER'S FATHER DIES, SHE TAKES control of the farm and family money, and for a brief time their new relationship is poised in perfect balance as each gives to the other exactly what she needs.

THIS HARMONY SHATTERS ONE NIGHT when Katherine accidentally runs over a man on a deserted road near the cottage. The incident delivers a fatal blow to their fragile happiness, and in a whirlpool of anger and accusations their relationship begins to unravel.

PLAYED OUT AGAINST THE EERIE ISOLATION of the rural Australian landscape, THE WELL is an extraordinary debut feature from director Samantha Lang.

"Clearly the work of a mature and talented new filmmaker. Dramatic and satisfying."  
DAVID STRATTON VARIETY

"Richly accomplished. The performances of the two women are exemplary."  
EVAN WILLIAMS THE AUSTRALIAN
Fig. 2.20 The poster for European territories emphasizes the mysterious elements in the novel, *The Well*.
THE WELL
Who knows what lies beneath the surface.

From this day she brings Katherine home to the cottage farm where she has lived alone with her dead husband. Katherine, a formidable, 70-year-old widow, soon comes to mistrust her husband, Harry. When she discovers that Harry was married to Katherine's best friend, she grows even more suspicious of him. Katherine's jealousy of Harry drives her to possess him completely.

Samantha, Katherine's daughter, returns from her studies and finds the cottage in disarray. She begins to question Harry's true intentions and疑虑s his relationship with her mother. Katherine, desperate to possess Harry, begins to manipulate him, forcing him to do her bidding.

When Harry's father, a wealthy businessman, dies, leaving a巨额的 legacy to the family, Katherine begins to scheme. She manipulates Harry into believing that he must inherit the entire fortune. Katherine's greed and manipulation lead to a confrontation with Harry, who finally realizes the true nature of Katherine's love.

The story unfolds as Katherine's manipulations and possessive behaviors create a toxic environment. Harry's attempt to escape Katherine's clutches leads to a dramatic climax, where Katherine's true intentions are revealed.

TECHNICAL DATA
Format: 35mm
Screen Ratio: 1.85
Color: True Color
Sound: Stereo

PRINCIPAL CREW
Director: Sandra Leary
Producer: David Green
Screenplay: Sandra Leary
From the novel by: Martha Gellhorn
Director of Photography: Michael Phillips
Editor: Anna Borghesi
Production Designer: Stephen Raft
Costume Designer: Ann Robinson
Hair: mantel
Makeup: mantel

PRINCIPAL CAST
Harry: Pamela Fabe
Katherine: Miranda Otto
Harry's Bird: Paul Giobi

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film, tapping into the complex, subterranean depths that exist in Jolley's work. In the film, however, as suggested in the poster for the Australian release and as discussed above, "what lies beneath the surface" is not the real issue: we are shown, exactly what "lies beneath the surface".

A point worth noting is that a tie-in edition of The Well was published by Penguin soon after the film's release. A spokesperson from the sales division at Penguin's head office in Victoria claimed during a telephone interview that she believes that "tie-in editions always make audiences aware of the existence of the book" upon which a film is based, and that "this tie-in of The Well sold reasonably well", although she also noted that there are "regular buyers of Elizabeth Jolley's work" who "would have already read the book" before seeing the film.77

Some might argue that it does not really matter whether or not filmmakers try to be faithful to a film's literary origins because most viewers of it will not have read the source anyway. Yet the publicity for an adaptation often relies upon using the literary author's name, and publishers are usually very quick to bring out tie-in editions upon a film's release, suggesting that there is a recognizable market. Often, too, the ways in which the film and the book are bound up together in the publicity and marketing emphasize the film's fidelity to the source in the hope that audiences will rush out and buy the book. It might be worth

77 Telephone interview, 6 April 1998.
mentioning here that over a period of eight years I surveyed at random students and other audiences, aged between 17 and 60 years old. My questionnaire listed all the adaptations of Australian films made between 1989 and 1998 (the decade under discussion in this study) and asked them to indicate whether or not they had seen the film, whether or not they had read (and/or seen, in the case of plays) the original text, and if so, was this before or after seeing the film? While there were some films many had seen, including *The Delinquents* (1989), *The Sum of Us* (1994) and *Cosi* (1995), many of the films, unfortunately, received a tick in the “Not Seen” column, supporting the general view that Australians are reluctant to watch Australian films. With rare exceptions, respondents also had not read (or seen, in the case of plays) the source. In those cases where they had, invariably they had read the original before seeing the film, suggesting there is a ready-made audience for film adaptations. This result, however, seems to undermine the generally held belief in the publishing industry that film adaptations stimulate book sales. While this may hold true for widely popular texts, given the surge in sales of Jane Austen's novels after the television series of *Pride and Prejudice* and the film versions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*, it clearly does not occur in all cases.

Although some will always find an appreciative audience, faithful adaptations ultimately please very few. They too often alienate those who wish to "see" on the screen a novel or a play they enjoyed, and so are disappointed when their own mental images do not appear before them, or are annoyed by even slight,
insignificant changes to the source. They also irritate those who want to watch a film whose primary goal was not simply to be faithful to its literary source. Faithful adaptations whose titles are the same as the antecedent text’s and also include the original author’s name, such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, often annoy both types of audience for the same reasons. Furthermore, this type of adaptation reinforces and encourages a reluctance to abandon the general critical approach founded on the degree to which a film adaptation is faithful to its source.

In his study of adaptations Brian McFarlane rightly points out the pitfalls of this approach. He argues that:

Fidelity criticism depends on a notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct ‘meaning’ which the filmmaker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with... the fidelity approach seems a doomed enterprise and fidelity criticism unilluminating. That is, the critic who quibbles at failures of fidelity is really saying no more than ‘This reading of the original does not tally with mine in these and these ways.’\(^78\)

The question of fidelity to the literary ancestor has dominated, and continues to dominate, discussions of adaptations. It seems to me that it would be far better if filmmakers, as well as critics, discussed the film that was made, rather than seeking

\(^{78}\) Brian McFarlane, 1996, pp.8-9.
to show the extent to which it was faithful to the source. I would argue that it is far more interesting to explore the film that exists and, if significant changes were made, what was the impact of these changes. As Brian McFarlane notes:

A true reading of the film will depend on a response to how the cinematic codes and aspects of the *mise-en-scène* work to create this particular version of the text...

There are many kinds of relations which may exist between film and literature, and fidelity is only one — and rarely the most exciting.\(^7^9\)

Questioning the value of fidelity is particularly pertinent to the next category of adaptations I explore, “variations.”
CHAPTER THREE
VARIATIONS

“They changed the ending!”; “The scene where...was left out!”;
“She wasn’t anything like...in the book.”; “Why did they add that scene where...?”; “The story was too different from the book’s.”
These and other similar remarks are common protests against altering a literary source when adapting it for the screen. Morris Béja rightly points out that many people resent it if ‘liberties’ are taken, or if a movie ‘distorts’ or ‘fools around’ with a book of which they are fond. There is no doubt that Hollywood has given us cause to be suspicious: instances in which movies have added love interest, tacked on happy endings, or ‘improved’ things to make them more ‘cinematic’ have caused many living authors to squirm in agony or scream in fury, and many dead ones to turn over in their graves.¹

Arguing for faithful adaptations, Martin Amis took Andrew Davies to task for his film interpretation of Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, which invented scenes and shifted emphases. “Each shifted brick”, he thundered, “threatens the whole building.”² One London critic referred to the recent British ITV television adaptation of Oliver Twist as “an assault on a national

treasure” and “an act of extraordinary chutzpah, the equivalent of fitting the statue of Lord Nelson with a replacement arm”. Paul Byrnes, in his review of the adaptation of Norman Lindsay’s *The Magic Pudding*, lamented that the filmmakers “lost most of the book’s most endearing feature — its madness”, and that while the film retained “much of its Australianess in language and look”, the “form” had been “hijacked by the inheritors of Disney’s formula, and turned into something of a cultural bastard.”

Geoffrey Wagner, in *The Novel and the Cinema*, castigates the Hollywood studios for their 1939 version of Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, calling it a “typical machine-made Hollywood transposition” of a “great fictional work”, and claiming that the film “seriously” distorted the novel. He summarizes his discussion by arguing that the studio should never have even tried to make a film out of this novel. “Why take the original at all”, he asks, “but for the accreditation of a great name?” He concludes with this rather peculiar statement: “It is the ignorance that hurts”⁵, revealing a sense of personal injury, as if he had some kind of direct connection with Bronte’s book.

Wagner’s highly subjective response to the 1939 version of *Wuthering Heights* is typical of that of many people who see a film adaptation which changes in some way a literary text they have read and loved. James Griffith argues that critics who rail

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⁵ Paul Byrnes, “It’s only half a magic pudding”, *Sydney Morning Herald, Metropolitan*, 14 December 2000, p.15.

against adaptations very often find fault with a film version of a literary source simply because of the omissions or changes that were made. In his discussion of the film adaptation of James Dickey’s *Deliverance*, Griffith describes the disappointment and confusion the novelist expressed when, “unconsulted and therefore unaware of the aesthetic reasoning”, he watched as details, dialogue, and action were revised until ‘nothing but the bones’ were left of his screenplay while ideas he thought to be ‘not only hopelessly but even laughably inadequate’ found full embodiment on the screen.\(^6\)

Douglas Kennedy, author of the novel *The Dead Heart*, argues that

in the movies business...a book is nothing more than a property. And the author of said property is basically regarded as a nuisance, a schmuck, a marginal dispensable figure in the hierarchical world of film production.\(^7\)

He also describes his bewilderment when he saw the screen version of his book.


\(^7\) Douglas Kennedy, “Getting the Treatment”, *Weekend Australian* 17-18 October 1998, p.10
I discovered that my nasty little novel — now rechristened for the screen as *Welcome to Woop Woop* — had been turned into a musical, replete with 22 Rodgers and Hammerstein songs...The novel's dark humour had now become broad and vaguely lavatorial. However, as I had just cashed the substantial buy-out cheque for the rights, I really wasn't in a position to say anything except: 'It's a little different from the book', which, quite frankly, was the understatement of the year.⁸

Griffith, however, argues in defence of the filmmakers who alter their sources, claiming that:

A faithful adaptation does not guarantee a good film, neither does an unfaithful adaptation necessarily result in a relatively poor film. When an adaptation is not intended to be faithful, the deliberate infidelity may cause critical misunderstanding.⁹

He rightly concludes that: "If a film lacks certain events or characters it becomes a more or less serious problem relative to intended effects; it is not a problem by definition."¹⁰

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¹⁰ *Ibid. p.67.*
Objections to the ways in which filmmakers go about their adaptations by inventing scenes, omitting others, changing endings and writing new dialogue, are frequent and noisy. Many consider this approach to be a “betrayal” of the source, and demand that adaptors strive to be both faithful either to the “spirit” or to the “letter” of the literary source. These particular audiences go to a film wanting to see, and believing that they will see, if not their own interpretation of a book or play, at least a version that is largely faithful to its source.

This quibbling over the extent to which the film is faithful is, however, highly subjective, and ultimately unfair. What these audiences really want is for the filmmakers to show on screen a more or less faithful interpretation of their own imaginings of the source. Many of those critics who express dissatisfaction with adaptations, according to Brian McFarlane, base their evaluations on no more than a subjective view that the “illusion of reality created by the film does not coincide with their perception of the illusion of reality”. He goes on to point out that a more objective and fairer way to explore an adaptation of, say, a novel, is not to clamour for fidelity but to pay close attention to particular corresponding scenes from novel and film to see what the film-maker has achieved by way of equivalence or how he has departed from the original. Such attention is not only possible but important if one is to avoid the unproductive
impressionism that undermines so much of the writing about adaptation.\textsuperscript{12}

While many audiences may fume against the rights of filmmakers to alter the source, it can be argued that, having bought an option, they are entitled to change the source in any way they choose in their efforts to enunciate for the screen a written text. This explains why someone like Saul Zaentz, Hollywood producer of box office hits \textit{One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest} and \textit{The English Patient}, can ridicule the suggestion that the title of the film version of Milan Kundera’s novel \textit{The Unbearable Lightness of Being} be changed because the film was so different from the book. When asked why he refused to change the title, he replied disdainfully, “Because I bought it [the option] and it’s mine.”\textsuperscript{13} Douglas Kennedy clearly learned his lesson the hard way. In his discussion of the process of adapting his novel, \textit{The Dead Heart}, he notes that

after some lobbying from yours truly — they...agreed to let me write the screenplay...Six months later, having delivered draft number two of the screenplay, I received a phone call from the producer, Dwyer. ‘We’ve all just read it and we all think it’s a tremendous improvement over the first draft.’ ‘That’s great’, I said. ‘So what’s next?’ ‘Michael Thomas is starting on Monday.’ I felt as if I had taken

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.} p.200.
\textsuperscript{13} Interview, \textit{Arts on Sunday}, Channel 2, 18 July, 1999.
a right to the jaw...I turned to my wife, Grace, and said, 'I think I've just been fired.'

However, several years later, after publishing two more novels and having sold the options of both to Hollywood, Kennedy is much more philosophical about the process of adapting his work to film. He writes that:

To date, I have had one or two pleasant conversations with the producers who are developing films of the books in their respective studios. And I have told them both the same thing: if you or the screenwriter want to talk things through with me, you've got my number. If not, I won't lose sleep over it. And if you decide that it's the perfect comeback vehicle for Pee-wee Herman, or want to relocate the plot to medieval Czechoslovakia, or decide to have a stream-of-consciousness sequence with a singing falsetto Viking, I'm going to say nothing. Because I have learned my lesson: My book, your film. And, while you're at it, show me the money.

A similarly pragmatic approach is taken by Helen Glad, Norman Lindsay's granddaughter. Shortly before the release of the film of The Magic Pudding, she observed:

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15 Ibid.
I know there are going to be purists who say ‘but it’s not Norman’s pudding’. Well, of course, it’s not Norman’s pudding!...They’ve taken a story that was written in 1918 and has lots of very old-fashioned elements that children don’t relate to but they’ve kept the essence of the story which is about adventure and greed and puddings being thoroughly rude.\textsuperscript{16}

Many in the film industry, including influential Hollywood scriptwriter and editor Linda Seger and the French screenwriter Jean Claude Carrière, point out that an adaptation is an original text and is copyrighted as such. “The adaptation is a new original”, writes Seger. “The adaptor looks for the balance between preserving the spirit of the original and creating a new form.”\textsuperscript{17} She urges scriptwriters to change whatever they feel is necessary to ensure that what is finally shown on screen is dramatically interesting and commercially viable, arguing that:

In making the transition to film, many books or plays that are downers have had the endings changed in order to appeal to the wider demographics of film and television...

\textsuperscript{16} Garry Maddox, “Long time cookin’, it’s showtime for the puddin’”, Sydney Morning Herald, 2 December 2000, p.3.
There is no rule...that says you can't use your imagination when working with the original material...But the transition to film requires that the material be accessible to the general public."^{18}

She concludes that "there is only one kind of impossible adaptation — one where the producer and writer do not have creative license" to make changes."^{19}

On the other hand, it could also be argued that it is incumbent upon filmmakers who choose to vary aspects of the source to give their audiences a clue that the film they have made is not a faithful translation of the source to the screen but an adaptation which clearly moves away from the original in certain areas. They should alert audiences to the fact that they are creating a filmic version of a particular kind. There could be several ways of doing this, including giving the film a different title (as in the case of *The Dead Heart*, which was re-named *Welcome to Woop Woop*), adding a superscript "A", or adding a rider to the title. Because of loud and persistent complaints by audiences, including reviewers, about filmmakers who change their sources, it seems audiences need to be alerted that the film version will be different from its original text. In many cases, what filmmakers have wanted to do is to make a commentary on, or a variation of, the ancestor. Where faithful adaptations frequently attract criticism because they are merely audio-visual

^{18} ibid. pp.5-9.
^{19} ibid. p.8.
translations which are essentially uncinematic, variations on the
originals are often ridiculed or criticized because the film “is
not like the book!” and, paradoxically, is therefore “not as good
as” its source. This is a criticism, however, which wrongly
privileges the literary source and does not attempt to deal with
the way the filmmakers decided to interpret the text for the
screen.

As explained in the Introduction, an adaptation which is a
variation retains the core of the original but emphasizes, de-
emphasizes, re-arranges, adds or omits some or many of the
original’s features. This type of adaptation usually results in the
creation of a new and often rather different text. By shifting
things about and concentrating on creating another, sometimes
significantly different, work these adaptors open up a dialogue
with, and sometimes make a comment upon, their sources.

Unlike adaptations which appropriate their sources (see
discussion in Chapter Four), however, variations seek to retain
much of the essential aspects of their originals, particularly the
narrative: that is, what we see on the screen is recognizably the
source, albeit changed somewhat, whereas with appropriations
what we see is fundamentally different. Because of this
similarity to the original, some audiences, unaware of, or
unwilling to puzzle over, what the filmmakers are trying to do,
often become outraged, believing that the creators have
“butchered”, “betrayed”, “distorted”, or “completely
misinterpreted” the original, while daring to retain the source’s
title, narrative core and most of the characters. Again, it might
be worth noting here that perhaps those involved in the publicity and marketing of a film which is a variation on its source should make it clear to audiences that this was the filmmakers’ chosen approach.

There has been a marked preference for variations of Australian literary texts adapted for the screen in the decade 1989-1998 (see Appendix A). In this chapter I shall discuss three of these in terms of what I believe are the three main ways filmmakers alter a source. Firstly, they deliberately change, often quite significantly, the characterization of the protagonist and other important characters. Secondly, they re-arrange the narrative, either by omitting, adding or changing scenes or incidents, particularly endings. Thirdly, filmmakers who are making variations omit, usually de-emphasize, or otherwise undermine or alter, any political sub-text contained in the antecedent text.

One main reason why filmmakers choose to make adaptations which are variations on a literary source is that they wish to impose their own interpretations upon the original. Another is to simplify the story in order to please a mass audience who, more often than not, go to a film seeking pleasure and visual excitement rather than ideas, debate, or confrontation. Linda Seger gives a third and interesting reason: “Many changes are made for dramatic purposes”, she argues, “in order to raise the stakes” or to make the situation “more serious” or more “active”. She goes on to say that she believes adaptors frequently have to change the source because film is:
immediate. It's now. It's active. A novel may be reflective — emphasizing meaning, context, or response to an event — but a film puts the emphasis on the event itself. Film works in the present and drives to the future. It's less interested in what's happened than in what's going to happen next...When we watch a film, we are in the same position as the characters. We, like they, don't know what will happen next. There's no time to think about what's happening. There's only time to experience, to be involved in the unfolding of events.²⁰

A final reason why variations are made could be because of the pressure placed upon filmmakers to make their films commercially successful. As Seger points out:

Creating a commercial and viable adaptation means giving the story a clearer structure, so audiences can easily follow it. Making it more commercial also means simplifying, clarifying, sometimes spelling out a story-line, and making sure that characters are not ambiguous. Novels and plays are more able to encompass ambiguities. But film audiences can get confused.²¹

²⁰ Ibid. p.24.
²¹ Ibid. p.7.
Of course, this approach to adaptations is not true of the so-called "art house" films, which target small and specific audiences. But of the adaptations made in Australia from 1989-1998, the "art house" films were, for the most part, faithful adaptations (see Chapter Two). With few exceptions — such as Lilian's Story (1996), a variation on its source and more "art house" than mainstream, as is the artistically engaging What I Have Written (1995) — the variations produced during the period under discussion all received theatrical releases into commercial mainstream cinemas and were marketed as mainstream films. Knowing in advance that this was the kind of audience they were seeking, the filmmakers may have made the changes they did in order to reach a large audience, something for which they could hardly be criticized. Films are very costly commercial ventures, so often their makers are forced into decisions to please producers, distributors, exhibitors or investors.

A final point in defence of those filmmakers who prefer to make variations is that at least they cannot be accused of privileging literature over film, something the faithful adaptors are often, and I believe rightly, criticized for. On the other hand, what variations have in common with faithful adaptations is an acute awareness of the source. While variations change certain aspects of the original, what is retained is, for the most part, the essence of the source, and, as with the faithful adaptations, there generally appears to be an emphasis on getting the right balance between enunciating the screenplay and re-presenting on screen much of the literary ancestor. As in the case of faithful adaptations, in variations the
source is ever-present in the filmmakers' minds although it does not take precedence.

VARIATIONS: COSÌ, BLACKROCK AND THE BOYS

As mentioned above, the three primary ways in which filmmakers create variations, whether the source is a novel or a play, are by altering characters, re-arranging or changing the narrative, and undermining political or controversial ideas explored in the original text. An exploration of three adaptations, all of which are variations, will, I hope, make clear what I mean. All three are adaptations of plays and are characteristic examples of the extent to which filmmakers manipulate their sources when making this particular kind of adaptation. Arguably, COSÌ (1995) is the most "radical" variation, while BLACKROCK (1997) and THE BOYS (1998) are more typical. As I hope to show, however, THE BOYS is the most cinematic of the three, COSÌ is arguably the least and BLACKROCK lies somewhere in between.

COSÌ (1995)

The screenplay for COSÌ, an adaptation of Louis Nowra's play of the same name, was undertaken by the playwright himself. The film's director, Mark Joffe, claims that the film script is "reasonably different" from the play "though the essence hasn't changed." He goes on to point out that "Louis and [he] decided that modernizing it would give it greater poignancy, and more
relevance to contemporary life.” Louis Nowra, however, clearly has another point of view. In the tie-in edition of the text he makes no reference to “modernizing” the play, but gives us plenty of details about the kinds of problems he faced in writing the script. He ends his introduction with the claim that the published screenplay is actually “the Writer’s Cut”, since some of the scenes he wrote were “cut out of the movie.” Nowra seems particularly concerned to document the problems he faced with Miramax who, he believed, were responsible for the many changes he had to make to his script. He makes numerous references to his problems with Harvey Weinstein, “the boss of Miramax”, who constantly faxed Nowra offering suggestions and advice on how to write the screenplay. Nowra claims that: “The process of writing many drafts in response to these constant suggestions was draining...[and that he] felt the irony and subtle characterisation were vanishing.”

He is justifiably piqued by Miramax’s request that he ensure an explicit ending so that audiences walk away knowing for sure that Lewis (Ben Mendelsohn) and Lucy (Rachael Griffiths) “would remain an item”. Dialogue to this effect was eventually included in the American version of the film, but the ending for the version released in Australia is slightly ambiguous. Neither ending is similar to the play’s, although Nowra includes in his “writer’s cut” an end sequence which mirrors closely the original play. This unnecessary, rather wordy, sequence was wisely

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24 Ibid. p.12.
dropped from the released film. The Australian team, however, were fortunately able to resist Miramax’s urging to cast Tony Curtis as Henry and Elle McPherson as Cherry. (These roles went to Paul Chubb and Jacki Weaver.)

Interestingly, there often seem to be differences of opinion between screenwriters and directors (when they are different people) concerning the transformation of a screenplay to the screen. In contrast to Louis Nowra’s complaints concerning Miramax’s interference with his script, shortly before the film’s release Mark Joffe, the director, reported that Miramax had been totally supportive of my work and of the production...I can honestly say there have been no problems with Miramax. They have only been fantastic...A lot of their input into every area of the production is what an executive producer or producer should have. There is nothing wrong with that.26

While they may disagree about Miramax’s influence, however, Nowra and Joffe clearly agreed on the type of adaptation they wished to make. The film was never going to be a faithful adaptation of, but a variation on, the original play. Nowra points out that:

One of the things I was most proud of

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was that Miramax did not twig that
Cosi had been a play until Harvey [Weinstein]
found out. They had thought it was an original
screenplay. The battle to make sure it didn’t
seem like a play for the screen never happened.\textsuperscript{27}

Much of the dialogue, though, has been directly transferred
from the play, giving the film at times an unnecessary reliance
upon words rather than cinematic tropes. As well, some of the
earlier scenes, particularly those immediately after the auditions
where Lewis (Ben Mendelsohn) and the patients try to work out
what to do next, look a bit “stagey”. Also somewhat theatrical,
rather than cinematic, are some of the later scenes where the
cast is rehearsing and sparring, scenes which seem to be slightly
over-written for cinema and which confine and limit the
cinematic essence of the drama on screen, what Susan Sontag
describes as “cinematic virtue”. This virtue, she claims,
consists in freeing up space and time through “discontinuities”.
She goes on to argue that:

The theatre’s capacity for manipulating
space and time are, simply, much cruder
and more labored than film’s. Theatre
cannot equal the cinema’s facilities for
the strictly-controlled repetition of
images, for the duplication or matching
of word and image, and for the juxtaposition
and over-lapping of image.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{27} Louis Nowra, 1996, p.12.
While there are occasional moments where “fidelity” to the play seem to be paramount, the film Cosi has many of the characteristic elements of a cinematic variation. It preserves the chronological structure, as well as much of the main drama of the play, although, like The Sum of Us (1994), it changes the setting from Melbourne to (the more marketable?) Sydney (Fig.3.1). To help reinforce the comedy, the pace of the film is faster than the play’s, which is evenly divided into two acts and has many quiet moments, long pauses, and some very thought-provoking dialogue. The montage sequence of the auditions, and the rapid intercutting in later scenes between Lewis’ house by the piggery, the Old Laundry rehearsals, and the Occupational Therapy Ward are particularly effective at establishing and reinforcing the comedy, as well as the pace and overall rhythm of Cosi.

The filmmakers have adopted the conventional approach to transposing a play to the screen, i.e., realizing settings, opening out and inventing scenes, so that there is, for the most part, a sense of sustained movement through space and time. The film also shifts easily between the settings of the chaotic, drug-filled madness of the asylum and the real, supposedly sane world of Lucy’s and Lewis’ house by the piggery. (In the 1994 version of the play, the piggery is eliminated, although according to Louis Nowra, the original production did include scenes set in Lewis’ backyard, which was close to a piggery. The play is semi-

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autobiographical, he says, as he himself once lived near a piggery in Northcote, Victoria.\textsuperscript{29} 

While there are some scenes which, as already noted, are theatrical rather than cinematic, many scenes work very well cinematically. The climax (Act 2, Scene 4 of the play), for instance, is not only opened out but effectively transformed into cinematic language. Where in the play Cherry and Henry hold up cue cards containing the English lyrics of \textit{Cosi Fan Tutte} so that the audience can sing along, in the film the entire sequence has been rewritten for comic effect and is full of visual and verbal humour. At one point, Cherry swings back and forth across the audience on the hook Julie has deliberately attached to her clothes and, to save the day, Errol (Colin Friels) steps in to hand out sparklers to the audience. As the sparklers glimmer and spurt, thousands of tiny glittering paper stars burst into the air, the music swells and the crowd explodes into applause. These final scenes are filled with visual and auditory exhilaration which triumphantly capture Louis Nowra's aim that the climax be "extraordinarily beautiful and magical."\textsuperscript{30} 

Also cinematically successful is the way in which Scene 49 of Nowra's screenplay, in which a tipsy Sandra (Kerry Walker) checks on the patients' progress, has been cut into three discrete but interrelated segments for the film, resulting in a highly cinematic sequence which is both comic and serious. Likewise, 

\textsuperscript{29} Louis Nowra, 1996, p.13. The original version of the play was first performed in 1992 at the Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, and is slightly different from the revised version in 1994, upon which the film is based.  
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.} 1996, p.103.
the trip to Bondi Pavilion to watch Nick’s (Aden Young) production of “Diary of a Madman”, invented for the film, is highly dramatic and very funny with its cross-cutting between close-ups of the patients’ responses and Nick’s exaggerated performance. We watch in amusement the reactions of Cherry (contemptuous); Henry (perplexed); Roy (ecstatic) and Ruth (timidly interested) (Fig.3.2).

Apart from openings out and inventions, the film version adds four minor characters, all for good reason: Errol Greer (Colin Friels), the head nurse, (roughly based on Justin the social worker in the stageplay); Jeff Kirner (Tony Llewellyn-Jones), the hospital administrator; Sandra Russell (Kerry Walker), dipsomaniac and head occupational therapist, and the Minister for Health, (Robin Ramsay). These three characters, Errol, Kirner, and Sandra, as well as the fleeting presence in the final scenes of the Minister for Health, not only help create the comedy of the film but form the underlying serious sub-text about the inadequacies and insensitivities of government and institutional bureaucrats, motivated by the economic rationalism and political expediency characteristic of government policy of the 1980s and 1990s. Mark Joffe, the director, points out that in the film they did not want to

really get into the issues. You won’t leave the cinema and say, ‘Ah, that’s what’s wrong with psychiatric hospitals.’ It doesn’t really touch on that. All we do is try to take a human perspective
when dealing with these patients...we
treat them with some respect and dignity.\textsuperscript{31}

This is in contrast to Louis Nowra's aim in the original play
which was not only to protest against the war in Vietnam but to
criticize the spirit of the 1970s when

chemicals began to control many of
the wilder excesses of madmen and saw
the first influx of social workers, who
like grass burrs, were attaching themselves
onto our social fabric.\textsuperscript{32}

In most part, the characterization of the patients, which
provides much of the comedy, is essentially the same in both the
play and the film, although it may be of interest to note that
Nowra, who did not seem particularly satisfied with the final
film, believes that the cinema version of his play is not
"vulnerable" and its humour is "defensive".\textsuperscript{33}

The two minor characters altered considerably for the film
are Ruth and Zac (Colin Hay). Ruth is given greater depth and
force in the film. An obsessive-compulsive personality, she is
portrayed as being more vulnerable than she is in the play. To
help us understand her, she is given a "back-story": she has been
abandoned by an unfaithful husband and is suicidal. She tells

\textsuperscript{31} Margaret Smith, 1995, p.6
\textsuperscript{32} Louis Nowra, \textit{Cosi}, Currency Press, Sydney, 1994, p.xvi. All subsequent
references to the stageplay are from this edition and are cited in the text.
\textsuperscript{33} Margaret Smith, 1998, p.57.
Lewis she knows how to cut wrists and, in fact, in one scene, is poised to cut her own wrists before Lewis stops her. Ruth’s story becomes in itself a comment upon the theme of infidelity raised in the opera Cosi and in the film text. It is through Ruth that we are actually shown the consequences of adultery yet, paradoxically, and in keeping with the conventions of comedy, because of her abandonment she finds a kind of freedom. By the end of the film Ruth has discovered an “original gesture”. As in the play and the film, however, while she is indeed timid, vulnerable and anxious she, like all the patients, is perfectly capable of physical violence, keeping Zac’s sexual advances in check through slaps and hard punches.

In constrast to Ruth, Zac seems slightly diminished as a character in the film. He has more lines in the play, some of them very powerful. Nothing like, for example, “I can’t stand real things. If I could put up with reality I wouldn’t be in here” (p.62), or that when trying to seduce a woman, “You have to wrap it all up in fancy language and then they swoon for you, when all it comes down to it [sic] the same thing” (p.79) is written for him in the film. The Zac of the play is a more complex and funnier character than the drug-crazed and at times irritating Zac of the film. The final scene of the film, in which Zac finally gets to play Wagner (to a pig), arguably not only overstates the role he has played in the drama but weakens the dénouement by pushing the film in a slightly different direction which, while suggested in the stageplay, has not been touched on at all in the film. This is the sub-text of fascism, explored in the stageplay through various references to Hitler, Mussolini and Zac’s obsession with
Wagner, contrasting throughout with Roy’s obsession with Mozart. Nowra’s stageplay also asks us to make a link between Zac’s playing Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” and the helicopter sequence in the film Apocalypse Now, which implied that the USA’s involvement in Vietnam bordered on Naziism. None of these intertextualities was transferred to the film. Consequently, the final scene where Zac plays Wagner lacks any real meaning and is only superficially funny.

The film adaptation of Cosi alters even more significantly the original’s characterization of Lucy, Nick, Julie and Lewis, although arguably Lewis has been changed less radically than the other three. In the play, Lewis is a disillusioned political activist. When Lucy demands that he choose between going to the moratorium meeting with her and Nick and his drama project, he hesitates, then replies firmly: “Mozart. I’m not going to let them down.” While Lewis in the film opts to continue with Cosi, he is not asked to choose between politics and the asylum: he is asked to choose between Lucy and the patients.

In the play, it is a furious Lewis (not Cherry) who punches Nick to the floor — after he has ridiculed the patients by singing “They’re coming to take me away, ha, ha, to the funny farm”. In the preface to his play, Nowra writes that:

Before the performance started a student radical came along. Here was a fellow who preached revolution and the equality of all, and this radical, let’s
call him Nick, started to sing into the microphone, as patients filed in, the song about madness 'They're coming to take me away, ha, ha!' I had never felt such anger towards anyone in my life.\textsuperscript{34}

The film version of \textit{Cosi}, however, Lewis never physically ults anyone. He is far more gentle, more boyish, more vulnerable, more likeable and more confused than the Lewis of the play.

Lucy and Nick are also significantly altered for the film. In the original text, both are committed political agitators who edit a student newspaper and help set up the moratorium. Lucy, Lewis points out, is

into politics. She hates talk about love. She thinks it's icky. 'Love is the last gasp of bourgeois romanticism' she says. She hates [Lewis] doing an opera about love and fidelity while thousands of Vietnamese are being killed by American troops.\textsuperscript{35}

She refers to the opera \textit{Cosi Fan Tutte} as "reactionary drivel" and tells Lewis that what is really important is:

How to understand how capitalism exploits the working class...How to stop

\textsuperscript{34} Louis Nowra, 1994, p.xvii.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.} p.33.
the war in Vietnam...How to make a piece
of theatre meaningful and intelligent, like Brecht
does. After bread, a shelter, equality,
health, procreation, money comes maybe
love. Do you think the starving masses
give a fuck about love? Love is an emotional
indulgence for the privileged few.\textsuperscript{36}

Lucy in the play also openly has sex with Nick: “I have sex
with him and sleep with you”, she tells an astounded Lewis during
their argument over the value of fidelity. “Ever heard of a man
who is faithful?” she cries, and ridicules him when he tells her
he is “shifting out of the house” because of her relationship with
Nick (p.71). None of Lucy’s sexual independence is translated to
the screen; in the film version, fidelity is portrayed as being
central to the relationship between Lewis and Lucy and is the
foundation for the sub-plot.

Nick in the play is as abrasive as Lucy. He brags about the
fact that he gives money to the North Vietnamese “for medical
supplies”. He is furious with Lewis for disguising the lovers in
Cosi as Albanian communists, an act which he views as

a bit of a kick in the face of a poor nation
struggling to feed its people...Here we are,
supporting the Viet Cong and you’re laughing
at their supporters, the Albanians.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. p.70.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. p.46.
Like Lucy, he is disgusted with Lewis for getting involved with a “fuckin’ Mozart opera...I mean, I directed you in two of Brecht’s plays, didn’t you learn anything?” (p.41).

Julie of the play is also a different character from Julie in the film. Julie, in the original text, is an ex-hairdresser, a drug addict and probably bisexual. She offers Lewis a hair cut, assuring him that she could “do a good job on you now because I’m not on junk”. She claims she has a

naturally addictive personality...
drugs make [her]feel sort of living...
Like lying in a warm, cloudy river.
Some people can’t imagine life without love,
well I can’t imagine life without junk.\textsuperscript{38}

After she tells Lewis she is leaving the asylum and getting on “the first train to Sydney”, she refuses his lift to the railway station, telling him:

I need my girlfriend. She’s stood by
me, through thick and think, mostly thin.
She’s coming up to Sydney with me.
Without her I would be dead.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. p.37.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. p.87.
She flirtatiously cautions him not to visit her when her girlfriend is there, because “she gets terribly jealous”.

In the film, Julie, played by Toni Collette, is portrayed as pretty and vulnerable; in the published screenplay she is described as being “attractive” and “pale-faced”.

She sings nicely, dresses seductively, laughs often, and shares private jokes with Lewis, with whom she shares a mutual attraction. When she tells Lewis in the film that she is finally leaving, she admits she is “a bit scared” because “There are a lot of temptations out there” and smilingly accepts his offer to visit her before she goes. Such is their obvious sexual attraction for each other that there exists the possibility that they will keep in touch. In his foreword to the screenplay, Louis Nowra writes that “The play’s ending for Julie had been quickly removed. She died of a drug overdose in Sydney. That was a definite no-no in the film version”.

Apart from slightly re-arranging the narrative, re-writing some of the dialogue and altering character, another way in which the film version of Cosi becomes a variation on the original is by completely eliminating the broader political sub-text of the play. The play is clearly set in the early 1970s during the anti-Vietnam demonstrations and, as Louis Nowra points out, these protests “are an important part of the context”, providing a political and metaphorical backdrop to the action in the asylum. In the play, Nowra shows us that war is indeed a very foolish and useless

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41 Ibid. pp.10-11.
enterprise. We best understand the characters of Nick and Lucy through their strong commitment to anti-war sentiments, and the theme of how the folly of war is equal to the folly of love echoes throughout the play. However, according to Louis Nowra, Richard Brennan, who bought the film rights, “thought that a period film would be too costly”. He adds that he was “amused at the notion that events only twenty-five years old were now ‘period’.”42 In an interview with Cinema Papers, Nowra admits that he was disappointed with the elimination in the film of the political subtext of his play. He says that:

_Cosi_ was a film that I enjoyed writing to a certain degree, but I found that the combination of half-American money and half-Australian money meant that the script to a minor but interesting degree, had to be compromised. We had to make a crucial decision that I now regret, though I was part and parcel of the decision. Not setting it in 1971 saved us a lot of money, but it took away the background of the Vietnam War, which, to me, gave it a much more interesting design. That is an indication of how to save a lot of money, but in doing so you actually remove something crucial.43

42 Ibid. p.12.
It does seem a pity that the filmmakers of *Cosi* agreed to focus on the “hero’s journey” and the “love story” at the expense of the political content in the original. It is easy to agree with Susan Dermody’s and Elizabeth Jacka’s claim that the political film is an “aching gap” in Australian cinema. They go on to argue that:

This should never, of course, be considered as dealing narrowly with politics but, more profoundly, as dealing with history in order to clarify our position and our political strength in the present.\(^\text{44}\)

Rather than explore the themes of war and politics, the filmmakers substitute the sub-plot of a bet between Nick and Lewis concerning Lucy’s fidelity, neatly echoing the dramatic narrative in the opera *Cosi Fan Tutte*. Mark Joffe notes that “There is a bit of a triangle going on”, and hopes the sub-plot is “subtle and not too heavy-handed.”\(^\text{45}\) While some might argue that this is precisely what is wrong with the sub-plot — it is, indeed, “too heavy-handed” — for the most part it is effective in terms of the comic world of the film. However, it is under-developed and arguably too quickly resolved. Where it is probably most feeble is in the final scenes where Lewis knocks Nick down after he has pleaded with Lewis to take back the fifty dollars. When Nick tells Lewis “Women shouldn’t come between mates”,

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\(^\text{45}\) Margaret Smith, 1995, p.7.
the film shifts slightly the dramatic focus, raising the well-worn theme of mateship.

By all accounts, Cosi was a successful film, in critical terms and at the Australian box office. It won an AFI Award for editing in 1996, and the Australian Film Commission ranks it in the top five Australian films for commercial success during the year of its release, making almost $3 million dollars prior to going to video. Its appeal to a wide audience is also revealed by the fact that the play and the film are popular classroom texts, in New South Wales at least, and the play is listed for study in the NSW Higher School Certificate.

While Cosi is a characteristic variation, apart from the mateship sub-text it is an exceptional film in terms of its subject matter when compared with other variations made during this period. Nearly all the others deal with families and the domestic world, and most explore various aspects of parenting, particularly the role of the mother. The Delinquents (1989), Turtle Beach (1992), Lilian's Story (1996), Blackrock (1997), Oscar and Lucinda (1997), Radiance (1998), In the Winter Dark (1998), and The Boys (1998) are variations which all have something significant to say about mothers and mothering. In a majority of these films, the mother figure is shown to be ineffectual, negligent or incompetent as a parent. In some cases the mother figure is redeemed, as in Turtle Beach (1992) and The Boys (1998); in others she is absent or ignored, as in Lilian's Story (1996) and Radiance (1998), but her existence is nonetheless central to the drama. In several of these texts, we
are asked to consider the degree to which the mother figure is responsible for, or at least complicit in, the behaviour of her children. Two particular variations made during this period which explore this theme are *Blackrock* (1997) and *The Boys* (1998). Both are roughly based upon true stories, both deal with horrific crimes involving the rape and murder of young women, and both are clearly concerned with continuing social discourse about the culture of male violence and who should be held accountable for violence against women.

*Blackrock* (1997)

As pointed out above, motherhood and mateship are the two main themes of the film adaptations of the plays, *Blackrock* (1997) and *The Boys* (1998), both of which are variations upon their theatrical sources. Both were adapted for the screen by playwrights; *Blackrock* by Nick Enright, the author of the original play and *The Boys* by playwright Stephen Sewell, from the original by Gordon Graham. Scriptwriter Deborah Cox has argued that, in contrast to Britain where “film and television have closer ties with theatre, where writers are more respected and go on to literary spheres”, in Australia “writers for television and film are particularly divorced from literature...the divisions between stage, television and film are very clear.”

While that may be true in general, it is not at all true when one looks at adaptations of Australian literature to film. Many of

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the adaptations in this study, for instance, have been scripted (and sometimes directed) by writers who are novelists or playwrights themselves, or involved directly or indirectly with drama for the stage or for television, thereby arguably compromising the cinematic essence of the screen text. Blackrock, for example, was directed by first-time director Steve Vidler, who was Nick Enright's student at NIDA. Rowan Woods, the director of The Boys, has a background in acting and Stephen Sewell, the scriptwriter, is also a playwright, further examples of the theatrical connections in the adaptations under discussion.

It is also worth noting that, in many of the adaptations produced during the decade under discussion, the writer of the original text is also the writer or co-writer of the screenplay, as is the case for David Williamson's Emerald City (1989), Death in Brunswick (1994), Blackfellas (1992), The Heartbreak Kid (1993), The Sum of Us (1994), Cosi (1995), Blackrock (1997), Dead Heart (1997), Radiance (1998) and The Sound of One Hand Clapping (1998). These examples point to the fact that "writers for...film" in Australia are definitely not "divorced from literature".

In keeping with its different intentions and audiences, the film Blackrock differs from the play (itself an adaptation of an earlier play by Enright called The Property of the Clan47) in several significant areas. The challenge the filmmakers faced in their adaptation seems to have been how to enunciate the

47 The title is taken from a psychological report tendered during Mathew Webster's sentence hearing which referred to Leigh Leigh as "a slut, the property of the clan."
powerfully dramatic force of the theatrical original while opening it out for the screen. The sparse theatrical settings, for the most part suggested through dramatic action and dialogue in the stageplay, have in the film been very effectively opened out and realized. The opening early morning sequence of the film immediately establishes the masculine surfing culture of the "Blacko boys". Consisting of carefully composed long, wide shots showing us a peaceful and warmly lit beach, the seascape is inter-cut with contrasting images of oil tankers and factories beyond the shoreline, revealing an unattractive industrial town. The party scenes at the surf club, the beach, the RSL club, the school, the cemetery, the police station, the houses and the gymnasium where Len Kirby (John Howard) coaches boxers, have also been successfully realized for cinema.

As well as making real the settings, the play is opened out for cinema by cutaways and scenes of the town, the streets, bridges, the ferry, the harbour, and the wharf (Fig.3.3). We see Diane (Linda Cropper) at work in a nursing home, Jared (Laurence Breuls) working and Tiffany's doughnut shop, all scenes which reinforce a sense that this is a busy working-class community. The invention of the Ayoub's delicatessen adds a multicultural dimension to the film not touched on in the play, and the addition of Kemel Ayoub (George Basha) for the film functions on two levels. Firstly, he can be viewed as a token salute to the multicultural composition of the community. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, his presence suggests that it is not only boys of Anglo heritage who are capable of performing and covering up vicious sexual crimes, nor is it only Anglo boys who
refuse to “dob” on their mates. Mateship, the film argues, is an environmental construct and cultural background is largely irrelevant.

Also helping to open out the text for the screen is a well-crafted, invented sequence, set in an old factory and shot from a variety of angles, of Stewart Ackland shooting glamorous young models he cannot even name. These scenes not only open out the play for film but function ironically, revealing Ackland’s (Geoff Morell) attitude towards the models, and reinforcing the theme of females as sexual objects for male consumption. This sequence also foreshadows the horrible events to occur at the party that night. Other scenes, including Diane’s interview with her doctor (Kate Sheil), Ricko’s (Simon Lyndon) “funeral”, and Jared’s tattoo session also effectively open out the play for the film. But while realization and opening out are appropriate and, in fact, usually necessary devices when transforming a play into cinema, in Blackrock the way these two techniques have been enunciated often fragment somewhat the structural unity of the text and lessen its dramatic power.

As a variation, however, this film does more than simply realize settings, open out the play and invent scenes. A comparison of the film version of Blackrock with the original reveals that the film also makes a commentary upon the source. In particular, the filmmakers obviously wished to make a point about the intrusive nature of the media. In the play, watching the news on television is mentioned, but there is never any presence of the media. In the film, however, after Tracy’s (Boyana
Novakovic) murder, television crews are seen everywhere: they barrage the Warners (Jeanette Cronin and David Field) with questions the morning after Tracy’s death and are hosed down and referred to as “bloody mongrels” by Diane. They roam the streets and the ferry wharf asking questions about the party, hover over the beach in a helicopter, film Tracy’s funeral and the fight between Cherie (Rebecca Smart) and Jason (Cameron Nugent), and even manage to catch Ricko’s send off. The sole reason given in the film as to why Jared believes the girls should not plant a tree for Tracy is because, “a TV crew will be all over us like flies, paying out on Blackrock: the hoons over the water” (Fig.3.4). The media are generally portrayed with hostility; for these filmmakers the media do not function in the public interest to investigate and report a vicious rape and murder and expose a community reluctant to help bring those responsible to justice, but intrude, trespass and provoke.

The film also omits any possible link we might be tempted to make to the sensitive area of deaths in custody, while at the same time ensuring that Ricko be seen to accept responsibility for Tracy’s murder. Instead of Ricko hanging himself with a belt, as he does in the stageplay, the filmmakers chose to have Ricko suicide by leaping off a cliff, thereby giving the narrative a conclusive, and appropriate, ending. A high angle shot of his body below confirms his death and there is the suggestion that this will be the end of the matter.

The play Blackrock is essentially a social realist drama about a very troubled community. However, in their adaptation,
Fig. 3.3 The filmmakers very effectively open out the stageplay.

Fig. 3.4 The film Blackrock includes a commentary on an intrusive media.
the filmmakers chose to mix genres, so that the film becomes a hybrid of rites of passage, crime drama and "teen movie" in which Jared's "journey" from adolescence to early manhood is the real focus. Publicity for the film, the tie-in of the screenplay released soon after the film, and the video cover, all testify to the idea that the adaptation's main concern is Jared's story. The screenplay's cover features stills of Jared and Ricko together at the beach, Jared staring in confusion directly at the camera. A troubled and confused Jared, looking downwards, takes up all of the left-hand side of the video's cover, with snapshot scenes of the party and the beach on the right. Almost all of the reviews of this film have a photograph of a dishevelled Jared frowning into the lens or gazing into the distance, with captions such as "torn between exposing and protecting his mates", and "boys are taught from an early age that getting the upper hand is what counts."

Jared's rite of passage is also emphasized in the film not only through frequent close-ups of his, at times, self-conscious attempts to be the brooding, sensitive young hero, but also through the amount of screen-time devoted to his story (Fig.3.5). Jared appears in only a little more than fifty percent of the play, some thirteen of the twenty-four scenes. In contrast, in the film, which consists of about 160 separate scenes, Jared is seen in more than 90 of them, is spoken about in several others, and the scenes and flashbacks of Tracy being raped and calling for help are all from his point of view. Jared's point of view and story dominate the film where they do not dominate the play, (if anyone does, it is Ricko), but the Jared of the film is significantly different from the Jared of the play.
The film adaptation of *Blackrock* is clearly targeted at a young audience. In fact, the filmmakers freely admit that *Blackrock* initially received an R rating and they re-edited the rape scene to get an MA rating and release it into mainstream commercial cinema. Producer David Ellick claims that they “needed an MA rating” because it was “absolutely essential that 15-year-old cinemagoers” could see the film, since “15 to 18 is what the movie’s really about.” According to Ellick, the filmmakers tried to combine the “music and the energy and the surfing” in such a way as to urge audiences to “feel how exciting it is to be 16 years old, with the whole world opening up for you, and life is pretty damn good.” In contrast, the play appeals to a more mature audience and is a more serious and complex examination of how mateship and masculine violence affect a suburban community. The play bristles with misogyny and homoeroticism: disgust with and disrespect for the female, and a firm belief that what really counts are your “mates”, are at the heart of the play and underlie the dramatic tension in almost every scene. Jared, a young man who responds with bored contempt to his mother’s feeble efforts to talk with him and to offer him guidance, is ultimately not much more than one of the many “hoons” of Blackrock. Like most of the characters, particularly the young men, Jared in the play blames Tracy Warner for what happens to her because she had not been acting “like a virgin”. In the penultimate scene, Jared tells Rachel that Tracy “was in it too. People don’t do things out of nowhere. Ricko’s

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49 ibid.
dead because some moll didn’t know the limits.” His opinion of Tracy Warner’s murder is encapsulated in the following dialogue:

Rachel: You know she was a virgin?
Jared: Then why didn’t she act like one?
Rachel: How does a virgin act?
Jared: People should act the way they are. Not dress down and look like a moll and dance like — a moll.50

There is a suggestion, too, in the play, that Jared could be as capable of rape as the boys who did rape Tracy. In Scene 23, Rachel tells him, “Let me go”, and when he refuses she kicks him in the groin. She is instantly sorry and as she comforts him he embraces her and immediately attempts to seduce her. The film version of this scene has been re-written to portray Jared as far less aggressive and more sensitive, qualities that would very likely appeal to a large, young adult audience. In the re-written scene Jared tries to embrace Rachel but she resists, and he immediately desists. Turning away from her, in a moment of dramatic irony, he admits that he feels “crook in the stomach” all the time, that he “can’t sleep” because he “didn’t do anything”. The audience, unlike Rachel, is, of course, aware that he is acknowledging that he should have done something to help Tracy.

In the stageplay, Jared confesses to his mother that he had, in fact, “tried to sleaze onto Tracy” but Toby had “dragged” him

50 Nick Enright, Blackrock, Currency Press, Paddington, NSW, 1996, p.61. Subsequent references to the stageplay are to this edition and, except for long quotes, are cited in the text.
and then I saw. Down below me, between me and the ocean. Davo and Scott pissing themselves. Toby Ackland dragging someone by the arm. 'Come on Tracy. Come on.' She was sort of half-giggling. He pulled her down on the ground. Then she wasn't giggling no more, she was like some animal in pain. Like he's got a hand clamped over her mouth...Scottie and Davo start barracking him. Cheering him on. Fighting about who's going to be first with the sloppy seconds. I let it all happen.\textsuperscript{51}

In the film, however, while Jared dances and flirts with Tracy, he is never directly involved in assaulting her. He sits on the "rock, having a smoke and a think", looks down on the boys "doing it to her", then runs away.

The females, like the males, of Blackrock are generally portrayed in both the play and the film as being physically aggressive. In the film, Cherie and her mother swear at and slap each other, and in both texts Cherie tries to destroy Ricko's car. In the film, Tiffany (Justine Clark) uses physical aggression to show Ricko she is glad to see him, punching him and shouting, "You bastard, Ricko! Not a fuckin' word in eleven months."
Tiffany, however, has been significantly altered for the film, being portrayed as a much more fun-loving and likeable character.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. pp.67-68.
who enjoys an affectionate, robust relationship with Ricko. In the play, Tiffany is submissive towards Ricko who calls her a “bitch” and a “total moll” and accuses her of trying to “turn” Jared against him (p.55). At one point she mournfully asks Jared to tell her what she is doing wrong, because she feels Ricko does not really “like” her. Jared simply tells her, “could be you talk a bit too much”.

Steve Vidler, the director of the film, says that he has vivid memories of being a 17 year-old working class kid from the western suburbs where life was about hooning around in cars, looking for a party to crash and picking a fight...guys...have no idea of girls’ feelings and they don’t care about them. They see sex as they see everything else — as a power game.\(^{52}\)

Likewise, Simon Lyndon, who played Jared in the play but is far more compelling as Ricko in the film, says that he grew up in Fremantle where the surf crew are just like the westie crowd...The guys get called studs and the girls get called sluts. With the amount of rapes that happen in small towns, it’s a wonder there aren’t more tragedies like the one this film is about.\(^{53}\)

\(^{53}\) ibid.
Both the source and the film make it clear that in Blackrock neither gender respects the other; in fact, there seems to be genuine dislike, suspicion, or, at best, tension, between the sexes of all ages. Any real affection is reserved for members of the same sex. Cherie, for example, is very fond of Tracy; Diane and Glenys are sisters and very good friends, and Jared is passionate about, and loyal to, his “best mate” Ricko. Their liking for each other is very effectively captured in the film through gesture and glance. They share direct and lingering eye contact in close-ups when re-united in the early scenes and, again, shortly before Ricko leaps off the cliff. Ricko also reserves a subtly performed “thumbs-up” gesture for Jared. In the early scenes it is a gesture of greeting; in the cliff-top scene it is a gesture of farewell (Fig.3.6).

In his foreword to the published screenplay, Steve Vidler claims that when he first saw the community theatre piece, A Property of the Clan, he thought it a “powerful dramatisation of important issues — the first truly honest examination of the dark side of mateship.”

Vidler also declares that he believes

at some level we are all Jared...[because]  
we deal daily with issues of enormous moral complexity, and we are all tempted at times  
to turn our back or live in silent acquiescence.

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55 Ibid.
Fig. 3.5 Jared's journey is the real focus of the film.

Fig. 3.6 Ricko's "thumbs up" is reserved for his best mate, Jared.
He goes on to explain that in the film he tried to show that Jared had

no framework to express what he's seen. And so he says nothing....At school boys are
taught metalwork and advanced trigonometry
and sport....But where is the discussion of ethics
and moral values? The religious structures which
guided a previous generation have collapsed. And
families have fragmented to such an extent that I
think a lot of young men like Jared are totally lost.\textsuperscript{56}

Inappropriate or incomplete education, lack of religion and
“fragmented” families whose children seem to be out of control
are the reasons Vidler gives for Jared's inaction. Neither of the
first two areas is explored in the play or the film, but the third,
the concept of fragmented families, is very much a part of the
sub-text in both, with both texts suggesting that the presence of
a father is what is important in a “real” family.

The play includes only two fathers, Stewart Ackland and Len
Kirby, neither a particularly sympathetic character. In the film,
however, there are several fathers who, with the exception of Len
Kirby, are generally portrayed sympathetically. Tracy's father,
Ken Warner (David Field), is invented for the film and his loss of
control after his daughter's murder is one of the most moving
scenes in it. Stewart Ackland, shown as indifferent towards his

\textsuperscript{56} Ruth Hessey, 1997.
young female models, is, however, portrayed as very protective of his own children, particularly his son, Toby (Heath Ledger).

The mothers, in contrast, receive less favourable treatment, particularly Diane and Glenys, the “single” mothers. The women’s behaviour in both the play and the film reinforces a common perception that “single” mothers are not good parents. In the play, Glenys has a boyfriend, who, Cherie tells us, is “always ringing up...leaving dorky messages” (p.58). Cherie sees her mother as someone who is “always” in a “party mood”, who can go out “raging all night...drinking” (pp.17-18), and in the play it is Glenys, not Shana’s mother, who encourages the male strippers to approach Diane, calling out “Hey spunk! Hey, stud! You! Buns!”, while waving twenty dollars. “Wouldn’t you like a piece of that to take home, Di?” (p.24) she cries. As in the film, Glenys admits that she is having real difficulty “bringing up a girl”, telling Diane that “Jared can take care of himself” but, like all girls, “Cherie’s got to learn the way the world works.” In both the film and the play, Glenys partly blames Tracy for what happens to her, calling her a “bloody idiot” and telling Cherie that, “You douse yourself in kero, then start playing with matches, you can’t blame anyone else when you set yourself on fire.” In the play, Cherie responds with a raised hand; in the film they physically fight. Glenys (Shayne Francis), in fact, is portrayed throughout the film as being a particularly physically aggressive mother. She slaps and shakes Cherie, and calls her a “lying little bitch” and a “little bugger”. It is not surprising that Cherie turns immediately to physical abuse when she is
frustrated, as when she attacks the Ayoub’s shop, Ricko’s car, and
Jason after the funeral.

Diane in the play is portrayed as being preoccupied and
anxious about her operation for breast cancer. On the night of the
party at the surf club, she tells her sister she would rather “blob
out” and watch a video than go to the club for her birthday. Later,
having been persuaded to go out, when the male stripper reaches
for her breast, she instantly decides she wants to go home. Her
relationship with her son Jared is difficult. In both the play and
the film Jared calls his mother a “nag”. In the film he goes even
further, telling her, “Dad was right. You got the rags on every day
of the week.” The tension between them ensures that, in both the
play and the film, she cannot bring herself to talk about her
breast cancer with her son. “Things keep getting in the way”, she
claims lamely. When Glenys in the play tells her that she has
“done a good job so far. The boy’s nearly there”, Diane asks
it is they go” (p.42).

For the most part, however, Diane in the film is not the
Diane of the play. Instead, she is given her sister’s personality,
being portrayed as fun-loving, mildly vulgar, and rather
promiscuous. A much stronger personality than her theatrical
model, she swears openly, laughs loudly, leaps in front of and
then into the car while trying to force Jared to apologize and it is
she, not Glenys, who is resentful towards the police. She also
clearly dislikes her neighbour and glares and swears at the
woman who shares her hospital ward. In the film, too, it is Diane,
not Glenys, who wants to go out “raging” that Saturday night. Glenys wants to stay home and watch a video. At the club, Diane flirts, drinks and later sleeps with Geoff (John O’Hare) whom she has met only that night. At times she comes dangerously close to being portrayed as a stereotypical working-class single mother who is slightly out of control, although Linda Cropper’s fine performance saves her character from being a type.

The mother-son bond between Jared and Diane is an important theme in both the play and the film. In the film, when Jared is preparing to leave, Diane asks Jared to write to her “one day. Tell me what happened to you? Because I lost you that night. That’s like losing a part of myself.” And yet in neither text are they shown to be particularly close. They are familiar with each other, but uncommunicative. In the film we watch Diane, in a carefully framed close-up, pack a photograph of a much younger Jared to take with her to hospital and there is the suggestion that she “lost” her son a long time ago. By the end of the film, as they work together to scrub the word “slut” from Tracy’s tombstone, it seems clear that they have become reconciled, if still distant. This distance between them is nicely captured where Jared cautiously advances towards his mother and the camera circles him, so that it appears as if he is circling his mother, testing the boundaries that obviously still exist (Fig.3.7). The gulf between them has been metaphorically explored earlier when Jared makes his confession to his mother in a location scene dominated by an enormous bridge. He tells her that he could have helped Tracy, only he did not because the boys were his “mates” and that is “all you got. That’s the way it is”, an explanation that is
Fig. 3.7 Jared and his mother - circling each other towards a reconciliation
incomprehensible to Diane. She can barely utter the line, “And you let a girl die” before she wanders off, sobbing loudly, in a long wide shot, the bridge towering in the background. In neither text is her complicity in covering up Jared’s behaviour commented on or explored.

Stylistically, the film Blackrock at times lacks unity. The rites of passage genre sometimes seems to be an umbrella overlay covering sequences belonging to other genres. The police scenes, for example, look like those of a crime thriller, at other times like a docu-drama. The relatively long surfing sequences, particularly in the middle of the film where we watch Jared form a foetal-like position under water, are reminiscent of surfing films, and the high school scenes smack of American “teen” movies. Ricko’s confession seems to belong to the stage: it is overly-wordy and studied, and while appropriately delivered in close-up, is without even a suggestion of the realism cinema is capable of portraying. There is not a drop of sweat or a hint of breathlessness, even though he has just had a furious fight with Jared.

For all that, the film generally received sound critical support, at least in Australia, and anecdotal evidence I have collected from young people between 15 and 18 suggests that most of them thought the film was well “worth seeing”. It was nominated for Best Film in the AFI Awards in 1997 and performed quite well at the Australian box office. In 1996, Nick Enright won a Gold Aawgie for the original play and the 1997 AFI Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. According to several local video stores,
it is a steady earner as a rental and enjoys “reasonable” sales as a sell-through.

THE BOYS (1998)

*The Boys* (1998) is similar to *Blackrock* in that it explores the lead up to, and consequences of, an horrific rape and murder partly based upon a real crime. Neither text focuses upon the event itself, suggesting that what occurs is not unique. Similarly, both explore negligent parenting, and the strong bond between “mates”. *The Boys*, however, is far darker and more dramatically compelling, both as a stageplay and as a cinematic adaptation. Both texts are “variations” on the original, but where, in *Blackrock*, we are shown characters who are generally likeable or, at worst, easily understood, in *The Boys* it is difficult to find any character with whom to sympathize or identify, with the possible exception of the mother.

Sandra, the Sprague boys’ mother in *The Boys*, is reminiscent of *Blackrock*’s Diane as a character: she is “working class”, “single”, and, like Diane, is portrayed as uncommunicative and anxious around her offspring, and incapable of disciplining or motivating them. In the film, Sandra’s one attempt to convince her sons to “do something” is an hysterical failure. “How did my life come to this?” she yells. “Get up! Clean yourselves up....Get a job! Go to the club! Get a life! Just get out of the house.” Her “boys”’ response is characteristically subdued, cold, and hostile. Stevie scoffs: “Oh, great! Now she’s throwing us out of the house”, and Glenn tells her to “steady on”. Neither takes her
outburst seriously, just as Jared in *Blackrock* rarely takes notice of anything his mother says to him.

Like Diane in *Blackrock* also, Sandra is portrayed as having been bullied by male partners, as mildly promiscuous, and as slightly vulgar and aggressive. Despite the reconciliation at the end of *Blackrock*, Diane in both the play and the film is not truly redeemed, for she continues to hide Jared’s indirect involvement in the rape and is, therefore, to some extent complicit in it. In contrast, the filmmakers of *The Boys* chose to absolve the mother from any blame for what her sons have done thereby giving the audience one character to identify with, something that is important in feature films. In Gordon Graham’s stageplay, however, all the women — the boys’ girlfriends as well as their mother — are clearly shown to be complicit in the Sprague boys’ crime by agreeing collectively to deny it and remaining loyal and together in the house, despite being besieged by an outraged public. Sandra Sprague never changes her mind about her sons: in her eyes, they are “decent ordinary boys”.

In her introductory essay to the stageplay Jocelyn Scutt notes that:

> The women characters in *The Boys* are the women who deserve every bit of it — according to the public.
> People chase Michelle from the precincts of the courtroom. A member of the public defecates in the

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57 Gordon Graham, *The Boys*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1994. All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited in the text except for long quotes which are footnoted.
middle of Jackie’s lounge room. It is the public which, shouting, yelling and threatening, surrounds the home where Sandra, Nola, Jackie and Michelle stand, defiant, on the side of ‘the boys’: ‘It can’t be them,’ they say; ‘Not our boys’, they claim....[as they are being] condemned as associates, supporters, accessories to the rapists and murderers.\(^{58}\)

Barrie Kemp goes on to argue that in *The Boys*:

> Sex and violence are intertwined themes set in a context of poverty, emotional deprivation and alcohol abuse...There is a relationship between urban poverty and violence. Powerlessness and a lack of education are both important factors in the resentment and anger which may develop...Violence appears to be everywhere...[It is] in the brothers; the police; in the neighbours [and] the public response of extreme outrage which often occurs...may itself be driven by the unease that people have about their own strong sexual and aggressive emotions [creating] the psychology of the lynch mob.\(^{59}\)


But where the playwright explores the “psychology of the lynch mob” and its relationship with the victims (in this case, the girlfriends and the mother), the filmmakers ensure that the girlfriends do not become victims of either “the boys” or a “lynch mob”. One by one, they leave the house. While Sandra, the mother, stays, she is clearly absolved from any blame and is not portrayed as an accessory in her sons’ crimes. Arguably these are the most significant changes made for the film, and perhaps the most controversial aspects of this variation.

In an interview shortly after the release of The Boys, director Rowan Woods pointed out that

in the second half of the play, all the women stay in the house, soliloquizing, and for me that was quite implausible...I felt that the women had to get out, out of anger, or to survive, not for any PC reason, but because it was more logical.  

He explains that he was particularly interested in making sure the mother’s story had a resolution.

If you think about what happens, pre-crime the other women all resolve themselves — they either stand up, or they flee, to survive. But obviously the mother is different, she’s

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left bewildered, dumbstruck, without really knowing what happens. It’s enormously important that the story is given resolution, and that’s not just to be truthful to her particular character, but also to represent what happens with mothers in such situations, where for long periods after a crime they find it difficult to come to terms with what their offspring has done, where it’s a long while before the narcissistic arrogance of the perpetrator can be recognised for what it is. A lot of the homework we did was in relation to mothers and siblings who had to put up with perpetrators who kept insisting on their innocence, and our research indicated that it did take a while, but that most of them did resolve the relationship, did gather their wits around them, come to terms with the truth of the situation, and move on. And the main perpetrator of the crime is left alone. So I think that ending is enormously profound...And without that resolution the black depression of the film would have meant that the audience would have walked away, not just socked in the guts, but also very depressed.\(^{61}\)

In his discussion of how he approached adapting the play, Stephen Sewell noted that, while he decided to retain, for the most part, the fragmented structure of the source, he was less

\[^{61}\text{Ibid. p.15.}\]
"interested in representing the detail of the play" than "the essence of it." Rowan Woods, the director, claims that when Stephen went away to write the screenplay he went with the brief, 'do what you bloody well want and feel.' The only thing that we did feel strongly about was that landscape of characters, we felt there was great potential in this family in crisis. We wanted to keep the beginning and the end points, and to try and get those flash forwards working as well. Everything else, we said, start from the beginning. But people who saw the play do feel that the film is like the play, that it has the core elements...[although] Stephen hadn't seen the play, I hadn't seen the play...I had absolutely no references to the world of the play; I wanted to build up my own references.\(^2\)

These personal "references" primarily relate to the way in which the filmmakers decided to treat the women characters. To ask of the women, "Why do they stay?" is a fair question after having seen or read the stageplay. But it is a question which is very complex to answer, and one the filmmakers clearly chose to avoid.

Stephen Sewell claims that:

Gordon Graham's play [is] a remarkable achievement: it looks at...evil in our spirit

without flinching. In developing the film, the crucial creative decision was to hold on to that and to not let go. At no point did any of our creative team attempt to weaken, sweeten or dilute Gordon’s central insights because we all believed in the play.\(^6\)

I would argue that changing the female characters and their behaviour, as well as giving the mother’s story narrative closure in order to redeem her and avoid difficult questions about complicity does, in fact, “weaken, sweeten or dilute” Gordon Graham’s play. Paul Wilson, in his introductory essay to the stageplay writes:

*The Boys* relentlessly portrays men who need women but, at the same time, loathe and resent them. Indeed, in the end the women suddenly realise that it was they themselves who the men were really raping and torturing when they carried out their gruesome acts. Despite everything, however, the women in the play stay by their men. And so it is in the real world. They stay with them because they need them, because they fear them, or because they have no other viable option — or at least because they believe this to be the case. Yet again, art imitates life.\(^4\)

Early in the play Sandra explains how and why she remains loyal to her “boys”. First, her loyalty is based on denial. In a monologue directed at the audience Sandra says:

I suppose you don’t dare try make sense of it, because of the things you’ve seen, the things you suspect they’re really capable of. You don’t dare try and add it all up, specially not in the black of night. Same as you don’t dare talk about it.\(^{65}\)

Soon after she tells Michelle, Brett’s girlfriend, that:

He’s who he is, Michelle. And you can either love what’s there, or...sometimes you’ve just got to go on holding onto things, even when they do something that makes no sense at all. Go on gritting your teeth and taking it.\(^{66}\)

Stephen Sewell claimed he began with the premise that “film is nothing if not story” and so felt he needed to “strengthen the narrative” by “restructuring of the work into three acts rather than the two acts Gordon uses”,\(^{67}\) and by giving the screenplay an entirely different ending. In the film, when Sandra (Lynette Curran) finally comes face-to-face with Brett (David Wenham) in prison and tells him “You must be very lonely...Sitting

\(^{65}\) Gordon Graham, 1994, p.3.  
\(^{66}\) Ibid., pp.5-6.  
up there looking down on the rest of us”, then walks out, the filmmakers give her the opportunity to regain some dignity as well as the power to turn her back on her own son (Fig.3.8). The film’s ending argues that we must not assign complicity or guilt to Sandra because of her inadequacies as a mother, despite the central role she has played in mediating the world her “boys” live in. But at the end of the play, Sandra Sprague has drifted into a fantasy world of denial and sentimentality. She sits fondling her grandson as she murmurs the final lines:

Ah, all the joys you and your two little brothers are going to bring me.
All the rewards. Yes, looking at you, how could a mum think there was anything bad in the whole wide world?  

This is a complex, highly ironic, ending which arguably portrays the mother figure as downright complicit, perhaps even evil.

In accordance with the kind of adaptation chosen, the filmmakers of *The Boys* gave all the characters, as well as the dramatic narrative, more of what Linda Seger refers to as “dimensionality”, in order to build the dramatic tension carefully and slowly towards a climax. “Film and television are story mediums”, Seger writes. “Adapting is a process of identifying and focusing the storyline within the novel, play, or true-life

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Fig. 3.8 Sandra (Lynette Curran) is redeemed in the film but not in the stageplay.
story." She goes on to argue that a "good dramatic story" for film

has direction. It moves towards a climax, with most scenes advancing the action....A good film story also has dimensionality. While the story is moving you, it is also revealing characters and developing themes...The writer selects and arranges a series of...incidents so they build with increasing intensity or suspense toward an exciting or dramatic resolution. By the end of the story, the events need to "add up", "make sense", and give the audience a feeling that it has arrived somewhere and completed the story's journey.70

In their adaptation of The Boys, I would suggest, the filmmakers have done just this. They have re-organized some of the incidents, strengthened and, to some degree, simplified the dramatic line, and made the women much more sympathetic and transparent in order to give the audience a feeling that there is at least a kind of resolution for some of the characters in this horrific story, something the play refuses to offer.

When discussing the decisions made about whether or not to show the crime itself, Woods points out that, in this case, he remains true to the play, which also does not show the crime on

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70 ibid. pp.77-78.
stage. He claims he was immediately attracted by this fact because it showed him

- a way into a tense relationship story;
- each time you crossed the cut you were passing a crime that impacted on their lives, but you never saw the crime itself. It provided a way of looking at why people do the things they do.\(^{71}\)

Woods admits, however, that in the end he has no definite answers to the motives of the Sprague boys.

We still came to the conclusion that although there were a whole lot of contributing factors, obvious contributing factors — poverty, mother/son communication problems, out of control drugs, an appalling inability to relate to women, sexual inadequacy — it wasn’t fair for us to push for any one cause ...It wasn’t that we didn’t want to answer any questions, it was that we didn’t have the answers ourselves.\(^{72}\)

Gordon Graham, the writer of the source, has claimed that his play

\(^{72}\) Ibid. p.15.
that day to create this tense cause-and-effect
story ... [and] created red herrings, so that,
while there's this incredible sense of
pre-destiny, actually in the film you don't
know who's going to cop it.\textsuperscript{79}

Ewell further argues that:

Stylistically the script was conceived
as a suspense-thriller, with Brett the
central character's problem being to
reconstruct a family which he perceives
has disintegrated in his absence; a goal
he achieves, to the horror of everyone.
Other minor changes were made, but
I believe we remained true to Gordon's
intentions.\textsuperscript{80}

\textit{The Boys}, however, is not a genre film, so that while it
certainly is "thrilling", it is not truly a "thriller": the crime is
only alluded to and thankfully, we never, as Jean-Claude Carrière
would have it, "see the elephants". We do not find out exactly
what happened and the consequences of the "boys" crimes are
portrayed in brief and undeveloped scenes, sometimes in single,
unrelated shots, ensuring that the audience continues to
experience the fragmented uneasiness set up in the opening. What
the filmmakers actually achieve is probably more reminiscent of

\textsuperscript{80} Stephen Sewell, 1998, p.xi.
film noir than thriller. Susan Hayward’s description of film noir suggests the visual style and cinematic impact of The Boys. She explains that:

The essential ingredients of a film noir are its specific location or settings, its low-key lighting, a particular kind of psychology associated with the protagonist, and a sense of social malaise, pessimism, suspicion and gloom. The setting is city-bound and generally a composite of rain-washed streets and interiors (both dimly lit), tightly framed shots…The city scape is fraught with danger and corruption, the shadowy, ill-lit streets reflecting the blurred moral and intellectual values as well as the difficulty in discerning truth. Characters are similarly unclear, as is evidenced by the way their bodies are lit and framed: half in the shadows, fragmented. The net effect is one of claustrophobia, underscoring the sense of malaise and tension.⁸¹

Brett Sprague (David Wenham), in particular, is framed and lit in this fashion (Fig.3.11), reinforcing his feelings of what seems to be at times incomprehensible anger and resentment against the world, and helping to explore his strange, mystical belief that, “Everybody’s a god in their own world”. The last sequence of the film, too, is filled with night images of dark streets dimly lit, tight close-ups and medium shots of “the boys” in their car as they cruise the streets lined with darkened milk

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bars and small shops (Figs. 3.12 and 3.13). Throughout these scenes there is the claustrophic "sense of malaise and tension" Hayward argues is the "net effect" of film noir. Brett's ramblings shortly before the crime about having this moment of "peace and serenity" with his brothers, "just the way God planned it", also reflects the "blurred moral and intellectual values" at the heart of this film.

As was mentioned earlier, the structure of the film is fragmented, reflecting both the structure of the original play and the sense of disorientation and unreality as "the boys" move in and out of alcoholic and drug hazes and drift towards violent chaos. The unusual flash forwards, for example, that occur throughout the play are cinematically enunciated in the film, helping to build dramatic force as well as to disrupt the continuity and chronology of the text, making it difficult for the audience to try to fill in any narrative gaps. This device helps create a non-linear, disconnected dramatic structure resulting in an ambiguous narrative. It also helps build dramatic tension and a sense of anticipation; we feel certain that something is about to happen, and that this something will be violent and horrible. Perhaps even more importantly, the technique also assists in conveying the frustration and feelings of alienation and inner turmoil of the characters, particularly Brett. As the flash forwards continue, we gradually come to realize that, in fact, something has already happened and we are watching the aftermath. The burning of the clothes in the back-yard we saw early in the film, as well as the arrest scenes, suggest that whatever has occurred has involved killing. Only at the end of the
The film *The Boys* is stylistically reminiscent of film noir.
a few minor characters in the opening out scenes, and one
important character, Kevin (Pete Smith), whose functions I shall
discuss shortly.) While the filmmakers of *The Boys* have, to a
small degree, simplified the dramatic structure and narrative of
play, they have succeeded in making the film essentially
"cinematic" as opposed to "theatrical". Part of the reason for
this may be that the playwright, Gordon Graham, was finally not
part of the team. As argued earlier, many of the problems of
adapting plays to film come from the frequent involvement of the
original playwright who is often reluctant to stray too far from
his/her text. Gordon Graham was, in fact, originally contracted
to write the screenplay of *The Boys* in 1996. The producers'
response to his efforts, he claims, were
to say the least, cold; their main objection
being that I'd stayed far too close to the
original, thereby keeping big chunks of
dialogue from what was a heavily verbal
stage piece. Clearly, they were after some-
thing far more visual; not surprising, in
retrospect, considering director Rowan
Woods' personal style, which is at the core
of the film's success.\(^\text{85}\)

At this point the "producers exercised their right to replace me
with another writer, Stephen Sewell"\(^\text{86}\). When invited to a
private screening of the finished film, Gordon saw

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\(^{85}\) Gordon Graham, "Learning to live with something that's not mine", *Australian*,

\(^{86}\) *Ibid.*
These flash forwards, apart from fragmenting the chronological order of the narrative and helping to develop characterization, also limit and control what we learn, and what we are asked to pay attention to. In what is commonly referred to as the classical narrative film, the story is the anchor for all other elements of the *mise en scène*, and the thing that drives the text. But with a film like *The Boys*, by no means a classical narrative, repeated viewings are essential in order to interpret and more fully appreciate the skill and style of the filmmakers.

In an article titled “On Fear and Loathing in the Cinema”, Peter Sainsbury, former head of Film Development at the Australian Film Commission and an independent producer, made an oblique reference to *The Boys* (and to the film *Head On*) when he argued that one of the ways to make Australian films successful in the local market is to make sure that our “cinema of social concern (homicidal siblings, gays in homophobic families) is in the hands of a commanding director.”

While Sainsbury was, in fact, being somewhat critical of the kinds of films made in Australia (he argues for a “cinema of surprise” rather than a “cinema of the ordinary”)\(^8\), his point about *The Boys* being “in the hands of a commanding director” was apt. Rowan Woods, although making his first feature film, was clearly in command from start to finish in *The Boys*, which he refers to as an “intersection of two genres: horror movie or thriller on the one hand, and social realism, particularly of the British tradition, on the other.”\(^9\)

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can be argued that a director’s role is not only to direct actors in
order to get the best performance, but, by collaborating in *mise en scène* and style, to direct an audience’s attention, then Rowan
Woods is a very successful director. Through an attentive and at
times aesthetically risky *mise en scène*, Rowan Woods and his
creative team successfully transform the theatricality of the
original into what is an essentially cinematic variation on the
theatrical source.

Pauline Adamek, a freelance film journalist based in Los
Angeles, writes in her review of *The Boys* that:

> Where the play was linear and claustrophobic,
director Rowan Woods and writer Stephen Sewell
have opened out the subject matter and
effectively employed various cinematic
techniques, including a sometimes disorienting
use of flash-forwards to inform the narrative’s
development.91

Her claims are not entirely accurate, since, as discussed
above, the play is not “linear” but, like the film (only even more
so), highly fragmented in structure, weaving back and forth in
time. (It begins very early on a Tuesday morning, moves back to
Monday afternoon; forward to Tuesday evening; back to Monday
afternoon; forward to Monday evening; forward to “weeks later”;
goes back to Monday evening (the night of the murder) and
finishes “months later”.) Her point about the play being

"claustrophobic" is, however, well founded. Like the play, the film is equally claustrophobic, although it does have some opening out. Most of the action, however, takes place within the confined spaces of the Sprague house, mirroring the feelings of entrapment and anxious desperation all the characters seem to experience from the time Brett Sprague is released from prison. Claustrophobia in the film is successfully captured through carefully framed images of small, enclosed spaces (small rooms, narrow hallways, wardrobes; even the backyard is small). Various shots, carefully composed, reveal shadows, interiors, and boundaries of all kinds restricting movement, including prison, walls, fences, gates, shopfronts and traffic lights. In contrast to the original stageplay, there is little dialogue in the film telling us about the Sprague family’s sense of limitation and their perceived inability to change things: we are shown this, and the visual text is primarily what gives the film its dramatic power and intensity.

As noted earlier, the filmmakers also invented for the film the character of Kevin (Pete Smith). In the published screenplay he is identified as a "large Islander", although in the film the boys derisively call him "Abo" (Fig.3.14). Apart from helping to reveal the boys’ braying racism, Kevin serves three main functions. First, he reinforces the filmic Stevie’s (Anthony Hayes) view that his mother is promiscuous. "Brett, Glenn, Stevie; three boys, two different fathers. Was it two different fathers or three?" Stevie demands of his mother. Pointing at Kevin, he shouts, "Who’s this Abo bloke? Who’s he the father of?" to which an outraged and despairing Sandra screams “No-one!”
Fig. 3.14 Kevin (Pete Smith) was invented for the film.
called national traits — a sense of defeat, a limited faith in social action, a respect for solitariness that also accompanies a suspicion of community or groups. In narrative the result is most often the construction of a condition of enclosure, restriction or entrapment...This condition of entrapment can assume a variety of literal or metaphysical forms...the metaphor of the prison...is notable for its recurrence.93

It seems obvious that the film of *The Boys*, in its use of boundaries as a visual *lietmotif*, strongly reinforces this myth. In my introduction I referred to a recurring image of characters (particularly women) in the adaptations under discussion who gaze outwards from behind some kind of barrier; this image supports Turner's view that entrapment, metaphorical or otherwise, occurs frequently in Australian narratives. Apart from the texts mentioned in the introduction, *Death in Brunswick* (1991), *Blackfellas* (1992), *Dead Heart* (1997), *The Well* (1997), *Radiance*, (1998), *In the Winter Dark*, (1998), *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1998), *Head On* (1998) and *The Boys* (1998) all have scenes containing strong images representing restriction of movement and metaphorical (and often literal) boundaries which inhibit action and perceptions. In the case of *The Boys*, much of the language and, in many different ways, the action and the settings (in both the play and the film) construct an atmosphere of “enclosure, restriction and entrapment”. Changing the ending

of the film in order to redeem the mother and set free the
girlfriends does not necessarily alter the course of the myth (i.e.,
it is not really a “happy ending”), because Sandra is portrayed,
ultimately, as bemused, bewildered and acted upon, as are Nola
(Anna Lise), Michelle (Toni Collette) and Jackie (Jeanette Cronin).
Nola is last seen alone and terrified, hitching a ride to a friend’s
house, but the implication is that she will go anywhere, so long
as it is away from the Spragues (Fig.3.15). Similarly Michelle,
scared but determined not to help Brett, locks herself inside her
mother’s flat, and a weeping Jackie screams in rage and
confusion: “You’ve hurt me! You’ve hurt me, Glenn Sprague”,
before ordering him out of the car (Fig.3.16).

In Chapter Two I referred to Jean Claude Carrière’s view
that realism has always been part of the “contract” filmmakers
make with audiences, realistic representations of the visible
world having been an important aspect of cinema from its
beginning. The Boys omits even a glimpse of the murder scene as
well as any scenes of the trial, and anecdotal evidence I have
collected through discussions and surveys with young adult
students supports the view that many prefer realism and dislike
ambiguity in cinema, especially those who enjoy genre films and
television crime shows. Comments such as, “I wanted to see
what they did”; “We should have been shown more scenes of them
being caught by the police”; and “I wish we could have seen a bit
of the trial”, were common responses after viewing the film.
During discussions, some students pointed out that they “felt
cheated” because they “couldn’t understand what really
happened”. Although some appreciated the filmmakers’ stylistic
Fig. 3.15 Nola (Anna Lise) leaves Stevie.

In the film all the girls leave the boys.

Fig. 3.16 Jackie (Jeanette Cronin) leaves Glenn.
risks, they were nevertheless so conditioned to expect realism (to be shown “the elephants”), that they were puzzled when their expectations were not met. Not that they wanted to watch a murder in graphic detail, but they wanted to see “just enough to make it clear what the boys did”. This, by the way, is an indication of how difficult it is to judge audience perceptions of screen violence: for some the violence will be gratuitous, for others, it will be “just enough” to clarify the narrative. Many also expressed a strong desire to watch evil being punished. The “psychology of the lynch mob” referred to earlier is rewarded in films by watching villains suffering and being condemned. In this respect, the original stageplay may have been more to their taste, except that I have yet to meet a student who has read or seen the original play of The Boys, which further reinforces my belief that many audiences now receive their stories primarily through film (and/or television).

The filmmakers’ version of The Boys is not only characteristic of the cinematic variation, but also reflects the influence of Hollywood conventions on Australian scriptwriting. In an article titled “Whose script is it anyway?” Louis Nowra explores the laborious process of writing for the screen, the “constant preoccupation” of Hollywood with “formula”, and the influence of theatre, and of Syd Field’s Screenplay: the Foundations of Screenwriting. Nowra notes that:

Stephen Sewell, introducing the published screenplay, the harrowing The Boys...writes how he restructured the original two-act
stage play into a three-act film. He inadvertently touches on one of the curious features of [Syd] Field’s formula. The three-act structure is an obsession of the 1920s and 30s Broadway and the West End, which modern theatre has consigned to oblivion. Plays of that era are rarely revived because their structure is predictable and old-fashioned. How did this anachronistic formula exert such influence over Hollywood? Because many Broadway practitioners of the three-act structure scurried to LA in the 30s and 40s to make their fortunes. They may have despised Hollywood, but their potent legacy remains.94

This “legacy” certainly extends beyond Hollywood, frequently, and in varying degrees, influencing Australian screenwriters, but in the case of The Boys it is a defining characteristic of the adaptation. The third act, added for the film, not only reflects the influence of Hollywood scriptwriting but also mirrors Hollywood’s preoccupation (some would say obsession) with the concepts of resurrection and redemption. Sandra’s dignified comment to her son in prison and her ability to turn and walk away from him signifies her liberation and redemption, as does the flight from “the boys” of all the women in the film.

While I am not arguing that the film version of *The Boys* is in any way a “Hollywood” film, contemporary scriptwriting techniques heavily influenced by Hollywood are nevertheless relevant when examining the adaptations of both *Blackrock* and *The Boys*. Stephen Sewell, in an interview with Philip Adams, tried to explain this influence:

Let me go briefly through the theory, at the moment, of filmmaking, and it is that of the hero’s journey...This is an idea of how you write movies and how you tell stories on film and generally. The hero needs to achieve certain results or has a problem at the beginning of the film...and at the end of the film has overcome difficulties in order to achieve these results.\(^{95}\)

However, in the case of *The Boys*, he pointed out why this formula would not work:

Very early in our story conferences we came quickly to the conclusion that if we took the hero’s journey on this particular story we would do a disservice to absolutely everybody because our heroes at the end of their story...achieve their goal by picking up an innocent young woman and raping and murdering her.\(^{96}\)


\(^{96}\) *Ibid.*
Philip Adams made the comment that
the problem is when you move out of
the intimacy and the narrow demographics
of live theatre into the broader audience
of the cinema...you’ve got to start thinking
about the market.97

He is absolutely right. In both Blackrock and The Boys, the
filmmakers had to make concessions to “the market”, as well as
to current Hollywood screenwriting devices. Unlike Nick Enright
in the film version of Blackrock, Stephen Sewell may not have
scripted a “hero’s journey” narrative for the adaptation of The
Boys, but he, like the filmmakers of Blackrock, finally decided on
a “Hollywood ending”. In the case of Blackrock, confessions,
imprisonment, suicide and reconciliation provide a satisfactory
conclusion to the narrative; in The Boys, through the addition of a
third act, Sandra and all the girlfriends are redeemed and
absolved from any complicity in their “boys’” crimes.

The general acceptance of what are essentially Hollywood
scriptwriting devices, according to Peter Sainsbury, not only
affects the way in which Australian scripts are assessed but also
the way projects are funded. “Public provision for film
production is an extension of the public service”, he argues, and

like any public service bureaucracy,
film funding agencies maintain legitimacy

97 Ibid.
by adhering to the empirical...[so the]
craft will become reductive in its definition
of proper script writing.98

He goes on to point out that, primarily because of “the
weight that...the rules of objective craft ...carry in the culture”,

Skill will be rewarded before imagination,
the familiar will be confined to naturalism, meaning
will be reduced to objective cause and effect and
difference will be recognised only on the level of
story. If script assessment is to enlarge rather than
diminish the potential of Australian film-
making...ways of preventing it becoming exclusive of
legitimate creative work must be developed and built
upon, to include the understanding of what kind of
film a given script implies and a much greater clarity
about what may or may not occur during
the translation of a script into a mise en scene.99

In the light of this empiricist tradition of assessing
scripts, it is not surprising that, when a project like The Boys
came along, funding was hard to secure, with it receiving “hostile
responses from several quarters.”100 The Film Finance
Corporation rejected it and

98 Peter Sainsbury, “On Sweetening the Grapes of Wrath”, Screen Director,
99 Ibid.
some of the script assessments were scathing. Assessments accused the filmmakers of being morally reprehensible and criticised them for putting 'scum like this on film.'

Fortunately, the project finally received support from the Australian Film Commission, Showtime, and SBS Independent. The FFC’s refusal to back The Boys appears to reinforce the argument that “the financing structure dominant over the last decade has had an inbuilt tendency towards safety and homogeneity” in Australian scripts.

In a radio interview, Philip Adams asked Stephen Sewell, “When you make a film as austere, compelling and inescapable as The Boys, do you get an audience for it of any significant size?”

Sewell replied:

Yes, the short answer is, yes. So for all those...fellow filmmakers who said, ‘you know, it might be a good film but no-one’s going to see it’, they’re just dead wrong.

Box office takings were, however, moderate, despite excellent reviews. Upon its release early in 1998, The Boys

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101 Ibid.
102 Martin Williams, “But will there be room for discord?”, Screen Director, Summer 2000, p.6.
103 Adams, 1998.
104 Ibid.
received almost universal praise from reviewers and critics, both in Australia and overseas. Adjectives such as “powerful”, “disturbing”, “compelling”, “harrowing” and “confronting” were used to describe the overall impact of the film. Many critics compared it with *Blackrock* and found it far more effective as a film. *The Boys* won Best Australian Film in the 1999 Critics’ Circle awards, as well as Best Director (Rowan Woods), Best Supporting Actress (Lynette Curran) and Best Adapted Screenplay (Stephen Sewell). It was also nominated for awards in almost every category in the 1998 AFI Awards and won Best Direction (Rowan Woods), Best Supporting Actress (Toni Collette), Best Supporting Actor (John Polson) and Best Adapted Screenplay (Stephen Sewell). *The Boys* premiered at the Berlin Film Festival and was also sold in the year of its release to the all-important market, the United States.

Many other adaptations which are variations on their source were made in Australia during the past decade, some of which I referred to earlier in this chapter. The variation, in fact, appears to have been the preferred method of adapting literature to the screen during this period, as it has been in many others. This is something that audiences, particularly critical audiences, need to be aware of before pointing out that filmmakers have in some way “violated”, “butchered” or “betrayed” the original by omitting some events, changing a character, or altering the narrative. It needs to be recognized that filmmakers who choose this approach are doing nothing more than exercising their creative rights. Working in a completely different medium, which generally restricts viewing time to about 100 minutes, requires
making decisions about which characters, incidents, or themes are to be emphasized, which may be undermined, added or altered, and what kinds of things can be omitted altogether. When making a variation, it is the filmmakers’ job to decide which aspects of the printed source are most important for achieving their cinematic interpretation of the original, if they do not believe they can, or choose not to, enunciate the entire text.

However, it could also be argued that there is always in variations an emphasis upon the script. Like the “faithful” adaptations, there is a definite sense that the filmmakers are working hard at realizing some, if not most, of their source and that adherence to much of the original is considered important. The antecedent text is therefore clearly recognizable on the screen (provided, of course, the audience has read the antecedent text), albeit frequently altered in different and often significant ways according to the filmmakers’ purpose and aims. Because of their reluctance to let go of the original, filmmakers who make variations too often make cautious, and literary or theatrical rather than cinematic, versions of the source. While The Boys (1998) certainly does not fit into that category, most of the variations made during this period do.

It also could be argued that the general approach to variations is to make protagonists less complex and more palatable for a wide audience and to emphasize, where possible, the love story. In the period under examination, the filmic variations of The Delinquents (1989), Turtle Beach (1992), Hammers over the Anvil (1994), Cosi (1995), Blackrock, (1997),
Oscar and Lucinda (1997) and In the Winter Dark (1998) all do this. In the case of Turtle Beach, Cosi and The Delinquents, the overall purpose of the filmmakers was also to eliminate or undermine all or most of any serious political comment in the original, as well as to simplify the narrative and emphasize the love story.

Another favoured device in variations is to re-structure the plot; in particular, to change the ending from one that is uncertain or perplexing to one that is unambiguous, in order to provide narrative closure. Variations in the period under discussion which have had their endings altered so that the entire tone and thrust of the dramatic narrative is significantly different include Turtle Beach (1992), The Heartbreak Kid (1993), What I Have Written (1995), Oscar and Lucinda (1997), Radiance (1998) and, as discussed, The Boys (1998).

What also emerges in the variations examined for this study is that the filmmakers have primarily chosen to make adaptations of texts dealing with the domestic world, particularly with relationships within a family, although these relationships have, with few exceptions, been shown as a good deal less complicated when translated for the screen. During an interview with Cinema Papers, Louis Nowra pointed out that "the great American theme ...is fathers and sons, but the great Australian theme is mothers and sons." Many of the texts adapted for the screen during the period under investigation support Nowra's view that Australian

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Generally speaking, the variations in this study also fall into the category of social realism. In their analysis of Australian films, Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka note that in these kinds of films, which they call “small essays of social ‘problems’ and ‘sub-cultures’”, there is a “virtual embargo on aesthetic risk”. While I would argue that there is nothing wrong with a national cinema producing films which are “small essays” on social dilemmas, I would agree that in these films sometimes filmmakers do need to take “aesthetic” risks.

Because of this general emphasis upon “social problems”, the variations in this period are also mostly drawn from plays and novels set in urban Australia, primarily in or near Sydney, reinforcing the frequent observation that, in the world of Australian cinema, “Australia” too often means either the outback or Sydney, and sometimes Melbourne. In fact, of the twenty-four adaptations undertaken in the period 1989-1998, whatever the type of adaptation made, the majority of them are set in Sydney, near Sydney, or in New South Wales, giving audiences, both nationally and internationally, fairly limited

\[106\] ibid. p.43.
representations of Australia. As has been mentioned, sometimes settings are actually changed from the original location to Sydney, as is the case for *Turtle Beach* (1992), (from Canberra to Sydney), *Cosi* (1995) and *The Sum of Us* (1993), (both from Melbourne to Sydney). *The Heartbreak Kid* (1993), however, did the opposite, changing its setting from Sydney to Melbourne, thus possibly making the film more convincing, given Melbourne’s significant Greek-Australian population. Substituting Sydney for Melbourne, however, is an “ongoing tendency”, according to academic Adrian Danks who argues that:

Sydney is regularly used as a backdrop and a dominant geography that is over-bearing, while films often struggle to bring Melbourne to the screen (or any actual sense of it).

Concomitantly, there is an ongoing tendency to transfer iconic, identifiable and essentially Melbourne stories to Sydney. Illustrating a preference for the more familiar, physical and picturesque aspects of Sydney’s cityscape, landscape, harbour, and weather. Among these trans-plantations are: *The Sentimental Bloke* (Raymond Longford, 1919) — a film which then goes on to define the urban imagery of Sydney’s Woolloomooloo as perhaps the most iconic in 1920s Australian cinema; *Monkey Grip* (Ken Cameron, 1982)\(^{107}\); *Summer of the Seventeenth*

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\(^{107}\) In fact the film *Monkey Grip* is clearly set in Melbourne. The daughter wears a Fitzroy Primary School t-shirt; characters read *The Age*; there are trams, a shot of the Carlton Post Office, and dialogue in Sydney scenes referring to their return to Melbourne.
Doll (Leslie Norman, 1959) (from a play evocatively located in the Melbourne suburb of Carlton and ... which, as if it [sic] to rub salt into the wounds, self-consciously frames the Sydney Harbour Bridge in many of its backgrounds).\textsuperscript{108}

In faithful adaptations and in variations, as has been pointed out, the source is crucial to the final film. In faithful adaptations the filmmakers deliberately privilege the literary source. The result is more or less a reverential pictorial and aural translation of the source. In variations, while the source is a valuable anchor, there are usually many subtle and often some major changes made when transforming the original into film. Nevertheless, in both faithful adaptations and variations, what audiences see on the screen is a recognizable reflection of the source. This is not at all the case for literary texts which are appropriated, or subverted, for the screen.

CHAPTER FOUR
APPROPRIATIONS

When filmmakers set out to make an adaptation for the screen which is either faithful to or a variation of the literary source, although some might argue otherwise, there is a case for retaining the original’s title for its film version. Despite the differences in the sign systems, there are enough similarities between the source and its screen companion in these adaptations to make it appropriate to call the film by its original’s name, although as argued earlier, audiences need to be alerted somehow to the fact that the film is an adaptation.

 Appropriateness is, of course, not the only concern. There are commercial benefits involved in the retention of the literary title and it could be argued that filmmakers should probably not pass up the opportunity to exploit the reputation of the original, especially if it is a well-known and much read text. If, on the other hand, the main purpose in adapting a literary text to the screen is to appropriate that text, retaining the antecedent’s title seems to be indefensible. What we see on the screen in appropriations is, for the most part, considerably different from the source. Faithful adaptations follow very closely their literary antecedents, which are always uppermost in the filmmakers’ minds. Utmost respect is paid to the original and minimal, mostly insignificant, changes are made, but always with an eye on the source. Adaptations which are variations, on the other hand, while having due regard for the original text, do not hesitate to make some significant changes necessary to
accommodate the filmmakers’ intentions. In contrast, appropriations re-write their literary predecessors, often making the film version radically different from its source. Geoffrey Wagner, whose term “cinematic analogy” is roughly equivalent to what I refer to here as an appropriation, defines this type of adaptation as one which does not “presume to be the original”, but may seek to “complement” it.¹

While of course there are some important aspects of the original retained in an appropriation, for example, the setting, the main protagonist’s name, key incidents, and even some of the minor characters, this kind of adaptation differs considerably from the original text. Audiences watching a faithful adaptation or a variation will nod in recognition, may be pleased or displeased with the filmic version, agree or disagree with some of the decisions the filmmakers have made, but will nevertheless walk out of the theatre aware of the many similarities between the source and the film. In appropriations, there are few similarities and the differences are overwhelming. Arguably, it is for this reason that when viewing this type of adaptation, some audiences become very resentful, particularly if they like the antecedent text, and accuse the filmmakers of “betraying” or “butchering” the “book”. It is perhaps worth pointing out here Geoffrey Wagner’s view that, like variations, appropriations at least break away from the “book-illustration” or “xerography” approach faithful adaptations use, and should not be considered treacherous because they never set out to copy the source.²

² Ibid.
In the decade under discussion, there were two adaptations which clearly set out to appropriate their original texts: *Death in Brunswick* (1991), which retains its original's title, and *Blackfellas* (1992) which does not. *Blackfellas* is an adaptation of Archie Weller's novel *The Day of the Dog;* *Death in Brunswick* is a film which takes as its source Boyd Oxlade's semi-autobiographical novel of the same name (originally published by William Heinemann Australia in 1987, and, at the time of writing, out of print). New and fundamentally different meanings have been created in these films which interrogate, challenge and often subvert their sources to suit the filmmakers' purposes.

*Death in Brunswick* (1991)

In the novel, *Death in Brunswick,* and occasionally in the film, parallels are drawn between the texts and Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice,* as well as the film version of Mann's work. There is a direct reference to the film *Death in Venice* on page three of Oxlade's novel, where an irritated Carl watches his mother listen to Mahler's Fifth Symphony (played intermittently throughout the film of Mann's novella.) Carl also tells us, "There she sat, a fat blond female Dirk Bogarde facing death, defeated, vain, but brave. *Jesus!*"³

Dirk Bogarde may have played Gustave von Aschenbach in the film adaptation of *Death in Venice,* but Carl's reference to his

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³ Boyd Oxlade, *Death in Brunswick,* William Heinemann Australia, Richmond, Vic., 1987, p.3. Subsequent references are to this edition and, except for long quotes which are footnoted, are cited in the text.
mother as being similar to the von Aschenbach character is mere psychological projection, for it is he himself who is similar. Like Aschenbach, Carl is preoccupied with aging and death; like Aschenbach he tries to recapture his youth by wearing make-up and fussing with his hair. Carl, too, is preoccupied with sexual desire and, like Aschenbach, is a voyeur. Carl also achieves a kind of epiphany through a vision. In *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach becomes obsessed with the beautiful but “chlorotic” Polish youth Tadzio, stalking him through the streets of Venice. At the end of the novel and the film, Tadzio, wading in shallow water, turns to stare at von Aschenbach, who, as their eyes meet, collapses and dies, recalling the vision of Tadzio beckoning him “into an immensity of richest expectation.” In *Death in Brunswick*, Carl, himself slightly “chlorotic” with his “spindly” torso, sore gums and rotting teeth, has a “vision” of Mustafa at the church, and like von Aschenbach, afterwards feels “exalted”.

The settings in *Death in Brunswick* are also reminiscent of *Death in Venice*. There are narrow, dirty streets and crumbling buildings, disease-ridden and foul. Like the resort in *Death in Venice*, the club in *Death in Brunswick* is protected by greedy and corrupt owners. As in *Death in Venice*, the people who move through the landscape in Brunswick are from various cultural backgrounds and speak many different languages. But while the novel *Death in Brunswick* echoes, and at times clearly alludes to, *Death in Venice*, it is a grotesque send-up of Mann’s novella and of the film. Sometimes serious, *Death in Brunswick* is also

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occasionally ludicrous, whereas there is nothing particularly humorous about *Death in Venice*.

Echoes and correspondences to *Death in Venice* also resound throughout the film *Death in Brunswick*, and clearly we are meant to make the associations. Audience members familiar with Thomas Mann's novella, the film adaptation, and also with Oxland's *Death in Brunswick*, will experience the film in a variety of different and complex ways, since the imaginative interweaving of all these texts adds depth and richness and makes for a lot of fun. For this reason, despite the significant differences between source and film, it is understandable that the filmmakers chose to retain the original's title.

The film version of *Death in Brunswick* appropriates its model in a variety of ways, so that what we watch unfold on screen is the novel seen askance. It could be argued that most of the novel's settings remain, however, as is the case for every change made for this film, they become a vehicle for black comedy, not drama.

In the novel, Brunswick is described as a place full of “unspeakably dirty” lanes where the “refuse from take-away shops and greengrocers spilled into the gutters” (p.58). The streets are lined with “dusty ti-trees” and “discouraged palms”; papers blow about in the “gritty wind” (p.77). Shoddy terrace houses made of “crumbling stucco” with “ugly little diamond paned windows” are inhabited by “melancholy unemployed Turks...with their unfortunate wives muffled to the eyes in the 30
degree heat” (p.4), and “dark children” play around “rusty abandoned” cars (p.30). Throughout the area, there is a “sweet, foul smell of decay”. Carl hates the place, referring to it as a “shithole” (p.39). Similarly, Carl is disgusted by the house he rents, with its “small dark kitchen” and “grimy” outdoor “dunny”, and dreams of “picture windows, rose gardens and indoor lavatories” (pp.2-3). The “rock’n’roll” club where Carl works is also “squalid”, smelling of stale tobacco and rotting food, and throughout there is an “atmosphere of sleaze, danger and criminality” (p.3).

In the film, however, while Brunswick, Carl’s house and the club are all portrayed as seedy, these settings are all part of the humour. The general squalor is set up in the credit sequence to the sounds of a cheerful bazouki tune, helping to set the comic mood. Two women in black confidently strut along a dusty littered street, one with a shopping cart and one with a dead Christmas tree which she determinedly pushes into an abandoned car, already half full of dead trees. Their boldness gives us a sense that they are in control of their environment, not victims of it (Fig. 4.1). Aluminium tins rattle and papers blow in the breeze, waking Carl (Sam Neil) who, fully clothed and obviously hung over, staggers outside to stomp on the cans. He looks about, furtively victorious, and leaving the cans in the gutter, returns inside to be greeted by the prostrate figure of his mother (Yvonne Lawley), her head in the gas oven. The startled Carl is relieved to see her sit up and say to him brightly but sarcastically, “Oh hello dear. Up already?” She informs him she has been doing “what [he] should be doing” and they argue light-heartedly over his
“unhygenic...bohemian” life style and over her opening a letter from his landlord demanding payment of the rent. All the while Carl is emptying mousetraps. The comic treatment of death, woven throughout the film, is quickly established in this brief scene, along with Carl’s way of life and his relationship with his mother.

Far from being revolting as in the novel, in the film Carl’s home is instantly established as a place for visual gags. We follow Carl from the mousetraps to his bathroom. The bath is stained and dirty, attached to the wall is an old gas hot water heater, unpredictable in its delivery of a hot shower. He lights the heater with a piece of paper; it fires up, he turns on the shower and begins undressing; the heater stops, the water slows to a trickle then stops completely. Just as he is ready to light it again, the heater explodes into action. Carl’s responses suggest a kind of patient resignation: we are to understand that this happens all the time and is simply part of living in Brunswick. The bathroom scene was created for the film (although not included in the original script)\(^5\), and works very effectively in establishing early the comic tone.

Likewise, Carl’s bike ride through the streets of Brunswick is a comic performance. Whereas in the novel we are simply told that “mounting his rusty bike, he pedalled through Brunswick. The sky was low and grey” (p.4), in the film there is medium shot of Carl pumping up his tyres, then a close-up of an instant.

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\(^5\) A copy of the original script was sent to me by John Ruane, the director of the film *Death in Brunswick*, whom I hereby acknowledge with thanks. The co-writer was Boyd Oxlade.
puncture, another visual joke alerting us to the haphazard existence of this character. A straight cut shows him ostentatiously donning sunglasses, and, wearing a leather jacket and black levis, an amiable Carl waves rather self-consciously to two black-clad female neighbours who, we suspect, have watched him set off on his bicycle many times before. Decaying industrial buildings and streets filled with grotty little shops, including a Halal butchery, establish the commercial and multi-ethnic landscape through which Carl meanders (Fig.4.2). Finally, leaning his bike against a wall, Carl furtively litters, dropping the remains of take-away food behind his back. His obvious guilt at polluting the area immediately endears him to us, and is in contrast to the uncaring, purposeful littering of the woman with the Christmas tree. These two small but significant and humorous actions in the credit sequence help set up the sub-text of ethnic differences explored throughout the film.

The kitchen scenes contribute to this sub-text, as well as to the film’s black comedy. After hiring Carl on the spot, for example, Janni (Nicholas Papademetriou) in a stereotypical Greek-Australian accent, orders Carl to “start cookin’”, disdainfully tosses him the keys, tells him, “No drinkin’, okay”, and leaves. We follow a confused Carl through a series of carefully framed point of view shots as he inspects the coolroom. Extreme close-ups of rotting tomatoes and cockroaches crawling over rancid meat are intercut with medium close-ups of Carl, only mildly dismayed, tapping half-heartedly with a plastic container at the cockroaches, and we respond with laughter, not disgust. In the novel, Janni and Carl despise each other but the
The film *Death in Brunswick* is an important contribution to a multi-ethnic Australian cinema.
spite and mutual dislike between these two characters, as well as the emetic atmosphere of the club, is radically undermined in the film, so that Carl's reactions to his employers and the club are always funny rather than maliciously hostile and vengeful as in the novel.

Similarly, the symbolism of the Coburg Cemetery is subverted in the film. In the novel the cemetery has two main functions. It is a place where, even in death, Brunswick's ethnic rivalries and prejudices are preserved by boundaries between the groups. It is also the place where Carl experiences a symbolic death and resurrection so that he feels he can finally "catch the fear" and take some control over his life. The cemetery sequence, though central to both novel and film, is radically altered for the film. It is also arguably the most cinematically visualized sequence in the film and contains some of its darkest humour. Tightly structured, although more slowly paced than the rest of the film, it is also carefully framed and neatly edited. This sequence is unified primarily by its lighting and the visual motif of liquids, including rain, mist and blood, and by verbal and aural references to other body fluids and explosions, such as Mustafa's gurgling corpse and Dave's noisy fart in the graveyard. John Clark's performance as Dave, outstanding throughout the film, is superb in this sequence, dominating all its scenes, and Sam Neil "whose timing", as one reviewer noted, "lifts every scene",\(^6\) functions as an excellent foil.

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Apart from the way these two characters bounce off each other, much of the comedy in this sequence is derived from the way in which Mustafa’s body is treated. His hapless corpse has its head thumped against the car boot cover; it is lifted, pushed, dragged, rolled and finally unceremoniously dumped into Mrs di Marco’s coffin, whose own body is stomped on and her decaying skull crushed, in close-up, to make way for Mustafa’s corpse.

Many other elements in the sequence contribute to the black comedy, all effectively framed and visualized using a range of angles and shots. In a close-up we see Carl’s horror and surprise at Dave’s plan; watch him disappear out of the foreground of a frame as he trips and falls into Mrs di Marco’s grave; see again in close-up his bewilderment and terror when he realizes he is on top of a dead body. There are carefully framed visual and verbal allusions to dirt, mould, mud and the stench. Dave’s inability to get out of the grave is a funny and effective parallel to Carl’s falling in. The inter-cutting of close-ups of the two men’s filthy clothes and bodies with various shots of boots and wide-eyed exhausted, confused faces, along with the high angle wide shots of their leaving the cemetery in the dawn light, is aesthetically pleasing as well as amusing.

In the penultimate scene of the sequence there are several close-ups of each man’s face filling the frame as they sit in the car in front of Carl’s house. As in the novel, Dave promises that he will tell no-one, not even June, about what has happened. Carl then declares, without much conviction, that he does not “want to live like this any more”, but Dave’s shrug and sly smile implies
that he, like us, simply does not believe Carl. Dave's insistence that Carl go to work, and promise that he will be there to help him get through whatever happens in the morning, is an ultimate pledge of mateship, which is what this film, perhaps more than anything, is about. In the very funny final scene of the sequence, Carl enters his mother's bedroom and stands before her, filthy, tired and sheepish. She asks him, cautiously and suspiciously, "What happened to you, dear?" and he replies in the manner of a little boy, "I fell over".

It is not unusual to omit or create characters when undertaking any kind of adaptation of a book to film, so it comes as no surprise that several characters have been omitted entirely in the film version of *Death in Brunswick*, or that some have been added. Of the minor characters who have been transferred to the screen, most share some fundamental characteristics of their literary model. Janni, Carl's boss, for instance, is a plump, loud Greek-Australian who despises Turks and, as in the novel, is partly responsible for goading Mustafa to attack Carl. Similarly, Laurie the bouncer (Boris Brkis) is a "huge lout" and a bully who defends Janni and intimidates Carl. Mustafa (Nico Lathouris), however, whose main function in the novel is to become a corpse and thereby a catalyst for Carl's epiphany in the graveyard, is more fully developed as a character for the film. In the novel he is simply referred to as Carl's "kitchenhand and pill supplier", a "youngish, quietish Turk" who has "four children and a wife", lives in a "Housing Ministry" flat, and earns "at least $500 a week" from his job, "dope money and the dole" (p.7). He has obviously worked with Carl for some time. In the film, time is
compressed for dramatic purposes. Carl, who has only just begun work at the club, meets Mustafa within hours of starting the job. Functioning as a kind of archetypal herald, Mustafa appears mysteriously out of the steam in the kitchen and we sense that he will, in some way, soon change Carl's life forever. In the film Mustafa has a short but well and subtly developed relationship with Carl, smirking at him when Carl tells his mother he loves her, warning him softly to stay away from Greek girls, and telling Sophie (Zoe Carides) that she is making “trouble” for all of them. In the novel, however, he has almost no contact with Carl and is ultimately de-personalized. After he is killed, the narrator repeatedly refers to him as simply “the Turk”; his face becomes “the Turk's face”; his hand “the Turk's hand”. The novel's Mustafa is never much more than a dead body, whereas in the film, while clearly dishonest and lazy, he is portrayed as an amiable enough sort of man with whom Carl would probably have become friends, had he not accidently killed him.

While the main features of the minor characters included in the adaptation are preserved, the filmmakers chose to alter quite radically the more important characters. Dave, June, Mrs Fitzgerald, Sophie and Carl are all different from their literary prototypes, as are the relationships that exist between them.

In the novel Carl is described as a “tired...aging blond rabbit” with a “receding hairline” and a “bald patch at his crown” (p.3). An alcoholic, he has small broken veins across his nose and cheeks, bleeding gums, “twenty-eight rotten teeth”, and puffy eyes. Very thin, with a “nervous leggy walk” (p.29), he has
“skinny arms and [a] slight pot belly beginning under his bony chest” (p.69). Carl himself suffers from self-revulsion, at one point looking in the mirror and exclaiming, “Ugh! I look like a fish. A rabbit fish!” (p.69). Towards the end of the novel, Dave tells us that Carl looks “like a worn and ageing schoolboy” and recalls “with pain how good-looking he had been” (p.142), although it must be said that the readers are never encouraged to view him in this light. Sam Neil, who plays Carl in the film, looks nothing like his literary antecedent. Sophie and Carmen (Doris Younane) believe Carl “looks like Sting” only is “even better looking”.

Not only is Carl generally portrayed in the novel as physically unappealing, he is also a “true neurotic”. He succumbs to jealous rages and superstitions, frequently crossing his fingers and “touching wood and similar rituals” (pp.57-58), and usually feels a victim of his environment. Always anxious, tired and miserable, we learn that

in his youth [he] had been an ecstatic consumer
of every mind altering drug he could get
hold of; but now, flinching from experience
like a snail, he craved only the bland delights
of tequila and Mogadon.7

While Carl is clearly a drinker in the film version, there seems to be no particular reason for his drinking and none of the back story about the “unmerciful” bullying he endured at school,

making him "paralysed and incoherent" when confronted (p.59), is transferred to the film. In contrast, in the film, while Carl is clearly fearful of physical confrontation, avoiding it whenever possible, when necessary, as in the scene invented for the film where Laurie attacks him, Carl will try to defend himself. This characteristic, though, is very much a part of the comic action and during the altercation with Laurie it seems to be Sophie who does the most damage. Overall, the film's Carl is a very different character from the novel's (Fig.4.3). The filmmakers claim that they decided to make

Carl more charming, hapless, a sort of innocent surrounded by thugs. A character who knowingly takes everyone around him to the utmost limits of their tolerance and endurance and then asks them for a cup of tea.  

The filmic Dave and his friendship with Carl are arguably closer to the source. As in the novel, Dave is a happy-go-lucky "blue collar" worker who enjoys a beer and a joke and is utterly loyal to his mate, Carl. His friendship with Carl in the novel is based upon "hard drinking and music...Dave loved opera with a real passion and Carl...loved baroque chamber music...both had a romantic devotion to Charlie 'Bird' Parker" (p.29). In the novel Dave has an existence as a character in his own right and part of the narrative is told from his point of view. Carl claims that "theoretically Dave constantly suffered for the oppressed and

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wanted to disembowel the bourgeoisie [and yet] Carl had never met a happier, more contented man” (p.30). A strong, stocky man, with a limp caused by childhood polio, he has a “faded hammer and sickle tattooed on [his] shoulder” (p.44). In the film version, however, as is the case for all the characters, Dave’s existence is centred around Carl’s story. The only concession in the film to the literary Dave’s childhood illness and his left-wing politics is a reference to an ongoing problem with his leg and a peace march poster on the wall in the background of the scene where Dave and Carl play darts (Fig.4.4). As is the case for almost all of the adaptations discussed in this study, political themes in Death in Brunswick are either merely alluded to or omitted entirely.

In the novel Dave’s relationship with June is also well developed. June, we are told, is a “tall stooping woman” (p.36) with shaven temples and short dyed orange hair. She is a teacher whose pupils call her “Miss Vinegar” (p.39). A militant feminist, she wears a badge “over one sagging breast” which reads “Dead Men Don’t Rape” (p.36), and takes a course on Friday nights in “Assertion Training”. She rules the household with an iron fist, forbidding the kids to read “battle comics”, eat McDonalds, or add salt, not necessarily because of concern for her family’s health but mostly because she does not want Dave “dying of high blood pressure and leaving [her] to bring up three boys on [her] own” (pp.45-55). June despises Carl, referring to him as a “wimpy little prick” and a “little creep” but has some respect for Prue, Carl’s ex-wife, because she left Carl to become a lesbian and went with their daughter Lilly to live on a commune called “Amazon Acres”. (While Prue is mentioned in the film, there is
Fig. 4.3 Sam Neil looks very different from the Carl Fitzgerald of the novel.

Fig. 4.4 Carl's (Sam Neil) and Dave's (John Clark) relationship is the only one similar to the source.
no suggestion whatsoever that she is a lesbian or that she and Carl had a daughter.) On the morning after Mustafa’s “burial”, when Dave refuses to tell June what he has been up to all night, she is furious. Ordering him to be “back by one-thirty”, she declares she is going to

the Women’s Refuge Collective meeting, and [they will] be talking about [his] kind of crap....[because it is] a political issue. It’s about time we women got together to stop this male bonding bullshit... Now get out of my sight.⁹

Despite her belligerence, Dave, we are told, “truly loved the termagant” (p.42), although he does wonder what might happen if, one day, he gave her a “backhander”. At one point he remorsefully speculates that June will die before him, “probably of rage”, and that he would have to “bury her with a loud hailer” (p.42). The relationship between Dave and June is probably the nearest the novel comes to being amusing, but it is clearly funny at June’s expense.

In the film version June (Deborah Kennedy) physically looks nothing like her literary model, nor is it clear what, if anything, she does for a career outside the home (Fig.4.5). She appears only in her domestic world as wife and mother. Unlike her literary ancestor, she is portrayed as being only moderately bossy and is wearily resigned to Dave’s easy-going manner, his smoking and his friendship with Carl. The only concession to the original

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June's feminism is a "Reclaim the Night" t-shirt she wears in a couple of scenes. She is far more tolerant of Carl than the novel's June, believing that his main problem is that Carl simply needs to "grow up". June habitually treats Carl with amused disdain, at one point asking him, "How old are you, Carl?" and ridiculing the fact that his mother still does his washing.

In the film, nearly all the characters, including Dave and June, treat Carl like a young muddle-headed boy. Dave, while disapproving of Carl's affair with the nineteen-year-old Sophie Papafagos, jokes with him about it, telling him, "Take it easy mate. Last time you were in love you got married". In the cemetery sequence, Dave patiently tells Carl three times, as a father would a child, to put the shovel across the grave so that Dave can get out. When he falls, he tells Carl to "get down and give us a bunk up". Flustered and confused, Carl childishly refuses and Dave immediately threatens him, as a father would a child: "You get down here or you'll walk home alone." Similarly, Dave worries about Carl's sleep: "I know you don't sleep too well", and warns him to show up for work the morning after Mustafa's death. Secretly tossing the murder weapon in his household bin, he unconditionally accepts that he is an accessory to manslaughter. While throughout the film Dave and Carl are portrayed as "good mates", Dave is always in control, showing the tolerance and care of a father for a son. He loses his temper only once, after Carl begs Dave for a car and some money so he can run off with Sophie. He tells Carl to "Go home. Sort it out in

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10 In the novel Sophie is only seventeen. Transferring this particular relationship to film would probably have been too risky in the light of current censorship laws and the ongoing debate about paedophilia.
the morning. Just go home.” Carl characteristically ignores Dave, mumbling about how much money he would need, and Dave uncharacteristically explodes:

Look you stupid bastard. Make a decision. You’re screwing Sophie’s life up. You’ve killed a guy for Christ’s sake and it will all be for what? I’ve had it with you. I’m jack of you and your mother. Why don’t you bloody well neck her? And fuckin’ do yourself at the same time.

Just as the relationship between Carl, Dave and June (and particularly between Carl and Dave) is ultimately quite different for the film version of *Death in Brunswick*, so is Carl’s relationship with his mother. Again, this has obviously been rewritten for black comedy, and there is no hint of the spiteful nastiness of Carl towards his mother in the novel. Mrs Fitzgerald in the novel is described as “blond and puffy”, a woman who thinks of “herself as a fey, charming Irish gentlewoman” (p.2), whereas Carl is as disgusted by her “fake Irish accent” (p.20) as by her constant smoking, her heavy make up, “flouncy girlish dresses” and high heels, her passion for Mahler, and her “high tuneless keening which put his teeth on edge” (p.59). When she wears black lace to church, Carl decides that his mother is truly “grotesque in the extreme, rather like Toad as the washerwoman” (p.161). In general, his relationship with his mother is portrayed as guilt-ridden, furtive and spiteful. Although he admits that she is “brave”, facing death as she does with her bad heart and a
"sort of grotesquely genteel frivolity" (p.20), he is at the same time furious with her because "she looks good for another twenty years, fuck her" (p.27). He is convinced she has "always tried to make [him] into something [he is] not" (p.62) and bitterly resents her for it. He flinches "with revulsion at the touch of her arm" (p.160), and despises her for trying to make him call himself by his birth name, Charles, telling himself "Shit! I've been Carl for twenty years. She's just like a vampire. She wants to take my... my soul" (p.69). By the end of the novel he experiences "real hatred" towards his mother (p.158) and is determined to murder her. The main reason why he bothers with her at all is because of his inheritance.

In the film, while Mrs Fitzgerald can be slightly overbearing with Carl, often treating him like a child, their relationship is radically different. An archetypal Peter Pan figure, Carl is irritated by, but genuinely loves, his mother, and every action involving these two characters is founded in affection and comedy. Like June, Mrs Fitzgerald in the film is physically nothing at all like her literary counterpart. Played by Yvonne Lawley, she is elderly, very thin, energetic and has a twinkle in her eye (Fig.4.6). She is also far less manipulative than the Mrs Fitzgerald of the novel, only lightheartedly hinting that she might change her will if Carl does not co-operate with her, but then immediately reassuring her son that she will not because, after all, "Charity begins at home." Just as with all the other characters, Carl is meek and boyish towards his mother in the film. From the outset he tries to win her approval, telling her in a childlike manner, "I'm going for a job mother". He later tells
Fig. 4.5 June (Deborah Kennedy) is quite different from her literary model.

Fig. 4.6 Yvonne Lawley plays Mrs Fitzgerald, a significantly different character in the film from her literary ancestor.
her proudly that he “got the job”, apologizes that he cannot come home to cook her dinner and tells her bashfully that he loves her.

Where the church sequence in the novel is mystical and odd, in the film these scenes have also been re-written for comedy. When Carl has a vision of Mustafa sitting beside him and forgives him by smiling and shaking what he believes is Mustafa’s hand, Mrs Fitzgerald kindly and gently tells her son to “let go of the man’s hand dear”. She is obviously pleased by his gesture, and there is no hint of criticism in her voice or manner. In the novel, however, this scene is very different. Carl tries to keep his mind blank, but his murderous “thoughts kept coming and coming”. He sits, “teeth clenched”, sweat trickling “down his back like blood”. He knows that the man grinning beside him is not Mustafa, and that he “wasn’t even very much like him, but it meant something. All this did” (p.166). His mother ignores him, gets “out of the pew with difficulty” and waddles up the aisle. Carl watches and thinks, “How old she has gotten lately — Ah! It would be a ...mercy. After all, she’s very sick. She won’t mind — Mustafa doesn’t mind” (p.167). This is his rationale for wanting to kill her, and it is assumed that he will.

In contrast, in the film, after they have been to church, Mrs Fitzgerald tells her son about his inheritance. Carl illogically accuses her of stealing his money. “I want my money”, he yells, and decides to poison his mother’s tea. His child-like tantrum causes her to have a heart attack and a stroke, which paralyses her from the neck down. As she lies unconscious in the hospital, he childishly pours out the truth about Mustafa, Laurie and Sophie.
This long speech functions as a kind of summary of the film, but is rendered humorously and the sequence ends with a medium close-up of Mrs Fitzgerald, alone and obviously conscious, gurgling and opening her eyes, clearly dumbfounded by what Carl has said. While in the novel she will probably be murdered, in the film she is merely paid back for her nagging interference in Carl’s life by being made mute and consigned to a wheelchair. Carl, armed with an electronic remote control for her wheelchair, is clearly and triumphantly in charge (Fig. 4.7). This is all part of the black comedy, however, since the characters who deserve it receive their final come-uppance. Laurie has his head cut off, Janni loses Sophie, Sophie’s father is paid back for bullying his daughter by having to reimburse Janni for their aborted wedding, and even Carl deservedly gets a punch on the nose. Strangely, only June escapes scot free: her persistent mocking of Carl, her tactless revelation in front of Sophie that Carl is married and her domineering personality are clearly not punishable in the filmmakers’ eyes. This is in contrast to the novelist’s point of view which is generally unsympathetic to June.

The film version of Carl’s relationship with Sophie is also appropriated for the film, transforming it from a bawdy, often vulgar, idiosyncratically erotic affair to a conventional romance. The original Sophie, we are told, has the lack of self-consciousness usually found in young Greek women, [which] coupled with heavy hints dropped by the bouncers, made her definitely available and to Carl, shy with
Fig. 4.7 Carl (Sam Neil) - in control of something at last.
women, availability was the scent of
a bitch in season.\textsuperscript{11}

She has a "very Greek profile...her round, soft face [is]
dominated by a strong hooked nose. \textit{Jesus what a conk!}" Carl
thinks:

It was a bit intimidating really. But
what about that pouter-pigeon chest —
that big shapely bum...He felt predatory —
like that well-known molester of young
Greek girls, Lord Byron. \textsuperscript{12}

Her "big Greek nose", Carl decides, gives her "real authority" and
he is equally attracted by the "bloom of fine dark hair on her
upper lip" (p.76).

John Ruane, the director, says that when he and Boyd Oxlade
wrote the first draft of the script together in 1987, "That draft
reflected strongly the tone of the book — dark, wonderfully
vulgar, and packed with larger than life, but recognisable
characters."\textsuperscript{13} The final draft, along with the finished film,
however, has quite a different "tone" from the first one and from
the source. In the film, a buxom Zoe Carides plays Sophie and,
while she is delightfully flirtatious, she lacks the lasciviousness
of her literary model (Fig.4.8). In the novel, their first sexual
encounter is her "businesslike" masturbation of Carl in the

\textsuperscript{11} Boyd Oxlade, 1987, p.12.
\textsuperscript{12} Boyd Oxlade, 1987, p.76
kitchen well before they have sexual intercourse. While in the film this incident occurs, it is portrayed humorously without a hint of debasement as in the novel. Despite his attraction for Sophie, Carl in the novel is portrayed as being sexually inadequate and mildly perverted. We are told he “made his sexual encounters as short as possible...caught [as he is always] between impending impotence and premature ejaculation” (p.82) and frequently “haunted by memories of sexual fiasco” (p.79). When Sophie takes him to her aunt’s house to seduce him, he is at first reluctant, repelled by her nipples which to him are like “octopus heads”. He thinks, “I’ll have to try — she really wants to” (p.81). What finally excites Carl is the abundance of thick black hair Sophie has over her body. “Curling black tendrils reached toward her navel” and “strong stubble showed where she had shaved her thighs”; he looks “with deep pleasure” at the “thick black hair that sprung between her round buttocks” (p.81). Oxlade goes on to describe their sexual activities in an explicit, mildly bawdy manner. At one point, Carl looks over Sophie’s “olive shoulder” to gaze at a “sad icon”. “Jesus”, he thinks. “Like doing it in church!” (p.83). In the film, we see little of their lovemaking as the camera tilts upwards and pans slowly across the religious icons to the sounds of their moans and delighted squeals. It is a highly conventional, amusing and inoffensive sex scene with none of the vulgarity of the novel.

Equally comic are the scenes at the cinema. In the novel, Carl goes to the movies with Sophie, half-drunk and “totally disorientated”. He sees the screen “awash with meaningless images and the sound track [is] a huge, frightening roar.” He
stares at the film in “total bewiderment” (p.73). Carl’s meeting with Sophie’s cousin Con is also unpleasant. Carl has applied some of his mother’s make-up to try to hide the puffiness under his eyes. When Sophie’s nephew Con asks Sophie what Carl has on his face, Carl thinks “Shit you little cunt” but replies “Ah...I got this rash.” In the film, however, Carl says nothing in reply to Con’s (Daniel Kadamani) question, and we watch him sheepishly and surreptitiously wipe the make-up off as he enters the theatre. This scene at the movies is one of the funniest in the film. Sophie and Carl smile and wink at each other, admire each other’s looks and kiss passionately, much to the disgust of Con but the delight of the other children (Fig.4.9).

In keeping with the conventions of comedy, the film ends happily, with Sophie’s and Carl’s wedding. In contrast, in the novel Sophie, who has been “in trouble” before and was forced by her father to give up her baby, telephones Carl and mournfully tells him, “Carl, I missed my period...and I’m never late...Carl....I told you about Dad and that. If I have to tell him... I got to leave home!” (p.158). Carl abruptly tells her, “OK, Sophie, look...I’ll take care of it! I can’t talk now, I have to take Mother to church.” As he already has a daughter he cares little for and refuses to support, there is no indication that Carl will do much for Sophie other than perhaps help pay for an abortion. In the film, however, while there is a suggestion that Sophie has had an abortion, she does not get pregnant.

In the final scenes of the film, having ignored Sophie’s warning not to visit her father, Carl, along with Sophie and his
Fig. 4.8 Sophie (Zoe Carides) lacks the lasciviousness of her literary prototype.

Fig. 4.9 Sophie's and Karl's relationship in the film has none of the vulgarity of the novel.
now paralysed mother, optimistically visits Mr Papafogos to try to convince him to accept Carl as a son-in-law. The screen goes black as, from Carl’s point of view, we see Mr Papafogos’s (Sakis Dragonas) huge fist coming towards us. A cut to a close-up of a grinning Carl in a neck-brace at his wedding, “a bridal table with the background of Leonardo De [sic] Vinci’s ‘Last Supper’ painted on the wall behind, minus the Disciples”,¹⁴ is the final scene of the film (Fig.4.10). Iconographically framed, this parody of The Last Supper is obviously meant to be amusing, ensuring that the audience leaves the theatre experiencing what one critic referred to as a “joyful celebratory feel for life”.¹⁵

John Ruane claims that when he read the galleys of the novel in 1986 he thought that it “lacked one thing and that was a satisfactory ending. Boyd just decided one day that he’d finish the book after lunch and dig a grave or two in the afternoon.”¹⁶ The novel does indeed suffer from a lack of narrative closure. It is rather awkwardly structured into three separate sections and, while narrative time overlaps, the story is essentially chronological but with a highly ambiguous conclusion, if one could call it a conclusion at all. Accordingly the screenplay has been more conventionally structured by adding a third act which reinforces the narrative, bringing it to a climax and providing a clear and conventional comic resolution. In his review of the film, Peter Lawrence acknowledged the filmmakers’ talents, arguing that:

¹⁴ John Ruane and Boyd Oxlade, Death in Brunswick, original screenplay, 5th Draft, 2nd Revision, (unpublished), Scene 127.
¹⁵ Peter Lawrence, 1991, p.47.
Fig. 4.10 Iconic framing of the wedding supper is used for humour and gives the film the ending its source lacked.
The film moves at a rapid-fire pace which serves to create narrative tension without becoming too undermined by its comic situations, a problem faced by a number of Australian comedies.\footnote{Peter Lawrence, 1991, p.48.}

According to one source, “\textit{Death in Brunswick...[was]} released out of its time. A few years later and it would have creamed the box office”.\footnote{Bill Green, “Despite its History, Screenwriting is in its Infancy”, \textit{Australian Screen Education}, Issue 24, Spring, 2000, p.18.} Nevertheless, it performed very well, grossing almost three million dollars in the year of its release, and was ranked in the top five Australian films in 1991.\footnote{Australian Film Commission, \textit{Get the Picture}, 4\textsuperscript{th} Edition, Sydney, 1996, p.221.} It was nominated for the 1991 AFI Awards in five different categories, including Best Screenplay, Adapted, and won the BASF Australian Video Award in 1992 for “Most Popular Australian Rented Video”\footnote{Australian Feature Films, CD-ROM, RMIT and Australian Catalogue of New Films and Videos, 1996.}

Geoffrey Wagner, in his study of the adaptation of \textit{Death in Venice}, argued that the film succeeded in “complementing its wonderful original, in the manner of some richly visual footnote.”\footnote{Geoffrey Wagner, 1975, p.345.} Arguably, the film \textit{Death in Brunswick} works in a similar fashion, although it could be considered better as a film than its original was as a novel. \textit{Death in Brunswick} is also a significant and valuable contribution to the small batch of texts discussed here which depict Australia as a place of mixed cultures.
Blackfellas (1992)

The adaptation of Archie Weller's novel The Day of the Dog, like the film version of Death in Brunswick, resolves some of the original text's ambivalences and contradictions, but in contrast to Death in Brunswick, the filmmakers of Blackfellas signal their intentions to create a different text by changing the title. The unpublished screenplay written by James Ricketson and Archie Weller, however, as well as miscellaneous production notes and the tie-in, all bear the novel's name, suggesting that the filmmakers were at least toying with the idea of retaining it. It is to their credit that they finally decided to give their film a different title, one which reflects the content and attitudes of the film, as opposed to the novel, thereby not attempting to frame our interpretation by using the source's name.

Before beginning a discussion of this particular adaptation, there are a few minor points that need to be clearly spelled out. First, I am aware of the controversy over whether or not Archie Weller is an Aborigine. Marcia Langton, in her long essay published as "Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...", claims that even the "label 'Aboriginal' has become one of the most disputed terms in the Australian language [reflecting] the uncertainty, confusion and constant search for the appropriate characterisation". She goes on to explain that:

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22 Marcia Langton, Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television..., Australian Film Commission, North Sydney, 1993, p.28.
The Commonwealth definition relies on the High Court opinion. It is more social than racial: an Aboriginal person is defined as a person who is a descendant of an indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identifies as an Aboriginal and is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community in which he or she lives as Aboriginal.”23

Whether or not Archie Weller is an Aboriginal person according to this definition is arguable, since none of his family has claimed Aboriginal ancestry. He insists, however, that, while in “legal terms” he has “nothing” to prove it, he “has a right to identity as Aboriginal” because of his “memories of growing up with Aboriginal kids and sharing police persecution”24 and because he believes that his “paternal great-grandmother was an Aborigine from South Australia”.25 In support of Weller’s claim, his brother argues that:

If you grew up in a West Australian country town and you think you are Aboriginal and people think you are Aboriginal, you bloody well are.26

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23 Ibid. p.29.
26 Penny Van Toorn, 2000, p.42.
For the sake of this study, Weller’s racial identity is of no real importance anyway, and it is easy to agree with James Ricketson who writes:

It is just as nonsensical to assess Archie’s right or capacity to write Aboriginal stories on the basis of the composition of his blood as it would be to assess William Shakespeare’s right or capacity to write Othello on the basis of the composition of his blood.\textsuperscript{27}

One could also add that if Weller has no right to write a novel like The Day of the Dog, Katharine Susannah Prichard had no right to write Coonardoo, nor should Thomas Keneally have written The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith.

There is also the problem of how to refer to Aboriginal people whose ancestry is mixed. As Marcia Langton notes, the various terms adopted by “Anglo-Australian legal and administrative” bodies have always reflected their obsession, even fixation, with Aboriginal people but also the uncertainty, confusion and constant search for the appropriate characterisation: ‘full blood’, ‘half-caste’, ‘quadroon’, ‘octoroon’, ‘such and such an admixture of blood’, ‘a native of Australia’, ‘a native of an admixture of blood not less than half Aboriginal’ and so on.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{27} James Ricketson, Letter to the Editor, Sydney Morning Herald, 29 March 1997, p.16.
\textsuperscript{28} Marcia Langton, 1993, pp.28-29.
In *The Day of the Dog*, Weller himself reveals this uncertainty, adopting what some might call racist terms in his references to various characters as “part-Aboriginal”, “half-castes” and “quarter-castes”. He also uses the term “nyoongah” to include all the Aboriginal people he is writing about. Nyoongah (also spelled nyoongar and nyungar) is “the collective name for the Bibbulmum tribes of south-western Australia”. However, while Doug Dooligan, the novel’s protagonist, comes from this area, Floyd, who is also referred to as a “nyoongah”, comes from the Meekatharra region in the far north of Western Australia and therefore might possibly belong to the Yamadji people. Obviously Weller decided to adopt the term “nyoongah” to refer to Aboriginal people in general in Western Australia and, although this may be inaccurate, in my discussion I have done the same. Where appropriate, I have also used the even more general terms “Aboriginal peoples” or “Indigenous peoples”.

A final point is that as a non-Aboriginal I acknowledge that my reading of *The Day of the Dog* and of the film adaptation may be limited in perspective. The playwright, Jack Davis, for example, reputedly told the director that he thought *Blackfellas* was “a racist film” although he did not explain why he thought so. James Ricketson, the director, speculates that “perhaps he thought it presented a negative image” of Aboriginal

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people. He also claims that there were conflicts during the making of the film

that boiled down to racial issues...John (Moore) had some difficulties dealing with me. Part of the problem was I was white and older and he has difficulties with people in positions of authority.\textsuperscript{31}

He goes on to say that David Ngoombujarra, whose performance as “Pretty Boy” Floyd Davies deservedly won Best Supporting Actor in the 1993 AFI Awards, (Fig.4.11) did not articulate his resentment until we finished the film and he said, “You are a whitefella presuming to tell my story. Why should I trust you.” There were times when it became hostile.\textsuperscript{32}

These views contrast strikingly with Archie Weller’s opinion that the film was a “breakthrough”, although he admits that it is still not strictly speaking an Aboriginal film...the producer...and the director....are necessarily white...[but] it is close enough to be held proud in any Aborigine’s eyes as our film.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{30} Raymond Gill, “Film just ‘a glimpse into Aboriginal life’”, \textit{The Age}, 16 November 1993, p.20.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
Fig. 4.11 David Ngoombujarra's performance as "Pretty Boy" Floyd earned him an AFI Award.
He goes on to point out that, for the most part, "The film was made by our people about our people for our people and that really is the crux of the matter."

I tend to agree with Weller and disagree with Jack Davis about any racism in the film, and as for any "negative" images, overall, the novel gives us a far more "negative" portrayal of "nyoongahs" than does the film.

Rhetorical Form in Blackfellas

In *The Day of the Dog* an intrusive narrator often comments on the action and characters so that we are told what to think rather than being allowed to make up our own minds. While the novel’s primary point of view is Doug Dooligan’s, we are often encouraged to judge him and other characters and events by this, at times, extremely irritating and often ambivalent and contradictory narrator. Early in the novel, for instance, we are told that Polly’s mother is a “sad, drunken wreck of a mother” who, when Polly was only three years old, had given her up to a home where she stayed for two years

before being reclaimed by a grandmother
influenced in part by vague feelings of affection but even more by a desire to claim the child endowment.  

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In case we are under any illusion that this is a unique event, the narrator goes on to tell us that, “Soon she will become a mother herself — and the whole cycle will start again” (p.12).

There are many other examples in the novel where we are told what to think, including several general comments on the “nyoongahs”, some of which seem to reflect a “whitefella” stereotypical attitude towards Indigenous peoples. Weller is rarely content simply to let the story unfold, interrupting at crucial moments to plead or make a point. These interruptions tend to distance us from character and action, encouraging complicity in the judgments made but succeeding only in irritating.

Although the filmmakers have opted to tighten the point of view considerably, revealing the narrative almost exclusively from Doug’s perspective, and have also re-structured the narrative, through the use of rhetorical cinema they have preserved the often didactic tone of the novel. Bordwell defines a rhetorical film as one which “presents a persuasive argument.”

He goes on to say that:

The goal in such a film is to make the audience hold an opinion about the subject matter and perhaps to act upon that opinion. This type of

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film...tries to convince the viewer of something of practical consequence.\textsuperscript{37}

While Bordwell is referring to non-narrative cinema, this type of film can easily be narrative in form, and *Blackfellas* is a good example. Roughly conforming to the genre conventions of a "social problem" film, *Blackfellas* sets up an argument in the pre-credit sequence, one which bears only a passing resemblance to the main themes of its literary source, thereby appropriating and arguably criticising Weller's preoccupations in the novel. In the novel the main ideas explored are that community and loyalty to the group are ultimately what really count, and that the essential problems Nyoongahs face are poverty, an overly-enthusiastic participation in gang warfare and crime and over-indulgence in alcohol, all of which bring them into frequent and hostile confrontations with the law. The problems with the law seem to be only vaguely related to dispossession of land, racism, or victimization by the police.

In the film, however, we are introduced immediately to the thesis that dispossession is the primary and fundamental problem for the Nyoongahs. Shortly after the pre-credit sequence we are given clues as to how this problem might be solved: each individual needs to embark on a quest to reclaim the land of their "Dreaming". From the opening images of the pre-credit sequence until the end of the film, the idea that an individual has the right and ability to choose his or her way of life is hammered home. The film's main narrative is constructed around Doug's battle to

\textsuperscript{37} ibid.
deny the pull of his “people” and regain Yeeticup, a property almost entirely invented for the film. “Doug wants to get back his land where he grew up”, James Ricketson explains.

To do that he has to take on a job like a whitefella. He doesn’t want to leave his people but feels he has to realise his goal...That’s the compromise he has to make. And in the end he gets his bit of land back where he has a spiritual connection, and he ends up with the girl he loves.38

Part of the film’s argument is the somewhat preposterous suggestion that if Aboriginal peoples wish to regain their land, they should buy it back, and, what’s more, they should do something useful with it. The filmmakers require Doug not only to buy back Yeeticup, but to restore the horse stud business his father lost during a drought. The film also proposes that Doug “can live a life nourished by indigenous traditions, while succeeding within the context of the dominant Anglo culture and economic system.”39

Another important aspect of this argument in the film is the suggestion that what has happened to the Indigenous peoples of Australia is not unique. This view is presented during the pre-credit sequence which opens with an establishing shot of a dry

and almost barren stretch of dusty red-brown land. Accompanied by music and a mix of sound effects suggesting insects, bird calls and sighs, all implying great age, isolation and distance, the camera slowly pans upwards and we watch as a naked Aboriginal elder (Louie Mulladan), who we later discover is Doug’s great-grandfather, grinds stone to make white powder which he mixes in his mouth and spits over his hand to create a rock drawing. There is a direct cut to a shot of a tractor, moving from left to right into the frame, suggesting that many years have passed, times have changed, and the colonials are making good use of what was once barren and useless land. The filmmakers, however, are clearly arguing that this occurrence is not unique to Australia, for in the next brief scene we watch as young Doug, dressed as a “Red Indian” and Floyd, dressed as a “cowboy”, play at killing each other (Figs.4.12 and 4.13). The claim is that invasion, dispossession, killing and the destruction of a whole way of life are common events and have occurred in many countries, including Australia and the United States.

These early scenes establish very quickly the main theme of the film. Land rights for Indigenous peoples is then reinforced through visual and aural clues. There is, for example, a slow and self-conscious pan at the end of the pre-credit sequence during which the Aboriginal flag, hoisted high and waving strong on a flagpole, finally fills the entire frame. Minor characters wear t-shirts and hats bearing the Aboriginal flag or colours, and the Warumpi Band’s song “My Island Home” plays at Ziggy’s night spot and is referred to later. There is also a key scene in which we are given a panoramic long shot of Doug (John Moore) as he stands
The opening images suggest dispossession occurs universally.
on a hilltop near Yeeticup, outlining for Polly (Jaylene Riley) with
a sweep of his arm his Dreaming Track. His gesture is
reminiscent of paintings, statues and early photographs of white
colonials surveying, with smug satisfaction, the land they have
acquired (Fig.4.14). This scene asks us to contemplate the
problems of dispossession and re-possession, but the
complexities of the issues are ultimately not seriously tackled or
dramatically developed. The scene ends with a joke, undermining
its overall significance. When Doug shyly but excitedly explains
to Polly that Yeeticup means Dancing Place and that it was once a
place where his “people” and other “mobs” came to “meet and
trade”, he suggests that perhaps Polly’s people came too. Polly,
who believes that the “bush” is not “fit for peoples”, quips that
her Dreaming Track “runs past Ziggy’s night spot and turns left at
the pub”. Disappointed, Doug does not laugh. Polly then tells him,
“You know...Floyd’s right. You’ve lost your sense of humour.”
Doug’s mood lightens instantly and he replies, “Yeah, well when
you see it, give it back”. They grin, and the scene ends.

Doug’s quest to regain Yeeticup is based upon only a few
brief references in the novel to the way Doug feels about his
childhood and the bush:

his old world, where he used to sit under
a dripping tree and watch the wonders of
Nature through a misty, fairy haze. Then
there was just Doug Dooligan and his land
and every tree and bush and flower belonged
to him as well as the secret things, like
Fig. 4.14 Doug's dreaming revealed in a gesture reminiscent of white colonialism.
kangaroo nests in the reeds on the salt flat,  
the birds' nests in trees and the wild bees'  
nests full of sweet honey.\textsuperscript{40}

When he is forced at twelve to move with his mother to East  
Perth, he realizes

he missed the swaying trees and  
the choirs of birds...the sheep...the cattle.  
Most of all he missed the cool brown pool  
where, it was said, the ancient tribes had  
come for initiation ceremonies.\textsuperscript{41}

But there is no suggestion in the novel that Doug hopes, or  
even wants, to regain the farm abandoned by Carey, his father,  
who, one day simply “gave up”, partly because his oldest son and  
heir, Tommy, was killed in Vietnam, but also partly because of  
age, a drought and his looming alcoholism. At one point Doug half-  
heartedly claims that he “wouldn't mind buyin’ a piece of land one  
day. All of me own. Like before” (pp.28-29), but he has no real  
tention of doing so, nor does he view the land as sacred. Near  
the end of the novel Doug, along with his “brothers” Floyd Davey  
and the non-Aboriginal youth Silver, “go out shooting the elusive  
kangaroos”. The young men gather around the dying animals’  
“twitching” bodies, cruelly watching the “anguished brown eyes  
that plead for the mercy they will never be given” (pp.152).  
Shortly afterwards, the narrator asks:

\textsuperscript{40} Archie Weller, 1981, pp.81-82.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. p.27.
Is this the way to repay your earth mother: your whole being? A part of your heart lies bloody upon the ground...[but the] dancing, yelping Floyd and grinning Doug don’t hear the earth groan and sigh in the blackness, as they cut off the tails and skin the warm quivering forms, then throw the unrecognisable carcasses into the back of the ute for the grunting pigs and slavering dogs to feed upon.\footnote{Ibid. p.152-153.}

There is no sense in the novel that any of these young men ultimately care one jot for the land; what’s more, neither is there the suggestion that this land is particularly special to the Nyoongahs. Tom Dooligan, Doug’s blue-eyed, auburn-haired Irish grandfather is portrayed as having equal love for, and claim to, the land, as have the other non-Aboriginal farmers in the district. These sentiments are generally transferred to the film. As one critic noted, at the heart of this film is the “comforting message for mainstream white audiences” that there is no need “for non-indigenous people to take any responsibility for the current situation of indigenous people, or to take any action at all.”\footnote{Philip Butterss, 2000, p.211.}

The historical complexities and vicissitudes of the Dooligan family are glossed over in the film, in contrast to the novel which clearly documents Doug’s family history. Tom Dooligan, his Irish grandfather, marries Mary, who is described as a “half-caste”.

\footnote{Ibid. p.152-153.}
They have a daughter called Deirdre and three boys, one of whom is Carey, Doug’s father. Carey in turn marries a non-Aboriginal woman, Edith Menzies, and they have a daughter, Jemima, and two boys, Tom and Doug. Doug, we are told, never accepts his mixed heritage. He feels he is “not black enough to become a real part of the secret shy world” of Floyd and the other Nyoongahs, yet “neither is he white enough to become a part of the busy scurrying race that rushes along like a perpetual mice plague, getting into everything and leaving behind a stale smell.”

In contrast, the film, in its determined focus on Native Title, almost entirely eliminates Doug’s migrant background, giving him an Indigenous great-grandfather who is buried at Yeeticup (Fig.4.15) and a “Nanna” (clearly Aboriginal) who wants to be buried there after she dies. Carey, Doug’s Aboriginal father, as in the novel, is married to non-Aboriginal Edith (unconvincingly played by Jack Charles and Julie Hudspeth respectively; it is very difficult to believe in their relationship). Doug’s Indigenous background and Nanna’s and Carey’s insistence that he reclaim Yeeticup, despite his mother’s objections, are the driving forces behind his quest. Doug tells Polly that Carey was once required to “buy back the land” for his own mother then lost it again, thus reinforcing the puzzling argument that if Aboriginal peoples want to reclaim their land they must accept that they have to “buy it back”. It is Nanna (Judith Margaret Wilkes), rather than Carey, who ultimately convinces Doug that he should try to repossess Yeeticup, although she does it in a rather contradictory way, claiming at first that it is important because Indigenous

44 Ibid. p.59.
Fig. 4.15 Doug's great-grandfather was invented for the film.
people are best placed to “look after this country”, then undermining her own argument. In a scene where Nanna and Doug stroll around Yeeticup, she tells him:

Your great-grandad was the only man of our mob left who'd been through the lore — been initiated. It got to your dad that he'd never been through the lore and so wasn’t a proper man. He was full of shame for that whitefella blood in his veins. Even though he worked with whitefellas, made his living with the whitefellas, but he still never knew the proper ceremonies to look after this land and it fair tore him up inside.

When Doug protests that he has even “more whitefella blood in him” than his father does, yet still feels as if he “belongs” to this land, his Nanna immediately decides:

It’s not what’s in your blood that counts, it’s what’s in your heart. If you feel something you feel it. There’s no getting away from it. Home is where the heart is, unna?

In a similar way to Polly’s joke, Nanna’s words, rather than reinforcing and strengthening the land rights theme of the film, unfortunately tend to muddy the argument for the audience, for if the re-possession of land for Indigenous people is based only upon what “you feel” in “your heart”, then they have no stronger bond
or claim to land than any other person, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, who also loves the land.

It could also be argued that in the film Doug’s quest lacks dramatic interest. His only real obstacle to reclaiming Yeeticup seems to be money (Fig.4.16). He easily overcomes this problem, first by getting a job with the son of an old neighbour, Tony Foley (Bruce Paterson), and secondly by taking money from Floyd. Floyd in the film (a character reminiscent of the giggling happy-go-lucky Mort in Keneally’s *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*) is portrayed as having the choice of going straight and playing competition football or continuing to drink, have fun, and steal and deal in stolen goods. At one point, with Doug’s help, having decided to play competition football after all, he earns a bonus of $500. He generously gives this to Doug to go towards the downpayment on Yeeticup (even though Doug has earlier refused to lend Floyd $500). Two other minor obstacles, those of repairing the homestead and establishing a horse stud, are also easily overcome. We watch a cheerful Floyd help Doug patch up Yeeticup (Fig.4.17) and Tony Foley obligingly lends Doug his stallion “Serenity Bill” to mate with his old mare. These seem to be fairly simplistic solutions to a very complicated historical subject which is justifiably the main focus of the film but is ultimately glossed over for the sake of narrative closure.

In their interrogation of the novel, the filmmakers decided to set up a contrast between Floyd and Doug, and ended by showing us that Doug’s choices were the right ones. In the novel, however, Doug’s journey is similar to that of Floyd and all the
Fig. 4.16 Yeeticup was invented for the film to give Doug (John Moore) a goal.

Fig. 4.17 Floyd (David Ngoombujarra) helps Doug restore Yeeticup - a goal too easily won?
rest of his “gang” — they are “going nowhere” and headed for
death. The dilemma of being street kids, some of whom, like
Polly, are on the run from the law, is only peripheral to the film,
whereas it is one of the main emphases in the novel. Occasionally
in the film version we see some of the general problems caused
by society’s marginalisation of the Nyoongahs. Polly is an expert
and unrepentant shoplifter, both Floyd and Doug know how to steal
cars quickly and efficiently, Floyd deals in stolen goods, and
Carey, an alcoholic, is in and out of jail. But it is established
quickly in the film, and reinforced throughout by the repetition of
the saying “You’re your own boss”, that these are problems which,
with some willpower, can be readily overcome. This is where the
film becomes particularly subversive of its source.

In the novel the philosophical concepts of freedom, choice
and destiny are raised at the outset, giving the book both an
existential thrust and a sense of looming tragedy. Towards the
beginning, the narrator asks rhetorically of Polly and Doug: “Are
they free?” The question is indented and isolated from the rest
of the text, highlighting its importance. The narrator, in the next
paragraph, replies, “No. He and she are trapped in a lifestyle they
can never escape. Might as well make the most of each other
while they are together” (p.16). There are throughout the novel
various references to choice and freedom, primarily from Doug’s
often confused viewpoint. In the first few pages Doug,
celebrating his release from jail, crows to his friends that he is
“free, man, free as a fuckin’ bird” (p.3). It is interesting that
this is the last line of the film, and it is Floyd, not Doug, who
says it, something I shall discuss shortly. Towards the end of the
novel, Floyd gloomily tells Doug that they will go ahead with the armed robbery because “Ya gotta do what ya gotta do in this life” (p.156), an attitude which sums up the novel’s tragic tone.

As in several of the other texts discussed here, there is a pervasive sense of entrapment and inevitability hovering over the characters in the novel, and we are convinced quite early that, if Doug and his friends keep making the same mistakes, they will be dead by its end. They aimlessly wander the streets of Perth, constantly looking for trouble. They steal, fight, drink, some rape, some want to be “a guerrilla and go to war”, others dream of shooting the detectives, “the Boys from Brazil: phut, phut. Right in the fuckin’ head” (p.45). The narrator, though, makes sure that we know that what they say is “Just talk, like leaves blowing in the wind” (p.45), and that what they actually do is what they choose to do. They are, after all, we are told, “men”; “no-one owns them. They are their own bosses” (p.44).

On the night Doug takes Valerie and Polly to the movies and they all end up in a fight with the drunken Jenny Compton (Doug’s ex-girlfriend) and her “mates”, Doug runs away with Tiny, only to be bailed up and beaten by the Boys from Brazil. As he is being threatened by “the quiet man”, the detective he fears most, Doug thinks:

What a bloody night this has turned out to be. He could be home in front of the heater watching TV, and yet here he is about to get a hiding, just like his cousin who is being
dragged off into the darkest corner.\textsuperscript{45}

Weller begins a new paragraph containing only one sentence in which the narrator tells us quite clearly that “It is his own choice, though.” In the novel Doug Dooligan makes all the wrong choices: from the first page to the last he chooses to do what he knows he should not do, but refuses to accept responsibility for his actions, preferring to indulge in self-pity and blame.

The filmmakers, however, chose to put a very different slant on Doug’s character, portraying him as relatively mature and reflective and, in contrast to Floyd, willing to behave responsibly. James Ricketson, the co-writer and director of \textit{Blackfellas}, complained that in interviews he did with the press for the release of the film:

\begin{quote}
no one...directly asked him: ‘What are you trying to say in this film?’ So I’ll ask and answer the question...in the film a phrase keeps cropping up, ‘You are your own boss.’ Various characters say it to each other. They’re saying that regardless of the circumstances of your life, ultimately you have to take responsibility for it.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

He goes on to point out, not completely accurately, that he “imposed” this “viewpoint” on the film adaptation. As previously discussed, Archie Weller himself was careful to stress in his

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid.} p.85.
\textsuperscript{46} Raymond Gill, 1993, p.20.
novel that his characters make their own choices and what they do is their “fault”.

As discussed earlier, the thrust of the novel is essentially tragic. Its protagonist, the mournful Doug Dooligan, is never able to overcome his despair or feelings of loneliness and hopelessness. He is described as “thin, forlorn and shabby” (p.7), and eighteen months in “prison have given him shifty, downcast eyes, a sullen mouth, and hunched shoulders...he looks like a vulture on a tree watching dinner crawl by.”47

Just as in *Death in Brunswick*, however, the characterization of the protagonist in the film version of *The Day of the Dog* is very different from the source. In contrast to the novel’s Doug, John Moore, who plays Doug in the film, is tall, of relatively solid build, and handsome, looking nothing at all like his literary antecedent. There seems to be a reluctance in the film industry to cast physically unattractive people, particularly as heroes, even though the characters they play might be fascinating.

Doug is also portrayed in the novel as being a violent young man who has a tendency to use weapons and “fight dirty”. Shortly before going to prison he, along with Floyd and Silver had “gone on a breaking and entering spree” (p.33). They spent the stolen money at the Perth Easter Show during which Doug’s then-girlfriend, Jenny Compton, is attacked by “white skinheads”. In his pocket Doug carries his grandfather’s “cut-throat razor”

which he often fondles "lovingly" (p.34). Even the skinheads are "stunned" at Doug's uncontrolled violence when he draws the razor and strikes again and again. When he is finally disarmed, terrified, he looks down and sees a "fat squirming boy on the ground before him, howling hideously". He immediately begins to kick him, his boots beating

out a tattoo of victory upon the pale body.
At every thud and gasp he became more of a man.
He would kill this person who had dared to laugh at him and his girl...Then he would be remembered for evermore.⁴⁸

While in prison Doug is put in "solitary" for "smashing up the cell he was in" (p.30). Much later, after he sees "Silver poised over Polly's naked body", his "whole thin body" shakes with "repressed violence". He leaps at Silver, seizes a knife and, his eyes gleaming "cruelly", snarls, "try me now, Silver, ya ugly fucker. Come on and let me rip ya guts out, ya big brave cunt (p.50).

Doug's violence in the novel is bound up with his desire to be remembered as a "big man". As he walks the windy, cold streets of East Perth with Polly and Valerie, he fantasizes about being "like a great chieftain walking through his concrete jungle, instead of a useless part-Aboriginal" (p.80). By the end of the novel he has sullenly rejected his sister's and her husband Jamie's attempts to rescue him and get him to work on their

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⁴⁸ ibid. p.35.
farm. During an argument, in a moment of uncontrolled fury, Doug pulls a knife on Jamie. He later admits that

if the giant [Jamie] had come any closer
he would have stabbed him. Once blood
is sighted, he thinks, he will keep on
drawing blood like a killer dog, until
the howling hunters ride him down. 49

When he is caught shortly afterwards for stealing Jamie’s car,
“quick as a rat”, he again grabs a knife and tries to stab him.

Shortly before the armed robbery, Doug recalls the time he
had burnt off a swamp. As he watches the flames, he decides that
the light he has caused is “far greater than the moon” and he feels

like someone...it was wonderful to cause such a
frightenly beautiful sight as an entire swamp
burning and dying...The fire was a magnificent,
living thing that emphasised his loneliness
and his power. 50

The night of the robbery will be, Doug believes, “also his
night. Today will be his day, too; doesn’t every dog have it’s [sic]
day?” (p.157). During the robbery Doug “shouts in his best TV
drama voice” that “this is a hold-up”, feeling “powerful...a

49 Ibid. p.137.
50 Ibid. p.157.
veritable lord...Everyone will remember this day with awe and wonder, and he is a part of it” (p.159). When Doug shoots the shopkeeper’s wife and a policeman, even the criminal Shagger is horrified at Doug’s violence, screaming to Silver, “Grab the mad bastard! What did he go berserk for? He’s fucked up the whole lot” (p.169). When they are chased by the police, Doug decides that he is “the leader now...It is his scrawny brown hands that control the delicate black wheel...This is Doug's moment” (pp.164-5). Smiling, he swerves to pass a sheep truck and hits another car head on. The last things Doug hears are, we are told, “Shagger’s screaming” and the “tortured shriek of metal on metal” as flames “as high as those on the night that he murdered the swamp” rise up, as “red as the blood of the dead killed on this fateful day” (p.165).

Doug’s brutality in the film version of this novel, however, is rarely shown, and even then is portrayed unconvincingly. The fight with Danny Forsyth that landed Doug in jail is only briefly referred to in the film, there is no fight at the Easter Show with skinheads, neither are there arguments or violent altercations with Jamie, who does not even exist in the film. There is no hint that Doug fantasizes about being a “big man” through violence; Doug is not part of an armed hold-up, and his past does not involve constant fighting, although it does involve stealing and drinking. In fact, we see Doug behave violently only twice. The first time is when he draws a knife on, but does not touch, Silver (Attila Ozsdolay) after Silver calls him a “poofter” for not objecting to his (Silver’s) attempted seduction of Polly. The filmmakers are careful not to make this a moment of intensity,
thereby undermining the suggestion that Doug is violent by nature. In this scene, Doug is seen in a medium shot grabbing a knife. There is a direct cut to a group shot in which he half-heartedly threatens Silver who is being held back by Tiny (Trevor Parfitt). It is obvious Doug has no real intention of stabbing Silver; he hesitantly twists the knife in his hand and makes no attempt to attack. The second time we see violence in Doug again involves Silver, whom he knocks down for trying to stop him from getting Floyd out of bed to go to football training. In each case Doug is merely defending himself while trying to avoid confrontation. He does not really care about Polly “getting fired up” with Silver, later telling her, “I don’t own you, Polly. You’re your own boss, unna?” He then admits he is ashamed of pulling a knife, telling her that he could have “killed Silver”. The line is delivered with such self-admonition that it is completely unconvincing. This character, we are sure, would never stab anybody.

The only other time in the film we are asked to believe that Doug could be violent is when Floyd tricks him into going to the Bull Pen where they are all threatened by members of a non-Aboriginal gang. Doug is shown in the background arming himself with a lead pipe. He looks down at it, tosses it away and tells Floyd: “You want to fight? Fight your own battles”, and walks off. This scene ends on a somewhat comic note when the police arrive and all the young men scatter, some clambering up the tall wire fence and hurling themselves over into the darkness, all to the sound of a lively, boisterous tune. There is no simmering rage, self-pity, sullenness or repressed anger in the film’s Doug (these feelings are clearly reserved for Floyd) although there are
two close-up shots of Doug which suggest his anger and disgust with the law. The first is during the pre-credit sequence where he sneers at a prison warden during the line up; the second is where Doug tries to avoid co-operating with the bullying Detective Sergeant Maxwell (cleverly performed by John Hargreaves) by staring unblinkingly at a point beyond the detective’s shoulder and ignoring his questions and threats.

In the novel it is Detective-Sergeant Conway and Detective Stevens who interrogate Doug. As Floyd “whoops and shouts on his way to Meekatharra”, Doug recalls the times he has been beaten up by police and

all the damage they could do....So he tells the truth...and feels almost like crying. He is such a coward. But no, not really. He is a...sensitive, lost person who just wants to live in peace. But at the cost of his friends? 51

Floyd, however, believes that Doug betrays him because he cannot “take a 'idin like a man” (p.123). This is in contrast to the film which portrays him as gallantly delivering up Floyd for Polly’s freedom. In a very similar fashion to the approach the adaptors took with Carl Fitzgerald in Death in Brunswick, in Blackfellas the anxious, “snivelling”, self-pitying and frequently malicious Doug of the novel becomes an amiable, kind (although ungenerous) and at times foolish, young man who, we are sure, will overcome all the obstacles and achieve his purpose. The

51 Ibid. p. 103.
filmmakers' characterization of Doug subverts the literary model, suggesting they believe that all young Nyoongahs like Doug can indeed become their "own boss". All they need to do is eschew violence, stop drinking and stealing, get a job, buy (back) some land and set up a business. Most important of all, they must have the courage to reject their own "people" whose way of life leads to "nothing but trouble".

The film throughout radically alters the novel's representations of Doug's relationship with his "people". In the film we are asked to believe that Doug must compromise and reject in order to achieve his goal. In the novel, however, if there is one consolation in the miserable landscape of his life it is Doug's happiness and sense of comfort when he is with his "people", particularly when they are all drinking beer. Doug believes "You only live once...You might as well live with your friends" (p.94). Only his non-Aboriginal mother objects to his frequent contact with his "cousins". On his arrival home she tells him that when he was in jail

the Greyboys used to come around here all the time with their problems...I got Tiny out of trouble God knows how many times and paid all of Lennard's fines and bailed Jason out...and looked after Hughie's girl...Oh! it just goes on and on and never stops!

How do you think my friends feel when a sniffling little half-caste girl creeps in here asking for money
or help for her man? When the police are coming around here every second day?\textsuperscript{52}

Doug, for the most part, ignores his mother's objections: unlike the film's Doug, he is distant and aloof with Edith, although we are told they are "friends".

In the film, however, Doug, for the most part, heeds his mother and frequently tries to break away from his "people". In particular, his relationship with Floyd is portrayed in the film as his main problem (Fig.4.18). Floyd, who at one point jokes that he is "always worried about [Doug] turning white on him", is the one who has led Doug into the fight with Danny Forsyth which resulted in Doug's jailing, and the one who encourages Doug to get drunk. In a revealing scene in a medium close-up we see Floyd deliberately swap Doug's shandy for a beer which Doug reluctantly drinks (Fig.4.19). By the end of the night Doug is drunk, kicking tins and shouting about his freedom, before joining Floyd and the rest of the group in a ride in a stolen car.

In the film, Edith's view that Doug must learn to reject his "people" is upheld. In the end, the film argues, the only way Doug will be able to become "his own boss" and reclaim Yeeticup is to deny Floyd and the rest of his "people". At one point, he angrily repeats what his mother has claimed: that he "wouldn't have been in jail in the first place if it wasn't for you [Floyd]." Later he tells him, "I've been awake all night thinkin', Pretty Boy. And you know what? Every time I've been in trouble I've been with

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. p.31.
Fig. 4.18 Unlike the novel's protagonist, the film's Doug tries to break away from his "people" and his old way of life.

Fig. 4.19 In the film "Pretty Boy" encourages Doug to get drunk, swapping his shandy for a beer.
you mob." Floyd interrupts, pleading with Doug, "But we're your people". Doug insists that he must make the break, telling Floyd, "If I don't get away I'll wind up in shit again." Floyd again pleads with Doug, reminding him that they are "brothers, unna?" Shortly after, in an idyllic re-birthing and renewal scene to the tune of pan flutes, we watch Doug at Yeeticup lead his horse into the river. They swim languidly together but, as they slowly mount the bank, into the frame come Tiny, Willice (Kelton Pell) and others, his "people" who just will not let him alone (Fig.4.20). Despite the film making it clear that he must, Doug is not yet able to break away from his "people", continuing to see Floyd, Tiny and Willice. He even hauls Floyd out of bed and forces him to go to football training, as well as going to his aid when, after having been fired by the referee from competition football for fighting on the field (Floyd’s look of sullen fury after he is sent off is one of the most powerful moments in the film), Floyd and Silver rob the football club. Floyd’s sacrifice at the end of the film only partly suggests that this is the resolution to Doug’s problems with his "people". After all, it seems as if he will marry Polly Yarrup, who is a Nyoongah, and it is hard to believe Tiny and Willice will leave him alone.

Director and co-scriptwriter James Ricketson claimed that although "Doug doesn't want to leave his people [he] feels he has to realise his goals", and that while this is an "individualist viewpoint" it is not really "at odds with Aboriginal culture, where family and communal links are much stronger than in white society." As was earlier pointed out, James Ricketson also

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Fig. 4.20 Doug's attempt at resurrection backfires.
argued that it is only by rejecting his “people” that Doug will get his land back and “end up with the girl he loves”. His original script’s final scene has Doug and Polly beside Floyd’s grave at Yeeticup in a “golden afternoon; an idyllic scene of grazing horses, the sounds of insects and galahs”. The script then suggests music and Doug tells Polly, “I come out to see ya at Nyandi.” Polly and Doug join hands, their “two hands making one fist” as the “end credits being to roll”\textsuperscript{54}. This “happy ever after” ending was, fortunately, omitted in the finished film. Although it is reminiscent of the opening shots in the pre-credit sequence and may have provided a sense of visual and aural continuity, overall the film would have been weakened by such a sentimental ending.

As in many of the adaptations discussed here, “mateship” is a major theme in \textit{Blackfellas}. While Floyd and Doug are good “mates” in the novel, their friendship is strengthened in the film version and explored visually in a very effective way. Floyd and Doug have two rituals, neither of which occurs in the novel but works very effectively in the visual medium of cinema. One is the locking of hands and a pledge that they will be “brothers for ever and ever”\textsuperscript{55} which is often shown in close-ups. The second is their childhood game of pretending to draw guns on each other, usually shown in a long, wide two-shot. Doug, to Floyd’s delight, always wins. In the final scenes of the film, these two rituals are performed one after the other, and it is Floyd’s re-enactment


\textsuperscript{55} In the novel, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youths in Doug’s gang pledge they will be “brothers for ever and ever” but this saying is not accompanied by any ritual.
of their childhood game that saves Doug and Polly, giving Floyd's death more poignancy than it otherwise might have had (Fig.4.21). The final shot is an extreme close-up of a bleeding Floyd who, having sacrificed his life for his "brother", sighs the final line: "Free, free as a fuckin' bird" (Fig.4.22). It is not made clear whether Floyd believes he is at last free from his troubles or whether he is freeing Doug from their, at times manipulative, relationship.

One reviewer of *Blackfellas* wrote that "although the film is marred by choppy editing at times, it is distinguished by its genuine black consciousness." While this "choppy editing" does create a slightly irregular rhythm to the film, and there are perhaps too few strong establishing shots so that at times we are not quite sure exactly where we are, it could be argued that the filmmakers achieve a kind of rhythm, not primarily through editing, but through an interesting technique of camera movement and composition. With rare exception, when the action in the frame is moving from left to right, there is, or soon will be, dramatic conflict. In the pre-credit sequence, for instance, the harvester comes into the frame from the left moving right and we sense the destruction of an Indigenous way of life is under way. Silver usually enters the frame moving from left to right when he is trying to sell stolen goods or make a deal with Floyd; police cars enter from the left and move right when they are suspicious of the Nyoongahs, and police enter rooms from the left when looking for suspects. Doug moves in from the left towards Floyd

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Fig. 4.21 The brotherhood ritual invented for the film which saves Doug's life.

Fig. 4.22 Floyd's sacrifice makes him the real hero of the film.
while trying to convince Pretty Boy to come with him to the bush (to which Floyd replies, “I don’t know what you see in that place, bro’. It’s just a bunch of fucken’ rocks”). Tiny and his friends silently and deliberately move in from the left towards Doug as he climbs up onto the river bank with his horse, and we sense that Doug will soon be in trouble. Many other instances of this technique help set up or reinforce dramatic clashes. On the other hand, when the scene is light-hearted, the actors mostly move from right to left. Polly moves from the right into the frame shortly after meeting Doug, telling him she would like to have a baby because there would always be “someone to love you for ever and ever, ay.” When Doug gets a lift on a truck to Yeeticup, the action moves from right to left, and several slow pans across the countryside and the homestead, with and without people, ask us to follow the camera as it moves from right to left. This cinematic technique has a steadying effect on the audience who might otherwise be confused by the speed, “choppiness”, and energy of what is, for the most part, a bold and provocative adaptation.

While *Blackfellas* was released shortly after the Mabo legislation and during the Year of Indigenous Peoples, David Stratton rightly lamented that it was “under-promoted and only booked into non-mainstream cinemas”.\(^57\) Neil Jillett, in his review in the *Age*, called *Blackfellas* “the best Australian film of the year”\(^58\) but, as he pointed out, it did not receive even a nomination for Best Film in the AFI awards because “it is merely

\(^{57}\) David Stratton, “James’s Dog has its day”, *Weekend Australian*, 28 August 1993, p. 11.

about Aborigines” and, according to many in the industry, films about Aborigines do not “do good business”, a sentiment also shared by the makers of *Dead Heart* (see Chapter Five). *Blackfellas* may not have made millions at the box office, but it deservedly won the Australian Human Rights award for Best Feature Film in 1993. James Ricketson won an award for Best Adapted Screenplay from the Film Critics’ Circle of Australia, and an AFI Award for Best Screenplay, Adapted, in the same year.

Appropriations are probably the best example of French screenwriter Jean Claude Carrièré’s dictum: put the book away and make a film. While one can argue about whether or not they are good films, appropriations, like intersections (discussed in the following chapter), at least start from the point of privileging cinema over literature. In faithful adaptations and variations we are always aware that some other text lurks behind the film, that something else is going on behind what we see and hear on the screen. There may be scenes which “play” like theatre, characters who seem to be too bound up with their literary models, dialogue which sounds artificial and too literary, or that some of the film’s settings function like theatrical backdrops. Whatever, something seems to interfere with, or, at least, interrupts, the cinematic experience. In contrast, in adaptations which appropriate an original text, we enter the world of the film as a world complete in itself, without self-conscious references to the literary world from which the film derives. This is a similar kind of experience to the one we have when we view what I have referred to as “intersections”.

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"Which should be uppermost in a filmmaker's mind: the integrity of the original work, or the integrity of the film based on that work?" asks Morris Béja.¹ He goes on to argue that:

Of course what a film takes from a book matters; but so does what it brings to a book. When it brings dedication and talent (or, if we are truly fortunate, genius), the result can be what André Bazin calls 'the novel so to speak multiplied by the cinema.' The resulting film is then not a betrayal and not a copy, not an illustration and not a departure. It is a work of art that relates to the book from which it derives yet is also independent, an artistic achievement that is in some mysterious way the 'same' as the book but also something other: perhaps something less but perhaps something more as well.²

When applying Béja's argument, it becomes obvious that faithful adaptations are essentially illustrated copies or literal renditions of a novel or play translated for the screen, whereas variations and appropriations are clearly "departures" from their sources. This is not to say that the filmmakers of these kinds of adaptations do not bring to their films "dedication and talent", but their purposes are different, and these films are not, and are not meant to be, the same text.

² Ibid. p.88.
"multiplied by the cinema". I would argue that the most successful and cinematically engaging adaptations are not variations or appropriations, nor are they faithful to the source, but those whose main aim is to coincide, or intersect, with the original. The main difference between intersections and the three other kinds of adaptations discussed in this study is that, in the former, the filmmakers' attention is focused on preserving both the integrity of the source and of the cinematic text, and they are made with a cinematic eye. The film version, therefore, becomes, as Béja has argued, an "independent...achievement that is in some mysterious way the 'same' as the book but also something other." Dudley Andrew, whose term "intersection" I use in this study, believes that this type of adaptation has the "specificity of the original within the specificity of the cinema. An original is allowed its life, its own life, in the cinema."³

As Brian McFarlane argues, the adaptation "proper" is a correspondence between the literary and the cinematic because it seeks with one concretized response to a written work, to coincide with a great multiplicity of responses to the original. Its aim is to offer a perceptual experience that corresponds with the one arrived at conceptually.⁴

In his discussion of Jean Cocteau's approach to filmmaking, André Bazin claims that

instead of trying like so many others to dissolve [his source] in cinema, on the contrary, he uses the resources of the camera to point up, to underline, to confirm the structure [of his source] and [its] psychological corollaries. The specific help given here by the cinema can only be described as an added measure.”

He goes on to point out that, in contrast to theatre,

Drama on the screen can exist without actors. A banging door, a leaf in the wind, waves beating on the shore can heighten the dramatic effect...in the theatre the drama proceeds from the actor, in the cinema it goes from the décor to man...Drama [in film] is freed by the camera from all contingencies of time and space...it is a denial of any frontiers to action.”

Recognizing the camera’s ability to “underline” and “confirm the structure” and the “psychological corollaries” of a source, as well as to reveal that “drama on the screen” can exist without actors and is free from “all contingencies of time and space”, is fundamental to the process of visualizing for the screen a written text. In a film adaptation which seeks to intersect with its source, the filmmakers are

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6 Ibid. pp.102-103.
always aiming, as Stanley Kubrick explains, “to invent external action which will be [what T.S. Eliot referred to as] an ‘objective correlative’ of the...psychological content.” Filmmakers who create intersections appear to be particularly mindful of the various aesthetic possibilities involved in trying to match the texts so that the integrity of the original is preserved and the adaptation is always cinematic.

Film critic Lynden Barber, although not attempting to categorize types of adaptations, alludes to this particular approach when he notes that:

In those relatively rare cases where [a source] is turned into a masterpiece of cinema, such as Bernardo Bertolucci’s The Conformist (derived from the Alberto Moravia novel), the sense of literary origins is buried beneath the visual sophistication. The psychology is intact but explored, somehow, through images.⁸

Filmmakers who succeed in making an intersection are also acutely aware, as Jon Boorstin points out, that audiences “don’t just watch a movie, they throw themselves into the experience”⁹, which reinforces Rudolf Arnheim’s view that we

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⁷ Morris Béja, 1979, p.57.  
instinctively search images for balance, for pattern, for meaning, whether we’re trying or not. We are animals built to respond to the signals of our eyes as a matter of life and death.\textsuperscript{10}

As Jon Boorstin notes:

Editors, cameramen, and actors know that the most telling criticism of their work isn’t that it’s phony or crude, but that it ‘takes me out of the picture’.\textsuperscript{11}

I would argue that faithful adaptations are not particularly concerned about whether or not they take audiences “out of the picture” because they want to privilege the original text, not “the picture”. In contrast, filmmakers wishing to make an intersection will avoid anything that might take an audience “out of the picture”, knowing that viewers are indeed responding primarily to the “signals” of their “eyes” and, partly, of course, to the signals of sound. This means that the creators of intersections are thinking visually and aurally, systematically and methodically transforming the source into cinematic tropes that “play”.

Moreover, when a film seeks both to visualize and intersect with its source, it becomes a cinematic extension of it: it is the source “multiplied, so to speak, by cinema”. It is as if one has entered into the world of the book through another door; the filmed version is its

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
own world as well as being a mirror image, or reflection of the book, in another “language”. The film that is finally made may or may not be a “masterpiece” but, arguably, we should not find fault with the filmmakers’ approach.

Adrian Martin, during a presentation at the Australian Screen Directors’ Association Conference at the Australian Film Television and Radio School claimed that

when something strikes me as cinematic...it is more than good words, dialogue and performance — cinema is words and a diversity of elements shaped using space and tension...[it is concerned with] matters of style [and with] precise sequences of emotion.\(^{12}\)

Filmmakers of intersections, through their attention to “dialogue and performance”, as well as to the “resources of the camera”, their awareness of what screen drama is, their artistic abilities to render an “objective correlative” of the “psychological content”, their visualized imaginings of the “diversity of elements shaped using space and tension”, create adaptations which are cinematically satisfying, yet in no highly significant way do they alter the source. Rather, they seek to coincide or intersect with it; to “multiply” or intensify the original “by the cinema”.

\(^{12}\) Adrian Martin, “What is a Cinematic Idea?”, Lecture given at the Australian Screen Directors’ Association Conference, Australian Film, Television and Radio School, 20 September, 1997.
Dead Heart (1997), and Head On (1998), I would argue, are the only two intersections made during the period under discussion. Although there are, of course, some minor changes or omissions in the cinematic versions, considered by the filmmakers to be necessary for the unity of mise en scène, to paraphrase Dudley Andrew, what is finally lit up is the original author’s work as visualized by the cinema.\textsuperscript{13} Space limits my discussion to only one of the two texts, so I have chosen Dead Heart because, ultimately, I think it is a better example of an intersection. Head On ever so slightly embroiders the original, although it always does so cinematically.

DEAD HEART (1997)

Dead Heart is not an “Aboriginal play”, just as its filmic version is not an “Aboriginal film”, although both texts deal with many of the contemporary dilemmas that characterise the difficult and complex relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Moral and legal differences and taboos, cultural appropriation and the tensions that exist between two very different groups of people living in one community are all subtly and thoughtfully explored in Dead Heart. Nicholas Parsons, who wrote the original play and is the writer-director of the film, claims that he was

not motivated by a desire to do something for Aboriginal people. The story was suggested to me by a real event that took place in the 1930s, a story about an Aborigine who killed another man for tribal reasons. He

\textsuperscript{13} Dudley Andrew, “From Concepts in Film Theory: Adaptation”, in Gerald Mast, \textit{et.al.}, 1992, p.423.
was gaol ed for 20 years, but broke out after six weeks and was never caught. It’s not so much a story of black versus white, but a story about the very different codes that operate in the two worlds at the same time. Depending on which side you are on, both are right. It’s a story with no real baddies. I want just to explore these two moral systems in conflict.\textsuperscript{14}

Parson’s view is reinforced from an Indigenous perspective in the notes which accompanied the play’s program for the 1993 NIDA Company’s production in which we are told that “this play represents not just a clash of cultures, but the vast differences between white man and blackfella law”. The notes go on to explain that:

As an Aboriginal you are born with the law, live with it and respect it. Aboriginal law is constant, it never changes, it sets down the value system which keeps the tribal way of life in chronological order. Through it you learn to respect each other. White man’s law is not constant, it changes to appease either the politicians or the majority of people who can be used as political footballs. \textit{Dead Heart} exposes some of the effects of Western society’s ignorance of tribal law and acts as a tool to bridge the gap that that ignorance creates.\textsuperscript{15}

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To the credit of both playwright and filmmakers, however, we are never asked to take sides: each point of view is presented equally and is shown to be equally complex.

*Mise en Scène* in the Film *Dead Heart* (1997)

The term *mise en scène* is used in a variety of different ways by people in the film industry and in screen culture organizations. The original French phrase *mise en scène* means “staging an action” and refers to the way in which a stageplay was directed. The term was later taken up by people involved in film, although it has always been difficult to define exactly what *mise en scène* means for cinema studies. In his essay “The Mystique of *Mise en Scène* Revisited”, Barrett Hodsdon points out that:

A basic definition of *mise en scène* might be the staging of action before the camera in a fictive context. The question of fictive context is crucial since *mise en scène* criticism revolves around a primary interest in narrative cinema....A more elaborate working definition of *mise en scène* is the precise placement of actors and objects before the camera in various spatial, pictorial and rhythmic combinations. Despite retaining its generality, the definition does suggest that cinema far surpasses the theatre in its potential for the rigorous organisation of on-screen space, by virtue of deploying the film frame as a centering device. Whereas theatrical space is so often dead space...in traditional narrative
cinema, filmic space is normally active space where actors not only perform their roles but offer performances for the merciless scrutiny of the camera... The camera constantly charts and redraws filmic space as fictive space and the actors submit themselves to the ceaseless recharging of on-screen space. By contrast, *mise en scène* in the quasi-void of theatrical space can never transcend its basic materiality (i.e., it retains its theatrical framing, usually the proscenium arch).\(^{15}\)

Some film directors also refer to a "*mise en scène* way" of approaching filmmaking, particularly cutting, as opposed to a "montage" way. Samantha Lang, for example, in her discussion of *The Well*, a faithful adaptation of Elizabeth Jolley's novel, clearly sees the differences between these two approaches. She argues that you can approach making films in a montage way, or a *mise en scène* way, letting performances evolve on the screen, the relationship between them, and working with the light. [In *The Well*] we picked the *mise en scène* way.\(^{17}\)

Adrian Martin rightly points out that this term in cinema studies is "notoriously wooly" and it has had a "variegated history... in both

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\(^{17}\) Samantha Lang, Director's Screening of *The Well*, Chauvel Theatre, 27 July, 1997.
film and in criticism”, primarily because there are “different ‘schools’ of
mise en scène, that, for the most part, lack a common language.”\(^{18}\)
He goes on to argue that for Bordwell and Thompson, mise en scène is
a “specific ensemble of formal elements”, but definitely does not
include the “cutting or the camera movements, the dissolves, or
offscreen sound of a film”\(^{19}\). Other theorists, however, consider
camera movements and cutting as part of the mise en scène. For the
purpose of my discussion of the adaptation of Dead Heart, I use the
term mise en scène to include all those “formal elements”, as well as
to the way in which the film was edited, or “cut”. I argue that,
through the filmmakers’ careful attention to cinematic mise en scène,
the film version becomes an intricate “matching”, or, to paraphrase
Morris Béja, even a multiplication of the source; it is the “same” as,
and in some ways, “more than” its theatrical ancestor.

Apart from some very minor changes to the source, and the
omission of superfluous anecdotes and dialogue, the film Dead Heart
is essentially the play as seen by the cinema. David Stratton points
out that: “Perhaps the reason the finished product is so cinematic is
because the material was originally conceived as a film.”\(^{20}\) According
to Stratton, Nick Parsons began writing the story as a screenplay in
1986 but “turned it into a play when funding proved elusive.”\(^{21}\) When
the play was well received, he re-wrote it as a screenplay which Bryan
Brown, along with Joanna Arrowsmith, set about editing. Parsons
notes that:

\(^{19}\) Ibid. p.92.
\(^{20}\) David Stratton, “A Plea for Understanding”, Dead Heart: The Screenplay, Currency
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
Many were the times I was convinced the script was right and we could do no better; yet Bryan’s ruthless determination inevitably found a cut or an improvement. In fact, so efficient was he that of over seven hundred slates that were shot, only around twenty were not used. Which is just as well: we couldn’t afford to shoot anything that we were less than sure of.\textsuperscript{22}

Bryan Brown (who also co-produced the film and acted in the lead role), pointed out that the script “went from 240 pages to 200, 180, 160, 140, 120 and finally to 109 pages”, at which point he finally thought it would be “filmable”.\textsuperscript{23}

Apart from getting the script “right”, one of the primary ways to achieve success in a film is to cast the “right” actors. This is not to say that, when undertaking an adaptation, an actor should be cast because he or she “looks like” the character in the literary source, since audiences usually imagine characters quite differently, even though an author or playwright may give a detailed description. However, in an intersection the actors cast must have the essential characteristics of their literary ancestors. Through very careful casting, the makers of the film version of \textit{Dead Heart} show us a group of intriguing, complex and credible characters who are, for the most part, utterly convincing in their movements and use of language.

\textsuperscript{22} Nick Parsons, “Author’s Note”, \textit{Dead Heart: The Screenplay}, Currency Press, Sydney, 1996, p.xii.
What's more, these actors manage to capture on screen all important aspects of their theatrical ancestors. Thoughtful casting becomes particularly important when the text relies upon an ensemble cast, as is the case in *Dead Heart*. Linda Seger rightly points out that film audiences “can only focus on a few characters in two hours” and that seven “focal characters” is probably about the limit.24 While the primary dramatic point of view in *Dead Heart* finally rests with Ray Lorkin, we are asked to follow at least six other characters, some more often than others, but all of them very closely. If Seger is correct, film audiences are pushed to the limit in *Dead Heart*, since we are meant to be alert to and follow the complex, and usually subtle, dramatic interactions and relationships between seven focal characters: Kate (Angie Milliken) and Les (Lewis Fitz-Gerald); Sarah (Anne Tenney) and Charlie (John Jarratt); Ray Lorkin (Bryan Brown); David Muller (Ernie Dingo) and Poppy (Gnarnayarrahe Waitaire).

Seger also argues that “sympathetic characters are considered essential for a commercially successful film. We need to like someone well enough to be in their company for several hours.”25

Arguably, though, we are not really asked to “like” anyone in *Dead Heart*, for none is really likeable, although we can probably understand what they are all up to. The filmmakers, however, do manage to engage our interest in most of the central characters, partly because of their attention to casting. Particularly successful are Ray Lorkin, played by Australian icon Bryan Brown, and David Muller (Ernie Dingo),

whose characters are given an extra dimension because they are played by popular actors. As Graeme Turner accurately notes, film stars have

an important ontological function in film...stars are semiotic systems...and carry a detailed and precise range of meanings with them. They present an important advantage to the film-maker in that they provide a reservoir of significances which can be drawn upon in the representation of particular types and values.26

At the same time, the fluid use of space and light in the original has been transformed into cinematic mise en scène through effective, imaginative and dramatic visualization of a sense of place. "In film", writes screenwriter Cherry Potter, "place is not merely the location of the unfolding story, it is integral to the expression of ideas and emotions."27 She goes on to argue that, "This is what distinguishes film from the theatre and most television and this is why it is especially important for screenwriters and film-makers to develop a sense of place."28

In Dead Heart the filmmakers have very successfully captured this "sense of place" which helps develop and reinforce the dramatic conflicts that unfold at the settlement. At the opening of both the

28 Ibid.
play and the film, for instance, there is a suggestion that Wala Wala is in serious decline and only a few more incidents might cause the entire settlement to collapse (Fig.5.1). In the play the stage directions tell us that Wala Wala is a “small Aboriginal settlement on the eastern fringe of the Gibson Desert, six hundred kilometres west of Alice Springs. It looks like a rubbish dump.” The film shows us an iconic outback landscape: an isolated, sparse, dry and dusty brown-red land dotted with temporary-looking, flimsily built structures. These structures are emblematic of “whitefella” civilization: there are the offices of the law, including the lock-up; the medical clinic; the schoolroom and the church. Throughout the film we see these pillars of white civilization being challenged by equally powerful opposing Aboriginal ideologies. It is quickly established in both texts that this community has already seen many minor confrontations between these two opposing world views. Not only is Wala Wala in a state of physical decay but it has become riddled with mutual hypocrisy, vengeance, resentment, distrust and a lack of comprehension or acceptance of the other’s point of view. While these feelings are primarily directed towards each other’s world view, they also exist within the groups as well. Both sides appear to believe they are doing something helpful for the other (in particular the “whitefellas” believe they are helping out the “blackfellas”) but in fact these beliefs are shown to be superficial and transitory. As Ray Larkin wryly notes:

We’re all treading on eggshells...They’re very smart, y’see. They’re hunter-gatherers,

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29 Nicholas Parsons, *Dead Heart*, Currency Press, Paddington, 1994, pp.10-11. Subsequent references are to this edition of the stageplay and, except for long quotes which are footnoted, are cited in the text.
Fig. 5.1 Wala Wala Settlement is in decline from the beginning.
you know? And ... what they’ve done: they’ve gathered a handful of white people in the middle of the desert. And the thing about white people is: you only need a few... and they can last your whole life.³⁰

Lorkin sums up the general feeling pervading the community by telling David that “This place is fucked. Sooner or later it’s just gunna” and, in the film, he makes an exploding noise. It soon becomes clear neither side will fight for Wala Wala’s survival. No-one really cares what happens to the settlement they presumably built and tried to manage together. In their responses to their immediate surroundings, both races in Dead Heart echo the traditional representation of Nature, in both Australian literature and film, of the land as both a challenge and an enigma (although this is perhaps less true of the more traditional Aboriginals, Mannga, Tjulpu and Poppy). In the film, Les gazes out of the window at an expanse of dusty red earth under a clear blue sky and says to Tony, “So harsh a place, but God, I love this country”. Mystified, Tony looks at the landscape and then at Les and asks, “Why?”, but we discover later, at the waterhole, that he, too, is captivated by the land of his Dreaming.

Games

The central motif at the heart of this drama, explored in both the play and the film, is that of gameplaying. Many kinds of games are played

³⁰Nick Parsons, 1994, p.38.
among and between most of the characters in *Dead Heart*. The three main types are secret games, games of revenge, and games of knowledge. These games, however, are far from frivolous. They appear to be won or lost often at great cost and the playing out of all the games ultimately destroys Wala Wala. But, in the end, there are no real winners or losers — even though at first it looks as if Poppy has won.

The idea of gameplaying is introduced through the game of cards Poppy plays with the First and Second Man at the opening and closing of each act in the play and in the opening and closing scenes of the film. Their card game becomes a metaphor for the many games played out in *Dead Heart*. In the play, David Muller also alerts us to the idea of a metaphorical game of cards, telling Ray, “Play your cards right, it’ll blow over” (p.33). An almost identical line appears in the published screenplay but was edited out during post-production for the final version of the film, a good example of how there is no need to say things in film when you can show them.

In the opening scenes of the film the game of cards is carefully framed and shot from various angles and twice in close-up. The first close-up shows us that the cards have reprints of Aboriginal drawings on one side, signalling the theme of cultural appropriation by both societies. We are asked to accept that white society uses Aboriginal art for commercial gain, while Poppy’s use of the cards suggests that Indigenous people pragmatically adopt non-Indigenous objects when it suits them.
The pack of cards also introduces the game of revenge that is about to be revealed and is very effectively visualized in the film. Poppy enthusiastically flings the cards into the air and there is a dissolve to the flashback of the night Mannga (Peter Francis) demands payback for Danny's hanging.

Another example of the care the filmmakers have taken to visualize (as opposed to simply opening out and realizing) the play is the close-up of the First Man's (Billy McPherson) hand, revealing four kings (Fig. 5.2). We are immediately alerted to the probability that the Indigenous people will win this game because they are the real "kings" of the desert. The notion that Indigenous peoples are "kings" in this landscape is further reinforced by the Second Man's early references to the eagle, a bird long associated with kings and gods, as well as with traditional Aboriginal medicine and creation myths. He tells Poppy and the First Man that he "go that one, like an eagle" in order to find "one man" and "pull out his ribs, take his heart" and "finish" him. There are two other references to eagles: Tony plays part of the song "Eagle Rock" on his tape-deck on the night he tricks Ray over the car keys and this same song forms a sound bridge between the final shots of the film and the end credits. It is fully played out as the credits roll.

Secret Games

Secret or private games are a major part of the dramatic narrative in Dead Heart in both the play and the film. The one significant change to the stageplay is the addition in the film of the Matheisen children, Adrian (Max Spessot) and Sonia (Courtnee Spessot). Neither child has more than two lines of dialogue in the finished film and is really no
more than a mere presence, but they do have several functions. Their main function is to give Kate's (Angie Milliken) secret game of adultery with Tony (Aaron Pederson) a greater sense of prohibition, from a non-Indigenous perspective at least. The Aboriginal point of view of Tony's affair with Kate appears to be relatively non-judgemental: at one point Benson (Wesley Patten), one of Tony's drinking mates, even makes a joke about Kate, teasing Tony with the remark: “You got...White one. You bad one. Bad boy.” and they all laugh. The thing they will not tolerate is Tony making love to Kate on an initiation site, something I shall discuss shortly.

During the telephone interview I had with Nick Parsons, he told me that he had “always thought Kate should have children” because they would “tie her to her relationship with Les...she would be more trapped”. He had not included children in the original play primarily because “it's difficult to put kids on stage”, but their addition to the film does indeed make Kate's adultery more shocking and more hurtful, especially for Les. It also strengthens her secret affair with Tony because she not only risks her marriage but custody of her children. Despite her “cold feet” and her misery, however, Kate is portrayed in the film, for the most part, unsympathetically.

The Matheisen children are also drawn into the secret game of warning Poppy and Mannga play with Kate. Mannga begins the game by having his face painted, and then peering through a window at Kate on the night of her birthday party in order to frighten her and very likely warn her that something is going to happen. The main rule in

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31 Telephone Interview with Nick Parsons, 7 May 1999.
this game is about making sure that Kate, and no other, “discovers” Tony's corpse. The children inadvertently almost ruin the game. We see David in the distance (from Kate’s point of view as she looks through a window) determinedly head off the two children who are walking towards Tony’s body. We later see the same shot in the videotape Ray Lorkin plays over and over as he speculates on what has happened to Tony, so that this game of warning takes on an added dimension of dramatic anticipation as well as, on Kate’s part, fear. This scene, by the way, is not nearly so suspenseful in the play where David watches Tony’s body being prodded by four Aboriginal people who “stand back and whisper, then run off” (p.49).

Kate also plays a private kind of cat and mouse game concerning her relationship with Tony. She risks being found out by openly painting (in the film she draws) the sacred site and then trying to hide her work under a cloth. In the film we are given a close-up of Kate's rather pedestrian crayon drawing of the waterhole near the sacred site which nevertheless works very well cinematically. It also reinforces the unsympathetic portrayal of Kate as a character; she is shown to be not only a rather distant mother, but a woman of no obvious talents (she cannot even type!) as well as being reckless. When Les compliments her on her work, she declares that it is just “therapy for God’s sake”. Presumably Les is at least partly aware of why his wife feels the need for some “therapy”, but he simply murmurs, “Alright”, and turns away from her to move towards the window. There is, however, little that is not found out about the “whitefellas” in this community and Kate’s picture is quickly discovered and stolen by an Aboriginal boy who passes it on to Mannga and Poppy. Kate’s secret
game with Tony is now clearly out in the open and, after burning the painting, Poppy prepares for Tony's murder.

How Mannga gets the picture in the first place is part of another secret game going on in *Dead Heart*. The Aboriginal children, although they have no lines of dialogue, play a significant part in the secret games being played at Wala Wala. In the play Kate tells Tony at the waterhole of her anxiety about the children: “They keep...they keep breaking in”, she says, “while we're at school....We come home and there's ....things everywhere. Personal things. My....underwear” (p.36). In the film references to the tricks the children play on the white adults are not spoken about; instead, they are very effectively visualized. We watch, for example, a small boy sitting in the rented media vehicle using Farrelly’s (Steve Rodgers) binoculars to gauge Kate’s reaction to the broken window. She knows, as he does, that someone has stolen her drawing and will give it to the elders. The little boy, when cautioned by Farrelly, runs off with his binoculars. A point of view shot through a window shows us Ray has seen all this but does nothing. Later, possibly partly out of guilt, but also to make a point about how to survive in Wala Wala, Ray finds and returns the binoculars, which by now are in pieces, to Farrelly.

In the film we are shown a scene, shot mostly in close-up, which deals with Mannga’s receiving Kate’s picture. Mannga’s distress and anger in the play are revealed primarily through dialogue as Mannga delivers a long anecdote to do with the site. He ends his story with a piece of advice to Poppy: “More better we punish Tony...Or something come here, come Wala Wala...
All finish” (p.39). In the film, however, in a cinematically visualized short scene we are shown, not told, all we need to know. An Aboriginal child, dressed in clothes stolen from the Mathiesen house, hands Mannga the picture. Mannga unrolls it and there is a close-up of Mannga’s face as he recognizes the site as one where “boys” are “killed” and made into “men”. He hands it to Poppy who looks at it quickly, then turns and glares at a couple of Aboriginal women. His look says, “this is man’s business” and the women wander off into the night. We are given a series of close-ups of both men as they move through several stages of emotion and the lighting slowly changes from warm firelight to blue-greys as the First and Second Man appear almost magically from the darkness. Soft and steady notes of the didjeridoo underpin these moments to add to the sense of sacredness this place clearly has for the Aboriginal men, and the scene ends on two close-ups, one showing us Mannga’s sullen and deep sadness and the other Poppy’s rage.

It is worth noting here that while Aboriginal elders, and to a much lesser extent, young Aboriginal men and Aboriginal children, are a significant part of the dramatic action in both play and film, Aboriginal females play no part at all. The film has been criticized by at least two critics for this. Tim Burns and Kathryn Trees in their article “White Hunter, Dead Heart” claim that:

There is no engagement with Aboriginal women; they are, as in many versions of Australian history, invisible. While it could be reasoned that this is primarily a story about men, and that the exclusion is a representation of how women are positioned, it does not
work as a critique. There are no critical signposts and, therefore, the film reinforces a history of silencing.\textsuperscript{32}

They go on to argue that “The white women fare no better”, concluding, “It’s hard to forgive the treatment of women in this film.”\textsuperscript{33} It hardly seems fair to find fault with the film on these grounds, however, because after all this film is an adaptation which seeks to intersect with the original, rather than to make a comment or critique upon it, something these critics seem to be arguing for. The portrayal of women in the film is the same as in the original, as it should be in this type of adaptation.

Drinking alcohol and sniffing petrol are also part of the secret games played at Wala Wala. Tony in particular is a main player in these games, laughing at the guitar-playing petrol sniffer and watching with disinterest Poppy’s attempts to stop the young man’s habit. Tony also leads the game of sneaking-in alcohol, driving off to Alice Springs at night to buy beer and wine and bring it into “town”, despite Poppy’s adamant objections. Until Danny’s death, Ray has pretended not to notice Tony’s game, mostly because he plays a similar one himself. He, Billy, Sarah and Charlie all drink beer (in the play it is VB, in the film “for production purposes all VBs became Fosters”\textsuperscript{34}, arguably a more international brand of beer). Poppy at one point catches Ray out, another good example of the way this film cinematically extends the original text. We see Ray looking out of the clinic’s window drinking a can of what Charlie has jokingly referred

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[33] Ibid.
\item[34] Nick Parsons, Dead Heart: The Screenplay, Currency Press, Sydney, 1996, p.15.
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to as “contraband” while watching Poppy try to stop a young man from sniffing petrol. In a succession of subjective camera shots we see Ray sip his beer, watch Poppy with disinterest, and, in turn, watch Poppy’s disgust with Ray. In the play we are merely given the off-stage sounds of the petrol-sniffer’s electric guitar.

Even Sarah has a secret game she plays in her imagination: she secretly admires Ray. Her admiration for Ray and the kind of man he is is finally spelled out quite clearly in the play but again, rather than relying upon dialogue, this is effectively visualized in the film. In the play when Charlie tells Sarah he will probably be leaving her to take up a lectureship at “New South” they have an argument during which Sarah tells him outright:

You’re not a real person, are you? You’re a fake, a sort of ...I don’t know...human...lecture tour of the dead heart....I thought you came out here because you were brave, but you’re a coward. You know the man I respect out here? The one white man. Can you guess?35

Charlie instantly replies “Ray”, and Sarah confirms this by telling him:

That’s right; do you know why?....Because he does what he believes in. He doesn’t care if a hundred people want to stop him....He doesn’t count the cost...he’s a very powerful man.36

35 Nick Parsons, 1994, p.83.
36 Ibid.
Charlie is quick to disagree; he thinks Ray is “a lunatic”.

In the film version almost none of these lines appear, again, because they are simply not needed in film. Cherry Potter, screenwriter and academic, rightly points out that:

In films the most important visual information about characters tends to be communicated through their actions, what they do. All actions give us some insight into the nature of a character and who they are, whether these actions are highly dramatic, like placing a bomb in the boot of a car, or very minimal, like looking out of a window when someone is speaking to them.\(^{37}\)

Rather than using dialogue, in the film, the filmmakers throughout frame the images very carefully visualizing Sarah’s absorption with Ray. It is obvious from the start, for instance, that Ray and Sarah feel very comfortable with each other: early in the film they sit alone in the clinic with the injured Billy (Lafe Charlton) chatting amiably. Sarah is pleased to see Ray arrive at Kate’s birthday party and willingly sits beside him during dinner, and at the end of the film, Sarah is with the critically wounded Ray, helping to load him into the medical van, while firmly and affectionately clutching his hand, to his obvious relief.

Likewise, Ray seems to admire Sarah, especially her ability to conceal a secret, at least when it suits her. After all, she is the one who tells Charlie that Kate has been having an affair, although her motive for doing so seems to be less to do with gossip and more with trying to strengthen her fragile relationship with Charlie. When Charlie asks after Kate’s health, Sarah replies “Pretty poor”, and then says: “Well…how’d you like to find me dead one morning?” Charlie ponders this remark, then asks in astonishment, “She was having an affair?” to which Sarah replies disdainfully, “Of course she was having an affair!” There is a suggestion in her tone that she is implying, despite his job as an anthropologist, Charlie lacks basic observational skills. During his investigation, Ray knows Sarah well enough to resist ordering her to reveal Kate’s secret. He half-heartedly pleads with her to tell all: “Come on, Sarah: what’d she say?” but quickly turns to Charlie, who, Ray knows, will, with very little pressure, tell him if he does know anything, which of course he does. After Charlie tells Ray what little he knows, he tries to implicate Sarah by telling Ray, “I don’t know…go and ask her”. The scene ends with Ray admiringly gazing into the distance towards Sarah (who has been watching the two men from the verandah) as he triumphantly says to Charlie, “Couldn’t do that, mate. She wouldn’t tell me”, and their feelings of mutual admiration are confirmed.

The media also play secret games at Wala Wala. When Gordon Reynolds (Berynn Schwerdt), a broadcast journalist, and his cameraman Nigel Farrelly, arrive at the settlement to write a story on Mannga and Tjulpu (who are being portrayed in the newspapers as part of a “lost tribe”).

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When Kate weeps over Tony's body, Farrelly, without permission, tapes the scene, including the shots of David moving languidly towards the body, a scene Ray later views repeatedly to try to guess what has happened. Nigel is portrayed in the film as always looking, often furtively, whereas Gordon is always listening and asking questions. At Kate's birthday party, for example, while Gordon listens to Kate's story about Haast's Bluff, Nigel restlessly turns to the curtained window trying, without seeming obvious, to peer through to see what is going on outside. After Ray has arrested Tjulpu, armed with a shotgun he screams in fury at the Aboriginal group gathering menacingly outside the gate of the compound. As Ray shouts and gestures, Farrelly is in the background, secretly taping Ray's performance. When Gordon asks him, "What was all that about?", Farrelly, a recorder rather than an interpreter, replies, "Who gives a fuck? It was fuckin' great!"

Games of Revenge

Games of revenge account for much of the dramatic action in both the play and the film of *Dead Heart*. These games are based upon fault-finding and payback (although, of course, non-Indigenous people call this justice) and the games continue until, finally, David calls a halt to them. When these games stop, all the players "go home" and Wala Wala is abandoned. The games of revenge are characteristically of two different kinds: physical and psychological, although at times Poppy, who is a master at these games, plays both.
The main game of revenge involves Poppy and Ray. It is established early that Poppy resents Ray’s right to send him to jail in Alice Springs for “shooting up” a Toyota, viewing this as payback (where Ray would see it as justice) and immediately begins to plan his own revenge (Fig.5.3) The reason why Poppy shoots up the Toyota, however, is an example of the moral complexities in this story. Poppy believes, as far as practical, that Indigenous peoples should live in a traditional way at Wala Wala. He insists that there is “no middle road” (although clearly even he has accepted a “middle road”, because he is a Christian and he chooses to live not in the desert but in the settlement). An Aboriginal elder and main protector of Aboriginal traditions at Wala Wala, one of the things Poppy is firmly against is alcohol. He shoots up the Toyota because Tony, who seems to have problems believing in anything much at all, has used the car to bring beer into the settlement. Danny, the hanged man, like many of the other Indigenous men in the community, had become drunk and, as Billy claims, “violent and abusive”, ending up in Ray’s lock-up where he hanged himself. Arguably, Poppy is partly right to blame Tony as well as Ray for Danny’s death: Tony for bringing in the beer (although Tony makes it clear that Danny “just sit down with” him and his friends to drink; no-one made him drink) and Ray, for not making sure Danny was supervised at all times. After all, Ray, along with everyone else, is aware of the horror the Indigenous people have of the confined space of the lock-up, and the ghosts of the dead they believe lurk there.

There is also the suspicion that, even if Ray has not been directly involved in Danny’s hanging, he may have driven him to it. When Billy knocks at his door, Ray in the film is shown in close-up and we see that not only is he hung over, suggesting that he himself
Fig. 5.2 The four kings - a metaphor for the gameplaying Dead Heart.

Fig. 5.3 Poppy is the Master Game Player.
abuses alcohol, but that he has a bruised face and cut lip, something which causes Billy to pause and back away from him, cautious and clearly shocked. In both the play and the film Billy confirms that Ray and Danny have had a fight when he says to Ray, “He punch you that one”, and Ray replies “Yeah, he did... But I didn’t crack... I was stone cold sober”. That he can be violent with prisoners is further reinforced when he later tries to bash Tjulpu (Djunawong Stanely), calling him a “piece of shit” for killing Tony.

Danny’s death provides an example of the different ways of viewing an event at Wala Wala. On the one hand the Pintupi people believe someone is at fault, because, as Charlie observes, “every death is a murder...if someone dies” there must be “a culprit” who will be required to undergo payback. On the other hand, the “whitepalla” has no trouble accepting that Danny committed suicide, and therefore no one else is responsible for his death. The difficulty for Ray Lorkin is that, while he is in Wala Wala to uphold the “whitefella” law, he has always acknowledged the need to “bend the law a hell of a lot so we can do things tribal way”. When Tony is murdered, Ray is no longer willing to “bend the law”, knowing now he will be forced to confront Poppy. Ray tells David grimly:

That old bastard...wants to get rid of me
because I sent him down for shooting up
his own Toyota. I mean: is that a joke?
He wants my blood. I can hear him singing now.
It’s him or me, Dave. Him or me...And if he sanctioned this killing...it’s gunna be him.
When Poppy finally manages to lure Ray, himself on an act of revenge against Tjulp, to the waterhole in the desert in order to have him speared to death, the game is interrupted by David, who has previously sanctioned Tony’s murder as payback for violating the sacred site. A day and a night in the desert, however, has clearly led David to disagree with Poppy’s view that there is "no middle road". Protecting the critically injured Ray with his own body, David declares that he has had enough of this game, crying out to Mannga: "No. All finish. No more, Poppy, no more. Spear him, you spear me too" (Fig.5.4). When Poppy, in Pintupi language, demands "Where is your anger?" and then asks him in English: "You: blackpalla, watpalla?" David desperately replies, "I’m just a fella."

Interestingly, when discussing this scene with students, many tell me they find David’s answer funny and some of them laugh during the screening. Perhaps this is because there is not quite enough dramatic intensity. Nick Parsons told me that he and the crew had had limited time and resources to shoot the scene and that he wished he had been able to "give it more coverage, different angles, more shots, to make it more compelling". He acknowledges that this is David’s "key line" and that, in the film version at least, in the delivery of it David appears to be "too passive". Limitations aside, this is the climax of a game of revenge between players who are bent on vengeance and willing to fight to the death. That David finally realizes the futility of this game is to his credit; that he is willing to sacrifice his own life to stop it puts him in the heroic realm. Indeed, if there is a real "hero" in Dead Heart, because of his actions at the waterhole, it is David. It

38 Telephone Interview with Nick Parsons, 7 May 1999.
Fig.5.4 These scenes at the waterhole are the moral centre of Dead Heart.
may be worth noting that Nick Parsons originally wrote *Dead Heart* with David as the protagonist, but changed it on advice from a friend who saw Ray Lorkin as the one who "drives the action" and therefore must be considered the "hero". While Ray does "drive the action", it is difficult to see him as the "hero". After all, the archetypal journey of a "hero" consists of separation, initiation, ordeal, sacrifice, resurrection and return. Arguably, Ray Lorkin undergoes the early stages but, primarily because of his persistent denial, he is incapable of performing the final and most important stages of the heroic journey which involve sacrifice, resurrection and return. He learns nothing much from his "supreme ordeal" in the desert, and brings back no worthwhile "bounty" on his return. Badly injured and still bewildered, a decidedly un-heroic Lorkin is carted off on a stretcher, clinging to Sarah's hand.

This climactic game of revenge at the waterhole reveals the choices each character makes, and shows us the moral core of *Dead Heart*. Ultimately it is a Christian view centred around reinforcing the commandment "Thou shalt not kill". Ray clearly believes in this rule when he refuses to shoot Tjulpu on sight, thus possibly risking his own life. This view is shown in contrast to traditional "blackfella" law practised by Poppy, Mannga and Tjulpu, who consider it "proper one" to "finish" an enemy and are outraged with David for refusing to let them "finish" Ray.

It could be argued that Poppy in the end wins this particular game of revenge by retreating into the desert, thereby abandoning the "middle road" at Waia Wal. He also "wins" a new Toyota, and

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knows no-one will be able to implicate him in anything because he has done “nothing” wrong; he has always “just been witness”. The problem with Poppy’s conviction that he has won the game is that in the process Wala Wala as a community is ruined and he has been instrumental in its destruction. There is no real sense, however, that Poppy cares very much, so determined is he to “pay back” Ray for all the evil he believes Ray has brought to the settlement, but surely even Poppy might have cause to regret that things at Wala Wala did not work out.

When it comes to games of revenge, Poppy seems to enjoy a great deal of power: he is, after all, the one who gives the order to kill Tony for his violation of the sacred site. In the play Mannga wants Tjulpu to kill Tony, but there is also the suggestion that he needs Poppy’s permission to carry out the murder. In the film we are shown in close-up Poppy’s face, his eyes narrowed and shining in the firelight, gazing towards a wary Tjulpu. In an extreme close-up we watch Poppy’s finger signals to the young man and know that he is ordering Tony’s death. We do not see the actual murder in the film, but nevertheless this particular game of revenge is suggested through careful visualization and intercutting of scenes at two different parties, signifying the two very different ways of life at Wala Wala. At the “whitefella” birthday party they sit inside at the table to eat, drink cordial out of glasses, and discuss Aboriginal beliefs and behaviour. Outside, by the campfire we watch the Aboriginal community tuck into huge hunks of camel meat, sing, and despite Poppy, drink beer. We also witness the First and Second Man chase Tony off into the bush to be ambushed by Tjulpu, exactly according to Poppy’s plan.
While the main games of revenge in *Dead Heart* involve Poppy and Ray, and Poppy and Tony, there are several other characters who also play these games, although not quite so seriously. These characters are “whitefellas” and their games of revenge are petty and psychological. Les, for example, plays the game against Kate, trying to pay her back for her adultery. After she has been found out, Kate tells Les she wants to leave Wala Wala, declaring hysterically:

I hate it here! I hate it. I hate these dirty dumpy little places. I hate their ugliness. I hate these people, I hate...touching them. I hate their smell. I hate their hands and their...fetid breath. They’re ugly, dirty black animals. They’re boongs. Coons. Niggers. They should be rounded up and shot; they should be exterminated. They should be...hunted...like....40

In the play Les shows his contempt for Kate’s outburst by looking at his watch and replying coldly that he “has a class”. In the film Sonia, their daughter, appears at the door and he picks her up after delivering this same line. The appearance of the little girl in the film further intensifies this scene, since it is even more shocking that Sonia has probably heard most of what her mother has said, which goes against everything she has been taught. Les delivers the *coup de grace* when he tells his wife stiffly that “I think, under the circumstances, we’ll tough it out, don’t you?”

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40 Nick Parsons, 1994, p.77.
Similarly, when Charlie realizes he is unable to complete his Dreaming map (in the film he blames Ray for this, saying, “That fucking maniac has wasted two years of my work”), he spitefully turns on Sarah and tells her that he has received a letter from Margaret who has told him, “there’s a lectureship going at New South”. Sarah immediately feels threatened, not by the lectureship, but by Margaret, and asks him if he wants to go “back to her”. Charlie seems incapable of accepting his failure and the real reasons behind it — that he has never been successful in his research at Wala Wala — and takes this out on Sarah in a fit of petty revenge. In a counter-attack Sarah pays him back by questioning his professional abilities and comparing his manhood unfavourably to Ray’s.

There are many other games of revenge, including one played by Gordon Reynolds, the television journalist, against Ray, visualized in the film in an interesting way. In a taped interview he taunts Ray, telling him something he knows full well Ray knows:

It’s Aboriginal custom to avoid places where... where death has occurred. Where family have died. But [Tjulpu] is now being held in the same cell his own father died in a few months ago. How do you think he feels?

He finishes the interview with a direct question, “Why are you still here?” The film cuts back and forth from slow zooms into close-ups of Ray as seen through Farrelly’s camera to the “real” on-screen images of Ray being interviewed, creating a mise en abîme sequence which gives these scenes depth and irony.
Games of Knowledge

Secret games and games of revenge drive most of the dramatic action in *Dead Heart*, but games of knowledge are equally significant and create a powerful sub-text. These games of knowledge are carefully woven into the *mise en scène* of both texts, and in the film are subtly and cogently visualized.

The games of knowledge essentially revolve around the differences between “blackfella” and “whitefella” world views. Significantly, this clash of cultures is never resolved, something revealed cinematically in the finished film in the scene where we watch on television the injured Ray Lorkin being loaded into a medical van. We hear Gordon’s voice-over telling us that Lorkin’s future is “uncertain” but that “one thing is c...”, then the power cuts out. Presumably the word was “clear”. In the play, the power cuts out after Oaks assures the audience that the Aborigines will “receive...exactly the same treatment as any other Australian citizen under Australian law.” Sarah says that it is “the generator” and that the power failure is a “little goodbye present (p.97).” By visualizing the cutting of the power on screen with a fade to black, as well as cutting on sound, in the film we do not need dialogue. Instead we are given in audio-visual language a powerful suggestion that Wala Wala is finished and that everything that has gone on, and continues to go on, between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities is uncertain. Nothing can be taken for granted, nothing at all is “clear”. The gulf between these two very different societies is portrayed in *Dead Heart* as being huge and irreconcilable. It is therefore easy to disagree with
David Stratton's view that *Dead Heart* is a "heartfelt plea for friendship and understanding between Australia's original population and its more recent migrants." Although of course its themes are topical, *Dead Heart* is not really an "issues" film and neither the playwright nor the filmmakers seem to be particularly interested in making any kind of "plea".

The games of knowledge can be roughly divided into games of competing epistemologies, one primarily scientific and materialist — "whitefella" games — and the other more spiritual and psychical — "blackfella" games. The games are immediately set up as being in contrast and in competition with each other through the characters of the First and Second Men. These two, both observers and participants in the dramatic action, are described in the play as being like "kumunjayi" men, men with "no name" (p.43). They are portrayed as being at once corporeal and incorporeal, appearing at crucial times seemingly out of thin air as catalysts for an incident and then disappearing. Nick Parsons in our interview claimed that he wanted to make them "kudaitcha men", Aboriginal beings who can perform mysterious deeds. He also wanted them to function as a "kind of Greek chorus; they listen and are also part of the action; they enter into it and step back from it". He explained that he had in mind the three witches from *Macbeth*, since, along with Poppy, they "form a kind of magical trio", weaving their spells in order to help undo Ray Lorkin, the "super king".

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42 Telephone Interview with Nick Parsons, 7 May 1999.
In fact, in the play, Parsons even paraphrases a line from Banquo's ghost scene in *Macbeth*, although he admits he had not even noticed doing it, which suggests how easy it is for one writer to absorb and unconsciously replay another. Macbeth cries out in terror, "The time has been/That when the brains were out, the man would die/And there an end! But now they rise again....And push us from our stools." In the play, after the First and Second Men trick him into believing he is seeing Danny's ghost, Ray cries out to David:

\[\text{Christ. Time was the man was dead and that was it. A man was just a man. Now they follow you around...crawling out and trailing you with his long rope hangin' off him.}\]

In the film, however, visualization is used to "match" these words, so we see nightmarish images of an Aboriginal man with a painted face hanging in mid-air. His boots swing ominously, his hand is outstretched towards a terrified Ray, tormenting him. There is a brief flashback to the lock-up and we realize that Ray's vision in the desert is, in part, caused by his guilt over Danny's hanging. The Second Man re-enacts these scenes and, in doing so, plays a game of knowledge which results in a catharsis for Ray. He knows, like many of the people in Wala Wala, that Danny's death could have been prevented. Through this "magic" trick, Ray is urged to feel guilt, and is forced to admit to

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44 Nick Parsons, 1994, p.93.
himself that he just may have been partly responsible for Danny's
death, something he has until now simply refused to acknowledge.

The First and Second Men are also clearly meant to show us that
Aboriginal theories of knowledge are not based on scientific evidence
or rational thought. The area of medical knowledge, for instance, is
explored in the first scene. The First Man tells us how he has recently
healed a man in Balgo. "One man: someone sing him, sing out his
spirit. I take his arm, suck on it, suck on it. Pretty soon I suck out a
blood. Pretty soon I suck out a stone...Someone sing in that stone to
kill 'im." After this treatment, the First Man proudly announces: "He
been alright. He been good." Exactly what the First Man has done to
save the man in Balgo is not clear from his description, but what is
clear is that the way Indigenous people in Dead Heart practice their
medicine is very different from the matter of fact and practical way in
which "whitefellas" perform in the medical realm. Sarah is the primary
representative of this particular area of knowledge. Essentially
uninterested and aloof, Sarah is rarely seen acting as a doctor or a
carer. She does not seem at all concerned about petrol sniffing or
drunkenness among the youth at Wala Wala, and she drinks and
smokes herself. Neither does she try to stop Ray from incarcerating
Indigenous people, even though she must be aware of the
psychological brutality of this practice, given their belief in ghosts.
She shows no real compassion for Billy's spearng, or interest in
whether or not he will have a limp, and she shrugs off any attempts to
suggest she is wrong about Tony's heart attack. Her way of knowing
about medical matters is pitted against the Indigenous way of
knowing. Although no sides are taken, there is the suggestion that
Sarah's knowledge is either not applied, or when it is, is merely
practical, based on clinical observation, and is, at best, perfunctory. This is shown in contrast to the Indigenous approach, which has a metaphysical element, and is applied with determination until it yields the right results. Where the First Man will travel long distances to heal a man who has had his spirit sung out, Sarah will not step outside her door to try to help stamp out petrol sniffing. In the play, in fact, in response to Gordon’s question: “You like it here?” she reveals her motive for being at Wala Wala when she replies: “Yeah. By and large. Money’s good” (p.43). In the film she is cast well. Anne Tenney has the ability to project an indifference characteristic of Sarah and there is a strong suggestion that her presence at Wala Wala has nothing to do with practising medicine, researching Aboriginal health or even money; she is there primarily because of Charlie.

Education is another area where games of knowledge are played out in *Dead Heart*. The main game concerns the value of learning English. Les is the leader of this game, insisting that the Aboriginal population must “go to school” and learn English. For Les, this is the main reason for “whitefellas” being at Wala Wala. When Ray queries the necessity for Tjulpu to learn English, Les angrily replies, “Well, Ray: in that case, what are we doing here? I mean, I can’t even teach English, exactly what are we supposed to be doing here?” Even Tony, who, as pointed out earlier, rarely reveals his beliefs in anything, considers that it would be wrong to teach Tjulpu English. When Kate asks him to give Tjulpu tutorials, he flatly refuses, telling her, “I teach that boy English, I think that old man spear me this one.” Poppy and Mannga are absolutely opposed to any attempt to teach Tjulpu English. Mannga is so determined to prevent this that he threatens Les with an axe. For the Indigenous people at Wala Wala, the English
language is a vehicle of destruction and repression. It is significant that Poppy uses English only when it can benefit him; when it really counts, he prefers to speak his native tongue. In particular, Poppy uses English when he is participating in games about money and about choosing a cultural identity. He believes firmly that there is “no middle road” and sees people as being either “whitepalla” or “blackpalla”.

When the television crew arrives at Wala Wala, he demonstrates his knowledge of the game of commerce. After confirming they are in television, he turns to them and demands, “You give me money”. In terms of being educated in “whitefella” games, Poppy is far from adept, but his clumsy way of playing these games shows us the influence “whitefellas” have had on the Indigenous community at Wala Wala.

Although education, particularly English lessons, seems to be a very sensitive matter at Wala Wala, there is some suggestion that not all non-Aboriginal people are against it. Tony, for example, speaks fluent English, unlike, say, Poppy, and in the film tells a little Aboriginal boy who tries to sneak out of the classroom to get back or he will turn into an “ignorant blackfella”. But where the two white children, Sonia and Adrian, seem to take their lessons seriously, dutifully studying their books and always attending class (although of course Les is their father and would insist on their attendance), the Indigenous children are portrayed as treating their hours in the classroom as a test to see what they can get away with. When we first see Les he is teaching English grammar. In the play, Les speaks as he writes, “The axle was broken...Is this a sentence?” then asks a child, “And your third sentence?” to which the child replies, “That car been fucked” (p.9). In film, where there is no need to say when one can show, the child’s line
is visualized. We see a close-up of Les holding the child’s exercise book in which this line is written, watch the child giggle into his hand as he realizes Les has read his sentence, see Les re-write the sentence, “That car was damaged beyond repair”, and watch him finally turn in triumph to the class to witness their disappointed faces (Fig.5.5). The child’s sentence suggests they know more about the game of English lessons than Les has taught them and enjoy challenging him at his own game (Fig.5.6). In general, though, the Aboriginal community seems to accept that, while English lessons may be useful for some children, when serious things happen, “tribal way” is the “proper way”. Les is unceremoniously ordered by an Aboriginal man to cancel his lesson because the children must attend the “sorry business” for Danny and there is no suggestion that Les has the right to object. By the end of Dead Heart, only Sonia and Adrian attend school and it is obvious that “whitefella” education is not a game “blackfellas” want to play.

The idea that things must be documented, filmed, recorded or written down — as opposed to knowing about the world through observation and the spoken word — is also the basis for another game of knowledge in Dead Heart. Les is the main player in this game, believing that to be literate means one must be able to write down words. In the film, significantly, his belief in the printed medium is cinematically extended to images as well as words. Shortly before Mannga threatens him with an axe, we see Les showing Tjulpu magazine photographs of Australia’s outback. Tjulpu seems interested, pointing in various directions to confirm he knows the whereabouts of these places. At one point there is a suggestion, though, that he is mocking this reproduced kind of knowledge. When Les shows him a
Fig. 5.5 "Whitefella" education: one of the games played at Wala Wala.

Fig. 5.6 The children play their own games with Les.
picture of the Bungle Bungles he first points one way, then another, confusing Les. Tjulpu's unfamiliarity with books is mildly derided in the film when Les turns the page and we are given an extreme close-up of a picture of a bull ant which causes Tjulpu to recoil in terror, making him look a little ridiculous. Arguably, though, this scene questions the value of education learned from books, whether via words or images; certainly Mannga sees no value in it at all as it is at this point that he appears at the doorway and threatens Les with a hatchet.

Charlie Roth (John Jarratt), an anthropologist, is also involved in extolling the value of information in print. He gathers his research through other media but the final results will be found in a book he is writing on the Dreaming stories in the "dead heart". The Aboriginal community are portrayed as having little time for Charlie, seeing no real worth to his enterprise. When he is allowed to attend Danny's "sorry business", although clearly he has been told not to record anything, he secretly tries to tape the ceremony. In the film we watch him lying on the ground, furtively peering upwards under the brim of his hat. He then switches on his small audio-cassette recorder. Within seconds, we see a close-up of a black foot kicking dust into his face as the person passes by, and there is a strong suggestion that this was a deliberate act performed out of contempt for Charlie's "whitefella" ways of collecting information. Charlie's book and his Dreamtime map is a "whitefella" game of knowledge that is of no real interest to the Aboriginal community, who know their Dreaming in other ways. Even Charlie finally accepts the futility of trying to document these Dreaming tracks, realizing that the "dead heart" is the ultimate winner. He has the final "whitefella" line in both the play and the film. "God, what a place", he murmurs respectfully. In the film his feelings and the
worthlessness of his map are very effectively visualized through the image of the wind whipping the map from his hands. He stares after it as it whirls off into the dust.

Ross Gibson argues that in Australian landscape films, “the heroes’ persistence in the legendary setting persuades us that the land is habitable, but only by a special breed of people.” The defeat of the “whitepalla” in Dead Heart suggests that this “special breed of people” are the Indigenous people; the “whitepalla” are portrayed as being, ultimately, bewildered and uncertain. In his contrast of typical American narratives with Australian, Graham Thorburn claims that “the classic American drama tends to go out on the attack — ‘hunting Indians’ — the Australian one will be more concerned with ‘defending the fort’.” In Dead Heart, even “defending the fort” is finally abandoned, and Wala Wala succumbs to the wind and the dust.

A final game of knowledge in Dead Heart concerns the different ways in which people acquire spiritual belief and faith. The Indigenous people have been taught to believe through direct contact with their land, their Dreaming, and by performing ceremonies on their sacred sites. The non-Aboriginal community at Wala Wala know spirituality through indirect contact with the Bible via David’s sermons, by prayer and by singing hymns. (Although, for a time, it is clear Poppy and other Indigenous Christians accept and perform these rituals as well.)

Even Tony, portrayed as being rebellious and confused, professes to know his Dreaming and says he gets “lonely” for his country. When

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Kate accuses him of not believing "in that" he defends himself by pointing out to her, "You stop believing one way, you don't start believing in another." Tony even admits to believing in the spirit who lives around waterholes, and pours sand over Kate to "keep her safe". In the film, this scene is carefully framed and thoughtfully visualized, capturing Angie Milliken's bare breasts in close-up as they are gradually covered by sand. In the play, as Kate moves slowly off-stage and the lights go down on the waterhole, we are asked to imagine what occurs in the cave where the Aboriginal elders ritually "kill boys...and make men". In the film version, however, this scene, shot in the studio, is fully visualized and carefully developed into a lively sex scene, during which a naked Kate and Tony make love on the floor of the sacred site surrounded by the symbols of "men's business" (Fig.5.7). The scene is given depth through parallel editing and sound-bridging. As they make love there is a sound bridge followed by cross-cuts between two sacred places, the "whitefella's" church (where Les and his children, with the rest of the congregation, sing hymns) and the "blackfella men's business" waterhole. Two dogs wander restlessly through the church and, as Tony's and Kate's lovemaking reaches its climax, the dogs growl and fight and the congregation disperses. The cross-cuts and sound bridges contrast the couple's frenetic actions at the sacred site with the at-first disciplined order of the church scenes, which are interrupted by the dog fight, giving the sex scenes an added dimension. There is the suggestion in the film (arguably racist) that Kate is responding to something animal-like in Tony and that the lust between them borders on the bestial. But there is also the suggestion that they share some kind of powerful spiritual bond. On the night of Tony's murder, for instance, parallel editing shows us Tony being chased in the bush while Kate, cleaning up after the party, pops a
Fig. 5.7 Tony's (Aaron Pedersen) violation of the sacred site is the most odious act in Dead Heart.
peanut into her mouth. As tension and anticipation builds in the bush, so tension increases inside the house. When Kate nearly chokes on the peanut and finally manages to catch her breath, we sense that, at this precise moment, Tony is murdered.

The idea that Kate is attracted to a primordial quality in Tony is further reinforced in the bedroom scene, when Kate and Les argue about Tony. Les tells Kate they must “stand firm” in the face of the likely abandonment of Wala Wala by the Aboriginal community. Standing firm is “what Tony would’ve wanted”, Les assures Kate. Kate interrupts him, asking him, “How can you say what Tony would’ve wanted...You didn’t know Tony, what he thought, what...what he could do.” When Les smugly tells her that he knew Tony “a little better” than she did, she replies aggressively, “Why? Did you fuck him?” A dumbfounded Les demands to know what she felt for Tony, love or lust, and in her frustration and fear Kate replies:

I don’t know... I don’t know. Les...
something...that he had, some...knowledge
that he had; Les...I’ve seen the place...where
little boys are killed...and made into men.47

While Kate’s adultery is generally portrayed unsympathetically and provokes much of the action which follows, it could be argued that Tony’s violation of the sacred site is the most odious act in Dead Heart. It defines his character as essentially self-destructive and nihilistic, and partly explains his heavy drinking on the night of his

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47 Nick Parsons, 1994, p.77. In the screenplay, the final line is slightly altered to “I’ve seen the place...where little boys die...and become men.”
murder when, significantly, he admits he has forgotten how to perform a traditional dance.

Ray’s pursuit of Tjulp to the desert is both a game of revenge and a game of knowledge. These games, ending at the waterhole, reveal how Indigenous knowledge, both practical and spiritual, competes with “whitetella” know-how. When Poppy tells David he must go with Tjulp to the desert because “someone” will tell Ray that David has helped Tjulp escape from jail, David mournfully declares that he “can’t live in the desert”, that he will “die out there”. David’s journey into the desert with Tjulp eventually reveals that David is far more of a “whitepalla” than a “blackpalla”. He tires easily, becomes thirsty quickly, has no idea where to find water, and has nowhere near the acuteness of hearing and sight of Tjulp. Tjulp, on the other hand, is portrayed as being completely at home in the desert. In the film, moving easily across a vast, dry landscape, half-naked, spear in hand, he is portrayed as a striking “noble savage” figure (Fig.5.8). He guides David to water and reassures him that his “brother” the wind will come soon and cover their tracks. He also sees and hears, where David does not, Ray’s Toyota far off in the distance and, to David’s chagrin, takes David’s shoes and forces him to wear emu feathers on his feet so Ray will not be able to track him.

Where David is shown as incapable of finding his way in the desert, however, Ray is portrayed as a competent bushman. He carries the right kind of equipment in his backpack, arms himself for the inevitable ambush, and refuses to give in despite the “big wind” Tjulp has forecast. “Blackpalla” knowledge, nevertheless, is ultimately shown to be superior. In the film, we watch Tjulp as he somehow mysteriously guides Ray through the wind, the dust and the
Fig. 5.8 Tjulpu (Djunawong Stanley Mirindo) is portrayed as a "noble savage" figure.
darkness towards the water-hole where Poppy and Mannga wait to kill him. As Ray succumbs to panic and nightmarish visions, firing wildly into the darkness, he confronts his guilt over Danny’s suicide, and the spirits of the desert embodied in the mystical appearances of the First and Second Men. In the film these night scenes in the desert are meticulously framed and shot, becoming an “objective correlative” for Ray’s inner turmoil. Blue filters, strong, long shadows, sound effects, light beams, brief flashbacks, and the magical appearances and disappearances of the First and Second Men give the mise en scène a nightmarish quality and we sense the power of Ray’s terror and confusion.

By morning, though, Ray reverts to denial. As he staggers upon the waterhole, he refuses to accept that anything of a metaphysical nature has occurred during the night, telling David, “Don’t give me that spooky Aboriginal bullshit.” As Ray leans forward to drink out of his hand at the waterhole, he gazes into the water and sees the reflection of a painted Aboriginal face. Reminiscent of Banquo’s ghost, we are asked to believe that this is probably Danny’s spirit, haunting Ray still. This powerful image is muddied by rippling water, but what is clear is that Ray, while denying any “spooky Aboriginal bullshit”, is staring it in the face (Fig.5.9). So determined is Ray to deny his guilt and the existence of an Aboriginal spiritual world that he delivers his monologue on the value of making Aboriginal peoples “whitefellas”. In the play he insists that:

They gotta learn to be whitefellas!

[Tapping his head.] Up here. That’s what the word is. You know that, Dave;
Fig. 5.9 Ray Lorkin denies "spooky Aboriginal bullshit" while staring it in the face.
you — you seen it. Tribal way is finished;
it doesn't have a chance.48

In the film he declares that Poppy is the real villain, “getting people back into the...the blackfella way, the old way...when a clean break is what they really need.” Ray's ideas are, however, ultimately undermined in both the play and the film: in the play because of his ramblings about dead men following him around; in the film because of the reflection in the water. How can we believe Ray when he is clearly filled with so much guilt and remorse? He may call it “spooky Aboriginal bullshit”, but his night terrors and the reflection in the water reveal he cannot discount its presence, even as he denies it. Ray's refusal to accept what is plainly in front of him becomes a metaphor for the various ways in which “whitefellas” have denied the truth about their relationship with Indigenous peoples and tried to make them, just as Ray does Danny, invisible.

These later scenes in Dead Heart are a powerful contribution to the idea that we need to make the journey inland, to the “dead heart”, before we can begin to make sense of what the land really means. Ray Lorkin, like many of us, however, is portrayed as determined to deny responsibility for past wrongs, and to ridicule the “blackfella's” spiritual or metaphysical beliefs. What undermines Ray’s viewpoint throughout the film, and suggests the metaphysical, is the way in which the mise en scène frequently moves beyond the realism cinema is usually most applauded for. David Bordwell notes that when critics judge a film in

terms of how realistic it is, they are trying to stifle the range of cinematic representations, arguing that:

To confine the cinema to some notion of realism would indeed impoverish mise-en-scène....which has the power to transcend normal conceptions of reality.\(^{49}\)

Ross Gibson rightly points out the paradox of most cinematic representations of the Australian landscape. He claims that Australian filmmakers have “configured this country of the mind” in “mythic terms”, yet they have portrayed it in cinema in

realist terms rather than with a ‘fantastic’ sense of the mythic storytelling involved...
The paradox is that the mythic argument of so many of the landscape films cannot be logically conducted through the techniques of realist representation.\(^{50}\)

I would argue that, in this respect, *Dead Heart* is a rare kind of adaptation, not only because it intersects with the original play, striving through mise en scène to “match” and even “multiply” the original, but also because it attempts, through frequent, non-realist visualization, to come to terms with the “fantastic” and the “mythic” elements of the landscape.


\(^{50}\) Ross Gibson, 1994, p.52.
On its release *Dead Heart* initially struggled at the box office, much to Bryan Brown's disappointment. "I can't believe Australians are hard-hearted", he told *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Paul Sheehan. "But a lot of people in the film industry told me you can't make a movie about Aboriginal themes. Maybe they're right."\(^51\) Some two weeks later, the same journalist reported that:

Maybe Australians don't have hard hearts after all. Since the *Herald* published a report this month about actor Bryan Brown's disappointment at the box office failure of his acclaimed but dying movie, *Dead Heart*, the film has enjoyed a remarkable revival. ...When it was released in November, *Dead Heart* received some of the highest praise ever given to an Australian film, but failed to take off at the box office.\(^52\)

Sheehan, however, also pointed out that, after the media's support, "dozens of people called to say they did not see the film because it was not shown in the suburbs"\(^53\), reinforcing a general view that distribution is a major problem for Australian films.

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Apart from difficulties with distribution, there is Peter Castaldi’s claim that Australians have a general “reluctance to go and see their own films, especially serious ones.”⁵⁴ He used *Dead Heart* to support his argument.

Take *Dead Heart* — a contemporary, well-made film ...it cost only $2-1/2 million, it was shot on location, it was a cop thriller, a good story, but it was released across only eight screens nationally and it received only a fourteen week run in total. It ran for seven weeks and did no business so Bryan Brown decided to complain — he received some good media coverage...and it got another seven week run. He and Ernie Dingo pulled beer during the last screening at the Chauvel — most people hadn’t seen the film, they came to see Bryan Brown and for the free beer.⁵⁵

David Stratton generally supports this view, noting that:

Films dealing with the Aboriginal community rarely have been able to find a substantial audience in this country. Even Fred Schepisi’s masterly *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* proved to be a costly failure on its original release, so it took guts for producers Bryan Brown and Helen Watts and their various backers to bring Nick Parson’s gripping story

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⁵⁴ Peter Castaldi, Australian Films Forum at the University of Sydney, 26 July 1997.  
to the screen.\textsuperscript{56}

Fortunately for the filmmakers, \textit{Dead Heart} finally succeeded at the box office. The manager of the Chauvel Cinema in Sydney, where the film had its initial release, claimed that:

\begin{quote}
It’s the most extraordinary reaction to a story I have ever seen...the week before the [first article in the \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}] we did $5,000. Since then \textit{Dead Heart} has been doing $20,000 a week. I’ve never seen such a turnaround in the ninth week of a film before, ever.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Box offices figures at the time were expected to exceed $400,000, something that made Bryan Brown very happy. “People are talking about it”, he is quoted as saying. “And each time someone sees this film it takes another brick out of the wall of ignorance.”\textsuperscript{58}

Most critics praised \textit{Dead Heart}, and Nicholas Parsons deservedly won the 1996 Film Critics Circle of Australia award for Best Adapted Screenplay.

\textit{Dead Heart} may have been difficult to sell in a commercial market dominated by Hollywood, but it is nevertheless a fine and significant film, as well as a topical one in the light of the on-going crisis in Australia concerning the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The film, I am told, “does steady business” at the local video shops and is also available for sale as a sell-through.

\textsuperscript{57}Paul Sheehan, 25 January 1997.
\textsuperscript{58}\textit{Ibid.}
An annotated screenplay noting the differences between the script and the finished film is also available (Fig.)

More importantly, for the purpose of this study, *Dead Heart* is a very good example of the way in which, through visual imagination and intelligence, along with the methodical transformation of theatrical tropes into cinematic *mise en scène*, a film can intersect with, "match", and even "multiply", a written text.
CONCLUSION

In Chapter One I pointed out that, with rare exceptions such as *The Boys* (1998), *The Well* (1996), *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1998) and *What I Have Written* (1995), all the adaptations made during the period under discussion are essentially “well-made” naturalistic feature films relying upon traditional narrative conventions and devices. For the most part, dramatic action emphasizes causality; plots generally unfold chronologically and shots and scenes are linked using psychological montage. Regardless of the type of adaptation that has been made, many also adhere to the three-act structure of the classical narrative film, a structure touted by many as being indispensable to the screen story. There are, however, some exceptions: *Dead Heart* (1997), *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997) and *In the Winter Dark* (1998) all have circular plots. *The Well* (1997) opens with the literary device of prolepsis (closely following the novel’s opening) by intercutting a scene, which later appears again in its rightful place, to foreshadow events to come. *The Boys* (1998) incorporates much of its original’s complex flashback-flashforward internal structure, and *The Sound of One Hand Clapping’s* (1998) plot is also fragmentary. Many filmmakers, including scriptwriters, when discussing how they went about adapting a source, made it clear that they believe, or have been taught, that the three-act structure and a linear plot are the main ways to strengthen a film story, and that a feature film’s true strength lies in the clarity of the dramatic narrative.

For the most part, apart from the intersections *Head On* (1998) and *Dead Heart* (1997), which cinematically “match” their
sources, the main characters in the films which belong to one of the other three types of adaptations have become generally more likeable, often less complex and far less aggressive or eccentric than their literary antecedents, whatever type of adaptation the filmmakers chose to produce (e.g., Blackfellas (1992); Death in Brunswick (1991); The Well (1997); Blackrock (1997); Lilian’s Story (1996); Cosi (1995); Oscar and Lucinda (1997)), although the exception here is clearly The Boys (1998).

Generally speaking, too, except for the two intersections, Dead Heart (1997) and Head On (1998), strongly political or philosophical themes or sub-texts in the literary sources have been either omitted or de-emphasized for the film versions. This is particularly the case for the two appropriations, Death in Brunswick (1991) and Blackfellas (1992), and for all the “variations” made during the decade 1989-1998, including The Delinquents (1989); Turtle Beach (1992); Cosi (1995) and Oscar and Lucinda (1997).

Australian literature, as well as Australian films, generally avoids love stories, although the reasons why this might be so are obscure. Brian McFarlane argues that this

shyness of Australian film-makers in dealing with the kinds of experience one would have supposed common to people everywhere presumably lies buried deep in the national psyche. Rather than make relationship the central issue of the narrative, many Australian films have
chosen to place it either in a recognizable
generic framework or subsume it in a
more comprehensive social discourse.¹

This “shyness” in exploring romantic love generally holds true for
the adaptations made during the decade under discussion. Except for
The Delinquents (1989) and What I Have Written (1995), there are no
ture “love stories”. Although there are, of course, heterosexual
couples who presumably love each other, their love is not the focus of
the drama. However, two texts, The Sum of Us (1993) and Head On
(1998), are directly concerned with homosexual love, and there are
hints of lesbianism in The Well (1997), reflecting the growing
acceptance in Australia of different sexualities.

As is the case for most Australian films, the texts chosen for
adaptation during the period under discussion are for the most part
small, character-driven narratives which, nevertheless, often explore
important social “problems”. Budgetary reasons partly account for
these choices. Tom O’Regan points out that:

With their smaller budgets, their greater
reliance on dialogue — telling as much as
showing — their limited capacity to stage
spectacle, the one-off character of production
...national cinemas like Australia’s are more
‘sociologically’ and ‘people reliant’. They rely
more on social texts and strategies of what

¹Brian McFarlane, Australian Cinema, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988,
pp.110-117.
video shops call ‘drama’. Even when working within action, horror and science fiction genres, Australian film-making creatively solves its production budget limitations by focusing less on the public spectacle of machines, objects and spectacular viruses than on the impact of these sometimes unseen monsters on an interpersonal rather than public scale.²

Furthermore, the list of films adapted from Australian literature during the decade 1989-1998 also reveals a continuing tendency towards choosing to make films in the “social realist” tradition, although there are examples of the consciously “literary” film (What I Have Written (1995), The Well (1996) and Hotel Sorrento (1995)). This emphasis upon social “problems” continues the tradition of what Dermody and Jacka have referred to as “issues” films. The main aim of these films, the authors argue, is to get audiences to “Pay attention, be moved, become aware, feel concern, pity and perhaps anger.”³ They sum up this type of film as follows:

Social realist ‘problem’ films tend to make an aesthetic virtue of the most quotidian realities; for them, reality is purely material, often bleak, cheap or cluttered, under the pallor of functionally low light levels; furthermore, the

‘problem’, with its essentially pessimistic connotations, generates and defines the world of the story; there is no story outside it, and understanding is folded upon itself.⁴

It seems obvious that these two authors view “social realist” films, with their emphasis upon social worthiness, as some kind of a flaw in Australian film-making, although why this should be so is puzzling. After all, literature, theatre, and, much later, cinema, have always dealt with the concerns and preoccupations of a particular society at a particular time.

Significantly, the majority of the adaptations made during 1989-1998 are also “domestic” dramas, the “problems” being explored within the context of a family. It could be argued that this preoccupation with social problems and the ways families are affected is the Australian film industry’s contribution to the contemporary debate about what, precisely, constitutes a “family” in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, especially in the light of the increase in single parents, divorced or otherwise; gay and lesbian parents; adoptive parents, and “environmental” as opposed to “biological” parents. While the traditional family unit of a heterosexual couple with children is represented in the adaptations under scrutiny here in That Eye the Sky (1994), Lilian’s Story (1996), Dead Heart (1997) and Head On (1998), so are single-mother families in Blackrock (1997), The Boys (1998), Radiance 1998); single-father families in The Sum of Us (1994), Brilliant Lies (1996), The Sound of One Hand Clapping (1998) and extended (Indigenous) families in Blackfellas (1993) and

⁴ Dermody and Jacka, 1988, p.245.
Dead Heart (1997). These families, however, are by no means “happy families”; rather, they are, as Tolstoy would have it, all “unhappy after [their] own fashion”. Some of the significant “family problems” which contribute towards this unhappiness and are explored in the texts selected for adaptation to film during this period are social “issues”, such as incest, Lilian’s Story (1996); sexual interference, Brilliant Lies (1996); betrayal of family and cultural traditions, The Heartbreak Kid (1993), Death in Brunswick (1991), Dead Heart (1997) and Head On (1998)\(^5\); teenage rebelliousness, The Delinquents (1989), Blackrock (1997), and adultery, What I Have Written (1995), Dead Heart (1997).

It is worth referring here to Louis Nowra’s claim that “the great American theme...is fathers and sons, but the great Australian theme is mothers and sons”\(^6\), a comment that seems to be particularly pertinent to the adaptations under scrutiny in this study. In many of the adaptations motherhood appears to be a preoccupation, as I pointed out in my analysis of Blackrock (1997) and The Boys (1998). Other adaptations which explore or make comments on the power of the maternal force are The Delinquents (1989), Turtle Beach (1992), Oscar and Lucinda (1997), Radiance (1998), In the Winter Dark (1998) and The Sound of One Hand Clapping (1998). Many of these films’ narratives also adopt the female point of view, thereby becoming part of what Tom O’Regan has referred to as the “cycle of women-centred narratives” in the films of the 1990s.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) It is interesting that the stories of Greek-Australian families are prominent in the texts chosen for adaptation during the period under discussion, suggesting that to be a Greek-Australian is “normal”. Perhaps the adaptation of Melina Marchetta’s novel Looking for Alibrandi might stimulate a similar view of the Italian diaspora.


\(^7\) Tom O’Regan, “Renegotiating the Australian Film”, Australian Feature Films,
Apart from a preoccupation with "social issues" and "the family", Australian cinema has long been concerned with the riddle of national identity. While the search for a national identity has not entirely disappeared from narrative films of the 1990s, it is significant that Australian filmmakers have become increasingly concerned with exploring not a single identity, based upon the orthodoxy of an Australia whose ethnic origins are white, Christian and Anglo-Celtic, but with representations of a pluralist national identity. The adaptations of Death in Brunswick (1991), The Heartbreak Kid (1993), Blackfellas (1993), Dead Heart (1997), Radiance (1998), Head On (1998) and The Sound of One Hand Clapping (1998) all reflect this attempt to come to grips with an Australia which is multicultural and diverse. Of course these films, as Graeme Turner argues, do not totally discredit "the established orthodoxies", but they do help audiences look for "new ways of thinking about the nation which do not align us with regressive, nostalgic and exclusivist representations or their legitimating ideologies."\[^8\]

He goes on to express the hope that it

may now be possible to think of the national through the multiple signs of heterogeneity, rather than the singular sign of homogeneity; ...to see 'the nation' as constituted

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CD-ROM, Informit, Melbourne, 1996. Besides the films mentioned here, O'Regan also lists Muriel's Wedding, The Good Woman of Bangkok, Waiting, Last Days of Chez Nous and Sweetie as belonging to this 1990s cycle in which the relationships between women, often sisters, is foregrounded.

through elaborated patterns of difference as well as through constructions of unity... [and these [films] offer their audiences [an] opportunity of recognising...representations of social experience which are defined by their hybridity.\(^9\)

Along with Graeme Turner, I fervently hope that the Australian film industry will “continue that journey” towards “hybridity” and pluralism, rather than “retrace its steps” back to films like Gallipoli, The Man from Snowy River, Crocodile Dundee and Picnic at Hanging Rock.

During an AFI Conversations on Film, Richard Flanagan, author of the novel The Sound of One Hand Clapping and writer-director of the adaptation, claimed that

Film allows that extraordinary fusion of music and sound and image which you can’t achieve in a novel, but a novel, on the other hand, has the quite extraordinary capacity to take you into the inner life of the characters and deliver a certain sense of the soul, so in the end, I see the two works as complimentary [sic] and to really know the story fully, you need to go to both.\(^10\)

In light of the fact that there are far fewer audience members now who are willing to read a novel in addition to going to see the film adaptation, this seems to be an unrealistic proposition. Arguably, it is

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\(^9\) Ibid.

unlikely in this new millennium that audiences are going to return in droves to the printed word, given the converging technologies and the limitations we all have on our time. It therefore seems to me that it might simply be better for filmmakers who are adapting literature to strive to make the texts intersect, rather than complementary, although be argued that tie-ins must continue to be published and used as an important marketing device for both book and film, and of course for those who will take the time to read the book.

Graeme Turner in his National Fictions argues that: “While there has been a proliferation of discussion of specific texts in literary criticism...this is not the case in Australian film studies.”¹¹ He goes on to point out that one of the few “systematic” accounts, Brian McFarlane’s Words and Images, is a reading of a collection of texts which examines the translation of one medium into another...[however] no conclusions are drawn.¹²

It has been my modest aim to build on McFarlane’s earlier study, as well as to complement his later, more theoretical work Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation. By complement, I mean that I have drawn on various aspects of the work, particularly in the area of fidelity, though where he has focused upon Hollywood adaptations of novels, I have concentrated on Australian texts, both novels and plays. I have also tried to draw some conclusions about the various ways in which filmmakers, in the decade 1989-1998, have

¹¹ Graeme Turner, 1993, p.3.
¹² Ibid. p.5.
gone about adapting Australian literary and theatrical texts to the screen. In particular I have argued that there are four main types of film adaptations: those which seek to be faithful to the source, dutifully or otherwise, those which are a variation on the source, those that appropriate the original text and those which intersect with it. I have also argued that faithful adaptations, because they privilege the literary or the theatrical text on which they are based, are the least successful adaptations in terms of cinema but that, because of the continuing insistence by critics and other audiences on fidelity to the source as the main aesthetic criterion, faithful adaptations are too frequently the main aim of filmmakers. On the other hand, I have argued that intersections, because they preserve the integrity of both the source and the film, are the most effective adaptations and are a worthy goal for filmmakers. Variations and appropriations, however, because of the varying aims and reasons for adapting the source, are arguably the most controversial, primarily because of the significant differences between the original text and the film.

Apart from my love of both literature and film, I have undertaken this study because I believe there is value in trying to encourage audiences to explore how and why filmmakers go about adapting a text for the screen. Along with Imelda Whelehan, I believe that the study of adaptations

allows us to acknowledge our actual reading practices in a postmodern cultural context, and inserts the reading of literary texts into the same critical sphere as the consumption of more explicitly commercial products. Perhaps
encouraging more flexibility in analyses of literary texts through the study of adaptations will enable the audience to be more self-conscious about their role as critics and about the activities of reading/viewing that they bring to bear in an academic environment.\textsuperscript{13}

The scope of this study has necessarily been limited by time and space. The organization of my work reflects my chosen focus on examining the process of adapting and on exploring the four different types of adaptations made. I have also chosen to limit my discussion to Australian texts because, although there have been many international studies on the transformation of novels to films, and Brian McFarlane’s \textit{Words and Images} and his \textit{Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation} have contributed to existing resources in this area, to my knowledge there is very little theoretical material available which compares and contrasts the processes of adapting Australian fiction and drama. I have also chosen to concentrate on contemporary texts — from 1989-1998 — for the simple reason that I find them the most interesting.

A future study worth undertaking might be to examine systematically the particular methods filmmakers use to adapt novels as compared with plays. Similarly, an examination of adaptations which are made for children, and of short films and documentaries, as well as of adaptations made for television, would be of great value to screen culture in Australia. Also intriguing might be a serious study of

our preoccupation with representations of “motherhood” in cinema, since it appears to be such a dominant theme in Australian narratives and a major one in many of the literary and theatrical texts chosen for adaptation during the period studied. These projects, however, must be left for another day and for someone more qualified than I to do.

Finally, I hope my work will go some way towards helping to overturn the underprivileged and impoverished position screen culture in general, and film adaptations of Australian literature in particular, occupy in our cultural conversation.
APPENDIX A

Complete List of Australian Film Adaptations, 1989-1998
by Category

Faithful Adaptations


Variations


Hammers over the Anvil, Roadshow, (1994). Adaptation of collection of short stories Hammers over the Anvil,

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1 I would like to thank John Ruane for giving me a copy of his original script for this film.


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I would like to thank Steve Wright for giving me a copy of his original script for this film.
**Appropriations**


**Intersections**


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