Re-visioning Australian Social Realism through a Feminine Lens

by

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BA (Hons)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Deakin University

October, 2013
Abstract

Social realism is a popular and dominant mode in Australian filmmaking, and indeed is a key mode of address in critically motivated films that explore issues of the social and the political. A primary concern in addressing social realism as an important, and indeed dominant, mode of address in the Australian filmmaking landscape is the relative predominance of male-centric/masculine character-driven stories.

What then of the female characters afflicted by the marginalising effects of their social status? Behind the closed doors of tenement flats, in destitute domestic spaces where mothers, children and families subsist on the meagre trickle of money earned by mainly men, the broader affective ramifications of fringe living have been left largely untapped in social realist filmmaking.

In plumbing the depths of gynocentric social realist stories, this research explores a unique critical lens through which discourses of gender and the socio-political collide. This feminine lens looks to gynocentric concerns, those dictated to by both dominant feminine discourse and the social environments that come to be attributed to, and often inflicted upon, the female gender. In its application of more affective modes of address, the feminine lens utilises formal articulations that speak through dominant feminine discourse while simultaneously deconstructing it in an act of internal criticism.
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Acknowledgements

Thank you to Associate Professor Leon Marvell for your guidance and words of encouragement throughout this journey. Thanks also go to Dr Leonie Rutherford and Professor Deb Verhoeven for their assistance along the way. Thank you to the indispensable Deakin HDR admin and research staff.

To my family and friends who have provided a lifetime’s patience and love—I owe you all.

Thank you to Trent: how lucky I am to have an office buddy in you—thank you for your support and friendship.

Warmest thanks to Lara for the intellectual, emotional and general life support—and for the laughter, always the laughter.

To my Dad for teaching me to raise my hands against mediocrity—you are missed, this is for you.

Most important and heart-filled thank you to my Ma, without your gentle words, fierce support and unwavering strength I would have crumbled long ago—this is because of you.

Parts of Chapter 4 were presented at ‘The Twelfth Humanities Graduates Research Conference’ in Perth 2011, organised by Curtin University and subsequently published in Changing facts, changing minds, changing worlds as a chapter entitled ‘Teesh and Trude: things unsaid in discourses of gender’. Parts of Chapter 6 were presented at ‘RevCon Academic’ in July 2012, organised by Revelation International Film Festival and subsequently published in SCAN: Journal of Media Arts Culture as an article entitled ‘Visceral shock in Cate Shortland’s Somersault’. Full details are in the Bibliography. Parts of the conclusion of this research are to be published in Senses of
*Cinema* in an article entitled ‘Can we have a falling horse: pushing the boundaries of social realist film in Amiel-Courtin-Wilson’s *Hail’*. Parts of Chapter 5 were presented at the conference ‘Assembling Identities’ held in Glasgow in May 2013, organised by the University of Glasgow.
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Introduction

0.1 A Process of Re-visioning

True philosophy consists in re-learning to look at the world (Merleau-Ponty 1996, p. xx).

Throughout this research I return time and again to a statement by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (2000, p. 16), who notes, ‘Films mean. But they do not just mean.’ In this pithy statement, Nowell-Smith points to those ways in which films evade rational schema of meaning making, those formal strategies that sit to the side of narrative logic and move into the realm of the senses, of the affective. Indeed, all films make us feel, though the weighting of critical significance between that of narrative logic and more affective formal strategies has been both unequal and inadequately plumbed as conjunctive parts of a film.

Nowell-Smith’s (2000, p. 16) ‘Films mean. But they do not just mean’ carries a particular salience when brought into the relief of social realist film, a mode of filmmaking that is predicated on marked types of meaning making—social, political and cultural. Throughout this research, I will reiterate the intrinsic and necessary elements of social realist film as socially critical, and thus politically minded, filmic texts that give voice to those who have little to none. The social realist film speaks for those subsisting on the fringes of society, marginalised by mere virtue of their social status, largely unrepresented by dominant modes of discourse. Though the social realist film, in exploring the socio-political ramifications of working class lives, necessarily relies on dramatic conventions to build both narrative arcs and character empathy, there seems little critical attention paid to the affective attributes that work in conjunction with the socially critical meanings made in the social realist film.

In further expounding this, those traditional social realist films that focused primarily on the heavily gendered working class spaces of men concurrently seemed to conform to a
set of conventions that echoed the supposed grim realities of those spaces. Well-known aesthetic tropes attached to the British social realist tradition, of Brit grit, bleak and dour backdrops complementing the starkly didactic narratives, has seen social realism as a descriptor the world over attached to a stringent and uncompromising set of filmic conventions. In this sense, the gendered working class spaces captured in the social realist mode of address adhered to a discursively masculine aesthetic—direct, didactic and unfussy.

What then of the female characters afflicted by the marginalising effects of their social status? Behind the closed doors of tenement flats, in destitute domestic spaces where mothers, children and families subsist on the meagre trickle of money made by mainly men, the broader affective ramifications of fringe living have been left largely untapped by social realist filmmaking. It came as little surprise then that those films that shifted both filmic gaze and narrative concern to working class women in many cases also saw a concomitant shift in aesthetic convention. This feminine lens looks to gynocentric concerns, those dictated to by both dominant feminine discourse and the social environments that come to be attributed to, and often inflicted upon, the female gender. This lens utilises formal articulations that speak to dominant feminine discourse while simultaneously deconstructing it in an act of internal criticism.

This thesis aims to explore both of these undermined concerns: the place of women and feminine discourse in the social realist film and the further concomitant acknowledgement of affect as a unique convention of the social realist film. The aim of the research is not to construct a new category of social realist film, nor is it to reconfigure any well-established discourses of femininity. Rather, the overarching aim is to identify a developing practice in Australian social realist film—that of the affective—and how this practice is being harnessed as a distinct formal articulation in discursively addressing femininity as a social construct present in everyday life. The identification and articulation of this development will be through the analysis of three

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1 It is worth noting here that the tradition referred to throughout this research is largely Anglo Saxon in representation and Western based, heavily influenced by the British social realist tradition.
2 Here I refer to the ‘masculine’ as the gendered concept attaching certain dominant discursive traits to the male sex, generally understood within the binary of masculine/feminine. Generally speaking, this binary outlines masculine/feminine attributes as, respectively, logic/emotion, industry/nature, public/domestic and so on (Schippers 2007).
recent Australian social realist films: Rodriga’s 2002 Teesh and Trude, Ana Kokkinos’ 2009 Blessed and Cate Shortland’s 2004 Somersault.

0.2 Australian Social Realism

One of the most unique and distinguishing features of social realist film is its changeable nature—that is, the content considered ‘social realist’ necessarily changes over place and time. The social, cultural and historical contingencies of social realist film mark it as a mode of filmmaking that must be contextualised to time and place. Though undoubtedly influenced by social realist forebears, particularly those from Britain, Australia’s nationally unique social issues and concerns demarcate Australian social realism as individual.

Australian cinema, more generally speaking, has largely been concerned with the exploration of local myth and national identity. In this regard, it is little different to many other smaller, cottage-sized industries. The distinct national specificity in Australian film speaks to a wider function of film, of a socio-cultural reflexivity that both informs socio-cultural discourse and is informed by it, as O’Reagan (1996, p. 19) writes: ‘Australian cinema inevitably shapes this culture … and is in turn shaped by it, it intersects with and articulates various social and national identities.’ This is evident from the earliest appropriations of national tomes such as Raymond Longford’s The sentimental bloke (1919), to later takes on bush myths and outback tales in films ranging from Ken Hannam’s Sunday too far away (1975), Philip Noyce’s Backroads (1977) and Ivan Sen’s Beneath clouds (2001). Running through the majority of these films—which are spoken to, and speak for, socio-cultural and national articulations—is a focus on the micro-politics of the everyday, the very human scale of a broader national discourse.

In his Australian national cinema O’Reagan (1996, p. 261) goes on to note a further specificity unique to Australian cinema, writing that more ‘than a “film in a film world”, Australian film attaches itself to social domains and becomes a vehicle for social problematization’ with a particular ‘reliance upon social intertexts and national specificities in film-making’. This supports a wider discourse surrounding Australian
film, suggesting a strong disposition for socially motivated or driven narratives—the *social realist film*.

However, teasing out what is meant by ‘social realist’ beyond that of a catchall for those numerous dramatic productions of the *human proportions* in an Australian socio-cultural specificity has been inconsistent at best. The current research is pushing for a further synthesis of meaning as it applies to ‘social realism’; that is, as a filmic label and mode of address with clear usages and implications in Australian film both past and present.

For film viewers, makers, critics and scholars alike, labels remain an important part of assigning wider meaning to film as a social and cultural text. I argue that this stands as particularly important for social realism given its overarching intent—its intrinsic ethos—as an inherently socially critical and exploratory mode of expression. If Australian film is overwhelmingly producing films of human proportions in their character-driven social realist dramas, then unpacking the critical and social discursive meanings of these films becomes particularly salient. This research takes one step towards exploring this mode of address in greater detail.

The label *social realism* has strong ties to the bulk of Australian films considered character driven and bound by human proportions, and so addressing the relative inconsistency in application of the social realist moniker seems important. This is not to say that this redress has not been occurring already in other national cinemas, and, indeed, to some degree in Australia. What is notable in the existing literature on social realism in Australia and abroad is the relative masculinist approach of the mode. On this, Darren Jorgensen (2005, p. 148) notes that Australian (social) realist films are ‘concerned with place, and with the masculine subjects of these places’. Jorgensen here is echoing Hallam and Marshment’s earlier claims of a greater emphasis on masculine subjects and concerns in social realism more broadly (largely surfacing in global cinema during the 1990s, though this androcentricism is traceable in earlier filmic periods),

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stating that ‘the displacement and alienation of masculine identities’ are recurrent to the point that ‘it is possible to speak of a cycle of films that share a collective concern with the effects of economic restructuring on their primarily male characters’ (Jorgensen 2000, pp. 184-5).

However, there are a handful of gynocentric films in contemporary Australian film that could be considered social realist. Particularly during and directly following the relative renaissance of Australian film of the late 1980s and 1990s new wave period, a number of female filmmakers began to shift their focus to the dark corners of society where women faced both the normative strictures of femininity as well as oppressive forces of social environment and political disregard. Films such as Glenda Hambly’s *Fran*, Campion’s *Sweetie* and Rachel Perkins’ *Radiance* each in their own way began pushing back against the predominance of social realist dramas focused on the disenfranchised male character, and in doing so also challenged formal conception of the social realist film more broadly.

### 0.3 Through a Feminine Lens

Regarding the feminist reclamation of the traditionally marginalised position of women and their gendered expressions, Luce Irigaray notes:

> The way for women to be liberated is not by ‘becoming man’ or by envying what men have and their objects, but by female subjects once again valorizing the expression of their own sex and gender (1993, p. 71).

This ‘valorising’ is at the heart of what I am calling the *feminine lens*—the unique focus being given by a handful of female filmmakers to ‘expressions’, issues and stories of ‘their own sex and gender’. Within the context of social realist film, this feminine lens provides an interesting means of exploring the harms and ills, and the pressures of gendered expectations—of *feminine* discourse—on women who subsist on the very fringes of society. The feminine lens as utilised via the mode of social realist address throws into stark relief the realities shared by many women—already marginalised by virtue of their gendered status—that have come to be marginalised by virtue of their social status.
With regards to one of the unique aspects of women in film, and in particular women filmmakers, Lisa French notes that women collectively share an ‘outsider’s view’. This view is one that allows for new perspectives to open up—for other ways of looking:

About *Only the brave*, Ana Kokkinos and producer Fiona Eagger have said they both believe, ‘women filmmakers can indeed create a different world to the one we have been accustomed to seeing at the movies’. Kokkinos has said that women also ‘write different stories and therefore make different films’ and also have a different sensibility in the ‘way they direct, in the way they work with actors and in the way they tell a story’ (French 1997, p. 79).

Of particular interest to French is Kokkinos’ belief that women filmmakers focus on feminine, or feminised, issues—those that ‘point to an emphasis on inner-life rather than action’ (p. 79). This seems to indicate an act of discursive habitus—that women, having been inscribed with certain dominant gendered expectations, come to have their work infused with those expectations. Though of course not always the case, those women filmmakers that have come to privy feminine styles and concerns seem to share particular filmic articulations, formal properties and dramatic conventions that further bind them together in a shared experience of womanhood.

It is the shared experience permeating their work that leads me to focus on a particular set of women filmmakers and their films throughout this research. Demarcating this set is the aforementioned focus and concern with feminine discourse and gynocentric stories. Further, in narrowing my research focus on social realist film, these are filmmakers and films that cast a critical gaze upon feminine discourse in the context of marginalising social spaces. It is this combined to which I refer as the *feminine lens*—a set of formal articulations that speak to dominant discourses of femininity in their concern with the sensuous, the melodramatic, the *affective* while simultaneously (through an exercise of mimesis) casting a critical eye over those dominant discourses of femininity. The feminine lens, then, is one that enacts a kind of internal criticism: that if one is to challenge normative conceptions of femininity then one must first name it.

Though these films are intrinsically critical in their social realist mode and feminist underpinnings, the feminine lens enacted throughout them does not necessarily regard
all notions of feminine discourse negatively. This notion of a feminine/feminist dichotomy is an important one to address: as Minh-Ha (2003, p. 169) writes, ‘being a feminist meant lacking in “femininity”’. Alternatively, these films, in an act of internal criticism, both valorise certain feminine expressions while also illuminating those that prove harmful within certain contemporary socio-political contexts.

Indeed, there is much to be criticised in relation to the discursive equation of female and femininity. In contrast, there is much to be explored in terms of the positive reclamation of femininity as pertaining to women. As such, there is dialogic at work between the critical evaluations of femininity as rooted in patriarchal discourse and a concomitant ‘valorisation’ of feminine expression.

Films that engage with issues of femininity and feminine discourse thus necessarily involve this self-reflexivity that both engages with as well as challenges issues of femininity. This is further explored by Elizabeth Grosz in her 1989 essay *Writing our way into the picture: women in the technological arts*, in which she challenges women in film to explore new ways of representing and addressing their gynocentric concerns, such as:

- foregrounding the colours, shapes or general visualness of cinema; or using cinematic techniques to appeal to senses other than the visual; or on the level of plot, character and content, creating non-stereotyped, ambiguous and irreducible terms, terms not amenable to or explicable by the norms of masculinity … [T]here are always other ways to represent, other modes of signification, other techniques to be developed and pleasure to be experienced than those which are dominant today (Grosz 1989, p. 19).

Grosz is in some ways prophetic in her call for new ways of representing and signifying women on film. In an appeal to the senses, for techniques that move beyond or to the side of conventional narrative action and logic, she speaks to a more recent ‘affective turn’ in film criticism. In the films that I will be analysing in this thesis, this appeal is headed in varying ways—feminine issues are addressed in a discursively feminine way,

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4 Indeed, all film is affective, though the ‘affective turn’ referred to here is a relatively contemporary turn to the affective attributes of film in a critical sense. Throughout this research I will turn to a number of film scholars that have come to acknowledge the critical importance of affect in film, including, but not exclusive to, Vivian Sobchack (1992, 2000, 2004), Steven Shaviro (1993) and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (2000).
that is, through the sensual, emotive, affective attributes traditionally assigned to the
gendered notion of femininity. It is these traditionally feminine expressions that render
unique the formal articulations of the feminine lens. In narrowing its gaze on female
characters, oppressed by virtue of their gender as well as their social status, the feminine
lens reclaims the feminine as worthy of primary expression while also illuminating the
harmful ramifications of feminine identities in marginalised spaces.

0.4 Methodology

The overarching intent of this research is to allow the films under analysis to speak for
and about the issues of socially marginalised femininities. The approach to this research
is transdisciplinary, with an overarching method of critical discourse analysis,
underpinned by both feminist theory and affect studies. The core concerns of this
research, though intrinsically related, are threefold: social realist film in Australia, the
place of women in Australian social realist film and the unique, largely affectively lead
means by which certain Australian social realist films are exploring gynocentric issues
of feminine discourse and femininity as a social category and identity. This requires the
application of multiple theoretical or methodological approaches. A transdisciplinary
approach, as noted, serves to support the greater part of this research driven by the
analyses of the three exemplar film texts.

The approach to both the thematic and conceptual elements, such as social realism,
femininity and affect, as well as the film texts themselves, is strongly grounded in
critical discourse analysis (CDA). Throughout this research CDA is approached as both
a method and theory. That is, CDA herein operates as a means of unpacking the
conceptual and topical elements present, while adhering to the theoretical Frankfurt
School and Marxist principals in challenging power structures and social inequities.

Indeed, social realism, as the mode of film explored herein, enacts its own internal CDA
in its focus on the marginalised, working class and underclass. In conjunction with the
films’ own critical analyses, the CDAs enacted through examining the films themselves
as well as the discourses at work in their production, draw from a feminist tradition that
maintains a ‘critical perspective on unequal social arrangements … with the goals of social transformation and emancipation’ (Lazar 2005, p. 1).

Further, the feminist tradition from which this CDA perspective draws is present in the necessarily feminist filmic texts, in their focused and critical approach to both feminine discourses more broadly and the gynocentric concerns of the film texts themselves. Within this research, femininity is approached as a discourse stemming from patriarchal and heteronormative discursive foundations. Femininity herein is identified in the social realist films under analysis as a discourse that is both socially constituted and played out on and through the body as a social category and social identity. Further, discourse, as it is referred to throughout this research, is gleaned from a Foucauldian and—by extension, Butlerian tradition—that acknowledges both the constitutive and transformative power of discourse as it relates to the social strictures of place and the lived body (Butler 1990, 1993; Foucault 1985, 1991; Hall 2001).

The dual focus of femininity as a discourse and femininity as it works on and through the body is directly correlated with the notion of a feminine or feminised lens. That is, femininity holds discursive articulations that tie it to notions of affect—feeling, emotion, the sensate, the sensuous, the carnal and so on. Affect, then is referred to as a shared part of both the feminine discourse being explored in the films under analysis and the means by which those films explore feminine discourse.

In a broader conceptual sense, affect is informed by the works of Eric Shouse (2005) and his interpretation of Brian Massumi (2005) in the delineation of affect from that of feeling and emotion, though all are able to be transmitted via the body and impactful in a critical sense. The likes of Jenny Edbauer Rice (2008) and Michael Hardt (2007) assist in further expounding the social and political role of affect in a broader critical studies sense, in that, as Hardt and Negri note, ‘Affect can be regarded … as a singular and at once universal power to act’ (Hardt & Negri 1999, p. 85).

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5 This is not to say that femininity does not possess other meanings and uses, but that the normative conception of femininity as in opposition with—and secondary to—that of masculinity is the one that is identified in the films under analysis and therefore it is this definition of femininity as a discourse that is utilised throughout this research.
Support for narrowing focus on the use of affect in film comes from the likes of Vivian Sobchack, (Sobchack 1992, 2000, 2004), Nowell-Smith (2000), and Steven Shaviro (1993). All of these research materials work as structural support for the film analyses themselves, with the key concerns of each theoretical or methodological area brought into further and greater relief when applied to the films.

0.5 Chapter Outlines

In Chapter 1 I will address the long-standing and multifarious state of social realism in film, considered both a genre as well as a mode of expression, in a broader Western context and in its Australian appropriations. The chapter aims to trace a broader legacy of social realism as a filmic label that exists in most, if not all, world cinemas, towards a more nuanced exploration of Australian social realism. Following this exploration of Australian social realism, my research will go on to highlight both an early didacticism in the largely masculinist narrative structure and narrative concerns, as well as a more aesthetically progressive approach in more recent social realist films.

Leading on from the previous chapter’s concluding statements on the largely masculinist concerns of Australian social realist film, Chapter 2 moves to identify both the defining parameters of feminine discourse as well as those social realist films that take feminine discourse and broader gynocentric concerns as their narrative fodder. Integral to this exploration of more gynocentric social realist films is the concurrent feminised approach to exploring those concerns. The feminine lens is outlined as the approach of certain women filmmakers that take femininity as a social concern as central to their films, to explore those concerns in a manner that shares certain discursive articulations with feminine discourse itself. Broadly, those articulations are referred to as affective, with feminine discourse tied to notions of the sensate, the sensuous, feeling and emotion, and the feminine lens exploring feminine discourse by utilising similar affective approaches; for example, by focusing on the body and on familiar feminine objects and spaces.
Chapter 3 will further narrow the focus to certain affective progressions taking place in Australian social realist film, and show that those progressions are showing themselves to be paralleling with the exploration of feminine discourse in a burgeoning (though still dishearteningly small) number of social realist films that are engaging with gynocentric narrative trajectories and concerns. The chapter will trace the similar discursive articulations, or iterations, both in affective address in those contemporary social realist films as well as in the feminine discourse with which those films critically engage.

Chapter 4, the first of three exemplar film analyses, will go on to explore the relatively traditional social realist structure, as well as affective progressions, present in Rodriga’s 2002 film *Teesh and Trude*. However, these affective progressions focus particularly on melodramatic rhetoric and the structuring of feeling—aspects of the film that go some way in pushing the formal and narrative boundaries of social realism. *Teesh and Trude* appeals both to discursive (known) literacies of meaning through symbolic montage and a recognisable *kitchen sink* aesthetic, as well as to empathetic identification through melodramatic rhetoric, as well as affective language, pastiche or mimesis, and an intimacy reflected through the film’s *mise en scène*.

Moving further into the foregrounding of affective moments in narrativistically typical social realist film, Chapter 5 explores Kokkinos’ 2009 film *Blessed*. Utilising melodramatic rhetoric similar to *Teesh and Trude*, with a similarly recognisable *kitchen sink* aesthetic, *Blessed* launches into more progressive areas with punctuations of poetic imagery, or *pillow shots*, as well as instances of visceral shock.

The linear structure of the three exemplar social realist film analysis chapters culminates in Chapter 6’s analysis of Shortland’s 2004 film *Somersault*. Shortland’s film, more so than the previous film exemplars, foregrounds affective moments on numerous occasions to the excess of narrative logic or to the side of narrative action. However, it does maintain the social determinants that dictate the socially critical ethos and political praxis inherent in, or intrinsic to, social realist film. Propelled by the social

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6 As noted previously, it can be said that these kinds of aesthetic, affective, formal progressions are taking place in other global social realist film; as is its nature, as reiterated, social realism necessarily involves a social, cultural and historical specificity and so the focus upon Australian exemplars of social realist film is both born from necessity of consistency as well as a familiarity of subject matter, space and place.

7 This linear structure is not governed by time, that is production or release dates of the films explored in this research, but rather in terms of increasingly progressive formal approach.
determinants set out in the early stages of the film, Somersault pushes the boundaries of conventional social realist filmmaking in constructing an intimate portrait of the internal, affective effects of socially embedded issues and social marginalisation.

Underpinning these films that are thematically or—content-wise—typical of social realism is their overarching concern with women and with discourses of femininity. I have identified three main discursive tenets that appear to greater or lesser degrees in all of the films examined, and that operate as key bastions of feminine discourse; that is, domesticity, motherhood and sex. These are explored as discourses in and of themselves, as agents of feminine discourse and as broader themes that run through the exemplar films.

Each of the films analysed in the analysis chapters individually addresses these tenets of feminine discourse in different ways, with critical emphasis being placed on the varied (and sometimes overlapping) affective methods of addressing those tenets of feminine discourse. The degree to which the films have employed affective modes of address has dictated the structuring of the film analyses chapters themselves: the first utilises more subtle, though subversive, methods, with the second furthering the visibility of affective modes of address, culminating in the third text in which affective address is quite clearly foregrounded.

The films engaged with throughout this research spring from a particularly fertile period of Australian filmmaking from the late 1980s and 1990s onwards; this was a revivalist period that heralded a new wave of female filmmakers. These were women unafraid to engage with gynocentric subject matter, with women and the body, through such grotesque and subversive ‘quirk’ films (French 2003, p. 294) like Campion’s Sweetie, Monica Pellizzari’s Fistful of flies and Perkin’s Radiance, to name but a few. However, there has been little of this more intensive focus on women and their stories in the more prolific and critically minded social realist mode of address. It is a hopeful step forward that this research on social realist films made by women, about women, is possible, albeit with only a handful of examples. Australia has a long history of women engaging with film in many and varied ways and with plentiful and varied subject matter. This research goes some way to continuing a documentation of those engagements in the more nuanced and specific field of social realist film.
Chapter 1 Social Realism: Shaking the Habitual

[S]ocial realism has shown us to ourselves (Armstrong 2003).

Dirty cityscapes; the din of working life muffled under heavy blankets of smog; nondescript suburban sprawls where the mundane and abject reside in dullard days of everyday monotony, dead-end jobs or no jobs at all. Taking such sullen subject matter as its narrative fodder, social realism as a mode of address pushes for the critical exploration of the everyday. Unpacking the socio-political layers of ordinary life, social realism structures narrative drama around characters marginalised by their very existence. These are films that document the near past and present history of social landscapes where characters subsist and from which their stories unfurl. Particularly in Australia, where film is seen to be ‘wholeheartedly enamoured with character-driven social realist drama’ (Verhoeven 2009, p. 74), social realism more broadly holds an important place in film as a space for normative dissidence, as a voice for those who have none, a framed assemblage of protest and politicking in celluloid form.

The question I address more broadly throughout this chapter is whether a synthesised definition of social realism can be achieved given its multifarious and changeable nature. Further, an overarching aim is to explore the ways in which Australia, drawing from a rich transnational history, has embraced its own brand of social realist filmmaking. Moving from a review of social realism as it sits in a wider filmic landscape, this chapter will go on to explore the local nuances inherent in Australian social realism: those themes, issues and aesthetics that set Australian social realism apart from its global counterparts. A culmination of this exploration will be the play of gender in Australia’s social realist canon. In further focusing the analyses, this chapter will conclude with a consideration of the relative absence of feminine issues and concerns compared to the veritable lion’s share of masculinist concerns tackled in Australian social realist film.
1.1 Introducing Social Realism in Fiction Film

Any exploration of social realism must begin with a review, or rather an overview, of contemporary definitions and readings in order to properly place social realism in a broader filmic context. However, to find a consistent account of social realism in film is no mean feat. Disparate approaches stemming from both a lack of coherent discussion in the wider film community, as well as the shifting of definitional parameters as they relate to different socio-cultural spaces and environments, all prove to be problematic in finding or proffering a catchall definition. My aim here is to bring together some accounts of social realism in order to provide a synthesis of commonalities found in social realist film more broadly, before moving on to the more localised discursive articulations of Australian social realist film.

As a labelling device at the hands of critics and scholars alike, ‘social realism’ is frequently used, though rarely in any unified sense.8 Presented alternately as a genre (Armstrong 2003; Lay 2002; Moran & Vieth 2006), as a movement or ‘style’ (McFarlane & Mayer 1992) or as a discursive term (Hallam & Marshment 2000), social realism has for too long been referred to as a throwaway descriptor with little leeway made in attempting to properly define it nor explore its own merits as a distinct mode of filmmaking.

In its more general role as filmic descriptor, social realism has alternately been employed to describe a sense of aesthetic realism or naturalism; express a particular type of critical rhetoric; and describe a bleak thematic type, sometimes tied to stringent formal structures such as episodic narratives and the aforementioned aesthetic realism, while at other times free to pursue more progressive formal artifice though adhering to particular thematic tropes. Straddling this line of debate between genre and mode, of stringent convention and progressive artifice, the most agreed-upon aspect of social realism among such veritable discord is its place as a non-normative kind of film and

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8 This is a sentiment echoed in other texts that touch on social realism as a filmic mode of address or genre: for example, Samantha Lay (2002, p. 5) notes that it is a term ‘often used uncritically and indiscriminately in popular film criticism’; similarly, Moran and Veith (2006, p. 145) note, ‘Social realism is, then, everywhere recognized but usually left undefined.’
filmmaking. Paying attention to characters found in socio-culturally specific environments that are generally overlooked in mainstream or commercial film productions, social realism is often independent, nearly always low budget and largely as fringe as the spaces and characters the films represent. As Samantha Lay writes:

Social realism has always been a somewhat marginal, sometimes oppositional mode of expression that has relied—to varying degrees—on its otherness from more mainstream film products as a distinguishing feature (2007, p. 233).

This distinguishing feature sees social realism pushing the boundaries of both mainstream aesthetics as well as mainstream ideas in film. In being factional and confronting rather than comforting or escapist in nature, social realism presents itself as counter to the Hollywood-esque idea of popular film.

Of course, other movements and modes of film have similarly bucked the trend of popularised, mainstream film over time, and oftentimes a binding agent of these dissidents of popular film is a dogged pursuit of criticism. Whether social, political, or philosophical, this pursuit of criticism is generally driven by a need for change: for example, movements such as Italian neorealism, Soviet socialist realism and the early realist cinemas of Scandinavia all sought to use film as a tool of critique and normative dissidence. Film over time has shown itself to be a powerful social and political tool (Turner 1999; Wayne 2001), with films able to construct and deconstruct, and promulgate propaganda as well as declare dissidence.

Oppositional movements of film, such as those mentioned above, all add to a pre-history of social realist film as a mode of address that is linked to uncovering the contextual connection between adverse conditions and those less socio-economically fortunate due to, as Hill (2000, p. 251) notes, the ‘absence of (adequate) representations of this group within the dominant discursive regimes’. While it is important to note that these cinematic movements are a part of social realism’s pre-history, grouped loosely together by their use of the ‘-realist’ suffix, it is not my intention to explore realist cinema in any broader sense. Nor is it my intention to enter into a debate concerning the definition(s) of ‘realism’ in any broad theoretical sense. That is for another research project: in this one it would be both unhelpful and, as is realism’s curse, never satisfactorily clarified. Social realism, then—as I aim to examine it in this research—is
definable as exclusively bound to film practice as a film movement and mode of expression. It is true that a retrograde analysis could be enacted in order to trace the histories of realist film theory and the advent of the ‘social-’ suffix by what has come before in realist theory and film, but suffice to say, this has and continues to be done. It is my contention that social realism as a filmic mode has gained enough discursive autonomy to be explored exclusively as such—a filmic mode of expression. The films in which I am interested⁹ are bound together by certain discursive commonalities that I will argue are intrinsic to social realist film.

1.1.1 Brit Grit and beyond

Traditionally associated in Britain with a reformist or occasionally revolutionary politics that deemed adverse social circumstances could be changed by the introduction of more enlightened social practices or structural change in society (Hallam & Marshment 2000, p. 184).

A common starting point in exploring social realist film in its own right is Britain. Overt social criticism and a concern with the social is, as Williams (1996, p. 191) notes, ‘the most significant … reputation in British cinema’, and as a result of the impact of this ‘significant reputation’, a large proportion of work on social realism in film turns to British social realist texts (particularly those of the 1950s and 1960s) as somewhat canonical.¹⁰ In effect, it is the legacy of Britain’s evident concern with social criticism in film that has demarcated some of the more conventional formal and generic parameters of social realist film to this day.¹¹ British social realism has coined definitional labels and terms such as the ‘kitchen sink’ drama, ‘Brit grit’ and the more eponymous ‘gritty’ or ‘raw’, and remains a relative touchstone of social realist filmmaking both in Britain and national cinemas beyond.

⁹ These films, Teesh and Trude (Rodriga 2002), Blessed (Kokkinos 2009) and Somersault (Shortland 2009), will be explored in coming chapters.
¹⁰ I say canonical in the sense that British social realism of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly those films by the likes of Ken Loach and Tony Richardson, are often referred to in analyses of more contemporary social realist film texts.
¹¹ There is of course divergence, both in thought and in practice, from these perceived conventions of social realist film, matters of divergence I will return to in Chapter 2.
On social realism’s unique social specificity and its degree of definitional changeability, Lay writes:

Social realism is difficult to define not least of all because it is both politically and historically contingent. As a consequence, since society evolves and changes so too social realism evolves and changes (2002, p. 8).

Despite this necessary changeability, there remain certain consistencies in social realist film that maintain a level of cohesion between individual social realist texts. Lay identifies these consistencies, particularly through the lens of British social realism, as relating to a distinguishing practice and politics, recurring issues and themes (some of which I will detail below), and formal representation. These are films predominately linked via their exposition of the scars of industrial societies, a display of ‘sociological realism’ contrasted with a romanticised or dramatised narrative treatment of those societal scars (Lay 2002).

Taking a similar line to that of Lay, Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment (2000, p. 184), in their _Realism and popular cinema_ note that social realism in the filmic and fictional sense\(^{12}\) is traditionally affiliated with Britain, and employed largely as a ‘discursive term used by film critics and reviewers to describe films that aim to show the effects of environmental factors on the development of character’. The social realism referred to by Hallam and Marshment (2000, pp. 184–5) is that which is framed around the consideration of ‘spaces of identity’. These ‘spaces of identity’ come about as a result of the ‘restructuring of the global economy, a transformation which is accompanied by … a decline of traditional industries’ resulting in a stratification of society and a class of peoples subsisting on the margins of normative society—that is, the _working class_, and increasingly interrelated, the _underclass_.\(^{13}\)

The ‘working class’ as representative of those peoples on the margins of society with little to no voice in mainstream film is a recurrent and persistent defining/distinguishing

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\(^{12}\) I iterate ‘filmic’ and ‘fictional’ here to divorce this social realism from other types such as documentary social realism, or indeed its other counterparts within a wider visual art movement.

\(^{13}\) The ‘underclass’, as I employ the term, are the generations that have inherited an impoverished legacy of the preceding working classes effected by industrial decline—these are a generation(s) who have parents that have not worked, or have experienced long bouts of unemployment, and thus generated an ingrained and socially embedded poor employment and work rate (Jencks & Peterson 1991; Murray 1990; Wilson 2012).
feature of social realist film. In order to briefly define what is meant by both ‘class’ and the ‘working class’, I turn to a definition outlined by Dahrendorf, whose Marxist leanings lend nicely to the left-wing praxis of social realist film:

Classes are based on the differences in legitimate power associated with certain positions, i.e., on the structure of social roles with respect to their authority expectations. It follows from this that an individual becomes a member of a class by playing a social role relevant from the point of view of authority … He [sic] belongs to a class because he occupies a position in a social organisation; i.e. class membership is derived from the incumbency of a social role (1959, p. 149).

As the working class encompasses those peoples seen in social positions with little authoritative power for enacting change, this lack of power in their lesser social positioning often sees the working class relatively invisible in the grand narratives of mainstream discourse. The prevalence of working-class characters in the social realist film reflects the role of social realist film in ‘reproducing’ or ‘mirroring’ the ‘social structures that need[ed] to be changed … that renders the invisible world visible’ (Denzin 1992, p. 21). It is in this manner, as Denzin (1992) notes on the broader social problem text, that the social realist film has ‘created an identification with the powerless in society’ (p. 21). This identification, as is iterated throughout this research, is firmly predicated on the overarching political praxis that unites all disparate and locally appropriated forms of social realist film—through a crusading social criticism with the aim to uncover hidden social problems.

In the opening quotation of this section, Hallam and Marshment (2000) note that a social realist film is associated with a ‘revolutionary’ or ‘reformist’ politics, a politics that seeks social change both in everyday practice as well as in the very embededness of social structures. This politics forms a critical praxis that is foregrounded in social realist film, a praxis that shapes and directs the narrative in order to push a particular agenda in relation to certain social adversities plaguing its central characters. The foregrounding of this reformist, revolutionary politics is combined with the fictive

14 As Moran & Veith (2009, p. 235) note, a defining feature of the social realist film is that it be ‘contemporary in setting and concerned with the working class’.

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This equation of social analysis through dramatic conflict outlines a distinguishing element of social realism, setting it apart from other films that may contain or address social problems. It is this relationship between ‘character and place’, as Lay (2002) writes, that is used to explore the social machinations of everyday life, and that outlines social realism as a discursive term and unique filmic mode of address. This relationship between character and environment, between place and identity, is the common lynchpin of all social realist narrative film.

1.1.2 The Social-now: Issues, Themes and Types

In foregrounding the social constraints of these marginalised characters, social realism ultimately, and uniquely, critiques the imbalances of a given society. The inherently critical nature of the social realist story can be found in the issues and themes unique to the social realist film. In reiteration of some aforementioned key points, social realism is generally held to be left wing in political sentiment with a crusading social criticism that aims to give voice to those who have none, and to uncover issues of social marginalisation through the exposé of those left behind by normative society. Furthering this, in her account of the critical qualities of social realism, Georgina Born (2005, p. 356) specifies the ‘raw power’ of social realism to explore and uncover ‘hidden social problems’. These ‘hidden social problems’ are those issues and themes that inform the central social analysis as enacted through dramatic conflict.

That the social problems addressed and analysed in the social realist film are deemed ‘hidden’ speaks to the left-leaning politics informing the broader social realist mode of address. Bucking against an institutional view of power, early social realist film, particularly in Britain, identified oppressive and marginalising power structures in place that produced class systems and privileged few. Those with a lack of privilege, and therefore a lack of power, were overwhelmingly those in poverty, migrants, women, and, in classifying terms, the working class. Those working the end of the factory lines, living meagre lives, making ends meet, often needing government support, with a lack
of basic Western capitalist freedoms—spare time and disposable income, for example—often leading to issues of abuse and neglect.

In the foundational films of British social realism of the 1950s and 1960s, these issues and themes were gleaned from epoch-defining events such as miner strikes, shifts in urban, class and party politics, and were condensed into character-driven drama with individual psychologies and stories illustrating the historical canvas. However, recurrent themes affiliated with class-based struggle have resulted in more broadly recurrent thematic tropes and socially critical issues being commonly shared. These are tropes predicated on wider themes identifiable as not necessarily nation bound, for instance those spurned from the effects of post-industrialism, degree post-colonialism, globalisation and increased economic—and thus social—instability.

These tropes are then intrinsically tied to the aforementioned socially critical ethos common to social realism the world over: social realist discourse focusing on a ‘world in which characters have little autonomy but are, instead, largely determined and constrained by their social environment’ (Moran & Vieth 2006, p. 155). Representative of these thematic tropes may be problems such as the dissolution of a working class, the consolidation of an underclass, family decay, racism, sexism or a shifting of gender politics, or, as Lay (2002, p. 14) highlights, ‘anti-consumerism, the negative effects of capitalism, and national identity’.

As a unique aspect of social realism is its socio-historical specificity, what I term the social-now, these broader thematic tropes are then further localised through the character-driven drama into more socially specific issues that speak to a particular time and place in the social landscape. In this manner, the themes speak to the broader social constructs that lie behind the socially specific issues plaguing the characters. For example, in a given social realist film the thematic trope of a decaying family life may

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15 This is a timely reminder here that these are the geopolitical boundaries within which this research is working. That is, Western democratic capitalist environments where class stratification, giving rise to social constructs such as the working class, are made possible and do indeed exist.

16 It is worth noting here that the working class environments populated by the social realist film are not, of course, only cesspits of abuse and neglect, and that this kind of negative representation has been criticised as promoting a class pathology. However, this kind of class pathology can alternatively be seen as a political tool used in order to further and pointedly assert the social criticisms intrinsic to the social realist film.
inform the more localised issue of alcoholism and domestic abuse present in the lives of the characters.

This will be more closely observed in the film analyses of following chapters in order to unpack some of the ways in which social realist film can articulate and navigate these kinds of socially embedded problems on a textual basis. However, it is worth reiterating that through the recognition of these kinds of issues and themes—whether alcoholism, domestic abuse, racism, family breakdown or the like—the inherent criticalness of social realism becomes evident. That is, in recognising and exploring these socially located issues and themes a process of critical engagement necessarily takes place. This maintains social realism as a politically motivated mode of address, one that articulates character-driven drama not as solely subjective but as indicative of more pervasive social dis-ease.

1.1.3 Form: Articulating the Social-now

Some of the more common articulations of the abovementioned issues and themes bring in to relief the connectedness of content and form in social realism. In Born’s account of social realism she highlights two key elements, a crusading social criticism and an aesthetic realism. These two elements have over time come to be seen as conventional in social realist film. The aesthetic realism called on through the formal techniques employed in social realist film was seen to best articulate the concomitant crusading social realism. Largely, the formal techniques of social realism were employed to create a critical distance through observational camerawork and minimal edits while maintaining emotive appeal by filtering the social commentary, or social criticism, through character-driven drama.

A key concern in employing a degree of aesthetic realism, of showing things as they really are in social realist film is the establishment of place in order to elucidate the all-important relationship between character and environment.17 The formal structuring of

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17 This relationship between character and place or social environment has been previously covered, and is further asserted by Samantha Lay (2002, pp. 8–9) who notes that a ‘key feature of social realist texts … [is] the way character and place are lined in order to explore some aspect of contemporary life in a similar way to naturalism’; and further expounded by Hallam and Marshment (2000, p. 194) who write that ‘the
place, of social environment, situates the social realist story within a specific socio-cultural and socio-historic temporality—the social-now—with the formal properties working to authenticate that social and temporal specificity. Given that this social and temporal specificity is intrinsic to social realism’s unique place in film, the formal structuring of these elements has rightly garnered criticism and debate. It is from both the mandate of social and temporal specificity as well as the intrinsic social criticalness of social realism that it has largely come to be identified with observational, documentary-style camerawork. These formal techniques are thought to enhance the authenticity of the social issues and events being explored and to best reflect, or indeed document, the social conventions of everyday life.

Closely associated with a naturalist tradition of a no-nonsense style of camera work, free from overt or progressive artifice, the aesthetic realism affiliated with social realism further consolidated its position as an oppositional mode of filmmaking, offering a departure from the artifice and gloss of mainstream (read Hollywood) film. These formal conventions helped to promote social realism’s overarching political praxis; that is, in a similar tradition to that of naturalism, stylistic properties seen to be capturing events as closely as possible to how things really are were therefore more ‘realistic’ (Lay 2002; McCabe 1974; McFarlane & Mayer 1992).

This aesthetic realism of the foundational British social realist period was seen to be more authentic and thus imbued with a greater sense of critical gravity. The artifice of mainstream productions, those carrying and consolidating dominant discourse, were contrastingly seen as unrealistic, as McFarlane and Mayer note:

Aesthetically, British films were held to be ‘understated’, ‘realistic’ and ‘natural’, or admirable in literary ways … in other words, by implication, all that Hollywood was not (1992, p. 8).

This stylistic or aesthetic pursuit of a more authentic representation of reality was gleaned from earlier germination periods of realist filmmaking, as mentioned above,

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18 This is particularly true of British and Australian social realist filmmaking in early productive, or revivalist, periods—roughly 1940 to 1960 in Britain and 1970 to the early 1980s in Australia. McFarlane and Mayer (1992, pp. 169–171) write exclusively on these ‘key periods’ within British and Australian cinema, noting that many films of this period held a pursuit to ‘make people think’ as opposed to any great commitment to traditional narrative structure.
preceding the establishment and address of social realism as a mode of expression in its own right. For example, early Soviet realist filmmakers overtly politicised their film in a process of reclamation from the hierarchical grips of the bourgeois class in order to express and give voice to the greater working-class population. This process of reclamation, this giving of voice, was ‘driven by a political desire to peel back the artifice of popular cinema and rid it of bourgeois sensibilities’ (Hallam & Marshment 2000, p. 26), and thus formal choices were intrinsically tied to political praxis.

The representation of marginalised subjectivities and unpopular issues and themes, those hidden social problems, has been tied up with a commitment of content over form and a mandate to capturing the social ‘truth’ through unfussy, ‘fly-on-the-wall’ observational camerawork, a legacy of those earlier realist movements mentioned above. This commitment values lack of stylistic artifice as a means of better capturing the authenticity of everyday, ordinary life, upon which some of the more harmful and marginalising repercussions of dominant social discourse can be seen.

Henri Lefebvre (1987, p. 9) defines the everyday as ‘a set of functions which connect and join together systems that might appear to be distinct … [t]he everyday, established and consolidated, remains a sole surviving common sense referent and point of reference’. This is an everydayness that ‘imposes its monotony’, it ‘implies on the one hand cycles, nights and days, seasons and harvests, life and death, and it implies on the other hand the repetitive gestures of work and consumption’ (Lefebvre 1987, p. 10). It is the monotony, the ‘repetitive gestures’ that come to be addressed in much social realist film, the overarching paradigmatic concerns of entrenched social discourse that ultimately work to oppress and subjugate. In this manner, the formal properties of social realism enact a ‘desire to bring … uneventful and overlooked aspects of lived experience into visibility’ (Johnstone 2008, p. 12), to reflect social truths.

I am arguing here that we challenge the traditionally held conceptions of social realist formal convention. The linkages between naturalism and realism as political strategies to represent a more truthful or realistic social environment, or to reveal hidden social problems, are tedious at best. As Christine Gledhill (1978) notes, it is the goal of naturalism to reflect, whereas it is the goal of realism to reveal, a distinction that is crucial to understanding the formal properties of social realism as tied to its intrinsic
political praxis. Social realism’s formal aims are to reveal hidden social problems embedded in the discourse of everyday life and enacted through the dramatic narrative action of the film. The social realist film necessarily, and conscientiously, carries with it a political bias through which it frames its narrative. In this manner, the formal structuring of social realism, whether described as ‘slice-of-life’, ‘raw’ or ‘doco-style’, is revelatory rather than purely reflective.

In a summary of sorts, traditional conventions of social realist film seek to reflect in their formal properties the broader social adversity faced by the characters in a more authentic, ‘realistic’ way. The evocation of this ‘realism’ through naturalistic formal techniques was seen as ‘well adapted to carry a message of social commentary and criticism’ (Aitken 1994, p. 32). Ultimately, the formal properties of the social realist film were used to articulate the social landscapes of people left on the margins, landscapes of ‘inner city decline, suburban poverty and isolation’ (Hallam & Marshment 2000, p. 185).

The oppressiveness of poverty, the dullard days of unemployment, the discomfort and confrontation of domestic abuse and street violence reflected in the very grain of the film, in the colour or lack thereof, the uneasiness of everyday working class and underclass life is captured in the jitters of a hand-held camera. Over time this no-fuss, doco-style naturalist aesthetics came to be associated with the social realist film as though a generic convention. However, this adherence to a particular set of stylistic conventions increasingly has been pushed and played with, the aesthetics of some more contemporary social realist films employing more stylistic artifice in order to reveal the personal affects of social adversity.19

1.1.4 Crusading Cinema: a Uniquely Critical Lens

[R]éalism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice (Bazin 1971, p. 26).

19 This concept will be further explored in Chapter 3.
No film can be objective—that is, can render an event as it is typically, sans camera—because filming always changes events. Moreover, this is just one instance of a law that applies to every aspect and order of being in the physical universe. Observation must alter the behaviour of whatever is observed (Carroll 1996, p. 248).

Lowenstein (2000, p. 221) refers to the social realist film as being ‘bound up with moments of contemporary social crisis’; the ‘now-ness’ of social realism through both the formal construction of authentic social spaces, as well as the crusading criticism of socially embedded issues current to those social spaces, maintains social realism’s important place in the wider scape of dramatic filmmaking. Setting social realism apart as a distinct and unique mode of filmic address, as opposed to a genre, is this very aporetic nature, of socio-cultural contingencies and changeability combined with an immutable crusading social criticism. In the pursuit of change, to examine and identify the contradictions and difficulties of contemporary life, social realist films are not simply socially conscious, but more importantly socially critical.

Social realism shines a light on those who subsist on the peripheries of society, telling stories that figure outside of the generic mainstream. This is a light that is shone not only to promote a social extension beyond that of the normative few, but also in order to unpack and explore why these characters figure as peripheral to the mainstream. What are the marginalising effects that impact these characters adversely? What silences them in mainstream discourse? Inherently then, social realism requires a critically analytical eye in order to mediate between the problems faced by the characters and the ‘broader social mechanisms’ that feed into those problems, as Hallam & Marshment expand:

Social realism, in this context, is less a set of specific formal attributions than an attempt to re-view existing mediated associations between social situatedness and personal identity through a focus on the lives of characters circumscribed by marginality (2000, p. 194).

The crusading nature and integral aim of social realism is located in the conscious critical engagement that it enacts with dominant social discourse, particularly those social discourses that render certain peoples excluded or ‘othered’. In this manner,
social realism in fact enacts its own diegetically driven CDA—a socially, and therefore politically, motivated mode of address that is, by nature, inherently critical.

Returning to Hallam and Marshment’s (2000) assertion that social realism is less about ‘specific formal attributions’ than about the relationship between character and place, identity and social environment, there is freedom to expand, evolve and adapt the means by which this relationship and the embedded social criticism unique to social realism is articulated in terms of form and narrative structure. It is for this reason, this necessary changeability and situatedness that I move away from labelling social realism a genre, and instead prefer to term it a mode of address, or mode of expression; it is a way of looking at things, a way of expressing social critique through film.

The most important aspect of my argument that social realism be addressed as a contained and separate filmic mode, divorced as it were from its ‘realist’ forebears, is the ‘social-’ prefix itself. Situating the filmic concerns within a space of temporal and spatial specificity, the ‘social-’ prefix of social realist film ties each film to a particular time and place where the ‘social’ aspect is defined within specific socio-historical parameters. Though this mandates a degree of changeability—that is, the content of any given social realist film will change according to time and place—I argue that there is an atemporal overarching intent of social realism that ensures its coherency as a cogent filmic label and mode of address. This intent ties together the representation of those characters marginalised by virtue of their social status with an inherent criticalness and left-leaning political praxis.

In reiteration then, however tied to time and place social realism may be, there remains an ethos—a political praxis—that unites all separate threads into an aggregate whole-of-social-realist film. The strategic intent of the social realist film in this regard has remained, as mentioned, atemporal. That is, the social realist narrative has an overarching criticalness motivated by a left-leaning political praxis with the broader aim to make visible those on the margins of society and to critically explore the social problems that plague them.
1.2 Finding an Australian Social Realism

They [social realist films] deconstruct the homogenising tendencies of commercial film culture by foregrounding locality through their use of local language idioms and indigenous actors, spatial specificity, detailed reference to local attitudes, beliefs, and points of cultural reference (Hallam & Marshment 2000, p. 195).

Building upon a literacy of national discourse, Australian social realism has made its indelible mark on the national filmic landscape. Indeed, Australia’s national film industry has come to be known as predominately concerned with the ‘social issues’ film: social realist or partly in social realist style. Gary Simmons notes:

Australian film has increasingly embraced discourses which tell us about the instability and indeterminacy of national aspirations, ethos and experience (2003, p. 58).

On a practical level, this has been borne from necessity given the small-scale industry of Australian film translating into limited production capabilities, with everyday, people-driven stories requiring less outlay of time and money than other kinds of fictive filmic fare. It goes somewhat hand in hand, then, that these smaller scale productions turn to the human dimensions of Australian life, what O’Reagan (1996, p. 261) notes as films operating within ‘human proportions’. These human proportions then operate in a larger system of cultural signification—exploring, supporting, or challenging discourses of the socio-cultural as it inter-textually relates to wider national discourse.

However, there is a good reason for why the thread of concern with social realism throughout this research begins with British social realism. I have referred to British social realism as canonical of the mode in the broader sense, and in this sentiment my work echoes that of McFarlane and Mayer (1992, p. 168), who, in their New Australian cinema: parallels in American and British film write, ‘Underlying the literary and nationalist strains at work in both British and Australian cinema is their devotion to realism’. This linkage could be accredited to the (post)colonial ties between Australia and Britain, with shared social sentiments and artistic expressions lending to an easily
comparable filmmaking imagination. Regardless, the threads of British social realism find themselves woven into the Australian social realist tradition, with Australian film’s enduring love affair with everyday activities, the preoccupation with socially critical character-driven drama both resembling the canonical social realist films of Britain and diverging into a locally nuanced appropriation of social realist film.

Elizabeth Jacka labels social realist film in Australia as having ‘acted as the conscience of the film community’ (Jacka 1988b, p. 90), with much of the structure and thematic content adhering to the aforementioned foundational texts of British social realism in the critical praxis of uncovering hidden social problem through dramatised narrative and character action. This sentiment is echoed by Moran and Veith (2006, p. 144), who note that Australian social realism ‘starts with the ideological universe in which its characters are located’ and that this is a universe that, in keeping with the conventions of traditional social realist film, is ‘contemporary in setting and concerned with the working class’ (Moran & Veith 2009, p. 235). Australian social realist film is then at once unique in its socio-spatial specificity while remaining familiar in general treatments of classed spaces and peoples.

Furthering this, in their 1980s definition of an Australian-located social realism, Dermody and Jacka (1988b) write:

The defining characteristics of the group is the choice of subject matter, and the relatively plain, dramatised documentary treatment thought proper for such subject matter. The subject matter is either a ‘social problem’ defined by the media and other discourses that construct the problem, or it is a social oppressed individual or group … These films tend to validate their presentation of contemporary, usually urban ‘reality’ through a style which ranges from documentary-like … to well-constructed television style realism (p. 91).

These films situate themselves very much in the realm of the social everyday, documenting through fictional narrative means the destabilisation and decay of socio-cultural formations around notions of community, family and individual enterprise in Australia.
This attention to the social everyday, and further to the social ills that plague those overlooked by the *vox populi*, is reflected in the multitude of Australian films that champion character-driven, often bleak snapshots of the platitudinous everyday. These are films that, in their highlighting of non-normative activities and the uncovering of the social problems often overlooked in popular film, make interesting what is commonly seen to be uninteresting. These issues explored in Australian social realism include delinquency in inner city Sydney in *The FJ Holden* (1977), homeless youth on the western fringes of Melbourne in *Mouth to mouth* (1978), drug use and prostitution in Sydney’s Kings Cross in *Winter of our dreams* (1981), mental illness and social stigma in *Angel baby* (1995), recidivism and male violence in *The boys* (1997), drug addiction and relapse in *Candy* (2006), gangs and cultural segregation in Cronulla in *The combination* (2009), to name but a few.

Though there has been a veritable barrage of social realist films made, and continuing to be made in Australia, there has been less of a formal coherency to Australia’s own brand of social realist film as compared to the more often explored British social realism. Though there remains, as stated above, a shared concern with, or ‘devotion’ to, realism in its broader discursive ethos of social exploration and criticalness (McFarlane & Mayer 1992), Australian social realism has not necessarily clung to any generic binds of style or form with a similar rigour to that of British social realism. However, there are recurrent thematic concerns and remnants of borrowed and appropriated aesthetics in style and form to be found in Australia’s own canon of social realist film.

The foremost stylistic tendency repeated throughout Australian social realism is the use of film form to create a ‘distance between film and subject’. An early example of this distancing effect in social realism can be found in Michael Thornhill’s *The FJ Holden* (1977), a film with a meandering and detached narrative that explores the lives of (sub)urban Australian teenagers, stylistically suggestive of observational documentary. The seeming lack of any familiar narrative trajectory allows a potential for objective distance to be inserted between film and film viewer: the characters’ actions and their lives on screen are presented more as objects to be considered than to be necessarily engaged with in a traditional fictive sense. The same can be seen to greater or lesser degrees in films such as *Ghosts of the civil dead* (Hillcoat 1988) and *Holidays on the river Yarra* (Berkeley 1991), all unremitting in their examination of the pervasive social
dis-ease in those fringe spaces of society (or indeed removed from society as with *Ghosts of the civil dead*), though all remain character driven in terms of narrative action, thus imploring the audience be both ‘empathetic but also critical’ (Moran & Vieth 2006, p. 151).

As these are films that aim to explore and unpack certain social problems, whether that is drinking, delinquency, domestic abuse or the like, the no-fuss capture of events in this manner aims to shift the audience focus predominately onto those problems at hand. It works in symbolic symbiosis with character and location to reflect the authentic and critical manner with which the story is being told, free from the stylistic artifice popularly used to deflect or hide from real and present wounds of society in more popular fictive film.

However, this privileging of content over form, alluded to in the abovementioned conventions of social realist film more broadly (and in particular in the canonical films of British social realism), has not resulted in stylistic stagnancy: Australian social realism has maintained a degree of pliability when it comes to style and structure. Let us return to Thornhill’s *The FJ Holden*, noted for its unusual narrative structure (or lack thereof) through which it documented and explored the everyday happenings, the social constraints, ailments and expectations of young people (particularly young men) in 1970s Sydney. The film has little to no narrative, sparse dialogue and multitudinous characters loosely linked through largely place alone, culminating in what Thornhill himself termed a ‘poetic social realism’ (Byrnes 2013). This author further finds the film’s treatment of the social realist content ‘at times bleak, and coldly funny … a semi-documentary style of shooting, with a script that never relies on dialogue, or even major plot developments’ (Byrnes 2013).

In this manner, *The FJ Holden* represents an early example of how Australian social realism has carved a more stylistically broad-ranging space with which to express itself, pre-emption of a wider contemporary aesthetic shift of social realism in which broader reaching stylistic features come to be utilised in addressing social realist subject matter. In *The FJ Holden*, there was early signs of this pushing of stylistic boundaries, further seen in later films such as *Romper stomper* with its action-paced, video-game like capture of urban racism; *Bad boy Bubby* in its bleak-made-strange magical realist take
on mental illness and domestic abuse; and *Ghosts of the civil dead* in which fluorescent lighting is pushed to unnatural places to accentuate the artificiality and claustrophobic nature of a high-security prison, the white walls reflecting the florescent glare to deaden faces with distended shadows cast under sullen eyes.

What ties these films together as social realist beyond any other label, despite certain stylistic or formal discordances, is the push for broader socio-cultural examination. The resonance of a ‘*who am I?’ sentiment found in much of Australian cinema is pushed and probed even further in the social realist film, asking not only ‘*who am I?’ but also ‘*why am I the way that I am?’*, casting a critical eye over the social determinants of marginalisation, oppression and subjugation. These social determinants are explored as the socially embedded issues and conflicts experienced by character(s) in locally specific spaces and whose position, behaviours and actions are directly influenced, or impacted by, this socially discursive charged environment.

### 1.2.1 From Outback to Urban: Australia’s Social Landscape

the Australian landscape as mirror to the soul reflects the grotesque and the desolate rather than the beautiful and the tranquil (Turner 1993, pp. 30–1).

Sunday mornings in the suburbs when the high-decibel drone of the motor-mower is calling the faithful to worship. A block of land, a brick veneer; and a motor-mower beside him in the wilderness—what more does a man want to sustain him, except a Holden to polish, a beer with the boys, marital sex of Saturday nights, a few furtive adulteries, an occasional gamble on the horses or the lottery, the tribal rituals of football, the flickering shadows in his lounge room of cops and robbers, goodies and baddies, guys and dolls (Ashbolt in McQueen 2004, p. 237).

A focus on environment, and in particular landscape, is a prevalent fixture in Australian film; its role in social realist film an interesting one to consider for its cultural and social connotations. Landscape as utilised in the social realist film, whether urban, suburban, rural or otherwise, is presented as discursively charged spaces. That is to say, these are real spaces reimagined on film to expose injustices and imbalances of normative
society. To appropriate Foucault (1986, p. 27), landscape is used ‘to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned’. Used in this sense, the very artifice of fictive film in the social realist sense is used to uncover the real spaces of socially stratified human life, the focus of the social realist film falling on the hidden layers of this social stratification.

However, in other iterations, landscape has played an important role in the annals of Australian history in cementing both a unique locality and conjunctively a unique national identity. In early representations of a narrativised Australia, setting or landscape showed itself to be an effective means to perpetuate national mythologies, characters negotiating these settings then reflective of a symbolic national character. In her book Illusions of identity: the art of nation, Anne Marie Willis highlights the central role that landscape plays not only in film but in the larger national imagination:

Whether we are talking about coffee table art books, films, literature or informed scholarship, landscape is the most pervasive theme in Australian high culture. Of course some kinds of cultural activities merely recycle popular mythologies about the land (of which there are several), others critically engage with them, but few dispute its central significance or attempt to counter its centrality (1993, p. 62).

The use of landscape to generate a sense of shared physical location and therefore shared cultural attributes, in the Anderson (1996) sense of an ‘imagined community’, presupposes a linkage between place, nation and identity. Ross Gibson (1994, p. 49) explores this presupposition in relation to Australian film—that landscape as a space for negotiation and contestation of concomitant and conflicting ideals of nationhood, identity, politics, society and community is reflected in the ‘symbolic terrain’ of the Australian landscape.

Gibson (1994) goes on to highlight a defining characteristic of Australian landscape in popular filmic representations, labelling them ‘landscape cinema’, as an ungovernable entity, working to instil a sense of hard work and resilience in the characters that come to inhabit and negotiate the landscape. Thus, from the early narrative and mythologies that have given rise to such national identities as the ‘Aussie battler’, the underdog as
entrenched in a predominantly working-class nation, are supported—indeed gleaned from—the relationship to place. As Rayner notes:

The idea of the intractability of Australian nature is essential to the national ethos. It is a notion that was instigated by commentators like William Dampier long before European settlement … In discussion of Australian cinema specifically, this notion appears enigmatic and convincing enough to shelter a seductive implication which marshals so much lyrical panoramic cinematography to persuade us that … the continent still stretches out as the text of some divine and immanent (as opposed to social and arbitrary) system of native Australian meaning (2000, p. 118).

This ‘divine and immanent’ reading of Australian landscape in film has largely come to be written upon vast natural spaces of the bush and outback. In films such as Picnic at hanging rock, Wake in fright, Sunday too far away, The tracker and more recently, Beautiful Kate, landscape is called upon to reflect existential crises, a sense of mysticism or internal reckoning. Collins and Davis (2004) call this a ‘landscape tradition’ in Australian film, taking for example the ‘road movie’, where landscape such as the bush or outback are employed as reflective of an inward journey projected outward. They note:

When characters traverse the outback landscape in an Australian road movie, the desert is confirmed as an utterly natural location for the spiritual crises of a secular society suffering from the aftershock of modernity and its colonial underpinnings (p. 82).

However, Australian social realism returns landscape and place to the ‘social and arbitrary’ as something worth exploring for its socio-political implications. There is a synthesis of the ideas outlined by Rayner (2000) in the linkage between place and national ethos, the divine and the arbitrary; that place as demarcated through landscape, and the ‘human proportions’ within, can reflect the realities of the social-now.

As stated earlier, it has come to be that Australia’s national film landscape has been overwhelmingly in favour of those narratives of more ‘human proportions’ (O'Regan 1996, p. 261); often this has located Australian film in spaces of the social everyday, the
traditionally social realist-inscribed working-class spaces of the urban, and ever increasingly the suburban. As with the formal properties employed in the social realist film, so the location works to enact a validation of (to reappropriate Dermody & Jacka’s (1988a) definition) a contemporary ‘reality’, a cultural artifice to reflect as closely as possible those social issues present in the real and everyday. In the social realist film this interconnection, or intersection, of character and place works less as a consolidation of a perceived connectedness to a broader and more abstract ‘imagined community’, than as reflective of social condition and, perhaps most importantly, of social conditioning upon character identity.

As has been previously noted as a distinguishing feature of the social realist film, the relationship between character and place reflects, or brings into relief; the discursive implications of life lived in everyday seemingly arbitrary spaces. The local inflections of Australian landscape contextualise and locate the issues and themes of Australian social realist film to imbue both an authenticity of place as well as a sense of the social here and now. This foregrounding of locality is constructed through the use of ‘local language idioms and indigenous actors, spatial specificity, detailed reference to local attitudes, beliefs, and points of cultural reference’ (Hallam & Marshment 2000, p. 195).

The spaces in Australian social realist film are those that, as Jacka (1988c, p. 126) terms them, are ‘according to the vicissitudes of everyday life’; when considered in conjunction with the other distinguishing or defining features of social realist film, namely the largely working-class nature of its characters and post-industrial concerns of its narratives, these spaces are overwhelmingly urban and suburban. Films such as Mouth to mouth, Metal skin, The boys and The combination all situate their character-driven dramas in urban, and to an extent suburban, environments, utilising them as ‘semiotic sphere[s] of culture’ (Hartley 1997, p. 183).

As an early example of this urban treatment of Australian social landscape, The FJ Holden establishes the urban and suburban spaces of Sydney, to reiterate Hartley’s term, as a ‘semiotic sphere of culture’ (Hartley 1997, p. 183): opening sequences frame two young men in a beat-up old Holden—main protagonist Kevin and his best mate Bob—as they drive too fast around the sun-soaked urban streets of Sydney looking for women. The camera cuts from medium close ups of the men in the car, to reverse angles
framing the windshield over their shoulders, out to the populated urbanscape beyond, and to external shots of the car as it winds its way around the block.

The car, an FJ Holden as the title suggests, is made the key feature in each shot, the iconic denotations of the Holden car recalling the industrial makings of urban Australia, the urbanscapes through which the young men navigate speaking to a cultural masculinisation. The hard lines of asphalt roads, the rumbling of the engine—in contrast with preceding images of Sydney suburbia as a familial and feminised space—and with their menacing driving through the urban streets of Bankstown, the young men of The FJ Holden attempt to ‘assert a masculine command of space’ (Biber 2001, p. 39). This space is one that is familiar and key to social realism as a critical mode of address; spaces of urban decay, spaces of blue collar work—working-class spaces, and by extension the suburban locales where the working-class man lays his weary head.

In summation, the social terrain of Australian social realist film remains in the spaces conventionally known to be working-classed spaces—the industrial urban, and increasingly the sprawling suburban, public spaces of work and the working class. These spaces are culturally inscribed and bring into relief the socio-political struggles of life lived everyday, as Davidson writes on the presence of the working class in Australian social realist film:

Working-class culture is one of struggle: firstly, personally, where each day is a battle for the worker-character, and secondly, where those everyday struggles erupt into broader social and political struggles (2009, p. 22).

Overwhelmingly that social terrain has been a masculinised one; retrospectively, this speaks to the gendered spatial divide of the public and the private in which public spaces of the urban were masculine domains, while the private spaces of the home conjoined with the feminine. Traditionally then, with social realism largely situated in urban spaces of the working class it followed that the social realist subject was more often than not the disaffected, socially marginalised male (Moran & Vieth 2006). Australian social realism has largely continued this trend, the relationship between character and place often translating into Australian male characters struggling with the

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20 Of which the next chapter will explore further.
social, political, and economically conflated strictures of living on the fringes of normative society.

1.2.2 Androcentrism in Australian Social Realism

The essential Australian is male, working class, sardonic, laconic, loyal to his mates, unimpressed by rank, an improviser, non-conformist, and so on. These virtues are defined and redefined under the harsh conditions of the bush, workplace, war or sport, in which women, and the feminine qualities, are considered to be beside the point (Dermody & Jacka 1988b, p. 62).

The place of the masculine Australian national identity is one well established. The quintessential Australian male has come to speak for, and dominate, Australia’s character topos. Emerging from nationalistic myths and stereotypes set forth in narratives of early post-colonial tomes from the likes of Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson—writers that sparked the beginnings of Australia’s own national imaginary—androcentric concern in Australian discourse is well entrenched. The ‘Aussie battler’, the ‘bronzed Aussie’, the underdog, the digger, mateship and a ‘fair go’ still hold resonance in a current national imagery that once bucked against the colonialist hierarchy, with pride and patriotism cultivated in the working-class, every day man achieving against the odds of a harsh country.

Australian film has come to reflect this dominant masculine presence in national discourse with a distinct prevalence of male-driven and particularly male ensemble, film production. Consolidating national myths and stereotypes around this quintessential Australian masculine identity, many Australian films not only concern themselves with predominantly male characters as central focus but also situate the films in traditionally masculine spaces—the outback/bush, the pub, prison and urban public spaces.

Acting as somewhat of a counterbalance, a critical voice in response to blind nationalism, Australian social realism has carved a niche with films that explore the conflict and contrasts of this aforementioned masculine identity. Concurrently, a number of these films sought to explore the cultural and political dimension of masculine identity in Australia in a manner more concerned with the problematisation
of such identities, breaking them down into their respective social dimensions. Through the valourisation of the everyday, those lived masculine identities are explored, replete with all the failures and conflicts that go along with ordinary Australian life. As such, a cycle of male social realism, with masculine concerns, emerged as dominant in the schema of ideological discourses explored in Australian social realism.

Not only in Australia but abroad also, this prevalence of social realist films that are foremostly ‘concerned with the displacement and alienation of masculine identities’ (Hallam & Marshment 2000, p. 184) is recognised as relatively commonplace. The aforementioned spaces in which Australian social realism has come to be located—the bush or outback and urban working-class spaces—have traditionally been seen to be populated more by men than women; the social realist films exploring these spaces becoming themselves largely male centred. These male characters often represent broader socio-cultural concerns of a changing national landscape, a globalised world impacting the socio-economic landscape that these characters inhabit. As the old becomes new, this ‘displacement and alienation of masculine identities’ is sparked and further inflamed via ‘the effects of economic restructuring’ of a post-colonial, post-industrial society (Hallam & Marshment 2000, pp. 184–5) and have been absorbed in a recurrent schema of social realist thematics.

Australian social realist film has a number of offerings among this cycle that utilise the male ensemble, tackling those aforementioned themes of alienation and disaffectedness through the lens of (patriarchally informed) masculine mob mentality. This can be seen to an extent in The FJ Holden and Holiday on the river Yarra, as well as earlier films such as Stone and Blood money, and later films such as The boys, Cedar boys, The combination and Animal kingdom.

The boys (Woods 1998) tells the story of Brett Sprague (David Wenham), a convicted criminal that upon leaving prison embarks on a series of violent criminal activities, culminating in the rape and murder of a woman, which further involves his brothers as well as a male friend. The critical engagement with the problematic aspects of masculine identity is brought into stark relief in The boys, and particularly so in its depiction of the relationship of the central male characters to that of the women in their lives. Brett encounters sexual difficulties with his girlfriend following his release from
prison, and the ensuing frustration in conjunction with a more deep-seated gynophobia is expressed in his verbal and physical abusiveness towards the women in his life; this gynophobic behaviour culminating in an ultimate hate act of rape and murder. The supporting male characters similarly show callous disregard for the women in their lives; Brett’s brother being dismissive of his pregnant girlfriend, all central male characters being implicit in the crime instigated by Brett.

In a broader thematic sense, all of these cumulative acts are representative of wider social problems. The film asks the questions ‘why are these men like this and what environment has facilitated such stunted and violent perceptions?’ In the truest sense of the social realist mode of address, The boys is essentially, to use Gillard’s (2008) description, ‘an investigation of a social problem involving sexism, family breakdown, imprisonment’. Similar questions are raised in David Field’s The combination, a film that looks at the racial tensions among Lebanese youths of the western Sydney suburbs. This is a male ensemble in the truest sense of the word, with very little female presence, implicitly probing the masculinist culture and relative social invisibility of women.

Even as these films move away from reproducing and reinforcing a masculine hierarchy as normative of Australian national identity in their exploration of the concerns and social decay prevalent around certain masculine national discourse, there remains a broader oversight of women, and the ‘feminine qualities’ as being ‘beside the point’ (Dermody & Jacka 1988b, p. 62). In displaying the disempowerment of certain masculine types in this cycle of androcentric social realism there is not automatically an empowerment of women or feminine qualities rendered other than masculine. Rather, in the absence of feminine representation and critical engagement with wider gynocentric concerns, there remains a relative social invisibility.

Despite a prevalence of social realist films in Australia critically engaging with androcentric concerns, there are those that have turned their gazes inward, to those internal spaces cloistered in the heart of suburban Australia; the suburban domestic, where a certain feminine discourse takes root, has given rise to a number of Australian social realist films exploring more gynocentric concerns. Though there are plenty of Australian social realist films that are inclusive of, and indeed go some way to critically explore, feminine characters, the films in which I am interested take women characters
and foreground them as central with concurrent socially embedded issues of feminine discourse critically explored.

1.3 A Summation

Everyday life is the historically conditioned framework in which the imperatives of natural sustenance (eating, sleeping … ) come to be socially determined: it is in the intersubjectivity of everyday life that human self-production is welded to the wider processes of social reproduction (Wright 1985, p. 6).

Social realism, as it is realised in this research, encompasses a number of processes in order to qualify as such: the first and most crucial is an ethos, a commitment to social critique that shapes the story of the film around characters marginalised by virtue of their social status, their problems emerging from society rather than put upon society. The second is the commitment to a socio-historical specificity, that is, a locality that situates the social realist story in a particular time and place in which those social problems are locally nuanced. This is not to say that those social determinates and issues are located only in that particular time and place, but rather are accented with a local, socio-cultural specificity. As Graeme Turner notes (quoted in Jacka 1993, p. 124):

Australia is only physically an island … its history is enclosed within a larger, Western history … the examination of the cultural specificity of our narratives is not in any way an argument for their uniqueness but rather for a kind of Australian accent which is audible and distinctive when placed in relation to that of other English speakers (1986, p. 8).

It is in this accented framework that the social realist film finds action in the inertia of everyday life, displaying the machinations of behaviours, of personal processes, that have come to be socially determined. To reiterate Wright, it is the ‘intersubjectivity of everyday life that human self-reproduction is welded to the wider process of social reproduction’ (1985).
Across all definitions of social realism, with its divisive and somewhat untamed nature, a crucial and consistent factor remains—that the social realist film is the key and primary filmic voice for those who exist on the peripheries of society, those who have little mainstream social visibility and those who are marginalised, oppressed, or subjugated by virtue of their social status, whether that be in regard to gender, ethnicity, race, religion or a mixture of some or all. In conjunction, the social realist film provides a primary filmic vehicle with which to explore social issues as they affect such marginalised peoples in their local intimations, the socio-cultural and historical specificities made clear in the use of localised literacies of meaning (with indigenous actors, recognisable places, home-grown vocabulary and so on) that articulate the wider social issues at hand and establish a sense of the social-now.

Further, and towards the following chapters’ concerns, this research is concerned with the place of women on the marginal edges of society. In particular, this concern is one that asks what kinds of voices are emerging from social realism that are engaging with feminine discourse and more centralised or foregrounded gynocentric concerns. There is an intrinsic and socially embedded dialogue continually occurring between this concept of ‘femininity’ and time and place in which it is uttered and acted out. Hollows (2000, p. 31) notes that ‘[f]emininity is not only made to mean different things over time, but also within any historical moment,’ and is therefore inherently changeable, a constantly problematised site for meaning and definition. In the following chapter I will look further into the unique aspects of social realist film that foregrounds the feminine.
Chapter 2 Finding Femininity in Australian Social Realism

Woman is a social being, created within and by society (Matthews 1984, p. 5).

Women on the frayed edges of society, of the working class, the underclass; women who barely subsist as single mothers, divorcees, commission housing convicts with drug-addled pasts; women thrown into the discursive arms of a feminine ideal by virtue of their female sex, and as quickly cast aside as abject by virtue of their social status. Exploring the unique approaches to women and women’s issues through the critical lens of social realist filmmaking, this chapter will turn to social realism and the women in them, and more particularly how femininity as a social discourse/construct is approached and unpacked through the social realist mode of address. These are films that do not turn away from the woman on the bus with faded bleached hair, one hand clutching a pack of cigarettes, the other an unkempt child. Instead, these films find those women who are intrinsically problematic in their othered existence of the feminine social norm and hold a steady gaze.

The sex/gender divide is now a commonly understood notion in broader gender studies, whereby the sex with which one is born is conjoined to culturally constructed ways of being, and presented as natural correlations. As Claire Colebrook (2004, p. 16) notes, ‘we locate gender in a domain of culture, ideology, stereotyping or society and see this as added on to what something is naturally’. Stemming from this, the gender discourse in which I am interested throughout this research is just that—discourse as a product of culture, further localised as a ‘social category’. Gender then, as it is referred to throughout this research, is discursively assigned (oftentimes enforced) to sex, despite their differentiations as one biological, the other socio-cultural:

‘Sex’ is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative

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21 This is an attestation taken from Joan Wallach Scott (1988, p. 32) in her *Gender and the politics of history*, who notes that gender is a ‘social category imposed upon the sexed body’.
function. ‘Gender’ however is a matter of culture; it refers to the social classification into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ (Oakley 1985, p. 16).

In this chapter, the gendered notion of femininity is outlined as socially determined and subjectively acted upon and through the body—the feminine identity is thus considered in the Butlerian sense as a ‘compelling illusion, an object of belief’ (Butler 1988, p. 520). The marginalised women in the social realist film are not excluded from this ‘compelling illusion’ of feminine identity: they too are shown complicit in femininity’s place as an ‘object of belief’, no matter how problematised that belief comes to be by virtue of the women’s social marginalisation. The femininity found in social realist film is the damaged line between normative identity and social (im)possibility.

2.1 Femininity

While one’s body is what one essentially is—the unchanging or brute fact—one’s social gender is subject to change and history … We locate gender in a domain of culture, ideology, stereotyping or society and see this as added on to what something is naturally (Colebrook 2004, p. 16).

If gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. One is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my ‘own’ gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself) (Butler 2004, p. 1).

If we approach social realism as a type of filmmaking that is inherently critical in nature, it is safe to assume that social realist films that concern themselves with issues of femininity approach the very concept of femininity in a critical manner. Further, social realist films that seek to explore issues of femininity and femininity as a concept itself could be considered feminist by virtue of that critical, questioning nature. With the
aforementioned shifting conceptions of social realism, those that take women and feminine issues on as a central concern broadly display the marriage of diverse individual psychologies and stories illustrating women’s resilience with an underlying class politics. Before addressing those films that foreground femininity as a social concern, an overview of femininity as a discursive term is needed.

As a means of foregrounding pervasive ideals of ‘femininity’, an early musing of Greer Litton Fox from her 1977 article *Nice girl* is worth quoting at length:

A woman (or man) must earn the label of ‘feminine’ (or ‘masculine’) through traditional sex-appropriate behavior, and one must act feminine (or masculine) continually in order to retain the label. Rarely is there carry-over of the label from one arena of action to another, and there is little allowance for even one transgression of sex-appropriate norms if one is to retain one’s claim to femininity (or masculinity). In sum, the lady is always in a state of becoming: one acts like a lady, one attempts to be a lady, but one never is a lady. In effect, then, throughout her lifetime a woman’s behavior will reflect continued efforts to attain what is essentially an unattainable status. There is no respite from the demands for ladylike behaviour—neither young age nor old age bring relief from such normative control of behaviour (pp. 809–10).

This notion of ‘earning’ the label of feminine is one that demarcates the sex and gender divide, aptly summed up by Simone de Beauvoir who said ‘one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one’ (Beauvoir 1993). This is a familiar adage, and one that has entered popular thinking in noting that one is born one’s sex, male or female, but becomes, performs, or *earns*, one’s gender, namely masculine or feminine.

There is certainly a socio-historical contingency that interferes with the unanimity of ‘femininity’, consolidating Smith’s (1988, p. 36) contention that ‘the notion of femininity does not define a determinate and unitary phenomenon’. How to define ‘femininity’ has become an anomaly much covered and, unsurprisingly, has underscored much feminist thought for a long time. In feminist thought, femininity has worn many masks, perhaps the most prevalent that of a masquerade for an all-too-pervasive patriarchal oppression; this conception of femininity largely understood as ‘a
romantic sentiment, a nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations’ (Brownmiller 1986, p. 2).

Early framings of femininity were largely generated from the momentum of second-wave feminism, casting normative conceptions of femininity into new areas of critique and scrutiny. Though not an entirely new endeavour, second-wave feminism took the critical exploration of femininity into newly ferocious spaces of discourse. This can be seen in a now canonical text on femininity as a distinctly social construct, *The feminine mystique*, by Betty Friedan (1965). This hugely influential and foundational second-wave feminist text did much to construct the oppositional polarity directed towards femininity at the time.

Friedan’s text, along with those of others such as Kate Millett and Sheila Rowbotham, were predicated on the ‘ideological consent to patriarchy’ (Hollows 2000, p. 10), and this, according to Millett (1977, p. 26), was ‘based on the needs and values of the dominant group [men] and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates: aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, ‘virtue’, and ineffectuality in the female’.

Friedan’s text endeavoured to outline the main tenets of normative femininity as both harmful and constraining to women, and as a plight that, at the time, was both unnamed and unacceptable. Domestic labour, keeping house, keeping up appearances through cleanliness and orderliness of the home, and subservience to male authority figures—which historically for Western and white adult women was a husband figure, as Friedan notes—meant a woman was too afraid to challenge the discursive strictures around her and ask ‘Is this all?’ (Friedan 1965, p. 57). The ‘feminine mystique’ was similarly predicated on the post-war decline of women in the workforce (the public sphere), in which the ‘highest value and only commitment for women is the fulfilment of their own femininity’ (p. 37) confined with the domestic realm of the home with only ‘wife’ or ‘mother’ roles/social identity(s) to achieve. Friedan’s work presents a woman upon which the feminine ‘mystique’:

- stunts her intelligence to become child like, turns away from individual identity to become an anonymous biological robot in a docile mass. She becomes less than human, preyed upon by outside pressures, and herself
preying on her husband and children. And the longer she conforms, the less she feels as if she really exists. She looks for security in things … she lives life through mass daydreams and through her husband and children (Friedan 1965, pp. 296–7).

Femininity, for many second-wave feminists, was a social construct fashioned by and for patriarchy, and which stood in the way of true or authentic femaleness—how this was combatted was, and remains, contentious and fractured, whether it be through a total or partial rejection of femininity (Dworkin 1974; Greer 2009) or re-conceptualising its virtues, as with the ‘lipstick feminism’ of the third wave (Baumgardner & Richards 2004).

It is from these canonical texts and ideas that the prevailing gender binary opposition of masculinity and femininity were solidified, and through which the apparent privileging of the masculine over the feminine were outlined and made clear. It is from these annals of early feminism that the notion of femininity as a social and cultural product prevails, and largely remains prevalent today. To further this, in her book The beauty myth, Naomi Wolf (1990, p. 177) writes that ‘femininity is code for femaleness plus whatever a society happens to be selling’; this is reiterated by Ann Oakley who notes that gender is a ‘matter of culture’, or indeed a matter of ‘social classification into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’’ (Oakley 1985, p. 16). Femininity, then, as a matter of culture or social classification, is localised and never finished.

The social norms that conjoin femaleness with femininity mandate a kind of infinite pursuit of becoming feminine, that is only ever partially realised in the act of performing that gender in all its socially and culturally coded articulations; this pursuit of femininity is, as Matthews (1984, p. 8) notes, ‘the attempt to live up to the various standards of her society, the struggle to behave like and to be a good woman according to her own and her society’s standards’. As noted in the opening of this chapter, femininity, as a gendered and therefore socio-cultural concept, is both an ideal and an illusion (Butler 1988), and because of its illusory nature, ‘[t]o be a woman is thus necessarily to carry a sense of failure’ (Matthews 1984, p. 8).
It is in this ‘sense of failure’ and the social impediments in the ‘pursuit of femininity’ that I am particularly interested when looking at gynocentric social realist films. Given that this wider research is concerned with situating femininity within the discourse of social realist film, conceptions of femininity as approached herein bring into sharp relief the changeable, temporal nature of femininity as a socio-cultural construct, and as relentlessly in tandem with various other identity forms. Hollows (2000, p. 31) writes, ‘Femininity is not only made to mean different things over time, but also within any historical moment, there will be struggle over the meaning of femininity’. As such, there is an intrinsic and socio-historically embedded dialogue continually occurring between this concept of ‘femininity’ and time and place in which it is uttered and acted out. The discourse of femininity, then, as Samantha Holland points out, is inherently difficult and problematic to talk about:

The difficulties lie in the fact that the term ‘femininity’ is a concept which refers to a set of gendered behaviours and practices, and yet which is fluid and not fixed, and can mean as many different things as there are women, just as there are as many ‘masculinities’ as there are men. As Butler argues, it is ‘a stylized repetition of acts,22 and is fragile, shifting, contextual and never complete (2004, p. 8).

A crucial, and helpful, aspect of social realist film is that it contextualises those issues, themes and wider discourses into a social, cultural and historical specificity; the social realist film says this is what was important at this time, in this place. From the selection of social realist films that explore issues of femaleness, and by extension femininity, a series of thematic motifs can be identified. These themes call upon certain central tenets, or key informants, of normative feminine discourse as a social construct, namely domestic labour, sex and sexuality and motherhood.23 When brought into relief in the social realist film, each of these thematic areas is explored for their related social concerns, framed in the localised social determinants that impede and marginalise the women who subsume feminine roles.

In their Women and cultural industries, Mattelart and Reader (1982) write:

22 From Judith Butler’s (1990, p. 190) Gender trouble.
23 Each of these tenets is foregrounded, each to lesser or greater degrees, in the films to be analysed in Chapters 4–6.
It is in the everyday time of domestic life that the fundamental discrimination of sex roles is expressed … The hierarchy of values finds expression through the positive value attached to masculine time (defined by action, change, history) and the negative value attached to feminine time which, for all its potential richness, is implicitly discriminated against in our society, interiorised and lived through as the time of banal everyday life, repetition and monotony (p. 65).

Certainly in times gone past, the equation of femininity with notions of domestic life and labour was an easy roll off the tongue. Indeed, it could be argued that to be feminine was to be domestic, these being one and the same. In conjunction with the establishment of class systems, propelled and consolidated by industrialisation, urbanisation and indeed later cosmopolitanism, the site of contest between what constituted woman and man became more localised, more salient. Upon this site of contest the dominant definition of the ideal feminine woman came to be predicated on the ‘ideal of the domestic ideology, according to which woman was defined primarily in terms of her reproductive and domestic functions’ (Pykett 1992, p. 12).

As is consistent with the binary nature of gender, discourses of the domestic further consolidated divides between feminine and masculine. This was a division between the feminised ‘moral and reproductive labour … in the domestic sphere’ as annex to the masculinised ‘competitive, economic, productive labour … in the public sphere’ (Pykett 1992, p. 12). This division is one that further demarcates femininity as defined by hetero-patriarchal discursive informants, a value system heavily favouring masculine attributes and behaviours though enforced under the guise of ‘complementariness’ rather than ‘competitiveness’ between men and women (Pykett 1992, pp. 12–3). That is, the role of women in the private sphere of the domestic is complementary to the role of men in public spaces of industry and paid work, for example. I say under the guise of complementariness because by the very virtue of feminine discourse, that is submissiveness, subservience, sacrifice and unseen labour, woman’s agency is seriously undermined, indeed, illusory (Butler 1988; Pykett 1992).

It is interesting to note that Pykett’s assertion of the ideal feminine, outlined above, ‘is being referred to in the past tense, alluding to a time past when these separate spheres
were conceived of and further consolidated. Taking into consideration certain contemporaneous cultural and temporal evolutions, the residue of this ideology remains, not least in representations of women in popular film, particularly those referred to as ‘women’s film’ or woman’s film’ in which domesticity is seen as a key feminine concern (Hollows 2000).²⁴

In the opening of her *Undoing gender*, Judith Butler asks:

> What does gender want? […] the social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood. This matter is made more complex by the fact that the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms (2004, p. 2).

What I am interested in is the exploration of this dependence, and of those social norms that call on the female sex to perform femininity. Further, what occurs when those social norms are further problematised by marginalised existences by virtue of social status—how does one perform femininity when already abject from a normative society, when one is existing on the very fringes of said society?

Social realism, as a means of explication and critical exploration presents an interesting mode with which to pose and potentially present answers to these questions. As femininity begins with the body, so too does film begin with the body—materialities of bodies on screen used to tell stories enmeshing with the bodily reception of those who watch as audience members, all surrounded and impacted by external forces of discourse. It is the interjection of social realism as a mode of address between body and discourse that I wish to explore further.

### 2.1.1 The Physical Life of Feminine Bodies

²⁴ This is further explored in Maria LaPlace’s (1987, p. 139) essay *Producing and consuming the woman’s film: discursive struggle* in *New Voyager*, noting that, ‘The woman’s film is distinguished by its female protagonist, female point of view and its narrative which most often revolves around the traditional realism of women’s experience: the familial, the domestic, the romantic.’ In this exploration, domesticity is established as a key feminine concern, inextricably linked to the discourse of femininity as reflected in popular film seen to be for and about women—thus also re-establishing the discursive denial of sex/gender difference in equating women and femininity as one and the same. The popular ‘woman’s’ films referred to here are those that further idealise femininity, and further naturalise the feminine attachment to both the female sex and the domestic sphere. This is alternative to the social realist films in which I am interested that explore the actualities of attempting to reproduce the feminine ideal. The ‘woman’s’ film as a further subset to social realism itself will be explored later in this chapter.
Femininity is lived through the body (Matthews 1984, p. 175).

The working usage of ‘femininity’ throughout this research is considered and aspect oriented; that is, it is not intended to encompass all that the term ‘femininity’ can come to mean and be defined by, but rather one particular and contingent definition. The notion of ‘femininity’ held to throughout this research is the normative model of behaviour assigned to the female sex and that is deemed socially desirable and socially determined.

In this definition, femininity is largely embodied by women in discursively disciplinary measures that dictate ‘ladylike’ or feminine behaviours that are contrasted with, and secondary to, masculine behaviours; that is, sexualisation without being unchaste, beauty achieved through artifice, slimness and sartorial constriction, and, in the patriarchally inscribed sense, the inferiorised feminine qualities of emotiveness, nurture, carnality, illogicality, sensitivity and the sensate (Bartky 1988, 1990; Hollows 2000). Further, these feminine behaviours are localised and subject to change according to a socio-cultural specificity. In this section I will look further into concepts of embodiment, of social discourse and the body.

If femininity is a social construct, a product of social discourse, then the feminine body is concomitantly a social body. The social body as referred to herein takes its meaning from a Foucauldian notion of discourse and power, and the ways in which certain ways of thinking and being are embodied, so that the body itself becomes a site of social (re)production. More broadly, this ties in with Foucault’s notion of ‘bio-power’ in which dominant and hegemonic power is exerted as an everyday, socialised and embodied occurrence; this discursive practice defines what is normal and acceptable, or otherwise, behaviour and aims to maintain social control at the site of the body itself (Foucault 1991).

Normative conceptions of femininity, then, reduce the woman to her bodily capacities, as different to and therefore ‘other’ than that of masculinity, and it is at the site of the

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25 For example, as articulated by Susan Bordo in her *The body and the reproduction of femininity: a feminist appropriation of Foucault* (1989).
body that socio-cultural notions of femininity are asserted and habituated. As Susan Bordo notes:

Viewed historically, the discipline and normalization of the female body—perhaps the only gender oppression that exercises itself, although to different degrees and in different forms, across age, race, class, and sexual orientation—has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control (2003, p. 166).

As a ‘direct locus of social control’ (Bordo 2003, p. 165), the body is the direct site for the normalisation and habitualisation of power and regulation, with the female body subjected to more bodily rigours than any other. Femininity as a discourse of power, historically proliferated through patriarchal control and subjugation in order to elevate the masculine to the upper echelons of the sex divide, has over time evolved, with processes of reclamation and movements towards greater equality initiated. However, there is no doubt that the female body and the subsequent pressures of attaining femininity placed upon women exist still.

While it is certainly true that, as Foucault attests, the body is the site of (social) control—that is, the body is a social site in which normative discourse is dispersed, maintained and reproduced including that of femininity—there resides in this attestation the threat of a discursive determinism: in denying any form of subjective agency or embodiment, a ‘discourse determinism’, as Bryan S. Turner (2008, pp. 210–1) notes, ‘fails to provide an adequate phenomenology of the body and abandons the idea of the body as sensuous potentiality’.

The ‘phenomenology of the body’ in conjunction with the social determinants that espouse gender as masculine or feminine is one circumscribed by the early theory of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Mead, and later (perhaps most significantly in relation to this research in their framing of phenomenology within other theoretical frameworks such as feminism), by the likes of Vivian Sobchack and Judith Butler. Indeed, it is Butler who has stated that:

the phenomenological theory of ‘acts’ … seeks to explain the mundane way in which social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic sign … gender is in no way a stable identity … it is an

Gender, *femininity*, is an act performed on a social stage, the performance of which is acted out through the body while under the duress of a socially determined gendered normativity. The duress of said social norms is both temporally and socio-culturally contingent, thus propelling the performance of femininity into a constant state of flux, a constant state of nearness but an ultimate unattainability.

The relationship I make between embodiment and social realism is one predicated on the break down between body and mind, the breaking down of a duality that, as McDowell (1999, p. 39) articulates, is a ‘key element in the recent theoretical approaches that question the relationship between anatomy and social identities’. In traditional conceptions of the social realist film, temporal and socio-cultural contingencies of social discourse, and further, social identities, are explored through character-driven drama, though with little purposeful regard to the embodied nature of certain social discourse and by extension social identities.

The disregard that social realism and critics of social realism have paid to the embodiment of social discourse has further excluded femininity as a social category largely played out through and upon the body. Matthews (1984, p. 175) states ‘[f]emininity is lived through the body’ and if we consider the body as a social site, then due to the social realist concern with discursive sites of social reproduction, the body becomes both a viable and necessary site to consider. The films I discuss in this thesis (*Teesh and Trude*, *Blessed*, *Somersault*) each consider both the social and the embodied, corporeal nature of femininity and the inextricable link between them both:

- Identity has become more problematically associated with corporeality …
- Corporeal identity thus carries social and personal meaning in a world of uncertainty and flux. Classificatory systems have been used over time to demarcate bodies—determining who constitutes insiders and who constitutes outsiders (Meekosha 1999, p. 26).

Femininity as an identity with a culturally conceived and socially determined discursive role—and the body as the site through which femininity is lived—raises questions of
representations of women in social realist film as a mode that examines and challenges social discourse. Indeed, there is a relative dearth of central women characters in social realism, and further in Australian social realism, that aim to explore more gynocentric concerns and social problems, and further that consider femininity as a socially determined discursive role. In the following section the trace of women and femininity in Australian social realism is followed in a pursuit of those films that do contain central women characters afflicted by gynocentric concerns and social problems, and that further consider femininity as a concurrent part of those social problems.

2.2 Backgrounding Women in Australian Social Realism

As was intimated in the closing of the previous chapter, there is a prevailing notion that social realism is heavily weighted towards male-centred, or phallocentric, narrative concerns. Indeed, Hallam and Marshment’s *Realism & popular cinema* (2000, p. 184) identifies more recent approaches to social realism as ‘concerned with the displacement and alienation of masculine identities’; similarly, Jorgensen (2005, p. 151), in localising this claim to Australia, notes that a ‘new’ Australian (social) realism ‘can be thought of as a local and male response to hegemonic space’. Further, in their *Film in Australia*, Moran and Veith write:

One very large, recurring subject found in Australian social realist films has to do with young men trapped in milieus and circumstances for which there is no escape. Under the impact of adverse social conditions having to do with both dysfunctional families and relationships and also due to unemployment, these men find themselves caught in a meaningless cycle of boredom, alienation, frustration, aggression and violence (Moran & Vieth 2006, p. 148).

This leads me to question where and in what ways women are being represented in (Australian) social realism. In the above quotation, we can garner that the representation of women in the male and masculine-driven social realist films are those that were part of, as well as demarcated and constrained by, the ‘dysfunctional families and relationships’ impacting the central male character(s). However, little has been written on the place of women in a mode of address seen to be most prevalent in the Australian filmmaking landscape (Jorgensen 2005; Moran & Vieth 2006; Verhoeven 2009).
Looking more broadly than social realism in particular, films seen to be foregrounding gynocentric concerns, and with central female characters, generally being grouped under the moniker of ‘women’s’ or ‘woman’s’ film. As multifarious as the name suggests, there is little consensus on what a ‘woman’s film’ is in any generic sense other than the tacit thread of central female leads and tenuously understood notions of ‘women’s issues’. Traditional takes on the ‘woman’s’ film were melodrama driven, and though providing a voice for women in the sense of foregrounding female characters, the issues considered part of the wider world of women in fact worked to make ‘culturally produced notions of man and woman, masculine and feminine, appear “natural”’ (Cook & Johnston 1990, p. 34).

For example, early, foundational texts considered that quintessential ‘woman’s’ films such as William Wyler’s *Jezebel* or Victor Flemming’s *Gone with the wind*—each with central, strong female leads—concurrently adhered to popular discursive conventions of femininity including self-sacrifice, punitive measures inflicted upon stubborn or wilful female characters, settings primarily in domestic spaces, and a primacy of maternal, nurturing, traditionally feminine qualities.

There has been much contention as to what constitutes a ‘woman’s’ film, and though there are those that have naturalised certain gender binaries, there are similarly those that challenge those images. Indeed, as posited in Claire Johnston’s canonical text *Women’s cinema as counter-cinema*, the very foregrounding of feminine imagery in film can concurrently enact an ‘internal criticism’:

> This internal criticism facilitates a process of de-naturalisation; behind the film’s apparent coherence there exists an ‘internal tension’ so that the ideology no longer has an independent existence but is ‘presented’ by the film. The pressure of this tension cracks open the surface of the film; instead of its ideology being simply assumed and therefore virtually invisible, it is revealed and made explicit (1973, p. 3).

I argue that the social realist films populated with central feminised characters are enacting this kind of internal criticism. A subset, or perhaps better understood as a
recurring pattern in this vast grouping of films known as ‘women’s film’ are those that fall into the category of social realism by virtue of their inherent socially critical ethos and political praxis. These are films that, in an overt or conscientiously critical manner, explore socially embedded issues affecting women in particular. These are films intent on laying bare the machinations of those issues and problems borne from social determinants, including but not limited to issues of gender inequality, adverse conditions impacting maternal work, domestic abuse, prostitution, to name but a few. Highlighting this as a cycle of films loosely grouped as dealing with ‘women’s troubles’ in Australian social realism, Moran and Veith (2006) write:

Women are at the centre of the narratives even if they are incapable of controlling or influencing the direction of their own lives. This cycle seems in part to be animated by latter-day heterosexual feminism so that some of the women in these films are portrayed as attempting to build lasting relationships with inadequate males (p. 149).

This recurrent motif of the ‘inadequate male’ in the more gynocentric-centred social realist films is in a sense a reverse in focus. As domestic spaces, and the women within them, were largely background characters in the more male-dominated social realist tradition, these gynocentric films invert this androcentric structure in order to foreground the female characters.

In the Australian social realist ‘women’s film’, central female characters navigate sexual relationships, relegating those ‘alienated’ and ‘disenfranchised’ (or as Moran & Veith note, ‘inadequate’) male characters to background, reactionary characters. This can be seen in films such as Fran, Sweetie, High tide and Looking for Alibrandi. In films such as Winter of our dreams, Shame, Little fish, Candy and Beneath clouds there is a shifting away from the prevalence of sexual or romantic relationships in favour of ‘other familial and social connections’ (p. 149). These connections are those that tie into wider discourses of femininity including motherhood, domestic work, conflicted sexual agency or desire, and other explorations and challenges to be faced from societal (normative) expectations of what it is to be a woman, to be feminine.

For the purposes of clarity, I have demarcated the presence of women in Australian social realism into three categories: entirely backgrounded; foregrounded as central or
shared-central (not directed by a woman); entirely foregrounded as central or shared-central (directed by a woman). The most heavily weighted of these three categories sees women backgrounded as secondary characters. It may seem counterintuitive to categorise in this manner, particularly in alluding to issues of authorship, though here I would refer to Lynn Fieldman Miller (quoted in French’s *Womenvision* 2003, p. 26), who states:

> I do not know if the evidence supports the existence of women’s imagery of a particular female iconography or a specifically female approach to filmmaking that is not accessible to men … The one thing I do know is that there is such a thing in this culture as a woman’s life as it is lived in a woman’s body even though not all women have the same experiences in their lives or in their bodies … there is a women’s culture … women film-makers and video producers do have identifiable methods, approaches and visions (Fieldman Miller 1988, p. xvi).

On closer examination of film titles such as *Fran, High tide, Sweetie* and *Looking for Alibrandi* there is a distinct echo of Fieldman Miller’s sentiment, and indeed that the social realist films identified as containing central female characters as well as female directors, have certain directives that intimate the ‘internal criticism’ outlined by Johnston (1973, p. 3)—an internal criticism that could only come from one authorised to speak from such an internal perspective.

Of the films that background women characters, not all, of course, do so in any malicious or overtly harmful way; in fact many of these films have strong, complex secondary women characters throughout. Similarly, films such as *Mallboy, Holidays on the river Yarra* and *Yolngu boy* focus on young adolescent male characters with female characters being secondary, and with little social critique on the role of the women in the film in any way. Rowan Woods *The boys*, on the other hand, depicts women as victims of social marginalisation at the hands of the disenfranchised central male

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26 There could be included here a fourth category, that of social realist films with no central female characters though directed by a woman, for example, Nadia Tass’ *Mr. Reliable* and Elisa Downs’ *The black balloon*.

27 The reason I say ‘authorised to speak from such an internal perspective’ is because these films were directed by women, who identify themselves as women, and as such have come to know—to varying subjective degrees, of course—the pressures of a socially inscribed norm of femininity. That each woman subjectively remonstrates with such pressures itself feeds into the individual articulations of the feminine subject in each film.
characters. However, in this instance it is more the social problems impacting masculine working-class culture that is being critiqued, with the feminine depicted as a victimised and subjugated ‘other’—collateral damage, as it were. This is similarly the case in films such as *The FJ Holden*, featuring women used primarily to illustrate the masculinised space of Bankstown, Sydney; and *Romper stomper* in which a prevalent secondary female character (Gabrielle played by Jacqueline McKenzie) is again largely represented as victim, or collateral damage, of the hyper-masculinised central male characters.

In films such as John Duigan’s *Mouth to mouth*, Michael Rymer’s *Angel baby*, Neil Armfield’s *Candy*, and Sen’s *Beneath clouds*, male and female share the central lead with a particular focus on the social pressures impacting romantic relationships or friendships. For example, *Angel baby* traces the romance between Harry (John Lynch) and Kate (Jacqueline McKenzie) as it braces against the social stigmas attached to their respective mental illnesses. These films do not purport to focus on any kind of ‘female iconography’, to use Fieldman Miller’s term, rather focus falls on the shared leads and the impact of social discourse on familiar relationship structures.

In those films that can be identified as social realist in thematic and modal intent, with central female characters and female directors, there is evidence of ‘identifiable’ methods, or practices, that speak to a ‘female approach’ to conventional social realist discourse. Gillian Armstrong’s *High tide* is one such film that on critical inspection, to appropriate French’s (2003, p. 9) words, ‘acknowledges the connection between women’s lives and their work’. Following central character Lillie as she finds herself financially stranded in a central New South Wales coastal town, *High tide* critically unpacks the harmful social determinants that have come to impact Lillie’s life as well as the lives of those around her. Lillie’s damaged life is one plagued with alcoholism and abandonment, and after finding temporary refuge in a local caravan park she is confronted with the daughter (Ally, played by a 15-year-old Claudia Carvan) she abandoned long ago. Confronting issues of a failed maternal identity, and further a failed feminine ideal, *High tide* gives voice to the everyday machinations of feminine discourse when impeded by social subjugation.
Other films, such as *Fran*, *Sweetie* and *Looking for Alibrandi*, similarly trace a line of female experience, from filmmaker to film, reflecting Fieldman Miller’s contention of a female, or feminised, vision. In the social realist film, this female experience—transposed, or fed into the thematics of the film itself—is one that is fractured by social determinants. Often this female experience is shown within the social containments that shape what it is to be discursively female, that is, *feminine*. Most often this is a suburban setting, where the feminised private sphere becomes reflective of the everyday female experience. In *High tide*, the caravan park works as a makeshift suburbia in which Lillie confronts the consequences of her self-imposed exile from the maternal role.

In films such as *Fran* and *Sweetie*, the suburban space exists more typically as a discursive space in which feminine identity is negotiated against social hardships. The following section will explore further the notion of suburbia as a feminised space, and the use of suburban spaces in social realist film as a discursive space where feminine discourse is established, as well as negotiated and challenged.

### 2.2.1 Suburban Women, Feminised Space

Suburbia does not possess a geographical location. Suburbia has been a way of identifying traces which are not, and perhaps never were, really present. This suburbia has been a way of thinking about other things … Suburbia names an imagined place which can hold together and enunciate a sometimes attenuated sense of self in the world (Healy 1994, p. xvii).

The proliferation of suburban fictions can be directly related to the increasing numbers of women in the industry who have shifted the cinema’s focus away from ‘more masculine topographies and narrative preoccupations’, in other words, the landscape narratives and traditions of (generally male) outback legends. Although the suburban sphere need not necessarily be regarded as a gendered one … a wide range of symbolic associations have attached women to the suburbs and men to the cities (or ‘the bush’ in the case of Australia). (Simpson 1999, p. 24).
In his *The sexualisation of suburbia*, John Hartley outlines the development of suburbia as both a ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ space, constructed via a series of interweaving discursive practices. Hartley (1997, p. 182) attests that contemporary suburbia is ‘the physical location of a newly privatized, feminised, suburban, consumerized public sphere’ whereby ‘the means by which public, political knowledges are not only circulated and consumed but recreated, generalized and personalized’. This assertion articulates and problematises two crucial aspects of suburbia and suburban space. The first is the linkage between notions of the feminine and suburban, with suburbia as the sphere in which home is located and domesticity is conventional of normative conceptions of femininity. However, the second assertion by Hartley problematises this linkage in dubbing suburbia as a ‘public sphere’; this contradicts traditional notions of suburbia and the encompassing discourses of domesticity as belonging to the internal, and feminised world of the private.

A compromise of Hartley’s redress of suburbia as a ‘public space’ is to address it as a bridge between both public and private, an ‘in-between’ (Simpson 1999) space open to those capillary modes of power that allow for the circulation and consummation of ‘public, political knowledges’, yet internal and private enough to be considered a space of the personal and interstitial. Indeed, when Hartley notes that suburbia is a space in which those public and political knowledges are ‘personalized’ he hits on this very inbetween-ness. To borrow from Simpson, who writes that the suburban sphere ‘need not be regarded as a gendered one’, the more recent proliferation of Australian film does promote a symbolic association between women, and broader feminine discourse, and suburbia as a more widely regarded private arena, with Simpson further noting:

> Given women, on average, still spend far more time in suburbia and invest more labour in its upkeep, perhaps it is not surprising that the domestic/suburban sphere is often represented in films with female creative control (Simpson 1999, p. 24).²⁸

Social realism in its earlier incarnations was largely focused on the public arena with its symbolic attachments to the quintessential working-class man. Conversely, the private arena of the suburban/domestic arena was relegated as background, as implicitly less

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²⁸ Including *Fran, Australian dream, Sweetie, Fistful of flies, Looking for Alibrandi, My year without sex*, and less explicitly though still notably in *The black balloon, and Hey, hey it’s Esther Blueburger.*
important in its function as a means to anchor the drab and impoverished lives of its characters in an unforgiving domestic space. This unforgiving nature of the domestic space was accompanied by a general sense of aesthetic emptiness resulting in little critical engagement with suburbia, as Fiske, Hodge and Turner (1987) write in their *Myths of Oz*:

If ‘imaginative’ or ‘creative’ are not words normally associated with a description of suburban living in Australia, that is due to the poverty of cultural analysis of the society to date and its inability to even hint at the reasons why most Australians make sense of their lives within that most maligned of environments, suburbia (p. 52).

In not granting the relatively insular and private sphere of suburbia and domesticity the same critical attention as that of the more obviously public arenas, there has been a relative dearth of films that explored in any detail, let alone in any critical sense, suburbia as a rich site of discursive construction and circulation. As suburbia and the domestic are also sites of femininity, this conjunctly meant a dearth in films that engaged with discourses of femininity in any great detail.

When translated into the lack of social realist film engaging with suburban and domestic discourse, this disavows the space itself, and the conjunct symbolic feminine affiliations, the chance to display its social effects on private, everyday life. Though the more general public sphere may indeed be a more direct site of those social problems that come to inform and inflame the social realist ethos, it is negligent to think that the impact upon the private spaces in our lives—suburbia and the domestic—are less important in terms of discursive effect. When considering that femininity is most enshrined in the suburban/domestic space, this further promotes a gender imbalance both in representation on screen and in subsequent critical engagement.

Kay Ferres (1994, p. 150) enters into this debate in noting that these ‘cultural analysts make a connection between the masculinism of Australian culture and the maligning of suburbia’. She writes:

it will take more than a nervous acknowledgement of masculinism to reframe cultural analysis of domestic space … the ‘strong signals’ which mark out the
private and ‘forbidden’ territory of the marital couple and pass the bedroom by, sticking to the safer public spaces, especially to the outdoor living area and back yard, those liminal spaces between nature and culture where masculinity comes into its own presiding over the barbeque ritual (p. 150).

Chambers (1997, p. 86) notes that the suburb, as a space of social organisation, has impacted the formation of certain gender norms, suburbia acting as ‘a material and cultural expression of the ideology of feminine domesticity: woman as homemaker’. In a timely redress, a number of recent Australian films have come some way in actuating this reframing of those ‘forbidden’ territories of the domestic space—the mainstream success of Muriel’s wedding included a sad portrayal of Muriel’s mother, Bettie, bound both by suburbia as well as the discursive constraints affiliated with her domestic role as mother and wife. This momentarily cast a much-needed critical eye over the serious effects of the invisibility of domestic labour and domestic identities: Bettie’s lack of feminine agency, her invisibility, ultimately leading to her suicide. Similarly, The castle and Idiot box\(^29\) both peered in through the windows of suburban Australia to provide both a creative and a critical treatment of that which is the most ordinary and everyday of lived spaces in the suburban home.

However, with more driving political intent those social realist films that have come to explore the suburban sphere, and more specifically, the women who come to subsume the roles of the suburban domestic feminine, look with a keener critical eye at the gender divisions and discursive strategies at play in suburban spaces. The discursive strategies at work in the (re)production (and potential subversion) of socially determined gender roles such as femininity in traditionally overlooked feminised spaces of the suburban and the domestic have still unrealised potential to redress tired and worn discussions of femininity and gender discourse, as Jacka writes:

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\(^29\) It should be noted here that both The castle and Idiot box have central male characters predominantly represented in domestic spaces, which indicates that although the broader concept of domesticity is still tied to constructions of femininity, it does not necessarily translate into an absence of men in domestic settings in film. However, this is not to say that the gender binaries at work between public and private, masculine and feminine, are concurrently done away with simply due to more men being represented in domestic settings.
The local has the potential to be surprising, shocking, uncontrollable and thus ultimately subversive or oppositional. Paradoxically, the most familiar things can be surprising if never before represented (1993, p. 127).

Jacka (1993) further notes that it is not only the local that is dealt with within Australian social realist film, but ‘[w]hen Australian cinema does register the dislocations of contemporary life, it is on the personal level’ (p. 128). Femininity as a social discourse becomes conceptualised (and re-conceptualised) in a process of intersubjectivity in the films to be explored throughout this research. It is from the ‘vicissitudes of everyday life’ (Jacka 1993) and the ordinary, those spaces where such normative conceptions of femininity take root and are circulated, consumed and consolidated (and conversely are able to be problematised and challenged), that further credence emerges for the feminist catch-cry ‘the personal is the political’.

Indeed, in these films the personal is the political, if only in the reflection of the social and political processes evident in the construction of feminine discourse. The social realist film critically engages with these processes, evidencing that it is in the life lived everyday that the gendered self is recycled, renewed, challenged, consolidated and broken down. It is not that femininity itself is only contained within these instances of everyday life, but rather that it can be brought into relief in the micro-politics of habitualised behaviours—behaviours articulated through the character-driven drama of Australian social realism.

The suburban spaces utilised in the films that feature in this research are treated as feminised spaces—spaces through which feminine issues and concerns, and feminine identities, can be critically engaged with, unpacked and in some cases redressed. The women that come to inhabit these suburban spaces are mothers, daughter, wives, girlfriends, lovers and friends, all struggling with the social marginalisation impacting the discursive roles of normative femininity they have inherited as women.
2.3 Fran to Fistful of Flies: Articulating the Social Feminine from the inside out

The films in which I am interested continue what French (2003, p. 9) notes as an acknowledgement of the ‘connection between women’s lives and their work’—less about authorial intent and more about the lived lives of women, in a shared communion of the discursive constraints placed upon the female and her gendered body, bleeding, as it were, into the very fabric of her creative works. This is not to say, of course, that all women filmmakers take as their subject matter femininity or broader gynocentric concerns, but rather that those that do have within them a particular interiority that only comes with having lived the experiences being translated onto screen.

In narrowing my focus upon social realism, my interest extends to those films that seek to challenge and explore the place of women in the social landscape of Australia. Femininity, as a central concern, is then both approached as a means to represent women on screen as well as a concept, or discourse, to be critically unpacked. It is in this dual approach to femininity that social realism as a critical mode of address shows itself, within the scope of this research, to be both useful and necessary.

Further to this, a key aspect I wish to explore throughout this research is the threads of formal convention as it changes and evolves over time and context in social realist filmmaking; when particular attention is paid to the conventions of social realist film made by and about women; there are interesting discursive dimensions to this thread. The feminine discourse under examination in social realist films by and about women is increasingly finding resonance in feminised imagery, imagery that articulates notions of feminine discourse while simultaneously challenging it. That is, these films are increasingly investing in the discursive articulations of femininity, the body, the affective, the sensate and the carnal, in order to challenge those articulations in an act of ‘internal criticism’ (Johnston 1973, p. 3).
With social realist film traditionally looking to the socially embedded external factors impacting the surface lives of its characters, films that take a more feminised approach in exploring feminine discourse as a social identity and social category are increasingly superseding the more rigid, dogmatic conventions and looking at the social impact in more internal, ‘multiple’ and ‘subjective’ terms (Jorgensen 2005, p. 151). Even among films that share central feminine concerns as well as female direction, a distinct progression of formal approach can be traced. For example, compare Hambly’s Fran, with its familiar docu-style approach to social realism (though with a shift of gaze to central female characters and the private sphere) with Monica Pellizari’s Fistful of flies, which similarly shifts its gaze to a central female character and the private sphere, though utilising a much more affective, subjective approach. Both films contain typical social realist thematics in addressing the strictures placed upon those who subsume marginal roles by virtue of their social status, yet both articulate these thematics in different ways.

Fran, both written and directed by Hambly, is an early example of a social realist critical engagement with social discourses of the feminine; centred around the fractured suburban life of Fran (Noni Hazelhurst), Hambly’s film engages with themes of feminine sexual agency, motherhood and domestic violence. Fran uses familiar social realist conventions, the docu-style speaking to Hambly’s past as a social worker and documentarian. The camera work is unfussy with minimal cuts and no formal artifice, using the natural light and quotidian settings of suburban Perth, as Terrie Waddell notes, Fran is:

firmly rooted within the struggling lower classes—images of single mothers with prams, pubescent young women (who may soon become single mothers with prams), flat, wide streets and identical brick veneer homes are instantly recognisable as Australian signifiers of economic underprivilege (2003, p. 191).

Waddell (2003, p. 191) goes on to note that Fran’s sexuality is ‘directly linked to her social status’, directly referring to her past as a foster child with an ‘alchy’ mother and absent father, her self-perceived need to have a man present in her life, to fill in the time

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30 This will be explored further as the ‘feminine lens’ in the next chapter.
and empty spaces with fleeting gratification from careless ‘deadbeat’ men working in a
discursive loop with her social position as outcast.

Fran’s sexuality is represented as both problematic in terms of the adequate fulfilment
of her feminine roles—keeping house, caring for her children—as well as problematised
by virtue of her social status. The film reflects this in its claustrophobic portrayal of her
messy home, tight shots of her clawing at un-attentive lovers as they both literally and
figuratively push her away. The socio-political ramifications of this, the intrinsic ethos
at the heart of Fran as a social realist film, culminates with the literal intervention of a
social institution when Fran’s children are taken from her as wards of the state—the
circle of social underprivilege repeating itself at the film’s end.

Monica Pellizari’s Fistful of flies, while dealing with similar issues of social
marginalisation and feminine sexual agency, takes a different formal tack, pushing the
boundaries of traditional social realist convention. On the outskirts of Sydney, sixteen-
year-old Mars lives with her mother and father in a clapboard house on a non-descript
suburban street. The setting, as with Fran, is one that speaks of the working class, long
dull-grey streets flanked with houses each looking like a replica of the other, a strong
sense of economic underprivilege reflected in the lack of gloss or shine in any part of
the film. The story follows young Mars as she struggles with her burgeoning sexuality
against the patriarchal hostility of her overbearing father, the staunch Catholicism that
runs deep in her Italo–Australian family, and the ostracism from a largely Anglo–Saxon
community.

Fistful of flies, then, deals with the kinds of social realist thematics that are intrinsic to
its unique place in film as a critical voice. However, the treatment of these rather typical
social realist thematics shifts into atypical territory. There is an almost surrealistic
quality to the film; the interiority of Mars’ conflict with the social forces that afflict her
reflected in saturated tones of grey and white, the editing rapid as though a kinetic flurry
of one thought after another, the camera catching snatches of objects that carry the
heavy symbolism of underlying themes of ethnicity, religiosity, patriarchy. There is a
clear focus on the body, namely that of Mars as she feels her way through her own
affective body in conflict with her femininity as a social body. Mars’ body is cloaked in
a symbolic feminine, she is often in virginal white that is contrasted with her sexually
desirous actions; it is a feminine body that is repeatedly reprimanded, beaten, for its succession into a sexually active body.

Fran too is beaten for her sexually active body; one particular scene sees Fran punched in the face and stomach after being accused by her husband of being a ‘slut’. The external effects of this violence against the feminine/sexual body is evident as Fran dons a blackened eye, shown attempting to cover it up with makeup—attempting to perform an idealised feminine body again and again. In Fistful of flies this violence is reflected much more abstractly, affectively. After repeated abuse at the hands of her father, Mars tries to shoot herself in a graveyard under the watchful eye of a stone Virgin Mary made by her father, a stone mason. She instead misfires, hitting the virginal Mother. Mars’ attempt at escape, both from her social situation as well as her discursive one as a gendered, feminine body both fails and succeeds—the symbolic, idealised feminine actualised as the statue Mary coming to represent Mars’ own struggle with her discursive body, one that she damages but never destroys.

Both Fran and Fistful of flies focus on issues of femininity, of female experience and consciousness, and yet do so in very different ways. Monica Pellizzari’s treatment, in many ways, supersedes the more dogmatic treatment of Hambly’s Fran, offering a more feminised, affective approach to critiquing the feminine, and, I argue, better employs Johnston’s (1973) notion of an ‘internal criticism’. It is this progression, towards a more dialectic, feminised approach to the social realist ethos that is reflected in Fistful of flies, an internal critique both of gynocentric concerns and feminine discourse, and of the formal boundaries long associated with social realism as a mode of address.

What I hope to have achieved in this chapter is not only a working definition of ‘femininity’, as a discourse borne from hetero–patriarchal ideologies, a cultural construct and social category, but also the ways in which social realist film can be a useful tool in critically exploring, and indeed challenging, ideas of femininity. A key emphasis of this is the notion of femininity being played out upon and through the body, that the body is not only a ‘text of culture’ but also a ‘practical, direct locus of social control’, with feminine discourse, ways of behaving and ways of being, as one mode of that social control.
That the feminine discourse to which I am referring is that which is most commonly attributed to, and constructed as a natural component of, the female sex feeds into the kinds of films that are of particular interest throughout this research. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the three films to be analysed in depth are not only about women, but also directed by women. In the next chapter, I will posit what I believe to be unique to a kind of women’s filmmaking culture, highlighting some of those ‘approaches and visions’ (Fieldman Miller 1988) being employed to specifically target issues relating to women and aspects of feminine discourse. This will be another step towards the examination of particular social realist films that in their own production seek to foreground notions of embodiment and the social reproduction of femininity while also inviting a critical engagement with those notions.
Chapter 3 Affective Articulation through a Feminised Lens in Social Realism

Hers is the empire of the affections (Hale 1852).

Affect is rarely considered a necessary and inevitable part of social realist film—a mode more lauded for its didactic socio-political motives than its persuasive affective properties. This chapter will examine the affective, stylistic shifts taking place within social realist film in Australia, further brought into relief by the contemporaneous increase in representation of feminine concerns within a number of those films. The films on which I focus throughout this research are those that are engaging with an eclecticism increasingly present in contemporary social realist filmmaking, and that are showing themselves to be paralleling with the exploration of feminine discourse in a burgeoning number of social realist films that are engaging with gynocentric narrative trajectories/concerns.

The relatively recent awakening of sensorial, affective resonance within social realist film has allowed for an interesting and renewed dialogic with familiar discourse. Similarly, an active associated with affective modes of exposition is avowing new and renewed discussion with overlooked issues, such as those relating to femininity as is explored within the films of interest throughout this research. I am arguing that the uptake of more affective modes of address in social realism, a known critical mode of filmmaking, is particularly useful in the exploration and unpacking of feminine issues and concerns with both affective address and feminine discourse sharing similar syntactical or discursive articulations. Therefore, while effectively naming and outlining those affectively motivated discursive aspects of femininity, an affective mode of address simultaneously provides a means to unpack and challenge those discursive elements.

As the last chapter traced the shift from the masculinist concerns of a majority of Australian social realist film to those few that have come to explore more feminine
concerns, this chapter will explore some of the ways in which those films are addressing discourses of femininity; these films are part of a progression, or evolution, within social realism that is seeing the means by which typical themes and issues are being addressed shift into affective filmic spaces. This progression is towards a social realism that, to borrow a phrase from Rutherford (2003), ‘recognises the full resonance of embodied affect’ as well as maintaining its inherently critical and political praxis.

The films in which I am interested are those that adhere to the social realist mandate in their address of typical issues and themes through a narrativised socio-political praxis aimed at exploring and uncovering social silences, yet that also acknowledge the role of affect (and emotion and feeling) within that praxis. This chapter explores the move towards more affective strategies in social realist film, and how this impacts, renews and revitalises those discourses taken to task within social realist film. The concomitance of this affective shift with the feminist adage of the ‘personal is the political’ makes it a particularly useful shift in explorations of discourses of femininity within social realist film.

3.1 Affective/Reflective

With the advent of the affective turn in academic studies, joining the ranks of a series of academic turns including the cultural and the visual, many disciplines have made claim to the potentials of affect in their own respective fields of study. As was the difficulty in defining social realism, so too is affect often referred to yet with little consistency in definition or usage. The necessarily multidisciplinary nature of affect due to its place within a broader academic shift does mean that this inconsistency is somewhat inevitable, and does insist on a contextualisation of its usage as contingent on the focus and field of research in which affect is being employed conceptually or otherwise.

Throughout this research, affect comes to encompass an umbrella term for the formally structured moments within film that give rise to more bodily situated (in)action\(^{31}\) that often sits to the side of narrative action or narrative progression. Affect herein speaks to

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\(^{31}\) I have parenthesised ‘in’ here so as to signpost the use of affect in those filmic moments of inaction, those moments that have no bearing on the forward progression of narrative action, and further that seem to stand alone as moments of existential liminality or spaces for more ontological contemplation.
embodied response as well as the more external representations of embodied response. Those external representations include the signalling of emotion, as well as the structuring of feeling and affect through formal spaces that avow potential affective identification and embodied response. Affect, then, is composite of a wider affective genus of body-centred meaning.

Drawing from Massumi’s introduction to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A thousand plateaus* (1987), and further expounded in Massumi’s own *Parables for the virtual* (2002), Shouse synthesises the popular stratification of affectations into the interlinked though distinct categories of feelings, emotions and affect. Shouse notes (2005, p. 2) that ‘feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects are pre-personal’. In the sense in which I am using it, affect acts as an umbrella term, or perhaps better as an overarching precursor, to feeling and emotion, in that both feeling and emotion rely first on a pre-personal affect taking place.

Further, I argue, all three categories that Shouse isolates as separate centres of affective meaning—the pre-personal, the personal or biographical, and the social—necessarily collapse in on one another, working as an interactive and collective process of affective, body-centred meaning making. That is, the pre-personal takes place in a sensorial acknowledgement of external stimuli, both semiotic stimuli of text, images and language, and other more primal affective stimuli of the senses: smell, touch, sound and so on. However, following on from the pre-personal is cognitive processing of those stimuli, which is a process of more mindful meaning making, which then necessarily ties the pre-personal to the personal; and, as I have argued in previous chapters, the personal is (discursively) tied to the social. Affect, then, is a collective process of the pre-personal, the personal and the social.

In acknowledging the processes of body-centred meanings that take place in moments of affective response, this research goes some way to further acknowledging the breaking down of the Cartesian dualism of body and mind. As Plantinga (2005) notes:

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32 I refer here to filmic form and the structuring of affective spaces via on-screen space, sound and carnal, empathetic identification with figures on screen; through such filmmaking practices as the close-up, filters, montage and so on. These spaces invite embodied response, foregrounding moments of affect above that of narrative logic.
The facile duality between reason and emotion lies as the unspoken premise behind many discussions of affect and the spectator, as though emotion must be ‘bridled’ or ‘mastered’ to allow reason to function adequately (p. 149).

The increasing attention being paid to affect and embodied response does not necessarily result in less critical analysis or the exclusion of critical thought. That is to say, the affective turn does not mean a turn away from the cultural, social or broader critical concerns of academia. Rather, as Hardt (2007) espouses, it requires a coalescence of both:

A focus on affects certainly does draw attention to the body and emotions, but it also introduces an important shift. The challenge of the perspective of the affects resides primarily in the synthesis it requires. This is, in the first place, because affects refer equally to the body and the mind; and, in the second, because they involve both reason and the passions. Affects require us, as the term suggests, to enter into the realm of causality, but they offer a complex view of causality because the affects belong simultaneously to both sides of the causal relationship. They illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers (p. ix).

The power to affect and be affected—what Hardt terms ‘the realm of causality’—primarily looks to immediate stimulation and the affected response. However, the social spaces that play stage to certain affective responses—those that support certain affective responses and, concurrently, can be shifted by those affective responses—have largely been relegated to the sidelines as being of little consequence, or at least less than that of critical, reflective and mindful analysis. However, neither reflection (at the level of critical mindfulness) nor pre-reflection (at the level of the affected body) stand alone in their respective process(es). This is a concept covered by Massumi (2005, p. 7) in his piece *The future birth of affective fact* in which he states, ‘Affect is not just one mechanism among others. It is a component of passage between mechanisms, orders of phenomena, and modes of power*. Affect exists in a symbiotic duality with the intellect, the personal and the pre-personal, the mindful and the proprioceptive, the social and the subjective.
A key concern in exploring the affective aspects of and affective shift within, social realism is how this impacts the intrinsic and necessary socio-political ethos of social realist film. There has long been a facile duality between the affective body and the critical mind, with recent affect studies going some way to addressing this apparent opposition. Film is a medium that relies on affect in order to dramatise narrative events and make them moving, gripping and entertaining. This further brings into relief this play between body and mind, as does a mode of address such as social realism where there is an expectation of a crusading social criticism through meaningful representation while simultaneously relying upon the aforementioned affective elements within dramatised narrative action in order to structure and deliver that crusading social criticism. As Turner writes:

The notion of pleasure has increasingly been placed in opposition to that of ideology. There are varieties of pleasure that are located in the body, their production having physical sources. Whereas the meanings we give to the world we live in are socially produced, there is an argument that suggests our physical pleasures are our own. Such a theory implies a limited degree of individual freedom from the forces of ideology (2003, p. 96).

Turner’s open-ended argument asks whether the possibility exists for a detachment from our socially produced selves, whether the site of the body (‘pleasure’ in Turner’s interpretation) allows for a ‘freedom from the forces of ideology’, an argument implicitly faced within the social realist drama that overwhelms this nation’s cinema.

The transitional space in film that I am arguing exists between, and in a symbiotic relation with, mind and body is one that acknowledges initial affective response and immediate, or near-immediate, reflective thought. This affective/reflective symbiosis is, in fact, a key component of social realist film. As a mode that holds an overarching socially critical ethos, spanning across time and place, a mindfulness of socio-culturally specific issues, of political structures and power ideologies is required. In order to make compelling the desire for change—as enacted through social realism’s crusading social criticism—it must appeal to the affective, to the emotive, to make one feel and be moved by this desire for change. Indeed, the formal structures are already in place within the fictional dramatic film for the social realist mode of address to make this compelling
appeal for social change—the mindfulness of a socio-politically aware narrative delivered in a dramatic appeal to the senses.

3.1.1 Affect and Film

Realist innovations take place in a kind of dialectic with what has gone before, under-writing their own appeal to be uncovering reality by exposing the artificiality and unconventionality of what has passed for reality previously (Hill 1986, p. 127).

The flesh is intrinsic to the cinematic apparatus, at once its subject, its substance, and its limit (Shaviro 1993, p. 254).

Affect, feeling and emotion are integral aspects of film; this may seem an obvious statement to make, but these aspects are largely taken for granted. The attention on affect in film has come about from the momentum of a broader movement within recent research, loosely coined the ‘affective turn’. With this, Kathleen Woodward identified an ‘explosion of academic fascination with the emotions’ as a reverberation and necessary redressing of ‘the anaesthetization of the emotions in everyday life’ (Woodward 1996, pp. 758, 60).

The affective turn, therefore, addressed a noticeable lack of an aspect of life that is always present. As a medium through which emotion, feeling and affects are purposively structured and utilised as a vehicle for character identification, narrative action or the narrativisation of conflict, romance, violence and so on, affect is a necessary and integral part of film and filmmaking. It was but a matter of time before the ‘affective turn’ would bleed into film and cinema studies, a field of inquiry already so naturally concerned with the senses and processes of (on-screen and spectatorial) affect. The discourse surrounding the affective qualities of film is not necessarily a new one, but a renewed insistence has come about, spurred on by the broader research insurgence of this ‘affective turn’.

As with other concerns that are explored using an affective lens, there are enduring questions in the utilisation of affect in conducting research—how are we to situate
affect socio-historically, critically, given its transdisciplinary nature? Further, how are we to develop a vocabulary for the use of affect when oftentimes the study of affect is looking to ephemeral and preconscious moments or occurrences given that many affective responses may begin (and remain) experiential and indeterminate? In furthering this I return to Nowell-Smith who goes on to speak of the unspeakable in film:

Films mean. But they do not just mean. Because they can be described with the aid of language we can be led to think that description can substitute for the film. This is the perennial temptation of what I have called the linguistic analogy. But films also work in less describable ways. They work as painting and music do, partly through meaning but partly in other ways; partly in ways that have linguistic equivalents and partly in ways that do not. The move in the direction of semiotics in the 1970s was ‘indeterminate’ and could not be brought within a rational schema. But the need for such a rational schema has become questionable. Too many of the things that films do evade attempt to subsume them under the heading of meaning (2006, p. 16).

Nowell-Smith’s assertion that films ‘do not just mean’ insinuates that those less concrete aspects of film, those that do not sit neatly within linguistic analogy at first glance, those affective and sensuous moments, are somehow void of meaning or unable to be subsumed ‘under the heading of meaning’. However, I argue that these are the aspects of film that are waiting to be mined for the potential meanings they can and do convey, the powers that they hold, not only over and through the body but also critically, mindfully.

One of the major proponents of this re-visioned addressing of film, Vivian Sobchack, utilised both traditional phenomenology as well as more current implications of finding meaning, or ‘making sense’, of film through more affective means. Flagging this, Sobchack (2004) notes in her book _Carnal thoughts_ the ‘multidisciplinary’ nature grounding her analysis of film. Indeed, it is necessary to draw from multifarious pools of research and methodologies when approaching any given topic or issue through an affective lens. This is not least due to the very fact that the affective, as well as the different though not unrelated areas of emotion and feeling, is rooted in the body, in the
sensorial and pre- or unconscious, which then must be made sense of through conscious modes of analysis.

The transdisciplinary, or multidisciplinary, approach that the affective turn requires is thusly so in order that we may go beyond the mindless moment of affect and into a mindful space of making meaning (or making sense in the denotative use of the word) of affect in the ‘bodily’ sense. Returning to Sobchack, this ‘making sense’ of those moments that we sensorially experience is a process that occurs throughout our everyday lives.\(^{33}\) The common question of how a film ‘moves’ or ‘.touches’ us inherently refers to the affective reckoning that takes place in critical reflection of film, a reckoning rooted in everyday living and the sensorial stimuli we each encounter in the complex discursively structured world around us, Sobchack (2004, p. 1) noting that the exploration between the ‘visible’ and the visual’ in an ‘image-saturated culture’ is an inevitability. It is this inevitability that is increasingly recognised and foregrounded in film, as our own multifarious senses, both the mindful ‘making sense of’ and the carnal-bound sense of affectations, ‘emerge and merge “in the flesh”’.

Affect in film, then, is but a moment, or series of moments—yet these are moments that are powerful as they ‘touch us’, they move us and powerfully prompt both thought and action. Sobchack’s sentiments of making sense of film through our ‘carnal senses’ finds foundations and resonance in Christian Metz’s theories on the experience of watching film, from imaginary to symbolic:

> I know I am perceiving something imaginary … and I know that it is I who am perceiving it. This second knowledge divides in turn: I know that I am really perceiving, that my sense organs are physically affected, that I am not fantasising, that the fourth wall of the auditorium (the screen) is really different from the other three, that there is a projector facing it … and I also know that it is I who am perceiving all this, that this perceived-imaginary material is deposited in me as if on a second screen, that it is me that it forms up into an organized sequence, and therefore I am myself the place where this really perceived imaginary accedes to the symbolic (Metz 1999, p. 823).

\(^{33}\) This is a process that becomes reduced, heightened and contained during the process of watching a film; it can be argued then that film has the capacity to make us more aware of this sense-making process that occurs in our daily lives through the unique experience of mediated experience and embodied affect.
When viewing Kate Woods' film adaptation of Melanie Marchetta’s young adult realist novel *Looking for Alibrandi* as a young woman, I became aware of myself as this ‘place’ where the ‘perceived imaginary’ of the film acceded into the symbolic, and that the symbolic held uniquely affective and subjective qualities. Predicated on familiar representational identification cues—that is, like the main character I too was a young woman from a broken home, attending an all-girls high school, and so on—through my viewing it, the film transformed into a relational, as well as reflective, object or text, identifiable both consciously and carnally. That was *me* up on screen, they were my problems, my grief, my confusions and triumphs.

There is an unusual pattern of recognition that can take place in those lasting impressions that a film can make on the embodied self. The tension and release when protagonist Josie slams her textbook into antagonist Carly’s nose; the shared frustration when Josie’s embattled mother tries to pull the seatbelt down from its holdings in the car and it gets stuck; the montage of Josie’s fingers tinkling the crystal beads on her grandmother’s bedside lamp, the recognition in my own bodily self as she described the smell of that bedroom—of her Nonna’s talcum powder, the perfume, the bedclothes. It occurred to me that the very first impressions of the film—that is precognitive, pre-identification—and the last lingering impressions were somehow linked, beginning in the skin, and embedded there long after.

Though the critical reading of representation and narrative logic has taken up residence in the primary halls of film theory and analysis, it should not discount the importance and inherently linked role of the sensorial, of the affective. It seems abundantly clear as a film viewer myself that this before-and-after affect needs further attention, as something equal to, and indeed incumbent upon, the logic of narrative and critical engagement.

What has led us to forget, or perhaps rather ignore, those visceral experiences of film that, if properly thought upon, make up the larger part of the pleasurable and meaningful experience of film?34 Further to this, how is it that these moments of affect

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34 Though this exploration into areas of affect speaks to a wider turn in academic research (the ‘affective turn’, as it were), this research looks exclusively to film, and any reading on affect will be grounded in
come to stand alone as only precognitive, as though lacking any correlation with the processes of ideation, or any possibility for critical engagement? Once a film enters into those reactionary spaces of the sensate, and concurrently the spectator also enters a respective space of embodied response that space is only fleeting—there is critical space before, and surely there is critical space after, and so on this goes in repeated form from precognition to post-critical thought. Neither works in solitary confinement. Rather, each informs one and the other, forming and informing. With the transgressive potential of affect in film combined with that of the social and critical potential of film as yet largely untapped, social realist film presents itself as an interesting mode with which to explore these interlinking potentialities.

3.1.2 Social Realism and Affect

Any representational form depends both on established conventions and departures from them (Smith 1995, p. 124).

A pervasive notion surrounding discourses of social realist cinema is that of the stylistic pursuit to show things as they really are. This pursuit has traditionally involved a set of aesthetic conventions applied to social realism that removed any unnecessary artifice, with a pseudo-documentary, or ‘fly-on-the-wall’ approach, predominately employed in order to capture the grit and grime of everyday life ‘as it really is’. Aesthetic conventions attributed to social realist film have over time accrued this ‘warts and all’ approach in the pursuit of a representational authenticity. However, in more contemporary offerings of social realist film a more progressive approach founded on a Bazinian approach is being increasingly employed, providing space to identify and negotiate subjective realities through depth of shot, long takes and lingering close ups—filmic spaces that are often to the side of narrative action, and instead reflective of more abstract realities. In this approach, artifice is embraced, as Bazin (1971) himself notes: ‘realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice’ (p. 26).

particular film texts. See, for example, Patricia Clough’s (2007) *The affective turn: theorizing the social* for further research on affect studies more generally.
In this approach, realism as attached to its social suffix is promoted as the social, political and economic realities, as lived through the body, as discursive strictures. Social realism, then, becomes less about capturing a style that best reflects an aesthetic authenticity of ‘real life’, and rather becomes more about capturing a reality as yet unrevealed, or underexplored—-aesthetic pursuit working hand in hand with critically socio-political praxis. The ‘real’ in social realist film, in this sense, pushes for the familiar and the ordinary to be made unfamiliar and extra- or unordinary, in order to best uncover those hidden social problems intrinsic to the crusading social criticism that is itself intrinsic to social realism as a mode of address. To draw from Lefebvre:

Why should the study of the banal itself be banal? Are not the surreal, the extraordinary, the surprising, even the magical, also part of the real? Why wouldn’t the concept of everydayness reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary? (1987, p. 9).

This is a sentiment echoed and made particular to social realism by Hallam and Marshment (2000) who note that a film ‘may be deemed realistic because it differs from current films or film styles, where the difference is construed as revealing a reality that was formerly hidden or absent’ (p. xi). It seems that the most problematic aspect of social realism has long been the ‘realist’ aspect and what that means in terms of stylistic characterisation. However, the revealing of a ‘reality’ is less about aesthetic convention and instead becomes increasingly tied to the social reality that comprises the broader social realist ethos of providing voice to those on the margins of society.

This shift in thought regarding how a social realist film should present its narrativised socio-political allows for the potential of renewed discussion on those discourses commonly addressed in social realist film; a renewed approach that can similarly refresh tired dialogue and worn rhetoric. Predominately explored herein are subjective realities as affected by social status and environment; this is a shift towards the personal, the pre-personal and the affective.

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35 As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is not my intention to enter into any wider debate regarding ‘realism’ in any ontological or historiographic sense. Social realism as it is referred to throughout this research is definable as exclusively bound to film practice as a film movement and mode of address. The ‘realist’ element is tied to the social and political ethos inherent in social realist film and the authenticity present in the socio-historical specificity unique to social realist film.
The subjective realities of the social realist character are rooted in the problematic social discourse that acts as symbolic antagonist throughout social realist film. As the character acts and reacts in accordance with the social environment, the social reality, within which they exist, the foregrounding of affect structures the actions and reactions of the character into a material or visible subjective experience of social realities. The structuring of the subjective experience towards social reality as affective response then opens spaces for embodied and empathetic identification from a spectatorial standpoint.

Tiago de Luca (2011, p. 49) goes some way to fleshing out this broader shift towards affective experience in the various incarnations of realist cinema in his analysis of Gus Van Sant’s *Gerry*, noting that ‘[r]ealism here does not emerge as a mimetic exercise, but rather as an aesthetic endeavour concerned with reclaiming the phenomenology of the viewing experience’. This is analogous with Ang’s (1996, p.45) concept of a ‘structure of feeling’, where she notes that reality can only be subsumed under subjective experience: ‘What is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a “structure of feeling”’.

The potential for social realism of this shift in notions of realism and its representation is twofold: it allows for the exploration of those social concerns and issues long turned to in social realist film to be explored in new ways that are inclusive of more disparate and varied signifying practices or ways of speaking, and in doing so allows for a renewed address, or redress, of tired discourse. Philip Gillett (2006, p. 51) considers realism ‘an apparently simple creed that aspires to bring the everyday life to the screen’. It is becoming increasingly recognised that just how that simple creed is realised on screen can be many and varied. Increasingly, contemporary forms of social realism are exploring conventional subject matter yet displaying an aesthetic eclecticism in ‘using a range of stylistic features drawn from a spectrum of formal strategies’ (2000, p. 184).

This broadening of formal strategies within social realist film is then a kind of abstraction of the realism of the topical, socio-cultural specificity of social realism’s narrative drama. This abstraction pushes for meaning in more affective areas, superseding older dogmatic forms of representation for a more dialectic mode of address. This idea of abstraction is one addressed by Shouse, who notes:
The power of affect lies in the fact that it is unformed and unstructured (abstract). It is affect’s ‘abstraction’ that makes it transmittable in ways that feelings and emotions are not, and it is because affect is transmittable that it is potentially such a powerful social force (2005).

Affect, as structured in and through the formal strategies in social realism, looks to the micro-levels of power, that is, power transmitted at the level of the body as much as through, and indeed in conjunction with, external factors of social environment. The contemporary (Australian) social realism in which I am most interested looks at the social determinants that operate at the micro-level of the mundane, everyday lived life. That is, the spaces between action, those familiar spaces where discursive power unfolds at the human level, at the level of the body. Social discourse as it works at the level of the body must be represented through the affective articulations of the internalisation of social power as social discourse. Affective address better displays this embodiment of power, while also inviting those moments of the mundane everyday to show themselves as affectively impactful with even the most platitudinous of acts shown to be brimming with feeling, emotion and affect.

In his Patterns of realism, Roy Armes (1986, p. 22) comments on the desired intent of neorealism: ‘Like most realist movements in the arts, neorealism was an attempt to get closer to reality by refusing old and outmoded conventions which inevitably falsify our picture of it’. This ‘pattern’ of redress and renewal of old conventions and tired modes of expression is both valuable and necessary in those kinds of filmmaking, such as neorealism and indeed social realism, that are identifiable by a particular social and political consciousness, as well as a formal structure that foregrounds this social and political consciousness articulated through character-driven drama.

I argue that the narrativisation of the social realist ethos is necessarily an affective one—it is the practice and structuring of the affective elements within a social realist film, concurrent with the overarching socio-political sentiment, that makes salient that socio-political sentiment. This is particularly true of social realist film such as that typified in Australia, that of character-driven social realist drama where the structuring
of affective identification around central character(s) is key in pushing forward the overarching socio-political sentiments of the film. As Clough & Halley note:

The affective turn invites a transdisciplinary approach to theory and method that necessarily invites experimentation in capturing the changing confunctioning of the political, the economic, and the cultural, rendering it affectively as change in the deployment of affective capacity (p. 3).

Through the medium of film—this experimentation in ‘capturing the confunctioning of the political, the economic, and the cultural’ via affective address—social realism is recognising and further opening up filmic spaces that push the critical limits of their socio-politically motivated narratives. The use of landscape, imagery of sky and long shots with languid pacing in Sen’s Beneath clouds is one example of this: the opening up of affective spaces to the side of narrative action speaking to an abstract realism of mood and atmosphere, the internal finding formal structure in the external. Similarly, an enhanced focus on the materiality of the formal elements of film, such as the hand-held camera work interspersed with CCTV (closed circuit television) style footage in Dee McLauchlan’s The jammed (2007) accord the film’s violent moments a palpable viscerality that can find resonance in the materiality of the body itself.

Courtin-Wilson’s Hail (2011) pushes these boundaries even further: the familiar content of underclass violence, repeat felony offences and substance abuse are removed from the didactic discourse of conventional social realist filmmaking and instead find empathetic spaces in sensorial identification, visceral shock and affective imagery. The use of extreme close ups of central character Daniel’s worn and rotting teeth serves symbolic meaning rather than pushing forward narrative action. In this case, the dogged attention paid to Daniel’s teeth invites a symbolic reading of social neglect, the imagery also providing space for embodied response to the material bodily effects of said social neglect. Further to this, the use of poetic imagery in conjunction with naturalistic narrative modes pushes for more abstract meanings in the micro-politics of the central characters’ lives—a horse falling from the sky juxtaposed with Daniel’s brutal acts of violence speaking both to the external and internal loss of control as Daniel transitions from prison back into society with little to no governmental or societal assistance.
In some ways, this is a simple addition of contemporary social realism to the corpus of films considered part of a broader ‘body genre, that is, those films that clearly acknowledge and pursue their potential to affect through bodily representation (most often discussed in the material excesses of horror and pornography). Social realism, however, is notably different in its general lack of excess. Rather, there is more often a subtle rendering of empathetic identification forged through the representation of affect rendered in more human proportions—the traumas and trials of everyday life structuring the potential for empathy through an embodied resonance with the bodies on screen.

Hardt (2007) notes that ‘[t]he greater our power to be affected … the greater our power to act’ (p. x) and I argue that it is in alignment with this sentiment that the foregrounding of affect in social realist film operates. Ultimately, those social realist films that come to foreground or privilege affective moments are those that most effectively communicate, through communion with subjective experience, their socio-political ethos or agendas.

3.2 A Feminine Lens

A feminine text would […] constitute a subversion of and challenge to a ‘mainstream’ text (Kuhn 1994, p. 12).

As social realist film in Australia adapts and changes, with increasingly eclectic formal strategies in addressing the socially driven issues and concerns, the breadth of thematic concerns simultaneously broadens. What was previously ignored or overlooked is now finding redress in a wider scoped social realist lens—what is of particular interest to the research herein is the redressing of socially determined feminine issues and concerns, and the concurrent advent of what I am calling a feminine or feminised lens.

I do not intend to equate the affective shift in social realist film with that of an increase in films addressing feminine issues and concerns, but rather the paralleling increase in both are well suited to each other in their shared affective articulations. As has been noted previously, femininity begins with the body (Matthews 1984); the female body is acted upon via a ‘policy of coercions’, in a ‘calculated manipulation of its elements, its
gestures, its behaviour’ (Foucault 1979, p. 138); the gestures and behaviours normalised as socially ‘feminine’ share, in their realm of the sensuous, discursive articulations also common to theories of affect and embodied experience.

The idea of a feminine lens as employed in social realist film is one that directly speaks to the aforementioned notion of ‘internal criticism’, as outlined by Johnston (1973, p. 3). To challenge something is to first speak of it; in order to challenge femininity as a social category explored in social realist film it must first outline and identify femininity as a discursive category. This notion of an internal criticism, that to challenge is to simultaneously subsume, is further articulated by Butler, who writes:

Consider that the use of a language is itself enabled by first having been called a name, the occupation of the name is that by which one is, quite without choice, situated within discourse … The ‘I’ who would oppose its construction is always in some sense drawing from that construction to articulate its opposition; further the ‘I’ draws what is called its ‘agency’ in part through being implicated in the very relations of power that it seeks to oppose (Butler 1993, p. 83).

If the feminine is lived through the body with its discursive articulations largely reducing the female sex to the realm of the sensual, the emotive, the affective, then it stands to reason that in order to challenge such conceptions those articulations must be spoken, outlined and understood. The feminine lens within social realism, then, is one that utilises the discursive articulations of femininity in order to unpack, challenge and redress femininity as a social category and identity traditionally assigned to women.

The feminine lens, as a means to look upon, to speak of and to, and to challenge notions of femininity within social realist film is constructed through the formal strategies employed to explore the social problems present in the given social realist film. For the sake of clarity, I have broken down the formal strategies of the feminine lens into three distinct ideas: melodramatic rhetoric, poetic realism and visceral shock. Each of these

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36 Remembering that I am exclusively referring to femininity as it is applied to the female sex, borne from patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies.
37 That is not to say that the idea of the feminine, or a feminised, lens is exclusive to social realist film, but rather this research project is looking at the uses of the feminine lens in social realist film as a means to explore femininity as a social category and identity with resultant and related social problems.
strategies is present to greater or lesser degrees within the three key films explored in this research, and each is employed to enact an internal criticism of femininity as a social category and identity severely hindered by issues of social marginalisation and subjugation. Though referred to below as distinct formal strategies, these three abstractions of the feminine lens do in fact work together, often overlapping or speaking to one another.

3.2.1 Melodramatic Rhetoric: Emotive Display

In melodrama, violence, strong action, the dynamic movement, the full articulation and the fleshed out emotions … become the very signs of the character’s alienations and thus serve to formulate a devastating critique of the ideology that supports it (Elsaessser 1987, p. 62).

Aside from its literary form in its audio-visual incarnation, melodrama has come to be traditionally associated with the (televisual) soap opera. This generic interpretation of melodrama is inclusive of both the ‘domestic/naturalist serials’ of Coronation street or Neighbours, as well as the more contemporary interpretations in the vein of Days of our lives or The bold and the beautiful, these popular and enduring programs coming to bear as defining exemplars of popular melodrama.

In its earlier incarnations, as Raymond Williams (1974, pp. 55–6) argued of them, melodrama and the soap opera largely incorporated domestic spaces and everyday life as reflective of ‘the run of ordinary experiences’, pointing to its discursive connections to femininity in its grounding in private spheres of the home and narratives driven largely by central women characters.

Although all incarnations of the soap opera treatment have at different times been derided as a low cultural form, it has conversely been critically engaged with for its gynocentric specificity in its typified central concern with issues of women, femininity and female pleasure. Overwhelmingly this critical engagement has taken place over the last few decades as feminism progressed into legitimised academic existence, with feminist treatments of the soap opera and the broader melodramatic mode adopted for its particular engagement with gynocentric, feminine-led discourse.
More broadly, melodrama, when regarded as genre, is noted for what Steven Neale (1986, p. 12) calls an ‘emotional hyperbole’, emphasising and articulating extreme emotional states through character action and response. This melodramatic trope of emotional extremes is typically organised through the binary of emotional states such as love and hate, happiness and melancholy, anger and pleasure, and so on (Neale 1986). The employment of this melodramatic trope can be dislocated from the defining constraints of genre that tie melodrama to such depictions as the soap opera. In this manner melodrama operates more as a method of rhetoric, a structuring of expression that purposively pushes for an intended emotional reaction or response. How this melodramatic rhetoric is characterised or articulated varies; for instance, the soap opera narrative of episodic character-driven drama being one such vehicle.

Social context or social discourse, in this definition of melodramatic rhetoric, can just as suitably act as motivation for the structuring of melodramatic rhetoric with melodramatic emotive response acting as product of social circumstance such as ‘family circumstances or the strictures of class and social propriety’ (Neale 1986, p. 12). Social realism, then, presents as a potential vehicle for the employment of melodramatic rhetoric in the articulation of response to and effects of social circumstance and social discourse, as well as a further means by which to articulate the conventional social realist political praxis or ethos.

It is not typical for melodrama to be regarded in the same discursive breath as social realism, with each modal approach seemingly at odds in their respective treatment of issues, themes and narrative address. Most visibly, this opposition seems to be brought into relief through conflicting conceptions of ‘realism’; at length, Gledhill explores the often-uneasy relationship between conception and convention of ‘realism’ (in film) and melodrama:

Melodramas’ aesthetic problem … is to demonstrate, to make real, social and ethical forces at work at that point in personal life where politics touch on the psychic. But realism is constrained by the boundaries of the empirically knowable and permissible. Melodrama, on the other hand, while never denying those boundaries, demands the real world match up to the imagination. Melodramatic aesthetics have survived because they offer to
bridge this contradictory pressure, taking ... authentic documents from the ‘real world’ and pushing them towards the symbolic activity of metaphor (1992, p. 108).

Melodrama, then, is not in conflict with social realism; rather it plays an integral part in it. Broadly speaking, melodrama refers to ‘a form of exciting, sensational and, above all, moving story’ (Mercer & Shingler 2004, pp. 88–9), with Gledhill (1987, p. 13) noting that it is best defined as a ‘rhetoric’ with the capability of existing in a number of modes or genres. With this in mind, melodrama is apt for usage in social realism. Indeed, melodramatic rhetoric is utilised more often than not in articulating character emotions brought forth from the traumas of discursive constraints, such as social position, gender, race or ethnicity.

There remains a symbolic link between affect/s and feminine discourse within melodramatic rhetoric; that is, feminine discourse includes the symbolic linkages between woman and emotion (particularly emotional excess or extremes). Therefore, it is not inconsequential that the films in which I am interested seem to foreground their usage of melodramatic rhetoric (as well as other forms of affective address) in their exploration of socially driven feminine discourse—the very language that assembles it also acting to disassemble it.

3.2.2 Poeticised Realism: Structuring Feeling

Narrative never exhausts the image ... Narrative can never contain the whole film which permanently exceeds its fictions (Heath 1975, p. 10).

A key aspect of social realism, an enduring and defining element, is the relationship between ‘location and identity’ (Hallam & Marshment 2000, p. 184), the spatial confines of the central character or characters speaking further to the social constraints and conflicted identity(s) collectively faced. More conventionally (or perhaps more traditionally), in those films that act as canonical texts or aesthetic touchstones,38 this relationship was brought into relief in the ‘gritty’ and ‘raw’ treatments that came to

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38 I refer here to British social realism such as the likes of Loach and Leigh as well as early Australian social realism, as well as aesthetic predecessors such as Soviet realism and Italian neorealism, as was explored in Chapter 1.
typify social realist film. The characters set against the cold, harsh realities of city streets, or run-down commission housing set up a visual play between the downtrodden characterisations and identity formations and the complementary downtrodden environment around them.

Australian cinema overall seems to have a long-standing relationship with both realism and a concomitant affinity with setting and particularly landscape. Aesthetically speaking, the realism to which I refer here is perhaps better noted as ‘naturalism’ in what Adrian Martin (1988, p. 97) noted as a cinematic directive to be ‘true to the actual’ or to provide a ‘window on the world’; as well as this, there is a seeming preoccupation with setting and landscape, what O’Reagan (1996) terms a ‘stylistic preoccupation’.

In a realist, or naturalist sense, landscape functions as a narrative space and further as a socio-cultural and historical space that authenticates the time, place and social environment in which the film takes place. This latter point is particularly crucial for the social realist film in which the social climate is and operates as the driving force behind conflict and narrative resolve, as has been explored in the previous chapter. This preoccupation with portraying setting and landscape, even within those stylistic confines of remaining ‘true to the actual’, does not exhaust the potential uses of such a preoccupation. As Andrew Higson notes:

In cinema, the image can both narrate and describe at the same time, but there is still a tension for, although the narrative system struggles to fix the meaning of an image, there is always more than the narrative can hold in place (1996, p. 3).

Higson (1996, p. 3) further notes that this struggle to fix the meaning of an image in film exists even in those films, such as most popular mainstream films of the Hollywood ilk, wherein the mise en scène strives to maintain visual meaning within the ‘organised interests of clinching narrative significance’. In the conventional social realist film, images, particularly those that serve the purpose of authenticating place or setting, are generally approached in this singularist discourse, as representing that which is ‘true to the actual’, with the notion pushed by Higson—of the image always being ‘more than narrative can hold in place’—largely overlooked.
The films in which I am interested acknowledge some of the broader aesthetic and ontological uses of the image; in landscape and setting, there is a going beyond the simple authentication of place in the naturalistic realist sense with an incorporation of what these spaces can do in a more poeticised realist sense. These spaces work not only in structuring a sense of socio-cultural and historically situated place for the characters, but also in structuring the feeling of the characters as they move in and out of those spaces: the drabness of a smog-soaked city street reflecting the heavy burdens of a homeless man; a sunset hanging above a suburban skyline providing structuring contemplative moments for the character and therefore structuring and projecting subjective feeling for that character. We move in and out of these spaces of structured feeling so that the critically motivated social realist ethos/political praxis is not compromised but rather softened in a dialectic play between body and mind.

Poetic realism then works as a constituent of critical affect, that is, that critical affect stresses the connectedness of mind and body, carnality and reason. Further to this, poetic realism stands as testament to affect working in conjunction with, not in opposition to, the discursively critical, socio-political praxis of the social realist film, in relation to which Hollows (2000, p. 131) notes, ‘cognition is not independent of emotion and the needs of the body’. Poetic realism, in employing affective formal articulations is well primed to address social issues of the feminine. Similarly, it shows itself to be crucial to the notion of an internal criticism of femininity as a social category and social identity\(^39\): it is able to frame the socio-cultural specificity intrinsic to social realist film and further push for meaning making in the cracks of discourse and the external, looking to the abstract and symbolic as further instruments of social power and redress.

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\(^{39}\) This will be illustrated through the following three film analysis chapters, looking particularly at Teesh and Trude, Blessed and Somersault.
3.2.3 Visceral Shock: Affective Intensities

Films mean. But they do not just mean (Nowell-Smith 2000, p. 16).

In the poeticised treatment of realism, as explored above, landscape, that is including urban or cityscapes as is more typical of social realism, is used to enhance the relationship between character and place/environment and identity. This relationship between character and place is an integral aspect of social realism as it speaks to the spatial and temporal specificity of the social realist film, while simultaneously foregrounding the socially driven impact upon character(s) as differentiated from other dramatic treatments loosely termed social problem films. As this poeticised treatment of typical social realist location allows for contemplative spaces to emerge, foregrounding of other affective qualities are able to work in varied ways.

As the social realist film necessarily explores and analyses certain social discourses through its politicised narrative drama, the potential for those affective moments to open up similar spaces of transgression or discursive redress similarly emerges. A return to the body through the primacy of affective moments allows for potential spaces of interruption, or disruption, of those discourses under examination within the film. As has been previously mentioned, the return to the body through this primacy of affect in social realism works especially well in exploring discourses of femininity, as femininity itself has been discursively and symbolically tied to the body—affective language then both acknowledging this discursive linkage as well as providing a concomitant language with which to break down this linkage. The acknowledgement of the affective articulations of femininity, of the body and the visceral, is used also as a medium of the social realist film through which to capture these articulations so as to analyse and dissect them; that is, there can be no holistic discussion of a discourse without first detailing the constitutive elements of that discourse.

40 The difference referenced here is a crucial element of the social realist narrative, in which the overarching problems faced by the characters are ‘created by society’ as opposed to ‘for society’ (Hallam & Marshment 2000, p. 190); this active role of socially specific problems is foregrounded through and by the relationship between ‘place, character and identity … social realism’s distinguishing feature’ (Hallam & Marshment 2000, p. 194) as was examined in the previous chapter.
One of the ways in which the affective properties of film can be utilised as a tool of discursive redress is through visceral recognition, the affective potential to ‘be touched’, for our body to recognise another’s and to share in the ‘carnal modality’ (Sobchack 2000) of bodies on screen. As a reappropriation of Sobchack’s ‘immediate tactile shock’, the *visceral shock* I am outlining here plays upon this affective quality of film to conjure in us the sense of one’s own body being touched, a proprioceptive juncture between skin of the self and the skin of the film—a reference somewhat to Laura Marks’ conception of ‘haptic cinema’ (Marks 2000, 2002).

The disruptive power of visceral shock comes as the social realist film allows discursive threads to emerge in its typified examination of social discourse through narrative drama, only for an unexpected affective return to the body, a carnal transgression, taking the place of both narrative and discursive logic. *Visceral shock* structures a carnal immediacy that allows for the momentary displacement of intellect, interrupting the normative flow of both narrative and discursive logic.

Massumi refers to this kind of affective response as ‘unformed and unstructured’ (Massumi 2002, p. 260), and thus these moments of visceral shock occur outside, or to the side of, conscious, reflective thought. This may seem somewhat counterintuitive to social realist film, a mode of address that is predicated on critical engagement with social discourse; however, when actively bridled to affective moments such as visceral shock there is much to be explored in terms of the experience of social realist film and subsequent critical readings within. To be removed, if only momentarily, from ideological effect and meaning, we find that a power of affect is then the potential space that emerged once returned to cognition and critical engagement. There is an almost forced displacement of (critical) mind from (sensuous) body within a moment of visceral shock, and to quote Barthes, it is a ‘moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas that I do’ (Barthes 1975, p. 17).

In a similar fashion to Barthes (who, it should be noted referred to literature, though an imaginative and media-based text nonetheless), Steven Shaviro notes that the carnal modalities present in film also provides a potentially powerful critical force, writing that ‘film’s radical potential to subvert social hierarchies and decompose relations of power lies in its extreme capacity for seduction and violence’ (Shaviro 1993, p. 64). In the
very break down of narrative logic via the enactment of visceral shock there is a concurrent disavowal of any discursive causal chain fully emerging, providing both affective resonance and the potential for renewed critical engagement.

3.3 Inward to Analysis

When our stories break down or no longer serve us well, it is imperative that we examine the quality of the stories we are telling and actively reinvent our accounts in ways that permit us to live more fulfilling lives (Kiesinger 2002, p. 107).

Ultimately, this shift towards more affective means of social address in social realist filmmaking is one predicated on a necessary renewed means of discussing social issues and problems, one that is grounded both in critical engagement as well as humanitarian and empathetic identification. This, as social realism is wont to do, is tied to wider social discourse gleaned from a decidedly left-wing sentiment of dialecticism as opposed to didacticism, a sentiment reflected here as Crompton notes:

the values that must be strengthened—values that are commonly held and which can be brought to the fore—include: empathy towards those who are facing the effects of humanitarian and environmental crises, concern for future generations, and recognition that human prosperity resides in relationships (2010, p. 5).

These left-wing ties to social realist filmmaking are well known and evident in the kinds of politicised crusading that this kind of film enacts; however, the shift into less didactic areas does not necessarily lessen this politicised aspect of social realism. More canonical realist film texts, those that form the foundations of contemporary social realism including that of Australia, were more likely to appeal to the Gramscian address of social issues, that of a ‘pessimism of the intellect’ (Gramsci 1971) that cast a raw and critical eye over a given society in order to capture things as they really are, warts and all, unremitting and biting. However, a more affective approach need not oppose such critical explorations of the social issues at hand in any given social realist film. Rather, it is a subtle shift inward, to make more visible those micro-politics and discursive
strategies, the capillary modes of power, that wind their way across and through the body, and conjunctly, those embodied affects that disrupt and challenge those modes of power.

Lived experience starts with the body, and the films in which I am interested acknowledge this in their conscious engagement with the affective. The social realist film need not be only about signified meanings embedded in the cold praxis of a socio-political discourse: it can also foreground how the body perceives, internalises, disrupts and devours discursive meaning. It is in this sense that femininity as a social construct is particularly adept at being represented and explored through more affective means of address. As femininity has been, and largely remains, coded with the corporeal, a shift in focus to be more inclusive of affect, emotion and feeling, of embodied response, as it interacts with critical analysis, is not inconsequentially fitting in addressing feminine issues and concerns.

Employing a more corporeally inflected mode of exposition, these films all at once reflect, reclaim, and reject their patriarchal-informed coding with corporeality, as though an activity in both masquerade and defiant ownership. In other words, in both the utilisation and deconstruction of these gendered/feminine modes of address, there is greater leverage for critical redress to take place.

Feminine discourse has deep roots in the body itself, feminine affectations predicated on binaries of feminine emotion to masculine logic, and feminine body to masculine mind. In this sense, affective address such as visceral shock in film, takes on a more nuanced meaning when applied to issues of womanhood and femininity.

The films in which I am interested explore and unpack the feminine construct and wider feminine discourse as briddled to the female body, and name such a construct through the body itself. The moments of affective address in these films affirm both the feminist adage that the personal is indeed the political, as well as attest to the need to enter a site of contestation in order to contest it. The films explored in the following three chapters are those that situate their characters within spaces of marginalisation and simultaneously turn the gaze inward to examine the embodied affects of those spaces of
marginalisation, and in particular the social determinants that come to simultaneously inform and disrupt the performance of normative femininity.
Chapter 4 *Teesh and Trude: Melodramatic Subversions*

It is in the everyday time of domestic life that the fundamental discrimination of sex roles is expressed … The hierarchy of values finds expression through the positive value attached to masculine time (defined by action, change and history) and the negative value attached to feminine time which, for all its potential richness, is implicitly discriminated against in our society, interiorised and lived through as the time of banal everyday life, repetition and monotony (Mattelart & Reader 1982, p. 65).

Here, in the first of the in-depth film analyses chapters, Rodríg’s 2002 film *Teesh and Trude* provides a preliminary entry to the critical exploration of women and gynocentric concerns in the tradition of (Australian) social realist filmmaking. There is a definable and traceable heritage of social realist aesthetic throughout *Teesh and Trude*, with formal evolutions in its use of the melodramatic looking glass and affective references punctuating the largely conventional social realist tropes. That it so intently focuses on the interiorised and damaged domestic lives of its namesake protagonists pushes *Teesh and Trude* into fertile new areas of social realist film and the kinds of socio-political spheres it can mine outside of its historically masculine confines. Indeed, *Teesh and Trude* expressly sits in opposition to the masculinised traditions of social realist film, inverting gendered roles and turning to affective formal language in exploring the socio-politically marginalised lives of its female protagonists.

The establishing shots of *Teesh and Trude* set a dreary scene of old bed sheets as curtains, beers cans and cigarette butts littering every table top surface, as a household sleeps in beds unmade for weeks on end. The scarcity of income, if indeed any income at all, is evident in the four tired walls of the flat, in the ill-fitting clothes, the empty fridge, the unhappy faces; a television sits in an unkempt lounge as constant companion, a portal into other worlds of social privilege and more attractive places.
The social realist film carries with it heavy expectations of drudgery, a sad and gloomy juxtaposition to the normative ideals of ultimate happiness and success promoted in much of the more mainstream media fare. Instead, the slow grind of the everyday and of the ordinary—with all the accompanying un-ordinariness of the problems that can plague those everyday spaces beset by social neglect—remains the conventional fodder of the social realist film. *Teesh and Trude*, in many ways, does not disappoint in fulfilling these expectations. Yet, in other subtly defiant and divisive ways, it comes to challenge those expected conventions.

*Teesh and Trude* plays out the lives of two damaged friends living together in a rundown suburban Perth apartment complex—Unit 16B, Platypus Rise Flats. Teesh (Susie Porter) is a thirty-something-year-old single mother struggling with the care of her energetic young son, Kenny, while her shy and sensitive boyfriend Les (Jacob Allan) battles for her affections. Teesh’s already tough situation is considerably worsened by the return of her brutish convict father Bob (Bill McCluskey) following his early release from prison. Apartment 16B’s other main occupant is Trude (Linda Cropper), a middle-aged woman desperately seeking the return of her two children currently in the custody of their notably more middle-class father. Unhelpful in Trude’s quest for self-redemption is Rod (Peter Phelps), her macho bricklayer boyfriend.

### 4.1 *Teesh and Trude* as Social Realism

The film borrows its formal sensibilities and episodic structure from the ‘kitchen sink’ style realism most attributed to British social realism. As Doug Anderson notes in a review of *Teesh and Trude* in *The Age*, this is a film that:

> won’t appeal to viewers who live similar lives or take refuge in sudsers such as *Neighbours*, which looks like sugar-frosted Cinderella fantasy compared with this … it isn’t Ken Loach or Mike Leigh but it’s in that ambit and the acting is very gritty … a penetrating observation of a type that is frighteningly accurate (June, 2007).

Indeed, in the very same vein as such television melodramas noted by Anderson, *Teesh and Trude* is almost entirely located in the suburbs, albeit exponentially more dour and drab than ‘Ramsay Street’ has ever been represented. That Anderson’s review refers to
the great (British) social realists Ken Loach and Mike Leigh is significant in the wider analysis of the film. Of course, Loach and Leigh are known for their politically barbed Marxist-driven takes on working-class Britain of the near past, flagrantly gloomy in tones of rain and city-smut; these were films that expressly aimed to show the social wounds of working-class life with unremitting political praxis in giving voice to those in the shadows of normative (read middle-class and bourgeois) society. Indeed, Anderson states that *Teesh and Trude* is *not* of the Loach or Leigh league of social realist film, but does make the veiled intimation that this is a film that is to be considered part of, or influenced by, this eminent British style of social realist film.

This reference to the canonical British social realist aesthetic is repeated time and again in reviews written about *Teesh and Trude*. Reviews pointedly take note of the use of the raw, naturalistic style in which *Teesh and Trude* captures its main characters and their environment: all compare this to the traditional conventions of early British social realism. Sandra Hall in her 2003 review for the *Sydney Morning Herald* refers to the film as an Australian take on the British ‘kitchen sink’ style of drama minus the ‘reviving’ humour. Similarly, on the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) television show ‘At the movies’ David Stratton labelled the film ‘painfully realistic’, prompting co-host Margaret Pomeranz to note that ‘the characters that are created are people I just don’t want to be with for an hour and a half in the cinema … [they are] so ugly and abusive of one another’. She also referred to the optimistic ending of the film as a ‘Hollywood arc that is such a betrayal of something Ken Loach would do, for example, with the same sort of people’ (ABC 2003). Returning to Anderson’s (2007) review, his critical assessment of the film was largely negative in labelling it ‘depressing’, as a ‘blur of futility, apathy and mindless struggle’, with the acting ‘very gritty’ and ‘of a type’. Perhaps best complementing all of these reviews of the social realist aspects of *Teesh and Trude*, and worth quoting at length, is Urban Cinefile’s Jake Wilson:

The observation of life in the margins rarely feels first-hand or fresh: with presumably unconscious snobbery, the script tends to associate universal facts of life with the working class in particular, as if wealthier mums never used tampons or had their kids wet the bed … Rodriga makes dutiful attempts to lyricise everyday life … Many scenes play out like dramatic exercises giving actors a license to indulge themselves—strutting like a turkey in flannelette,
Peter Phelps is the worst offender, but Linda Cropper also goes overboard in her big moments without adding much depth to an underwritten role. Susie Porter does better, maintaining her natural charisma despite studiously unflattering clothes and styling ... When Trude’s relatively well-off ex-husband arrives in these lower depths, he’s treated as an index of normality, a visitor from a higher dimension; a sharper and more even-handed chronicler of class differences (like Mike Leigh) would never have made that mistake (2003).

Although rather bemoaning certain failings of *Teesh and Trude* in its British kitchen sink style of social realism, these reviews do much to pool together the general formal approach that the film takes in its address of social issues inherent within the narrative. There is a grittiness to the film, not only in its working-class content, but also in the shooting of the film itself. As referenced by the above reviews, there is a recognisability to this adapted formal style, a nod to the influential British social realism of the 1950s and 1960s. The major departure is in the sense of place and temporality within *Teesh and Trude*. It is very clearly not the socio-cultural world of its forebears in the Loach and Leigh style. Rather, there is an acute ‘Australianness’ to *Teesh and Trude*, a cultural literacy that is put through the rigours of social realist address in its characteristically challenging and critical mode of address.

*Teesh and Trude* continues a legacy of Australian social realism that prefers to look at the micro-politics of the everyday; character driven with an eye on the detail of social issues, these micro-politics are those that fall under the ‘formations of ethnicity, sexuality, and gender’ (Turner 2002), discursive threads unravelled from a larger ideological fabric of social hierarchy, normativity and hegemonic oppression. Social realist film, both here and abroad, has largely looked to the working class and those public spaces inhabited by the working class. It has come to be that within social realist film, women and with them the gender-related discourses of femininity along with the domestic spaces traditionally inscribed as feminine places, have been somewhat more neglected.

The larger part of *Teesh and Trude* takes place within the cramped confines of the two female leads’ Perth flat; we are privy to every room, every detail, from the unkempt
bedrooms and slovenly lounge, to the toilet with its broken cistern. These internal, domestic spaces are privy to most of the narrative action and character development, secondary characters and sub-plot strands coming in and out of the small flat while Teesh and Trude remain the notably constant inhabitants. There is little hiding the discursive elements laid bare in locating the film largely within a domestic space—the female characters notably tied to the internal, inside domestic spaces, the male characters seen as outside figures coming in and largely belonging to those public spaces of the local mall, building sites and urban streets.

\textit{Teesh and Trude} is one of a number of films that has shifted the social realist gaze from the outward spaces of the working-class masculine, inwardly to that of the domestic feminine. Oftentimes quite blunt representations of oppressive, ‘inadequate’ and hyper-masculine characters are utilised in comparativist terms in order to highlight the secondary value and vulnerable nature of the feminine characters.

Through the highly critical and politicised lens of social realism, \textit{Teesh and Trude} employs the use of (classed) gender stereotypes as a tool for negotiating particular formations of identity. Most pre-eminently, in the case of this film, the discursive constructions of femininity invite a sympathetic look at the working-class domestic woman. Often used in social realism to push forward a particular perspective or political praxis,\textsuperscript{41} invitational narrative is constructed through character development, intellectual or referential montage within \textit{mise en scène}, as well as melodramatic rhetoric in order to promote an identification with, or sympathy for, that perspective or political praxis (generally played out via a leading character, in this instance with both Trude and Teesh). Within social realist film, this is most evident in the representation of characters as victims of their social status, with accompanying social determinants such as poverty, abuse or unemployment, in order to promote sympathy for the working-class character. This accentuates an ‘us vs. them’ mentality that isolates those characters from normative society, squaring blame on societal imbalances of power and equity.

What \textit{Teesh and Trude} does, in calling upon the referential meanings attached to already established discourses of gender, is to construct an invitational narrative that is

\textsuperscript{41} What I have previously referred to as the social realist ethos.
quite forcefully persuasive in its political intent in empowering the patriarchal-oppressed domestic feminine woman. The ‘Loach-ian’ style with which _Teesh and Trude_ is put together situates its characters within a recognisable working-class milieu, and the central characters, Teesh and Trude themselves, are seen to be victims by ‘virtue of their social status’ (Hallam & Marshment 2000), their position made all the more sympathetic in their juxtaposition with less than savoury subsidiary characters and blatantly unfair or uncomfortable situations.

Each of the women is juxtaposed with less satisfactory characters and situations that invite both forgiveness and empathetic identification above and beyond their own apparent failings. Supporting Moran and Veith’s claim of a ‘women’s cycle’ within social realist film in Australia, this juxtaposition is generally set against ‘inadequate’ male counterparts, in this instance the characters of Rod and Bob, as well as the class discrepancies evident between Trude and her ex-partner. A clear example of invitational narrative can be seen in a scene in which Trude is reunited with her two children. Having lost her maternal rights seemingly through her own negligent past behaviours, Trude is finally able to see her children when her ex-partner allows them to visit. The class disparity between Trude and her ex-partner is evident in clothing, language and demeanour, as well as clear intimations that Trude is largely to blame for the fractured family. However, working simultaneously with this is the melodramatic framing of Trude’s happiness at being reunited with her children, coming to invite a sympathetic identification with Trude’s situation.

To further cement this sympathetic positioning, the characters of Rod (Trude’s macho boyfriend) and Bob (Teesh’s convict father) are introduced to disrupt and jeopardise Trude’s visit with her children. Rod begins loudly swearing on the phone, his uncouth behaviour cultivating an uncomfortable environment. Similarly, Bob begins to berate his daughter, swearing and aggressively posturing throughout the small flat. By mere comparison, the placement of these characters within the narrative invites a sympathetic negotiation of Trude.

Further, Teesh’s mothering of her small son Kenny is often presented as negligible, inviting a degree of judgement that Teesh is an unfit mother. However, the alternative, of Kenny being taken by the aggressive and belligerent Bob is presented as a far worse
scenario. That Bob is represented as so wholly unpleasant also provides an invitation to forgive Teesh’s shortcomings given her underprivileged and abusive upbringing under the rule of her father. In a similar fashion, the character of Rod is constructed as a hyper-masculine, brutish bully, and his treatment of partner Trude both negligent and antagonistic. *Teesh and Trude* punctuates the narrative with instances of Rod’s behaviour towards Trude, so that when Trude finally stands up for herself it is not only a liberatory moment for herself, but also a moment of emotional recompense for us as viewers.

*Teesh and Trude*’s narrative is constructed in order to invite a sympathetic chord, or connectedness, with the female protagonists. This is largely achieved through the juxtaposition of the female characters with those of the male characters; discursively, this utilises the gender binary of feminine and masculine that didactically deconstructs the power hierarchies evident in patriarchal conceptions of women. Through its use of gender stereotype and the political praxis evident in social realist filmmaking, *Teesh and Trude*’s narrative invites a process of critical unpacking, an exploration of the discursive strategies at work within domestic spaces and gendered roles.

Within the invitational narrative there is a ‘wrenching loose of ideas as assumptions and positions are questioned as a result of an interaction’ (Foss & Griffin 1995, p. 6). This interaction in *Teesh and Trude*, between the characters themselves as well as between spectator and film, enacted through the invitational narrative is such that it is made abundantly clear who is right and who is wrong: the male characters are pitched as largely inadequate and brutish, the female characters as reactionary and victims of the male characters. In this manner, *Teesh and Trude* enacts an internal criticism, exploring the power structures evident within feminine/masculine gender binaries via the very implementation of those binaries. This kind of invitational narrative leaves little doubt that it is the women who are worse off and we are invited to sympathise with the characters of Teesh and Trude, and, by extension, with the political, feminist sympathies of the film itself.

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42 Foss and Griffin (1995) call this ‘invitational rhetoric’ making it applicable to various modes of communication, not solely filmic.
The invitational narrative, as a convention utilised by the social realist film in order to push a particular political perspective, provides, to quote Foss and Griffin (1995, p. 16), ‘a mode of communication for women and other marginalised groups to use in their efforts to transform systems of domination and oppression’. This is utilised in Teesh and Trude through its use of gender stereotypes and binaries, enacting an internal criticism that in imagining these gendered notions through an inherently critical social realist lens, simultaneously challenges those gendered notions.

This invitational narrative works in two ways throughout Teesh and Trude, and indeed within the broader confines of social realism as a mode of address: first, by exploring and creating empathetic identification with the undermined concerns of the marginalised woman; and second, by cultivating such invitational or empathetic identification, pushing certain affective formal boundaries of the social realist film. Though certainly calling upon thematic and formal tropes of traditional social realist film, Teesh and Trude’s self-conscious and self-reflexive use of melodramatic convention and affective motif both highlights the discursive feminine confines of the female protagonists and simultaneously criticallyunpacks that feminine discourse.

4.2 A Feminised Lens

It is evident in Teesh and Trude’s early stages that it calls upon well-worn aesthetics and narrative tropes of traditional social realist film, in the tradition of British social realist ‘kitchen sink’ dramas. In the attention it pays to the working-class environment in which it is set—the tired brickwork of the apartment complex, the hardened language the characters employ, the references to financial and social hardships—the canvassing of corners largely unseen in popular film indexes Teesh and Trude’s place as a social realist text. There are, however, deviations from these known conventions, evident in its very deliberate and focused filmic gaze—a feminine lens. This feminine lens operates in two symbiotic ways: in the attention it pays to women and their socio-political gynocentric concerns, and in the deliberate formal ways in which it represents these gynocentric concerns.
In *Teesh and Trude*, the focus on gender politics, its inversion of the traditional disenfranchised working-class masculine character to the less visible domestic feminine character, and the subtle aesthetic shifts employed to explore these gender politics, speaks to a gaze, to a lens that purposively frames women and their socio-political, gendered concerns. A defining feature of *Teesh and Trude* is the close attention it pays to the demarcation of feminine and masculine discourse. In conjunction with its typically social realist creed of giving voice to those marginalised by virtue of their social status, the film simultaneously explores how that marginalisation impacts issues of gender, and in particular women. Following his consideration of *Teesh and Trude*’s exploration of the opposition between the ‘heroic and everyday life’, Garry Gillard (2002, p. 21) notes, ‘There is another simple opposition in the film: one between men and women’.

As previously noted, this careful attention turns in on itself in enacting an internal criticism in which this opposition between men and women is shown to be both a product of the social and cultural as well as discursively harmful. The ways in which this opposition is constructed in order to enact such an internal criticism is to be found in the very fabric of the film, the camera’s gaze, the placement of objects and the *mise en scène*. It is in this constructedness that *Teesh and Trude* promotes a distinctly feminised look at the classed and gendered struggles faced by the female protagonists.

Social realism has much of its on-screen territory plotted out on cityscapes and public spaces of the working class, with interior, feminised spaces of the domestic, of the home and the suburb, generally omitted from or incidental to key narrative action. From the outset of *Teesh and Trude* this well-worn convention of social realism is inverted in shifting narrative focus away from public spaces inward to the domestic spaces of the suburbs and the home. Indeed, *Teesh and Trude* clearly marks the gendered separation of these spaces, of a masculinised public space and a feminised private space. The Western Australian suburb that Teesh and Trude call home speaks to a broader demarcation of feminine symbolisms that, for better or worse, further segregate male and female, masculine and feminine, as separate discursive entities.

In her article *Women’s negotiation of suburban space in Australian cinema*, Catherine Simpson (1999) ventures to offer a direct relationship between the proliferation of what
she deems ‘suburban fictions’ and the increase of women in the film industry—that
suburbia, as it were, remains commonly understood as part of a feminine sphere. Simpson notes that although the ‘suburban sphere need not necessarily be regarded as a
gendered one’ there remains a residual symbolic literacy that has ‘attached women to
the suburbs,’ (1999, p. 24). Simpson here points to an important ideological correlation
between the domestic space, as part of a wider suburban sphere, and the narrative
choices made by many women filmmakers. Further then, this refers to the ideological
correlation between the domestic space and the feminine construct in general: Teesh
and Trude, set almost entirely within the domestic space, is bursting with symbolic
capital that calls attention to the ideological correlation between feminine discourse \(^{43}\)
and the domestic. This symbolic capital is evident from the outset, imbued in the very
objects captured centre of screen.

4.2.1 Feminine Objects

From the opening titles, a montage of objects are framed, seeming to represent, as
Misao Dean (1998, p. 4) eloquently espouses, ‘moments stolen from the flux of an
ordinary woman’s day’. Nail polish, a hair brush, tea cups on coffee tables, framed
pictures of small children earnestly blowing out birthday candles; all objects declaring
the realm of the feminine rooted firmly within the domestic space—a space, it is
important to note, that has traditionally been seen as constructed and subsequently
reinforced by patriarchal bearings (Dean 1998; Matthews 1984; Smith 1988). However,
this does not come to mean that the domestic space is exclusively bound to a gender or
that men cannot possess these objects as their own and remain men (read masculine as
the normative objective for men in discursive terms). Rather, these symbolic objects
allow for a spectator literacy to emerge of what is traditionally associated with, or as,
feminine, and conversely what is not considered feminine.

Further establishing the distinct domestic space is the introduction of its other, the
public space. Immediately following the opening sequence in which we are introduced

\(^{43}\) This is defined in detail in previous chapters and works from the critical/discursive presumption, as
Matthews (1984, p. 809) writes, that a ‘woman (or man) must earn the label of “feminine” (or
“masculine”) through traditional sex-appropriate behaviour, and one must act feminine (or masculine)
continually in order to retain the label’; those time-enduring conventions of femininity, though details
subject to change socio-historically, are the performance of domestic labour, motherhood and chaste
sexuality (Hollows 2000; Matthews 1984; Wolf 1990).
to the two central protagonists, Teesh is shown returning from grocery shopping, stopping by the work site of her boyfriend, Rod, where he is shown bricklaying with his workmates. From this outset, the two spaces are made out to be clearly associated with the traditional binary opposition of feminine space as domestic space and masculine space as public space. Just as Teesh comes to be the symbolic bearer of normative femininity, so her male counterpart, Rod, displays the same in the juxtaposed masculine role.

Rod is shown interacting with his male workmates, imparting advice to his young apprentice on matters of the heart, ‘First time and all mate, bust a hymen’ he chortles. As Trude approaches, Rod accusingly inquires, ‘What are you doing here?’, a verbal signposting of the segregation between these two gendered spaces: as Trude enters the public space of Rod’s worksite (working within the discursive terrain of the film itself) she is in fact a category mistake, a feminine alien within a masculine territory. The continuation of this literacy of meaning, initially established in Teesh and Trude’s opening titles, is further allowed to emerge as predicated on already existing discourses of gender and space, of the dualistic binaries of masculine and feminine, public and private, as Ferres (1994) notes:

Situated in the home, isolated from social relations, women’s activities are measured against other industrial forms of work: production is contrasted with reproduction and consumption. Domestic work fits rather uneasily here, both in terms of its practice and its product … Consumption, the other feminine domain, is also problematic. The consumer is either assumed to be passive and subject to manipulation, or the subject of a fantasy of excess, of endlessly deferred pleasure. These paradigms reproduce a devaluation of the feminine. The alignment of ‘agency’ with work and production in the public sphere affirms a masculine norm (p. 150).

These are the issues foregrounded in Rodriga’s Teesh and Trude: the ‘uneasiness’ of domestic life and the importance placed upon it as a stage for the success (or failure) of

44 Though both come to be symbolic bearers of these normative gender roles, as previously explored through the work of Matthews (1984), it is done so in a constant state of flux, of becoming and unbecoming. This problematic process is a key concern throughout Teesh and Trude, as Gillard (2002, p. 23) notes, ‘By the end of the film, most of our conventional hierarchies have either been overturned or given a severe tweak.’
normative womanhood (femininity). Returning to those objects placed in montage during the opening titles of the film, in furthering, or in complication of, their existing symbolic currency is the use of ironic juxtaposition as the titles roll on—the coffee table cluttered with an overflowing ash tray, beer bottles, a packet of tampons strewn across its surface, a dirty dinner plate in the kitchen sink, a leaking rubbish bag and half-painted lounge room walls. The discursive feminine construct is ruptured through the strategic placement of objects that speak to what it is not, or what it should not be. The opening four and a half minutes of *Teesh and Trude* work hard to establish both a discursive literacy of meaning concerning discourses of femininity within the domestic space,\(^{45}\) while systematically complicating and rupturing that literacy.\(^{46}\)

### 4.2.2 Disrupting the Domestic Feminine

With the immediate establishment of the domestic space—a suburban home inhabited by women—the film dives forth into well-established waters and, one shot after the other, begins a slow descent into *undoing* the domestic feminine ties that bind women to private spheres. Following on from the opening montage of objects, the titles continue with a series of additional establishing shots further rooting us within this problematised domestic space—a table lamp, its luminescent green momentarily demanding full attention before its throw of light reveals a mottled and sickly brown–blue–green of a lounge room wall; it becomes apparent that such a crude application of paints is an attempt at concealing a floral-print wallpaper, the cheap watery coats of ill-matching colours barely hiding the outlines of now grotesque wallpaper petals.

Sat side by side with the ironically juxtaposed images of normative womanhood, *femininity* (tea cups, pictures of children, kitchen sinks and beauty products) are those of non-normative womanhood, *unfemininity*—empty liquor bottles, overflowing rubbish bins, undone dishes in dirty sinks. These establishing shots invite further politically charged critical readings. The overcoats of paint in a displeasing miscellany of colours speak of a ‘culturally constructed murkiness that exists between society’s image of women and women’s reality’ (Schrift 1994, p. 111).

\(^{45}\) And conversely, in its initial absence, also that of masculinity.

\(^{46}\) As will be further analysed, this disruption continues throughout the film in a series of juxtaposing moments in the *mise en scène*. 

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There is a reminder here of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story, *The yellow wallpaper* — the wallpaper, symbolic of the domestic space, coming to represent both the psychological and physical boundaries of normative femininity, a ‘space of female confinement, equating femininity with interiority’. In Gilman’s short story the wallpaper comes alive with women ‘who must struggle to escape its confines’ (Liu 2004, p. 26). So too, these opening images in *Teesh and Trude* suggest a similar rupture, a symbolic attempt at abandonment of the domestic space and the confines of femininity. Not only serving as a critical referent of feminine discourse, the series of title images and domestic objects among uncleanness and disrepair serve as symbolic of both the emotional states and social status inherent within. They speak of the frustration and dis-ease of the women within the discursive confines of the domestic sphere, of the suburban squalor that further confines them to near silence and robs them of nearly all agency.

Following these establishing shots, the first introductory images of Teesh and Trude appear. Both characters are shown sleeping, *docile bodies* in the literal sense of the term, not yet awakened into the world of discursive meaning, not yet mobilised into their socialised ways of being. Set amidst the symbolically charged opening shots, Teesh and Trude are of course already marked as discursive beings, *docile bodies* in the Foucauldian sense, as Bordo (1989) writes:

> The body is not only a text of culture. It is also, as anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Michel Foucault (among others) have argued, a practical, direct locus of social control. Banally, through table manners and toilet habits, through seemingly trivial routines, rules, and practices, culture is ‘made body,’ as Bourdieu puts it—converted into automatic, habitual activity … Our conscious politics, social commitments, strivings for change may be undermined and betrayed by the life of our bodies—not the craving, instinctual body imagined by Plato, Augustine, and Freud, but what Foucault calls the ‘docile body’ regulated by the norms of cultural life (p. 309).

The beginning of the day proper (and with it the film’s narrative) awakens with Teesh and Trude; as they sleepily begin to take on the day, the characters themselves become a
part of that symbolic currency already established: language use, dress, expression, each of the character’s individual crises unfurling within the storylines, are absorbed into the pre-set symbolic currency of domesticity, a literacy of meaning that consolidates the link between femininity, woman and that of the domestic space (the home) and domestic activities (housework, child rearing and so on).

Domestic space as coded feminine is repeatedly reaffirmed throughout the film, what Gillard (2002, p. 23) refers to as being part of one of the film’s ‘axes’ as the ‘home and public space’, in accordance with another of its main axes of ‘man and woman’. Immediately following the opening titles and establishing shots of central characters Teesh and Trude, a montage of activity presents Trude grocery shopping, Teesh fumbling with a packet of tampons at home and Rod laying bricks outside in a wide open (public) space. The film continues its intimations of symbolic currency here with these binaries of gendered spaces, of the feminine/domestic (or private) and the masculine/public. The setup is clear: domestic spaces are feminine places. However, this does not mean that these spaces are unable to be tampered with, problematised and transgressed.

The feminine subject, occupied in this instance by central characters Teesh and Trude, are simultaneously defining, defined, constrained or made abject by the home—the domestic. It defines them as feminine, while simultaneously disavowing them feminine agency as they fail to fully inhabit their feminine presumptions. Hollows (2000) writes that femininity is not only temporally contingent, but also socially and culturally affected by issues of race, ethnicity and class. Thus, in ‘any historical moment, there will be struggle over the meaning of femininity’ (Hollows 2000, p. 31). The critical address afforded by the social realist format allows for explorations of femininity as intertwined with other identities; these are women who are mothers, lovers, friends and so on. Social realism acts here as a site for the struggle of femininity, played out through the narrative lives of Teesh and Trude.

In a sequence that heralds the unwelcome arrival of Teesh’s father Bob upon his release from prison, a number of tense scenes between the two become a vehicle through which a number of Teesh’s unfeminine traits are highlighted. After Teesh rejects Les’ proposal of marriage, Bob remarks, ‘Doing you a favour boy. She can’t cook for shit, whores
around, can’t keep a clean place to save her life, knows fuck all about anything, got a kid to boot!’ In one fell swoop, Bob lists those key elements in the performance of femininity (and of course Teesh’s un-performance of them). This is a watershed moment in the film as its gives voice to a number of discursive threads that operate throughout *Teesh and Trude*.

The introductory moments for Teesh and Trude display a type of sub-binary being enacted between the two women, of a femininity in flux next to a femininity abject: Trude walks into the lounge room where she finds Teesh asleep on the couch, and picks up some dirty plates from the coffee table littered with stubbed out cigarettes, beer bottles and tampons Teesh has left there. In Trude’s movement, her attempts at domesticity, as arbitrary as they may seem, are in direct contrast to Teesh’s stasis, around her the refuse of a femininity unperformed. As for many of these moments in the film, Trude’s attempts at playing house are short lived, with moments of rupture not far away.

Shortly after placing the dishes in the sink, Trude goes to make a cup of tea only to find the milk carton empty as Teesh has drunk it all and neglected to replace it. As Teesh awakes, the first lines of dialogue begin with Trude reprimanding her: ‘Oh, you drank all the fuckin’ milk’, laments Trude towards the reclining Teesh.

‘I needed it.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘Fuck you too.’

This again lends itself to the ongoing problematisation of the traditional domestic feminine, coupled with the abject imagery or domestic disrepute the immediate use of coarse language similarly ruptures any normative representations:

Cultural processes and expectations have traditionally mitigated against women’s use of obscenity, on (at least) two counts. Firstly, swearing, or the
use of expletives, is perceived as an intrinsically forceful or aggressive activity (Coates, 1993; de Klerk, 1991, 1997). Thus, women who engage in such behavior can be seen as transgressing cultural stereotypes and expectations of femininity, wherein they are positioned variously as deferent, polite, nurturing, and oriented towards the needs/feelings of others (Stapleton 2003, p. 22).

This language continues throughout Teesh and Trude and is one of the more insistent performances of unfemininity, concurrently used to punctuate more discursively reflexive moments in the film when the very confines of femininity are spoken about and contested. In an initial showing of Teesh and Trude’s playful inversion of gender stereotypes, as well as working-class stereotypes, the use of crass language is perhaps the most arduously felt; the barrage of ‘fucks’ and all tenable variations as well as a myriad of other expletives punctuates the film like a thousand grease spots on a page. The linkage between crass language and the working class is, in this regard, not lost on Teesh and Trude. ‘[W]orking-class speech’, crass or colloquial language and swearing, are traditionally ‘linked with masculinity and toughness’ (Hughes 1992, p. 291): that Teesh and Trude are depicted explicitly indulging in such language is an adage to the film’s transgression of normative femininity.

Language as transgression in Teesh and Trude calls into effect a number of discursive traits of proper (feminine) behaviour and the manner in which they are both applied and utilised. Firstly, the distinction between female and male usage of expletives is rooted in the spatial binaries previously explored—in the public sphere, away from the home and in the ‘world’, where workingmen swear with little repercussion. However, within the domestic sphere feminine discourse mandates woman as moral compass (that is, for example, that women as mothers are responsible for ‘transmitting the norms of speech to children’ (Hughes 1992, p. 292)) and thus the use of expletives is seen as much more taboo and thus more transgressive.

47 Instances like this can be seen at 25.19–25.40 when Teesh has a heated discussion with her boyfriend, Les, in his place of work. As Les’ manager intervenes, Teesh aggressively swears at him, prompting him to eject her from the place of work (expulsion from the public space again heavily laden with discursive symbolism). Similarly, and perhaps most pointedly as a crescendo nearing the final moments of the film, this again occurs at 1.06.37–1.08.20, when Trude enters into a cuss-laden tirade directed at boyfriend Rod in which she accuses him of neglect, listing her domestic duties so overlooked and belittled.
As archaic as this may seem in a contemporary sense, the deep-rootedness of this resonates loudly within normative feminine discourse—what is considered *ladylike* still largely disavowing of the use of crass language for the female sex in order to successfully enact the feminine construct of *correct womanhood*. Of course, the actual usage of expletives by women may not necessarily reflect these discursive expectations, as Kramer considered, ‘there seems to be a conflict between what women’s speech really is like and what people think women’s speech is really like’ (Kramer 1974, p. 47). Secondly, as noted, there is the strong connection that expletives have with the working class, as Hughes (1992) notes:

The use of profanity by members of the WC [working class] is sometimes judged as due to their being uneducated, that lack of education results in their having an inadequate vocabulary with which to handle their situation, thus they utilize the language they know (p. 291).

Although, as stated, the use of aggressive and socially unacceptable language problematises both Teesh and Trude’s place as traditionally feminine within the domestic space: that Trude has from the outset been seen to play house—picking up dishes, busying herself in the kitchen and taking offence at the lack of such initiative from Teesh—does set up a sub-binary between the women, that is, of Trude as (attempting) the domestic feminine, and Teesh as the antithesis, wilfully rejecting the normative feminine expectations within the domestic space.

### 4.3 The Eternal Becomings of a ‘Good Woman’

The process of becoming a woman is the process of the pursuit of femininity, the attempt to live up to the various standards of her society, the struggle to behave like and to be a good woman according to her own and her society’s standards. Because femininity is an idealised and illusory quality, and because it is composed of inconsistent and contradictory parts, its pursuit is doomed to failure. She cannot please all people all of the time. To be a woman is thus necessarily to carry a sense of failure (p. 8).
Trude’s attempts at being what is expected of her as a woman within the domestic space is, again, symbolised quite obviously in initial scenes. On a number of occasions, the camera cuts away to a small wall adornment, a flower picture, hung on the kitchen wall. The floral wall adornment repeatedly falls off its nail, upon which Trude repeatedly hangs it back up.48

As Trude is shown in these initial causal scenes, attempting to perform correct womanhood, shopping for milk, caring for her partner, Teesh is conversely shown enacting all those traditional taboos and forbidden spaces more often subsumed by monstrous-feminine-type characters.49 She is shown not only tampon in hand, but sitting on the toilet, and refers to herself as ‘bleeding like a stuck pig’; she is most visibly the ‘monster’ as she is seen to consistently behave ‘monstrously and transgress the social roles and roles that usually confine them’ (Berenstein 1996, p. 5; England 2006).

An early introductory montage sets out this sub-binary between Trude and Teesh: as Trude discovers that Teesh has finished all the household milk, she sets out to the supermarket, and quick shots are juxtaposed of the women—Trude placing milk into her shopping basket, Teesh sitting on the toilet and struggling with the plastic covering on a tampon, Trude walking home with an arm full of grocery bags.

The domestic task of housework is returned to throughout Teesh and Trude, with household chores either half-done or completely ignored. Trude punctuates a number of scenes with attempts at domestic chores—‘S’pose I should clean this place up a bit’, to which Teesh replies ‘s’pose you should’—with the unspoken disarray of messy bedrooms entirely overlooked, unwashed towels that have been used to soak up young Kenny’s wet bed, ironing that is passed from one to the other without ever being entirely completed. The discipline of a tidy home, the ‘home goddess’ complex cast upon the feminine self is thusly attempted in consistent failure or is abjectly ignored; the

48 Thusly repeating the floral motif as representative of traditional feminine domesticity, and its subsequent and systematic rupture, first seen as the floral wallpaper crudely painted over, and secondly as the floral wall adornment constantly falling from its fixed place.
49 Hélène Cisoux (1989, p. 280) wrote, ‘Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives … hasn’t accused herself as being a monster?’; the monstrous feminine, often discussed in relation to horror films, relates to the transgression of the discursive boundaries (of femininity), rendering them abject. The ‘monstrous’ is usually denoted (or connoted) by the reproductive body.
construct (of femininity) entered into willingly is then conversely problematised time and again.

### 4.3.1 Maternal Failings

Continuing with *Teesh and Trude’s* inversion, or problematisation, of feminine discourse is the role of motherhood for both women. Within the wider feminine discourse the role of motherhood is crucial; traditional feminine discourse (that is, patriarchally predicated) pre-ordains for the woman that the desire for children, the ‘maternal instinct’, is thusly innate (Chodorow 1989). That this was, of course, not true informed many fields of early thought on motherhood and the importance that the mother role played in the development of children, and conversely the adverse impact when that role was not performed adequately (Doane & Hodges 1992; Farganis 1986; Freud 1963).

We know from the outset of *Teesh and Trude* that Teesh is a mother: her son Kenny is present in the home and is shown in interaction with Teesh early on. It is not, however, a normative representation of motherhood. Following on from the opening titles when all characters—Kenny included—are seen as slumbering bodies, unproblematic, unproblematised, Kenny is first shown in his wakeful state as childishly playing with Trude, while his mother Teesh responds with reprimand and impatience. On the other hand, it is not clear that Trude is a mother until further into the film. The discursive significance of Trude as a mother with absent children does much to further consolidate the rupturing of the performance of femininity. Empathy is built from the outset, as Trude is represented as desperate for her children’s return with little to no indication as to why she lost custody in the first instance.

As Trude is returning home from grocery shopping she is shown in long shot stopping on the street. Her gaze draws the camera to the distant petrol station across the road. There we see two children standing beside a car. As the camera cuts back to Trude, static as she walks forward bringing herself into closer repose, she stares more intently, prompting a return to her line of sight, the children entering the car with a man. Cut to Trude’s increasingly flushed, anxious, excited face as the car pulls away and out of frame, Trude is now in close up, she reads the number plate of the car aloud to herself,
and again, and again, closing her eyes as though to better commit it to memory, all the while anxiously repeating the series of letters and numbers.

Thereafter, the camera follows Trude’s feet as they anxiously stumble up the stairs of Platypus Rise, while under her breath she continues to repeat the license plate number ‘1AWL507’ until through the door. Once inside she scrawls the number on a women’s lifestyle magazine lying on the kitchen table next to beer bottles and a full ashtray. Trude, out of breath, picks up the home phone and dials a number, cryptically asking for a ‘Terry’ whom she wants to ‘run another plate’. Teesh enquires, ‘Did you get a good look at ‘em this time?’

‘Yeah. Oh, I tell ya, I swear it was them’, Trude responds, Teesh chiming in on the last line intimating that this is not the first time Trude has had a sighting such as this.

In conventional melodramatic fashion, the details of Trude and the children are left unclear, heightening intrigue and enforcing emotional engagement; meanwhile other strands of the multifarious plot begin to emerge (the imminent return of Teesh’s father is hinted at, the tension between Trude and Teesh’s friendship further explored, Rod’s make-or-break bricklaying job is introduced, the binary between Les and Rod established).

In the scene preceding the reintroduction of plot line concerning Trude’s absent children, the two women are shown in tense interaction, at odds with each other’s taste in men, further consolidating the sub-binary established between the two women. Having asked Teesh to wash a large towel that she has used to soak up Kenny’s wet bed so that Rod can use it upon his return from work, Teesh throws the dirty towel at Trude: ‘Wake up to yourself Trude! Fuckin’ running amok, turning the world upside down just so the bastard can dry his nuts in a big towel.’

‘What is it with you? Why have you got it in for him?’ Trude defensively inquires.

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50 This occurs at 15.23, immediately following on from the introduction proper of Rod and Les in their places of work, thus further consolidating the gendered binaries of public and private, feminine and masculine.
‘Because he takes and you give.’

‘So does Les.’
‘He takes what I give.’

‘Yeah, poor bastard.’

A series of innocuous back-and-forths heightens tension between the women, an advertisement on the television for tampons prompting Teesh to comment: ‘Don’t ever try them, they’re bloody useless’, with Trude responding:

‘Well maybe you don’t use ‘em right.’

In this interaction between the women, the discursive symbolisms of Trude’s attempt at normative femininity and the converse abject femininity of Teesh are brought into stark relief. With both women seemingly at a stalemate, the narrative strand of Trude’s absent children is reintroduced. As the two protagonists continue to sit together watching television and smoking cigarettes, a news program reporting on a school bus accident prompts both women to turn their thoughts to motherhood.

‘I really thought I saw the kids this morning’, Trude says, a close up detailing her forlorn face, ‘At the servo. I couldn’t be sure of course. There was something about the girl that got me. The way she was standing, dainty-like, y’now? Even when she was a baby everyone said she was perfect. Got that from Gary I s’pose.’

Teesh is momentarily shown tossing a sympathetic glance at her friend. After a moment’s pause, as both woman draw back on their cigarettes and exhale, Teesh responds, ‘Well four years is a long time.’

‘Yeah. I’ll try Terry again.’

The establishment of the sub-binary at work between the two women that precedes this scene is indicative of the further entanglement of feminine discourse with the role of motherhood. Teesh, having shown complete disregard for both domestic duties and, at
best, impatient discontent at her role as a mother clearly rejects the normative role of femininity with little regard for her abjectness. Trude, on the other hand, is shown both dutifully trying to complete her domestic duties, and affectively displays her desire to mother despite this being an ultimate failure (as her children’s absence attests). The entire sequence works hard at establishing this: as the television returns to a soap opera melodrama, Teesh comments that the woman’s dress could ‘blind you’, to which Trude responds, ‘Looks sexy, but’. The repeated use of the soap opera seen on Teesh and Trude’s television screen points to the normative construction of the feminine woman, and sits in stark contrast to the flawed and failed reality of Teesh and Trude’s environment. This sequence both establishes the importance of motherhood within feminine discourse while also highlighting both women’s repeated failing at fulfilling their respective maternal, and by extension feminine, roles.

One of the most important scenes in unpacking this entanglement between femininity and the representation of motherhood occurs when Trude is finally granted her wish to see her children. Again using the mise en scène as a site for an unspoken politic, the social realist ethos of the film, Trude’s reunion with her children is heavily laden with discursive salience. With the license plate run by Terry earlier in the film having proved successful, Trude’s ex-partner Gary, father and sole custodian of the children, allows a supervised meeting between mother and children.

As Trude is in the laundry sorting Rod’s dirty washing, Gary and the children are seen in juxtaposed cuts driving into the complex of Platypus Rise, conversing in the car about the unsavoury look of the place, of whether to go in or not. An over-the-shoulder shot displays Trude’s displeased face as she is handling the washing; behind her the feet of Gary and the children can be seen ascending the stairs. Being unable to physically see this occurring, and concurrently having no knowledge of the visit, Trude is rather inexplicably shown in close up at this moment with a dawning realisation, or perhaps a dawning potential realisation, upon her face that her children are near. She hurriedly turns and runs up the stairs, reaching her flat just as Teesh and Rod have admitted Gary and the children.

This series of shots displaying this dawning awareness upon Trude’s face seems to intimate a certain instinctual knowing, a maternal instinct, that alerts Trude to her
children being near. This is an odd collusion with feminine discourse; a momentary fulfilment of Trude’s thus far relentless and unfulfilled attempts to be a ‘good woman’, to be a feminine woman, domestically dutiful, submissive, a caring and present mother. In this moment she comes to possess a maternal instinct that has brought her to her children, a momentary fulfilment of that feminine normativity, albeit soon again ruptured.

On seeing her children, Trude is shown overwhelmed, tearfully embracing son Craig and daughter Layla. There are tense moments of conflict as Craig angrily scolds his absentee mother and Rod’s macho posturing throws into stark relief the class divide between Gary and the children, and Trude’s world with Teesh. Trude anxiously expresses ownership of her children, ‘my boy’, ‘my little pumpkins’ and so on, the waver in her voice suggestive of the taut and trembling line of maternal discord she walks.

As Rod boastfully and bullishly introduces himself, attempting endearment with his beau’s children, the discrepancy between gender and class becomes increasingly clear. Rod acts as discursive pawn in further delineating the gender and class divide as he shakes the hand of Craig: gesturing a limp wrist he remarks ‘Needs a bit of toughening up this one then. Eyes not the only thing he got from his Mum.’ Similarly, on meeting Layla, Rod scoffs, ‘You sure this one’s yours Trude? Wouldn’t have picked it, [she’s] pretty.’

As the reunion continues, the differences between mother and son and mother and daughter become clear. The anger within Craig is further solidified as he rejects Trude’s endearment of ‘my boy’ (angrily returning ‘I’m not your boy’) and the placidity of Layla (gently reassuring Trude as she comments on their visit, ‘I’m glad we did Mum’). This echoes the sentiments of Nancy Chowdrow, who states:

Mothers, I argue, by virtue of their sense of gender (whatever the individualized conscious and unconscious fantasy and emotional casting they give to this gender) experience daughters as, in a certain sense, like them and sons as, in a certain sense, unlike them. Reciprocally, girls and boys themselves appropriate and transform these unconscious maternal communications through their own intrapsychic capacities for fantasy, their

In so purposively constructing a problematised representation of these women, particularly Trude, attempting normative femininity and ultimately failing, the introduction of Trude as possessing a maternal instinct, as partaking in this sacred maternal mother–daughter bond, speaks ultimately to the uneasy, and often contradictory, relationship between feminist politics (that this film very clearly enacts) and the role of motherhood in the lives of women.

4.3.2 Sex and the Social

While particular socio-sexual systems vary, each one is specific and individuals within it will have to conform to a finite set of possibilities. Each new generation must learn and become its sexual destiny, each person must be encoded with its appropriate status within the system (Rubin 1975, p. 161).

Tellingly, sex is not entered into too readily or frequently throughout Teesh and Trude. As a film that, at its core, is a CDA of feminine/masculine binaries and the classed and social issues that impact the enactment of those binaries, sex—as being largely null and void of any agency within discourses of femininity—speaks volumes in its relative absence. Sex is enmeshed in the film’s wider concerns with discourses of gender, implicated in veiled or implicit discussions of gender hierarchies, power and oppression. Each of the central characters acts as conduit for the varied and often conflicting discourses of sex at play with those wider discourses of gender explored throughout the film: Teesh labelled as ‘whore’, Trude as largely un-sexed, Les as atypical with a feminised approach to sex, and Rod as fulfilling the typical normative masculine (read patriarchal) approach to sex, centred around his own pleasure (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Neale 1983).

The tense relationship between Teesh and her jailbird father Bob plays an integral role throughout the film in enunciating a number of Teesh’s failed feminine attributes. Often entangled in other feminine identities, particularly motherhood, Bob highlights sex as one aspect crucial in the un-performance of normative femininity. In one revelatory
sequence (35.07–36.30), Bob reveals that he has legal custody of Teesh’s son Kenny due to her previous deviant behaviour. His accusatory dialogue reveals both the tenuous role that sex plays within discourses of femininity, as well as its relative incompatibility with motherhood. As Teesh gets increasingly agitated with her father she emotes, ‘Why don’t you fuck off out of my life and out of my kid’s life?’

‘Your fuckin’ kid?’ Bob retorts menacingly, ‘Aren't you forgetting something?’ Ignoring Teesh’s attempt at placating through small talk, Bob finally reveals: ‘The kid’s mine legally. Yeah, I had to, when this slut was boozed up and whoring around. Well you don’t have to worry anymore. I’ll take him off your hands so you can start sitting on it again.’

In this moment, Bob speaks to the discursive confines of femininity—the ‘slut’ as sexually active woman not fitting into the definitional parameters of what it is to be a truly feminine woman in any normative sense. Bob clearly demarcates the incompatibility between the sexual woman and the mother, and that only when her child is removed, only when she ostensibly is a mother no more, can she return to being a sexual woman. Inelegantly referred to by Bob when he snarks, ‘I’ll take him off your hands so you can start sitting on it again’, Teesh is marked as symbolic of the incompatibility of woman as mother and women as sexual agents, and that her sexual agency can only ‘start again’ once she relinquishes motherhood.

This contradiction, so tied up within the discursive threads of gender, is further explored as the sequence continues. Teesh and Trude sit at the kitchen table, a moment of respite from Bob allowed as he leaves on a beer run. Talk turns to Les, Teesh’s sensitive boyfriend so opposite in demeanour to that of Bob, ‘Bloody Les’, she muses, ‘You know I was his first? Well, sort of.’ From this a candid talk emerges, as Teesh goes on to reveal her first sexual encounter with Les. ‘When he puts his fingers inside me they’re really smooth. He’s never worked with his hands. They’re not rough or cut up, they’re just smooth. And it’s like they’re finding out things about me, you know, asking things that he can’t’, Teesh speaks softly, gently, her words considered, almost poetic. However, after a short contemplative pause a return to her more defiant character emerges, ‘I mean I’ve never had his cock, I won’t let him.’
This discussion of Les acts as a site for the complexity of both Teesh’s (un)performance of femininity, as well as the role of sex in the binary of masculine and feminine, to play out. That sexual submissiveness is a common feature of normative femininity; Teesh remains defiant and perverse, or abject, within the bounds of normative femininity. She does, however, skirt the lines of feminine and unfeminine, as she discusses Les’ hands, displaying the mechanism of her own desire, her language soft and longing and feminine. Teesh in fact voices her in-betweenness, between defiance and desire, ‘I’m scared that he’s one man with his hands and another man with his cock. He doesn’t make me; he doesn't push me into it.’ From this perspective, Teesh is neither truly feminine, nor entirely unfeminine, through her admittance of fear of penetrative sex she speaks to the lineage of discursive male/masculine sexual domination and female/feminine sexual submission. Teesh both vocalises her fear of Les’ potentially latent oppressive masculinity, while in the same instance highlights his non-performance of that masculinity.

In her *Femininity and domination* (1990), Sandra Lee Bartky writes:

> The truly ‘feminine’ woman, then, will have ‘appropriate’ sexual desires for men, but she will wish to shape herself, physically and in other ways, into a woman men will desire,’ (p. 50).

That Teesh purposively does not ‘shape herself’ in this manner, consolidates her role as unfeminine, her rejection of those attributes traditionally found in the normative feminine woman, but finding respite from judgement in Les’ relative un-performance of masculinity. Trude refrains from displaying too much emotion, refusing the primacy of Les’ pleasure as a man; and conversely highlighting his thoughtfulness, his sensitivity and focus on the pleasure of Teesh, transgressing the normative bounds of masculinity. ‘The first time he put his fingers in I cried, they were so smooth. I cried. I didn’t let him see that of course. He was really quiet; it was like he was really thinking about where his fingers were. And then I came.’

Throughout Teesh’s monologue, close-up cuts to Trude frame a face clearly affected, furrowed brow and tear-gilt eyes. When Teesh has finished speaking, Trude responds, ‘That’s beautiful’—a line tinged with regret and desire. Abruptly ending this thoughtful moment between the two women, Rod swings the front door open, reprimanding Trude
for not listening, for not providing him with his phone charger, immediately sending Trude back into a state of flux. This sequence brings into relief, for both Trude and viewer alike, the distinct differences between the two men, Rod and Les. This is a theme that runs throughout the film, though the representation of sex perhaps bears the most discursively impactful weight.

A number of sequences establish a traditionally patriarchal masculine/feminine sexual dynamic between Rod and Trude: as he gifts her skimpy red lingerie before commenting it may not fit her; similarly when he expressly ignores her while ogling another woman in the shopping mall; in his rough physicality as he pulls her towards him. The gender politics at work between Rod and Trude is visually represented as he towers above her and as she kneels in front of him: frequently Trude is shown looking directly at him, Rod purposively diverting his gaze. He both sexualises her and denies her any sexuality herself.

_Tees and Trude_ works hard at establishing these very clear binaries: traditionally structured gender hierarchies are strictly adhered to between Trude and Rod for the larger duration of the film. This is done to provide maximum discursive punch when Trude finally speaks her subjection, and sex plays a large role in both the former and the latter.

In one particularly salient sequence Trude accuses Rod of a lack of intimacy: ‘You don’t even touch me anymore Rod’, she mourns.

‘Oh yeah? Well what about last Friday? What was that then?’ retorts Rod incredulously.

‘Oh yeah, you fuck me but you don’t touch me. What’s the matter Rod? Are my tits too slack; is my arse too big, have I got too many fuckin’ wrinkles?’

In one sequence of dialogue, Trude highlights a series of discursive attributes associated with normative femininity and the gender divide between masculine and feminine: the difference between touching and fucking indicative of the desire divide between feminine and masculine; the appearance and sartorial expression of power, of subjugation, internalised by women in the performance of femininity (Bordo 1989),
thrown into negative relief in Trude’s accusatory rhetorical questioning. Just as the power hierarchy between normative femininity and masculinity seems well and truly consolidated within *Teesh and Trude*, there is a moment of transgression: this vocalisation of Trude’s feminine subjection proving the Foucault adage that ‘where there is power, there is resistance’ (Foucault 1998, p. 95). Of course, Foucault goes on to say that this resistance can never be outside of that power, there is no ‘escaping it’; and while this may be true, the speaking of the feminine subjection is power nonetheless, a momentary transgression, relations of power laid bare.

4.4 Melodramatic Rhetoric

Melodrama’s aesthetic problem … is to demonstrate, to make real, social and ethical forces at work at that point in personal life where politics touch on the psychic. But realism is constrained by the boundaries of the empirically knowable and permissible. Melodrama, on the other hand, while never denying those boundaries, demands the real world match up to the imagination. Melodramatic aesthetics have survived because they offer to bridge this contradictory pressure, taking … authentic documents from the ‘real world’ and pushing them towards the symbolic activity of metaphor (Gledhill 1992, p. 108).

Throughout many of the scenes in *Teesh and Trude*, the television provides constant background noise: the chimes of a game show, the applause of a sitcom, the dulcet dialogue of the recurrent soap opera. At one point Teesh expressly notes that ‘if it wasn’t for that fuckin’ TV I wouldn't know what fuckin’ day it was’. In this manner, the television functions as a portal to the outside world; in those claustrophobic scenes that are contained within the walls of the women’s two-bedroom flat, taking up the larger portion of the film, the television acts as a point to break tension, a central figure in the lounge room that at one time or another unites all the characters together as they sit and stare, chat and smoke.

Most importantly, the television functions as a discursive compass: it draws attention to the wider concerns of the film bubbling under the surface of the distended plot lines that
provides for narrative action. As Rod and Teesh sit upon the couch in front of the television, Rod comments on a gender-ambiguous character upon the screen, ‘I like this chick. Or guy. As long as it knows the difference.’ Given that a disproportionately large amount of time is given to the central characters watching the television, the comments made while sat in front of the ‘box’ are there to be heeded—pointing to the undercurrent gender politics threaded through the entirety of the film, Rod’s seemingly throw away comment serves as a gentle reminder to pay attention.

The most recurrent of the television programs, that repeatedly gains visibility within Teesh and Trude, tellingly, is the subtype of melodrama, a soap opera. When this program does appear in scenes it is ever present, expressly given camera time. When operating in the background it can be heard, in the corner of the screen it can be seen. Even the dialogue and a non-diegetic musical soundtrack never entirely drown out the television melodrama: it defiantly peaks through, much like the flowers on the wallpaper in the lounge room where the television sits stalwart, faint yet noticeable, under the sickly blue paint overcoats.

Woman as central narrative concern in the filmic text is often delineated within the generic/conventional confines of ‘melodrama’. The tropes of melodrama have come to typify certain conventions held to be ‘feminine’, as Neale (1986) comments, marked by ‘emotional hyperbole’ (p. 12), and the melodramatic text often set in domestic spaces. Melodrama then has come to be associated with women, as a subtype of feminine narrative, even suggested as archetypal of a long-contested ‘women’s film’ (Butler 2002; Kuhn 1984, 1993; Moran & Vieth 2006). It is significant then that melodrama is habitually pointed to throughout Teesh and Trude:

Not only are film melodrama (and more particularly its subtype the ‘woman’s picture’) and soap opera directed at female audiences, they are also actually enjoyed by millions of women (Kuhn 1984, p. 18).

Teesh and Trude aesthetically, and narrativistically, reads as a melodrama (a good measure of soap opera convention punctuating particularly dramatic points), supported further by its gynocentric concerns. However, its social realist ethos and critical reflexivity of gender politics simultaneously undo its melodramatic grounding.
These reflexive melodramatic elements in *Teesh and Trude* are most evident through the symbolic use of the television: on a number of occasions a point-of-view shot is presented with the camera assuming the camera’s perspective, gaze turned towards Teesh and Trude as they sit on the couch watching the television. When perspective is shifted it unfolds that the television program that the women are viewing is a daytime soap opera, referencing such ‘sudsers’ as *The bold and the beautiful* or *Days of our lives*, replete with soft focus and artificial lighting, representing those extreme examples of the melodramatic convention that reproduce and reinforce the ‘emotionally hyperbolic’ feminine construct. As perspective shifts to the television screen, a short scene of the soap opera plays out: a leggy blonde is being sweet talked by a sharply dressed man, ‘You look sexy in that dress’, he says, to which she replies, ‘You know just what to say.’ She falls into his embrace, her cheek pressed against his chest, and, as the camera lingers on her backlit face, she gives us, the viewers, a sly and knowing glance.

The parallels, though unstated, are evident as the gaze of the television’s soapy clashes with both that of the downtrodden Teesh and Trude as well as the viewer. In this moment the film, with a sly knowing nod to our leggy blonde heroine-pretend, alludes to those feminine essentialisms inherent in melodrama in a critical referentiality. It is as though a discursive nod—*here are the issues at stake, we know there are gender essentialisms being utilised and we want you to know that we know*. There is an ironic contrast between the lives of emotion, glamour and feeling between the male and female in the soap opera, and the quotidian and abusive realities of the male/female relationships in the classed and gendered ‘real life’ world of *Teesh and Trude*. This is made most evident as the camera moves from the unrealism of the soap opera, with its soft focus and artificial lighting, back to Teesh and Trude, the dank lounge room light casting dim and unflattering light upon the women, cigarette in ash tray, everyday refuse strewn across table top and stained carpet.

In this manner, *Teesh and Trude* both enacts conventions of melodrama as well as contests them. Though aesthetically in opposition to the conventional glittered gilt of soap opera melodrama, *Teesh & Trude* is structured, or styled, narrativistically in the manner of a ‘women’s picture’ (Kuhn 1984), enacting a condensed version of the
emotionally charged soap opera narrative trajectory. As Cantor & Pigree note (quoted in Kuhn 1984), the structure of the soap opera narrative includes:

competing and intertwining plot lines introduced as the serial progresses. Each plot … develops at a different pace, this preventing any clear resolution of conflict. The completion of one story generally leads into another, and ongoing plots often incorporate parts of semi-resolved conflicts (p. 18).

The competing storylines, in the same manner as the soap opera subtype of melodrama, constructs a web of heightened emotional states, the likes of which it becomes difficult to leave without finding the end. Of course, the web constructed within *Teesh and Trude* is without high gloss and glamour, and instead conveys those social realist concerns understood as decidedly more bleak, more *real*. Teesh struggles with her hyperactive child, frightened of the imminent return of her abusive father who carries the threat of taking her child from her; Teesh’s boyfriend Les wishes to marry her but her hesitations due to a wild and turbulent past create strife between the two. Trude, meanwhile, has lost custody of her children due to a drug-addled and troubled past; having not seen her children for four years, she is on constant watch for them in the street, reporting to a friend we assume works at roads services number plates of cars she sees potentially carrying her children; simultaneously, having invested money into his failing bricklaying business, Trude is watching her savings being lost at the hands of a negligent, brutal lover. And so on it goes in the tangled mess of narrative threads, creating a ‘melodrama’ of which the convention attests:

Realism and melodrama played a dual role in the development of modern narrative cinema. However, in both general and academic usage the melodrama has traditionally been situated into oppositional and subordinate relationships with realism. Despite the notable attempts of some critics to redress this situation, melodrama remains widely used today as a pejorative term to denote sensationalism and sentimentality in works deemed absent of artistic merit (Presence 2012).

Over time this oppositional between realism and melodrama has been developed, as both terms have come to be referred to as genre and convention. However, as Linda Williams notes, melodrama traditionally referred to ‘a pervasive form of exciting, sensational and, above all, moving story’, thus is applicable to, ostensibly, all narrative
film to varying degrees. Melodrama, then, can be delineated, as Gledhill (1987) notes, as **rhetoric** rather than a clearly defined genre.

The melodramatic rhetoric in *Teesh and Trude* is used reflexively to call critical attention to the constructedness of gender, and in particular to that of femininity, as it is, so codified into the conventions of melodrama. As stated above, melodrama as rhetoric is used ‘to demonstrate, to make real, social and ethical forces at work at that point in personal life where politics touch on the psychic’ (Gledhill 1992, p. 108). Imbued within the *mise en scène* of *Teesh and Trude*, the melodramatic rhetoric constructs the politics of the social realist lens/ethos: it is in the opening titles as those objects, so carefully placed, convey a gendered currency of meaning; it is in the working-class language of the characters as they tell each other to ‘get fucked’, to ‘fuck you’, to ‘piss off’; it is in the broken seams of Trude’s pilled and fading jumper; it is in the satisfied faces of our flawed female protagonists as they stare down at a pleading Rod upon his knees. All of this creates a ‘moving story’, it provides excitement, sensation, and it pushes us to *feel* and to *think*, thus is melodrama in its purest form.

*Teesh and Trude* is a woman’s picture in its exploration of gynocentric concerns. Moving away from the definition and constraints of melodrama as genre or convention, it instead utilises melodrama as a rhetoric to flesh out, to give affect to, the ‘social and symbolic’ equation between femininity and struggle:

> The woman’s picture resorts to melodrama in Nowell-Smith’s\(^\text{51}\) sense as the mode appropriate to generating stories of suffering, self-sacrifice, the non-fulfillment of desire.

Ultimately, in *Teesh and Trude*, melodrama works as a critical tool, as well as a means by which to provide ‘resonance to dramatic situations’ (Elsaesser 1987, p. 43). In reflexively referring to, and performing, melodrama in its subtype/gentrified soap opera incarnation, *Teesh and Trude* critically analyses one space in which the feminine construct is (re)constructed and reinforced.

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\(^{51}\) Specifically in regards to American cinema, Nowell-Smith referred to the binary of active/passive as it relates to the gender binary of masculine/feminine, noting that as the feminine has been constructed as a passive entity, women struggle to figure in an active filmic rhetoric, ‘Broadly speaking, in the American movie the active hero becomes protagonist of the Western, the passive or impotent hero or heroine becomes protagonist of what has come to be known as melodrama.’ Thus, he highlights that women best figure in the emotive-driven, passive melodramatic, and if there is a male to figure in this rhetoric it mandates an ‘impairment of his “masculinity”’ (Nowell-Smith 1987, pp. 113–8).
Similarly, in utilising a melodramatic rhetoric within the *mise en scène*, that is, by giving critical importance to the *mise en scène* as a ‘repository of meaning’ that is a ‘primary characteristic of the melodramatic rhetoric’ (Presence 2012), social realist politics are given affective primacy. This melodramatic rhetoric is the discursive vehicle through which *Teesh and Trude* enacts its internal criticism of the marginalised feminine. By utilising a mode of address that is coded feminine—by feminising the lens through which the marginalised and oppressive lives of its female protagonists is explored—a reflexive and mimetic exercise of criticism, an *internal* criticism, is enacted.

### 4.5 Saying Things Unsaid in Feminine Discourse

If one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pre-gendered ‘person’ transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which is invariably produced and maintained (Butler 1990, p. 3).

*Teesh and Trude* critically engages with ‘traditionally female modes of communication’, modes of which are rooted in patriarchal discourse and present certain essentialisms that define the feminine as binary to that of the masculine. This is chiefly achieved through the reductionist method of utilising stereotypes, those that rest on assumptions of working-class gender hierarchies, gendered essentialisms that see the masculine and the feminine as distinctly different. However, these gendered essentialisms are not taken on face value. The film, through its social realist lens, takes great issue with the social attitudes that delineate male/female roles, both in the unstated politics of the *mise en scène* and within the narrative itself. Each character is a careful appropriation of gendered expectation gone awry—an un-maternal mother, a guileless
middle-aged woman, an un-protective father, an unmanly bloke and a macho bloke unable to provide.

It seems on first impressions that *Teesh and Trude* is content to further perpetuate harmful habitualised/normative gender discourse, for both female and male, within classed spaces. However, on closer inspection the excessive degree to which gender binaries are enacted throughout *Teesh and Trude* come to work strategically; this is a film that, in effect, satirises those binary gender expectations with both the feminine and the masculine, similarly pushing both working-class stereotypes and the associated gender stereotypes to mimetic saturation points. Each character is a pawn for a broader politicking, the social realist lens accentuating the critical aspect of each character.

Trude makes initial attempts at practicing the domestic feminine role in the film’s opening sequences, as she busies herself in the kitchen, verbalises her need to clean the flat, and waits on her boyfriend. Eventually, Trude out and out refuses her domestic role almost entirely. This is done, in the first instance, through small gestures such as giving up on domestic duties and resigning herself to the couch, and also through more grand and symbolic gestures such as verbalising her dissatisfaction at her domestic confines during a lovers’ spat, eventuating with their blackmailing her boyfriend in order to gain both financial and ideological leverage from the domestic space.

That Trude ultimately fails in her attempts at becoming the domestic feminine (as the suburban squalor and absent children attest) is not inconsequential. Rather, it intimates the futility of normative femininity, impacted by social class, environment, time and place, fulfilling Fox’s (1977, p. 810) attestations that the feminine is a state of flux, a continual state of pursuit, of becoming: ‘neither young age nor old age bring relief from such normative control of behavior’. Further, as Matthews (1984, p. 7) goes on to consolidate, ‘Any ideal of femininity is thus, by definition, unattainable.’

Teesh, on the other hand, does little to try to attain any state of normative femininity, seen to outwardly resist it throughout. Teesh remains entirely listless and emotionally difficult, her complete rejection of the domestic feminine role, of mother and housekeeper, as well as her repeated affectations regarding her heavy menstrual cycle, render her abject. Her father, both in the literal sense but also symbolically in the
patriarchal ‘Law of the Father’ sense, verbally brands Teesh as abject in stating ‘she can’t cook for shit, whores around, can’t keep a clean place to save her life’. In consolidating those intrinsic elements to the correct performance of womanhood (femininity) as being unperformed, unfulfilled, failed, Bob essentially deprives Teesh of any agency within the domestic space.

In further contrast to Teesh and Trude’s representations of (un)femininity, Rod and Les similarly enact a sub-binary of (un)masculinity. Presented as polar opposites in terms of their gendered roles, even by namesake, with ‘Les’ decidedly gender-ambiguous and ‘Rod’ conspicuously phallic. Les works in the fruit and vegetable department of a supermarket; Rod lays bricks. The oppositional play between them is eloquently illustrated in one key sequence in which extreme close ups interchange, of Rod’s hands in heavy-duty, dirty worker’s gloves roughly throwing down hard bricks into soft sand, and then of Les’ soft hands, blemish-free, gently caressing and packing away his glossy, waxed fruits and vegetables.

Les is as soft and sensitive as Rod is abrasive and brutish; however, it is Les who is succeeding in his work while Rod is not; it is Les who provides protection and fortitude in the domestic space while Rod does not. Gillard writes of Les as the linking force between the domestic and public spaces:

Indeed, if man and woman are two poles of the film’s axes, and home and public place (shopping mall) are seen as two poles of another axis, then Les may be seen (in Levi-Straussian terms) as a mediating term which makes communication possible between the extremes. And so it is Les who literally brings the tool which provides the possibility for all the strands of the narrative to be tied together (2002, p. 23).

Les exists as a post-patriarchal type character, successfully providing, striking balance between emotive and tough, leading and being led. Les avows Teesh’s unfeminine behaviour while also undermining Rod’s patriarchal dominance, and in doing so assists in allowing for a potential space within the gendered power matrix for alternative agency to emerge. As Gillard notes, Les acting as a ‘mediating term’ between the film’s axes of masculine and feminine assists in the potentiality of transgression, for an alternative agency, for both masculine and feminine. That is, as he proves to most
successfully achieve in his masculine role (eventually, as he both provides, works, and so on) as well as displaying feminine traits of sensitivity: desiring marriage and caring for young Kenny. The lines of gender hierarchy, so carefully established throughout the film, are symbolically redrawn. This provides Les a liberatory space to be both masculine and un-masculine without the discursive repercussions and in doing so provides space for Teesh and Trude to follow suit.

The concluding sequence of the film sees Teesh and Trude enter the public space, so displayed as an unfeminine space (as a masculinised space, and in this case, the site of Rod’s unfinished bricklaying job) with some degree of agency. The stereotyped oppressive patriarchy—personified by Rod and Teesh’s father—having been expelled from both the domestic space and the film frame itself, and with it ‘conventional hierarchies … overturned’ (Gillard 2002, p. 23), the two women gain control of their home and control of, or at least some equal footing with, the men in their lives. In ending the film in this manner, *Teesh and Trude* offers domestic-bound women a propitiatory space and a symbolic liberation not traditionally afforded within feminine discourse or, for that matter, within the conventional social realist film.

*Teesh and Trude’s* allegory of domestic discourse ultimately functions as strategic device. In its (almost) satirised performance of gender (stereotype), a process of re-signification is initiated for the feminine subject and for feminine discourse more broadly. Through the politicking looking glass of social realism and its focused feminine lens, *Teesh and Trude* explores and uncovers femininity as a ‘norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us [women], but which we occupy,’ and from which we can ‘reverse, re-signify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely’ (Butler 1993, pp. 126–7).

The (feminist) politics of *Teesh and Trude* can be found most prominently, is spoken most loudly, within its acknowledgement of things unsaid in discourses of gender, and within its recognition of the feminine subject as having been ‘subjected, made object, deprived of agency, and inscribed with patterns of desire that hold that oppressive pattern in place’ (Davies 1992, p. 59). This acknowledgement is first and foremost established through the formal conventions employed—the feminine lens shifting focus onto the women often overlooked in the social realist film, and giving voice to their
unique and gendered concerns of constraining feminine discourse that both speaks for them and through which they themselves speak.

In the most significant scene of the film, Trude finally dares to voice her feminine subjection in an argument with boyfriend, Rod: ‘You don’t even touch me anymore’, Trude mourns, temper quickening, ‘Who do you think I fuckin’ am? I am not some slag you can pick up, throw around and pay off.’

‘You never minded before’, retorts Rod, mouth agape.

‘I just never said anything before.’

Though perhaps not entirely affording the women an alternative agency (remembering that the social realist film aims to uncover abjection, suppression and subjugation, not necessarily negotiate a way out of it), what *Teesh and Trude* does afford the women is a voice through which to speak their subjection.

In its invitation narrative, *Teesh and Trude* as social realism explores the machinations of the working-class domestic woman, the patriarchal underpinnings, subjugations and oppressions made evident in the central female protagonists’ trials and tribulations. In representing Teesh and Trude as victim of, and fighting against, negligent and inadequate males, the feminist-driven political intent of providing a propitiatory space for the domestic-bound woman is made abundantly clear.

Whether one chooses to align oneself with the perspectives and insistences of such an overt invitational narrative is of course acutely subjective; what is non-negotiable, however, is the evidence of such invitational rhetoric in exploring the social boundaries of femininity within working-class domestic suburbia. In calling upon referential meaning of familiar aesthetics of the social realist ‘kitchen sink’ drama in conjunction with the stereotypical representations and melodramatic treatment of gender ideology, *Teesh and Trude* teeters near the edge of farce. However, in its treatment of femininity as socially constructed and subjectively enacted there is potential for subversive and oppositional readings. The more dogmatic, or didactic approach, though often seeming
heavy handed, attempts to subvert the largely masculinised approach to traditional social realist film and by way of this, provide an often unheard feminine voice within.
Chapter 5 **Blessed: Liminal Readings of Femininity**

The mother was in a sense everywhere—one could hardly discuss anything without falling over her—but always in the margins, always not the topic *per se* under consideration. The mother, that is, was generally spoken to, not speaking; she was usually discussed as an integral part of a discourse (because she really is everywhere) that was spoken by an Other. She was a figure in the design, out of focus; or, if in focus, then the brunt of an attack, a criticism, a complaint, usually in the discourse of a child (male or female) or in that of an adult (male or female) concerned to attribute all ills to the mother (Kaplan 1992, p. 3).

In Kokkinos’ 2009 film *Blessed* the tension and politics between place, character and identity—those that are impacted and affected by, as Hallam and Marshment (2000, p. 192) term it, the ‘socio-economic and spatial confinement of contemporary urban life’—are intently focused on the lives of those most often tucked away from public life. Played out through intersecting stories of a series of mothers and their children, *Blessed* peers through the broken blinds of commission housing and the working-class suburban home to investigate the confinements of domestic space and those discursively bound to it. The tensions of character, identity and place are acutely focused on the classed characters, maternal identities and working-class spaces, tracing the convergent lines of mother and child as they move between private and public, suburban and urban spaces—each component impacting the next, and so on and so forth. The politics are unmistakably those of a social realist film, addressing issues of social marginalisation and giving voice to those on the very margins of contemporary society.

Where *Teesh and Trude* produced subtle shifts in social realist convention through its use of mimesis, melodramatic rhetoric and a reflexive awareness of the stylistic tropes of traditional social realist film, *Blessed* pushes the boundaries even further. Utilising the same feminine lens that shifts focus from masculine to feminine working-class
characters, the outward shift from public to domestic in *Teesh and Trude* is enacted much more affectively in *Blessed*. An inward shift to gendered spaces of the self and of the body is increasingly explored alongside, and as part of, the socio-political concerns of its characters. Indeed, the feminine lens in *Blessed* further delves into the feminist adage that the personal is the political and the social is written upon the self as affective response. This inward, affective exploration of the socio-political and its intersection with feminine discourse as experienced by the female characters in *Blessed*, are first evidenced in the formal conventions employed. Similarly employing melodramatic rhetoric to cultivate empathetic identification, as previously explored in *Teesh and Trude*, a more intensive focus on affective life in *Blessed* challenges concepts of the social, the political and the bodily, the affective, as concomitant and coactive parts.

*Blessed* follows the loosely intertwining stories of five mothers and their children over the course of one day and night, in the suburbs of Melbourne. In each story, mother and child are contained in and of themselves, yet their stories impact and collide with one another; with the film split into two sections, or chapters, entitled simply ‘The children’ and ‘The mothers’. The opening sequences of the chapters introduce each character as they sleep, a motif that works as a connective link between the two narrative sections. On a more figurative level the sleeping figures work as docile bodies, inert and vulnerable, yet to awaken into the constraining environment of their lives and the social maladies of poverty and urban/suburban marginalisation.

Though the narrative strands of mother and child are linked, and often reactionary to one another, the nexus of *Blessed* is the mother characters. In all cases, the children’s day is constructed as reactionary to an event(s) in or from the domestic environment of the home. The domestic, as a space of the home as well as a broader discursive concept, is connected with the key mother characters. This pulls *Blessed* into the discursive realm of the feminine, with motherhood a part of an idealised feminine identity problematised by the social determinants of social marginalisation, whether that be poverty, abuse, neglect or addiction.

The structure of the film itself similarly finds *Blessed* exploring discourses of femininity—in having the children’s stories preceding that of the mothers, with the subsequent struggles and strife of each child then finding genesis in the following
storylines of each mother, *Blessed* becomes a discursive forum for a typical mother-blame trope.\textsuperscript{52} The feminine lens, beyond simply subverting the social realist gaze towards that of central female characters, complicates the conventional mother-blame trope via the close attention the film pays each of the mother characters’ subjective situations. Each of the women are given careful defence against apparent maternal neglect or impatient or other treatment of their children. This utilises a kind of invitational narrative typical of social realist convention in representing the relationship between, and impact of, social environment and marginalisation on character and identity. *Blessed* takes an additional step forward in this social realist convention in promoting empathetic identification, making those socio-economic impacts emotionally intelligible, through the foregrounding of affective moments.

5.1 *Blessed* as Social Realism

In its social realist praxis, *Blessed* presents the key mother characters as victims of their socio-economic circumstances. In stylistic approach alone, *Blessed* maintains a familiar social realist focus on conventions of dread and hopelessness with a large section of the film taking place in typical working-class public spaces of the urban. This approach speaks to the wider social realist praxis of giving voice to those on the social margins, finding its stories in the cracks of normative society. Where *Blessed* employs the feminine lens, however, is in the maternal melodrama of its female characters. The film promotes certain feminised articulations through close attention to the placement of bodies and objects that speak to a wider feminine discourse, while simultaneously rupturing ideas of an idealised femininity in referring back to the social determinants facing each mother that, to use Ruddick’s (1980, p. 344) phrase, ‘make one wonder at the further possibilities for maternal happiness in decent societies’.

\textsuperscript{52} ‘Mother-blame’ is a theory initiated in Freudian analysis and further consolidated in early child psychology texts, stipulating that as mothers have historically acted as the primary source of care, any negative experience or trait of a child can be traced back and attributed to the ineptitude of the mother (Doane & Hodges 1992). This was tied to feminine discourse and the role of motherhood as natural and necessary in the performance of correct womanhood, and consequently absorbed into many forms of cultural representation. Kaplan noted that Western film habituated such stereotyping of the mother, with mother-blame generally being enacted through the ‘bad mother’ character trope that, due to her maternal and feminine inadequacies, is generally punished in the text (Kaplan 1983; Kaplan 1993).
In reviewing *Blessed*, Hall (2009) writes that once again for filmmaker Ana Kokkinos ‘pessimism prevails’—the premise of this pessimism intimating a clear social realist standing. Indeed, the social concerns of economic hardship and class disparities are evident in the character type and setting of *Blessed* in working-class Melbourne. Given that the film was adapted from the stage play *Who’s afraid of the working class*, of which the playwrights53 also had a hand in the screenplay, it stands to reason that much of the working-class politics inherent in the play has been carried over into the film adaptation.54 It is subject matter made for the social realist film: poverty, violence, urban decay, racism, gambling, domestic abuse, and on it bleakly goes.

*Blessed* locates itself in two distinct, yet linked, social spheres—that of the urban and the suburban. The opening scenes of both ‘The children’ and ‘The mothers’ establishes these two spaces as being predominately working class and imbued with social ailments:55 the suburban homes shown are old and worn out, with peeling and cracked paint, faded carpet and bed sheets for curtains. The characters are shown interacting in old kitchens and bedrooms with unmade beds, in backyards with creaking old Hills Hoists and grotty green rubbish bins. There is a tension in each of the suburban homes represented, operating as the bed of seeding troubles, though it is not until the characters leave the home, the suburban, and enter the urban that such troubles truly bloom.

The suburban is tied to the familial as troubled with a distinct lack or absence of familial unity contrasted concurrently with the isolation of urbanscape. The urban settings move from neon-lit pokies rooms in local RSLs, to inner city commission flats, street corners busied by working girls, social services buildings, police stations and

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53 Namely Andrew Bovell, Patricia Cornelius, Melissa Reeves and Christos Tsiolkas.
54 However, there are quite distinct differences between the play and the adapted film. Foremost is that of the structure of each text: *Who’s afraid of the working class* routinely addressed the audience in pauses of direct didacticism, in what Hopgood deems ‘a Brechtian device that draws attention to the political nature of the project’ (Hopgood 2009, p. 15); *Blessed*, on the other hand, integrates these previously overt politics into the weave of narrative action, moments of emotion and affect calling upon critical reflection of the politics at hand.
55 I say predominately here as there is a glance at middle class society, perhaps even old money or an element of old bourgeoisie, with the introduction of Laurel, an elderly Anglo–Saxon lady with a now estranged Indigenous son, James. It becomes evident through the use of flashback and emotive montage, that Laurel had denied her adopted son (perhaps an instance of the ‘stolen generation’, though the circumstances around Laurel and James’ relationship are never made entirely clear) from seeing his birth mother—her lonely figure shown successively at the door of Laurel’s large Victorian-style house on James’ birthday, neatly leaving a present at the door before walking away. The signs of an affluent middle class existence evident in the large and comfortable home, and similarly in the striking contrast created when Laurel is confronted with the young, working class Daniel as he invades her home.
mortuaries. There is a repeated use of graffiti-laden walls and alleyways, the nooks and crannies of broader city streets creating an atmosphere of suffocation and of isolation. This general grittiness, of rain-soaked pavements at night, and sparse vistas of train yards and condensed high rises, reiterates familiar stylistic tropes of the social realist film.

Not only are these locations where the poor and under-represented reside, but they are also representative (in a figurative or symbolic sense) of the trials and troubles, the depression and hopelessness, of the stories that each of the characters carry with them—these locations truly showing the rips and tears in the social fabric. One of the more poignant and symbolic moments of character location utilised in Blessed is the final scene of ‘The children’, in which the brother and sister characters Stacey and Orton seek refuge in a charity bin. A label seen blazoned across the front of the bin as the camera tracks towards the opening where Stacey and Orton can be heard talking reads *homeless.*

The characters in Blessed are represented as both victim of or reactive to their socio-economic situations, as well as bearers of a broader social politics. As Hallam and Marshment note on the thematics that come to encompass the characters in the social realist film:

> Using the socio-economic matrix of these localised situations as background, the films play out dramas of ‘universal’ human significance: coming-of-age stories, oedipal scenarios of growth, development and conflict between the generations, domestic relationships and the traumas of everyday family life (2000, p. 185).

Further speaking to the social realist praxis inherent in Blessed, the characters themselves establish the undercurrent of social redress taking place throughout the narrative action proper. Laurel, played by Monica Maughan, addresses young runaway

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56 Though Blessed does heavily rely on these tropes, it breaks away in moments of affective respite—expansive shots giving breathing space to the typically tight and cluttered shots of street-level cityscapes. These expansive shots portray moments of sublimity, of hopefulness or restfulness, to the side of narrative action, utilised as the sun sets on each character wherever they are within their urban confines. This is a relatively contemporary shift in traditional representations of social realist content that will be explored further below.
Daniel (Harrison Gilbertsen) after he breaks into her home searching for petty cash, ‘I
don’t think you are bad’, she says, ‘I think you are trying to be bad, but I don’t think
you really are. Being poor is bad, being hungry is bad, having no decent education is
bad.’

In this sequence’s penultimate stages, Laurel gifts to Daniel John Steinbeck’s *The
grapes of wrath*, the political rallying against poverty and the working class a none-too-
subtle symbolism in the social realist narrative-scape of *Blessed*. In this sequence, a
class pathology of the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ is brought into stark relief. The social
politics of a marginalised working-class youth is made coherent and visceral, giving
some weight to deride O’Reagan’s (1996) sentiment that Australian social realism
shows signs of a ‘partial decline’ in the emphases on class disparity. Indeed, *Blessed*
pushes further with its social politics that a working class exists still, and that it remains
in those places of the most marginalised benefactors of a social invisibility at the hands
of a mythologised ‘battler’ ideology (Elder 2007).

Another key example of this foregrounding of social politics is the secondary character
of Sergeant Kendrick (Neil Pigot), charged with questioning truants Trisha (Anastasia
Baboussouras) and Katrina (Sophie Lowe) after they are picked up for shoplifting: ‘You
haven’t got much, have you?’ Kendrick remarks, ‘Do you get envious? Do you get
angry? When you see the girls who have got everything?’ After baiting the girls, he
enters into a didactic diatribe prompting a rebellious outcry from Trisha. In this
moment, as Kendrick schools the girls on what is really at stake in the social politics,
not only of the film, but of wider normative societal discourse, there is a symbolic head-
to-head between the powers that be: the institutional (in this case, the police), and those
that suffer most from institutional exclusion (marginalised working-class youth).

‘Life isn’t a big fancy dress party’, says Kendrick. ‘You can’t just pretend to be
something you’re not. Everyone has to look like what they are. And what are you girls?
Trash … What are you going to do with your life? You’ve got nothing.’

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57 Indeed, it could be argued that the 1990’s new wave in Australian cinema has seen a strong return of
class politics.
‘We haven’t got nothing. We haven’t got nothing! We’re fucking smart! We’re fucking smart so don’t you say we haven’t got nothing, you fucking prick!’ rebels Trisha, in both a reaction to Sergeant Kendrick as well as a figurative catch-cry for the film’s crusading social politics.

5.2 A Working Class Femininity

In a similar fashion to the previously explored Teesh and Trude, the characters in Blessed tread the line of stereotype and farce in its representations of gender and femininity; at once making recognisable and disrupting the literacies of meaning attached to discourses of woman and femininity. Normative conceptions of femininity are toyed with in the construction of each female/mother character. Perhaps most notably, this is evident in the character Bianca, played by Miranda Otto. In one key sequence, following a windfall at the pokies, Bianca enters an up-market dress shop, finding there a gold-sequined mini dress that she subsequently tries on.

The gold dress, symbolic of an idealised femininity—delicate, petite and beautiful—comes to be disrupted by Bianca’s inelegant enactment of her less than ideal circumstances. She tugs and pulls at the dress as it catches on her head and flailing arms, her nude-coloured bra, too big for the dress, awkwardly peaks out the side of the arms and cowled neckline. Every fold of skin is shown, her hair a tangled mess, her face makeup-free, red and flustered. Bianca is shown unable to perform an idealised feminine identity, and even when afforded the luxury of such a feminine object, it is ill fitting and clumsy. Bianca is further shown wearing the dress at home—a non-descript suburban house with cluttered kitchen surfaces and inelegant, cheap furnishings, the contrast between the crafted gold dress and the decidedly working-class interior of Bianca’s home, made stark and uncompromising.

The home, as previously noted a conventional marker of normative femininity, is a recurrent feature in Blessed, speaking to the working-class environment impeding each of the mother characters’ abilities to adequately fulfil their feminine roles. Trisha (Victoria Haralabidou), in her cramped brick house, is a single mother and sole-income earner; similarly, Rhonda (Frances O’Connor) lives in commission housing indicative
of her subsistence on government handouts; Tanya struggles with a mortgage she cannot afford with an unemployed husband and dependent child in a house with peeling paint and stained carpets, and on it goes.

*Blessed* goes some way to illustrating the incompatibility between social marginalisation, in the working-class characters of the film and the strictures of feminine identity. It illustrates this through a feminised approach to typically social realist spaces of the urban—the discomfort and displacement of the characters made evident in close-up shots of hands and pained expressions—as well a focus on feminine objects and symbolisms, such as the home, sartorial attire, allusions to desire for romance, touch and love, all punctuated by the failings of each woman due to the constraints of her social status. Overwhelmingly, however, the feminine lens operates via the simple assertion of the role of the mother, her place in domestic spaces, and the continual failings of femininity as she attempts to carry out the social role of feminine in the face of socio-economic hardship.

### 5.2.1 Marginalised Motherhood

Maternal practices begin in love, a love which for most mothers is as intense, as they will experience. Although economic and social conditions … may make that love frantic, they do not kill the love (Ruddick 1980, p. 344).

An overarching, and overwhelming, intent of *Blessed* is the abundantly clear delineations made of the discursive ties that bind mother to child, and the maternal to the feminine. In one particularly charged sequence in *Blessed*, Gina is frantic in the search for her missing son, Roo. Unaware of his whereabouts for some time, Gina convinces herself that an unidentified body found in a river is that of her son. She hurriedly picks up her handbag and keys, and rushes to the car to make her way to the mortuary in order to identify the body she so stalwartly believes is her son. Watching helplessly, almost entirely unnoticed by her mother, Gina’s daughter Trisha yells after her, ‘How do you even know it’s him?’ If only momentarily, this stops Gina’s anxious rush, and she turns to her daughter in considered reply, ‘Because a mother knows these things.’
Mothers are enduring figures in film for good reason, because they function as integral and enduring figures in every life: whether idyllic or less than, the relationship each person cultivates with their mother (even if this means an absence of a relationship) is an inherently impactful one. Of course this operates in two integral ways: the biological and the social. The mother gives life; this is indisputable and mandates the importance of the mother, if only singularly rooted in the biological sense. Socially and culturally, the mother as construct—that is adjunct to normative feminine discourse—has imbued certain expectations and characteristics upon the role of the mother that have been habitualised into screen representations of motherhood. In its probing, social realist mode of expression, Blessed explores these expectations and characteristics, foregrounding the pressures and ambivalences inherent in motherhood, heightened in the harsh environment of working and underclass (sub)urbaniy.

As with broader discourses of femininity, conceptions of motherhood can and have changed in response to socio-cultural and temporal contingencies. However, there are certain enduring qualities that have seemingly stood the test of time in regards to changing conceptions of feminine discourse and the maternal role in that discourse. Indeed, the linkage of motherhood to normative conceptions of womanhood, of femininity, is long and enduring. From this has emerged an abstract notion of the ‘ideal mother’—sanctifying maternal characteristics such as selflessness, nurturing and care, sacrifice and nourishment, and so on—attributes that have much cross-over with broader feminine ideals, though arguably greater in discursive weight given the cultural gravitas held by the institution of motherhood in society past and present.

Though it is true that the institution of motherhood, and the role of the mother herself, has certainly evolved over time, residual expectations of the ideal mother have carried on into contemporary notions of motherhood. Certain evolutions in maternal discourse have loosened the grip of normative femininity on notions of motherhood: as the role of women in public spaces increases, the ‘career woman’, and the choice of some women to wait to have children or to have no children at all, is certainly less stigmatised than when gender roles were more distinct and rigid. Nonetheless, the notion of a maternal drive, a maternal instinct, and the expectation of the truly feminine woman to achieve
motherhood remain largely adhered to in normative society, indicative of a persistent notion of motherhood as an integral aspect of ‘correct womanhood’. With increased critical attention paid to representations of women on screen, and to film products that foreground gynocentric issues—such as the much debated ‘woman’s film’—the role of the mother is primed for further exploration.

As Linda Williams (1984, p. 300) notes, the ‘device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood’ is typical of on-screen representations of motherhood, particularly in those genres, or sub-genres of the ‘woman’s film’ and the maternal melodrama. It is this imbalance that Kokkinos explores in Blessed in its foregrounding of the inherent struggles and ambivalences of motherhood. Each of the central women characters are mothers. Each mother’s ability to effectively mother her children is impacted by events and struggles wrought by the effects of socio-economic, or socio-cultural, hardship to varying degrees. Rhonda, Bianca, Tanya and Gina, are each struggling with poverty and the social impacts of such a meagre subsistence.

Perhaps most pointedly, the character of Rhonda represents the worst-case scenario among all of the struggling mothers. Her story is presented as layer upon layer of struggle and strife; this is made even more poignant due to the placement of Rhonda in the structure of the narrative itself. Introduced quite late into ‘The mother’ chapter after the other mother characters have been well established, Rhonda is noticeably set apart and thus made distinctive, significant.

The mise en scène giving voice to a yet-unspoken politics, Rhonda is introduced in close up, the static shot soon panning down the length of her seated body to reveal one hand resting against a heavily pregnant belly, a cigarette and lighter wedged between her fingers, a large box of Horizon Blues clutched in the other. Behind Rhonda is a noticeboard, indicating she is outside of the home, with flyers and pamphlets pinned in patchwork pattern. Positioned parallel to Rhonda’s vacant gaze, a flyer advertises

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58 This is exemplified in Australia by recent political events surrounding the prime ministership of Julia Gillard: most pointedly, Gillard was accused by back bencher Bill Heffernan of being ‘deliberately barren’, and similarly criticised by Tony Abbot as lacking experience in family matters due to her lack of children (Summers 2012). This highlights that gender politics that tie expectations of femininity with motherhood rage on, albeit nowadays within a forum of debate rather than hierarchical, or hegemonic, notions of gender roles.
‘Managing on a low income’. The whereabouts of this space, hinted at with the placement and signification of the noticeboard flyers, is named only when a secondary character enters the scene, ‘Rhonda? Hi I’m Gail, your new case manager.’ The introduction of Rhonda in a social services office is of course loaded with referential meaning: as well as categorically situating Rhonda’s storyline in a social realist setting, it immediately signifies her socio-economic hardships.

Of no small symbolic worth is that Rhonda is the only mother character whose establishing shots (excluding the opening sequence of the characters sleeping) take place outside of the home, outside of the domestic space. Further, with the exception of her unborn child, Rhonda is the only mother character not introduced in the same space as her children. As the home is the discursive space within which motherhood is most traditionally situated, that Rhonda is singled out as the one and only mother outside of that space discursively labels her as problematic and highlights from the outset her feminine failings as absent mother—as well as unfit mother, as both the cigarettes and social welfare office attest.

The domestic space conventionally belongs to the mother as forum for both motherhood and supporting feminine duties, so Rhonda immediately problematises these normative conceptions of femininity: as the establishing sequences demonstrate, here is a mother without her kids whom we first encounter in a social welfare office. The juxtaposed imagery of a pregnant Rhonda with cigarette between her fingers immediately opens this character to reproach and remonstration. This is heightened by the fact that the story of Rhonda’s children has preceded her own, their homelessness and intimations towards domestic abuse at the hands of their mother’s boyfriends damning Rhonda before her own day unfolds. Rhonda’s establishing story invites judgement, actively calling upon a cache of referential meaning attached to normative conceptions of femininity, those that call upon motherhood as a crucial role in the performance of correct womanhood, thus casting Rhonda into the role of unfeminine, as the ‘bad mother’.

Though surface representations of Rhonda, particularly in these establishing sequences in the social welfare office, seem to invite judgement and discursive recrimination, there is a defiance that points to a more abstract and existential thematic. As Rhonda bites and snarls at welfare worker Gail, we catch glimpses of a name scrawled upon her hand in thick black ink: *Mickey*, whom we later find out is the son taken from her and placed
Rhonda personifies the sentiment of Ruddick’s (1980) ‘maternal thinking’: though easier to cast in the role of ‘bad mother’, drawn from the ‘grossly distorted images’ of motherhood that dichotomise the maternal role as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, the character of Rhonda, with the supporting mother characters, reminds us of the truly unstable nature of motherhood. The actuality that no mother can achieve the perfection dictated by the myth of the selflessly devoted mother is stretched to its farthest limits in Blessed, and in particular with the character of Rhonda—pushing Ruddick’s (1980) sentiment of a mother’s love for her child(ren); that even in the face of truly spectacular failings, of ‘economic and social conditions’ that ‘may make that love frantic’, those problems and failings ‘do not kill the love’ (p. 344).

5.2.2 Domestic Discourse

Discourses of the maternal and the domestic space go hand in hand, encoded in a wider feminine construct. The life of the mother has been traditionally inscribed upon the home, the domestic sphere. This thread between maternity and domestic spaces is indicative of a discursive binary, the gendered segregation of feminine/domestic and masculine/public. Though this binary has considerably weakened over time, not least in part due to feminist movements such as the suffragettes and second-wave feminism, the discursive dregs of these binaries and the discursive constraints to which they belong are still understood and upheld in many regards.

This focus on spaces of the domestic has conjunctly seen a greater focus on the role of motherhood. This is indicative of a shift from the not-too-distant past when the role of the mother was less foregrounded on screen, relying instead on dominant conceptions of motherhood naturalised in mainstream cinema through the use of stereotypical representation, as Pascoe (2006) notes, ‘These [stereotypical] representations are, perhaps, particularly important in issues of motherhood, as the mother frequently takes a minor role on screen and her behaviour is accepted as normal and largely unexamined.’ (pp. 2–3) By employing a social realist lens, Blessed does much to
challenge, or unpack, a number of these maternal stereotypes in order to undermine the role of assumption and judgement in representations of motherhood.

On the surface, the domestic space is utilised in Blessed to locate the film in the world of the working class. These are recognisable images, often seen in the kitchen sink dramas of early British social realism, or the suburban melodramas popular in the Australian revivalist cinema of the 1990s. Establishing scenes for the characters of Tanya, her husband Peter and their son Daniel, take place in a run-down suburban clinker brick house; a long dank hallway breaks off into small bedrooms with unmade beds and big old wardrobes. When we meet Tanya and Peter in the kitchen, the linoleum floor looks cold and the lead pipe kitchen sink tired and leaky.

The mise en scène within these domestic spaces works in reflecting the classed intricacies of each character: Tanya is trying, working two jobs to pay her mortgage, and accordingly the house is neat yet tired. In the backyard the washing hangs white and clean on the old Hills Hoist but the paint is flaking off the door jambs. Concurrently, Rhonda’s home is within a tall faceless block of commission housing; she has pictures of her children on the fridge but her children are notably absent from her home.

Blessed utilises the domestic space to play upon the still-resonant notions of the feminine ideal that binds women to the home and domestic labour. However, from the outset each of the mother characters is seen to resist, disregard or struggle with their place within this domesticised feminine ideal: Bianca (Miranda Otto) remains in bed while daughter Katrina (Sophie Lowe) readies herself for school; Gina is shown arguing with her daughter, struggling to maintain order and rule within her home; Tanya stands at the kitchen sink, blowing her cigarette smoke through a crack in the window, engaged in a domestic dispute with her husband; and Rhonda is shown outside of the domestic realm, symbolic of her ultimate failings of the feminine ideal of the ‘good mother’. Rhonda’s establishing sequence within a social welfare office (making her the only mother initially introduced outside of the domestic space) most significantly foregrounds the social and economic struggles that disrupt the domestic space and the encompassing feminine/maternal discourse for all the mother characters to varying ends.
*Blessed* represents the domestic space as the source of unrest for the children characters; the home (or lack of) the beginning point of each wayward trajectory for the troublesome storylines of the children. In many ways this consolidates the importance of the domestic space as a stabilising force in the lives of children, and further consolidates the important role of the mother within that space. That the mothers fail to create a safe, nourishing domestic environment for their children further engenders the role of mother as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’. In a sense, it is within the domestic spaces of *Blessed* that normative feminine discourse is consolidated, a reminder of what is under examination within the film in a broader sense: the expectations placed upon these mothers as discursive subjects takes root in the home, the key space where the feminine ideal is brought most sharply into relief. When the characters exit the domestic space, the film goes some way in foregrounding those extraneous issues that ultimately led to domestic brokenness.

### 5.2.3 Sex (and Motherhood)

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to an historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasure, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power (Foucault 1998, pp. 105–6).

Sex is noticeably absent from *Blessed*; this is not inconsequential in light of the film centrally concerning itself with mothers and motherhood. Sex has little place within maternal discourse and, viewed under the wider normative discursive constraints of femininity, is a complication at best. In broader discursive terms, sex within feminine discourse mandates that a woman be both sexually alluring yet chaste—the balance between the two, crucially, a stumbling block in the perpetual becoming of the feminine woman (Hollows 2000; Matthews 1984). There is clear contradiction within the place of

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59 This visibility of relative absence is no small part due to Kokkinos’ previous films, *Head on* (1998) and *The book of revelation* (2006), in which sex was a central narrative concern.
motherhood as encoded within a wider feminine construct that places sexual discourse in both the necessary and the disavowed: as Adrienne Rich notes, a contradictory duality takes place in the mother as ‘beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing’ and yet simultaneously the body of woman was a ‘source of moral and physical contamination’ (Rich 1981, p. 34).

The normative feminine woman is asked to be sexual but only at the service of other (in the patriarchal sense this translates as female sexuality at the service of man), and not for the service of self, that is, woman’s own pleasure. For woman as mother, sex is functional and simultaneously problematic is the required absence of sex for the normative discourse of motherhood to be performed correctly, as Summers wrote of early Australian discourses of mothers and sex:

> It is conveniently forgotten that married women must have sexual intercourse in order to reproduce: a general Australian puritanism has managed to convince itself that mothers are not sexual creatures and female sexuality is either denied or relegated entirely to the Damned Whore stereotype (Summers 1975, p. 153).

Tied into the discursive details of what it is to be a mother—caring, selfless, ready to sacrifice all for her child or children—the mother as a discursive subject has expectations placed upon her, those that Betsy Wearing (1996) argues are part of the subsuming process of the mothering role, with the disavowal of sex and sexual agency the collateral damage for the woman as mother. The cultural habituation of this mother–sex divide has been translated onto screen representation—Australian mothers generally seen as asexual due to their place as secondary characters—or representations of the sexual mother character associated with bad or failing mothers (most explicitly seen in those films with mother characters as central, such as *Caddie* and *Fran*).

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60 Summers’ text was specifically referencing early colonial life within Australia, and thus the institution of marriage was much more intrinsically tied to discourses of motherhood. Though there remains a resonance of this linkage between marriage and motherhood today, primarily seen in the habituated ethics of ‘good’ mothering and stigmas attached to single parent, or indeed homosexual parenting, it is certainly less impactful and therefore not necessarily covered in this research.

61 This is further consolidated by Kaplan in her work on representations of mother in early British melodrama, in which the sexual mother is always bad or evil (Kaplan 1987).
The most visible references to sex in *Blessed* are those intimated during arguments between Tanya and her husband Peter (William McInnes). Early sequences involving husband and wife establish a tension and conflict between the two, largely stemming from Peter’s crises of being jobless and unable to provide for his wife and child. After an argument resulting from Peter requesting money from his wife, Tanya in exasperation accuses, ‘You know, you never touch me.’

‘What? You don’t want me to touch you’ replies Peter, clearly taken aback by Tanya’s accusatory observation.

‘Touch me then. Touch me’, Tanya implores.

The implied sexual discourse that unfolds between Peter and Tanya speaks to a broader division between masculine and feminine conceptions of sex: the appeal to be ‘touched’ equates sex with intimacy, a more feminine-imbued romantic notion of sex.

This ‘romanticised sexuality’ (Hollows 2000, p. 84) as a more woman-defined, feminine sexuality, is further defined between Tanya and Peter as they wait in the hospital following their son’s attempted suicide. Peter admits that he took the money Tanya had previously accused her son of stealing, an event that sent the boy’s day spiralling into chaos. Peter explains, ‘Because I hate thinking where you get it, and I hate just having to shut up about it.’ In Peter’s admission, he voices his abject masculinity, the unbearable inversion of his gendered preference: he is voiceless as head of his home as bread winner and, it seems, his wife is unfaithful to him. As Tanya goes on to explain that she cares for invalid for extra money, it becomes clear that she is fulfilling her feminine and domestic role elsewhere: ‘I clean his house and I do his washing, and I cook for him. When he can eat.’ Peter aggressively retorts, ‘Are you fucking him?’

‘If he could, I would make love to him. If his body wasn’t so tired, if he wanted me that way.’

62 There is a secondary story at work in Peter’s story, as he is represented as robbed of his masculinity: unemployed and therefore unable to financially support his family, emotionally weak and sexually inactive. The gender binary is inverted with Tanya and Peter in this sense: Tanya as primary breadwinner, and, in less obvious ways, sexual aggressor.
This sequence establishes a clear gender binary, albeit a disrupted one: Peter subsumes the masculine if only in his failings of it, clearly distressed at his lack of ability to provide, his emasculation brought full circle in his wife’s perceived unfaithfulness. In distinction, Tanya is represented as typically feminine in her caring and nurturing role, as a nurse in her day job and a private caregiver to a terminally ill man. This is habitually signified throughout the film, first in her intimate and emotive language in the opening sequence between her and Peter, and in subsequent interactions with her son as she looks upon him lovingly and strokes his forehead.

The distinction made between ‘fucking’ and ‘making love’ further consolidates this division between feminine and masculine, and throws some light on the impact this division has on gendered conceptions of sex. Feminine discourse is encoded with notions of sex that are romantic, emotionally driven, a transmission of patriarchal power that has seen the woman historically take on a more submissive sexual role. Peter, in using the more aggressive and thus more masculine term ‘fucking’, draws a line between the two—a line that is visibly drawn upon the screen, as the camera zooms out to reveal Tanya and Peter sitting in the hospital waiting room, a chair separating them. In a symbolic bridging of this gender divide, Tanya pleads one more time, ‘Touch me Pete’, at which point Peter reaches for her hand, pulling himself in to the vacant seat and next to his wife, her head pressing against his chest.

Though only implied and never seen in Blessed, it is Rhonda who is the most sexual, and sexualised, of the mother characters. Notably, it is also she who most obviously fails at her role as mother. Again, sex is never explicitly referred to, rather it is hinted at, intimated in accusatory and damning moments of Rhonda’s inadequacies as a mother. The first of these intimations takes place as Rhonda attends a meeting with her social welfare officer, Gail, who asks after her current boyfriend, Nathan. ‘What about your partner?’ Gail asks, ‘Is he the father?’ The question masks an assumption/allegation of multiple partners, consolidated in an earlier sequence as Rhonda’s children converse about her previous boyfriends, the good and the bad.

The scene in which Rhonda’s children refer to a number of their mother’s past lovers also reveals the only other reference to sex in Blessed—sexual abuse. Tied into the
socio-economic environment in which the film takes place—of poverty and reliance on welfare, the harsh gender warfare of hyper-masculine men and domestically bound, subjugated women—the revelation of sexual abuse similarly ties the sexualisation of Rhonda to that of the neglect of her children. In placing her pleasure above the care of her children, Rhonda’s role as sexed comes to be affiliated with her role as a bad mother. The scene begins with Orton and Stacey observing a prostitute as she propositions a man in his car. ‘In the car, what do they do?’

‘Stuff’, replies Orton.

‘And they give ‘em money? That’s like Nathan, but he doesn’t give me any money.’

‘What do you mean? Does Mum know?’

‘It’s when she said I had to sleep in your room. You didn’t want to share.’

Orton, clearly troubled, presses Stacey further, ‘But it was Phil, when you came into my room, not Nathan. Phil was before Nathan.’

‘Was he better than Nathan?’

‘Same.’

‘There was someone who was good.’

‘Ted. He was before Phil. He’s Mickey’s Dad.’

‘Who?’

‘Mickey, our brother.’

‘Where’s Mickey?’ Stacey asks.

‘Foster care.’
Rhonda as a sexual being and a mother is inherently problematic. More broadly, this speaks to the lack of sexual agency afforded to women as mothers, as though the expectations of selfless love and sacrifice ultimately means sacrificing self-hood altogether, including sex and desire. Politically, this speaks to the class pathology in which Rhonda is situated, the cycle of poverty and abuse reflected in Orton and Stacey’s conversation about their mother’s previous lovers, one after the other continuing the cycle of abuse and neglect. The role that sex plays in this cycle is an inherently negative one, first in Rhonda’s neglect of her children in placing her sexual needs above that of her children’s safety, and also in the problematic sex that occurs within the underclass environment—indicative in the representation of prostitution, pregnancy in the midst of poverty, and sexual abuse.

5.3 Melodramatic Convention as Affective

Love, affection, and the affectionate dispensing of emotional sustenance may seem to be purely private transactions that have nothing to do with the macrosocial domain … But this is false (Bartky 1990, p. 109).

Though the image of the mother has often come to be sanctified, this is largely at the expense of affording any agency to the woman as mother. This is an occurrence captured on film in the patterned appearance of the mother character being stereotyped and categorised to fit the rigid discursive constraints placed upon the maternal. This is what Kaplan referred to in her documentation of the four categories of the mother character as the good, the bad, the heroic, and the silly, weak or vain (Kaplan 1990). As Williams (1984, p. 3) notes, ‘The device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical of the “woman’s film” in general and the sub-genre of the maternal melodrama in particular.’ *Blessed*, though at once seeming to typify this, simultaneously challenges and disrupts such devices:

As a melodrama, *Blessed* ticks all the boxes: it uses music to convey emotions that words cannot express; its multilayered narrative exploits the devices of chance, coincidence and missed opportunities; the audience is called upon to bear witness to suffering and judge moral characters; and resonating
throughout is the archetypal figure of the lone mother struggling to look after her family (Hopgood 2009, p. 15).

Melodramatic conventions are utilised routinely throughout *Blessed* to provide emotional resonance in key moments throughout the film. These conventions are turned to in its depiction of its socially marginal characters to heighten action and to highlight symbolically significant occurrences, as well as in bringing into relief its representation of life, as Klevan (2000, p. 21) eloquently notes, as a ‘series of events with stylistic extremities both outlining and making vivid the eventfulness’.

A prime example of the melodramatic convention utilised in order to make ‘vivid the eventfulness’ is the interlinking moments between mother and children in the final sequence of the film—a long montage of the dramatic peaks of each of *Blessed*’s multifarious narrative threads. Gina heads to the mortuary to identify the body of a boy found in a river, convinced it is her son while simultaneously dealing with conflict from daughter, Trisha; Rhonda meets Orton at a café where he accuses her of allowing Stacey to be sexually abused; Tanya returns home to find son Daniel overdosed on prescription drugs in her bed; and so on the threads unravel.

In his online review of *Blessed*, Craig Mathieson bitingly remarks:

> Trying to prove some kind of spurious authenticity by shocking an audience is not a valid form of realism. It’s typical of the ill-made choices that dominate this film, which render it a hysterical melodrama that manages to be both condescending and vapid … *Blessed* sets you up: you’re supposed to be disgusted, and then when Rhonda is punished for her actions you’re expected to feel sympathy. There is one scene, a confrontation between Katrina and her mother, a fading beauty with a gambling addiction, that suggests their individual story could have made for a far more incisive feature, but ultimately it’s easier, and more noble, to cut from shock to shock … It’s the film’s philosophy writ large: strive for effect, not lasting illumination (2009).

Quite obviously, Mathieson’s is a negative reading of *Blessed*’s particular melodramatic, affective conventions. However, he does highlight the clear melodramatic approaches that are utilised in *Blessed* as well as a more pessimistic
appropriation of social realism’s invitational narrative trope used to push the inherent political praxis within.

In contrast to Mathieson, I argue that melodramatic rhetoric, and shock and affect can be useful in prompting more urgent redressing of the social ailments depicted in the film. Similarly, in noting Blessed’s ‘hysterical melodrama’, Mathieson’s review picks up on the film’s use of a feminised approach to those social issues related to feminine discourse and broader gynocentric concerns. Notably, there is irony in the use of ‘hysterical’ as a term often applied to negative, patriarchally driven notions of the feminine. In an oppositional reading to that of Mathieson, I argue that in its use of such feminised melodramatic convention, Blessed presents the potential for feminine issues to be addressed from the inside out, enacting a kind of internal criticism.

All film is ‘moving’ in some way, particularly dramatic fiction film that utilises the manipulations of melodramatic rhetoric to enforce an emotional investment or to promote an engagement of spectators with the content and assist in retaining it for the duration of the film. In social realism, such as it is in political intent, melodramatic rhetoric functions in the conventional way of ensuring emotional investment and also as a means of social criticism—the heightened emotive language of melodramatic rhetoric employed to impress a political agenda through emotional engagement with the everyday stories of social issues and events.

Social realist fiction film was never only about pushing political agenda or giving voice to those on the peripheries of society; rather it is simultaneously about making meaningful those political agendas, making resonant those voices. Hockenhull (2008) states, ‘Film is an aesthetic medium and capable, through its visual compositions, of evoking emotions and feelings.’ (p. 44) Blessed employs a good many recognisable melodramatic conventions, those that evoke emotions and feelings, in its interweaving narrative where stories overlap, interrupt and provoke, with resolution (if any) left to the very last minute.

In stretching the aesthetic fabric of social realism, Blessed utilises moments in which an ‘aesthetic dimension’ acts in ‘excess of narrative plausibility’ (Hockenhull 2009, p. 66); in moments of poeticised realism, these aesthetic dimensions come to utilise the
environment—city vistas, suburban streets—not only as the social landscape but also as reflective, emotional landscapes. Moving away or evolving from the traditional social realist film that represents a reactionary trope—the characters reacting against social issues and constraints, for example—*Blessed* also attempts to represent the introspection of those social issues through the use of Ozu-like pillow shots.

Nearing the end of each character’s day, as dusk falls on Melbourne, they are shown in quiet contemplation, the expanse of city or suburban vista that they look upon in the middle distance working as momentary quiet for the encumbered character, as representative of their internal reckoning, and also as momentary reprieve (for character and spectator alike) from the heavy social issues explored via the film’s narrative textuality. Though referring to the use of more natural, ‘pastoral’ landscapes, Hockenhull’s (2009) sentiments still hold true for these moments in *Blessed*:

The presentation of this pastoral imagery is timely for the spectator who is permitted to engage with the elements of the landscape, enabling self-reflexivity and contemplation. By analyzing the ‘frozen’ composition within the film frame, a mode of study employed in art-historical practice, a tangible emotional response is facilitated that is not necessarily available through a narrative reading (p. 70).

This is indicative of a broader shift within *Blessed* that expands conventional discursive address into more affective areas. In Blessed’s own heightened peaks of melodramatic rhetoric, it moves into moments that foreground the visceral and affective lives of the characters, these moments oftentimes operating outside of direct narrative action. This foregrounding of affective address is interesting in its interruption of not only narrative trajectory but their interruption of discursive literacy. This is exemplified most pointedly in the concluding sequences of Rhonda and her children’s story: in the final sequence of ‘The children’ we see Rhonda’s son and daughter, Stacey and Orton, taking refuge in a large charity bin. As the children’s day is turning to night, Stacey and Orton light a candle, placed between them, the light flickering on their faces. ‘What do you see Orton?’, Stacey says, looking into the flame. ‘It’s our Mum. Just play alright? It’s our Mum, isn’t it? What’s she doing? Is she dancing?’
Orton—his jaded expression giving in as Stacey eagerly implores, ‘What’s she wearing?’—replies, ‘Her good dress.’

‘The blue one’.

‘She’s at the pub.’

‘No, somewhere better. Somewhere special.’

When we come to Rhonda the same evening in ‘The mothers’ chapter of the film she wears a blue dress, *her good dress*, earrings dangling from her ears, tattoo of a swallow symbolising family emblazoned on her arm. After failing to engage with her son following a brief and tense meeting, Rhonda scours the city for her children, unknowingly passing them as they take refuge in the charity bin. This is an important and impactful happenstance in the film, as we later learn that Orton and Stacey burn to death in that very charity bin, the candle used to bring them light signifying their ultimate end.

Upon learning of the deaths of her children, Rhonda is escorted to the morgue, still in her blue dress, to view their bodies, now fused together by the heat of the flames. The bodies themselves are never shown, instead a tight close up on the face of Rhonda, static, first as she processes horror and then erupts into long, broken and grief-stricken screams. Rhonda’s scream, *a woman’s scream*, is notably different to those heard time and again as audible counterpart to woman-as-victim. Beyond her grief, it speaks to a deeper, more resonant and discursively biting, hurt. As Philip Brophy muses:

> Let us voyage through the many synchronized, stretched and silenced screams which sail between the cinema and our social reality—screams whose tactile renderings are acoustically blurred, and whose significance is dulled despite the violence which prompts their release. I ask a simple question: what does it mean when a woman screams? (1999, pp. 52–3).

There are two forces at work in this scene: the first is the continuation of Rhonda’s transgression of, or abject placement within, normative feminine and maternal
discourse. Through the unleashing of her voice in guttural shriek and howl, Rhonda ‘eschew[s] all conventions of the tamed feminine voice’ (Brophy 1999, p. 67), at once overturning the silence of mothers domestic bound, of the restraint expected of the woman as feminine, modest, meek, nourishing and nurturing to others, as well as vocalising ‘the gaping emotional wound baring her capacity to feel, hurt, yearn’ (p. 68), making herself the feminine other—monster, abject, animal (Creed 1993).

The second force at work is Rhonda’s screaming giving voice to this transgression, this feminine abjection. As Murray Smith states, ‘character structures are perhaps the major way by which narrative texts solicit our assent for particular values, practices and ideologies’ (1995, p. 4), and up to this very moment Rhonda has been structured to easily fit a particular value judgement predicated on her failing as a mother, failings further predicated on a habitualised or internalised femininity as maternal discourse. Up until this point, the tragic fate of Orton and Stacey is easily attributable to the negligence of Rhonda, yet as she lurches into her broken and animalistic scream these discursive judgements are put to one side, if only for the length of the scream itself, and in its place the potential for embodied response, an affective prompting that upon re-entering the discursive space allows for a critical redressing of those automated, habitualised responses to Rhonda as a gendered subject, as a bad mother, as unfeminine.

Of all the mother characters, Rhonda is the most discursively loaded, constructed as to seemingly invite judgement and recrimination throughout the larger part of Blessed, then positioned to affectively invite sympathetic or empathetic identification in the final stages of the film. In contextualising the film within the world of the maternal discourse, each character is represented as being outside of the normative expectation of motherhood to varying degrees. Rhonda’s actions and inactions place her farthest from those normative conceptions of motherhood, under the broader feminine construct. Though vocal in her love for her children, Rhonda’s construction as unfeminine—her abrasive language, her sexualised nature, her depiction as being selfish, and, not least, the dispossession of her children—render her as un-maternal also.

Though seeming to invite judgement and recrimination upon Rhonda through her representation as unfeminine, un-maternal, she is simultaneously shown to be a victim of her environment and social circumstances, the social realist ethos of socio-political
hardship working upon, and not because of, the characters. *Blessed* proves itself to be a truly social realist film in this exploration of place, social environment and identity, and the interactions and impacts of socio-economic hardship on success and personal development. There is a sense of moral didacticism that operates through a large portion of the film, the *mise en scène* speaking to these politics of social marginality, yet there is a pushing of boundaries in moments that foreground emotion and affect (as with Rhonda’s scream) that momentarily transgress discursive constraint and critical response.

In furthering this journey into critical affect, Rhonda’s behaviour upon leaving the moment is similarly troublesome to her (un)feminine discursive trajectory. As the police escort her home, Rhonda asks to stop at a local pub. On entering, she heads for the dance floor, dancing in her good blue dress, as though metaphysically going some way to fulfilling the imaginary desires of her now-deceased children. The camera moves with Rhonda, non-diegetic music now drowning out the drone of the pub jukebox, her thrashing movements slowing allowing a slow pan out to mid-shot: Rhonda, now swaying, moves in and out of the light and dark of the dance floor.

At work here is a clear example of critical affect—that is, an affective engagement, as the children are framed in tight close ups constructing an intimacy, the candlelight evoking an almost metaphysical warmth that disrupts, even momentarily transgresses, the maternal discourse that has previously damned Rhonda as a ‘bad mother’, as *unfeminine*. Orton and Stacey’s imaginings of their mother speak to the ideological/discursive bond between mother and child, as though transcendent, prompting an affective engagement as they enact their own, both with each other and with their absent mother. Concurrent with this is the problematising of that ideological/discursive bond: the jarring of normative feminine maternal discourse through the representation of Rhonda as neglectful, reliant on social welfare, smoking while pregnant, blind to the abuse of her young daughter, is problematised through this affective engagement.

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63 For instance, in the opening shots showing Rhonda in the social welfare office waiting room, her pregnant belly and cigarettes carefully juxtaposed; similarly, the use of the John Steinbeck novel *Grapes of wrath* in young Daniel’s story; and indeed, the use of montage in Bianca’s scenes as she plays the pokies.
It is this jarring through critical affect that is the ambiguity between the apparent neglect and yet intelligible/affective love that Rhonda has for her children (and vice versa) that are pressed upon in Blessed. As Rhonda moves in and out of shadow, in between both dark and light, the mise en scène in this final sequence speaks to the film’s ultimate claim—that mothers are multifaceted, multifarious subjects, able to fail at being mothers yet also love their children.

5.4 Social Affect

Much of Blessed engages with recognisable conventions of traditional social realism. In its location and social environment of working-class Melbourne, its character and narrative structures work in dialogue with discourses of poverty, addiction, abuse and neglect, with a political praxis that aims to explore the socio-economic hardships that precipitate such discourses and give voice to those negotiating the terrain of non-normative society. In focusing on a series of women connected by their shared maternal identities, Blessed further engages with discourses of motherhood, the struggles of which are informed by the wider ideological constraints of normative femininity.

Through this shared identity of mother, the film critically unpacks the social contingencies that impact the capacity of each woman to fulfil her role as mother. In turn, this highlights the intrinsic and inherent ambiguities and difficulties facing women in classed positions of disadvantage, and the futility of such rigid and absolute notions of motherhood gleaned from normative feminine discourse.

Taking this one step further, however, Blessed pushes its narrative into areas that wholeheartedly take on the feminist adage of ‘the personal is the political’. Not content with simply engaging discursively with these issues of motherhood and femininity, the film opens up spaces of affective engagement, moments when those structured and normalised notions of motherhood and femininity can be momentarily interrupted. Though certainly not utilised for the entirety of the film, this foregrounding of the affective is strategically placed at the end of each character’s narrative thread. Having had the majority of the film’s narrative to create a discursive trajectory for each
character, foregrounding the affective in these final moments skews that discursive trajectory at the very last moment before final judgement can be made.

Ultimately, the message that Blessed pushes is one of maternal love, and as Ruddick (1980) argues, ‘economic and social conditions … may make that love frantic, they do not kill the love’. The traditional conventions of social realism certainly make intelligible those economic and social conditions. However, the way in which those conditions impact such an abstraction as ‘love’ is less conventional. Pushing the boundaries of the social realist aesthetic, the use of (critical) affect in Blessed promotes affective response as part of, not separate from, the social being.

In a number of reviews of Blessed the theme of physical and sensate reaction (or interaction with the film) within the lived body of the viewer in empathetic identification with the bodies on screen is referred to time and again. One writes, ‘Our heart lurches violently the whole while and even though I felt bruised, I also felt energized and completely satisfied by the whole experience’ (Keller 2009); another states, ‘At a moment of almost unbearable sadness, the gifted thesp’s [Frances O’Connor] reaction is nothing short of spine tingling … finding beauty in harsh physical and emotional environments’ (Kuipers 2009). Blessed allows for the foregrounding of certain moments where the ‘cultural hegemony of vision is overthrown’ (Sobchack 2000), moments that undermine its own invitation for discursive judgement of the troubled women/mothers, and in those moments allow for a renewed engagement with those discourses of the maternal and the feminine.

Noel Carroll writes (2007, p. 147), ‘There is an undeniable relationship between moving images and our affective life—that is, our life of feeling … they [moving images] not only yield the impression of movement, they also move us.’ This relationship is actively foregrounded in Blessed, attempting to portray a more authentic social reality, without the heavy didacticism of traditional (in the style of the British) social realism. In this pushing of the boundaries of the social realist convention, (though never entirely

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64 I use the term ‘critical affect’ to impress the connectedness of body and mind that affect works in conjunction with the discursively critical and political praxis of the social realist ethos: as Hollows (2000 p. 131) notes, ‘cognition is not independent of emotion and the needs of the body’. 
breaking away from those conventions), *Blessed* strives for a balance between conventional narrative textuality and a more redolent and visceral mode of address.

It is in these moments that there is greater potential for renewed engagement with feminine discourse and wider social determinants; those visceral and affective moments informing and informed by the critical, invitational readings more conventionally tied to the social realist film. It is in this manner that *Blessed* intimates one way forward in the evolution of social realist film as a mode of filmic address.
Chapter 6 *Somersault: Femininity as Visceral Experience*

A gesture expands into gymnastics, rage is expressed through a somersault … (Eisenstein in Gerould 1974, p. 75).

In the final film analysis chapter, Shortland’s 2004 *Somersault* demonstrates a further reimagining of social realist convention, pushing its formal representation of the social realist ethos into yet more extreme and affective spaces. There is a clear and present synthesis between the critical explorations of feminine discourse, as it comes to be experienced by the film’s central female character within her social marginalised positioning, and the formal conventions employed with which to enact such critical explorations. In *Somersault*, the formal shifts evident in the previous films explored are present and further pushed, an internal criticism of feminine discourse through the feminine lens neither subtle nor inconsequential.

Shortland’s 2004 first feature film opens with hand-held camera shots of bushland, the camera skirting close to the trunks of passing trees so as to capture the rough of the bark. Accompanying this opening sequence is the lilt of a nursery-like soundtrack of xylophone and ambient fuzz. Panning down the bark of the trees the camera momentarily stills itself, framing the leaf-littered ground through which a dirty mattress peeks, serving momentarily as backdrop for the film’s title to briefly appear. Soon thereafter comes a cut to a suburban street, the streetlights and passing cars barely distinguishable through the dim of morning light and a heavy blanket of fog. A cross-fade introduces an almost impossibly blurry shot of an indistinct moving figure, flitting in and then out of frame.

The closeness of the camera’s gaze, coupled with the indistinctness of the hand-held camera work, allows for only glimpses of recognisable object or place in these title shots—the blurred vision of long-distorted fingers grabbing at fabric; tousled blonde hair that appears and disappears again behind a floral patterned bed sheet; small white hands clutching at clothes pegs; the buzz and zip of the fabric being pulled from the
metal clothes line string. Fair skinned and beautiful, the profile of a face is finally revealed before cutting away to a wide-angle shot of protagonist Heidi (Abbie Cornish), now fully formed before us pulling clothes down from an iconic Australian Hills Hoist, sentinel, in a suburban backyard.

There is much to be gleaned as to the nature of Somersault from these opening titles. The punctuating childlike music establishes a countenance of innocence congruent with the softly tinted lens, presenting the world in primary blues and reds. This is the first established instance of a discourse of innocence, later consolidated in the introduction of Heidi proper, her youthfulness not only represented in appearance but also demeanour. There is the slightest of nods to the coming disturbance of such innocence with the discarded mattress, dirty and disquieting among the otherwise tranquil setting; the mattress both a symbol of the underlying social realist ethos of the film and also the sexual politics enacted throughout.

Essentially a coming-of-age film, Somersault follows the fate of fifteen-year-old Heidi as she journeys away from her home to the cold mountain town of Jindabyne. When we first encounter Heidi she is at the home in suburban Canberra that she shares with her mother, Nicole (Olivia Pigeot), and Nicole’s boyfriend, Adam (Damian de Montemas). Heidi flees home after Nicole witnesses an inappropriate sexual encounter between her daughter and Adam. Having received an offer from an unknown man to work for him in the snowfields of Jindabyne, Heidi takes a bus and makes her way up the mountain. Upon arriving, the initial prospect of work falls through, leaving Heidi entirely stranded. There are sexual undertones to this unknown man who we learn had previously offered work to Heidi in the snowfields; the sexual ambiguity only alluded to when Heidi reaches Jindabyne and, using a business card she has previously acquired from the man, calls what evidently is his home phone number. When a female voice answers, Heidi innocently asks after ‘Eddie’ who, upon learning it is Heidi, rather abruptly ends the call with a ‘please don’t call here again’. At this point, stranded and alone, Heidi’s sexual journey truly begins, as she begins to both explore her own sexuality and use sex as currency so as to have a roof over her head and more than her own company.
Heidi lurches from one reckless and sexually charged encounter to the next, along the way meeting a young local farmer, Joe (Sam Worthington). What begins as a sexual relationship soon becomes the force by which both characters come to face confused emotional states and deeply personal issues. Following a general coming-of-age narrative arc, the convention of a protagonist experiencing internal reckonings, states of confusion and epiphanic peaks is accomplished less through narrative-led action and more through affective and sensorially led sequences, as the opening titles foretell in their ambient and tactile tones. We are led to feel as Heidi does, following her expulsion from home predicated on the literacies of social issues outlined in early sequences, constructed via a literal closeness to Heidi, close ups and unmissable attention to her own bodily senses, prompting, or pushing for, an embodied, empathetic identification with Heidi at a more visceral level.

A critical analysis of Somersault finds a number of discourses at work—most notably those of gender, of femininity and masculinity, discourses of adolescence and of sexuality. It is a film that seems to actively probe the sexual constraints of femininity and adolescent (hetero)sexuality through the portrayal of Heidi’s voracious and challenging, conflicted sexual identity. Of particular concern herein are those discourses of femininity at work in Somersault as an implicit though pervasive concern that colours the reading of the film throughout.

Femininity, in the broader sense, has most often been regarded as oppositional to that of masculinity; bound by the domestic space as opposed to the public space; emotion driven as opposed to logic driven, and so on. This gender binary is both produced and resisted through the contrast and conflict constructed between Heidi and sometime lover Joe, largely made apparent through their respective relationships to sex. Discourses of

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65 Though taking many different forms, the coming-of-age narrative arc has shared consistencies, as Rishoi (2003, p. 9) writes, ‘The coming-of-age narrative foregrounds the pain and confusion that accompanies a conflicted subject position—we all want to belong, somehow, to a culture that recognizes only the coherent subject as normal—but these texts argue that normality is, in the end, chimerical.’

66 In reiterating the broader definition of femininity at work throughout this research, it is considered as the normative model of values and behaviour traditionally attributed to the female sex, a set of cornerstone subjectivities concerning sex, motherhood and domesticity informed by a wider patriarchal ideology, and, as Smith (1988, p. 123) defines, that ‘locates the social relations of a “symbolic” terrain and the material practices which bring it into being and sustain it’.
sex and intersections made with those of femininity are both changeable and full of ambivalences, as Hollows notes,\textsuperscript{67} from a Foucauldian position of discourse and power: discourses of sexuality are not a power which ‘represses’ a ‘natural’ sexuality but instead produce effects of power which organise and produce what sexuality is in historical and geographical contexts (Hollows 2000, p. 74).

Heidi herself is presented as a problematised site of femininity; a site of both production and resistance. She is shown very early on completing domestic tasks (hanging washing, making coffee for her mother’s boyfriend), as well as being routinely sexualised and conversely punished for her sexual voracity (most acutely represented in Heidi’s displacement from the home, the domestic space, usually attributed to constructions of femininity). It is apparent from early on that Heidi’s gendered self is at battle with the normative and the changing, her sexual identity a social site of a feminine identity in flux.

Further complicating this is the competing discourses of girlhood/innocence placed side by side with those of sex and sexuality. We are alerted to Heidi’s young age (fifteen) from the outset, further consolidated through the \textit{mise en scène}, Heidi’s innocence symbolised through childlike music, her curious and inquisitive nature, a naivety that pervades Heidi’s interactions with most she comes across, as well as the repeated motif of her scrapbook journal.

An early scene of Heidi fetching her mother from the pub establishes these problematic and competing discourses that come to bracket Heidi throughout the film. Appearing small next to the pub counter, Heidi is shown as though a curious child picking up and fiddling with objects, and responds in near whispers like a shy school girl when engaged in conversation. Thus, when Heidi first comes to be sexualised it seems incongruous. It holds with it both a currency of young female over-sexualisation, propagated inter-textually in wider media texts, and impinges upon the character of Heidi as enacting a subversive, or oppositional, feminine identity. She is beautiful and curious and sexualises herself to a point of desirability—all current normative feminine

\textsuperscript{67} This is a position taken from a Foucauldian notion of power and discourse, as Hollows (2000, p. 74) iterates, ‘For Foucault, discourses are meaning-producing systems which are both instruments and effects of power’, and as Foucault (1998, p. 101) himself states in relation to discourse of any kind, ‘Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.’
attributes—and then ruptures that normativity by acting upon her sexual curiosity with both a confronting level of calculation as well as an unhinged surrender to her bodily whims, the title of *Somersault* made abundantly clear.

An alternative reading could find Heidi to represent somewhat of a ‘cultural artefact of changing ideologies’ (Wills 2008, p. 241) in regards to feminine sexuality. That is, Heidi is both seen to be sexual object and sexual agent, routinely sexualised by others as well as acting upon her own sexual urges, thus somewhat bucking the normative depiction of the female body as only object, or indeed sexless. However, Heidi’s sexual agency seems not borne out of desire *per se*, but is rather the *only* way Heidi knows how to connect, a behaviour that proves to be dangerous. The character of Heidi complicates normative readings of sexuality as feminine or unfeminine, disempowered or empowered, by showing them as interwoven and not mutually exclusive. In particular, the framing of Heidi as childlike and innocent is seemingly in direct contrast with her sexual activities. However, the intimacy of the camera and the visceral attachment to Heidi collides together these contrasting elements in a way that resists easy explanation and reorients us towards ideas of femininity.

From very early on Heidi is shown to instigate a number of sexual encounters, first with her mother’s boyfriend, then on her first night in Jindabyne, as well as the morning after, engaging in acts of seduction in attempts to secure a job as well as stave off her aloneness. These initial encounters are important, as they establish Heidi’s misplaced desire for company, for connection with others following her leaving home, as well as establishing a countenance with the more visceral and affective modes of exploring these (inherently social) issues.

**6.1 *Somersault* as Social Realism**


In the grey overtones of working-class suburban Canberra established following the opening titles of *Somersault*, Heidi enters the dimly lit lounge room of her home; seated
on an old and worn brown couch, Adam sits, beer in hand, watching a game of AFL on the television screen. Heidi looks upon Adam with a veiled expression, vaguely foreshadowing the illicit encounter between the two soon to come. Heidi’s mother is at the pub, free from Adam, we assume due to a drinking problem briefly addressed by Nicole when Heidi visits to retrieve her home, ‘Where’s Adam?’ Nicole asks.

‘In the car’, Heidi responds innocently enough.

‘Great’ Nicole accuses, ‘You know he’s going to want to come in for a drink.’

In its early stages, *Somersault* fits a traditional social realist mode of address, though immediately pushing the stylistic boundaries of conventional social realist film, there are certainly aspects held to that alert the spectator to the social environment informing the story more generally (particularly those grey and drab overtones of suburban Canberra and Heidi’s home). In subject matter, *Somersault* sits as classifiable within the conventional ethos of social realism as a film that throughout remains dialectic concerning those wider issues of problematic sex spurned from a lower socio-economic environment, of familial conflict and gender divides.

Initially, *Somersault* is located in the more conventionally held-to social realist space of sprawling suburbia: fleeting street shots showing Heidi’s house, one among many, small and run down on an ordinary Canberra street. Though Heidi is introduced in dreamy blues and whites, her pale skin and blonde hair carrying a symbolism of purity and youth—the wider surroundings speak to a muted drudgery in tones of grey, throughout the house, more muddy browns and reds adding to the cramped and dated feel, a working-class house with no airs or graces. Heidi herself is introduced in the backyard of her home, taking in clothes from a sturdy old Hills Hoist, not only intimating at the old age of the house, but also locating *Somersault* within an Australian context. Inside the house, the lower socio-economic, working-class environment is further consolidated in the cramped and messy interiors. Heidi’s mother Nicole, beer and cigarette in hand, is first introduced at the local pub, the muted drudgery of the colour palette continuing throughout the pub’s dated décor. Further, Nicole’s partner Adam is introduced as recumbent on the couch, a game of AFL on the television screen, a beer can by his side and a rat tail at the back of his head.
These early scenes in suburban Canberra, and the placement of the characters in this space, as well as the appearance of the characters themselves, their behaviours and accoutrements, speak to a literacy of meaning often attributed to the social realist film: characters that are seen to be rough around the edges through the presence of tattoos, alcohol and cigarettes, in run-down and tired spaces alluding, to a social nexus between character and place, the working-class character and the working-class space (Hallam & Marshment 2000; Jacka 1988a; Jorgensen 2005; Moran & Vieth 2006).

This grounds the film within a particular socially and politically charged space, one that is colonised by social realist filmmaking. Heidi’s problems, those she comes to face upon leaving this initial space, are rooted in her social environment: an oft-absent mother who leaves work early and spends her evenings in the pub, the rough, hard-nosed boyfriend with a drinking problem who further taxes the time spent between Heidi and her mother, the socio-economic issues at work visible in the frayed edges of an old couch, the dated television set, the loose and tired weatherboards hanging from the suburban house.

It is not long after this initial space is established, within which Heidi makes her sexual advance to Adam thus beginning the crux of narrative action, that the film is entirely removed from this traditionally social realist space and finds itself among the cold rural beauty of Jindabyne. Thus, stylistically, it may seem problematic to label Somersault social realist, with a large portion of the film not aesthetically fitting conventional expectations. Similarly, the attention paid to the more affective and visceral aspects of characters and content could be seen as outside of that which is conventionally held as social realist.

The suburban home in which the film is initially established speaks to a schema of a social realist ‘kitchen sink’ aesthetic: a bare backyard with the exception of a dilapidated shed and lone Hills Hoist clothes line; inside the house is small and cramped, messily furnished, and in contrast to the cold hues of blue and white outside there is a dankness with palettes of dark yellows, browns and muddy reds splashed across a dumpy old couch and primitive television flickering in the corner of the lounge room.
The major tripping point then, the problematic aspect of *Somersault*, is its use of stylistic artifice\(^{68}\) clashing with the ‘raw’ aesthetics most popularly associated with social realism (those that are referentially utilised in the opening sequences of *Somersault*). The opening sequence of *Somersault* foreshadows this aesthetic, stylistic shift in its use of distended colour, cold blues and whites heightening the effect of the outside chill of a winter’s morning in a Canberra suburb. Use of the hand-held camera is less about instilling a sense of realism than is the case in more conventionally recognised social realist films, where the camera moves with the characters, giving a sense of immediacy and spectator presence within the frame itself. Instead, the lilting, unsteadiness in these opening shots works with the filtered colours and non-diegetic soundtrack to imbue a sense of innocence, like a child day dreaming.

However, the sequences following the film’s title situate *Somersault* more conventionally than the aesthetics employed in the opening sequences identify its broader social realist ethos—as stated above, the overtones of suburban Canberra, the humble, run-down house attesting to a lower socio-economic context. This context is then consolidated as problematic to the development of Heidi in the interaction between her mother and her mother’s boyfriend—intimations of previous inappropriate sexual behaviours in the absence of her mother and of alcohol problems working to support Hallam and Marshment’s (2000, p. 194) attestations that a social realist film must assert that the problems faced by character and narrative are ‘perceived as a problem created by society’.

*Somersault* uses the larger part of its aesthetics to expressionistically reflect the inner states of its main protagonist in Heidi and, similarly, to construct an atmosphere that both supports and subverts Heidi’s conflicted feminine and sexual identities: Heidi peers through the rose-coloured tint of a pair of ski goggles, the camera assuming her gaze; long shots of Heidi displaying her smallness as she skips stones across a lake, the tinkle of lullaby-like music further consolidating her girlhood status; and in juxtaposition, the use of close up and extreme close up of Heidi’s skin, flushed and

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\(^{68}\) The use of this stylistic artifice will be further explored below, but is an aspect touched on by Hallam and Marshment (2000, p. 192) in their *Realism and popular cinema*: ‘The hybrid forms of contemporary social realism continue to adhere to many of these basic properties but are far more eclectic in style, embracing a wide range of aesthetic strategies that often combine an episodic narrative structure with expressionistic techniques garnered from modernist “art” cinema and popular melodramatic elements from generic fiction within their overall structure.’
bruised following her sexual exploits both disrupt those discourses of innocence and
girlhood, while also promoting an embodied identification with Heidi—filmically
bringing us close, discursively pushing us away.

Crucially, however, the thematic trajectory of Somersault is social realist in ethos—the
key element, I argue, in labelling any film ‘social realist’. This ethos makes privy those
characters that find themselves ‘marginalised by virtue of their social status’ (Hallam &
Marshment 2000, p. 190). As a young girl from a working-class, evidently
underprivileged background, Heidi is certainly one of those marginalised by virtue of
her social status, her problematic character journey from the footholds of a socio-
economically underprivileged milieu evidence of the fact.

This supports a distinction made by Hallam and Marshment (2000) between the social
realist film and the ‘social issue drama’; an important distinction to make in narrowing
down what is, and is not, considered social realist given that many films overtly include
socially charged narratives. Many films can be seen to be enacting varying levels of
social critique, and as evidenced by the social nature of people today, in fictional drama
there are elements routinely labelled ‘social realist’ in nature. However, it is the primacy
of problems constructed by a social environment/setting that is unique to the social
realist film, as Hallam and Marshment (2000) note:

in social issue films, the individual’s problems present a problem for society
… rather than being perceived as a problem created by society, a perspective
… attributed to social realism (p. 190).

It is on this basis that Somersault comes into its own as a social realist text, situating
Heidi within a social environment that then speaks to the issues and problems she
comes to face and reckon with throughout the narrative. Though there is little spoon
feeding as to why these issues exist for Heidi, the opening sequences located in the deep
suburbs of working-class Canberra make evident levels of social hardship and
marginalisation that have informed the choices made, and that come to be made, by
Heidi.
In a review in *The Village Voice*, Melissa Levine writes of this shift in stylistic address, though noting that what the film does address is predicated on a socially mandated premise—what has been and comes before impacts what occurs and comes after:

*Somersault*'s dreamy, sexy, rather chilly style captures Heidi’s attempt to escape her past, to build something new atop the rubble of what came before, and ultimately to hide it. What she learns is what everyone learns: it can’t be done (Levine 2006).

This statement condenses the essential trajectory of *Somersault* and, with some unpacking, points to the unique shifts within the film that both label it social realist while also (stylistically) redressing what that label means. Through the early sequences of *Somersault*, which establish Heidi’s entrenchment in an environment of working-class suburbia replete with signs of alcoholism, sexual indecency and familial troubles, it is made clear that Heidi’s problems are intrinsically tied to this social environment. The social effect, the social ‘rubble that came before’, directly influences how Heidi comes to build her life thereon.

However, rather than maintain focus on the genesis of the issues within this social environment the film shifts focus to Heidi’s personal struggle upon leaving the direct source of those issues. Rather than predominantly concentrating on the external effects of her social environment, as has been traditional in social realist film, we are witness to the internalised affects, the habitualised complexes that Heidi has reconciled within herself as reactionary to her social environment back in suburban Canberra—made all the more evident upon her leaving that social environment for a new and unfamiliar location in Jindabyne.

*Somersault* builds upon a known legacy of social realist filmmaking; a literacy of meaning that roots the problems faced by Heidi throughout the film firmly in the social environment from which she emerges. Ticking the boxes of social realism, then, is *Somersault*'s insistence on Heidi’s problems as stemming from society, and not the other way around, and shedding light on these issues through the individual of Heidi gives a politicking voice to a marginalised and oft-unheard voice of working-class adolescence. Pushing the boundaries of social realist filmmaking are *Somersault’s* stylistic choices, which aid in giving *feeling* to the social critique enacted throughout; a
critical affect that etches the scars of social marginalisation on and through the very body of Heidi.
6.2 Femininity Lived through the Body

Jill Julius Matthews writes that ‘[f]emininity is lived through the body’ (1984, p. 11), a notion that literally transposes itself into the narrative of *Somersault*, as the camera tracks and traces the body of Heidi as she experiences the spaces she inhabits, and lives out the becomings and un-becomings of a burgeoning sexuality. Heidi’s own senses concurrently appeal to ours, fleshing out the overarching issues of femininity as a social identity as she fumbles through the ramifications of her marginalised beginnings. The feminine lens, as it is utilised throughout *Somersault*, focuses almost exclusively on the discursive articulations of the sensuous, the sensate—of feeling and affect, shared with the idealised notion of a feminine identity. As in the other films discussed, this concomitant use of feminine articulations opens up the film to enact an internal criticism of feminine discourse, as it collides with the social strictures typical of social realist film.

Beginning in the working-class suburbs of Canberra, the social determinants that come to afflict Heidi are established early, with the effects of those social afflictions then left to ripple through the very body of Heidi throughout the remainder of the film. This is a clear pushing of the conventions of social realist film, with the notion of utilising a feminine lens to push an inherently social-realist-crusading social criticism becoming a dominant aspect of *Somersault*. There are recurrent external motifs, of the domestic and the maternal, that similarly enact this feminised approach, with Heidi’s experience of them foregrounded again via largely affective means.

6.2.1 Domestic Divergence

On the spectrum of normative femininity, in all its multiplicity, domestic discourse has continued to play an important role in the maintenance of what is and what is not acceptable. This is the space in which the mother resides, where children are cared for, where domestic duties are carried out and the house becomes a home. In this regard, the domestic space and affiliated actions and behaviours remain largely attributed to, and an important aspect of, the woman as feminine. This is one part of the production of
femininity, indicative of the ‘micro-physics of power’ that ‘fragments and partitions the body’s time, its space, and its movements’ (Bartky 1990, p. 63) of keeping house, maternal drives, of nurture and nourishment. In these many ways, the gender norms of femininity remain rooted in domesticity in the residues of a socially mandated and patriarchally driven panopticism.69

_Somersault_, by opening in a domestic space, immediately calls upon this literacy of meaning, of these articulations of femininity in the domestic space. When Heidi is first revealed, she is pale and beautiful among the pure white sheets she is retrieving from a backyard clothesline; she is immediately situated as budding feminine, soft and pretty, playing house, gentle and helpful. However, the domestic space itself speaks to the disruption of these norms: the house is run down and dark, Heidi’s mother initially absent, her mother’s boyfriend, Adam, shown drinking in front of the television. The lower socio-economic milieu of suburban Canberra in which Heidi has grown is made quite clear.

Though never a violent or entirely destitute space, Heidi’s home is indicative of her wider social status, signalling a problematic upbringing attributable to her social and economic environment. There are subtle intimations of a degree of isolation endured by Heidi: her mother initially absent from the domestic space (shown later to be at the local pub), Heidi instead completing a number of domestic duties, subsequently flicking through a journal in which she hesitates on an old birthday card from her mother (a symbol of the fractured maternal bond that is returned to throughout the film), later taking a trip to the pub to retrieve her mother. All these images signal a less than ideal domestic space, the signs of a stunted femininity made all too clear with Heidi’s sexual advances towards Adam driving her from her home.

The home then, the domestic space, with the scars of socio-economic hardship clearly visible upon it, is shown to be the foundation of Heidi’s complications—her troubled

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69 As Foucault (1979, p. 138) writes on this process of power, discipline and internalisation: ‘What was being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, and its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A “political anatomy”, which was also a “mechanics of power”, was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, the discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, “docile” bodies’.
relationship with sex and her body, the discord between her innocence and her social identity as feminine as well as her very displacement from home. It is interesting then that when Heidi reaches Jindabyne, she finds herself a makeshift domestic space, complete with ghosts of the past and a kind of stand-in mother. It is at the Siesta Inn that Heidi finds semi-permanent residence; the motel owner, Irene, showing a maternal care for her, allowing her to stay in her son’s old flat behind the motel rooms.

Although the Siesta Inn becomes a second home for Heidi, the flat providing more permanence than the motel room in which she initially finds shelter, it remains more of a transient space. There is enough of the domestic to remind us what has come before, what Heidi has left behind, yet a lingering impermanence that allows Heidi to transgress, or to challenge, the normative constraints that her home back in Canberra placed upon her. Echoes of Irene’s son resonate throughout the room: posters, an old band t-shirt hung limp in a near empty wardrobe, a nudie calendar tacked to the back of a door.

As Heidi explores this new space she both makes it her own, cutting out a flower from the corner of the calendar to paste in her journal, as well as masks herself in the foreignness of it all, wearing the t-shirt, entertaining Joe with half-truths and lies about her genesis. Just as there are echoes of Irene’s son, so there are echoes of Heidi’s home left behind, a lost child finding herself in this place, as though a stand in for Irene’s own lost child. These reminders both call judgement upon Heidi’s behaviour and provide transgression from those very expectations from which we judge—from those discourses of innocence that reconcile Heidi as child, as a daughter, discourses of femininity that play out upon Heidi’s body as she explores and challenges ideas of sex and relationships.

The domestic spaces in Somersault cradle both these judgements and transgressions, as the site upon which the machinations of normative femininity are both assembled and disassembled. This is where Heidi gleans her disjointed concept of love and sex, from her mother and from her mother’s absence and the social environment that raised her; it is where the discourse of innocence, of childhood, is built around Heidi in her girl’s bedroom where she flips through her scrapbook/journal under pink lamplight; it is from
where she is ejected, made abject as a feminine subject; and it is where she is found again, the complexities of her transgressions brought into relief.

6.2.2 Mother, Daughter and Maternal Discourse

_Somersault_’s narrative action begins with a brief sexual encounter between Heidi and her mother’s boyfriend, Adam. A precluding sequence provides space for the assumption that an inappropriate relationship between Heidi and Adam had been previously fostered. This sequence utilises those early traditional social realist aesthetics, with Heidi and Adam waiting in the car for Nicole to emerge from the pub, a dark and dank grit permeating each shot, highlighting the uneasiness and problematic sequence unfolding. Lit by the neon signs of the pub and Adam’s cigarette, a shot of the rear vision mirror reveals Adam’s eyes trained upon Heidi in the backseat. Adam’s gaze is constructed as predatory, the noireisque aesthetic of cigarette smoke and a shadowed face adding to his menace. Heidi is initially unaware she is being watched, Adam’s voyeuristic stare victimising Heidi in her passive position.

When Heidi does become aware of Adam’s gaze she momentarily engages, interrupted only when Nicole enters the car, causing both to hastily look away. Interestingly, as Adam and Nicole engage in a passionate kiss, Heidi looks on, her expression one of anger, perhaps jealously foreshadowing her calculated sexual advance towards Adam in the coming sequence. Although it is never revealed why Heidi is upset by her mother’s kiss with Adam, this hints at the complicated relationship Heidi has with her mother in particular. It speaks to a maternal bond like that supported in Rich’s _Of woman born_, who writes:

> Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement (1981, pp. 225–6).

We are left to wonder whether Heidi is jealous of her mother’s relationship with Adam, perhaps feeling left out, or whether she sees her mother’s sexual identity as a curious entity and as catalyst through, and example by which, to pursue her own sexual identity.
Although Heidi’s mother is only very briefly met, she plays a crucial role in the discursive configuration of Heidi. It is through the absence of the mother that Heidi’s discourse of innocence is disrupted, her apparent emotions of jealousy (or indeed envy) as she watches Nicole passionately kiss Adam not coincidentally juxtaposed with the following sequence of Heidi’s sexual advances towards Adam. It is Heidi’s mother who dispels her from the home, beginning the narrative trajectory that is prompted by a rupture of discursive literacies around mother and daughter bonds.

Heidi’s violent separation from her mother, as an allusion to this feminine construct of the mother–daughter bond, is exemplified clearly in a sequence where Heidi is shown alone and exploring the shores of lake Jindabyne. She is shown walking by herself, her isolation formally accentuated with alternating shots of close ups of Heidi and long shots of her small figure by the expansive lake. She is seen skipping and singing the playground rhyme with accompanying hand clapping actions of ‘Miss Mary Mack’, her hands thrusting out in front of her as though meeting hands with an invisible partner. Heidi’s voice is looped over, an ethereal atmosphere cultivated via the disembodiment of her singing voice and the saturated blues and reds of the landscape, the dull clap of her gloved hands amplified as her actions are interchangeably made quick and slow. The stylistic artifice of this sequence imbues an emphasis, an importance, to the sequence, an importance brought into relief as Heidi finishes her rhyme, the concluding line repeated ‘she lost her mother, mother, mother’ as a final long shot tracks her becoming increasingly dwarfed by her surroundings, focus steadily lost.

The loss of her mother is signposted as important, and not only the loss itself but also the connotations for her behaviour as linked to the break in this maternal bond between mother and daughter. Further consolidating this is a repeated motif of a birthday card Heidi has stuck in her scrapbook/journal—an object symbolic of her role as a child, so distinctly juxtaposed by her sexual behaviours. The card, replete with glittered motif

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70 This incongruence between children and conjunct discourses of innocence is one well documented, with the moral argument largely rendering children (in the case of Heidi, adolescence, though toeing the line of childhood at fifteen) as sexless. In her paper *The moral rhetoric of childhood*, Anneke Meyer (2007, pp. 87–8) addresses this in stating, “Through the discourse of innocence, sexuality and morality became central issues in relation to children. Many sexually charged practices were identified as “adult vices” and deemed dangerous to children, whose innocence has to be protected from “pollution”.” In signposting Heidi as innocent, childlike, as well as sexually active and voracious the film plays upon the discourses of both innocence and femininity that render sexual agency as undesirable, thus permeating the
of a unicorn, is addressed to Heidi on her fifteenth birthday, signed clearly with ‘love always, Muma’. Heidi is shown in an early scene in a Jindabyne pub running her finger over the glittery mane, quickly slamming the book shut, as though unable to face the hurt contained within. This occurs again following her admission to Irene that her mother is not dead, an admission that brings Heidi’s story almost full circle as the angst played out through her sexual conduct and confused interactions is finally laid bare.

After thanking Irene for her hospitality, Heidi abruptly speaks her admission, almost in uncontrollable emotional candour, ‘My mum’s not dead. She’s not dead. I make stuff up and before I came here I did something really bad.’ Heidi’s voice peaks in distressed dulcet tones, her admission of the act that led her to Jindabyne, though, stated in a guilty hush, ‘I kissed my Mum’s boyfriend. And she looked at me; she looked at me like she didn’t know who I was anymore. I’m really sorry Irene.’

‘She knows you. She knows you’, Irene answers, taking Heidi’s red-gloved hands, as though those of a guilty murderer with blood on their hands—granted forgiveness with a gentle touch. After problematising the mother–daughter bond trope, the film’s resolution goes some way to reinstating it to an almost idealised position, almost. In being first cast out by her mother, then searching for a maternal figure in Irene, Heidi shows herself to be in the state of perpetual feminine becoming and unbecoming, and that the idealised notion of maternal discourse and the mother–daughter bond is fraught with the harsh realities of life lived everyday.

6.2.3 Feminine Sexuality

The sexual encounter between Heidi and Adam establishes Heidi’s sexually inquisitive, at times almost predatory behaviour, as exhibited throughout the film. As a central concern, sex—the idea of it, the pleasure, the danger, the discourse surrounding it—takes up a lot of space within the film. Though it is irrefutable that sex holds its place as a key concern within Somersault, it is rarely seen in its act, little explicitly shown, no gyrating bodies, no sweat-soaked sheets. Rather, it is more prominently the time existing before and after the act of sex that is concentrated on. Comprised of emotion,
affect and touch, these before-and-after moments look more generally at the discourse of sex, and Heidi’s relationship to it; the gendered assumptions and judgements that emerge through referential meaning as we see Heidi place herself in sexually charged situations.

The uneasy relationship between Heidi’s sexual behaviour, her gendered self and her childlike adolescence, is implicitly referred to throughout the film. This is most evidently brought into relief following her employment at a local service station where she is befriended by workmate Bianca. Heidi is invited for dinner at Bianca’s familial home, where it soon becomes clear that Bianca’s father, Roy, is the same man Heidi had made sexual advances towards earlier in a ski shop.

Offering to drive Heidi home, Roy marks her very clearly as other to that of Bianca; in a menacing scene, Roy deviates off the road back to Heidi’s accommodation, parking the car in front of the large frozen lake, the headlights casting ominous shadows across the interior of the car. ‘She’s a very good girl. You know she’s basically got her whole life in front of her, and her Mum and I don’t want anything to mess that up. Do you know what I mean? I think it would be better if you two don’t see each other outside of work. I just think you’re two different types of girls’, Roy explains to a clearly upset and frightened Heidi.

This scene speaks to a binary at work within feminine discourse itself, one that sees the actively sexual woman as counter to the feminine norm. Roy labels his daughter ‘good’ and thus implicitly labels Heidi as ‘bad’, the ‘two different girls’ signifying the feminine and unfeminine, Bianca and Heidi. Roy resides here in the role of patriarchal panoptical judge, his standards of what mandates a ‘good girl’, in this moment, rendering Heidi abject. Heidi then, as abject feminine, as unfeminine, is robbed of her agency, she is voiceless, and literally remains so in her silence throughout this sequence, unable to answer Roy at all.

In the scene following, Heidi’s naked body is shown submerged, face down in a bathtub, bubbles sporadically appearing from beneath the water’s surface. After an uncomfortably long time she turns over, her face finally emerging from the water for a desperate and anxious breath. The water as discourse, Heidi submerged represents her
gendered constraint, only to break the surface of the water as an artefact of changing ideologies, treading the water of acceptable and unacceptable in discourses of feminine sexuality.

Ultimately, sex operates in *Somersault* as a device to traverse the ambivalences of traditional, or normative gendered conceptions of (hetero) sex. Heidi challenges the stereotypical depiction of young females as sexless in her depiction as active in her sexual desire; conjunctly, however, she is represented in ways that simultaneously cast her as sexual object, as sexually passive after the initial pursuit. Similarly, Joe is cast largely as a hyper-masculine and dominant character, though when confronted with Heidi’s sexual desire he is seen challenging his masculine conceptions of sex and sexuality.

Throughout the film, there are mentions of Joe’s active sex life, with his friend Stuart asking him who he is ‘fucking’, then going on to list a series of descriptions and names of girls; and again when Stuart and Joe have a confrontation, Stuart refers to Joe as ‘fucking the girl from the servo’ to which Joe replies, ‘Just cos’ you couldn't get a fuck if you tried.’ Between the young male characters this concept of sexual conquest is addressed as entirely normalised. Conversely, Heidi is constructed as problematic in her sexual activeness, she is presented largely in binary terms contrasting with Joe: needy to his stalwart, emotional to his lack of, sexually deviant to his normal behaviour. This is expressly addressed within a sequence in which Heidi invites two young men back to her flat. Clearly too intoxicated to further give sexual consent, it seems evident that the two men are to take advantage of her before Joe enters and ejects them from the flat. Heidi, shown small, naked and vulnerable, covers herself with a sheet and addresses Joe, ‘I just want to tell you that if you ignore someone and you don’t call them then you can really hurt their feelings.’

‘Is this what happens when someone hurts your feelings? Jesus Christ, it's a slight overreaction don’t you think? You go out, get drunk, you fuck anything that moves, you think that’s normal?’ Joe’s response gives verbal license to the overarching gender hierarchy that is played with throughout the film. In being constructed as a sympathetic character via discourses of innocence and social marginality, Heidi complicates the
binaries so clearly at work. In responding to Joe’s question as to why she has gone out and ‘fucked anything that moves’ Heidi replies, ‘I didn’t want to be by myself.’
‘Do you know how fucked up you are? It’s like you’ve got a big problem, it's a big fucking problem. And if I was you I’d get some sort of help.’

‘And you don’t have any problems do you?’ Heidi accuses, the camera again in close up, though maintaining distance as it reverse shots between Heidi and Joe.

‘Do you think I’m going to sit here and tell you about my problems?’

‘No, you’re too scared!’

In this sequence, the representation of both Heidi and Joe as ruptured gender identities is fully realised: Heidi’s sexual agency disavowed due to her femaleness, Joe’s discordant masculinity brought into relief as he both desires and is repugnant of Heidi in this sexualised state. Similarly, the normative masculine binary of logic/emotion is brought into further relief, as the previous sequences of Joe crying in front of his father, making a sexual advancement towards a gay neighbour, and struggling to connect with Heidi are juxtaposed with Heidi’s accusation of his fear to emote. In this manner, sex operates as a means by which to address broader gender-based assumptions, and at this point the tension constructed between Heidi and Joe, both as lovers and as feminine and masculine, is brought to a head.

6.3 Visceral Shock

In the early dramatic sexual encounter between Heidi and Adam, it is Heidi’s sexual inquisitiveness that is established, while also establishing the film’s broader concerns with touch and the body, and the affective moments that they predicate. Watching her mother’s car leave the driveway, Heidi hastily makes a coffee for Adam, taking it to him in the bedroom where he reclines in bed watching the television. After some brief small talk, Heidi asks Adam about a tattoo on his chest, ‘Did he hurt?’ she inquires, ‘Can I touch it?’ she follows, after which she begins tracing the outline of the tattoo with her finger. The use of close ups creates an intimacy and an intensity as Heidi
lowers herself towards Adam, her hand pressed against his chest as they kiss. Simultaneously, the film grounds itself in concerns of sex as well as the body, with Heidi’s sense of touch recurrent throughout the film.

There are countless examples of Heidi’s sensual reading on the world around her: fingers running over objects, pushing, touching, tasting and smelling, the camera pulled in tight around her so as to create a palpable intimacy with Heidi, a tactile bond where we are prompted to identify not only subjectively but bodily also. There is little room given formally to step back and view Heidi from more objective spaces, and her ambivalence as a feminine identity in flux, as a sexed body moderated by gendered expectations is robbed of both literal and discursive ground to ever truly bloom.

In an article in the edited volume *Reinventing film studies*, Nowell-Smith (2000, p. 16) offers a pithy statement: ‘Films mean. But they do not just mean’. This statement says much about the state of traditional film studies and the attention it has long paid to narrative meaning making; critical studies of film then largely excluding other properties of film as being less than or unimportant in terms of social critique or discursive analysis. One of those aspects long overlooked is the role of affect and viscerality in film as a potential social and critical force.

Affect can be found in all film to varying ends, however those films that give primacy to such moments are often overlooked for capacity to be critical, to transgress, to transform. The possibilities for discursive commentary and social critique through those filmic moments of affect and viscerality are underexplored. *Somersault* is one film that gives primacy to these affective qualities of film, and herein is explored for the critical potentiality of those affective moments—as visceral shock and aesthetic interruptions—which can locate and open up new spaces for social discourses of sexuality and femininity in the film.

As establishing shots go, there is little spoon feeding in *Somersault*: we are left to feel our way through the film’s environment for a significant portion of the opening titles. There is a forewarning—a preparation—occurring in these moments, as this is a film that speaks as much to the body as it does to the mind. The aforementioned statement by Nowell-Smith (2000) is aptly expanded thus:
Films mean. But they do not just mean. Because they can be described with the aid of language we can be led to think that description can substitute for the film. This is the perennial temptation of what I have called the linguistic analogy. But films also work in less describable ways. They work as painting and music do, partly through meaning but partly in other ways; partly in ways that have linguistic equivalents and partly in ways that do not. The move in the direction of semiotics in the 1970s was ‘indeterminate’ and could not be brought within a rational schema. But the need for such a rational schema has become questionable. Too many of the things that films do evade attempts to subsume them under the heading of meaning (p. 16).

The opening titles work in this manner of eluding linguistic explanation. Sobchack (2000), in her paper *What my fingers knew*, spoke of her striking awareness of the ‘gap that exists between our actual experience of the cinema and the theory that we academic film scholars write to explain it—or, perhaps more aptly, to explain it away’. Accordingly, when critics initially discussed Shortland’s *Somersault* there was a fishing for a descriptive framework in attempting to recapture the viewing on the page, to speak the unspeakable, with one critic writing:

> It’s a film that invites you to feel what’s happening on the screen as well as to watch it. The sound of a car thumping across a bridge or of the flame of a gas burner whoomping alight. The effect of hot water being poured on to a windscreen that has iced up overnight, or of a body arching in erotic pleasure. What it’s like inside a bar with the music turned up loud. Shortland insists that the world is made up of all kinds of experiences, not merely those that push the plot forward (Ryan 2004).

It is this insistence on those elements outside of narrative logic and explicit storytelling that is most anomalous within *Somersault* (and films like it). Certainly, feeling can never be divorced from the watching of film—and nor should critical analysis be exclusionary of this intrinsic duality of film. Nonetheless, what murky waters do we delve into when attempting to speak of things that are purposively unspoken? How do we utter what cannot be properly named but only experienced, felt?
The questions being raised herein are what potential is to be found, what meaning garnered, in the analysis of those anomalous, sensuously-producing affective aspects of film? In conjunction with more traditional film analysis, of representation and narrative for example, is there potential for the renewal of old discussions on well-worn discourse and entrenched ideologies—does *Somersault*, in those moments of visceral affect, open up new space, for instance, in discussing discourses of femininity and sex/adolescent sexuality?

In many regards, *Somersault* fits a contemporary social realist mode of address, particularly in the grey overtones of suburban Canberra following the opening titles. Similarly, in subject matter classifiable as social realist, it is a film that throughout remains dialectic concerning those wider issues of problematic sex spurned from a lower socio-economic environment, of familial conflict, and gender divides. However, the formal approach taken by the film presents an interesting opportunity in redressing these issues outside of the traditional bounds of the social realist film.

Given that conventional social realist films have traditionally placed greater emphasis on narrative structure and the gritty, raw drama itself, form and style is frequently found to be secondary though rather formulaic, as Hallam and Marshment (2000) note:

> The words ‘gritty’ and ‘raw’ tend to embrace both the thematic elements of the films—which often confront the troublesome relationship between deprived environmental conditions and human psychology—and the ‘no frills’ style in which they are made. Frequently low budget productions made on cheaper film formats that create grainy images unsaturated with colour, the camera style of social realism has traditionally favoured the use of a documentary ‘look’ achieved coupling simple continuity editing strategies with observational camerawork (p. 192).

Though still carrying a social realist ethos, broadly speaking, *Somersault* enacts a simple shift in focus, away from the observational, the effective, and onto the sensuous, the affective. Drawing from Barthes (1975, p. 65), we find in *Somersault* that ‘value [is] shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier’.
In defining affect, Shouse notes feelings are ‘personal and biographical’, emotions are ‘social’, whereas affect is ‘pre-personal’ and thus able to be ‘transmitted between bodies’ as there is no distinction between ‘individual and environment’ (Shouse 2005). The provocation of emotion, as a projection or display of feeling, in film is undeniable; affect, however, is much more problematic. This is the unspeakable referred to by Nowell-Smith (2000); it is the unformed and unstructured moments proffered in *Somersault*, such as when Heidi’s feet are shown pressed against the plaited tassels of a motel rug, when she runs her fingers over the cold smooth of a bathroom tile, or presses her hands upon a lover’s heaving chest.

Borrowing from Massumi’s (2002) definitions of affect, Shouse continues:

> The power of affect lies in the fact that it is unformed and unstructured (abstract). It is affect’s ‘abstraction’ that makes it transmittable in ways that feelings and emotions are not, and it is because affect is transmittable that it is potentially such a powerful social force (2005).

The affective moments within *Somersault*, above all, spring forth from Heidi’s burgeoning understanding of her own sexuality. The ties that bind in feminine discourse grant her power as a desirable body and simultaneously disempower her as a sexual body. As Heidi explores both herself and those around her, the camera is most often in close up, though when broken from its intimate moorings she can be seen in the harshest of lights. From the more conventional voyeur’s perspective we may well wonder why Heidi would put herself in such harm’s way. We may ask what her promiscuity is achieving. In other words, there is space, both figuratively and literally, for more discursively formed critical readings to take place given distance from Heidi herself.

The literal closeness to Heidi works towards an intimacy that transcends her imprudent actions, which are—in no uncertain terms—alienating and confronting at times. Of course, in formal language the use of close ups, or indeed extreme close ups, has a resonant currency in creating a sense of intimacy, or involvement, from a viewer’s perspective. When Heidi is at her most vulnerable, we are brought in even closer to see the prickle of her skin, the blush of her bruise. This closeness provides a liminal space between the ideologically bathed narrative action, imploring instead an embodied,
sensate identification, a space for empathy to take root, not removed from but rather to the side of discursive interference.

Thus, a unique aspect of Somersault is the emphatic attention given to the body, to embodied responses (both the protagonists’ and our own) and, most repetitively, to touch. Heidi’s hands, her fingers, are a recurrent motif, particularly in the early stages of the film. There are multiple close-up shots, often extreme close ups, of Heidi touching—literally feeling her way through her environment, tracing the outline of her mother’s boyfriend’s tattoo, running her fingers across the smooth cold of bathroom tiles. One sequence is entirely comprised of Heidi’s hungry hands. As Heidi explores the hidden corners of the Siesta Inn where she is lodging, she is shown in montage running her hands over objects and surfaces, running her fingers over photographs, ornaments, papers and clothes.

If one were to count the number of instances in which the camera draws attention to Heidi’s hands, it becomes almost innumerable. The first signposting of Heidi’s tactile approach to the world again comes early in the piece, enforcing an intimacy with her if only through persistence: as Heidi enters her neighbourhood pub to retrieve her mother she immediately picks up a drink coaster, turning it over in her hands before placing it in her pocket. When greeting her mother she touches her necklace. Later as she sits next to her mother’s boyfriend on his bed she traces the outline of a tattoo on his chest.

Each of these instances is nestled between moments of narrative action, and like Ozu’s pillow shot, the visceral primacy of these shots provides at once a welcome departure from narrative action (serving their own purpose, whatever one would like that to be), while implicitly binding the viewer to Heidi with incessant calls to the body—that is of Heidi’s body but also our own bodies as they react in a visceral recognition. That our own fingers can know warm skin, can feel the resistance of a piano key, of a lover’s hand, provides the potential for embodied identification, simultaneously allowing for a momentary suspension of narrative logic, or discursive meaning making, reminding that, as Sobchack remarks:

we are in some carnal modality able to touch and be touched by the substance and texture of images; to feel a visual atmosphere envelop us; to experience weight and suffocation and the need for air; to take flight in kinetic
exhilaration and freedom even as we are relatively bound to our theater seats; to be knocked backward by a sound; to sometimes even smell and taste the world we see on the screen (2000).

We are to feel through our own fingers as Heidi runs her fingertips across the rough glitter stuck onto an old birthday card; we are to be sensitive to the embodied reverberations, the knowingness of tender pain as Heidi traces and presses into a fresh bruise upon her thigh. It is imposed upon us formally so that it is not long until Heidi’s body can come to speak to us as our own bodies speak to us—of hunger, pleasure, pain, exhilaration, nausea, anxiety.

6.4 Touching, Feeling the Social

*Somersault* promotes a reflexivity between Heidi’s journey of learning and of meaning making via her own touch, her own skin, through the film’s formal construction of her experiences—that is, experiences of those ‘tactile, kinetic, redolent, and … taste-full’ (Sobchack 2000) kinds that we self-consciously and hungrily absorb and drink in as a curious, newly sexed teenager such as Heidi; and our own concurrent journey experienced through the embodied response to the film, our skin touching that of the film’s, that of Heidi’s.

We are not left long in *Somersault* before being reminded that this is a film largely concerned with sex, and Heidi’s experience of it, as a number of those visceral instances attest. And so, instead of offering a narrative engagement with the subject of sexuality and Heidi’s (un)femininity (and to a lesser extent, Joe’s (un)masculinity), the film seems to ‘enact [sexuality] at the level of affective transmission’—along the lines of what Ann Cvetkovich (1992) calls ‘the representation of social problems as affective dilemmas’ (p. 2). Had those instances of tactile/visceral experience not been so persistent, so *disruptive*, it would be quite easy to read this film within certain discursive or ideological pedagogies, such as those of femininity, adolescent sexuality, and broader gender binaries. And yet this is systematically interrupted by those provocations of embodied response, and most emphatically with moments of *visceral shock*: 
Familiar with mainstream cinema’s standardized formats, we have become used to thinking of and enjoying feature films first and foremost in terms of plot and characters, identification and narrative logic (Beugnet 2007, p. 5).

This familiarity has come to dictate much film analysis, not least in those films considered social realist. Those visceral, affective moments within film are ‘commonly construed as detrimental to the viewer’s interpretative or analytical appraisal of what is being presented to him or her’ (Beugnet 2007, p. 39). However, in films such as Somersault that do privilege those affective moments over narrative logic or explicit social politics, it is worth considering how those moments can, and do, relate to the more implicit social and political concerns. Thusly, Somersault can certainly be read as engaging in sexual politics, both within the wider narrative and within its formal elements if they are read as equal and not oppositional. If Somersault can be read as utilising well-known gender binaries (Heidi as feminine, Joe as masculine), then interruption of said binaries through explicitly affective, sensory experiences does not remove the sexual politics of the film; to the contrary, it actively challenges those said binaries in the very act of the interruption.

The visceral shock referred to here is this very aesthetic interruption. The use here of the term visceral shock is a reappropriation of Sobchack’s (2000) use of ‘immediate tactile shock’, arousing a sensation of one’s own body being touched, in conjunction with the character being touched as well as the character who touches. Situated within the phenomenological sense, this connotes a preconscious relationship with the film, a proprioceptive juncture between skin of the self and skin of the film—what Marks (2000, 2002) explores as haptic cinema.

One scene in particular illustrates the disruptive power of visceral shock. The sequence involves the film’s two primary protagonists, Heidi and Joe, on their first ‘real’ date, upon which they head out for dinner at a local Chinese restaurant. Following an unpleasant encounter with old mates, Joe is visibly irritable, snatching his hand away from Heidi’s as they enter the restaurant, snapping at the waitress when asking for a bowl of fresh chillies, muttering aggressively under his breath as Heidi hesitates upon ordering. Clearly anxious about Joe’s turned mood, Heidi begins to question him, ‘Am I
your girlfriend?’ and ‘Do you love me?’, receiving short and exacerbated responses from Joe, ‘Jeezus Heidi’ and ‘I don’t know, we only just met’. Joe finally reacts quite aggressively, ‘I just don’t like being fucking intimidated’ he rasps.

Up until this point, the narrative has consistently drawn upon a well-worked literacy of meaning, most obviously the normative gender binaries of the masculine and feminine. Heidi is shown trying to hold Joe’s hand, she whinges and mollycoddles, anxiously nagging at Joe as to the status of their relationship, pushing for commitment. Conversely, Joe pulls away, remaining stoic, non-committal and brash. It seems as though the film has reached its diegetic straps, neatly referring to binary constructs: the needy feminine and the gruff masculine. This is well-worn territory, an exhausted language with which to speak of (hetero)sexual relations, and traditionally we could expect—in a film utilising a questioning, challenging social realist lens as here—that dialogue between Heidi and Joe might continue in order to (re)address/redress this.

However, rather than continuing the conversation, both the literal conversation between Joe and Heidi and also the discursive one predicated on feminine/masculine binaries, Heidi picks up the bowl of fresh chillies and throws them back into her mouth (Figure 6). We again move closer to Heidi’s face as her eyes turn bloodshot, her face trembling, and despite Joe’s hushed and angry commands that she spit them out, Heidi swallows in a moment of Cronenberg-esque transportation to the body.

As we watch Heidi experiencing the heat of the fresh chillies hitting her senses not only is there an immediate ‘carnal identification with material subjectivity’, to use a Sobchack phrase, but it also interrupts those burgeoning engagements with social and discursive judgements—a ‘carnal subversion of fixed subject positions’ (Sobchack 2004, p. 67): Heidi as feminine, Joe as masculine and so forth. It is a literal shock, reminding us that engaging with film is not only seeing it, but also experiencing it.

The visceral shock as present in this scene acknowledges the immediacy of a moment that momentarily displaces intellect and interrupts the normative flow of narrative logic. In this instance, Joe and Heidi’s discussion from which a literacy of meaning, a series of discursive threads, was emerging. Had they been left to emerge, the potential for a much
more literal binary reading of the text would have been greater than that of the affective surrendering insisted upon instead.

Massumi (2002, p. 260) refers to these kinds of affective response as ‘unformed and unstructured’, and thus remaining outside, or to the side of, conscious thought. When actively bridled to affective moments via instances of visceral shock, there is much to be explored in terms of the experience of film and the subsequent critical reading of it. Taken away, if only momentarily, from ideological effect and meaning, we find that the power of affect is then the potential space that emerges once returned to cognition and critical engagement. There is an almost forced displacement of (critical) mind from (sensuous) body within this moment, and to quote Barthes (1975, p. 17), it is a ‘moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas that I do’.

The very breakdown of narrative logic via the enactment of visceral shock, the disavowal of a discursive causal chain (as with the masculine/feminine binary within *Somersault*) provides both affective resonance and the potential for renewed critical engagement. Shaviro (1993) writes:

I am urging that we surrender to and revel in cinematic fascination, rather than distance ourselves from it with the tools of psychoanalytic reserve and hermeneutic suspicion … film’s radical potential to subvert social hierarchies and decompose relations of power lies in its extreme capacity for seduction and violence (p. 64).

There is a violence to Heidi’s abrupt intake of the chillies, her vomiting in the toilet, the water hitting her flushed skin. It skew any discursive logic into utter disarray—indeed, if any predictability was being seen to emerge, it is in that moment swiftly done away with and in its place a carnal transgression. It is not that those discourses of femininity are replaced, but that in the very interruption of its literacy a space emerges in which to engage with it anew.

Referring to these immediate responses in cinematic viewing, Sobchack refers to a *cinesthesia* that foregrounds the:
complexity and richness of the more general bodily experience that grounds our particular experience of cinema and both, as well, point ways in which the cinema uses our dominant sense of vision and hearing to speak comprehensibly to our other senses (2000).

It is not enough to acknowledge that cinesthetic experience exists, but to attempt to understand how and where it sits within the myriad of experiences and readings that take place within a film. The violent arrest, the visceral shock, that throws the senses into an uneasy sensorial identification with Heidi moves us closer to her, and simultaneously away from her as only a symbolic, or signifying body, thus the Heidi that exists as an (un)feminine subject is, if only momentarily, undone.

As a film that purposively foregrounds the affective elements that sit to the side of forward narrative momentum, Somersault actively asks for meaning to be found in less obvious places. Heidi is at once a feminine body as well as a sensate body; the discursive logic attached to the former is seen here to be momentarily skewed by the latter through the affective power of visceral shock. These affective moments allow for transgressive possibilities to emerge, as what is known—in this instance those discursive attributes of (un)femininity—is brought undone, ruptured in a moment of embodied arrest. This affective power, then, is indeed critical power. The carnal subversions (Sobchack 2004) of discursive logic are made possible through those affective moments—such as those found within Somersault—that elucidate affect in film as more than mere emotional filler, but also a potentially powerful critical and social force.
Chapter 7 Conclusion

7.0 The Social Feminine

A feminine language lives on the boundary. A feminine text overthrows the hierarchies. It is absence-silence-madness present-speaking—sane. It proves the hierarchies mistaken. Like the voices Bakhtin hears in the novel’s carnival, the female voice laughs in the face of authority (Price Herndl 1991, p. 11).

Throughout this thesis I have reiterated time and again the intrinsic and necessary elements of social realist film, that of a critical lens and a crusading political ethos that gives voice to those who have little or none; these are stories of those subsisting on the fringes of society, marginalised by mere virtue of their social status. More particularly, my research has sought to explore in detail the female voice and those issues particular to discourses of femininity problematised by social marginalisation further to the broader gender politics at work in discourses of femininity.

Social realist film, with its inherent critical lens and crusading political ethos, is also about inciting change, even if that incitement is only to point out the problems and those socially embedded issues that need redressing. All the films explored in this thesis are calls for change, an incitement of redress, in those feminine spaces where female voices are suppressed, abused and silenced by harmful and marginalising social factors. In the final images of Teesh and Trude, Blessed and Somersault there is an imagining of change or the opening of future hopeful spaces where there is potential for change.

These endings recall Felicity Collins’ musings on the late 1980s and 1990s post-new wave films (the beginning of the Australian ‘quirk’ cinema phase) at a time when Australian women were really being heard in film:71 she writes of Radiance (Perkins

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71 This was seemingly reactionary to, or a transgressive extension of, the large number of ‘ocker’ films of the 1970s new wave period, which Tom O’Reagan (1989) described as ‘hedonistic’ and obsessively
1998), *Floating life* (Law 1996) and *Vacant possession* (Nash 1995), ‘These endings refuse the romance around the figure of the daughter.’ (Collins 1999, p. 115) Though Collins is referring to particular instances in particular films, the broader sentiment of a reimagining of social discourse rings true with the films explored in this thesis. That is, in their defiant political praxes, all three resist masculinist tradition and place the figure of woman as central to both the typical social realist narrative and broader critical concern.

The feminine lens, as it has been referred to throughout this research, takes these political praxes, of women as central to the social realist narrative, as its critical motivation. This is the foremost crucial aspect of the feminine lens—the harnessing of the social realist mode of address to critically explore woman as social construct and, in particular, the discourses of femininity at work within that construct.

Further to this reimagining of social realism through the feminine lens is the formal articulations that come to represent and express these political praxes. The feminine lens utilises formal articulations that speak to dominant feminine discourse while simultaneously deconstructing it in an act of internal criticism. In employing formal affectations that lend themselves to the discursive articulations of feminine discourse—the melodramatic rhetoric in *Teesh and Trude*’s reflexive use of the soap opera, in *Blessed*’s intent focus on maternal activities, the intensely bodily-focused, sensuality-infused aspects present throughout *Somersault*—the feminine lens infiltrates the discursive space of femininity from the inside out, speaking through it in order to critically explore it.

Ever in a state of flux and becoming, the feminine woman is social, and conversely the social is intrinsic to discourses of femininity. The gendered expectations placed upon women through these discourses of femininity are played out upon the female sex through the very spaces they inhabit, the interactions they have, the everyday activities in which they partake. All three films demonstrate the stringent and constraining, as well as liberatory and valorising, role that femininity plays in the social lives of women concerned with the ‘pleasures of the body’ in such a way that it promoted a kind of anti-intellectualism and an upholding of the mind/body dualism. Within these ‘ocker’ films, O’Reagan (1989, p. 76) notes the emphasis on ‘sex, drinking and women’, pointing to the largely misogynistically driven depictions of women in this cycle of films.
subsisting on the fringes of society. The formal language of each of these films finds new and reimagined ways to speak for and about these women and their socio-political gynocentric concerns.

7.1 Can we have a Falling Horse?

This thesis, in its formal evolutions and the harnessing of such evolutions in examining the role of feminine discourse for women living on the frayed edges of normative society, has had two primary, though concurrent aims. The first—the formal evolutions via more affective approaches to social realist film—can be considered more broad reaching in its application to Australian social realist film than just those focusing on gynocentric concerns.

I return to Nowell-Smith’s (2000, p. 16) charged statement that ‘Films mean. But they do not just mean.’ It is a statement that leads the two tacit threads working throughout this research—first, that films mean and none more so in a purposeful and politically directive manner than social realist film; second, that films make us feel, and that neither meaning nor feeling are mutually exclusive. It has not been the aim of this thesis to suggest this has not always been so. Indeed it has always been that meaning and feeling, a film’s narrative logic, for instance, and its affective properties, have necessarily existed and worked together in film. The films analysed herein indicate an increasing awareness and harnessing of affective convention in their pushing the boundaries of what can be considered a socio-politically critical film text, a social realist film.

These kinds of affective shifts are not unique to the three films explored herein. Films such as Sen’s Beneath clouds (2001), Warwick Thornton’s Samson and Delilah (2009) and Courtin-Wilson’s Hail (2011) are some of the recent examples of films with typically social realist thematics that have employed stylistic artifice, abstractionism and symbolic imagery that at times comes to privilege affective moments above that of narrative logic. Similar to that of the films examined here, reviews of these films come to reflect the public response to these formal shifts in representing typically social realist themes; Hail, for example, is referred to as ‘no run-of-the-mill social realist
narrative’ (Nelson 2012), as a ‘stylistically ambitious art film rather than your average dirty realist Australian drama set in the world of drug addicts and ugly criminals’ (Siemienowicz 2012).

Indeed, *Hail* positions itself in a similar to that of *Somersault* in its more radical reimagining of social realist themes and spaces. As with *Somersault’s* anxious repetition of tight, lingering shots of the female body so too *Hail* plays with abstraction and symbolism to further explore the violence and decay present in certain working-class, or underclass, spaces of Australian inner city suburbia. In one sequence pushing the boundaries of social realist convention, a transitional shot breaks away from the film’s male protagonist to an expansive sky, a patchwork of farmland seen far below, with a brown horse falling and tumbling in terrifying and sublime abandon. Speaking back to the social determinants in the early stages of the film, the horse free falls in a symbolic concomitance with Daniel’s free fall from societal norms. On a further, more subjective level, the abrupt abstractionism of this imagery pushes for a visceral, affective engagement, sitting uneasily—though in accordance nonetheless—with the more narrative logic of the realist social landscape also present in the film.

To refer back to a definition set out by Hallam and Marshment (2000, p. 184), social realism in film is ultimately ‘a discursive term used to describe films that aim to show the effects of environmental factors on the development of character through depictions that emphasise the relationship between location and identity’, and thus the human impact is necessarily a part of the crusading social criticism intrinsic to social realism. The falling horse in *Hail*—as with the melodramatic rhetoric in *Teesh and Trude*, the poetic imagery throughout *Blessed* and in *Somersault’s* use of filters, extreme close ups and affective primacy in moments of carnal and visceral shock—works towards finding a truly intimate and nuanced depiction of this relationship between location and identity, the subject and the social.

A broader concern raised by this research, and one that could and should be explored further, is just how far one can push the formal boundaries of social realist filmmaking before its inherent social criticism gets lost. *Can we have a falling horse?*
The conclusion I come to is, simply, yes, and that a move towards a social realist formal aesthetic that comes to foreground affective moments, of the symbolic and the abstract, can in fact enhance the social and critical impact essential to social realism as a unique filmic mode of address. The pushing of formal boundaries in social realism, as seen in these kinds of affective moments within *Hail*, and as seen in *Teesh and Trude, Blessed,* and *Somersault*, ultimately serves the greater critical purpose of Australian social realism—that is, of highlighting the victimising and marginalising impacts of harmful social discourse on the human proportions of everyday life.

This thesis makes the claim that a film is no less socially or politically critical due to its more expressionistic, affective artifice; indeed, as has been shown through the films analysed herein, this artifice can be utilised in order to reveal a more holistic view of the social impacts of social marginalisation not only on the external but also on the internal life lived.

### 7.2 Hers is the Empire of Affections

The way for women to be liberated is not by ‘becoming a man’ or by envying what men have and their objects, but by female subjects once again valorizing the expression of their own sex and gender (Irigaray 1993, p. 71).

The increasing use of affect in social realist filmmaking, when employed in the critical exploration of the socially marginalised female character, resists the opposition of femininity and feminism and simply explores the personal politics of the discursive bounds that still exist for the female sex. It neither celebrates nor condemns, supports nor refutes. Exploring discourses of femininity in social realist film—femininity, so maligned and challenged when found on the fringes of society where such rigidity in gender stereotype is made all the more unreasonable due to socio-economic constraint—reveals a liberated space in those more affective moments. And yet there is an intrinsic feminism in foregrounding the personal as political through the use of affect.
In doing away with the traditional didacticism of social realism and instead giving primacy to the dialecticism of embodied and affective representation, the voice for women grows vaster, more genuine, more widely represented in its innumerable ambivalences and intricacies.

When Australian cinema is appropriated by the ‘women and Others’ it has routinely erased, different endings are proposed. These endings have something to do with space and vision, and something to do with time and memory (Collins 1999, p. 112).

Ultimately this evolution of social realist film is necessary, not least because known conventions elicit tired rhetoric, but more importantly because as discourse changes, so too should those articulations, the methods of representation and analysis, that seek to explore those discourses. Femininity, in all its stagnant and changeable states, has found a welcoming space in more affective social realist film, one to better explore the social body of women as feminine—bounded as socially informed, yet disparate in their individual articulations.
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