

Stranded in Suburbia: Women's Violence in Australian Cinema

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AUSTRALIAN CINEMA HAS A LONG HISTORY OF DEPICTING VIOLENT MEN: FROM *WAKE IN Fright* (Ted Kotcheff, 1971), *Mad Dog Morgan* (Philippe Mora, 1976) and *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979) in the 1970s, *Romper Stomper* (Geoffrey Wright, 1992), *Blackrock* (Steven Vidler, 1997) and *The Boys* (Rowan Woods, 1998) in the 1990s, to *Wolf Creek* (Greg McLean, 2005) and *Snowtown* (Justin Kurzel, 2011) in the 2000s. Throughout this period, Australian cinema has paid exclusive attention to men's violence: vigilantes, petty criminals and troubled young men in the suburbs. Felicity Holland and Jane O'Sullivan declare that these 'lethal larrikin' films are in discussion with concepts of Australian masculinity, 'questioning and subverting a number of almost iconic assumptions about power, powerlessness, and violence in Australian masculine culture' (79). In recent years, however, there has been a small but impactful cluster of films that show women acting violently, too. *Suburban Mayhem* (Paul Goldman, 2006), *Animal Kingdom* (David Michôd, 2011) and *Hounds of Love* (Ben Young, 2016) all contain female characters who exhibit intensely violent behaviour, committing (or conspiring to commit) acts of homicide and murder. While critics have examined men's brutality extensively, Australian women's aggression has not been considered in the same way (Butterss; Heller-Nicholas; Holland and O'Sullivan; O'Brien; Villella). Female violence in Australian cinema is a new and unanswered question.

Speaking broadly, Western cultural narratives—whether in cinema, literature, television or other media discourses—tend to frame women's violence as exceptional. This is not unexpected. Women who do violent things are statistically in the minority compared to men, and women are overwhelmingly the victims of male violence. That said, the belief in women's non-violence operates on the level of ideology. Cultural discourses repeatedly frame women's aggression as not just uncommon, but fundamentally abnormal. As Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry note, there is a widespread view that women are not inclined to be violent: 'A conservative interpretation sees women as peaceful and apolitical, a liberal view understands women as a pacifying influence on politics, and feminists who study global politics often critique the masculine violence of interstate relations' (2). As such, '[w]omen's violence falls outside of ... ideal-typical understanding of what it means to be a woman' (2). On the occasions where women do commit violence, cultural texts regularly attempt to 'make sense' of their actions. As Sjoberg and Gentry identify, one strategy is to align them with stock archetypes: desperate mothers, depraved 'monsters' and perverse 'whores' who resort to violence out of maternal impulses or an intrinsic moral corruption (30). Cinema texts also tend to narrate the subjectivities of women who commit violence as a way of dealing with the challenge her actions make to gender ideology.

The issue of how a specific national cinema grapples with women's violence has yet to be considered in detail. This essay therefore examines representations of women's violence in Australian cinema, looking particularly at the strategies used to depict their brutality in three films of the post-2000 period—*Suburban Mayhem*, *Animal Kingdom* and *Hounds of Love*. Australian films about violent women are certainly less common than those about violent men. Rather than dismissing them as exceptional, however, I argue that they present a unique critical opportunity. *Suburban Mayhem*, *Animal Kingdom* and *Hounds of Love* raise questions about how cinema portrays violent women in relation to Australian society. They invite comparison with so-called 'lethal larrikin' films and their critiques of Australian male violence. They also beg the question as to whether Australian films about violent women respond to the same imperatives—whether industrial, aesthetic or cultural—that position filmmakers to depict violent men.

Suburban Mayhem, *Animal Kingdom* and *Hounds of Love* each focus on women who engage in similar types of violence. Their protagonists are women who commit, or plan to commit, illicit interpersonal violence and homicide (rather than, for example, state-sanctioned violence or psychological abuse). *Suburban Mayhem* tells the story of nineteen-year-old Katrina Skinner (Emily Barclay), a hard-partying young woman who loves muscle cars, sex and spending big at the local beauty salon. After her father threatens to take custody of her baby daughter Bailee, Katrina conspires to have him murdered. Using her considerable sexual appeal, she convinces a male admirer to bludgeon the older man to death. *Animal*

Kingdom concerns the Codys, a criminal family specialising in armed robberies. Their matriarch is Janine or 'Smurf' Cody (Jacki Weaver), a seemingly nurturing grandmother who orders the murder of her grandson Joshua (James Frecheville). Set in Perth in the 1980s, *Hounds of Love* concerns a married couple, John and Evelyn White (Stephen Curry and Emma Booth), who kidnap, rape and murder young women as a sadistic means to enliven their sex life.¹

While these films differ in terms of genre—*Suburban Mayhem* is a lively black comedy, *Animal Kingdom* a tense crime drama and *Hounds of Love* a thriller—they all foreground women's acts of brutality. The protagonists' violence also takes a similar form. They are physically aggressive and homicidal, and their violence is a key event in each film. It is a point of climax in *Suburban Mayhem* and *Animal Kingdom*, and an ongoing threat in *Hounds of Love*. Significantly, these films also all take place in the Australian suburbs. Each emphasises women's relationships with families and male partners in their homes. Violence and place are therefore linked phenomena. I examine how *Suburban Mayhem*, *Animal Kingdom* and *Hounds of Love* imagine women's aggression via an understanding of suburbia as key Australian location, one that embodies the continent's position as part of the remote, antipodean south. Through their narratives and aesthetic strategies, these films connect their themes of gender violence to the Australian suburb as an isolated place of death and survival.

Violence and Australian Cinema of the South

Over the past decade, a group of young, male Australian directors have made their names by debuting dark, violent features on the international festival circuit. These are David Michôd, who screened *Animal Kingdom* at the 26th Sundance Film Festival, Justin Kurzel, who exhibited his feature debut *Snowtown* at the 62nd Cannes International Film Festival, and Ben Young, who screened *Hounds of Love* at the 73rd Venice International Film Festival. These films each tell stories of men and women inflicting considerable violence upon one another: in *Animal Kingdom*, the Cody family and the police assassinate each other; the psychopathic antagonist of *Snowtown* tortures his enemies; in *Hounds of Love*, John and Evelyn repeatedly capture, rape and murder young women. It is therefore tempting to read these films as indicative of a national fixation. Critic Jason di Rosso canvasses this idea in his review of *Hounds of Love*: 'why are Australian directors ... attracted to such vile inhumanity?' he asks. 'You could argue there's a brutal violence repressed

¹ These films also closely mirror real-life criminal cases occurring in Australia. Katrina of *Suburban Mayhem* resembles Belinda van Krevel, who was convicted for asking a friend to murder her father; *Animal Kingdom* is openly based on the Pettingill family—headed by Kath Pettingill, known in the press as 'Granny Evil'—who committed the Walsh Street police shooting in 1988; the events of *Hounds of Love* very much resemble those of the Byrnie case, in which Catherine and David Byrnie raped and murdered several young women in Perth in the 1980s. These films' treatment of historical events is, however, highly fictionalised.

deep inside us, as a people, that somehow needs to come out on screen' (n.p.). Geoffrey Macnab pursues a similar line of questioning, albeit more flippantly: 'What is it with Australians kidnapping and torturing strangers?' (102).

It is certainly possible to argue that gender violence is symptomatic of a deeper cultural preoccupation. Violent male behaviour is not only ubiquitous within Australian film, from *Wake in Fright* to *Wolf Creek*, but the nation is itself the product of invasion and genocide. Violence within the national cinema can therefore be hypothesised as a traumatic repetition of a foundational colonial aggression. Whether occurring in *Romper Stomper*, *Blackrock* or *Snowtown*, death and conflict is a historical legacy that the nation seems destined to re-enact through its cultural texts. This is a compelling explanation. However, gender violence in Australian film is also demonstrably shaped by the industrial relationships between the global north and south, particularly the northern cinema industry in Western Europe and North America. Before analysing the representation of homicidal women in Australian films, it is therefore important to account for the north-south relations that shape Australian cinema's engagement with violence in the first instance.

Success on the northern international festival circuit has long been important to Australian directors. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978) was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 1978 Cannes festival, *My Brilliant Career* (Gillian Armstrong, 1979) received an excellent reception at Cannes in 1979, *Love Serenade* (Shirley Barrett, 1996) won the Caméra d'Or in 1996, and Indigenous filmmaker Warwick Thornton achieved the same accolade with *Samson and Delilah* in 2010. Such recognition can lead to international distribution deals, as well as opportunities to direct far bigger projects at home and abroad. Kurzel, Michôd and Young's careers exemplify this process. Since their festival success, each has gone on to helm big-budget, international features financed by large production companies in the United States and United Kingdom. Following the positive reception of *Hounds of Love* at the Venice Film Festival, for example, Young secured representation in the US and won a directing job on Universal Pictures' science-fiction blockbuster *Extinction* (2018). Young describes this as a direct consequence of the Venice event:

The day after the Venice premiere my phone exploded. I ended up with a fantastic agent in UTA [United Talent Agency] and management in LA in Thruline. UTA organised two or three private screenings to which they invited Hollywood big wigs. I got a bunch of offers and *Extinction* was one of the scripts in which I saw the most potential. (n.p.)

After *Snowtown*, Kurzel similarly went on to direct much larger international projects, starting with *Macbeth* (2015)—a British-French co-production starring Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard—and *Assassin's Creed* (2016), an adaptation of the hit videogame franchise, also starring Fassbender and Cotillard. According to Kurzel, these opportunities arose after Fassbender, impressed by the director's work, made contact and asked to meet. Kurzel subsequently formed a friendship with the influential star (Bodey 3). Michôd has also gone on to international projects: *Animal Kingdom* was adapted into a US television series for TNT with Michôd as executive producer, and in 2017 Michôd directed *War Machine* for Brad Pitt's production company Plan B.

Rather than repelling critics, the violence in Young, Kurzel and Michôd's films became a focal point for positive reviews in the US and UK. Commentators frequently expressed admiration for the directors' affecting filmmaking and ability to manipulate tone. Writing for *Slant*, Derek Smith notes that *Hounds of Love* shows 'the restraint and visual acuity of a veteran director's work' (n.p.); Eddie Cockrell for *Variety* says the film 'generates a coiled depravity and almost unbearable tension' (n.p.); Michael Sragow for *Film Comment* remarks that 'Young keys his camera and cutting to his performers' rhythms; he uses slithery camera movement and slow motion to convey their languorous, volatile, and destructive moods' (n.p.). Similarly positive comments appear in write-ups on *Snowtown* and *Animal Kingdom*. In a four-star review, Peter Bradshaw describes *Snowtown* as a 'well made but gruesome and often unwatchably violent film' (9), whereas Wally Hammond for *Sight & Sound* praises Michôd's 'excellent ear for language, both verbal and body' (50). Such appraisals reveal critics' willingness to commend these films' intensity whilst simultaneously noting how uncomfortable they are to watch.

While these reviewers do not explain why they praise filmmakers who elicit negative affect, they do imply that Young, Kurzel and Michôd's handling of violence proves their filmmaking ability. This is not without precedent. Disturbing content has long been a feature of the international art cinema circuit, and critics are primed to appreciate transgressive filmmaking. Such taste-preferences are, on one hand, characteristic of contemporary culture industries. As Nikolaj Lübecker observes, the shock tactics of the historical avant-garde (which he dates from 1910s-1930s in Europe) have now become the norm. Taboo-breaking works are 'eagerly awaited by the art market' (111), and the cinema industry is no exception. Mattias Frey makes a similar comment in his analysis of contemporary art cinema, noting that shock tactics are particularly important for filmmakers who want to 'gain attention and a foothold in a competitive, globalized marketplace' (122). In keeping with Frey's remarks, the late 1990s and first decade of the twenty-first century saw a turn towards explicit content in European art cinema. This trend is now referred to by several names: the 'new Extremism', the 'cinema of sensation',

'*cinéma du corps*' and 'feel-bad' films (Horeck and Kendall 1-2; Beugnet; Palmer 171; Lübecker). This moment saw numerous directors take on horror, thriller and erotic genres, such as Gaspar Noé in *I Stand Alone* (1998), Claire Denis in *Trouble Every Day* (2001) and Lars von Trier in *Antichrist* (2009). This shift towards sensory, transgressive filmmaking allowed directors to deliver the kind of taboo-breaking works that critics expected of practitioners. It also provided them with aesthetic opportunities and a chance to exercise a particular skill set as artists. Films that centre bodies in the throes of pleasure or aggression demand a modality that engages with cinema's affective registers—its capacity to titillate, horrify and disgust. Australian filmmakers are not immune to these developments in the global art market (or, indeed, the enticements of working with a professed 'cinema of sensation'). They also address a northern milieu of taste-makers who are willing—even eager—to celebrate dark films.

Depictions of gender violence in Australian films thus emerge from the aspirations of filmmakers combined with the career-making influence of northern film critics and studios. Attention-grabbing explorations of gender violence achieve both product differentiation and artistic distinction overseas. They are also a way of showcasing a filmmaker's skill with the cinematic medium. Not all directors who make films about homicidal men and women achieve success via this strategy, of course. *Joe Cinque's Consolation*—a true crime story about Anu Singh, a young law student who killed her boyfriend in the 1990s—screened at the 42nd Toronto International Film Festival in 2016 but its director Sotiris Dounoukos has yet to announce further projects. *Suburban Mayhem* screened at the 59th Cannes International Film Festival in 2006, as well as the 31st Toronto festival, yet director Paul Goldman has not made another narrative feature. Moreover, many Australian filmmakers avoid the northern festival circuit, working instead within parameters of genre cinema. The success of horror films such as *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014), *The Loved Ones* (Sean Byrne, 2009) and *Wolf Creek* are cases in point. Nevertheless, for directors who seek opportunity on the northern festival circuit, sensational treatments of death and violence provide a strategy for success.

The Place of Women's Violence

Whilst industrial motivations undoubtedly influence filmmakers' engagement with violence, *Animal Kingdom*, *Hounds of Love* and *Suburban Mayhem* do exhibit similar aesthetic and thematic strategies that warrant attention. From their opening shots, these films all identify Australian suburbia as their setting. The very first scene of *Animal Kingdom* takes place inside a family home. The protagonist, Joshua, sits watching 'Deal or No Deal' on television. His mother is slumped on the couch next to him, dead from a heroin overdose. *Hounds of Love* foregrounds its location of 1980s Perth even more conspicuously. The film opens with an

establishing shot of the suburban sprawl; it is hot, flat and indistinct, blanketed with brick-and-tile houses, bitumen roads and yellow lawns. *Suburban Mayhem*, too, begins with a flyover shot of the front yards and streets of the fictional Golden Grove. In each of these films, suburbia is, overwhelmingly, the chosen setting for gender violence.

In order to understand why this is significant, it is important to first identify the long relationship between Australian cinema and place. As Deb Verhoeven has argued, scholars of Australian film have focused on 'how the "Australian" in Australian cinema should be distinguished, both in the sense of how it can be differentiated from other national cinemas and how it contributes to abiding discourses of Australian excellence and "goodness"' (152). One way of doing this has been to emphasise the physical landscape and to define Australian cinema as a cinema of place. This tendency emerged out of what Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka call the 'AFC-genre', the character-driven, literary adaptations favoured by the Australian Film Commission in the 1970s. The genre developed after the success of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975), producing films such as *The Getting of Wisdom* (Bruce Beresford, 1977), *The Mango Tree* (Kevin James Dobson, 1977) and *My Brilliant Career*. Dermody and Jacka note that these pastoral period films were promoted as 'films "we could be proud of"' (31). In particular, their beautiful imagery and mise-en-scène projected 'a middle-brow cultural worthiness' to a global audience (32). These films also use their attractive natural settings as signifiers of antipodean Australianness. As Graeme Turner says, they are films that foreground their nationality through 'representations of the landscape' (100). Such films are also shot in a particular style that lingers upon and showcases the natural world (100). The environment thus provided a point of differentiation and symbolic significance for Australian cinema.

Films set in the suburbs have their own counter-history in Australian cinema, yet they also define Australianness via a construction of place. Films about the suburbs operate in symbolic opposition to AFC-genre texts, which rejected 'the suburban quotidian' in favour of picturesque bushland (Dermody and Jacka 119). The history of suburbia in Australian film is thus extensive. The suburbs have been a setting from teen car film *The FJ Holden* (Michael Thornhill, 1977) to the Islamic-Australian comedy *Ali's Wedding* (Jeffrey Walker, 2017). Suburbia's legitimacy as a representative of Australianness has been hotly contested, however. As Sue Turnbull notes, since Federation and the early twentieth-century: 'the idea of the bush was mooted as an alternative basis for the construction of a more masculine and authentic notion of Australian national identity' (19). This is despite the fact that most Australians live in suburbia and have done so since the turn of the last century. There remains tremendous ambivalence regarding the suburbs that is reflected in filmic output, from affectionate depictions in *The Castle* (Rob Sitch, 1997), to more critical representations in *The Boys*. Yet in spite of this uncertainty,

the suburbs are also a location tasked with defining Australian cinema and national character.

Australian films that represent male interpersonal violence are frequently set in the suburbs, particularly from the 1990s onwards. These texts characterise violent male behaviour as a problem symptomatic of the locale, particularly outer suburbia (although inner suburbia can also produce problematic male subjects, such as neo-Nazi Hando (Russell Crowe) and his friends in *Romper Stomper*). Each of these films features men or adolescent boys who have few economic prospects. *The Boys* and *Snowtown* are the bleakest with regards to their protagonists' circumstances. The eponymous Sprague brothers of *The Boys*—Brett, Glenn and Stevie—are unemployed, uneducated and unmotivated. Brett Sprague (David Wenham) in particular has a history of aggression. The film begins the day that he is released from prison after serving time for aggravated assault. Brett whips up a violent, misogynistic discontent amongst his brothers—constantly moaning and belittling his siblings—and the day ends as they abduct a woman from a bus stop, with the implication that they rape and murder her. *Snowtown* is a similar story of male discontent and aggression. John Bunting harbours a visceral hatred for homosexuals and paedophiles, whom he sees as one and the same. John befriends Jamie Vlassakis (Lucas Pittaway), a sixteen-year-old teenager who has been sexually abused by his stepbrother and his mother's boyfriend. After winning the boy's trust, John gradually goads Jamie into increasingly violent acts. Together they torture and murder several residents of the working-class community of Salisbury North.

In both *The Boys* and *Snowtown*, socially disempowered men bond by victimising other people. Topographically removed from the urban centres of economic and political power, the suburbs become both symbol and cause of the protagonists' immobility. Albert Moran and Errol Vieth write that Australian films like these stress 'an inevitable and constraining environmentalism at work between its characters and its locations' (151). Suburbia seemingly yields little opportunity and stifles any aspiration these male characters may have. Philip Butters suggests that violent behaviour in such films is a form of 'protest masculinity', culminating in men's violence against each other, violence against women, and violence against themselves (109). The suburb thus operates as a literal and symbolic device that accounts for men's violence. As Fiona A. Vilella writes of *The Boys*: 'Here is an existence right in the heart of suburbia—the quiet streets, the brown-brick 3-room house, the car in the driveway—ruled by a cultural and existential void ... In this harrowing film, Rowan Woods has attributed violent behaviour primarily to a particularly suburban way of life rooted in a parochial, rough-n-tough Australianness' (n.p.). The suburbs literally trap men in disempowering, dead-end locales; they are also a metaphor for social immobility.

Suburban Mayhem, *Animal Kingdom* and *Hounds of Love* also link women's violence to suburbia. Through their respective plots, these films characterise homicide as an act that women perform when they want to maintain their domestic and familial power—something that is vitally important within the suburban world of each film. This strategy is particularly evident in *Hounds of Love*. As the narrative highlights, the primary reason why Evelyn is complicit in rape and murder is because it pleases John, and she is desperately afraid that he will leave her. Several scenes characterise Evelyn as highly dependent on her husband due to his abusive manipulation. She tells one of her victims that she has been with John since she was thirteen years old; a later sequence reveals that, whilst she has two children from another partnership (occurring when John and Evelyn separated for a time), John blackmails Evelyn by withholding his consent to have the children come live with them in their household. John, however, needs Evelyn. She is the one who befriends Vicki (Ashleigh Cummings), the young woman they kidnap at the start of the film. Evelyn's presence also reassures Vicki that the couple pose no danger—something John would likely not be able to do were he acting alone. While never excusing her behaviour, *Hounds of Love* thus emphasises that Evelyn's complicity in the murders secures her a modicum of power in her relationship with John.² In a similar vein, *Suburban Mayhem* and *Animal Kingdom* also position violence as a strategy that women use to maintain power in their relationships. In *Suburban Mayhem*, Katrina convinces an admirer to murder her father—and this allows her to retain custody of her daughter, Bailee. In *Animal Kingdom*, Smurf directly benefits from her family's criminal activities and is therefore invested in protecting them from prosecution: her sons have bought the family home using money from drug deals, and the house also serves as a hub for the Cody's activities. When Joshua seems to be on the verge of informing on the family, Smurf asks a corrupt police officer to assassinate the young man. In both these films, women's interpersonal violence stems from a protective impulse and desire to maintain the domestic power they have between themselves, their partners and children. For Evelyn, Katrina and Smurf, homicide is a solution to interpersonal problems.

The suburbs, as depicted in *Hounds of Love*, *Suburban Mayhem* and *Animal Kingdom*, offers symbolic rationalisation for this logic. These films characterise suburbia as a place that isolates its female inhabitants, leaving them with little options for escape or transformation. Indeed, the 'constraining environmentalism' that effects male protagonists in *Blackrock*, *The Boys* and *Snowtown* also effects women in *Suburban Mayhem*, *Animal Kingdom* and *Hounds of Love* (Moran and Vieth 151). Moran and Vieth write that such characters are defined by their

² *Hounds of Love* also contrasts Evelyn's choices with those of Vicki's mother Maggie (Susie Porter). Maggie has left her marriage to an affluent professional to start a new life—a personally and financially difficult decision for her. Her strength in doing so operates as a narrative foil to Evelyn, who completely fails to break free from John.

environment and are unable to transcend their circumstance: 'characters are discovered in these milieus at the beginning or early in a film and they are usually still there at the end of the film' (151). Survival therefore depends on adapting to the environment by whatever means necessary. Indeed, this idea is the central metaphor of *Animal Kingdom*; it surfaces during a conversation between Detective Nathan Leckie (Guy Pearce), one of the few honest policemen in the film, and Joshua. As Leckie says:

Everything knows its place in the scheme of things. Everything sits in the order somewhere. Things survive because they're strong, and everything reaches an understanding. But not everything survives because it's strong. Some creatures are weak, but they survive because they're being protected by the strong for one reason or another.

Looking to Joshua, he concludes: 'You've got to work out where you fit'. The metaphor implies that hierarchical power struggles, violence and clan loyalties define the world of *Animal Kingdom*. Survival of the fittest is the governing rule. For his part, Joshua survives Smurf's attempted assassination and realigns himself with the Cody family. Smurf returns to the role of domestic matriarch, albeit without the power that she had initially. In *Animal Kingdom*, as in *Suburban Mayhem* and *Hounds of Love*, suburbia is therefore a constraining environment where no external force—not even the law—can offer a means for escape. Stranded in the suburbs, women commit violence to maintain their domestic power in the absence of any alternative.

Affect and Suburban Aesthetics

So far, I have examined how the narratives of *Suburban Mayhem*, *Animal Kingdom* and *Hounds of Love* link violence to suburban isolation and the power struggles it creates. Yet Australian films about gender violence also infuse their depictions of suburbia with a strong mood and atmosphere, tones that underscore their explorations of brutality. *The Boys* and *Snowtown* present a desolate suburbia filmed in cool blues and greys; *Suburban Mayhem* brims with barely-contained renegade energy; *Hounds of Love* creates a hot, stifling portrait of suburban Perth. Such constructions have not gone unnoticed by critics. In her analysis of *The Boys*, Vilella identifies an intense despair woven into the film, its setting 'ruled by a cultural and existential void, monotony, emptiness, blandness, unfulfillment and discontent' (n.p.). Di Rosso makes a similar observation in his review of *Hounds of Love*, noting that the film 'hold[s] you in the nightmare' (n.p.). Yet while reviewers praise these films' affective qualities—their depressed and oppressed moods—scholars have yet to examine the role that affect plays in relation to gender violence.

Affect—the physical and psychological intensity of experience—is a key part of cinema language. As Vivian Sobchack writes, film is a sensory medium as well as a narrative one, involving what she calls ‘wild’ communication:

the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience. A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood. Objectively projected, visibly and audibly expressed before us, the film’s activity of seeing, hearing, and moving signifies in a pervasive, primary, and embodied language. (3-4)

Researchers have begun to apply this understanding of cinema as an affective phenomenon in analyses of Australian film. Describing what she calls ‘sensory-driven’ cinema, Claire Henry argues that texts such as *Samson and Delilah*, *Hail* (Amiel Courtin-Wilson 2011) and *Snowtown* depart from the pictorial tradition of the AFC-genre, offering ‘a different relationship to landscape—one that is based in affect as opposed to lyricism or the pastoral’ (268). For Henry, investigating these films’ overt sensuousness can provide a fresh perspective on Australian cultural output and create new frameworks for analysis. Gabrielle O’Brien advocates for a similar approach in her analysis of *Snowtown* and *Romper Stomper*, writing that ‘[b]oth films invite spectators to move away from the kind of viewing associated with conventional narrative dramas (based on representational features such as character and narrative development) and towards a more tactile, physical kind of contact’ with the film (67). Like Henry, O’Brien states that this approach can help appraise Australian cinema anew. Grady Hancock, too, makes this contention in her analysis of the ‘social realist’ genre. She argues that an investigation of cinema’s experiential dimensions can reveal much about how social realist films represent the world authentically: ‘affective moments’, she writes, ‘can, and do, relate to the more implicit social and political concerns’ of Australian cinema (185).

Such approaches offer a productive framework for reading gender violence in films like *Hounds of Love* and *Suburban Mayhem*, which both create a sensory viewing experience. In these Australian examples, affect—particularly the feelings of oppression, entrapment and aggression constructed through the *mise-en-scène*—play a central role in narrating the causes and forms of women’s violence. *Hounds of Love* creates a particularly strong affective quality. The film begins with a very slow-moving shot from the driver’s seat of a car. It shows a group of young women playing netball on a sun-drenched court. An atonal and throbbing soundtrack plays over the image, which cuts to close-up of the women’s arms, legs and hands in motion. An extreme close-up then reveals a pair of eyes—a woman’s and a man’s—as they pick off a solitary netball player who walks home along the

streets. It is the height of summer. The sequence has an expository function, establishing John and Evelyn as predators and young women as their targets. It also firmly locates suburbia as their sphere. The opening shot is also the first of several slow-motion sequences in *Hounds of Love* that halt the narrative and emphasise the suburban streets: trees, bitumen road, glaring concrete footpaths, tiled rooftops, brick houses, and a horizon that disappears into the beyond. The extreme slow-motion, filmed at high speed to capture the subject's movements in precise detail, estranges the location and lifestyle of the suburbs, making them uncanny. *Hounds of Love* also repeatedly bookends scenes with shots of the sky, particularly of aeroplanes flying over the houses. In such moments, the sky looks high and remote. The image creates a visual metaphor—the events of *Hounds of Love* seem to transpire in a lowly, forsaken place.

Such depictions do not merely locate the film in suburbia; they create a highly embodied viewing experience. The high sky dwarfs the onlooker, inviting an agoraphobic terror. The yellow light—a sign of the intense December heat—constructs a paradoxical, suffocating claustrophobia. The suburb seems too hot, vast and isolated to escape. Indeed, almost all of the film's action takes place in John and Evelyn's neighbourhood; there is literally nowhere else to go in the world of the film. Moreover, scenes within the domestic environment show John controlling Evelyn through manipulation and emotional blackmail, demanding a spotless home and abusing Evelyn when it is not perfect. Through such strategies, *Hounds of Love* conveys Evelyn's subjective experiences to the spectator. While she is doubtless a dangerous figure—and the plot never positions audiences to condone her actions—the film vividly communicates her suffocating existence. Though ostensibly free to leave, the world outside seems even more hostile, and Evelyn's solution is to endure. Under such conditions, violence happens.

Suburban Mayhem is another example of highly affective cinema, although its qualities are quite different to *Hounds of Love*. The film presents Golden Grove as an ugly and mundane place. For Katrina, however, it is not a prison. It is an arena in which to pursue the hedonistic pleasures of drinking, shoplifting and sex. Suburbia has a renegade, libidinous energy in *Suburban Mayhem*, and the film communicates this via several aesthetic strategies. Quick cut editing and lively performances play an important role, however, the soundtrack is a particularly vital component. The film begins with a rock version of Hoyt Axton's garage song 'Double Dare', covered by Australian musician Adalita Srsen, which plays over a flyover shot of half-acre blocks, brown brick houses, lawnmowers and driveways. The music is brash, rollicking and full of aggression. It arrests the spectator-listener and invites them to share the intensity of the music. A similar moment occurs during a montage of Katrina's many lovers (one for every letter of the alphabet, from 'Andy' to 'Wayno'). 'Sucker Love' by rock band Magic Dirt plays, and the track begins with Srsen singing:

I'm a sucker for your love, babe ...
 I'm a sucker for your love and I just can't get enough
 I'm a sucker for your love and I love to fuck it up.

Musical interludes like these in *Suburban Mayhem* invite a physical, bodily engagement from the spectator. As Thomas Elsaesser explains, in such moments: 'the artificial rhythm thus imposed (the film's "heartbeat") locks into the spectator's physiological disposition (the audience's "heartbeat")' (98). These stylistic choices suggest that Katrina is a woman defined by her suburban environment. Unlike Evelyn, however, she is not easily oppressed. *Suburban Mayhem* instead conveys the excitement Katrina experiences through her delinquency and, eventually, her violent struggle for dominance over her father.

Significantly, *Hounds of Love* and *Suburban Mayhem* also construct suburbia as an ahistorical and homogenous place, qualities implicated in the affect and violence they show. Both films bear historical markers—ubiquitous Nokia phones indicate a mid-2000s setting for *Suburban Mayhem*, and the costuming and props of *Hounds of Love* correspond to the 1980s. Yet in each, the plot and mise-en-scène give no impression of a past beyond the immediate circumstance of the story; they are films insistently focused on the present. This occurs predominately through a process of omission. Neither *Suburban Mayhem* nor *Hounds of Love* contain any reference to events prior to the immediate experience of characters in the film, or that of their parents'. Dianne (Genevieve Lemon), a neighbour of Katrina's in *Suburban Mayhem*, makes a passing reference to Katrina's mother, a similarly 'wild' woman who abandoned her children. Even *Hounds of Love*, which ostensibly takes place in the 1980s, does not use its settings for any specific purpose; it could easily be set in any other twentieth- or twenty-first-century decade (indeed, di Rosso describes the 1980s setting as 'a not particularly well remembered, slightly kitsch framing device' for the psychological drama (n.p.)). This temporal flatness echoes the physical homogeneity of suburbia. The opening flyover shot of *Suburban Mayhem* depicts Golden Grove as bland and undistinguished; it is instantly recognisable as the Australian suburbs but utterly unremarkable. As Leah Churchill-Brown observes: '*Suburban Mayhem* could have been filmed anywhere—it could have been Wollongong, it could have been Adelaide' (cited in Cuming and Scott 35). *Hounds of Love* contains similar establishing shots; as Paul Byrnes writes, '[m]en in stubbies and sideburns mow their lawns and wash their cars in endless rows of Australian suburban ugliness'³ (n.p.). Suburbia is therefore temporally and physically unmarked in these films. Such blankness underscores

³ The 'Australian ugliness' is a term coined by architect Robin Boyd in his 1960 book *The Australian Ugliness*. It refers to the then dominant aesthetic of Australian suburbia. For Boyd, this aesthetic is defined by 'Featurism'—useless and often kitsch ornamentation—and the use of building materials and designs inappropriate to the landscape and climate.

its inert, purgatorial quality—it is a place with no distinctiveness, no history and no future.

This representation of suburbia in *Hounds of Love* and *Suburban Mayhem* is not ideologically neutral. It imagines Australia as a place without history, heritage or identity prior to colonisation and the development of the land into half-acre blocks. Depictions of suburbia in *Hounds of Love* and *Suburban Mayhem* are therefore resistant to changes in how Australian film and television has represented place in recent decades. As Graeme Turner notes, suburbia in Australian media is no longer a strictly white, middle-class environment. Television programs such as *East West 101* (SBS, 2007-11), *Redfern Now* (ABC1, 2012) and *Sunshine* (SBS, 2017) and films such as *Floating Life* (Clara Law, 1996), *Head On* (Ana Kokkinos, 1998) and *The Home Song Stories* (Tony Ayres, 2007) depict a multicultural suburbia that includes both Indigenous and non-Anglo migrants. Turner writes that this 'new version of the suburb ... runs against the grain of the traditional conception of the suburb in the Australian national imaginary' ('Cosmopolitan' 569). Felicity Collins and Therese Davis make a related argument in their discussion of the Australian bush in cinema. After the Mabo 1992 and Wik 1996 decisions, Australian cinema began to acknowledge the land's history before white memory:

there is now a popular awareness that the continent has been written over by Indigenous languages, songlines, dreaming stories and Law for 40 000 years or more. Since the Mabo decision at least, the image of the outback landscape in cinema provokes recognition of historical amnesia (rather than an unknowable, sublime, interior void) as the founding structure of settler Australia's myths of belonging. (76)

Examples of such 'awareness' can be found in *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002) and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002). Films about interpersonal gender violence are therefore resistant to developments in Australian film and television's own multicultural conception of the land. Their depiction of suburbia as 'empty' constructs a compelling suburban 'forsakenness'. However, this ultimately requires the amnesia of the Eurocentric-colonial cultural memory.

Conclusion

In a feature article for the *Guardian*, Philip French offers a brief, simplified account of Australian cinema from the 1970s onwards. He writes:

The movies that initially made an international impact dealt with the shaping of national identity, cultural exchanges with the aboriginal population and the mystical relationship with the country and its vast,

empty interior ... But there has also been a different, parallel tradition about urban or, more particularly, suburban life, harsh demotic prose to the poetry of Weir, Schepisi, Beresford and Armstrong. (24)

Much of this 'parallel tradition' concerns class immobility, familial conflict and gender violence in Australian society. Correspondingly, Australian scholars have paid considerable exegetical attention to male violence within the national cinema (Butterss; Heller-Nicholas; Holland and O'Sullivan; O'Brien; Villella). Yet filmmakers have also depicted women in their 'demotic' tales. *Suburban Mayhem*, *Animal Kingdom* and *Hounds of Love* explore the feminine darkness at the heart of Australian life. The male larrikin is no longer the object of scrutiny in these films. The focus is instead on the women who conspire in, or initiate, brutal acts of their own.

This paper has followed *Suburban Mayhem*, *Animal Kingdom* and *Hounds of Love* into new critical territory. It has examined how these Australian films imagine women who commit violent acts of homicide. At first glance, *Suburban Mayhem*, *Animal Kingdom* and *Hounds of Love* seem to replicate Australian cinema's existing 'preoccupation' with interpersonal violence; before pursuing this point, however, I have argued that such films are shaped by industrial conditions and north-south relations. As an industry that is geographically removed from European and North American centres, Australian cinema can achieve international recognition by appealing to northern standards of excellence. Vivid depictions of interpersonal conflict attract attention and allow filmmakers to showcase their skill on the festival circuit. Indeed, the successes of AFC films like *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and *My Brilliant Career* in the 1970s compared to those of *Hounds of Love* and *Animal Kingdom* in the 2010s suggest that Australian cinema has responded to changing international taste. Whereas critics once favoured exotic antipodean landscapes, Australian brutality now makes a stronger impression.

While fulfilling such industrial imperatives, *Suburban Mayhem*, *Animal Kingdom* and *Hounds of Love* do also return to established themes in Australian cinema, particularly the interest in gender violence and suburbia. I have argued that the suburbs operate in two ways in *Suburban Mayhem*, *Animal Kingdom* and *Hounds of Love*. Firstly, they are a literal and symbolic explanation for women's homicidal acts. These films causally attribute women's violence to inescapable circumstances of place—a condition that the suburbs symbolise. Such locations fix women in familial formations, leading them to conspire to murder those who threaten their power (in the case of *Animal Kingdom* and *Suburban Mayhem*) or to maintain the fragile power they have (*Hounds of Love*). This is comparable to the male iteration, in which the suburbs represent a social immobility that produces aggressive 'protest' masculinity. Whether committed by men or women, violence is a product of Australian suburban dysfunction: its banality, isolation and danger.

The second way that the suburbs operate in relation to Australian gender violence is as a device that conveys the affective states that engender women's acts of homicide. Expressive depictions of the suburban environment communicate the oppression or excitement that lead to aggression in *Hounds of Love* and *Suburban Mayhem* respectively. Australian cinema thus imagines the origins of gender violence not only via narrative, but also through cinema's tonal dimensions. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith declares, 'Films mean. But they do not just mean' (16)—they also communicate in emotional and sensory ways. The psychic intensities and affective conditions that *Hounds of Love* and *Suburban Mayhem* create support their engagements with women's violence—aggression is, after all, a type of affect. While it is not always necessary to link a film's tone to its broader 'meaning', in *Hounds of Love* and *Suburban Mayhem*, tone does illuminate women's violence. The affective response that these films invite emulates the psychic and emotional conditions for Katrina and Evelyn's aggression. Suburbia ferments boredom, isolation and a sense of being trapped alongside men.

According to Holland and O'Sullivan, Australian cinema responds to the nation's status as 'a culture conditioned by its invader-settler past as well as the impact of its status as a penal colony' (79). While this formulation is perhaps a simplification, it is true that many Australian films are, to this day, undergirded by a conception of Australia as a forsaken place. In their suburban settings, *Hounds of Love*, *Animal Kingdom* and *Suburban Mayhem* imagine the nation as analogous to their female characters' domestic situation; at the bottom of the world, trapped in suburbia. The question going forward, then, is whether filmmakers will continue to invest in this image of the forsaken south, or instead find new ways to imagine Australian women's violence.

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