

## **Representations of Masculinity in Australian Cult Film**

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The question of diversity is of great importance in all areas of research. As a medium which reaches all sectors of society, diversity in cinematic representation is particularly interesting. This paper is a work in progress, as it remains to be supplemented by the interview responses from participants of a cult movie group in Sydney. These interviews seek to uncover views on the representation of masculinity in Australian cult film.

Traditionally, Australian films have not offered much of a variety in their representations of masculinity. In the media, discussions have taken place for the last 5 years about the confused state of men and 'troubled masculinity'. In order to combat this supposed 'confusion', it is vital that films reflect the diversity of masculinity in Australian society when representing men. This paper will feature a case study on the 1987 cult film, *Dogs In Space*, in which the kind of masculinity portrayed within the text will be discussed. Of the other cult films on the spectrum, *Dogs In Space* is one of the earliest examples of a range of masculinities being portrayed. This film and other cults reaffirm a comfortable space for different kinds of masculinities; that is, by showing a broad spectrum of masculinity on screen, men may feel more comfortable expressing feelings and identities in their own lives, so we can better understand contemporary masculinities.

Masculinity has been viewed historically as a cohesive way of being, rather than, as Robert Connell suggests, a performance with constant slippage. He states:

“We need to speak of ‘masculinities’, not masculinity. ... It is now abundantly clear that the Australian identity was not just constructed around the image of a man, but around the image of a white man and that race relations and racialised identities are of great importance in the enactment of masculinities. We can never again speak of ‘Australian masculinity’; there are multiple masculinities on the continent” (2003,14).

David Buchbinder notes that “texts seek to reproduce the dominant masculine as both a reflection of a particular social reality and as a model on which men in the culture may pattern themselves” (1998, ix). By denying difference, the dominant societal order can stay in place without question. The restrictive nature of traditional masculinity shows how diverse representations on screen are imperative to broadly acknowledge that in society it is normal for various enactments of masculinity to exist side by side.

In Australia, masculinity has been closely linked to ideas about national identity by theorists such as Grimshaw, Lake, McGrath and Quartly (1994). As a nation, we have no real solid, cohesive national identity, only those based in myth. National identity has always been conceptualised in terms of masculinity, thus men have been trapped into the rigid idea of how they should perform. Russel Ward believes:

“National character is not, as was once held something inherited; ... it is rather a people’s idea of itself and this stereotype, though often absurdly romanticised and exaggerated ... often modifies current events by colouring men’s ideas of how they ought ‘typically’ to behave” (1958, 1-2).

Although Ward was writing in 1958, many men are still striving to live up to these expectations, as well as new ones. In particular, Australia’s sporting culture, and the established patriarchy it represents, attempts to keep the stereotype in place in order to excuse bad behaviour (like the off season shenanigans of NRL football teams) as mere ‘larrikinism’.

Society as a whole is slowly coming to terms with the idea that there are multiple masculinities. Until fairly recently, Australian films have been preoccupied with representing an Australian masculinity befitting the stereotypes – a stoic, tough individual, often working on the land, unemotional, dependable, a larrikin or an ANZAC (Ward, 1958, 1-2). The kinds of film being presented, and by association, the kinds of masculinity being presented are closely linked to industry policy. In 1975 the industry was largely concerned with films that could be ‘the cultural flagships of the nation’ (Turner, 1999, 165) and were therefore largely dependant on national stereotypes. Since 1988, the industry has re focused on attempting to make commercial features. Graeme Turner suggests that:

“A consequence of this opportunistic, project-driven, and relatively low budget strategy was that explicit representations of the idea of ‘the national’ largely disappeared from Australian film, giving way to more contemporary stories unselfconsciously played out within Australian locations” (1999, 170).

Despite the change in policy, films that fall outside of the representation of hegemonic masculinity (such as *Bad Boy Bubby* and *Dogs In Space*) often fail to find a wide audience – one of the early indicators that a cult may form. It is then possible to locate the kinds of masculinities represented in Australian cult film on a spectrum – the spectrum of Australian masculinity. At the centre of this spectrum, we have this kind of ‘traditional’, hegemonic masculinity. To the right, we have what Connell (1995) has termed ‘hyper masculinity’, a dangerous, extreme and often violent performance of masculinity. To the left we have what I will call ‘alternative’ masculinities – sensitive men, queer men, abused men, confused men. In everyday society it is probable that this group would be closer to the centre than the fringe, but in terms of filmic representation, they have been branded as outsiders, and these films, cult.

The diverse nature of cult film itself allows for a kind of diversity in the types of masculinity which are portrayed. Danny Peary states: "When you speak of cult movies, you speak in extremes" (1981, xiii). The work of Mark Jancovich on cult film has been analysed extensively by other film scholars in recent years. In his 2002 article *Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Sub cultural Capital and the Production of Cultural Distinctions*, Jancovich discusses the notion of 'authenticity' and how he believes it is used as a device to distinguish who should be allowed to 'speak' about film. However, it is his point about defining cult film which is most relevant to this discussion.

"Indeed, the frequently stated problem of defining cult movies is precisely based on the fact that they are specifically defined according to a sub cultural ideology in which it is their supposed difference from the mainstream which is significant, rather than any unifying feature ... these distinctions are central to the complex operation of cultural competencies and dispositions within this field" (Jancovich, 2002, 308).

Here, Jancovich identifies one of the main difficulties in working with cult, that is, it is often identified not by what it is, but by what it is not. A problematic binary is created with the 'mainstream', as the 'mainstream' is not a cohesive monolithic structure, but like most things, subject to change. As Jeffrey Sconce (1995) notes, a constant battle for hegemony takes place, within the audience, over what is 'cult' and what is 'mainstream'. The binary that is created between cult/mainstream aims to situate the opposite as the 'other' in order for an oppositional identity to be formed.

Jancovich notes:

"This shared opposition to the 'commercial mainstream' is necessary to both camps because it presents them as standing in clear distinction to a conformist mass of viewers and allows them to present their own favoured films as defamiliarisations of the 'signifying practices' associated with the 'mainstream'" (2002, 310).

This point reminds us that a number of oppositions exist when discussing cult: cult/mainstream, high/low class/culture, good/bad taste. This is what also occurs with masculinity, as an opposition is created between masculinities, each is made to fight for prominence by those writers and directors and financiers who exert influence on the story.

In relation to Australian cult cinema, McFarlane, Mayer and Bertrand suggest:

“Since the renaissance of the Australian cinema in the early 1970’s, some filmmakers have produced works that have been embraced by certain film audiences, both in Australia and overseas and have been transformed into cult films. These films are in some way ‘on the edge’; they may be extreme works that are daring and creative, and perhaps perverse, overblown or excessive” (1999, 92).

Richard Lowenstein’s film *Dogs In Space* links both to this point about the audience’s embrace of cult films, and Jancovich’s point that it is cult film’s “definition according to a sub cultural ideology in which it is a supposed difference from the mainstream which is significant” (2002, 302).

Set in the punk scene in Melbourne in the late 1970’s, *Dogs In Space* shows how “cult films are products of elements of popular culture that may be considered unpleasant or repellent, but that are somehow fascinating” (McFarlane, Mayer, Bertrand, 1999, 92). Early in the film it becomes obvious that the house that most of the band members occupy is facing impending doom. The lifestyle that they live is presented as fairly repellent, with an incessant stream of characters coming through the house, living in squalor, and protagonist Sam’s (Michael Hutchence) increasingly erratic drug induced behaviour.

The longevity of *Dogs In Space* as a cult film can be found in the following explanation:

"The cult movie is memorable in its detail. Certain sequences, scenes or shots are outstanding in their tone, style and the emotion that is created. Eco contends that 'a cult movie is proof that ... cinema comes from cinema'. This indicates that cult movies contain a high level of intertextual reference and that these films are first and foremost, art works that exploit the cinematic form" (McFarlane, Mayer, Bertrand, 1999, 92).

The intertext in *Dogs in Space* lies in the references to issues of the time, most particularly Skylab falling back to Earth. This does not limit its appeal to an audience who remember these events, as certain themes such as friendship, love and living in a share house are universal.

Whilst not greatly concerned with plot, *Dogs In Space* captures a mood, a reflection on themes that most can relate to personally. In his article on *Dogs In Space* in *Senses of Cinema*, Tim Groves suggests that while *Pure S...* is:

"arguably a more significant [cult film] for its portrayal of inner city life, perhaps the importance of the film for contemporary audiences lies in our recollections ... *Dogs In Space* permits us to linger dreamily with the legend of our youth for a while" (2001, 2).

McFarlane, Mayer and Bertrand believe:

"Once again, [Lowenstein] is less concerned with individual stories than with creating an ambience ... he achieves an intense, fluid evocation of a squalid destructive lifestyle as the camera prowls through the overpopulated house where most of the action takes place. The film's incessantly pounding score insists on a kind of energy that is poignantly at odds with the lives of the affect less, stoned, despairing inhabitants of the house" (1999,118).

With its roots in the punk subculture, and its appeal to youth, *Dogs In Space* has certainly been embraced as a cult film, as supported by Groves and McFarlane. The performance of the late Michael Hutchence also adds to its legend. Since his death, he has taken on a somewhat iconic status, as the renewed interest in his life, subsequent books by his family members and former band, INXS indicates. His own lifestyle exemplified the 'live fast, die young, and leave a good looking corpse' of Hollywood icons and of the character he played. Perhaps this is another case of life imitating art.

As an Australian cult film, *Dogs In Space* offers a significant case study of masculinity. The main focus of the film is the relationship between Sam and Anna (Saskia Post). Although the occupants of the share house and its visitors are mostly male, it is noteworthy that none of them are typified as an 'average Australian male'. There is Sam, lead singer of Dogs In Space, who wanders around usually mumbling incoherently or jumping around maniacally while high; Tim, an electronics geek who is useless with women; Lucio, a serious engineering student contending with both exams and a pregnant one night stand; Grant, who cannot keep track of all of his conquests, and Tony, a hippy living in the house with his girlfriend. Various male visitors to the house also perform kinds of masculinity outside of the stereotypes. Chainsaw man, a man entranced with machinery is the only male approaching a kind of 'typical Australian hegemonic masculinity', however, his lunatic raves about his chainsaw obviously parody this kind of masculinity and he is presented as a freak, rather than the norm when compared to the other house mates.

The slippage of traditional male and female roles between Sam and Anna is noticeable from the first scene of the film. Most of the housemates and their friends are sleeping out for David Bowie tickets, and a young Noah Taylor makes a cameo as a fan. Immediately, a sense of nostalgia is evoked for the audience who were/are part of this subculture. The camera cuts to a speeding car of 'yobs' yelling obscenities at girls and speeding away recklessly. The yobs pull up at the David Bowie sleep out and start abusing Sam, who is canoodling with Anna and is totally oblivious to their taunts. The ringleader of the group accuses Sam of being gay, and when this barely

registers (Sam merely groans and rolls over, pulling the blanket over his head), the thug exits the car and approaches. It is intriguing that the clothing he wears would not be considered 'traditionally' 'manly' – high heeled platform boots and form fitting, flamboyant clothes. The director attempts to subvert audience expectations, as these clothes could even be read as signifiers of the thug's own homosexuality. The thug begins to kick Sam, shouting that he is a 'little poofter'. Sam remains on the ground, groaning, until Anna steps in to defend him, but she is pushed out of the way by the thug. Another girl approaches and smashes a bottle in his face and he falls to the ground. Anna hits another one of the thugs with a piece of wood. They retreat, swearing at the girls while Sam stays seated and pulls the cover around his head. The gang speeds off with the Goths and Punks throwing litter and their bodies at the car. Anna jumps back into Sam's arms and says "You, you were supposed to be protecting me!!". This line resonates throughout the entire film, right up to its tragic conclusion. Despite her tough exterior, Anna longs to be loved and protected by Sam, but he selfishly ignores her, to pursue his drug habit, which ultimately claim her life. In this instance, the kind of masculinity portrayed typifies what media commentators are calling 'masculinity in crisis', as they fail to take care of themselves or those around them.

In *Senses of Cinema*, Groves makes note that "the depiction of women [in *Dogs In Space*] is quite conventional" (2001, 2). However, from this first scene we can observe that traditional gender roles reverse and slip throughout – Sam's immaturity and the lack of responsibility of the others in the house means that Anna is not only a mother figure to all in the house, but a father as

well, particularly financially. She is the only one that works, she is the provider, and she stands up and defends Sam from thugs. Whilst living in the real world to a far greater extent than the other characters, she is "totally yielding to the lifestyle" (Pascho, 3) of the house, and her unconditional love for Sam leads to her demise. In the scenes where Anna takes heroin it is clear that she is trying to escape the reality of her desperate life with Sam. It is as if she knows that her love for Sam will be devastating in a telling scene with the Girl, a character who remains nameless and is adopted by the house after running away from home. The Girl asks how it feels to be in love, and Anna turns away and says "With that thing? Really frightening".

The initial scene where the group sleep out for tickets is indicative of the kind of masculinity Sam portrays throughout. He is often childlike and always seeks Anna's full attention in a pathetic manner. He usually achieves this by pulling her to the floor, to which she replies that he only cares about himself. This statement is self evident throughout. After the first party, the group stop at 7 Eleven and Anna buys food for everyone, making sure they all have what they want, like a protective mother. Later, whilst they eat at home she tells Sam that she has lost her job, while he barely listens and tries to steal cigarettes from her. His only concern is where his peanut butter will come from. Sam simply takes everything he wants from Anna without asking, or offering anything in return. This is clear in a successive scene where Anna is dressed for a job interview and Sam remains in the bath splashing water at her. Anna's attempt to better their situation is impossible for him to comprehend, he is only interested in whether she will attend his gig and apply his eyeliner. For men in the audience, the masculinity portrayed in *Dogs In*

*Space* is a cautionary example of the consequence of an environment of poverty and substance abuse.

Sam not only disregards Anna's feelings, but those of his fellow band members. He attacks the playing ability of Tim behind his back, and then barely manages to inform him that he has been dumped after the gig, in the most insensitive way. He has also managed to upset Anna by flirting with groupies to score speed. Later that night Anna takes heroin with him for the first time, to dull the pain of life. She has a bad reaction, and while Sam does take care of her, the next morning he groans when she has taken the day off work, making apparent how selfish he is. Groves states:

"The film moves gradually towards its inevitable tragic conclusion, yet it has little dramatic tension. Nor are the characters developed in depth. Rather, they exist on the surface Lowenstein creates, constantly moving, as if trying to avoid sustained interaction with people" (2001, 1).

It is far easier for the characters to carry on with their self destruction if they remain alienated from those around them. Sadly, Anna does not, leading her to heroin as an escape from reality, a reality in which men are portrayed as harmful and destructive to the lives of women.

Since Anna is a mother figure to him, when she is away, Sam feebly phones his mother to provide him with food. He barely acknowledges her attempts at conversation, as she feeds him, brings his washing and changes his bed linen. He eats his food and then dismisses her like another adoring groupie. This suggests that Sam is yet to acknowledge women as the equal of himself, a problem psychologist Anthony Clare (2001) believes to be widespread.

The only event which can shake the group from their malaise is the death of Anna, the matriarch of the house, which comes after another wild party. Anna returns towards the end of the party, as she had witnessed Sam kissing the Girl, and left in a rage. Sam and Anna take heroin together, and we see her in a dream like sequence farewelling the other housemates, before being whisked away by the now successful Sam, in a limousine. The final sequence of Anna's funeral is intercut with Sam performing in a video clip. We can see this song as his tribute to her, her death is the catalyst for his success. Anna's death is her final sacrifice to Sam and the subsequent devastation felt by him and the housemates, awakens them to harsh reality. They are evicted from the house as the police can no longer ignore the illegal activity taking place. The emotion evident in Sam's performance has made him a success, while Anna paid for her love for Sam with her life.

From this examination of *Dogs In Space*, we can recognise a number of significant findings about cult film and the representation of masculinity within. *Dogs In Space* has achieved cult status as a nostalgic look at the influential punk subculture. The existence of cult films on the fringe and of cult fans comprising a similar subculture allows for an alternative representation of gender which may not be seen in more commercial films. Diversity is an extremely important part of any representation. With my forthcoming interviews of cult fans, I hope to further support the points put forth here and gain a greater understanding of the allure of cult film and the spectrum of Australian masculinity.

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