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The Suburban Australian Gothic in *Lake Mungo* and *Beautiful*

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New Australian Gothic Cinema does not find its stylistic and narrative tendencies in the conventions of the explicitly supernatural or romantic past, but rather in the simplicity of daily routine. New Australian Gothic Cinema is the realm of parody, sarcasm, caricature, malevolence, self-doubt and the irrational, and moreover, is frightening as a result of (rather than in spite of) its proximity to the ordinary. (Thomas and Gillard, 2003: 44)

The brand of horror cinema labelled Australian Gothic has traditionally focused on manifestations of the uncanny, the convergence of the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the ‘stubborn bias’ of the normal ‘towards the perverse, the grotesque, the malevolent’ (Dermody and Jacka, 1988: 51). One stereotypical register of Australian Gothic, in films such as *Long Weekend* (Colin Eggleston, 1978), *Razorback* (Russell Mulcahy, 1984) and *Primal* (Josh Reed, 2010), has been the horror in, of and emanating from the natural landscape, in forms of the eerie and the abject connected intimately with the unfathomability and inhospitability of the Australian environment and fauna themselves. A complementary form of the Gothic, in films such as *Heat Wave* (Phillip Noyce, 1982), *Goodbye Paradise* (Carl Schultz, 1983) and *Georgia* (Ben Lewin, 1988), has explored the occurrence of arbitrary malice, violence and conspiracy in human environments. These films have portrayed persistent and unpunished wrongdoing as an unavoidable characteristic of urban living, and thus have evoked comparisons with American film noir. Social commentary and black comedy exposing the fashionable hypocrisies and pettiness of suburban Australia have also entered the Gothic canon, in examples like *The Night The Prowler* (Jim Sharman, 1978) which satirises the vacuities of self-regarding bourgeois existence, and *Body Melt* (Philip Brophy, 1993), which lampoons the obsessive body-consciousness and fitness fanaticism of insipid suburbanites. These films’ judgemental perspective on suburbia and its inhabitants anticipates more mainstream, ‘feel-good’ fare such as *Muriel’s Wedding* (P.J. Hogan, 1994), and its ‘unyielding gaze at the ghastliness, the “muckiness” of suburban family life’ (Martin, 1995: 32).

Noting these varied precedents suggests that the definition of a horror cinema of and about the suburban itself, as living space, life style or characterisation of community, requires further elaboration within Australian filmmaking. Representations of suburbia in American cinema have frequently evinced strong generic bases. Melodrama has provided the articulating framework for the exploration of punitive social mores (*All That Heaven Allows*: Douglas Sirk, 1955), the explosive nuclear family in the Cold War (*Bigger Than Life*: Nicholas Ray, 1956), and the dissatisfactions of affluence in the counter-cultural era (*The Graduate*: Mike Nichols, 1967). Self-conscious updates of Sirk's and Ray's contemporary films have expanded their critiques to examine social tensions related to gender identity and race (*Far From Heaven*: Todd Haynes, 2002), second-wave feminism (*Revolutionary Road*: Sam Mendes, 2008), and crises in post-feminist patriarchy (*American Beauty*: Sam Mendes, 1999). Horror has delivered conservative and castigatory portrayals of teenage sexuality (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*: Wes Craven, 1984), satiric depictions of Eisenhower-era consumerism (*Parents*: Bob Balaban, 1989), and apocalyptic explorations of adolescent alienation (*Donnie Darko*: Richard Kelly, 2001). The challenge for Australian Gothic films has been to reflect the influence of popular American cinematic precedents, while rendering a comparable but specifically Australian response to and representation of suburbia. Perhaps the most popular Australian horror film of recent years *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014), deliberately obscured national signifiers of place and accent to achieve international success. By contrast *Lake Mungo* (Joel Anderson, 2008) and *Beautiful* (Dean O'Flaherty, 2009) can be seen to adopt and mobilise the tropes and traits of both American and Australian horror in their scrutiny of suburban existence while at the same time, and in keeping with wider categorisations and interpretations of the Gothic, maintaining a focus on 'the small, yet consistent flow of malevolence and disorder that is never far from the surface in Australian productions' (Thomas and Gillard, 2003: 36).

***Lake Mungo*: 'the saddest thing'**

Joel Anderson's feature film debut assumes the registers of news report footage, video recording, and digital and phone-camera images in order to probe a series of supernatural incidents occurring in and around the town of Ararat. *Lake Mungo*'s pseudo-documentary form fits within the pattern of 'found footage' horror exemplified by *The Blair Witch Project*

(Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999), while its gradual revelation of a teenage daughter's dual life evokes comparison with *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch and Mark Frost, 1990-91). A disingenuous opening title presents the film as a documentary:

In December 2005, a tragic accident began a series of extraordinary events that thrust a grieving family and the small Victorian town of Ararat into the media spotlight. This film is a record of those events.

This adoptive form legitimises the gradual and piecemeal exploration of events through interviews conducted with the participants and observers, after the manner of a journalistic investigation. The concentration upon family tragedy and revelatory, external scrutiny is established by the scenes which follow the opening title, in which blurred and muted home movie images are succeeded by a recording of an emergency phone call and news footage of a night-time search operation following the disappearance of Alice Palmer (Talia Zucker) while picnicking at a lake near her home. The aftermath of the teenager's death by drowning is represented through stereotypical news coverage (images of the search, a statement from a police spokeswoman, reporting of the recovery of a body, and friends offering clichéd descriptions of Alice at her funeral service) suggestive of the homogenised circulation of familial suffering for general consumption. However, this reduction of Alice's death to a series of overly-familiar images, some of which recur later for reappraisal, underlines the film's thematic focus on the creation and interpretation (and often the re- and mis-interpretation) of still and moving pictures as manipulable, evaluative and talismanic artefacts.

Before the documentary title and the scenes of news footage, the film opens with a series of cross-faded nineteenth-century black and white photographs. Accompanying these pictures are comments from unidentified speakers in voice-over (these are subsequently revealed to be excerpts from interviews with Alice's family and friends which form integral parts of the documentary). An emphasis upon the narrative significance, and interpretative and emotional burden of photographs is discernible in many Australian Gothic films, such as *Summerfield* (Ken Hannam, 1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975) and *Cassandra* (Colin Eggleston, 1987). Despite their eternal safeguarding and ceaseless inspection in these films,

the hoarded photographs do not and cannot explain a narrative or contain or reflect the lives of their subjects. Their stillness and framed-ness, and their compulsive keeping indicate their artifice rather than their realism, their standing as symbols of loss rather than preservation, and their misappropriation and misinterpretation as objects of obsession rather than knowledge. While the photographs accompanying the opening credits of *Lake Mungo* bear no direct relation to the film's narrative, their relevance lies in their analogy to many of the image-making and –reading activities subsequently undertaken within it, since the closing credits reveal these pictures to be examples of late nineteenth and early twentieth century photographic experiments in recording the presence of ghosts.¹

Following Alice's death, the Palmer family home becomes a site of supernatural disruption. Noises and movements in the house at night are at first addressed in a prosaic, domestic fashion, with Alice's dad Russell (David Pledger) rehangng his daughter's bedroom door and calling in pest control. Alice's mum June (Rosie Traynor) begins to have vivid nightmares in which her daughter, still dripping with water, walks through the house and stands at the foot of her parents' bed. Through her recollections in interview, it seems June suffers a nervous breakdown after her daughter's death. However, when Russell (who had wanted to 'get on with' life and had buried himself in work), becomes distraught after encountering Alice's ghost in her bedroom, the family begins to explore several avenues to account for Alice's reappearance. After the image of Alice is seen in photos taken after her death, in pictures of the family home's back yard taken by her brother Mathew (Martin Sharpe) and in video footage shot near the lake where she drowned, Alice's body is exhumed to remove the possibility she was misidentified by Russell. Mathew sets up video cameras to record inside the house at night and June contacts a professional psychic and medium, Ray Kemeney (Steve Jodrell).

The viewing and re-viewing of photographs and videos taken by Mathew and others initially suggests that a supernatural explanation for events is plausible, if not inevitable. Although the film's narration is linear, and therefore the family's and audience's interpretation of the images is gradual and sequential, the pseudo-documentary format acknowledges a retrospective positioning, and therefore implies a final, complete knowledge and understanding will be reached. As each inexplicable event takes place (for example, discerning Alice's ghost inside the house on Mathew's video footage) the persuasive supernatural explanation is at first accepted and then countered by further rationalising

revelations (such as Mathew's confession that he faked the video footage and backyard photos). Therefore, while its narrative unfolds, *Lake Mungo* seems to fulfil the conditions of the fantastic text, as the family and the viewer hesitate between selecting rational or supernatural explanations, and accepting or rejecting the apparent shift in natural laws (Todorov, 1975: 25, 33).

The intra- and extra-diegetic hesitation between rational and supernatural accounts which defines the fantastic text is marked in *Lake Mungo* by a prosaic cynicism linked to its suburban setting. In interview Ray Kemeney admits the pragmatic and predatory aspects of his work with the ill and bereaved, offering them 'the possibility that death is not the bitter end... a consolation which I'm quite happy to give them considering the fact that what happens after death is up for grabs anyway.' Russell reacts with scepticism to Ray's staged and unproductive séance, and Ray shamelessly admits to being in unfamiliar territory when viewing Mathew's video footage, since he has never actually 'seen a ghost before.' Ironically, it is Ray's self-protective instincts (recording all his sessions using hypnotism to avoid future law suits) which reveal the occurrence of genuinely supernatural and extra-sensory episodes. After his confession, Mathew expresses no motive or excuse for his falsification of the images of Alice beyond the quasi-psychological justification that it improved the 'mood' in the house by providing something for the family to 'focus on.' This oblique dismissal of his actions (while evidencing the family's and Mathew's own need for therapeutic support), introduces the penultimate section of the film in which an introspective and analytical treatment of the family's relationships takes place.

While Mathew departs on a beneficial road trip with Ray, June reconsiders her family's past, her mother's reserved nature, and her own diffidence towards Alice. Her reflections are heard in voice-over alongside falsely-smiling family photos of all three women, and home-movie images distanced by slow-motion: 'I hope that Alice did know how much I loved her...I guess I held something back a little as she grew older. That would be the saddest thing, to think she might not know.' Acknowledgement of detachment and secrecy within the family is followed by Mathew's camera, continuing to film inside the home in his absence, capturing the intrusion of the Palmers' neighbour Brett Toohey (for whom Alice had worked as a babysitter) in Alice's bedroom, attempting to recover an incriminating sex tape. The excerpts from this recording inside another middle-class home included in the documentary introduce different forms of hesitation and uncertainty: Alice's parents are forced to wonder whether

the filming was covert, and whether the act was consensual. This sordid suburban episode is interpreted by Russell as being instrumental in Alice's withdrawal from her parents in adolescence: literally in her secretiveness, and even figuratively in her death. Additional revelations (about Alice consulting Ray several months before her death, and the discovery of her 'most precious things' buried on a school trip to Lake Mungo), produce a final convergence between the suburban and supernatural, and the twinned mysteries of adolescence and the uncanny. The viewing of Alice's own mobile phone footage (pointedly interred and therefore intended not to be seen) and the 'confidential' footage of her hypnosis sessions with Ray reveal a series of supernatural and prophetic events, in which she describes her dreams (including one identical to June's described earlier, in which she plays the reciprocal role) and seems to encounter her own ghost, the image of her drowned corpse as identified by Russell, four months before her death. Therefore the 'burden' of secrecy Alice carried was not (only) based on adolescent alienation or sexual shame, but horrific intimations of her own mortality.

Paradoxically, the confirmation of the presence of the supernatural (in conceding that the image on Alice's phone can have 'no rational explanation'), and therefore the progression of the film from the hesitation of the fantastic to the acceptance of the marvellous (Todorov, 1975: 41), ends the family's distressing investigation. After the return home from Lake Mungo, the Palmers begin to they 'feel like a family again': a montage of everyday scenes shows the family going on picnics again, spectating at sports events, Mathew socialising with girls, and Russell working in his garage. In June's words, the house was now 'calm.' In an ambiguous comment that seems to merge the living, secretive daughter and the dead, haunting Alice, June reflects: 'It seemed strange to me that Allie should withdraw so abruptly. I mean, we didn't help her, we didn't change anything. I think we just collectively made a decision to move forward.' Having found 'peace' and 'closure', Russell, June and Mathew pack up and move away. June's last walk around the empty house is intercut with visual and audio recordings of June's and Alice's consultations with Ray. Under hypnosis, June describes entering the family home and walking to Alice's room. With a cut to the interior of the empty house, June's voice is replaced by Alice's under hypnosis: 'Someone's there. I think someone's coming down the hall. It's my mum – I don't think she knows I'm there. She's leaving.' A cut back to June in Alice's empty room shows her declaring: 'Alice isn't here.' As June exits the room and the family leave for the last time, Alice's voice

(echoing the account from the consultation but apparently now present, and unmediated) comments sadly: ‘She’s going now. She’s leaving the room.’

These final scenes, and images in the final credits assert the existence (and continuing presence) of Alice’s ghost in the photos and family environments we have already seen. The recurrence at this point of a family photo seen near the start of the film (now understood as a final photo taken when they move out) is altered by a slow zoom in to reveal Alice’s figure in the darkened window in the background. With their departure, the surviving family members have not so much accepted the supernatural as become contemptuously familiar with it. In being content in their own therapeutic process and cure for grief, they appear to have become insensible to Alice’s continued presence, and pain. The last examples of the pictures which have been subjected to endless scrutiny are (re)interpreted by the viewer, not the family, and remain tied to the home the rest of the family has left. Finally, the ‘saddest thing’ is not that a teenage daughter died in a needless accident, that members of her family were ignorant of the sinister aspects of her life while she was alive, or even that they were distressed by subsequent, supernatural events, but that their ‘Allie’ is shown to be as unknown in life as she is abandoned in death, and in the afterlife. Thus the departure from the suburban home marks the family’s final oblivious recovery, and Alice’s ultimate loss.

Beautiful: ‘sometimes girls leave’

Every innocuous movement is made suspicious, every suburban commonplace menacing. The suburban haven, away from the dangers of the city, not only fails to protect its children, it has become the breeding ground of living nightmares unknown to urban landscapes. (Gill, 2002: 16)

Australia Gothic is frequently located within the rural environment, the isolated and empty interior, the unacknowledged landscape beyond a contemporary metropolitan vision, outside (and opposite to) the urbanised, domesticated, and populated Australian cityscapes on the peripheries of the continent. Yet characterisations of American horror have located the worst, most secretive and corrosive horrors within the confines of the normal, the urban and

familial – the uncanny literalised as Freud’s the *unheimlich*. This suspicion of the unseemly and immoral existing behind the door of the family home connects with the dissatisfaction which accrues around the surface contentment and material comfort of the suburban environment. If the suburban existence is understood as the distinction of affluence, exclusivity, and social and physical mobility away from urban spaces characterised by decay and criminality, then the recognition of depravity within the suburban space concretises the fear that there are no significant differences between human habitations, or their inhabitants. Dean O’Flaherty’s *Beautiful* foregrounds twinned suburban anxieties, of both the intrusion of violence into an exclusive and safe suburban space, and of the pre-existence of depravity within and perpetrated by the suburban community itself. Fittingly, as a depiction of anxiety, repression and release, the narrative of *Beautiful* is punctuated by accusations, speculations and dreams, and takes place in a deliberately defamiliarised setting.

The Australian suburban environment portrayed in *Beautiful* appears equally emphasized and disguised. In a way reminiscent of the indefinite era (combining contemporary and old-fashioned popular cultural references) in which events unfold in *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), the middle-class neighbourhood in *Beautiful* appears to straddle indeterminate and nostalgic zones. Danny (Sebastian Gregory) uses a 35mm SLR camera and rides a Chopper bike from the 1970s, yet his room is adorned with posters for American horror films of the 1980s, and Suzy watches 1980s INXS music videos. Teenagers with Australian accents are seen playing both basketball and cricket, while Danny’s stepmother Sherrie (Peta Wilson) owns a left-hand-drive American car. If, as its director claims, ‘*Beautiful* is not a real world’ (Flanagan, 2009: 56), it nonetheless appears to evoke comparison with or actively allude to numerous preceding (American) cinematic worlds. Rjurik Davidson remarks that:

Beautiful’s avowed influences include *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999), and *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), all of which share a particular view of the suburbs as nightmare [...] It is not truly surrealist in the sense that logic is highly symbolic or that quotidian logic breaks down. Rather *Beautiful*’s world is disorienting rather than hallucinatory. (Davidson, 2009: 51-52)

Likewise Sandra Hall suggests *Disturbia* (D.J. Caruso, 2007), itself indebted to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) is another possible source for O'Flaherty's film (Hall 2009). The director admitted to wishing to invoke the 'timelessness' of *Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton, 1990), and to the selection of suburban Adelaide locations being made 'because they looked European/American' (Flanagan, 2009: 56). The apparent existence of *Beautiful*'s suburban environment and community in a temporal and spatial bubble distinguishes this indeterminate Australian suburbia from the specific historical and cultural understanding of the American suburb as marker of ethnic and economic difference, and as mythic, antagonistic opposite to the urban environment (McDonogh, 2006: 473-75).

Beautiful begins with predictable images of female vulnerability, redolent of the teenage slasher film. A uniformed adolescent school girl is seen travelling alone on a bus at night time. When she gets off at a lonely stop and walks home along dark, tree-lined streets, she appears to be followed by a large black car. These brief scenes are followed the film's framing device, a voice-over from Mrs Thomson (Deborah-Lee Furness), reminiscent of the introductory narration to episodes of *Desperate Housewives* (Marc Cherry, 2004-12). She describes how the calm and beauty of her suburban environment disguises its underlying atmosphere of endangerment and criminality:

When people visit Sunshine Hills they comment on the beauty and serenity. What they don't talk about is the raw fear that resides in our eyes. I recall the exact moment that our fear was born. It started when the teenage girls in our neighbourhood were being abducted. And Number 46, the bad house, with an equally dubious history of rape and murder [...] Amanda Howatt was the most recent girl to disappear. She remains missing, and each day that passes, our fear intensifies.

Initially accompanying sunny, idyllic scenes of green, well-tended gardens and children playing on quiet roads, Mrs Thomson's narration appears to conjure up expository flashbacks depicting or suggesting the fates of the abducted girls. (However, the last scene in this sequence is an enigmatic glimpse of a screaming man, with a pistol pressed to his temple). The prominent subjective and unsubstantiated nature of these images and her assertions ('I

heard that they found Jenny's body in a dumpster at the back of a local supermarket' [...] neighbours say they saw her getting into a black car') is significant, as the investigative narrative dominating the remainder of the film underlines (as in *Lake Mungo*) the dubiety of perception and ambiguity of images. Mrs Thomson's narration follows the fleeting slasher-film introduction, and is itself succeeded by objectifying images of her own daughter Suzy (Tahyna Tozzi). Suzy lies on a sun lounger in a swim suit on the front lawn in a deliberate, coquettish display for her younger neighbour Danny, who observes and photographs Suzy covertly. Mrs Thomson's self-conscious, salacious narration thus connects several interlinked, sexualised female objectifications, merging her own prurient gossip with fetishistic representations of adolescent femininity.

Danny's voyeuristic activity extends to curious observation of his stepmother applying make-up, and eventually, under Suzy's seductive coercion, investigation of the mysterious, sad woman who watches from the window of 'Number 46.' Danny's fascination with these taboo female presences is stimulated not simply by nascent adolescent sexuality but by the mystery surrounding his mother. His policeman father Alan (Aaron Jeffery) has never revealed her identity, or why she abandoned Danny fourteen years ago. When his parents are out, Danny uncovers a hoard of family photographs in their bedroom drawer, all of them apparently torn to remove the image of his mother. In one of these pictures he notices a charm bracelet, which later he seems to recognise as belonging to Jennifer (Asher Keddie), the woman at Number 46. Danny's susceptibility to Suzy's sexual manipulation is, however, contextualised within a pattern of aberrant, voyeuristic, latently violent and misogynistic behaviour connecting virtually all the male characters within the film. Suzy's father, like Danny's, subscribes to a lurid magazine, 'The Police Quarterly', which publishes sensationalised, illustrated accounts of violent and sexual crimes. While searching for her father's magazines (in order to identify the unknown male who lives at Number 46), Suzy and Danny also come across his stash of copies of *Hustler*. Ambiguously, Alan is shown in a brief scene watching prostitutes on an urban street corner from his police car. (Her suspicions about Alan's violent and secretive nature lead Sherrie to abort an unplanned pregnancy). Observing a teenage neighbour being escorted to her family car, Suzy whispers to Danny: 'That's the Dispina family. The oldest daughter Sofia told me last year that the father wouldn't leave them alone, if you know what I mean.' Having already encouraged Danny to see and speak to Jennifer, Suzy now persuades him to attempt to get inside Number 46, and to 'get some secrets' by 'sneaking around the houses' as well. With this wider license for voyeurism, Danny traverses

the neighbourhood, observing the Dispina family again, spying on a middle-class couple's sex games, seeing an elderly man calmly viewing a violent pornographic film, and watching a woman ironing in the nude. This Lynch-like revelation of the private sexual life of a neighbourhood where 'voyeurism is contagious' and suburbia becomes 'synonymous with exotica' (Hall, 2009) ends with Danny also seeing Suzy dancing provocatively in front of a window, to her mother's annoyance and alarm.

This dispassionate exposure of the pervasive, hidden deviance within the suburban environment contrasts with an exaggerated, self-conscious sequence visualising the stories of 'The Police Quarterly.' As Suzy and Danny search her father's magazines for a photo of the man living with Jennifer, the unmotivated sound of a film projector intrudes and a rapidly edited, grainy black-and-white sequence of images and typed excerpts unfolds, including identity parades and crime scene details from the magazine. The sequence ends with the discovery that Max Forster (Socratis Otto) is sexual offender arrested in 1980, which leads Suzy to conclude that Max is the abductor of the missing girls, and that Jennifer is being held against her will. Emboldened by this information, Danny visits the house to confront Jennifer with their suspicions and offer to help her escape. Although she refutes all their allegations as lies and urban legends, Jennifer does offer a more mundane explanation for the girls' disappearances: 'The only thing that's true is that sometimes girls leave. Sometimes they run away.' This seemingly personal confession, and his recognition of the charm bracelet, lead Danny to believe Jennifer is the mother who abandoned him.

Danny's conflicting relationships and responses (encompassing curiosity, guilt, desire and resentment) to the female presences around him precipitate subjective dream sequences which explore these only partially understood and articulated emotions. After his conversation with Jennifer, he dreams of Max abducting Suzy in his black car, while he and Jennifer look on smiling and laughing. In a deleted scene, he imagines Suzy and the missing girls (appearing as ghosts with grey flesh, bearing livid wounds and autopsy scars) dancing in the night time streets before him. When he returns to Number 46 to find Suzy (after her apparent kidnapping by Max) the interconnected strands of his voyeurism and emotional vulnerability converge, in his desire rescue Suzy, regain his mother and solve the mystery of the missing schoolgirls. However, his investigative intervention (after the manner of *Summerfield*) precipitates more trauma than it uncovers truth. Arriving at the scene after

Danny has accidentally shot and killed Max and Jennifer, Alan assures him that Jennifer was not his mother since she died when he was a baby. To cover up his son's involvement in the shooting, and possibly in finally accepting his own guilt (for hiding the truth from Danny or perhaps, as a glimpsed flashback to the screaming man in the first sequence implies, for being implicated in his mother's death after all), Alan takes his own life. As he flees to his own home, Danny sees Suzy being returned to her parents from his original voyeur's vantage point. It becomes obvious that Suzy staged her apparent abduction as a final act of manipulation, and she smirks when she sees him watching her. Not only has Danny's preferred speculative narrative proved incorrect, but Suzy's has been revealed to be exploitative falsification, akin to (and perhaps even a source of) her mother's gossip and urban myths. Disabused of the fantasy about his mother and cured of his desire for Suzy, Danny leaves Sunshine Hills at the film's conclusion, driving away in the care of Sherrie through the same deceptively ordered suburban environment seen in the opening sequence.

Conclusion

Closure is partial, a sense of loss remains (Botting, 1996: 134)

Lake Mungo and *Beautiful* adopt and adapt the characteristics and approaches of popular American films set in suburbia in applying aspects of the Gothic to portrayals of the Australian suburban environment. Although *Beautiful* appears to obscure some of its geographical or cultural specificity, its resemblance to obsessive, detrimental investigative narratives such as *Summerfield* and *Georgia* justifies its categorisation within the Australian Gothic. Similarly, despite its comparability to American found-footage horror, *Lake Mungo* exhibits a Gothic concentration on the uncanny landscapes (both natural exteriors and familial interiors) and domestic deviance in common with Australian Gothic conventions. Both films also explore connections in gender representation with the literary Gothic, in the characterisation Alice, Jennifer and the missing schoolgirls within the model of 'the Gothic heroine, passive and persecuted [and] presented as an image of loss and suffering' (Botting, 1996: 131). The chaste, ethereal and unattainable Jennifer shares her costume of a plain white dress with the abused Dispina daughters and the ghosts of the disappeared girls, all

apparently objects and victims of violent and harmful male desire. At the same time, the equally stereotyped destructive temptress incarnated by Suzy becomes a figure of contempt for her manipulative performance of sexual desirability and vulnerability. Allied to both films' over-arching emphasis upon voyeurism and the visual image, and specifically an invasive, investigative gaze upon a female object defined by enigmatic pain and irrecoverable loss, these restrictive feminine representations perhaps evince as much as they critique pervasive misogynistic attitudes. Criticism of the characterisation of Suzy as no more than 'the cliché of the vampish, teenaged, femme fatale' and 'simply a puerile male fantasy-fear' (Davidson, 2009: 52) disregards the appositeness of this equally desired and denigrated imaginary object, incarnated within a dream-like suburban adolescence.

In *Beautiful*, the Gothic suburb becomes a psycho-analytical stage (in both senses: as developmental interlude and as performative arena) in which phases of identity formation (injurious as well as instructive) are seen to take place. The film's geographical, cultural and temporal indefiniteness, allied to its emphasis upon the subjective and the oneiric, mean that its events occupy a commonplace environment and 'quotidian logic', albeit embellished by the narrational perspectives of Suzy, Mrs Thomson and Danny. While Danny can and must leave this environment, under the guardianship of Sherrie, his last view of Suzy, reclining on the sun lounger in an exact echo of her first appearance, suggests both a consignment of her to mature memory and the continuation of the suburban fantasy life to which she contributed. The last views and sounds of Sunshine Hills partner the closing narration of Mrs Thomson's voice-over, as in an echo of Jennifer's isolation she looks out on the street from a shrouded window. Her voice-over asserts her continued centrality to the life of the neighbourhood, as she begins embroidering new extravagant gossip, facilitated by her daughter's deceptions. Closure in *Beautiful* is therefore contingent upon the persistence of fantasy life, in retrospection for Danny (redolent of his photographic voyeurism, but perhaps also therefore explaining the film's nostalgic temporal placement) and in the perpetuation of suburban mythic narratives by contemptible female characters.

In *Lake Mungo*, the Gothic suburb becomes a site of supernatural horror, attuned sociologically and culturally to middle-class diffidence and detachment. The 'closure' in jargonistic, therapeutic terms welcomed by the surviving family members is poignantly distinguished from the reassurance of narrative conclusion, since the film's last scenes and

final images affirm the melancholy presence of Alice's ghost. The persistence of Alice's spirit, confirmed but contained by photographs of the past and apparently restricted to the environs of the family home, reasserts the sociological and familial significance of this suburban Gothic narrative: Alice always was and now will always remain an absent presence to her closest relations. Even the proof of the obsessively studied photographic images cannot overcome the family's ignorance and, ultimately, indifference to their daughter and sibling. Although evoking comparison with more simple, horrific found-footage spectacle in American cinema, *Lake Mungo* mobilises the potential of the ghost story to explore the 'contrast between narrow reality and lost, metaphysical dimensions' (Botting, 1996: 124), and the gulfs between individuals divided by generation, gender and experience. In accommodating influences and precedents from American horror cinema, and adapting aspects of an enduring Gothic filmic tradition to the representation of the Australian suburb, *Beautiful* and *Lake Mungo* evince the pertinence of Australian Gothic motifs to other than natural settings, and the articulate hybridity of the Gothic in negotiating 'its own meaning through its relationship with the wider socio-cultural landscape' (Thomas and Gillard, 2003: 39).

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¹ The photographs used in the opening credits sequence are identified as being taken from the Barlow Collection held in the British Library:

<<http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/prbooks/namedcolnprintedmat/namedcolnprintedmatb/namedcolnprintedmatb.html>> (accessed 28 April 2015).