

## “Social Values in Australian Film”

*“Social Values in Australian Film” is an essay written by Loren Crawford exploring the notion of social values in film texts and more specifically in Gillian Armstrong’s 1988 film ‘High Tide’ and Steve Jodrell’s 1987 film ‘Shame’. This piece pays attention to the values that are reflected within the film and within the production period; specifically feminist values, the focus on the notion of ‘Australian identity’ and family values.*

*Furthermore, this paper takes into account the existence of these reflected values within Australian society within the decade of production (1980’s). This essay discusses selected representations (characters, settings, etc.) from the relevant films and their role in projecting the social values within the film and of the time. Moreover, this essay is an analysis of the way in which audiences are engaged and respond to values reflected within the films of discussion and the manner in which this influences their response. Finally, this essay explains the extent to which the text supports or challenges the relevant social values.*

Quoting the notable paper ‘The Death of the Author’ (1977) of French philosopher and literary theorist Roland Barthes, social values are described as being relevant to films in that;

“We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author- God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.”

Roland Barthes, in the above quote brings forth points, which challenge the original view that in a text the author or creator intended to bring forth one singular message for that author. Barthes in replacement presents the idea of social values, namely that one text may have an array of contrasting messages for and from a conglomeration of variant sources. This means that Barthes view was that meaning was developed due to connection between the text (film) and its viewer, not merely the text (film) and its creator or author.

This means that society will influence the way we interpret a text, and although a director, filmmaker or author may have particular points that they are attempting to get across; this is not the most important thing! The most important point that can be made in relation to social values by Roland Barthes is that the most important thing is in fact the relationship of the text to the audience.

“Social Values are a reflection of broad, underlying beliefs, views, opinions, customs and conventions which guide and direct social attitudes in any society. “

Social Values may act in support of their audience, or work against or to challenge that very audience. Within one text, particular social values may intend to in fact both challenge and support the society that the particular text is a product of. Social values may be a reflection of what is most prevalent in society at a particular time; for example High Tide (1988) reflects feminist values being established during the late 1980’s, however feminism is not a single message intended by director Gillian Armstrong or Script Writer Laura Jones but instead a part of a reflective array of contrasting messages

for and from a conglomeration of variant sources, as perceived by the audience of the film.

Social Values may also represent a confrontation of conflicting values within one society. This is where new values are emerging, and dominant values are being diminished by these emerging values. For example, 1988 production *High Tide* shows emergent representation of women in film in conflict with the dominant representations of males in film; this presents social values in the form of gender conflict.

It is notable when discussing social values to take into account that not all Social Values are obvious to the society that holds them because they are taken for granted, They are believed, preferred, upheld, desired, enjoyed and maintained because they are unquestioned by the majority.

A dramatically apparent role is played by feminism and feminist values in 1988 production *High Tide* and 1987 production *Shame*. Both products of their time, feminism had been grounded as a genuine social concern by this time; as both productions are a reflection of the societal influence in gender equality, access to power and female influence within different sectors of society. These changes were being made within various places within society, *High Tide* mainly reflecting reforms in the arts, industry and the home. 1987's *Shame* deeply reflects attempts at law reform bringing to light serious social concerns with chauvinism and emerging feminist values to support the female gender.

Gillian Armstrong's; *High Tide* brings forth major concerns within the film industry outside the film itself by casting three female roles as major characters within the narrative and also adding to emergent feminist values within the industry at the time, the gender swap of the main character of Lilli from a male role to a female role. This is intentionally reflecting values within the production period, in allowing an audience to be challenged by Lilli's avoidance of responsibility, among certain freedoms that would have been more acceptable to society during the production period if a person of the opposite gender had perused them. This reflects those above listed values, concerns with women's roles within the industry and gender equality values and issues. Women's influence in the media and in the film industry was a major concern of the time, influencing the production of *High Tide*, and Armstrong's take on a film originally meant for male characters. Armstrong utilises this film to bring forth feminist values that were being pushed at the time. In this case, Gillian Armstrong deliberately intends to allow *High Tide* reflects society's values; this would have influenced audience receiving the film at its release.

Feminism had been well established by the 1980's with such law reforms as the sex discrimination act having been passed in the mid 1980's ('84). Within the category of feminism and feminist values, society presented itself with a segregation of sorts due to the controversial value. These were namely, that group concerned with women's issues conflicting with a secondary group concerned with men's issues, and reversed feminism and inequality. Even within feminism, there was a segregation of sorts. Some of the people concerned with feminist values were undeniably critical of males as a gender; where as some of those concerned were more sympathetic to males as a gender and as a not only necessary but valuable sector of society. These feminist values of the time were deeply reflected within both films. Coinciding with feminist values and reforms, female

labour force participation was dramatically increasing from 50% to 64% in the early 1990's.

During the late 1980's feminism was a major interest of the public, appearing in debates and gender articles in the media. Magazines and programs brought out articles to promote and demote feminism as a major value of the time. Society of the 1980's was socially concerned with enabling females to have equal rights to males in such fields of society as the workplace, the home and family, the industry and the government. It was also concerned with women's access to power. Both films target access to power as a deep feminist issue of the time. Both films also act in support of feminism as a social value. When focusing upon feminist values in relation to both film texts; *Shame* and *High Tide*, it is integral to notice and understand that a major indicator that both films support feminist values and viewpoints is that both films focus upon women as principle characters targeting their problems, and life experiences as the main content and focus of the texts.

1980's Australian Society was growing increasingly concerned with its identity as a nation, and also with the social identity of Australians as people. These social values being reflected in Gillian Armstrong's *High Tide*; we are confronted with a picturesque landscape of Australian entertainers, an RSL club and a caravan park spread across an off-season beach of locals. It is also apparent that *High Tide* strives to confront this value through the addition of American Songs and heroes. *High Tide* reflects society's challenges upon Australia's adaptation of American culture, and as a result questions our national identity and the identity of Australian people in general. Through *High Tide*'s representations of an Elvis impersonator, who in fact commences the film along with such folk as Cowboy Joe, an American-style cowboy songster performing at the local RSL, *High Tide* pushes the challenge to Australians to discover their individuality as a nation, and also to separate themselves from the culture of other nations; namely America.

In Australia at the time, tax incentives were being introduced in order to protect Australian culture from more influential and dominating cultures such as that of the United States which was, and still is being constantly depicted in the media (films, television, news articles, music, etc.) to enormous extents. These incentives were put into place in order to encourage investment in the Australian film industry. Although more films began to be produced, the influx meant that the quality of the films coming out of Australia was far less controlled by Australian directors and producers, and creative control and quality control was forfeited as a result of this to investors; resulting in even greater American culture being depicted in Australian films.

1988 was the year of the Australian Bicentennial. This was the nationwide celebration of 200 years of permanent white (European) settlement. A group called the Australian bicentenary Authority (ABA) was established to lead planning, funding and the co-ordination of proposed projects, celebrations and events, which highlighted Australia's cultural heritage. The largest event of these celebrations was entitled Expo '88, which was a World Fair held in Brisbane. This event was themed, "Leisure in the Age of Technology" and was considered an important event in the shaping of Brisbane's history, and in the shaping of Australian history and cultural individuality. This event was also considered an assistant in putting Australia on the map internationally and culturally segregating the nation, from various nations such as America, to which the influence upon Australia was being fiercely challenged by Australia's values; such as the importance

being put upon the finding of Australian identity at the time. The media picked up Australia's newly found values in identity and expressed this by showing television programmes relating to the bicentenary.

Steve Jodrell's 1987 production *Shame* picks up Australia's value upon Australian Identity through exploring a depiction of life in rural Australia, adding a place which isn't often explored in film to movie history and casting it into the limelight of society at the time.

Both films, *Shame* and *High Tide* depict strong changes in the traditional family format. *High Tide* sees three generations of women, without any strong male characters in the family unit. Armstrong's character Bet (grandmother) has a partner whom of which she is not married to, and Lilli lost her husband in an accident and is not involved in a long term or steady relationship. *Shame* depicts family attitudes changing and major crisis within the family unit. We view several dysfunctional families, and the effect, which these changes have upon children in families facing such issues as marriage breakdown. *High Tide* and *Shame* both reflect the influence and activity of grandparents being involved in the family unit, which was an emerging representation and value of the late 1980's.

These representations all belong to a category of 1980's Social Values relating to the family and the family unit. On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1987 the crimes (family violence) act became law. This reform supported the growing focus upon family values, by providing legal protection for victims of domestic violence and child abuse. This law assisted in providing legal means for a restraining order to be taken out against the offender. This sort of reform was needed in order to stay consistent with emergent values upon protecting children and the family unit.

Single parenting was also becoming more acceptable, changing societies social values upon the family unit further. Films such as *Shame* and *High Tide* depict this, in support of the changing family values.

In *High Tide*, Lilli is an unconventional contrast to the conventional Australian landscape of Eden. Although a mother, Lilli is depicted as being unreliable, self-centred, unstable and self-cynical addition to the film. Despite these rather negative qualities within this representation of Lilli, she is also described as being an alternative free-spirit, with a modern lease on life and the freedoms and adventure which may come with it. For example, the scene in which Lilli sets off for the weekend with Mick depicts her adventurousness and spontaneity. Lilli's erratic behaviour is included in this representation; Lilli is always leaving, never arriving.

Lilli is a new-age woman, uncommitted to men or children, due to this she is able to be spontaneous and reckless with little or no consequence until of course she lands herself in Eden and is confronted with Ally. Lilli has been described by Judy Davis (the actress whom played the character) as 'despicable.' This description is apparent in both the abandoning of her child (Ally) and lack of interest in seeing her in a decade or more.

It is notable that Lilli is very much self-reliant, a solitary character, with little support from family or friends, unable to hold down a job. Due to her previously carefree nature, Lilli is hesitant developing an attachment and in her growing concern for her daughter. Furthermore, it is also notable that Lilli's character was originally intended to be a male.

The reversal of gender appealed to changing gender values of the 1980's. Audiences probably would have been more willing to accept Lilli's characteristics as a reflection of the opposite gender; unreliability, self-centredness, instability.

Lilli's unruly and untamed appearance further adds to her characteristics and the representation, which is shown of her and her generation through High Tide.

Lilli is depicted as being personally unsatisfied, and despite her initial opinion that she lived 'an adventurous brave sort of a life', remains unsatisfied as she admits to being cowardly. Despite these rather unflattering and unappealing qualities, the above dialogue takes into account that Lilli is a part of a generation, which is self-reflective and able to see faults in themselves. This is a contrast to Bet's character and generation, which seems relevantly foreign to these concepts.

Bet is shown as a contrast character to representation 1- Lilli. She is represented in the light of an older generation as being strong, determined, somewhat aggressive and forceful. These characteristics in particular ways are directly opposing the characteristics of the younger, Lilli. Bet however, is similarly self-reliant and has little to no support from those around her. Bet is a hardworking, headstrong woman, capable and confidently supporting herself and Ally (grand-daughter) for some years, whilst managing several jobs.

Physically Bet has a full-bodied physique, but is energetic and hard working. Bet's physical appearance mirrors her characteristics as does her assertive walk, the delivery of dialogue and the way in which she performs tasks with a firmness; completely self-assured.

Bet is able to be self-assured without appearing to be arrogant and assertive without compromising etiquette. In terms of Bet's relation to Lilli she is depicted as having a more dominant manner and character. This threatens Lilli who is directly insecure, and in certain forms timid. This contrast is especially depicted in a scene in which Lilli admits cowardliness, Bet agreeing responds; "You should wake up to yourself."

Continuing from this point in the film, we're met with Bet's stable opinions, which remain sturdy throughout the film. In this way Bet is depicted as narrow minded and stuck in her ways. The phrase, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" is extremely relevant when discussing this character representation.

Bet makes it obvious that she finds Lilli's behaviour unacceptable. Returning again to the scene in which Lilli admits cowardliness, it is apparent that Bet is not familiar with concepts such as self-doubt and views herself as an elder and Lilli and Ally's superior.

Indication generation gaps between Bet and Lilli as well as Bet and Ally, Bet tells Ally that her mother is dead; however when Bet realises that Ally has discovered the truth and is confronted with this; she fails to respond in an appropriate way. Bet fails to recognise this newly discovered information; she discards its importance to the futures of all three women, especially Ally. Sweeping the significance of the issue under the mat as a result leaving Ally ultimately in the dark; with virtually no understanding of her grandmother's approach toward her mother, and her relationship with her mother.

Bet represents a conservative page of a past generation. The entertainment she provides, and her interests in such paces and entertainers provided by the local RSL club are

forced upon Ally. As a teenager, Ally has little interest in the types of things that Bet does, which further separates them; pointing out the vast generation gap.

Most men inclusive of; Lester (the Elvis impersonator), the RSL club owner and Mick are viewed in a critical light. Although the film explores men in a social context, Gillian Armstrong's main focus in *High Tide* is women and their experiences. To explore men in leading roles and as a major focus of the film; would sacrifice the female focus of the film. In which case it is significant that men play supporting roles. So, although this is a feminist film and does view men in a critical light, it is mainly focused on empowering women and exploring the power of men, rather than stripping men of their power.

Males such as the club owner and Lester are viewed in positions of power. These male figures tend to abuse the power and control they are given over women, such as Lilli. For example; the club owner insisting that Lilli strip when it becomes obvious to us as an audience as the film continues that there were plenty of other roles which Lester could have granted Lilli suggests that Lester was directly misusing this power over a woman in a predicament. Furthermore, it is interesting that the film commences with Lester playing a leading role in the stage show, and females including Lilli playing back up roles. This further emphasises that men rather than women were holding positions of power at that time.

Throughout the film, male characters show a failure to meet women where they're at. This included Mick in his spilling of Lilli's secret to Ally, despite the fact that Mick is definitely viewed in a contrasting light to other males. This particular view of men is also shown through Mick's body language whilst Lilli tells him the secret. He is unable to respond in the appropriate manner to the situation. He reassures Lilli and denies her claims of irresponsibility on her part when a wordy response was not at all necessary. The depiction of Mick as a male is still critical, however some of Mick's characteristics and qualities are viewed as more feminine, and hence looking at the film from a feminist viewpoint, viewed as potential qualities that men such as Lester and the RSL club owner might strive to achieve.

This representation, although critical of males; is dramatically different to the representation of male figures in *Shame*. This is a more stereotypical and extreme feminist representation of males. It shows them as being completely uncaring, aggressive and exceptionally sex focused. Although *High Tide* views men as being sexually aggressive; for example, throughout the scene of the Bucks Turn which shows Lilli stripping in a stage show, and also the manager pushing Lilli into doing this initially; *Shame* is a much more extremist critical and feminist view of men during the 1980's with the representation of men raping women living in the rural setting.

*High Tide* is a representation of a coastal region of Australia. This representation of the setting of Eden (NSW) at an off peak time moves away from the stereotypical view of coastal Australia. This was a deliberate act of the director; attempting to portray the less ideal lifestyles of those Australian's strewn between the modernist values of the city and the deserved and conservative lifestyles, values and landscape of rural Australia; Lilli portrays this medium. This representation is a realistic view of rural Australian lifestyle. *Shame* shows a more stereotypical rural view of Australia although this too is not often depicted in film of many cultures.

The representation of Lilli as an independent, self-reliant, modernist woman directly reflects values of feminism. Namely the attitude change toward women, and newly found support of independence as a quality of women which commenced its occurrence during the 1980's. The representation of Lilli emanates a new freedom and empowerment being granted to women through feminist values of the 1980's.

Lilli being represented as a woman in a position and with set characteristics of such things as avoidance of responsibility reflects concerns with gender equality. As this role would have been more accepted if Lilli's character were to be played by a male, it challenged audience perception of women in the industry, linking it to feminist values of the time.

Lilli's spontaneity and recklessness as a character as well as her unconventional appearance add to women's individuality, which was being promoted by feminists during those years. Feminism; also being concerned with access to power was much reflected in Lilli's representation.

Although the representation of Bet's character is not as much of an obvious reflection upon feminism and feminist values; Bet's headstrong and capable attitude directly relates to the feminist struggle for equality of the sexes at the time. Whilst her assertiveness mimics the portion of feminist values associated with women gaining power. These characteristics demonstrate a woman with some influence upon what's occurring around her, and with a small level of power. Despite this, Bet often directly agrees with the males around her, and is old-fashioned and somewhat narrow-minded and unwilling to change her ways to adapt to new feminist values coming through at the time.

The representation of men in the film is very critical, and somewhat typical to feminist films. This critical exploration inside *High Tide's* representation of males reflects feminist values associated with equality of status and access to power. This particular representation of men also falls into the category of feminist values in its exploration of men in minor roles; giving leeway to explore females in leading roles; experiences and problems alike.

These values are reflected in the representation of Lilli in that she represents exploration, adventure and identification of a new age of Australian values. Lilli is interested in self-exploration and reflection, as a member of her generation. This represents the inquisitive nature of society at that time, contained within the value of the finding of Australian Identity throughout the late 1980's, specifically relating to the Australian Bicentennial in 1988.

Bet however is a more stereotypical representation of an older Australian woman of the generation above Lilli's. Bet is less concerned with discovering Australian identity, and often indulges in influential pieces of American culture; such as music. Bet however, does add to the rural landscape of Australia, which is depicted in the film, a perfect representation of a woman soaking in the influence of the local RSL club, which adds greatly to the scenery. Despite this, Bet is predominantly linked to the influence of American culture. Bet brings to light a rural and coastal Australia, which is rarely depicted in Australian film or the film of other countries and cultures.

The Australian (rural/coastal) setting is a relevant representation of a less ideal Australian lifestyle. It adds to the values of Australian identity in that our landscape, especially in that era, through the media and socially has helped to define our culture.

Lilli is a valid representation of changing values in the Australian family unit of the time. Having abandoned her child, and ultimately in the end of the film adding to the upcoming change in the family unit; to more single-parented families.

Bet however is viewed in a more traditional context in her relation to family values. Despite this, she also adds to the change in that grandparents and outside relatives were becoming more involved in the family unit.

The representation of men, and more specifically the representation of Mick as a single parent further elaborates upon these changes to the family unit throughout the 1980's.

In relation to feminist values, Audiences will first respond in relation to dominant values existing in society; traditional values. Feminism is an especially controversial topic in this regard, asking audience's to correct and reform their mould of the genders. This especially applies for any audiences who had contained in their belief system prejudices against women; whether that be capability in daily tasks or productivity in the work place. For example, audiences with the belief that women are not as productive as men at work are encouraged to rethink this view after seeing the representation of Bet who holds down several jobs and supports her grandchild. The audience's response to women's issues will also have to be confronted and questioned. Female audiences stuck in previous conforming mindsets to dominant male figures would also need to reassess their value systems and consider the feminist values being brought across in the film.

With events such as the Australian Bicentennial occurring, audiences would have been likely to already be pondering these issues. Attitudes toward American culture and other dominant cultures would also have been reassessed. It is likely that some questions an audience may ask of themselves after viewing this particular film are those such as; "To what extent does American culture influence me?" and "Should I allow American/ Dominant cultures to influence my life/ the film industry of Australia?" due to this, responses toward both American and Australian products would have changed, and have been questioned. Attitudes toward Australian rural and beach culture also would have been questioned and possibly adapted to suit this emerging value; the importance of Australian culture!

Old-fashioned views toward the family unit may have also been considered whilst looking at this film. This particular value may have been a particular controversial and sturdy dominant value in the 1980's; so attempting to put forth this as an emergent value, especially to audiences such as those of religious backgrounds may have been difficult. The changing of the family unit/structure would have forced some religious groups, (Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, etc.) to reassess and justify their beliefs upon the family unit, and single parented families. In this case, attitudes toward those who aren't in a sturdy relationship or those who are raising children on their own would need to be thought over.



High Tide supports the emerging values of feminism, attempting to make feminist values more acceptable to the society at that time and bring them into public focus. The fact that a young Australian director directed High Tide brings a stronger focus to feminist values, as Gillian Armstrong broke into the Australian film industry. It is notable when regarding this topic that at the time; women were a scarcity in this profession in Australia. Feminism is also supported in that the film creates female heroes. In the film it is apparent, even through considering the opening of the film that males are portrayed and represented as being obsessed with male heroes. Through Lester performing as Elvis it also becomes apparent that males have a certain obsession with repeating the past as it were. Although High Tide is not a typical feminist film, and illustrates the women's flaws and problems, its main focus is their experiences. High Tide supports the fact that feminist values create female role models and heroes. Although none of the three women are perfect role models, qualities come through in each woman that are admirable and have been rarely shown in the past. This supports feminism's effect. For example, the adventurous and independent qualities in Lilli, and the hardworking, head-strong qualities in Bet, as well as the inquisitive representation of Ally is in strong support of these emerging values of the 1980's.

High Tide also supports these values through its representation of the treatment of women by men, and the loss of individuality that they suffer due to the conditioning of male figures. It is obvious that this film attempts to bring to light an exploration of chauvinistic values that were dominating at the time of the film's production and as a result appeal to the audience's sense of justice and the female audience's sense of safety and self-appeal in order to promote feminist values which were emerging during the production period.

The idea of society valuing Australian identity was a relevantly new and emergent value of the production period. The film also supports this exploration of Australians attempting to discover what was unique about them culturally and also who they were in relation to the film industry at that time; as the Australian Bicentennial occurred. However, within the value of Australian identity is also the idea that American Culture influenced our society far too greatly during this production period. High Tide incorporates American culture influence (Elvis impersonator, American music, Lilli putting on American accent in car with Mick, Cowboy Joe, etc.) in order to challenge this influence upon Australian people. It challenges its audience to consider this emergent value, and also the influence of dominant cultures upon Australia as a nation and also upon the Australian film industry.

Changing values toward the family unit are both supported and challenged by the film. In relation to this value, High Tide provides food for thought for it's audience within a challenge of their views toward the traditional family unit and toward their acceptance that the family unit was moving down a different path (divorce, single parented families, grandparent involvement, etc.) The film supports the support of relatives outside the immediate family unit being involved in the family, however it challenges the treatment

of children within the family, acknowledging the importance of mothers and motherhood to the child, and the future of that child.