Challenging the Safe Centre
An exegesis to support the screenplay

Shelf Life

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Statement of Originality

The work presented in this exegesis has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the exegesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made within the exegesis itself.

Signed _______________________________
Abstract

This exegesis examines the processes used to produce a body of studio work that investigates how screen-based narratives and aesthetics function in relation to, and are able to question, political and cultural hegemony. The final outcome of the studio work – a feature-length screenplay called Shelf Life – has at its thematic core a focus on neoliberal ideology and its cultural manifestations, an exploration of the social exclusion that is a by-product of that phenomenon, and an examination of the emancipatory potential of the cinema. It looks at how a work can engage with, yet also challenge, mainstream modes of storytelling to counter their potentially soporific effects, which may work to obscure deeper counter readings.

The screenplay embodies a bricolage of influences in its final incarnation, as different strategies were developed to deal with the interaction between content, form and conflicting ideologies. A process of iterative writing shifted the work from its beginnings as a narrative exploration of theme to focus on the interplay between aesthetics and ideology, and the ways in which aesthetic choices can contribute to a spectator’s active reading of the work. It finally culminated in an extensive process of improvisational writing, which aimed to shift how the work was engaged with, away from an unquestioned a priori reading to a less stable liminal reading to allow for a more mindful viewing experience.
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Preamble: The Filmmaker and Commerce

In 2004, during an admissions interview for a film course, I was asked by a prominent filmmaker why I made the types of small socially focused films that I did. His question was followed by the emphatic comment, “This country can only support one Rolf de Heer.” That statement shocked me at the time, and I wondered whether he was trying to justify his own filmmaking practice or simply trying to provoke a debate. On reflection, I believe this exchange could be seen as one more round in the ongoing argument about the place of a “national cinema” in Australian culture. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka (1987) and Tom O’Regan (1996) suggest that such discussions routinely oppose art to commerce, as they attempt to determine just what genres might sustain a local film industry, engage audiences and/or compete with the Hollywood juggernaut.

On the day of that interview, I replied that as a filmmaker I felt compelled to reflect on my lived experience and to present those reflections in ways that connected meaningfully with others. I acknowledged that the kinds of small, personal stories I was interested in telling might not fit a commercial mould. But until then I had never considered that there might not be an audience for my films, nor that I could be faced with a lack of support, or that my goals were unrealistic. Clearly we had differing ideological positions, and I felt mine was under challenge at an industry level. Could my ideas and work be considered illegitimate if they were perceived as being economically unviable? Suddenly I felt as though I was being excluded.

I tell this story because it goes to the heart of this research project, and also because it is deeply connected to the central focus of my work. One of the things that concerns me on both a personal and a professional level is how our collective
experience is shaped by the demands of neoliberal capitalism. My research project, comprising a script and this accompanying exegesis, primarily explores this phenomenon and the position of my own filmmaking within it.

My research is as much about finding a way to question a system that impacts on me and those around me as it is a thematic exploration in a narrative screenplay. To me, these two are intrinsically linked. Finding a way to challenge the ideological forms that shape our social realm connects unavoidably with my negotiation of filmic forms.
Chapter 1

Introduction: Reflecting Neoliberal Experience

The major studio outcome of this research is *Shelf Life*, a feature-length screenplay developed through the application of conventional screenwriting strategies and the cumulative contribution of a series of targeted collaborative creative exercises. The exegesis, in turn, offers an analytic account of the processes underpinning the development of the creative work and an outline of the cultural and ideological framework to which it responds.

It should be noted that the scope of a feature-length screenplay lends itself to an exploration of divergent ideas around a theme, and this is certainly true of *Shelf Life*, which was written over a lengthy period. This doctorate took longer to complete than initially expected, starting in 2006 and finishing in 2015. This was due to personal illness, which interrupted the work for extended periods of time. The writing reflects this interrupted timeframe in its shifting and fragmented approach. Initially, it was intended to be a narrative investigation based on observation and critical qualitative research. However, in the process of writing it morphed into a deeper investigation about the role of ideology in shaping social experience and the ways in which aesthetic choices can contribute to a spectator’s active reading of the work. An exegesis is not meant to be a thesis in and of itself; rather, it is an explanation of a text. The exegesis therefore reflects the varied approaches taken to researching and writing the screenplay.

The original aim of this doctorate was to write a screenplay that looked at the social exclusion that occurs as a result of economic disadvantage. This was designed to
build on a general line of socially conscious work that I had been pursuing for many years. *Gravity* (1999) and *My Mother, Jesus* (2003) are two of my short films that exemplify this preoccupation. They have screened at festivals, both locally and internationally, and have been recognised with a number of awards for their portrayals of young people who are grappling with events in their lives, which have roused their consciousness in some way. Both films attempt to capture and explore critical moments of potential growth for their young central characters, and in this sense I would say that they are both precursors to the work done in this research. *Shelf Life* continues this line of inquiry with its focus on themes of social/political awareness and emancipation of the individual.

Please note that it is appropriate to read the screenplay now and then return to the exegesis. See Appendix D for the *Shelf Life* screenplay.

**The Socio-political in Shelf Life**

Central to this research project is an engagement with the rhetorical and visual structures of neoliberal ideology. Put simply, neoliberalism, which is most notably associated with the philosopher and economist Friedrich Hayek, is the principle of *laissez-faire* free-market economics, characterised by small government and a self-regulating market. Adopted in the 1980s by powerful Western governments, such as those of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States, in the years since it has spread to become the dominant global economic paradigm. But neoliberalism is not just an economic principle independent of society. As Manfred Steger and Ravi K. Roy (2010, p. 11) note, it is “(1) an ideology, (2) a mode of governance, (3) a policy package” – each of which has social implications that deeply affect the way in which we live our lives on a day-to-day basis.
One of the defining characteristics of neoliberal ideology, as outlined by Susanne MacGregor (2004), is its appeal to individual identity in opposition to the welfare state’s appeal to collectivisation, resulting in us being defined as human capital and thus encouraged to construct our ‘selves’ through a system of consumerism (2004, p. 143). Thus a cycle is established whereby the consuming individual serves the critical function of keeping the economy ticking over, signifying the primary importance of the individual to the economy. This scenario creates a competitive environment in which success is measured by conspicuous consumption – a process that is actively encouraged by government through policy in order to maintain continuing growth.

Much of my research has focused on understanding how neoliberal ideology might operate to position people, such as the characters in my screenplay, as predominantly individualistic consumers, only to then position them as outsiders due to their economic circumstances. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2010) argues that neoliberalism reinforces forms of global apartheid, restricting social mobility by maintaining a separation of poor and wealthy nations. One might argue that a similar process of partition operates within nation-states to construct socially excluded groups. The representation of the experiences, formation and responses of such socially excluded characters is at the core of the creative output of my research.

I am interested in how such cinematic representations, through narrative, characterisation and aesthetic choice, might communicate a truth about the way we live now, by peeling away layers of cultural subterfuge and revealing the political and economic mechanisms by which we are organised socially. This is in opposition to dominant forms of mass entertainment, which tend to paper over such revelations, subduing and coercing the viewer through an adherence to standard forms of
narrative, character and aesthetic. Here I take note of the views of scholars such as Michael Meadows, who suggest that:

A range of discourses compete for legitimacy through cultural institutions, like film, which act to secure consent for particular ideas and assumptions about the world. More often than not, alternative views are systematically marginalized or ignored. But alternatives do exist – alternative ways of thinking, alternative ideologies which might re-frame interpretation of events, and alternative ways of constructing and maintaining notions of culture. (Meadows 1996, p. 263)

Early in the research, I observed that there were few Australian films that dealt with these competing discourses, many favouring instead to pander to commercial interests. I wanted to work against that grain.

Australian media academic Ben Goldsmith (2006, p. 171) argues that many Australian filmmakers, and by implication screenwriters, are “reluctant to tackle the defining issues of our time”. This view is backed up by the filmmaker and academic Boris Trbic (2005b, pp. 32–5), who argues that “the ongoing political debate about the changing face of Australian society, family, workplace and sense of identity has rarely inspired scriptwriters to produce engaging, controversial and subversive films, or to speak frankly to their audiences”. It is my opinion that little has changed in the years since these claims were made. From my observation, where films have directly and indirectly engaged in political and economic critique, they have typically adhered to standard forms of representation that, in their illusionistic form, fail to challenge the viewer to properly engage with their message, or they have been otherwise restrained in their challenge to such forms.
The Australian films of the neoliberal era that do engage thematically with the impact of economic and political pressures on society often fail to dig deep into the root causes of those pressures. Some noteworthy films that fit into this category are *Spotswood* (Joffe 1992), a quirky dramedy about a business suffering at the hands of shifting markets and rationalisation, *The Bank* (Maynard 2002), a thriller with its depiction of corporate corruption, and *Three Dollars* (Connolly 2005), a drama that portrays a man coming to terms with the fragility of his economic security. Each of these films represents a critique of neoliberalism, and each displays a tendency to adhere to mainstream formations of narrative, genre, aesthetics and mise-en-scène, which are not engaging beyond their capacity to entertain. These films paper over truths by their very aesthetic and avoid real confrontation.

Steve Giles (1997, p. 75), summarising the playwright and theorist Berthold Brecht, says that Brecht believed the sociological experiment of theatre should “provoke contradictions which are immanent in society, so as to make them perceptible”. Arguably, this could extend to all art, including cinema. I agree with Brecht. In my own research, I have sought to answer the research question, “How can the screenwriter challenge the forms of entrenched ideology that work to subjugate disempowered and socially excluded people, in particular unemployed youth, who exist within the neoliberal paradigm?” In answering this question, much consideration was given to thematic content and aesthetic form.

My aim has been to create a specific narrative example that is structured by my understanding of how neoliberalism shapes the lives of people such as the characters in *Shelf Life*, and at the same time investigate the role of cinema as a bearer and creator of neoliberal ideology. In this research, I look at the concept of agency as it exists within culturally and politically defined identity positions and I
explore how people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are immobilised by rhetoric and subjected to social exclusion as a consequence of the ways in which they are represented in popular culture.

The strategy I have used has been to employ ideological critique to dissect and contest dominant aesthetic, cultural and political formations that tend to favour the hegemony, a concept most widely associated with Antonio Gramsci. Terry Eagleton (1991 pp. 115–16) defines Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony as a whole range of practical strategies by which a dominant power elicits consent to its rule from those it subjugates. To win hegemony, in Gramsci’s view, is to establish moral, political and intellectual leadership in social life by diffusing one’s ‘world view’ through the fabric of society as a whole, thus equating one’s own interests with the interests of society at large.

I am not sure that I am attempting to “win hegemony”, but I certainly aim to question it, and in the process enable others to do so as well.

Edward Said (1983, p. 158) argues that in order to counter hegemony, one should aim to address “the fundamental components of meaning in representation”. In line with this, I look at the form film takes, and investigate alternative uses of narrative and aesthetic modes to, as Said (1983, p. 158) suggests, “tell other stories than the official sequential or ideological ones produced by institutions of power”. The goal of this work has been to represent the socially excluded in a way that legitimises them and renders them visible by challenging the persuasive power of the dominant ideology, thus enabling the audience to recognise the structures of meaning implicitly embedded within cultural forms. My work aims to find a way to encourage viewer engagement so that viewers might have the scope to question the position of the
characters in the story and consider their own capacity as agents within the dominant social order.

In terms of chronological process, this creative research project focused first on theme in its early stages, and then later on form, and finally considered the relationship between the two. In practical terms, my approach was first to write a screenplay about a social phenomenon and then to analyse that screenplay, asking how its form affected what the work signified and how the viewer might comprehend it. The screenplay was then re-drafted and developed by drawing on a variety of influences and techniques, including improvisation. That iterative process is outlined in this exegesis. The exegesis itself is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 is a literature and context review. It expands upon the major concepts outlined in the introduction, and maps how those concepts have been treated in Australian cinema and academia since the beginning of the neoliberal era in the 1980s. The concepts covered are neoliberalism, ideology and aesthetics.

Chapter 3 opens with a discussion of the methodological approach to the writing and continues with a critical reflection of my early intuitive approach. It shows how I incorporated theoretical research and practical evidence into the writing of the screenplay. Its primary focus is on narrative explorations of theme, and on the practical concepts and methods that were considered when writing the screenplay.

Chapter 4 is a detailed explanation of the research after it shifted focus to include a consideration of aesthetics and their attendant ideologies. Here I also discuss the incorporation of improvisation as a methodology.
Finally, the conclusion summarises the arguments and findings presented in the exegesis. It considers the future possibilities for the finished screenplay, examines the limitations on the research and suggests possible future research directions.
Chapter 2

The Neoliberal Landscape

A Fractured House: The Policy and Rhetoric of Neoliberalism

The widespread adoption of neoliberal economic and social policy by many governments over the last 30 years has had a resounding impact on the ways in which we live. Shelf Life and its central character, Kate, embody an exploration of the impact of neoliberalism on some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in the Australian setting. Kate is a 16-year-old girl who lives with her mother and younger sister in a poorer suburb in an unspecified city. Coming from a position of financial hardship, Kate particularly struggles with how to meet a growing need/social requirement to create a legitimate identity as she attempts to define herself through a prism of media representations/expectations and consumer culture.

The screenplay developed as a response to what I saw as the social exclusion of economically disadvantaged people, who are not only deprived of participation in the social and economic contract of neoliberal capitalism – namely the means to create a legitimate identity through consuming the market-driven artefacts that are the indicator of “success” in material terms (e.g. clothes, cars, houses, the latest technologies) – but are then vilified for not living up to the norms that the system establishes. I was prompted to think about these things when I saw friends and family myopically putting themselves through financial hardship in order to attain and maintain the latest technology of the day. The marketing machine seemed relentless, and people seemed helpless in the face of its onslaught as they tried desperately to keep up. Through Kate, I ask what happens to those who fall through the cracks –
those whose boats don’t rise on the rising tide of economic prosperity, but who instead struggle to compete in a system that derides them for failing to fulfil the role of the good and functional consumer.

Of course, this presents a troubling paradox for people living under these conditions. What do they do when faced with such a dilemma? Academic Peter Marks (2012, p. 7) asks, “Will it be that those who enjoy ‘utopian’ lives will be unwilling to give up their advantages? What might be the consequences of that unwillingness: conflicts in which those relegated to regional dystopias refuse to accept their excluded status?”

As I became more immersed in the world of *Shelf Life* and Kate’s place in it, I knew I wanted to explore the possible consequences of such a scenario. I began to ask myself about the structures that could lead to such a scenario and how I might reveal them in *Shelf Life*.

What I found was a system of political policy and rhetoric that sets up a paradigm through which individuals are positioned as self-interested consumers regulated by a complicit media. I found that media representation and culturally constructed identity positions are sites of control and subjugation, which position those people on the economic margins as somehow dysfunctional. It also seemed pertinent to consider how Australian filmmakers had responded to this phenomenon, given that film is a reflective and culturally defining form. And since contemporary Australian cinema operates within the neoliberal paradigm, I wanted to explore the nature and extent of its complicity.

I delve further into these concepts in this chapter, looking specifically at the neoliberal cult of the individual as opposed to community, the individual as consumer and the role of the media in shaping cultural identity. I then consider how Australian cinema is positioned in response to these concepts. Where appropriate, I try to
explain how these concepts manifest in the screenplay’s narrative. In the following chapters, I consider in greater depth how *Shelf Life* responds to such questions, asking about the ways – narrative and aesthetic – in which it is possible to reveal the mechanisms that overwhelm the marginalised and trap them in a cycle of exclusion.

**Individualism and Consumerism: Neoliberalism and the Positioning of Identity**

Early in my writing journey, I was interested in exploring the impact of the pressures of consumer culture on young, economically marginalised people. I recognised that the pressures to consume appeared to be escalating, and I wanted to understand this phenomenon in greater depth. Australian academic Damien Cahill (2007, p. 225) argues that “neoliberal restructuring is radically transforming the nature of citizenship [as] new desires for commodities have been fostered that underpin recent economic growth”. Of most interest in Cahill’s statement is the link he establishes between economic growth and the fostering of “new desires”. The continued success of the economy, it would seem, is dependent on constantly generating and satisfying new consumer “desires”. But what does this actually mean for people like the characters in *Shelf Life*?

A typical trait of neoliberal policy is its appeal to individualism rather than to notions of community. Carol Johnson (1997, p. 40) notes that in the case of neoliberalism in Thatcher’s Britain, “A major difference in the images and meanings evoked to sell pro-market policies lies in the emphasis on individualism. Thatcher has continued to stress the sense of ‘individuality’ and initiative as a key feature of the British national character.” Indeed, this is evidenced by Thatcher’s classic statement “there is no such thing as society”, taken from a 1987 speech in which she argues that individuals must look after themselves first. Such appeals to individualism are also characteristic of neoliberal policy in Australia – although, as Johnson (1997, pp. 40–
1) points out, the adoption of neoliberalism by the ALP under Hawke and Keating in the early 1980s may be seen as “watered down” because it “appealed to a form of group identity”. Subsequent government policy has been more in line with Thatcher’s brand of neoliberalism and its focus on the individual, particularly under the current federal Liberal National Party Coalition government led by Tony Abbott.

If appeals to aspirational individualism lead to a greater emphasis on the consuming power of the individual, what does this mean for the process of identity-building for those on the margins? Stuart Hall (1989, p. 31) contends that, under neoliberalism, consumption is a space where people “use things to signify who they are … ‘goods’ double up as social signs”. Individual success can then be measured through the ability to consume, and by what is consumed and how. Increasingly, the ability to consume defines us in terms of a kind of moral responsibility to the economy. This led me to wonder how people in Kate’s position – that is, young and poor – assess their value and self-worth. How does this impact their ability to achieve social validation and legitimate citizenship? If someone is unable to consume at a ‘meaningful’ level, it would seem that they risk having no identity and possibly face being marginalised at best.

Janice E. Pearlman (1976, p. 245) argues that, “The ‘marginals’ … are defined as permanently outside of the society since they do not participate in the shared values which are the definition of society itself.” They have “no position in the dominant social system” (1976, p. 119), and remain unintegrated because they exist outside the economic system. While Perlman was writing about the highly visible social exclusion in Brazil’s favelas, the examples may be much harder to detect in the urban spaces of Shelf Life. Kate’s experience is a cycle of continual effort to achieve social legitimacy, only to be denied at every turn. At face value, it is not easy to
identify the underlying causes of her exclusion; it is not necessarily a physical boundary, as in the favelas, but rather a sociopolitical one that manifests in certain undisputed cultural formations, such as the media, which express a particular dominant ideological position.

An Implicated Media

The media have long had a role in influencing social opinion. Cahill (2007, p. 226) suggests that it has been "shaping desires" and "defining our positions as consumers" since the 1950s, and continues to do so now. But it goes further than simply influencing us as consumers. As Australian media studies theorist Graeme Turner (2005, p. 160) argues:

The way we learn about our society, the way we participate in its decisions and debates, the way we construct our personal and community identities, and the stories we tell ourselves to explain the particular nature of our culture and society, are all framed, negotiated and developed in some way through the media.

The level of media influence can be difficult to quantify, and the media are perhaps just one element that influences social outcomes; however, if Turner is correct, the media affect us at a much more fundamental level than simply prompting us to buy goods. But how exactly does this influence operate?

In his examination of the treatment of those on welfare by The Australian newspaper between November 2009 and June 2010, Philip Mendes (2012) argues that the journalists were complicit in their support for certain neoliberal policies. He found support for tighter controls on welfare recipients and portrayal of the unemployed as holding “fundamentally different values and attitudes to the rest of the community”
At the same time, current affairs television programs such as *A Current Affair*, which both reflect and shape popular opinion, characterise those on the margins by using stereotypes that include working-class Bogans, warring suburban families, dole bludgers, hoarders, hoodlums and violent youth.

A relatively recent example from *A Current Affair* (Grimshaw & Steinfort 2012) focused on a group of young female “dole cheats” on the Gold Coast, who were coaxed into proclaiming their lack of social responsibility on national television. This segment villainised, denigrated and belittled them, and took no account of their circumstances or any social influences that might have placed them in such a position. This story follows in the footsteps of the more infamous misrepresentation of the Paxtons on *A Current Affair* in 1996 (Turner 1999). In that story, the unemployed children of the family were offered jobs interstate, far away from their home, on the proviso that they cut their hair. When they turned down the offers, their moral character was publicly crucified by the show. The ways in which economically marginalised people are treated by media outlets such as *The Australian* and *A Current Affair* position the poor as one-dimensional and dysfunctional, and gloss over the complexities of life without appearing to reflect any kind of truth.

This kind of representation can be seen to extend to television shows such as *Pizza* (Fenech 2000), *Bogan Pride* (Wilson 2008), *Kath & Kim* (Turner & Riley 2002) and *Housos* (Fenech 2011), to name just a few, which characterise the working class and poor as crass, grotesque and kitsch, and as objects of derision – albeit often dressed up in the guise of being affectionate representations. Recently, those goal posts have shifted. With *Upper Middle Bogan* (Butler & Hope 2013) screening on the ABC, it seems that there is now also a show to disparage the cashed-up Bogan (CUB) as well. The term ‘Bogan’ is often invoked to characterise the social failures of the
working classes. As Pini, McDonald and Mayes (2012, p. 146) argue, “we come to know the figure of the Bogan through a set of dispositions, practices and proclivities which are coded as pathological and morally deficient ... they are positioned as the antithesis of the absent but ever present normative middle-class subject”.

At times I too have enjoyed watching some of those shows, even though I am well aware that Pini and colleagues (2012, p. 152), as well as others, have pointed out that mockery is a device that not only creates distance but also “masks much more sinister operations of power and social exclusion”. Perlman (1976, p. 102) argues that this is in accord with the “constant attempt of those in power to blame the poor for their position … masking the unwillingness of the powerful to share their privilege”. Shelf Life also emanates from the world of the working class and poor. It draws on the same characters, but a conscious decision was made to represent them in a way that would challenge the mainstream modes of representation outlined above. Through Kate, Shelf Life asks how people who are represented poorly by the system might react to the position in which they are placed when that position is laid bare before them.

A contemporary example of this debate can be found in the dispute surrounding the three-part documentary Struggle Street (SBS 2015). The series purported to be a “fly-on-the-wall observational documentary” which “gives a voice to those doing it tough right on the doorstep of Australia’s most affluent cities”. It attracted controversy because it claimed to give voice to a community of people who consequently found their own – very loud – voice, in backlash over how they felt they were portrayed. One of the show’s promos, which was eventually pulled after protests, featured a man breaking wind; it was a moment that arguably was included only for its
sensationalist qualities and for its ability to tap into beliefs about the dysfunction of
the poor – a concept that is easily saleable.

I still have family who live in Mt Druitt, a suburb featured in the documentary, and I
went to school not far from there. In my view, the documentary drew on stereotypes
that clouded what might have been truthful representations, and I think it is good to
see these people standing up for themselves and that a debate about representation
and agency is taking place in such a prominent fashion. Were the filmmakers well-
meaning in their intentions, or were they simply operating from a position of
privilege? And can a documentary such as Struggle Street – which, it should be
noted, has been a ratings winner for SBS – really effect social change, or will it
always be compromised by the requirement to be populist and entertaining?

The kind of mocking and critical representations found in mainstream media do not
reflect reality as I see it. In Shelf Life, my aim has been to counter this by presenting
a different image of people who are marginalised – one that shows the difficulties
they face in their encounters with societal forces, employment uncertainty, housing
insecurity, eroded communities, mental health and general poverty, without being
sensationalist. I also explore the theme of media representation explicitly in the
sequence when Kate is co-opted into a TV commercial being shot in the
supermarket in which she works, and is ultimately ridiculed for her failure to speak.

Television and other media, in both private and public domains, increasingly form the
ubiquitous background chatter of everyday living and, as argued above, set up a
penetrating sphere of social influence. However, it is in the cinema that we as
viewers are encouraged, simply by the very nature of the darkened room, to
surrender our focus to whatever is on the screen. More often than not, we do so
willingly, potentially opening ourselves to the influence of ideas in a much more
passive manner. In the next section, attention turns to the Australian cinema landscape in order to gauge how it is implicated in, and responds to, the overriding neoliberal paradigm.

Reflecting the Political and Social in Australian Cinema

If we look at the output of Australian cinema since the start of the neoliberal era, it could be argued that there has been a paucity of films that have dealt directly with the political ideology of the era and very few that have reflected on the major political and social events that have taken place during that time. In comparison, British cinema saw a significant response to the politics and social policies of the Thatcher era, most prominently in the so called “kitchen sink” dramas of filmmakers such as Ken Loach, Mike Leigh and Alan Clarke. David Sterritt (2006, p. 315) suggests that Thatcher’s policies and personality gave British filmmakers an impetus to create works that were, “vastly more antagonistic than those usually found in earlier traditions of British cinema”. Conversely, as Boris Trbic (2005a, p. 54) argues, in Australia in the neoliberal era, “political film lost its wide appeal”. According to Trbic (2005d, p. 32):

The looming horizon of McMansions that has brought the values of “middle Australia” into the centre of the present-day political debate is profoundly absent from local films, as is the underclass of “losers” created by the almost unprecedented economic boom of the 1990s. Filmmakers seldom challenge the lethargy and emotional vacuum induced by the frantic, soul-destroying quest for prosperity. Instead, they frequently present us with an array of predictable situations and galleries of formulaic characters, underestimating
the viewer’s need to question, challenge, and perhaps re-examine the key norms and parameters of his/her world.

In response to this situation Trbic refers to playwright and screenwriter Andrew Bovell’s keynote address at the 2005 Melbourne Writers’ Muster as a kind of call to action. He notes (2005d, p. 32) that Bovell usefully “outlined an author’s responsibility to engage with the social, political and cultural tendencies facing contemporary Australian society … and to act as authentic voices of cultural dissent”. At the time Bovell was lamenting the lack of political engagement by Australian writers. If we turn to Bovell’s more recent 2012 Foxtel Screenwriters’ Address (Wheeler Centre 2015), we see that his concerns remain largely unchanged. In the speech, he talks about art versus commerce being “one of the great tensions in what we do [as writers]” and asks, “Can great cinema be a fusion of the two?” He argues that in recent years there has been a push to write for audiences who simply want to escape life’s pressures, who don’t want to be confronted by more challenging subject matter. If we heed this call, he suggests, “it is the films that don’t set out to do that which are at risk. The tougher films, the darker films, the political films … We want the light and the dark, don’t we?”

Trbic (2005a, p. 55) suggests that the lack of socially and politically conscious output reflects the fact that “large sections of the population do not feel oppressed”, so filmmakers who focus on social and political subject matter risk being “consigned to the periphery of public and media interest”. Thus a film such as The Finished People (Do 2004), with its gritty portrayal of homeless youth in Cabramatta, can win, at best, critical but not popular acclaim.

“Make films that people want to watch” is a typical cry to filmmakers that comes from various sectors, including filmmakers themselves. Recently producer Timothy White,
whose crime genre film, *Son of a Gun* (Avery 2014), failed to achieve box office success, was quoted by Don Groves (2014) on the IF website as saying, “We have made too many dark, introspective films that have not been rewarding”. Karl Quinn (2014), in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, contests such arguments by countering that, “Dark isn’t necessarily a turn off”, citing David Fincher’s (2014) *Gone Girl* as a dark film that has found box office success locally.

What is apparent, in contrast to these “dark films”, is the number of films that reflect upon the aspirational nature of contemporary Australian society but don’t go very far beyond simplistic representations of our experiences of it. An example of this is the misfit dramedy *Muriel’s Wedding* (Hogan 1994), which shows a family fragmented by individual ambition. The father, Bill Heslop, with his desire to succeed in business and politics at the expense of his family, and Muriel, with her desire to succeed socially and financially at the expense of her authenticity, speak indirectly about the familial impact of the neoliberal drive toward individualism and its erosion of communal bonds. In my view, the film looks at the end-result of systemic influences rather than addressing the root causes of the social order, and does not make the connection to the prevailing economic ideology that pushes these characters in such a direction. In addition, it chooses to satirise the situation and as such aligns with the arguments of Pini and colleagues (2012), as outlined above, which asserts that such kitsch representations of the working class work to subjugate the people at the centre of their stories through representations that mock them as an amusing underclass.

I question what message is sent by such shallow explorations of the socio-political when coupled with the limited and limiting representations of those on the margins that already proliferate in the mainstream media. What kind of notions do we get
from these films about who we are? What ideas do they reinforce when there are so few films to balance out the representation? Next I will discuss the arguments surrounding national cinema as an agent that acts to establish and reinforce notions of national identity, and consider what kind of influence such representations have socially.

**National Cinema, Identity and Ideology**

Film is an economic commodity as well as a cultural good.

(Moran 1996, p. 1)

This seemingly simple statement bears extensive consideration when discussing how film is situated within economic and social structures. Few would doubt the impact that films from the United States have had in terms of their ‘cultural colonisation’ of American culture and ideology. Of more interest is their influence on distant film industries, such as Australia’s, where many in the film industry see themselves competing with the US juggernaut, thereby greatly influencing the type of “product” we make in Australia. At an institutional level, one of the ways in which we have competed is by projecting national identity through the creation of a national cinema. Dermody and Jacka (1987), among others, maintain that such national cinema – more often than not controlled by centralised gatekeepers – risks creating a kind of homogenised version of national identity. Andrew Higson (1995, p. 4) argues that:

National identity is by no means a fixed phenomenon, but constantly shifting, constantly in the process of becoming. The shared, collective identity which is implied always masks a whole range of internal differences and potential and actual antagonisms. The concept of national cinema is equally fluid, equally
subject to ceaseless negotiations: while the discourses of film culture seek to hold it in place, it is abundantly clear that the concept is mobilised in different ways, by different commentators, for different reasons.

What interests me is the impact that this commercial orientation has had on Australian cinema and the kind of identity it not only represents but also produces, validates and reinforces. It can be argued that this is merely the nature of cinema as commodity, fulfilling its capitalistic role within what Theodor Adorno (1972, p. 8) calls the “culture industry”. As Adorno (1972, p. 9) suggests, “The hucksters of the culture industry base their activities … upon the principle of the commercialization [saleability] of their work- not upon its actual content or construction”. In the pursuit of profit and financial viability, it must appeal to mainstream tastes, and in the process support, adhere to and generate dominant ideological norms.

This point has also been made, with reference to Australian cinema, by Dermody and Jacka (1988, p. 11), who argue that “film is suspended between culture (and cultural debates) and industry (and the discourses of employment, profitability, the language money ‘speaks’)”. Typically, what wins out in this scenario are the arguments for commercial viability. For example, a push to make more genre films that adhere to particular character archetypes, such as serial killer thriller Wolf Creek (Mclean 2005), might be pursued at the expense of telling stories that have the potential to explore the diversity of Australian identities. Thus identity collapses down into a neat commercial function, and it is the most saleable identity that will win out.

In this, I side with Moran (1996, pp. 10–11), who argues that:

There is no such thing as a ‘national cinema’ if the phrase is used to designate a single, unitary object. National populations are marked by a
multiplicity of cultural communities to which individuals belong in varying
degrees: there is no such thing as a single national cultural identity.

*Shelf Life* aims to challenge the notion of national identity as a commodified object
by focusing on diversity and reframing typical representations of the economically
and socially disenfranchised. I believe that, in the process, this will reveal some form
of truth about what it means to be socially excluded.

In the following sections, I discuss some films that exemplify the arguments outlined
in this chapter and consider the roles they play in shaping/representing our
experience of living within the neoliberal paradigm.

**The Response to Neoliberalism in Australian Cinema**

In the development of this project I have examined a wide variety of films which
speak to the phenomenon of neoliberal capitalism in Australia, some of which have
already been referenced earlier, however it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to
discuss them all. Instead I have chosen to identify some indicative examples of films
of the era, and selected those that have a broad popular or critical reach, that deal
unambiguously with the nature of neoliberal ideology and social exclusion and its
impact on marginalised people, and that exemplify different modes of representation.
These films were also singled out because, for reasons that will be outlined, they had
the greatest impact on the direction *Shelf Life* took. Those films are *Blackrock*
(Enright 1996), *The Castle* (Sitch 1997), *Kenny* (Jacobson 2006), and *The Finished
People* (Do 2004).
**Exposing the Machinations of Industry**

*Blackrock*, which deals with a similar demographic to *Shelf Life*, is a film that interested me early in my research. I liked the way it was able to untangle and address how certain media representations of women can have a negative social impact – particularly on younger people, who also happen to be the focus of *Shelf Life*. The film resonated with me because I grew up in similar working-class environments in Blacktown and Ipswich. One of my most vivid memories of attending school at Blacktown Boys’ High was hearing a fellow student boasting about how he knew the men who killed Anita Cobby, as if it meant he now had status. This is an attitude that seems to jump from the pages of *Blackrock*. The story touched a nerve that seemed to reflect my own experience.

On the surface, the film deals with issues of masculinity and sexism within the Australian context, although the deeper focus that is woven through the film’s narrative relates to how gender identity/roles are positioned through media representations and how these representations can enable a particular social atmosphere to evolve that can have dire consequences. The film suggests that the media influence not only public opinion but go much deeper as they define and inform the social fabric itself. This mirrored the work I was doing with *Shelf Life*, so naturally *Blackrock* became a significant influence.

One of the key characters in *Blackrock* is Stewart, an advertising executive. He is the one character that harnesses real power in the film – the power to influence others through his job in the media. He represents industry and the capitalist economy more broadly. In one scene, Stewart’s wife, Marian, recalls a line from his advertising campaign, “What counts most for a woman …”, mocking the way his advertisement patronises and objectifies women. Stewart’s response, “You don’t like it, Ladies,
don’t watch”, indicates his willingness to profit from this sort of scenario. The systemic influences of the media industry on society are bluntly brought into focus when a scene showing Stewart accepting an award for the advertisement is juxtaposed with scenes showing a drunken teenage beach party and the subsequent rape and murder of a young girl, Tracy, whose death itself becomes commodified as her murder is turned into a circus sideshow by the media.

The world of the film is one divided by wealth: those with power and those without it. Numerous references are made to the separation of rich and poor, and the resentment felt by the disadvantaged is one of the central themes. It is suggested that this sense of resentment and powerlessness, when combined with the prevailing sexist attitudes, is one of the contributing factors that leads to the murder of Tracy. The working-class people in the film are excluded from the process of constructing their own identities, and this position of powerlessness makes them resentful.

I admire the way Blackrock addresses the social issues at its core – the way it cleverly weaves them into its narrative and is able to unveil how the influence of an industry can filter down to affect a social microcosm. But I still feel that it misses the opportunity to look further and to critique the deeper economic influences at play, namely the influence of capitalism on communities. The representations of women in advertising with which Blackrock deals do not miraculously appear in a vacuum. The advertising industry does not exist independent of other industries; it is, of course, a symbiotic manifestation of modern capitalism, an interplay between government, industry and society. I knew that this depth of investigation and this angle or approach were territory into which I was keen to dig in Shelf Life.
Normalising the Neoliberal Experience

*The Castle*, which tells a David and Goliath story of a working-class family, the Kerrigans, pitted against industry, portrays the family as the affable everyman who overcomes adversity through hard work and the possession of a good nature. The family members are portrayed as being slightly eccentric, to say the least. Arguably, such ‘affectionately’ mocking characterisations mask a deeper and almost certainly unintentional function, which is to demarcate and enforce hegemonic norms. *The Castle* taps into the well-worn narrative common to Hollywood of the little people overcoming insurmountable adversity to succeed in the third act. The family members pull together and are rewarded for their efforts, thereby instilling a false hope of success in the viewer that is probably elusive to many. Interestingly, it is the communal force of the family that overcomes big business, which acts as a critique of the neoliberal tendency towards individualism.

The eponymously named *Kenny*, with its focus set squarely on the blue-collar working class, treads similar ground to *The Castle* in its portrayal of the everyman. Kenny is the embodiment of the arguments that I have outlined earlier regarding national cinema and the positioning of identity. Kenny is widely feted as the working-class everyman, but does his affable and accepting nature normalise rather than critique his class predicament? As Jon Stratton (2011, p. 27) argues, “the ideological thrust of the film is to legitimate Kenny’s accepting personality. Kenny is the submissive Aussie battler in a neoliberal world.” Compared with the Kerrigans’ tight family unit in *The Castle*, Kenny’s own family has fallen apart, but he persists in his economic endeavours because it is the thing to do – particularly if you are doing well financially, as he believes he is. In *Kenny*, financial success trumps social connectedness.
Interestingly, one could argue that these films, made ten years apart, capture the growing emphasis on individualism over time during the Australian neoliberal experience. In this sense, they represent a shifting portrait of Australian neoliberalism; however, this belies the function that I believe both films serve, which is that, in their own ways, they both work to placate what one could argue is an already ideologically disengaged viewer. Disengaged possibly because, as Trbic (2005a, p. 55) suggests, “they do not feel oppressed”. *The Castle* mythologises our capacity to change our situation in the face of the hegemony, and *Kenny* develops a normalcy toward apathy and acceptance of neoliberal identity positions.

Significantly, *The Castle* and *Kenny* – which, it is worth noting, were both independently funded (in the case of *Kenny*, via a version of commercial funding) – achieved huge popularity, as reflected in their box office takings. But I am prompted to ask whether these films truly reflect the complexity of Australian society. In my opinion, they present a cartoonish papering over of my own experience of growing up in a similar working-class milieu. This was something I was keen to address with *Shelf Life*. I knew I wanted to achieve a more realistic representation of the living conditions for the working-class poor and at the same time not shy away from dealing directly with the social and political factors that can lead to exclusion.

A film to which I turned for inspiration was *The Finished People*, which does not avoid dealing with complex representations of Australian society. In the following section, I discuss how it mobilises the concepts of identity and agency to reframe our understanding of social exclusion and I explore the concepts of identity and agency as they relate to marginalised youth.
Social Exclusion and Reframing Identity – Young people and agency

There are few Australian films of the neoliberal era that deal directly with social exclusion as a phenomenon. Khoa Do’s *The Finished People* goes some way towards reframing our understanding of young people who live in the Sydney suburb of Cabramatta and the social exclusion they experience. The film contextualises its story by referencing, in its opening title, the infamous Bob Hawke (1987) quote, “By 1990, no Australian child will be living in poverty”. However, in referencing the political and framing the film as a response to political rhetoric, it does not go so far as to directly question the system of economics that would result in such exclusion. In this sense, it is reactive to the end condition of neoliberalism.

Reflecting on the plight of a group of disadvantaged youth, the film mostly marries content and form through the aesthetic choices of cinéma vérité, improvised dialogue and the use of non-professional actors as the means to unfold the narrative. This lends the film a kind of realism akin to the documentary form, which partially strips away the cinematic façade. This was something that resonated with me as I wrote *Shelf Life*, and I kept it in mind during the improvisation process with which I experimented towards the end of the research.

The most interesting thing about a film like *The Finished People* is the voice it gives to disadvantaged youth within the cinematic form. Originating out of a youth services organisation called Open Family in Cabramatta, the film was developed in a collaboration between filmmaker Khoa Do and the actors, who were themselves homeless youth from the area. Much of the story is based on work drawn from the insider knowledge of the actors. The film provided them with an entree into a forum that typically has been inaccessible to people in their position. As Scott Henderson (2007, p. 8) suggests, before the advent of YouTube and other video-hosting/social media sites,

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The Neoliberal Landscape
"Youth has normally been a group that is unable to control their own cultural representations". I like the way The Finished People enables the storytellers to take control of how they are represented, empowering them along the way; however, as Henderson also suggests, the level of agency displayed by youth in the newer self-generated social media is somewhat diminished by a willingness of youth to re-present more established representations found in traditional mainstream media. He argues (2007, p. 16) that, "The promise of agency and identity is part of the seduction of the popular representations that become crucial in the lives of youth, a concept identifiable in YouTube in its repetition of dominant narrative and cultural codes drawn from elsewhere." In other words, there is a level of mimicry employed by young people in their auto representations, whereby they buy into dominant modes of identity.

In The Finished People, this kind of mimicry is certainly evident in the story of Des (played by Rodney Anderson). Des is a young man living on the streets who falls into organised crime when he becomes desperate to support his pregnant girlfriend. It is a believable scenario; however, this storyline draws on clichéd cinematic narratives and aesthetics of the criminal underworld that work against the naturalistic presentation established by the filmmakers. In referencing the well-worn scenario of crime plans gone wrong, the story misses an opportunity to show something authentic and instead veers toward saleable crime caper territory, epitomised by films such as Pulp Fiction (Tarantino 1994), Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels (Ritchie 1998) and Two Hands (Jordan 1999), each of which draws on and at times celebrates clichés of the crime genre for hyper-commercial purposes. I think these films are enjoyable spectacles, but they sensationalise and trivialise crime and lack the veracity seen in a film such as The Finished People. I appreciate the entertainment value they offer but at the same time I appreciate the truth and insight
of *The Finished People*, so while the Des storyline might reflect Anderson’s experience of living in Cabramatta, for me this shift in the narrative and stylistic approach towards something more populist saw the story lose the power of nuanced truth. I really wanted to see the film explore, on a deeper level, the political causations that the opening Hawke quote seemed to promise.

In *Shelf Life*, Kate’s interaction with the way she is represented in the advertising material is intended to engage with this same concept by exploring her own sense of empowerment and agency as it relates to her representation. I discuss this in more detail in the section titled *Redressing Representation* in Chapter 4; however, in brief, Kate symbolically reclaims her identity by literally removing and defacing the supermarket advertising material that contains her image.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the concepts of neoliberal hegemony, identity, individualism and media positioning with which I have engaged in the writing of *Shelf Life*. It has looked at the political and industrial structures that lead to the social exclusion of people who are marginalised due to economic disadvantage. It has also considered the position of Australian cinema in relation to neoliberalism and questioned cinema’s potential to act in response to social and political pressures. The films examined here exemplify the arguments therein: *Blackrock* with its focus on the impact of industry and big business on society; *The Castle* and *Kenny*, which reveal much about the role played by cinema in establishing and maintaining neoliberal identity positions; and *The Finished People*, which gives a voice to the disadvantaged and reframes identity through its truthful representations. The analysis of these films shows a variety of approaches to the filmic treatment of neoliberalism and its impact on Australian society, but also suggests a
shortfall in its treatment by filmmakers who at times reinforce mainstream ideologies and at other times could possibly dig deeper into the root causes of social exclusion as discussed in the opening sections of this chapter.

Chapters 3 and 4, outline the research methodology and talk about how *Shelf Life* engaged with the concepts discussed in this chapter as it explores the position of the socially excluded and asks what conflict might arise if young people such as Kate fall through the cracks.
Chapter 3

Early Process: Methodology and Narrative Exploration

Methodology – the Screenplay as Research

This first section of Chapter 3 outlines my methodological approach and grounds it in existing arguments about the creative arts as research. As a screenwriter and filmmaker, I tend to begin by writing intuitively about something that vaguely interests me. In this case, that vague interest was the impact that the aspirational nature of capitalism has on economically disadvantaged young people living within contemporary Australia. The work that is produced during this initial phase of writing tends to be quite nebulous, but it becomes more cogent in subsequent drafts as I research backwards in order to understand the subject matter. This process of continual exploration in and around the subject matter then re-informs the work further as the ideas that have been explored shift and eventually become more condensed and clear.

According to Australian artist and art theorist Graeme Sullivan (2010, p. 110):

Knowledge creation in visual arts is recursive and constantly undergoes change as new experiences “talk back” through the process and progress of making art in research settings. This transformative feature also applies to the artist-researcher, who is very much an embodied part of the research process as visual arts knowledge is framed, encountered, critiqued, and created, as insight is revealed and communicated.
In this sense, the research pathway itself becomes the methodology because it shows how I progress from concept to concept in an effort to continually feed back into the work. It is practice- and action-based research, or what Donald A Schön (1995, p. 56) refers to as “reflecting-in-action”. Schön (1995, p. 131) describes the research process as “a web of moves, discovered consequences, implications, appreciations, and further moves”. Indeed, writing Shelf Life seemed at times directionless as I allowed the research to explore disparate paths of interest. Beginning as a single idea, it became quite nebulous, encompassing a number of ideas and influences – many of which would eventually become superfluous to the research as it became condensed and was whittled down to its essential ideas and concepts.

Film academic Robyn Stewart (2001) uses the term “bricolage” to describe visual arts research as “a complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like creation that represents the researcher’s stories, representations, understandings and interpretations of the world and the phenomena under investigation”. She argues (2001, p. 1) that the bricoleur appropriates many different theoretical frameworks and methodologies of qualitative research, “pieced together … providing solutions to a problem in a concrete situation”. Stewart’s description of the visual arts research process certainly rings true for this research project. I have selected from many areas of influence but the main resource upon which I have drawn is my own insider knowledge of the subject-matter.

I believe my specific experience and history, coming from a similar working-class background to my characters, has allowed me to access a sense of personal truth. Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg (2000, p. 4) argue that reflection “turns attention ‘inwards’ towards the person of the researcher”. Further to this, Joseph Maxwell
(1996, p. 38) argues that, in connecting with a research paradigm, “The explicit incorporation of your identity and experience in your research has gained wide theoretical and philosophical support.” Coming from an army family, I grew up in many places; however, when I was in the middle years of primary school, we did eventually settle in the sprawl west of Brisbane, south of the river. The majority of my formative years were spent in and around Ipswich, west of Brisbane, with a short period in Sydney’s Blacktown. While I don’t name any particular regions or suburbs in the screenplay, I do draw upon my own experience of growing up in these areas. My characters often hail from the same working-class background as mine. They are an amalgam of people I knew from the area when I was growing up, and of people who live there now, but there is no specific identifiable “real” person used as a source in the script – just imaginings that have fallen through my filter.

The theoretical framework within which this research project is formed is a Marxist reading of cinema and visual media, and the inherent ideological positions contained within those forms. As Jonathan Culler (1997, p. 143) points out, “For Marxism, texts belong to a superstructure determined by the economic base. To interpret cultural products is to relate them back to the base.” This research aims to do just that, by unpacking the process by which neoliberal capitalist ideology operates within cultural forms that work to subjugate the less economically secure members of Australian society. It examines rhetorical and visual forms of information that express an ideological position within a culture and tries to frame an understanding of that phenomenon through an application of theoretical perspectives, such as Marxism (with its focus on class struggle within capitalism), blended within my own positionality as the researcher. Operating from a Marxist perspective was perhaps due to my own personal biases. It was not a conscious decision to choose one
framework over another; rather, the approach seemed to settle on what was best suited to the intentions of the work, which was to question the existing hegemony.

Edward Said, who advocates counter-practice of hegemonic modes, has outlined a set of instructions or strategies that uncannily reflect the processes at which I arrived in my own work. Foster (1983, p. xiv) paraphrases these as “a critique of official representations, alternative uses of informational modes (like photography), and a recovery of (the history of) others”. In Shelf Life, I used ideological critique to deconstruct cultural forms of representation that perpetuate certain ideological positions. I have looked at the forms taken by film and, through an interrogation of practical methodologies, investigated “alternative uses of informational modes” to challenge audience-expected norms. I have also endeavoured to reframe historical perspectives about structures of belief – or, as Felicity Collins and Therese Davis (2004) term it, “backtrack” – over history in order to reframe our thinking in the present.

The result of this inquiry is a body of critical and creative work, much of which sits peripherally to the main screenplay. The peripheral works meant that I was able to test out ideas, allowing the research to feed back into itself. I have described this earlier as a symbiotic relationship, as ideas flow in both directions feeding the main work and the peripheral works concurrently. These works comprise a varying range of documents, including diaries of notes, the initial rehearsed reading at Metro Arts, a short mood piece filmed as a collaboration with Unn Lilleaas at Redcliffe, a script for an experimental short film that explores the use of form and metaphor, and finally an extensive process of improvisation with actors, which resulted in its own collection of notes, a loose research diary, scene ideas, character notes, filmed footage and a potential film in its own right. There are also several other thematically related
screenplays that were worked on concurrently, which allowed me to explore other characters and stories besides those explored in *Shelf Life*. Some of this work is discussed in the chapters that follow; however, the main text discussed is *Shelf Life*.

**Narrative Exploration**

*Shelf Life* had its beginnings in 2004 as a joke between some friends and I that for our next film we would make something populist and comedic about a disaffected, down-and-out teenage girl who worked the register in a supermarket. It was a joke at our own expense, aimed squarely at the socially focused work we’d been producing. Perhaps this joke arose in response to my encounter with the interviewer mentioned earlier and his quip that Australia could only support the idiosyncrasies of one Rolf de Heer, although I can’t say for sure as it certainly wasn’t intentional.

Regardless of its origins, the idea stuck and I soon became intrigued by this lonely disenchanted character. For some reason, she kept rising to the surface, so I began to delve further into who she might be. Increasingly, I saw the character reflected in those around me, and gradually something of more substance emerged that was sharply disparate from the earlier pastiche of the character. I had two obvious paths that I could choose for this character: a shallow vehicle for laughs or something that, in my mind, reflected people in all of their complexity. This suggested an early consideration of the style the film should take, and harks back to my earlier discussion about the art versus commerce debate.

It interested me that, in some way, I felt pushed as a filmmaker to present a character in a particular light that would satisfy commercial imperatives and appeal to a wider audience. Yet I was not interested at this point in allowing the screenplay to be influenced by such concerns. Yes, I wanted the characters to be engaging but I
also wanted to allow them to develop unencumbered by commercial pressures. Instead, I began to question what such pressures applied to storytellers might mean for the people my characters represented. Did I want to trivialise the lives of the young and poor, or did I want to reflect them with a sense of veracity? I became interested in exploring this dichotomy of representations and how each of those representational pathways might affect the socially excluded in terms of their societal influence. The character that evolved out of this process would eventually become Kate, the protagonist in *Shelf Life*.

In 2004, I produced a one-off play of select scenes from an early draft of the screenplay, originally named *Fly Girl* (see Appendix A) as part of the rehearsed reading program at the Metro Arts Theatre in Brisbane. The script was partially adapted for a theatrical performance and maintained a loose narrative that focused on the relationships between key characters. This allowed me to build a better picture of Kate (originally called Jules) and her mother; however, it ultimately short-changed the characters by not digging far enough into the social and political factors that were impacting upon them. It was a simple look at social exclusion and teenage pregnancy, which heavily referenced the genre conventions of social realism in its stylistic choices – all of which seem fairly clichéd upon reflection.

The Metro Arts rehearsed reading program is designed to garner feedback on projects in development. The feedback I received from the audience gave me some insight into where the project was lacking, but also some idea of its potential. I determined that the project was something worth pursuing in greater depth, and believed it would be suited to postgraduate research because, even though it tapped into the zeitgeist, the subject-matter seemed to be under-represented in Australian film output and I wanted to explore the shortfall. It also coalesced concepts that I had
explored in my earlier work – mainly to do with the potential for cinema to act as an agent for social change. I wanted to explore that aspect of my work in more depth as well.

Early on, I read *No Logo* (2001) by Naomi Klein, which discusses various ethical and moral failings within the workings of late twentieth-century capitalism and consumer culture. Of most relevance to my research was the section “No Choice”, where Klein talks about big brands using their dominance to manipulate people into consuming their products, simply due to a lack of other choices. I saw a connection to the Kate story and a potential explanation for her disaffection. Coupled with some of the things I was observing in the behaviour of those around me at the time, I began to question more deeply the systemic forces at play. I became particularly interested in the behaviour of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who were grappling with the idea of aspiration and consumerism, and the product fetishism associated with the possession of new technologies.

Around the same time I also read *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough* (2005) by Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, which outlines the impact modern consumer culture has on the individual and on their sense of identity. It posits that we suffer from *affluenza*, a condition of the neoliberal era characterised by an addiction to consumption, which leads to various states of emptiness and disaffection. In the early drafts, I used Kate to explore the concept of affluenza and its impact on the poor. What happens to their sense of identity if they cannot participate? And what does it mean for them if their identity is not validated or recognised? This can be seen in the red dress sub-plot, which was an early inclusion. In the end, the red dress came to symbolise much more than a simple
object of Kate’s fetishisation. The importance of the red dress is discussed in further
detail later in this chapter.

By the time I enrolled in the Doctorate of Visual Arts in 2006, the screenplay had
been renamed *Shelf Life* – a title that plays on the fact that the story is partially set in
a supermarket, the ultimate locus of consumerism, but also references the
commodification of all facets of life under late capitalism and suggests the
impermanence and expendability of the individual within that system. I wanted the
name *Shelf Life* to suggest that the neoliberal individual was also subject to a kind of
use-by date, bringing in the idea of people existing as human capital – a mere
function of a larger system.

The early focus had not moved far from an exploration of the impact of affluenza.
This was coupled with a distracting pregnancy plotline that would endure well into
subsequent drafting. I approached the exploration of theme intuitively in the early
drafts and a great deal of time was spent nutting out the various elements into a
uniform story that had a logical structure and believable outcomes. The focus would
eventually shift to gaining a better understanding of the causes of social exclusion
and to exploring its impact on the young and economically disadvantaged, but in
these early stages I was wholly concerned with getting the basic character and story
down on paper.

The journey of this research largely reflects the growth of the character Kate from a
mere fragment of a person into a fully-fledged individual with a connected and bound
social existence and all the complexity that goes with being a real person. It also
reflects my personal discovery and understanding of the fundamental factors or
mechanisms that went towards forming this character and her story within a very
particular socio-political-economic setting. These early drafts, which were written in
the first phase of writing between 2006 and 2009, morphed greatly as my understanding of the systemic forces deepened and my thoughts shifted to thinking that if people could catch affluenza then perhaps the political and economic system might be the virus. I wondered whether a film could inoculate an audience from extreme forms of this virus.

As I began to look more closely at instances of neoliberal ideology and rhetoric, I began to get more of a sense of how people in Kate’s position are impacted by the system and I started trying to work those concepts into the screenplay, for example the television advertisement plot line with its exploration of identity and agency that is woven through the script. Much of that research is set out in Chapter 2. This background research informed my understanding of the neoliberal phenomenon and greatly influenced the screenplay. The following sections of this chapter will outline how I engaged with that research in the screenplay.

**Dealing with Social Exclusion**

To a large extent, I have tried to avoid using obvious and explicit examples of exclusion that might take place between characters from different status groups. I was not interested in *Shelf Life* being an exploration of power differentials between classes. Instead, I have tried to capture the ways in which social exclusion manifests structurally through things like identity positioning and representation – for example, the mocking of Kate in the television commercial with its underlying impetus to conform and fit in, and through institutional rules and regulations (DoCS, Centrelink etc.) – things that filter down from the ideology and rhetoric of the system at the governmental, industrial and economic levels. It would have been easy to show conflict between these different class groups, and the message of exclusion would
have been clear and obvious, but the implications of the systemic causes of
discrimination would have been diluted – and it was the system that I wanted to bring
into focus, not just how it manifests socially and personally in conflict situations. In
any case, social exclusion is often hidden and subtle in its operation, subsuming
everyday life, buried in the fabric of our interactions rather than in open conflict.

For example, in *Shelf Life*, the scenes between Marnee and Kate are loaded with
class tension. Marnee, whose name sounds like “money”, comes from Victor’s old
life, when his family had money. The tension appears when Marnee’s easy and
confident nature is juxtaposed with Kate’s desperation to maintain a grasp on Victor
– who, for Kate, represents the promise of a better future. In the following scene,
Kate is confronting Victor over a conversation he is having with Marnee.

**KATE**
Why are you talking to her? I thought you didn’t like her.

**VICTOR**
She’s getting me a job in management. It’s a great opportunity.
I really feel like I can do something with it.

**KATE**
Really? Well that’s great. Maybe we can find a place together.

Marnee overhears this.

**VICTOR**
I really think you need to leave and we’ll talk later.

**KATE**
Later when? When? You don’t even have a phone.
Are you gonna call me? Victor?
Kate is becoming loud and Victor is becoming embarrassed.

MARNEE
Victor, is everything alright?

KATE
(to Marnee)
Why don’t you fuck off?

VICTOR
(trying to quiet her)
Just calm down.

These kinds of sub textual interactions signal differences in perceived status without the need for overt statements of the social conflict.

As a result of this focus, characters do not give voice to petty manifestations of difference and disparity. Instead, a voice is given to the excluded, to reframe our understanding of these people by undermining the typically presented image of them, thereby empowering and allowing a different representation to speak. By rejecting the negative stereotypes of the warring poor found in many media representations, which reinforce the norms of an exclusionary system, I sought to represent the characters in a more nuanced and truthful way.

**Framing Neoliberalism**

*Seeking Asylum at Home*

There are a number of different ways in which *Shelf Life* frames a conversation about neoliberalism, and these will be discussed in this section. One instance of political rhetoric that the screenplay draws upon in order to highlight a disconnection between what is said by politicians, what is pushed in the mainstream media and
what exists on the ground is the “rising tide lifts all boats” aphorism. This metaphor, widely attributed to John F. Kennedy, is frequently used by politicians of the modern Australian era, often in tandem with the suggestion that a trickle-down economy will spread benefits to all sectors of society. It makes the claim that all members of a society benefit from a strong and robust economy. *Shelf Life* explores the idea that some individuals in fact struggle to stay afloat regardless of how successfully the economy appears to be functioning.

It is no coincidence that I have chosen to undermine the “rising tide” metaphor with the image of asylum seekers on boats attempting to reach Australia, along with the sequence where Kate dreams she is drowning in front of the refugee boat. As I write, the asylum seeker debate continues, with the Abbott led LNP government pushing a hard-line ideological agenda of exclusion, with its Operation Sovereign Borders (Australian Government n.d.). My aim here was to draw attention to the idea of exclusion – and indeed, many of the characters in *Shelf Life* endure tenuous circumstances with regard to their sanctuary. Disconnected from the mainstream, they struggle on the margins of a rigid and repressive system that does not recognise them and literally refuses to house them. This theme is set up early in the piece with the plotline surrounding the character Jade, and reinforced by the inclusion of several other characters who also strive for security.

Kate watches a news report about asylum seekers stranded on a boat off the Australian coast. Soon afterwards, Kate’s friend Jade runs away from home and finds refuge on the streets, only to then mysteriously vanish after Kate takes her into the family home. Kate then sees an apparition appear before her of the boy on the boat that she had watched in the earlier news report, and at this point she herself begins to sink in the flooded stormwater drain. Further to this, Kate’s own domestic
situation is fragile, due to the threat that the DoCS officer will remove Kate and her sister along with the added potential that the family home will be sold from under them. Then there is Victor, whose own domestic situation is represented as being temporary (he lives in a caravan) after his family lost their own home years earlier.

The theme of exclusion is again reinforced when Kate sees the new migrant family at her auntie’s work place, a migrant support centre. These are all significant examples of how the different characters struggle to stay afloat. The aim was to bring into focus a disconnection between political rhetoric and lived reality.

A more explicit manifestation of this theme is the image of Victor’s caravan, which first appears early on in the MALL DELIVERIES AREA scene:

EXT. MALL DELIVERIES AREA – DAY

Around the back of the mall, Kate and Jade sit in the gutter sharing a cigarette. Behind them Em, Flick and Sairs are getting changed, going all out with high heels and revealing dresses. Joel and the other boys stand by smoking and laughing amongst themselves at the girls changing.

...

Kate’s attention is drawn to the other side of the road, to where several ratty-looking caravans are parked in a vacant lot at the back of an amusement arcade called DREAMLAND. Plastered above the caravan on a huge otherwise featureless expanse of red-brick wall that makes up the back end of the shops are the words ‘DREAMLAND WELCOMES YOU’. The words are chalky and faded like some relic of happier, more prosperous times.
This caravan on the vacant block of land is meant as a critique of the myth of the Lucky Country, an embodiment of the political promise of prosperity and inclusivity that has turned out to be false. For me, the juxtaposition of the promise with the reality reveals a certain dirty truth. In a sense, Victor’s caravan represents all of the marginalised characters in the screenplay, who exist in a kind of realm of the temporary with their eyes fixed firmly on a false promise. This thematic exploration of the neoliberal promise of inclusivity, supposedly found in the act of consuming, is further explored in *Shelf Life* by the narrative taking place in and around a shopping mall. Next I discuss the importance of how the setting and location allows for a critique of the neoliberal structuring of daily life.

**The Pursuit of Happiness**

In the early drafts, I chose to critique the concept of consumerism by setting part of the story in a shopping mall; however, as the writing progressed, this location became much more critical to the exploration of how neoliberal capitalism organises the ways in which we live our lives. The disconnect between the promise and the reality of the ‘boats rising’ and Dreamland metaphors extends aptly to the kinds of empty promises found in suburban shopping malls – those icons of consumerism that house the promise of affluence, happiness and fulfilment, and serve as the locale where the neoliberal capitalist dream is played out.

The way the characters in *Shelf Life* buy into the affluent lifestyle is set up in the same MALL DELIVERIES AREA scene mentioned earlier, when the girls in the group that Kate is with get dressed for shopping, obviously aspiring to some idealised image of sophistication and beauty that has been projected onto them by outside forces.
FLICK
(To the boys)

Why don’t you take a picture?

They mock the paparazzi. Flick gives them the finger as she struggles with a shoe. Kate and Jade eye the girls over their shoulders with wry judgment.

The girls don't quite pull off their efforts to fit in. Kate, in contrast, is written to appear more contemplative about these choices, so it holds more significance when, in a later scene, she too chooses to try to access the power of inclusion promised by such an affluent lifestyle. The mall signifies hope for them.

Kate lives in and around the shopping mall; she inhabits it not only physically but mentally as well. You can see the mall from her house and later, at Jade’s house, we can see from a different angle the same massive edifice of the shopping mall across the rooftops. This image of the shopping mall hovering constantly in the background, like some towering Foucauldian panopticon, is repeated throughout the screenplay as a rather direct comment on the omnipresent and omniscient nature of capitalism, suggesting that it is somehow woven into the very fabric of everyday life, heavy and immovable, omnipresent, always watching like some silent monolith. In this case, however, social discipline comes not from the prison, as it does in Foucault’s metaphor (1977), but from the coerced drive to consume and to conform to the neoliberal agenda. It is a form of social control that filters down and extends out from centralised industrial, economic and political mechanisms.

In the sections above, I have outlined some of the ways in which Shelf Life paints the overall landscape of life lived under neoliberal capitalism by showing not only the drive of excluded individuals, such as Kate, to survive and attain legitimacy, but the web of policy, rhetoric and industry that structures their existence. Next I deal more
specifically with the treatment of character in *Shelf Life*, and consider the role of representation within the neoliberal system.

**The Neoliberal Individual**

Typical of the neoliberal agenda is the push to identify people as individuals rather than as a collective. This encourages competitiveness, and in Kate’s modes of social connection we can see an exploration of the impact neoliberal individualism has on community and the individual. Kate pursues people who she thinks can lift her out of her position and, for the most part, struggles with the idea of joining together with her family except when it will benefit her. Thus, although she is not entirely self-centred, as the Jade plotline shows, her motivation for keeping her mother on the right dose of medication and her sister out of trouble is to keep the officials at bay, thereby maintaining her own dubious refuge. She is not motivated by any kind of benevolent altruism towards her family. Her manipulation of Victor also attests to this, and she can appear callous in her behaviour towards others. This is not a criticism of her, for in this schema she is merely a product of her environment.

The elusive character, Jade, stands as a symbol of Kate’s longing for a connection to community that just is not there. Jade offers a chance for Kate to reject the kind of competitive individualism imposed on her. This speaks metaphorically about the erosion of communal bonds, as individuals are pushed into a competitive paradigm. In the end, we do see Kate’s position shift in this regard. After everything she experiences, she seems to come to a realisation that if she cannot save herself then at least she can save her younger, less empowered sister. To do this, she must sacrifice the home in which both she and her mother live. She calls in the DoCS officer, knowing full well that it means the certain break-up of the family unit and the
likely sale of the house. But it also guarantees the salvation of her younger sister by ensuring she no longer has to return to an untenable environment. Instead she can remain in the safety of her own father’s more stable home – Kate and her sister share a mother but have different fathers. Choosing to enter into abject poverty in order to save one member of her family from hardship marks Kate’s ultimate rejection of the contract of neoliberal individualism.

Early in 2010, during the process of redrafting the screenplay, I became aware that my initial focus on political rhetoric and policy – as outlined in the sections above, where I dealt mostly with framing the themes and issues – did not fully deal with the ways in which these characters are actually subjugated and excluded by the system. I started to look more closely at the concept of identity, and this led me to consider the positioning of identity and how people are socially excluded through representational practices. I began to assess what I had written to this point in light of these ideas. I wanted to draw attention to the processes whereby media representation perpetuates an ideological position. With this in mind, I set out to analyse how people are typically represented, particularly those from excluded demographics. My aim was to challenge those representations and thus subvert the ideology.

**Identity: Redressing Representation**

We experience the struggle for legitimacy primarily through Kate’s eyes. Her story raises questions about the limits of economically and culturally determined identity positions. I have argued earlier that films such as *Kenny* essentially normalise the position of the poor, pegging them as affable yet laughable Bogans. *Shelf Life*, on the other hand, highlights the challenges faced by the poor in legitimating their
Early Process: Methodology and Narrative Exploration

identity in an exclusionary system, as they strive to be included and accepted within the wider culture.

The dismantling and exposing of neoliberal identity positions was something with which I was only partially concerned when writing early drafts of the screenplay. During that time, my intention was primarily to explore the process of identity construction and how it might apply to a group of characters who I thought were marginalised due to their low incomes. Subsequent research lent more perspective to the ideas I was exploring in those early drafts, and allowed me to refine my ideas in this area. I came to understand that these characters were not just marginalised due to low incomes, but were actively subjugated and positioned as outsiders by the neoliberal system. So my exploration of identity shifted to take into account just how the system imposes itself.

I began to ask myself, “How can I enunciate the complexity of life lived under the neoliberal capitalist system without resorting to demonising the economically disadvantaged, who it seems in Australian cinema/media are already often portrayed as dysfunctional?” Responding to this question involved “opening up representational practices that allow for more complex registers of cinematic signification” (Marciniak 2003, p. 64). These registers might give voice to a critique of positions that appear to be ubiquitous and unquestioned. In so doing Shelf Life does draw on some of those tropes of violence and dysfunctionality but it does so with the intention of remaining non-judgemental and non-sensationalised.

Kate embodies the kind of individualism that is propounded by neoliberal political rhetoric. She desires everything she is supposed to desire; she is aspirational, making moves to get ahead. She lands a job and covets a red dress in a shop window, which she simplistically sees as a kind of talisman to cure her ills. When she
turns to the dress at a crucial moment towards the end of the story, it provides insight into the important role this commodity plays in her desire for a better life. Tellingly, she turns to a material object at a time of crisis, rather than seeking any kind of communal connection. If we see the dress as representing the promise of capitalism, it could be argued that when the dress fails her, so too has capitalism.

Thus, when Kate tries the dress on at the end of the film, hoping to win Victor over, it presents a tragic vision as she straddles two identities. The way Kate puts the dress on in her bedroom is imbued with defeat. Donning the dress is almost an act of self-humiliation in that she recognises the failed identity yet still chooses to inhabit it.

INT. KATE’S BEDROOM – AFTERNOON

...

She looks at the security tag clipped very securely to the dress. She tries to prise it off but is unsuccessful so decides to cut it off, attempting to make the cut as small as possible with nail scissors. She tries it on in front of the mirror. The cut has made a noticeable hole so she puts a puffy jacket on over the dress to hide the hole then stares at her reflection. This is not the image the dress promised in the shop window. She exits.

While Kate still desires the life promised to her, at the same time her disaffection makes it evident that she no longer really believes it is attainable. She resents both the dress and Victor, and everything they have come to stand for in terms of a secure future.

The limits of these neoliberal identity positions are challenged most obviously in the juxtaposition of the Kate we have come to know over the course of the story and the
Kate who is simplified, misunderstood, and trivialised in the advertising material produced for the supermarket where she works. Kate is ridiculed when her image is used in the advertisement. The poster produced for the advertisement can be seen as simultaneously mocking her failure and representing her aspirations. It both chastises her and points her in the right direction. The failure of the red dress to fulfil its promise of transformation in the desperate supermarket scene when she confronts Víctor for his abandonment exemplifies the false allure of capitalism for people in Kate’s position. This is reinforced when she defaces one of the posters containing her image and, later in the supermarket, rips down the poster, which openly ridicules her identity. The iconoclasm of this act, as she symbolically reclaims her identity, suggests that a nascent self-awareness might be emerging.

Referencing the character Alex (Malcolm McDowell), the protagonist in Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick 1971), Kate reworks her image, applying heavier makeup and cutting her hair, fulfilling the stereotype of violent and impoverished youth. This is a strategy designed to make obvious and destabilise such stereotypes about the poor. Kate embodies the hyper sensationalised imagery seen on nightly tabloid current affairs programs while overtly mocking it. She becomes a caricature of a violent, under-educated stereotype. This representation of Kate mobilises stereotypes of the ugliness of poverty to question the ways in which the poor have typically been portrayed by political rhetoric and popular culture. The aim of juxtaposing this exaggerated version of Kate with her more nuanced self is to enable spectators to recognise how their own ways of looking are framed, thereby enabling reflection on the ways people are represented and the practices through which identity is constructed and contrived.
Whereas Kate, in the act of taking on this new persona, appears to concede to the societal pressures around her, the transformation she undergoes can be seen as an act of defiance of neoliberal ideology. The question arises of whether Kate rejects the idealised image of the functioning/contributing neoliberal individual. Is it in fact her choice? This also raises the issue of agency, and of the ability of people to move within the system. In the next section, I look at how *Shelf Life* explores the issue of agency as it relates to the marginalised in our society.

**Agency**

One could argue that, in order to escape the system, Kate chooses to self-destruct. But I maintain that she effectively has no other choice. The reality is that she is faced with her world being annihilated because she does not have the economic means to change it. It is not my intention to suggest that all bad deeds lead to an untimely end or that ‘you reap what you sow’, but rather to question received wisdom about the social order and our options within it. Kate’s apparent demise raises the question of agency and the conditions for social mobility within the system.

In the film’s opening credits, we see a bird that has set up home high in the shopping mall rafters, removed from its "natural" habitat and adapting to an artificially constructed world. My intention here was to create at the outset a metaphor for the organisation of society as it is constructed under neoliberalism. I wanted to question the structures within which we exist. We see the same bird nesting in the closing images, which sets up a sense of circularity and stasis, prompting questions about the possibility of agency.

The bird/wing metaphor is also intended to represent Kate’s desire for freedom, and recurs several times throughout the story. It may be a trite and clichéd concept, but it
is one that feels true to the character. In this light, the bird nesting in the shopping mall serves as both premonition and confirmation – an embodiment of the way Kate’s idea of freedom literally resides within a vacuous shopping mall. She has bought into a hollow dream, one where freedom is fully commodified.

This symbolism reaches its zenith when the car in which Kate is travelling is hit by the truck bearing an insignia of a pair of chrome wings on its grill together with the words “Fly Girl” – a reference to the original title – painted above it. This is intended to suggest that, for Kate, the promise of freedom is a cruel hoax. Her desire for freedom and financial security, and her eternal striving to attain these, prove to be her ultimate undoing. The symbol of freedom literally smacks her in the face. The idea that freedom has been commodified and sold to Kate is also at play here. Through the blood and shards of glass and the glare of the truck’s headlights, Kate sees the wings on the grill and smiles. The moment is ambiguous. Does she smile because she sees the irony in this final “delivery” of freedom? The truck – a tool for the exchange of commodities – is what kills her. Contemplating the cost of Kate’s rebellion against a system that has rejected her, does the audience wonder whether she has died trapped in her own passive delusional state or reached a final awareness that delivers her freedom, even at the moment of her death.

I mentioned earlier in this exegesis that one of the goals of this research was to open a dialogue with the viewer. The apparent bleakness of the narrative certainly raises questions in the writer, as it no doubt does in the reader/viewer. Some would call this ending nihilistic. Others would say audiences do not want to escape to the cinema to see a world such as this. As the writer, I accept that such viewpoints will be levelled at the script, but in the world of Shelf Life this is the only possible ending. Having said that, at the time of writing these early drafts, while I was content with the way
Shelf Life dealt with its themes, I was still concerned with how effective the writing might be at starting a dialogue with the viewer in which they were actively engaged with the film’s themes. In the next section, I outline my thoughts regarding these early concerns.

A Return to Work and Questioning My Early Process

After an extended period of time away due to illness, I returned to the research in early 2012 and began to reassess the work undertaken up to that date. The early drafts of Shelf Life that had been written prior to 2010 foregrounded social exclusion as a narrative concern. They were about framing the neoliberal paradigm and exploring how the characters were embedded within that world. I was questioning the plight of the individual, questioning the causal factors that lead to social exclusion, questioning the will of the individual to change their situation and questioning what factors controlled subjective awareness and the will of the individual. In answering these questions, the screenplay shifted from a simple exploration of the end-product of social exclusion to take in a consideration of the functioning of ideology. This involved identifying and isolating the ideological messages embedded within political rhetoric and mainstream representations, and seeking ways to subvert or challenge those within the screenplay narrative. I wanted to create a vision of these characters that was free of negative stereotypes and instead imbued with a sense of truth. The aim was that Shelf Life might, in some way, work to counteract the effects that a proliferation of such rigid mainstream ideological messages and simplistic representational practices could have on the disadvantaged. Key to my assessment of this was a reconsideration of how the characters functioned in Shelf Life.
Character and Authenticity

The screenplay had been through several drafts and had reached a point where I felt it fleshed out the theme sufficiently, but upon reflection it became apparent to me that the characters were too “ventriloquised”. I was concerned about their ability to express the themes effectively without becoming overly didactic and preachy, and in these early drafts that is exactly what they were: contrived and manufactured to service the political and social concepts the screenplay explored rather than being characters with a voice that would resonate with an audience. I felt that the writing was too heavy-handed, and relied too much on storytelling devices rather than the characters and the action unfolding in a more organic way.

I began to think that a reliance on conventional storytelling devices ran contradictory to the goals that I had set out to achieve, in that the writing adhered to mainstream modes of storytelling. Reading critically, I was able to identify certain clichéd narrative devices that had been worked into the script unintentionally. I believed that their presence spoke volumes about the way certain cinematic conventions were like an innate and unquestioned language upon which I drew when writing. I thought this was evidence of the strength and undetectable pervasiveness of dominant ideological forms.

Filmmaker and academic Nathaniel Kohn (2000) reflects on the role of the screenwriter in Hollywood, suggesting that an adherence to such dominant ideological form, as discussed above, is not only the modus operandi for screenwriters in Hollywood but is also a condition of their employment. He argues
(2000, p. 491) that “screenwriters write in a highly restrictive form, and they do so from a rigidly constructed position of insecurity within the overall Hollywood system … These very real constraints of form and context … underpin the hegemonic forces at play in Hollywood." I wondered whether I was unwittingly submitting to such pressures as well. Kohn describes the words these writers produce as being “nonintimidating … words that cry out to be loved” (2000, p. 490). The result is that the writer’s individual voice becomes homogenised as they succumb to the “capital-generating entertainment apparatus” (2000, p. 491). Was I, in a similar way to Kohn’s description, simply following suit by repeating mainstream forms of storytelling? I was keen to challenge instances in my own writing where I felt I had unconsciously adhered to such forms.

Of concern was the heavy reliance on metaphorical devices, such as those outlined in this chapter, that I thought were distractions from the real story of the characters. In addition to these, I also identified several set-ups and pay-offs that I felt also served as distractions. For example, Kate’s early boyfriend, who worked as a mechanic and would come to pay dearly for rejecting Kate, had certain careless characteristics highlighted in early scenes that telegraphed his eventual demise in a workplace accident. This I felt took away from the immediate experience of the character, and would instead prompt the viewer to be distracted by the telegraphing and the eventual cathartic satisfaction of seeing his inevitable demise as a kind of moral come-uppance. I was worried that I was thinking for the viewer. There were several instances of this kind of writing that prompted me to feel as though I were being influenced by the language of cinema without even realising it, co-opted so well that I was not even aware I was perpetuating dominant conventions.
At this stage, I was beginning to think that I wanted to strip the writing back to a simpler and more direct approach, one that eschewed all elements of narrative artifice, and return to the character as the storyteller. Instead, the script seemed to step right off the page of Robert McKee’s *Story* (1999) or Christopher Vogler’s *The Writer’s Journey* (2007) in its adherence to prescriptive screenwriting practices. These are books designed to help the screenwriter tell stories that will be more commercially successful. Assessing the script in these terms, I was able to identify elements from Vogler’s book, such as Kate’s quest or ‘hero’s journey’. Other characters represented ‘mentors’ and ‘threshold guardians’. These were characters ‘performing’ certain roles in the narrative that could be linked to a direct commercial function of making the story more saleable. I began to wonder what the implications of this were with regard to how the characters in *Shelf Life* were tethered to the commercial imperatives of cinema. I wondered what that meant for the work, considering that it set out to critique the way capitalism functions through media representations. How could the characters in *Shelf Life* perform these commercial functions and at the same time critique that very same thing? I felt this was a major contradiction in the work that would eventually need to be confronted and challenged.

I began to wonder whether counteracting my own conventional impulses could allow me to destabilise what was being seen and how it was being seen. I commenced a process of breaking down the familiar strategies that I employed – the narrative framework or the aesthetic scaffolding through which ideology is housed within the text. I recognised that this was a way of calling into question the mechanism through which ideological positions are communicated and maintained, and I began to see the link between this and the thematic concerns of the work. I believed that breaking
this conventional framework – of the relationship or conveyor belt between text and viewer expectation – would lead to undermining the illusionistic inevitabilities that come with satisfying those expectations, and would thus place the viewer in a position of active engagement. It was about enabling awareness.

At this point, I was frustrated by the road block I had hit with the writing, and started thinking about new methods that I could employ to overcome the problems the research was facing. I wanted to find ways to break free of the conventional formal strategies of mainstream narrative filmmaking by pulling apart some of those strategies and undermining the ways in which they fed into viewer expectations. The big change came when the focus shifted from thinking about the writing strictly in terms of theme to instead incorporating a consideration of how cinematic form plays into the hands of dominant ideologies that normalise and subjugate; and searching for ways to challenge that. I expressed these concerns to my supervisors, Pat Laughren and Margaret McVeigh, who both encouraged me to pursue an idea I had about exploring alternative approaches to the writing process that used improvisation as a writing technique. I now asked, “How can I in some way reveal the representational mechanism?” My focus moved to questioning how ideology functions through form rather than addressing ideology as a thematic concern as I had done previously.
Chapter 4

Late Process: Aesthetic Exploration

Exposing the Seams

This chapter is concerned primarily with a consideration of how the aesthetics of cinema interacts with ideology, and what effect dominant/alternative forms might have on the viewer. After my dissatisfaction with the early drafts and with what I perceived as their lack of capacity to engage, I began to assess how the script could be revised so that it might communicate in a more authentic way. This led me to take a closer look at aesthetic theory in order to gain a better understanding of how film is constructed and received.

During this phase of the research, I questioned how visual and aural elements as they are shaped by cinematography, mise-en-scène and sound, and conjured in the blueprint – that is, the script – might perpetuate dominant ideologies through their adherence to widely accepted narratives and aesthetics that are linked intrinsically to the maintenance of hegemonic ways of seeing. This interested me for two reasons. The first relates to how this concept affects the characters in *Shelf Life* with regard to their emancipation; however, more importantly, I was concerned with how *Shelf Life* itself communicates with the potential viewer.

One of the key concerns of this research has been the concept of conscious awareness as it applies to people living within the neoliberal paradigm, and considering how people might unconsciously be manipulated into behaviour that is complicit with the over-arching economic system. I became interested in exploring how that system functions in relation to the individual, through forms of mass
communication such as cinema, to create a structure that houses and spreads dominant ideologies that deeply affect our ways of living. Using Kate as the conduit in the narrative explorations of the early drafts, I addressed some of the political rhetoric that filters down into media narratives, myths and representations that result in social exclusion. I was interested in Kate’s awareness of how the system operated upon her, and I felt that the early drafts explored this reasonably well through the narrative. However, they did not address how *Shelf Life* itself might be implicated in the subjugation of the viewer through an adherence to an aesthetic that emanated from the hegemony, or indeed how *Shelf Life* might critique that phenomenon and potentially create awareness in the viewer about how the system functions.

As mentioned in the last chapter, I felt that the early drafts of *Shelf Life* seemed to emanate from a well-worn language of cinema. In my view, they were tethered to a particular aesthetic, and I was not aiming to make a film that fell in line with other hegemonic texts and drew unquestioningly on their language. In order for *Shelf Life* to properly question the influence of neoliberal ideology on people, I felt it was paramount that I address these aspects of the screenplay. I now became focused on developing a method in my writing that would allow for a dialogue to be established with the viewer about the nature of ideology – one that was not solely based on narrative, but also incorporated an investigation into how different aesthetic approaches could better reveal and undermine the functioning of ideology in media texts. Key to this was a focus on the mindful engagement with the text. This chapter outlines how these concepts influenced the later drafts of *Shelf Life*, which were written after returning to the work in 2012.
Challenging Ways of Viewing

There is a long history of thought in the fields of sociology, philosophy and art theory about the nature of illusion associated with mainstream media. An influential approach proposes that mass media establish a paradigm whereby we, as viewers, are massaged into submission not only by the social narratives and ideological perspectives housed in media narratives but also by their formalistic aesthetic modes. Many scholars, including the philosophers Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1975), believe that the Hollywood version of mass entertainment operates formalistically to subdue and distract us as viewers, encouraging us to suspend disbelief and willingly allow ourselves to be swept up into a frenzy of spectacle, empathy and cathartic release that renders us essentially immobile.

In their book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1975), Adorno and Horkheimer outline the industrial nature of the culture industry as being characterised by popular, mass-produced, mainstream media, which Adorno terms “low art”, with the prime example being the Hollywood blockbuster. As Adorno (1975, p. 17) says, “The concepts of order which it [the culture industry] hammers into human beings are always those of the status quo. They remain unquestioned, unanalyzed and undialectically presupposed, even if they no longer have any substance for those who accept them.” He goes on to argue (1975, p. 17) that, “The power of the culture industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness.” This occurs not only through narrative reinforcement of particular ideas and concepts about the world, but also through how stories are constructed and communicated aesthetically, via form that is seamless, palatable and easily digested, thereby concealing its ideological message.
The types of aesthetics practised by the culture industry, Adorno (1991, p. 93) contends, “appear so rigidly and so frequently that they are no longer perceived in their own right but only as repetitions whose perpetual sameness always expresses an identical meaning”. It is the constant reinforcement and reproduction of a particular way of presenting and viewing the world that he argues is illusory in its universality. On the other hand, he maintains (1972, p. 135) that “high art”, which is characterised by works that sit in opposition to the culture industry, “keeps faith precisely by its freedom from the end of the false universality”. He argues (1991, p. 72) that high art strives to overcome this universality, “through the force of its very construction”, suggesting work that draws on authentic aesthetic form, unencumbered by the influence of the culture industry, can somehow overcome “its own oppressive weight”.

Jacques Rancière (2009, p. 85) argues for the breaking down of aesthetic representation, stating that, “The aesthetic break has generally been understood as a break with the regime of representation or the mimetic regime.” He argues that the aesthetic break can be conceived of as “not the abolition of the image in direct presence, but its emancipation from the unifying logic of action; it is not a rupture in the relationship between the intelligible and the sensible, but a new status of the figure” (2009, p. Loc 1612). Here Rancière argues for the image to be untethered from the established “regime” of aesthetic meaning that we, as viewers of media, films and art, have come to know so well, and in so doing, create a new way of seeing that looks beyond unquestioned hegemonic form. As Rancière says, it is “a clash of heterogeneous elements provoking a rupture in ways of seeing and, therewith, an examination of the causes of that oddity” (2009, p. Loc 1010). This way
of thinking has the potential to bring about awareness and mindfulness in the viewer, and was a path that I was keen to explore with *Shelf Life*.

How these aesthetic ideas have been played out in practical terms by others is multifarious, manifested in numerous forms of reflexive work and postmodern aesthetic critique spread across wide-ranging disciplines. In terms of performative practices, though, these concepts have most notably been explored in the theatrical work of Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, who essentially took differing approaches to solving the same problem. Brecht advocated a critical distance that allowed one to be conscious of the mechanism of representation and critically engage with the content. Artaud rejected this critical distance, and instead advocated a visceral immersion that enabled the audience to feel and live the experience in order to gain greater insight and understanding.

The methodological approaches of Brecht and Artaud, along with the aesthetic concepts outlined by Adorno and Rancière, remained at the forefront of my thoughts as I began to tackle the redrafting. The research now shifted to take in the complex question, “What are the conditions required for the screenplay to generate conscious engagement and what consequences does this have for rethinking culturally defined identity positions and their impact on the socially excluded?” Next I outline how I set about answering that question.

**Incorporating Liminality**

At some stage during the research, I came across the work of academic and theatre director Richard Schechner (1985) and that of anthropologist Victor Turner (1979). According to Graham St John (2008, p. 3), taken together their work “proved critical to the formation of performance studies”. Turner outlines how, in one collaboration,
he melded theatre with anthropology as a pedagogical approach to teaching ethnography to students that would allow them to “turn back to ethnographies armed with the understanding that comes from ‘getting inside the skin’ of members of other cultures” (Turner 1979, p. 81). The process immersed the students in the world of the subjects under observation, an approach that Turner speculated would lead to the students achieving an awareness and better understanding of the cultural dynamics and idiosyncrasies of the other. In a way, this is similar to Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty* in its immersive practices; as a concept, this would later become important to my process of improvisation as I saw it as a way to potentially connect with audiences.

**Liminality Defined**

Initially, what struck me most about the Turner/Schechner dialogue and Turner’s ethnographic work in general was the concept of liminality, something upon which Turner built during his research into the rituals of small-scale tribal cultures in Africa. According to St John (2008, p. 5), Turner understood liminality to be “a temporary breach of structure whereby the familiar may be stripped of certitude and the normative unhinged, an interlude wherein conventional social, economic, and political life may be transcended”. This appeared to echo the concepts outlined by Adorno and Rancière, so I became interested in its potential.

Liminality refers to the middle phase of ritual events – for example, initiation rites. It is the feeling of dislocation experienced by the subject who is at the centre of the ritual – one who moves from a state of knowing to unknowing and back to knowing again but is somehow changed. Turner (1974, pp. 38–41) divides the liminal into four phases: breach, crisis, redressive action and reintegration. As he describes it, “The limen … is a no-man’s-land betwixt-and-between the structural past and the
structural future as anticipated by the society’s normative control of biological development” (1990, p. 11). He describes ordinary life outside of liminal experience as indicative, invariant and rational, whereas liminality can perhaps be described as a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to and anticipating postliminal existence (1990, p. 12).

Importantly, he argues that the fourth phase, reintegration, can result in either, “(a) the restoration of peace and “normality” among the participants, or (b) social recognition of irremediable or irreversible breach or schism” (1990, p. 9). It was this threshold between stasis and schism in which I became most interested.

**The Liminal in Shelf Life**

With regard to *Shelf Life* I was particularly interested in how Turner’s concept of liminality could be applied to both the cultural and political landscape of the screenplay’s narrative, and to the characters and the liminal space they inhabit. I also considered its application to cinematic form itself, and the experience of viewing the finished film. Turner argues that liminality can also be thought of in terms other than ritual, in episodes of conflict that sit in opposition to “ordinary” life and, as Clair Schwartz (2013, p. 43) notes, liminality can manifest in states which are, "emotional, sexual, developmental, economic or political". Thus I could see the potential for its broad application to the work. Would the film maintain the status quo or would it possess the potential to cause a schism in the viewing experience? I was beginning to wonder whether liminality as a concept had the potential to act as a tool that could engage the viewer through both immersion and dislocation.
Turner’s account of liminality suggests stripping out known and understood signs, symbols and referents, and reassembling them into a new ambiguous form and structure – one that confounds not only the viewer, but perhaps the creator as well. It is a reconceptualisation of what Rancière (2009) calls the “mimetic regime”, which does not reject it altogether, but rather transcends it. Creatively speaking, this got me thinking about how the narrative aesthetic of my project might be reworked to reflect these new ideas. In terms of character, it allowed me to think about challenging representation in a way that was not bound to a desire for complete nuanced authenticity or stripped back realism – a desire that might only result in yet more artificiality and illusion.

As I have indicated, initially I felt I wanted to adhere to “truthful” representation as a way of reframing existing representations that I believed were predominantly skewed in mainstream media. However, the concept of the liminal suggested that strictly adhering to a social realist aesthetic would not necessarily achieve the result I was after. Perhaps I could free up the cultural referents in the same way that, for example, Caryl Churchill does in the play *Cloud 9* (1995); or renovate structure as Christopher Nolan does in *Memento* (2000) or as Gaspar Noé does with *Irreversible* (2002). I now felt freed to rework the original text without having to reject it entirely.

It was easy to recognise the elements that were already present in the early drafts that embodied the notion of liminality. The socially excluded subjects in *Shelf Life* exist in a state of liminality, outside the norms of the system, inhabiting liminal social space in terms of their identities not being validated by the wider community. These characters, neither here nor there, are in between – in a state of flux. The nascent themes of homelessness and threats to personal security that had emerged in the early drafts had more emphasis placed on them in revised drafts, and would
continue to become increasingly central in subsequent drafting. The refugee motif had been present but became more prominent when Kate’s auntie was made a social worker for newly settled migrants. The inclusion of the runaway Jade and the threat to Kate’s own security, as well as various other examples – such as Victor’s story of loss – were also emphasised.

It is Kate’s “journey” though that forms the main exploration of liminality. Her efforts to gain legitimacy are met with a continuous cycle of rejection and exclusion. Her position within the wider society is uncertain because she exists within the tenuous space between belonging and not belonging, in a pattern of struggling for legitimacy and of being rejected. We see her going through a repetitive process of effort faced with rejection and exclusion on repeated occasions as she is fired from her job, rejected by Victor, and then also rejected by her father. Typically, it is men who fail her, and this failure symbolises the failings of the patriarchal state. All these things serve to trap her in the liminal space. Her eventual journey to escape to her father’s place in Queensland is also a journey into the liminal unknown, representing a breaking of the pattern of repetition. Steen Lykke (2003, p. 83) argues that "repetition can turn into difference". He says:

> Repetition and difference are possibilities for transformation. That is what characterizes the liminal space, based on an obvious dichotomy: between a breakup and a return, between leap and repetition … But the figure of return is also a rebirth and a cure, a liberation through re-creation, and thereby a caretaking of the self, which can lead to the ability to obey the command: "Know thyself". (2003, p. 83)

But does Kate come to know herself? This question is intentionally left unanswered in order to raise questions of awareness and agency in the viewer.
Liminality and the Coming-of-Age Narrative

I recognised that the transition through liminal experience resembled the coming of age trope, a narrative device that is typical of mainstream hegemonic narratives and one that also seemed to envelop *Shelf Life*. Here I am speaking of the (Joseph) Campbellian (1968) “hero’s journey” and the prescriptive Hollywood formula found in many films that see the protagonist born anew, somehow changed for the better by the final scenes. If populist “Hollywood” cinema is anything to go by, it would seem that, as audiences, we love to buy into the coming-of-age myth and its associated tropes of the underdog and the battler come good. Within the Australian context, one can look to the popularity of *The Castle* and *Kenny* as evidence that Australian audiences enjoy seeing these kinds of stories told about themselves. I began to question what this might mean for the viewer in terms of offering a sense of false hope. Do these kinds of stories simply placate the viewer?

In *The Castle*, we see a working-class family in a struggle with government and industry ultimately triumph and retain their family home. Kenny, a hard-working everyman, is on his own journey towards acceptance of his position in life as he finds meaning and value in financial success. The common theme in films like these is that, as people, we have the agency and wherewithal to grow and develop, to come through the hard times either changed for the better or at least able to tolerantly accept our lot in life. We seem to find some comfort in these stories. But how truthfully do they accord with actual human experience, and what effect does wholesale acceptance of them have on those excluded from mainstream society?

My observation is that, very often, little changes for those on the margins, who exist in stasis and cycles of repetition. Such myths in this light appear only to coerce people into accepting their plight as natural rather than as a product of political,
economic and social systems, thereby giving fuel to aspiration where perhaps there is none to be had. I recognised the need to address these elements in Shelf Life.

Kate’s story has many elements of a classic coming of age narrative, and I was keen to explore how we as an audience might engage with such narratives. Kate’s journey through the narrative and her physical journey to her father’s house fit with the hero’s journey in a structure that mirrors the coming-of-age narrative. It therefore seemed an obvious avenue to subvert the received narrative structure and dispel the myth. Could breaking the pattern of the character emancipated in the third act by creating ambiguity in Kate’s position at the end of the narrative effectively deny cinema’s hegemonic language?

What interested me here was the unchanged character who remains stuck in the liminal middle phase but appears ambiguous regarding their level of cognitive awareness of their situation. Importantly, Kate’s emancipation is left hanging in limbo, and we assume that she remains stuck in the original pattern of abjection. She appears to be confronted by her own position as one that disturbs the social order, yet she remains powerless to change it. Perhaps, in her case, emancipation is the awareness of her outsider status; however, I would prefer not to state this as a certainty. The aim was that such ambiguity would raise questions in the viewer about the agency of people in Kate’s position, and the veracity of what we believe to be our own personal sense of agency.

**Liminal Structure**

I decided to book-end the narrative within framing scenes that openly questioned, in a self-reflexive manner, the story they contained. I did this by getting Kate to narrate the scenes in voiceover, allowing her to address the viewer directly about her story, which is about to be told. Book-ending the narrative is a device used in many films –
possibly its most famous use was in *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming et al. 1939), which is also a good example of the coming-of-age trope at work. The character, Dorothy, returns from her dream state changed for the better, having learned important moral lessons about kinship – no doubt an ideological lesson and a reinforcement of moral norms for the viewer as well. In the case of *Shelf Life*, however, Kate invites the audience to actively consider the content that sits in between the book-ends, inviting us to get lost in the “grey mash” of the ensuing story and to consider an alternative existence. This speaks conspicuously to the nature of viewing and our propensity to engage passively, to be swept up into illusion and to allow ideological messages to go unquestioned.

Kate’s invitation into the grey mash and its resulting ambiguity, with regard to her position at the end of the story, aim to undermine the kinds of neat resolutions typical of illusionistic hegemonic texts. The ‘grey mash’ symbolises the liminal void in between the real and the imaginary, and aims to create a sense of confusion in the viewer as to what the real world of the story is. Given that Kate’s invitation promised something utopian, and what we see clearly is far from that, have we in fact been watching her dream world after all, or a nightmare reality? Does this ambiguity have the potential to place the spectator into a liminal void as well, through an elusive sense of closure and the disruption of an easily understood narrative? In the end, Kate appears trapped within the liminal in-between, which is evident in the circularity of her repeated experiences of rejection and exclusion. She is never truly able to move beyond her position as defined by the social system. Instead, repetition and stasis remain her norm, thus the hero’s journey is subverted.

The narrative structure employed in *Shelf Life* is designed to create discomfort in spectatorial vision by subverting and frustrating expectation. In its reflexivity, the
narrative structure creates a space for the viewer to question both the utopian myths that coming-of-age narratives often embody and the impact that widespread dissemination of such narratives might have socially. It aims to allow the audience to contemplate the nature of narrative truth, not just in *Shelf Life* but also in other socially defining public narratives that exist in the cultural realm. This structure sets out to create a meta-narrative that prompts us to question the way we encounter and understand narrative truth, to consider how truth is constructed aesthetically in the media, and to consider the ideological positions that might lurk beneath the surface of such representations. Cumulatively, could this work towards breaking down the process of media representation through which dominant ideologies are perpetuated?

After several drafts incorporating the concept of liminality, what resulted was essentially a grand metaphorical device that presented neoliberal capitalist society as suffocating and impenetrable for the poor. It was all very well to make these changes to form and character in order to reflect the new thinking regarding liminality, but I still felt as though the screenplay was heavily reliant on cinematic conventions, and I wanted to do more to challenge these. I also knew that I wanted to go further in terms of exploring the possibilities for creating a liminal environment for the viewer to try to find ways to build engagement in the text.

Significantly, towards the end of 2012 I recognised that there were two applications to which liminality could be applied. The first was the script, its characters and in turn the viewer. This has been outlined above. The second application was to the writing process itself – as a tool to challenge writerly habits and any adherence to dominant form that might go unquestioned. I now turned to improvisation as a method to try to
subvert the heavy hand of the writer and to tap into less “ventriloquised” characters who expressed a more authentic voice.

**Improvisation: A New Development**

In *Liminal Acts*, Susan Broadhurst (1999, p. 1) offers a definition of liminality in the context of live performance, suggesting that it is characterised by, among other things, a “deligitimation of authorial authority”. This struck me as an interesting thing to consider in relation to my own work, given that I knew I was trying to address the way in which I used the language of cinema to find ways to undermine hegemonic modes of storytelling to which I felt I was unintentionally adhering. In filmmaking, the realms of writing and performance are usually very separate, where the screenplay is typically developed independently and well in advance of production and without the aid of actors. Broadhurst’s definition held allure because through it I recognised that I might perhaps look beyond what is “typical” in terms of screenwriting practice for a method that would enable me to question my process – one that might unsettle my ‘authorial authority’ through experiments with improvisation.

I wondered whether using improvisation as a writing tool would lead to a negation of accepted aesthetic strategies and undermine elements such as foreshadowing, clichéd structure and character, the signposting of metaphor, set-ups and pay-offs, which appeared to have infiltrated *Shelf Life* and to which I seemed to be so partial as the writer. Could a process of improvisation achieve a certain unmediated authenticity? Filmmaker and academic Leo Berkeley (2011) notes that the belief that improvisation somehow operates outside of the usual formal structures that one might associate with scripted drama is considered by many to be a myth. The suggestion here is that, regardless of the perceived authenticity that comes from
using improvisation, the end-product still emanates from “broader creative, social and cultural contexts” (2011, p. 5), indicating that the end-result is potentially no more removed from established storytelling structures than something that is actively scripted by the writer. With this in mind, I felt freed to use improvisation as a tool for assessment rather than to completely reject the original text. I was not entirely sure it was right to reject every element in the screenplay that was the result of established storytelling structures anyhow, after all these characters and their stories had been hard fought for, but I did at the very least want to understand them and manipulate them to my own ends. Perhaps using improvisation to challenge the language from which they were born might allow for a breaking down of the very structure that congeals ideological positions into a palatable illusion and invite a more liminal and active reading.

As Haney (2008, p. 69) writes with regard to theatrical performance:

> Liminal interiority in sacred theatre, then, is a void in thought shared by performer and spectator. Not reducible to the mundane, this void lies in the gaps between words and thoughts, in the background of all language and ideas as a silent beyond-ness, and immanently within knowledge as its generative condition of unknowingness.

I contend that this liminal moment is found in the doing and viewing of the improvised act. It is not restricted to live theatrical performance, where performer and spectator are physically in the same room, but can be found in the recorded improvised act as well, a moment in flux captured on the screen. My thoughts were that improvisation might therefore be used to instil a sense of liminality in the text and at the same time act as a challenge to the writing process. I wondered whether improvisation would cause a rupture in the usual state of knowingness that one might associate with
a priori cinematic readings, and thus lead to a more active reading. Would breaking down elements of cinematic illusion and challenging the viewer’s auto-recognition of established cinematic and performative codes and structures achieve an instability that would lead the viewer into a liminal space where the text becomes unfamiliar?

The Use of Improvisation in Shelf Life

There were two main practitioners to whom I looked for information about the improvisation process: Mike Leigh and John Cassavetes. I narrowed my focus to these two filmmakers because they have both used improvisation extensively in their work – albeit for very different reasons. They proved useful in two distinct ways: Leigh provides a very practical and rigorous method that could be followed to produce work; Cassavetes explores in depth how one can challenge convention through improvisation and destabilise the response to the work – both the viewer’s and the creator’s.

I had used improvisation in the very early stages of the work after having participated in a workshop run by Robert Marchand for AFTRS called ‘The Mike Leigh Method’ (2004). At that time, I recognised it as a tool for producing work that was both interesting and original. It was also useful in its capacity to generate characters and storylines that were authentic. But I never really considered how that process might challenge my own authority as the writer, simply because I felt I would still maintain ultimate control over the end-result. Nor did I consider how improvisation might challenge entrenched modes of storytelling and question my place within that process. Now, with the concept of liminality in mind, I began to reconsider the potential of improvisation as a method that would allow me to generate a level of
unknowningness in the text – a shifting ground of unsureness in the maker and, by extension, the viewer.

In reviving my interest in Mike Leigh’s method, I turned to Paul Clements’ *The Improvised Play: The Work of Mike Leigh* (1986), which explains in great detail the process Leigh uses to develop characters with his actors and, subsequently, the story they will tell. While Clements’ book is the main resource upon which I drew for information about how to explore Leigh’s method, this was supplemented by what I learned in the workshop with Robert Marchand in 2004 and from anecdotal information contained in interviews with those who have worked with Mike Leigh. I will not go into depth about the intricacies of the method, as there is not sufficient space in this exegesis. I suggest turning to Clements for a blow-by-blow account.

In brief, the Mike Leigh method is an intensive process that typically takes place over several months, although the period can be as short as six weeks. It is very different from the usual way of making a film, as he is able to attain funding without the existence of a screenplay or even a story idea. As Clements (1986, p. 22) says, “Although the work itself is going to be entirely specific and concrete, getting going on a Leigh play involves a great leap in the dark.” It involves the development of intricate characters based on real people that the actors know. Interestingly, there is never a written script and things are rarely written down by anyone involved, as note-taking is discouraged. All of the “text” exists in the heads of the creative collaborators. Storylines generally follow on from character discoveries, and are refined until the work is distilled down to the final highly polished version of character and events, which is then rehearsed and filmed essentially like a typical scripted film.

Early in the improvisations, a colleague questioned my intention to use improvisation, suggesting that often it is the director – or writer in this case –
relinquishing control and responsibility because they lack the vision to tell a story. This may be true in some cases; however, I argued in reply that the Mike Leigh method is rigorous in its process of creating character and story. Things are not made up on the spot while filming; instead, they are worked on extensively beforehand. Improvisation is used as a “writing” tool, and I believe that it is this that allows the work to go beyond character and narrative clichés. I also argued that Mike Leigh’s method maintains a high level of the writer/director/puppeteer’s creative involvement because the guiding hand is ever present. Therein lies a problem that I would come to identify later, as I realised it was precisely my hand in the work that I wanted to question.

Compared with the writer working in solitude on a screenplay, Leigh’s process might seem incredibly short. The improvisation I came to do with actors for *Shelf Life*, which took place over around eight months commencing at the end of 2012 and finishing midway through 2013, was by comparison long and drawn out simply by necessity. I had work commitments and also, as I was unable to pay the actors, we were not able to commit to a short, intensive process from which the work might have benefited – one more in line with the concentrated process Mike Leigh uses. This was not entirely problematic, however, as it did allow for ample time between sessions for gestation and writing to take place. However, I am aware that it was difficult for the actors to remain engaged with the process, given its protracted nature. Still, the dedication, talent and copious amounts of patience and generosity they brought to the project have made all the difference and it must be said that the research would not be what it is without them.

[See Appendix B for DVD recordings of some of the improvisations.]
The actors were Zoe de Plevitz, Chris Sommers, Dan Eady and Johann Silva (mentioned in order of involvement). They became involved after I put a call out through friends and casting agencies, looking for actors interested in trying something out of the ordinary. I was on the hunt for actors with experience who were adventurous.

One of the challenges I faced when incorporating improvisation into the methodological approach was that I was trying to apply it to an existing screenplay. It was not my intention to start from scratch with a new work, but rather to explore how this process could be applied to the original document. The approach I went with was to devise characters with the actors based on real people they knew, but who could stand in for the characters in the screenplay. They would offer a kind of sounding board for discoveries that might be incorporated into the original characterisations, thereby allowing for some of the more glaring elements to be identified and either kept for effect or rejected. The aim was to tap into more authentic and idiosyncratic characterisations that were, to a degree, unencumbered by the influence of mainstream tropes, stereotypes and clichés.

Zoe was the first to become involved. My intention was to explore characterisations applicable to the character Kate from *Shelf Life*, and to produce a short film based on those improvisations. At this stage, I had not fully committed to a strict adherence to the Mike Leigh method, so these first improvisations began with a short script and character description that fell in line with the version of Kate on which I was working: young, pregnant and with secrets to hide. This was a mistake that was tricky to correct down the track, although the Mike Leigh method does allow for some plasticity when melding character back-stories, so it wasn’t insurmountable.
In accord with the Mike Leigh method, Zoe came to the first session with a list of people she knew and, one by one, we went through the list discussing their characteristics and qualities in great detail. In the interest of privacy, we never discussed who these people actually were, and it is appropriate that I don’t go into too much detail about them here for the same reason. We settled on several people who had interesting qualities and began to explore them through small improvisations that allowed us to eventually select one who would form the basis for the character and further improvisations. The final decision in this process was mine. Although the person I chose was somewhat older than Kate is in *Shelf Life*, she did embody certain characteristics that I thought were emerging in Kate. For example, the person chosen possessed conflicting qualities, being both cold yet loyal, standoffish yet generous and she was also somewhat self-absorbed, which was a quality I wanted to explore in Kate.

Improvisations were broken down into two areas: first narrative work, which involved exploring the biography of the person and improvising their life events chronologically, and second behaviour work, which involved improvising around their beliefs and physicality. We spent a great deal of time exploring simple character qualities and developing an extensive back-story, all of which was incredibly useful to draw upon when writing later. Eventually the base person was set aside, and at that stage we were free to embellish and develop the character beyond the original base.

A lot of the elements I thought were hackneyed in *Shelf Life*, such as the teenage pregnancy, were edited out because of these improvisations. For example, Zoe and I developed an intricate back-story for her character that explored the history of a broken family. Zoe’s character had been sent away from the family to live with
relatives, and she spent a great deal of time alone at the beach so we went to the beach at Redcliffe and did many of the improvisations on location.

Being surrounded by the public on location lent a sense of danger to the improvisations, as Zoe at times interacted with real people. Non-actor reactions gave an immediate sense of authenticity that I hadn’t imagined. At one point, Zoe chased a dog away, causing its owner to react abruptly. At another point, she humorously tried to follow a man and engage in conversation about his dog. I observed, always from a distance, as inconspicuously as possible. It was often the small things that registered as interesting and noteworthy, rather than any grand events that might influence narrative direction. An example of this is the choice Zoe made for her character to secretly bury items she found on the beach for safekeeping. To me, this small act showed the character trying to gain some control over her situation when she had none, and this quality was something that I would retain for Kate and explore in further improvisations. In Shelf Life, it manifests in Kate’s strong desire for independence and self-determination, but also in small things like her secretive beliefs about the tarot cards that she would share with those close to her. Prior to this, Kate was merely a victim bouncing from one misfortune to the next. I was now able to imagine Kate in a new way that was rendered three-dimensionally.

Some of the choices Zoe made placed my imagined vision of Kate into stark contrast and allowed me to see the character in a much more nuanced way, suggesting a level of idiosyncrasy and depth that had previously been absent. Kate became more resolute and less desperate in the way she behaved. I saw her as less running and more walking methodically, less hysterical and more considered, less teary and more cold and pragmatic. Furthermore, these improvisations began to alter the direction of the story, solidifying its focus on emancipation. My hopes regarding the potential of
improvisation to address the concerns I had about the ventriloquised characters were slowly confirmed, but the improvisations were stalling as we had hit a wall.

**An Expanded Scope: The Involvement of More Actors**

At the beginning of 2013, with some prompting from Zoe and after some consideration, the decision was made to incorporate other actors. Zoe felt that the process was becoming stagnant and I could see her point. I variously approached Chris, Dan and Johann, each of whom agreed to come on board. With the involvement of these actors, I became more interested in the rigour offered by the Mike Leigh method and decided to follow it more faithfully. After a short meeting at which I outlined the process we were going to use, initial work progressed with each actor in isolation. We began to work on developing characters from each actor’s list of known people and, following the same process that I had explored with Zoe, we eventually brought those characters together to see what would evolve. Dan became a playwright estranged from his family and the brother of Zoe’s character; Chris a disconnected taxi driver; Johann a belligerent passenger. Each of these characters was chosen because they explored different aspects of the characters in *Shelf Life* and, as with the discoveries made with Zoe in the early improvisations, much new information was discovered that could be incorporated into subsequent drafts of *Shelf Life*.

An abundance of creative material came out of the improvisations, including various scene ideas, extensive character notes, screenplay treatments, recordings of improvisations and a mood piece shot at Redcliffe. The culmination of this process was an unfinished piece, a completely new and separate story called *SAFE: A Play by Lucas Prendergast* (see story outline in Appendix C), which tells the story of a brother and sister who come together after many years to revisit the gradual
disintegration of their family in order to seek truth and clarity from the muddiness of history. This work brought together all of the elements from the improvisations and was the penultimate extension of the Mike Leigh method. I would love to have filmed it, but it wasn’t possible at the time. It is not at all related to the diegetic world of *Shelf Life* in any way except that this new story was essentially an exploration of character, stagnation, truth and the self-deception that tends to cloud perception of our immediate experience but is often made all too clear in retrospect. This mirrored Kate’s story from *Shelf Life*, with its focus on emancipation and consciousness, but the outcomes were very different. While it was an incredibly interesting path to explore, I remained acutely aware that I risked going ‘off topic’. As appealing as it remains to me as a project to pursue in its own right, I did not want to start over by producing a new piece of creative work for the research, which is and always was about the development of *Shelf Life*.

The question I needed to ask was what could be gleaned from the improvisations that could be incorporated into *Shelf Life*. The answer was that this phase of the research did bring many revelations about the characters in *Shelf Life* – mostly Kate – and helped to narrow the screenplay’s thematic focus. Both of these things were crucially important, but the process garnered little specific material. Furthermore, after a few months of improvising with the ensemble, my thoughts were that this process was not succeeding in achieving my original aim, which was to challenge the dominant modes of storytelling present in *Shelf Life* by undermining the dominance of the language of the mainstream. I still felt the screenplay was drawing on too many conventions of plot and narrative. Thus the Mike Leigh method provided the rigour I sought to hone the screenplay and a forum to think about it in depth, but
it is quite manipulative, and was proving to be too rigid and somewhat contrived in its outcomes. I knew contrivance was something I wanted to challenge in my own work.

The issue, as identified earlier in this exegesis, was that I still felt akin to a puppeteer, and this was not allowing me to challenge my own creative tendencies and habits. I began to look beyond the process we were using for other examples of filmmakers who used improvisation in their work in a way that was less rigid than Mike Leigh’s approach and more akin to the kind of unmediated effect alluded to in Broadhurst’s definition of liminality.

**An Altered Approach: Incorporating Cassavetes**

The work of John Cassavetes quickly came to mind. More than any others, his improvisations seemed to possess that unmediated, freewheeling quality I was after. I had always liked Cassavetes’ films for their ability to unsettle me. When I watch his films, I feel I am watching something raw on the screen – unlike Mike Leigh’s films, which by contrast seem highly polished. The characters in Cassavetes’ films seem to jump from the screen in a way that challenges my understanding of how a film should be. Ray Carney (1994, p. 3) argues that Cassavetes’ work operates in contrast to “the reigning systems of knowledge within American film”, which he claims is characterised by “a dominant stylistic system of expression” (p.3). This, he further describes as a “stylistic syndrome” that is brought into sharp focus by filmmakers such as Cassavetes. Cassavetes (cited in Carney 1994, p. 282) describes the aims of his process as follows:

> I can understand people would like more conventional form, so they can borrow it, much like the gangster picture … You can “read” it, because it’s something you know already. But if you deal with a scene [in an unconventional way], it’s very hard for people to get with the film because of
their expectations … Other films depend on shorthand, a shorthand for living … They prefer that because they can catch onto the meanings and keep ahead of the movie … I want to break their patterns. I want to shake them up and get them out of those quick, manufactured truths.

I recognised that what Cassavetes wanted to achieve through his work was much more in line with what I was aiming to do with Shelf Life, so I decided to explore his process further.

Cassavetes provides some insight into his process in an interview (cited in Carney 2001, p. 217) in which he states that, through improvisation, he aimed to capture “a characteristic spontaneity in the work which makes it appear not to have been planned”. Further to this, he explains (2001, p. 217) his process of working with actors:

I write a very tight script, and from there on in I allow the actors to interpret it the way they wish. But once they choose their way, then I’m extremely disciplined – and they must also be extremely disciplined about their own interpretations. There’s a difference between ad-libbing and improvising, and there’s a difference between not knowing what to do and just saying something. [I believe in] improvising on the basis of the written work, and not on undisciplined creativity. When you have an important scene, you want it written; but there are still times when you want things just to happen.

From this we can see that Cassavetes approaches the use of improvisation very differently from Mike Leigh, starting with a screenplay in advance and then improvising with the actors during rehearsal and shooting, and even extending this idea into postproduction. But how does he arrive at such a different outcome from
that of Leigh? Carney (1999, p. 1) gives a clue to this in the DVD commentary for *Shadows* (1959):

> The typical Hollywood director goes into a shoot with as much as possible figured out in advance – what his characters should look and sound like, how they should act and feel in every scene. Cassavetes made films very differently. He used filmmaking not to make points he had already decided on, but to explore aspects of his experience he didn’t understand.

The significant difference between Leigh and Cassavetes is that Cassavetes used improvisation to challenge the text on the page, as well as his impulses as a filmmaker and those of the actors, rather than as a tool to create the screenplay. Arguably, the end-result does possess the spontaneity he was after, and is markedly different from the outcomes of Leigh’s improvisations.

As a result of his more fluid approach to rehearsal and filming, Cassavetes’ films at times seem to exist in a state of chaos. Carney (1999, p. 1) argues that Cassavetes’ characters “display the capacity to break their own patterns, to find their way out of the emotional mazes they wander in”. In my mind, the performances certainly reflect this. It is as if you can see the actors or characters thinking and interacting rather than repeating lines by rote, and I wanted to see whether we could achieve a similar outcome. What results from this process, at least for me, is a feeling of being challenged as the viewer, as my understanding of what I “know” to be character and narrative are continually undermined. Here the performances sit present at the forefront of consciousness, as one is motivated to consider the choices being made by character and actor together. This makes the subtext bristle in a way that might usually seem hidden, as the actual “performance” and its meaning rise to the surface for observation and consideration. I saw how this could be a useful tool to employ in
challenging my own techniques and habits as the writer and felt it would potentially have a profound effect on the viewer.

I knew this was something I wanted to explore in Shelf Life, and I was curious to see whether it would translate to the page. I began to wonder how this process could be applied to the work the actors and I had already developed in the earlier improvisations. I decided to alter my methodology by stepping away somewhat from the Mike Leigh method and freeing up the rigidity of what the actors and I were doing. We now embarked on further improvisations based on the earlier work we had done, but with a skewed approach designed to destabilise. I began to interrupt the improvisations mid-stream with instructions that pushed the actors to make different choices for the character – choices that were at odds with earlier decisions and discoveries we had made. Concepts that had already been established were challenged and questioned. For example, Zoe’s character became more aggressive in contrast to her more passive qualities when we questioned the motivation behind those choices and discovered that in fact the character might respond very differently to the experience of rejection. She now began to goad the other characters in subtle physical ways that provoked reactions, such as pushing her car seat back into the legs of another character in protest at being ignored and belittled. This action caused Dan (still in character) to get out of the car in heavy traffic and yell at her from the footpath, only to then storm off down the street. These qualities found their way into Shelf Life in Kate’s challenge to Marnee when she feels threatened at the loss of Victor and her subsequent confrontation with Victor in the supermarket near the end, both of which are imbued with strength rather than victimised weakness.

This approach threw the well-established character dynamics that had been created using Mike Leigh’s method into chaos, creating some of the most exciting moments
in the improvisation and also some of the most challenging and edgy to watch. At times I would also yell instructions during the improvisation simply to stifle the direction in which was headed, or to push the actors to challenge one another. Often I did this for no other reason than to create chaos and break patterns or challenge the narrative direction and the actors’ choices to see what would result. It often made me feel very uncomfortable, as the process descended into chaos, but I also liked seeing the actors working to stay in character during these moments – to see them thinking. Rather than a seamless performance, I was trying to expose the seams.

I too felt challenged by the process, and it was important that I felt so. As interactions began to spiral out of control, I found myself reluctantly relinquishing some of the ideas I had about what should happen, and began looking for discoveries in the performances. I believe the actors also felt invigorated by the uncertainties that lay in their interactions as they had to rely solely on the extensive character work we had spent months developing. The use of this process freed us from the shackles of technique and habit, but also enabled us to tap into a certain textual indeterminacy that wasn’t there in the original drafts. I began to consciously choose elements to incorporate that were confounding and sat sharply against my own expectations.

One example of the results generated by this new process is the scene where Victor is beaten up by thugs. This scene came out of some improvisations between Chris’s taxi driver character and Johann’s belligerent passenger character. Chris and I had improvised his character in solo improvisations for several weeks when I introduced Johann as a passenger. For this improvisation, Chris had no idea he would be picking up a “real” passenger or what the passenger would be like. Johann’s character, an alpha type, was developed with the specific goal of unsettling Chris. In addition, I was giving instructions from the back seat for Johann to challenge Chris’s
character. The outcomes were interesting because Chris – whose character was also an alpha type, but somewhat more stoic – was thrown off balance and had to adjust on his feet.

The resulting scene in *Shelf Life*, which functions to explore themes of housing and job security, is an awkward one that is not meant to move smoothly. Victor displays a kind of stuttering apprehension that didn’t exist in the earlier drafts. It gives the character more nuance and depth but, more importantly, its outcomes are less determined and defined in terms of how the character is received. I have tried to break patterns in the characters in order to create a scene where interactions are more difficult for the viewer to read. Whether or not this translates from the page is perhaps difficult to quantify until the screenplay is produced.

In terms of applying this new process to the original text, it proved most useful as a tool to reassess character authenticity and shift focus away from a primary reliance on storytelling devices to instead focus on creating authentic character and action as the driving force behind the way the story is told. It allowed me to rethink how the characters interacted. That is not to say that the screenplay went through any major upheavals: it didn’t. Much of the original material remains in terms of the metaphorical exploration of theme, but the characters now drive the story in a less contrived manner.

The process simply gave me the freedom to look beyond the limited scope found in the early characterisations, to imagine characters that were more authentic and less weighed down by the roles they performed in terms of functioning as storytelling elements, such as being written with character arc in mind or existing solely as an obstacle to create drama. The improvisations allowed these elements to be considered and rewritten or completely rejected, such as with the pregnancy plotline.
and the accompanying obstructionist boyfriend character, both of which simply existed as obstacles to create drama.

**Review of Late Process**

The question I asked after this process was incorporated was, “Has the hegemonic language of cinema that I was so concerned with been challenged in some way?” In my opinion, the script no longer seems to fit within a standard-shaped box. At the very least, it looks beyond such constraints. The focus on liminality and the use of improvisation did allow me to conceive of the story and characters in a way that fell outside of the standards to which I had been adhering and gave the characters more authentic voices, less burdened by cliché, stereotype and the functions they were designed to perform. Whether or not that comes across on the page is for others to judge. This also raises the further question of whether or not this process achieves the desired outcome of creating a liminal experience for the viewer.

The issue with which I was dealing, as noted earlier, was with how to treat the original screenplay within the context of the improvisation process and whether or not that sense of liminality could be captured in the scripted word. Creating a liminal experience for the viewer that would bring about awareness was, as I have mentioned, a key concern during the improvisation process. As Haney (2008, p. 69) argues:

> In terms of sacred experience, while reading the script can no doubt evoke the liminal, the optimal intersubjective experience of liminality, one that interfuses the verbal and the transcendental, the sacred and the profane is certainly that of the performance itself.
I tend to agree with this statement, and naturally I questioned the value of this phase of the research if it could not yet be tested on the viewer. Was it possible, in some way, to capture the essence of that improvised undirected moment and inject it into the screenplay for the viewer to experience, or was improvisation in this context simply a tool to rethink the existing text? I think that both are true. The screenplay and resulting film certainly would raise enough questions in the viewer to achieve that goal, and I feel the new process was integral to achieving that. It is possible to use improvisation to both challenge the text and to imbue it with a certain amount of ambiguity. I believe it allowed enough of the original text to be altered to create a certain amount of confusion and perplexity, to break patterns and challenge expectations.

In addition, the improvisation process and the continual reassessment of the screenplay allowed by that improvisation enabled me to question the writing on a deeper level; this caused me to look at each element in the screenplay and consider its political, social, economic and cultural purpose and effect. It is possible that the true value of the process lies in its iterative nature, which allowed me to deepen my writing and better understand what I was doing. In the next and final chapter, I will restate the various ideas that the research embodies with a focus on what lies ahead for the work in terms of its likely future. This includes addressing the realities of funding, distribution and exhibition.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

The Situation for Non-Commodity Filmmaking

Ever since savvy entrepreneurs realised the potential for cinema to turn a profit, it has had a commercial focus. However, this seems to have become more acute since the beginning of the neoliberal era, as the imperative to serve fiscal requirements continues to intensify and film in general becomes more and more commercialised to meet those needs. Peter Wilkin (2001, p. 72) argues that cinema is a key player in neoliberal industry. He points out that:

The dominance of the US cinema industry has come about through the conscious activities of the Hollywood system seeking to exert political influence over successive US administrations to exert their global power to influence international trade legislation so as to suit the interests and power of American cinema.

Further to this, Jyostna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner (2011, p. 7) maintain that the dominant US film industry is "at the base of a culture of commodity, such that audiences are produced as commodities and buyers of commodities, thus sutured into an entire network of commodity relations". This scenario results in the dominance of a particular worldview and aesthetic that in effect marginalises other film markets and alternative world-views that might be less fixated on profit as the main goal. In the case of Australia at least, it is a scenario that seems to go unchallenged by many filmmakers who, presumably, remain focused on maintaining careers in a difficult environment. In the battle of commerce versus art produced
under a neoliberal framework, where everything is accountable to the financial bottom line, many marginal stories go untold. Instead, the cinema landscape continues to be saturated with safe, star-driven, franchised blockbuster spectacles that have evolved to endlessly retell the same profit-safe stories, mostly imported from Hollywood but also replicated by some Australian filmmakers in the pursuit of viability.

Finding an Audience

Stalwart independent American filmmaker Jon Jost (2011), who identifies his films as being “independent/non-commercial” or non-commodity, offers a rather scathing assessment of the current situation for filmmakers who want to work outside of commercial film structures. He suggests that the festival circuit no longer holds any potential for films that don’t fit the commercial mould, and that “it [the festival circuit] only goes on for things that have some apparent commercial value, which generally would mean very conventional cinematic handling”. He also argues that, over the last 20 years, the niche that once existed for films that broke with or even challenged convention, allowing those filmmakers to “eke out a very minor living”, now only exists as “a free download on some obscure film nut Internet thing, but no money goes from it to the filmmaker”.

This bleak view is quite depressing if one fails to recognise the growing potential of the internet as an avenue for promotion, distribution and exhibition, as Jost appears to have done. I suspect some filmmakers might remain trapped in the glory days of the cinema operating in the cinema, but it is clear that new technology is changing everything we understand about industry and commerce. Recently the Australian federal Treasurer, Joe Hockey, argued that new online businesses such as Uber and
Airbnb, sometimes referred to as “digital disrupters”, are “restructuring our economies – whether we like it or not” (Greber 2015). Clearly the same can be said for the media industry, which is itself undergoing a massive shakeup due to the impact of digital technologies.

It is probably still too early to switch off the life support, and perhaps Jost might want to see how things pan out. Ten years ago, YouTube didn’t exist, nor did video-on-demand streaming services, social networking or crowd-funding websites. Yes, audiences have become fragmented but the new digital platforms also offer new ways to access audiences that I believe have not yet been fully explored by independent filmmakers (including non-commodity filmmakers), simply because the phenomenon is so new.

This view is backed up by Mark David Ryan and Greg Hearn (2010), who have written about “next generation filmmaking”, suggesting that new opportunities are emerging for audio-visual content creators in “digital distribution outside theatrical release” (2010, p. 2). They cite one team of Australian filmmakers whose short animated comedy film, *Beached Whale* (Boshier, Green & MacFarlane 2008), achieved a phenomenal amount of financial success via the internet. It was released on YouTube for free and has subsequently received 8.5 million views, enabling the filmmakers to leverage that success into a series on the ABC, *Beached Az*, and the sale of $2 million worth of online merchandising. Not bad for a film that cost $15 to make!

I’m not suggesting Jost and others go down this track; it clearly wouldn’t fit with his non-commodity ideals, but it does highlight the possibilities of the medium in contrast to his “obscure film nut Internet thing” statement. Surely there are as yet undiscovered opportunities for makers of non-commodity or marginal cinema lurking
within the “digital disruption” that the industry is currently experiencing. I think Jost has failed to identify the positives of his situation in that the digital opportunities (disruptors) have in some ways actually undermined the established model “owned” by the hegemony in terms of distribution and exhibition – surely a win for those on the margins? It should be noted that, as I write, the debate about just how filmmakers should take advantage of the shifting distribution/exhibition paradigm is ongoing, with commentary abounding in the (cinema) industry press about how Hollywood and established distribution models are being tested (Groves 2013; Schager 2014; Stewart, 2014); so far, no single model has emerged.

Perhaps the bigger question is whether the audience for these films has dried up. I doubt it, and the continuation of festivals such as the Melbourne Underground Film Festival (MUFF) and Revelations Film Festival (REV) in Perth, which cater for these kinds of works, would evidence this as well. Darren Jorgensen (2007, p. 59), reviewing the 2007 REV, notes the critical and commercial success of REV, a festival that is programmed with films that “offer ways of rethinking the possibilities of a medium dominated by commercial models of filmmaking”. He cites the success of the festival as evidence that “the commercial model is not the only way forward for cinematic production in this country” (2007, p. 60). I agree wholeheartedly with his view.

These segments of the audience – or “niche markets”, to use Ryan and Hearn’s (2010) more positive capitalist spin – are currently harder to access in the changing media landscape compared with the traditional channels of yesteryear, such as festival exposure, distribution deals and cinema runs, and they will remain so if non-commodity filmmakers refuse to adapt. Whether or not Jost wants to believe it, he is already a brand, and his attitude of “I won’t lift a finger to promote it, sell it, find a
distributor, or otherwise try to shovel warm butts into seats” (2011) might be an admirable political protest, but it smacks of hypocrisy, considering that he has a long-standing career and has made a living from filmmaking. I think that it would be a shame if filmmakers like Jost faded into obscurity because of a stubborn reluctance to promote their work and thereby keep the conversation going with their audience. I commend his commitment to his particular aesthetic and what it speaks politically, but you have to maintain a voice. If not, the other side wins.

The Situation for Shelf Life

Obviously, as my research would suggest, I too share some of Jost’s political ideals regarding the commodification of cinema and of all aspects of life in general, but I wonder whether there is a happy middle ground in the art-versus-commerce debate. Daryl Sparkes (2006) advocates that filmmakers resist the urge to make their films overly challenging for viewers to watch. He argues (2006, p. 62) that

without an audience to watch a documentary film, and one who find it a pleasurable experience to watch, whereby giving it their full attention, then the aesthetic and ideological significance become ineffective and impotent. The political nature of the film does not affect the consciousness of the proletariat if there is no proletariat to view it. It, therefore, becomes a worthless cultural product.

Sparkes (2006, p. 57) also argues that “to associate popularity solely with bourgeois ideology is a falsity; there is nothing vulgar or anti-political with Marxist art undertaking the same process”.

I tend to agree with Sparkes’ statements, yet I am reluctant to position myself as a maker of commercial films. I think I fall somewhere in between Sparkes and Jost with
regard to my aesthetic approach. I do set out to challenge the ideology tied to dominant aesthetics, but I also engage with those forms as well, and in turn reflect the language and aesthetics of mainstream cinema back on itself by communicating alternative ideological perspectives that run counter to the hegemony. What does this mean for a film like *Shelf Life*, which is potentially challenging to watch, and which, like so many other Australian films, does not fit within an accepted marketing rubric? How does it attain funding? What avenues exist for it to have a voice and recoup its cost?

**Getting It Made**

For all my talk about wanting to break from the commercial mould, the reality is that filmmaking is still an expensive process, regardless of the cheaper and more accessible digital formats. It is possible to make a feature film on a micro-budget and distribute it online for next to nothing; however, a basic estimate of *Shelf Life* indicates that it would not be a micro-budget production. It contains a large cast, multiple locations including a boat at sea filmed from the air, an expensive dream sequence involving a boat in a flooded drain and a car crash – all of which cost money. It may be necessary in the future to reassess the script and a stripped-back rewrite might be in order so as to meet the realities of funding the production – or perhaps an innovative use of rudimentary hand-drawn animation might be appropriate for the more expensive scenes, resulting in a purposefully amateurish aesthetic that challenges the polished Hollywood aesthetic. Regardless, it will still require some funding.

I don’t want to delve too far into funding models as that really isn’t what this research is about, so I will keep my outline of the possibilities fairly brief by referring to some examples of films that have managed to successfully attain funding. To begin with,
there is the obvious self-funded route which would require a stripped-back rewrite. This is a risky proposition, but one that has been used successfully by many, including Australian filmmaker Kriv Stenders, whose feature film Blacktown (Stenders 2005a) was self-funded for $50,000. The film, which won the 2006 Sydney Film Festival’s Audience Award, acted as a calling card to establish his profile and prove his talent as a filmmaker after the box office failure and lacklustre critical reception of his debut feature, the big budget The Illustrated Family Doctor (Stenders 2005b), which was incidentally released in the same year.

Stenders’ next film, the critically successful Boxing Day (2007), received $100,000 from the Adelaide Film Festival Investment Fund (AFFIF) in return for a premiere at the festival. Stenders describes the film as “a suburban siege drama to be told in one single, continuous shot” (Munt 2008). The film, which is gritty in both its subject-matter and aesthetic, didn’t smash any box office records, taking just $3000 according to the Film Victoria website (Film Victoria 2009), but it did help to consolidate Stenders’ reputation as a daring filmmaker who innovates in marginal territory.

The funding of Boxing Day by the AFFIF highlights the willingness of some in the industry to continue to foster original new work by providing ongoing support to filmmakers who work on the margins. This is where the AFFIF and, similarly, the Melbourne International Film Festival, with its Premiere Fund (MIFF PF), step into the funding void by offering opportunities that bypass the usual state funding avenues for filmmakers who wish to produce work that might be considered non-commodity in terms of its outcomes. To quote the AFFIF website, the goal of the fund is “encouraging and showcasing new and bold screen works” (AFFIF 2015).

The AFFIF, along with MIFF PF, offers an attractive production-to-exhibition pathway.
that has the potential to gain further exposure not only for the film but also for the filmmaking team.

Another option being explored by many filmmakers is the crowd funding route. For example, independent filmmaker Hal Hartley used Kickstarter to raise funds for his feature films *Meanwhile* (2011) and *Ned Rifle* (2014), signalling a trend among more established filmmakers to look beyond usual funding models. An example of an Australian production funded in this way is the feature-length horror film *The Tunnel* (Ledesma 2011), which raised a tiny budget of $36,000 through a Kickstarter campaign by selling individual frames from the film for $1 each. The film had a small cinema release but was then notably distributed and exhibited online as a free download through a deal the filmmakers struck with BitTorrent. At the time, this was considered to be a daring move for the filmmakers to take, and it remains to be seen whether it will work as a long-term strategy to build an audience base.

**A Difficult Ending**

Clearly the above discussion has been concerned with how the changing face of industry and economics affects my practice, but the work began as an investigation into how neoliberalism impacts socially upon the economically marginalised. Just as there is no clear or easy path forward for this project, *Shelf Life* also offers no easy path for the characters in its sights, nor for the viewers with whom it aims to engage. Kate’s predicament is shown to be more abstract and complex than the simplified and homogenised representations one might find in Hollywood’s idealised versions of life. By questioning the idea of identity and cultural representation through a disruptive narrative and aesthetic approach, the screenplay suggests that real
mobility often remains intangible, but that awareness of the structures that lead to such a scenario might result in some form of emancipation.

In summarising Adorno’s aesthetic theory, Thomas Huhn (1985, pp. 181–2) argues that, “Aesthetic illusion is not an appendage of an artwork … but is rather its very mode of existence. Illusion is the defining characteristic of artworks” and, “The positive aspect of meaning … needs to be disentangled from the negative sway of illusion.” I have tried to follow these sentiments in my own research. In this work, I am not so much trying to negate illusion as attempting to critique its ideological underpinnings by revealing its operation. While it does question dominant modes of storytelling, the screenplay also adheres to certain conventions of form and narrative that one could argue position it as participating in the very thing it sets out to critique. In this sense, it represents an interplay between the mainstream and the marginal, and is itself liminal in nature. This allows for a critique of mainstream representational strategies through juxtaposition with their ideological antithesis.

Reflecting “real” experience, the narrative remains open-ended. Rarely does life display neat narrative conclusions; instead, the absence of Hollywood-style closure invites curiosity, whereby the viewer has the potential to become aware of being implicated in the narrative. The consequence of this is that culturally defined identity positions that lead to social exclusion might be recognised and their impact considered. It is, of course, not possible to test how Shelf Life might affect viewers within the scope of this research. Currently it remains an unproduced screenplay, and all of this hypothesising remains just that, hypothetical, until it is on a screen with an audience watching.

Nonetheless, this research did ask and answer questions. Clearly, it became a process of recognising and understanding where I am positioned as the creator of
the work and also of understanding where that work sits within the wider political and
cultural arena. It was important to me that the work achieve a sense of authenticity
within that space, and I think it does so with varying degrees of success. As the
writer, it became a twofold process of identifying the ideological structures that were
affecting the characters in the screenplay and finding ways to challenge those
structures so they might resonate with the viewer’s consciousness.

It is not my assertion that the methods used to write the screenplay represent
something new in cinema, or indeed in the Australian cinema. Thomas Elsaesser
argued (1981, p. 270) that:

Theoretical interest in the cinema has recently tended to focus on notions
such as ‘distanciation’, ‘anti-illusionism’, ‘audience participation’. The feeling is
that the cinema ought to raise the consciousness of the spectator, demystify
and instruct him about (political) reality and the ideological function of the
cinema itself … this is a discussion about the cinema as an institution within a
certain society [and] … about how art, and in particular the cinema relates to
society and individual consciousness via the aesthetic processes themselves.

I am aware that, in this regard, Shelf Life does not break new ground. After all, one
needn’t look too far into the history of Australian cinema to find work that is both
challenging and unconventional. Where I believe Shelf Life does successfully fill a
gap is in its treatment of subject-matter that appears to have been continually
overlooked. Specifically, it questions and redresses the accepted ways of
representing and conceptualising the poor in this country, in the process exposing
the ideological perspectives of neoliberalism, which appear to abound in popular
media, including cinema. By doing so, Shelf Life contributes something to the
ongoing conversation within the Australian cinema about the notion of national identity as embodied within national cinema.

From here, it becomes a journey for me to discover how I can make the kinds of films I want to make, and for that I turn to filmmakers such as Ben Rivers, Lav Diaz, Clair Denis and perhaps even Rolf de Heer, who sometimes treat film as a critical art practice but are always authentic and not primarily concerned with films as a commercial endeavour. I think the relatively recent developments in the technology of production, distribution and exhibition foster a much more egalitarian environment, enabling many more filmmakers to participate on their own terms. The cards are still in the air regarding the direction in which the business of telling stories will develop, and the result may well be that we see more stories told in the future that give audiences room to think outside the box: projected, digital or otherwise.
Filmography


Bogan Pride 2008, R Wilson, Sydney. Distributed by SBS TV.


A Clockwork Orange 1971, S Kubrick, USA. Distributed by Warner Bros.

Dole Budger Challenge: She Bragged About Being a Gold Coast Dole Bludger and Then Got Her Benefits Cut 2012, T Steinfort, Melbourne, 2 July. Distributed by Nine Network.


Gone Girl 2014, D Fincher, USA. Distributed by 20th Century Fox.

Housos 2011, P Fenech, Sydney. Distributed by SBS TV.

The Illustrated Family Doctor 2005, K Stenders, Australia. Distributed by Pod Films.


Kath & Kim 2002, J Turner & G Riley, Sydney, AU. Distributed by ABC TV.


Meanwhile 2011, H Hartley, USA. Distributed by Olive Films.

Memento 2000, C Nolan, USA. Distributed by Newmarket Films.


Pizza 2000, P Fenech, Sydney. Distributed by SBS TV.

Pulp Fiction 1994, Q Tarantino, USA. Distributed by Miramax.

Shadows 1959, J Cassavetes, USA. Distributed by Lion International Films.


Struggle Street 2015, SBS, Sydney. Distributed by SBS Television.


Upper Middle Bogan 2013, R Buttler & W Hope, Sydney. Distributed by ABC TV.

The Wizard of Oz 1939, V Fleming, USA. Distributed by MGM.

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Appendix A – *Fly Girl Script*
Appendix B – DVD Documentation of Improvisations

(See DVD on page 125)
Appendix C

Story Outline for SAFE: A Play by Lucas Prendergast

The following outline represents a draft of the story concept that was devised during the improvisations undertaken as part of the research process for Shelf Life.

Performers:

Zoe de Plevitz as Angie

Dan Eady as Lucas

Chris Sommers as Taxi Driver

LUCAS, a brilliant yet shambolic playwright in his mid-30s, is suffering from writer’s block as the deadline for his new play swiftly approaches. It is being billed as next season’s blockbuster and no amount of live reading with his development team seems to unblock his process. He confesses to the director (a close friend) that he can’t find the drama anymore. Added to this, he believes he’s losing his memory, the by-product of a brain injury sustained in a car accident in his youth. He is convinced something about the accident holds the key to his writer’s block and that the answer lies his past. He needs to access it now before he forgets it completely.

Lucas visits his younger sister, the insular ANGIE, who is in self-imposed exile as an inpatient in a mental health institution. He aims to convince her to drive him back to their home town for the weekend so they can see their parents on the family farm - to re-connect. He tells Angie about the writer’s block but she becomes hostile, telling him he’s neurotic. They argue about his debut play and the damage it did to the town, to his family, and to Angie. She doesn’t want a repeat of that. He accuses her
of keeping secrets, says she knows something. He threatens to lift the lid on the
town if she doesn’t go with him. She reluctantly agrees to drive him.

On the drive Lucas and Angie stop outside the town on the highway where the car
accident occurred. Lucas doesn’t remember it ever happening. Angie is astounded
that he can’t remember anything. There is an uneasy and mistrustful feeling in the
town when Lucas and Angie arrive. At the farm they are greeted by their parents and
a small congregation from the church. Lucas is immediately hostile towards the
churchgoers, accusing them of brainwashing his parents. He asks them to leave so
he can spend time with his family. Later that night Lucas confronts his parents about
the car crash but they can’t talk about it because it tore the town apart and made life
very hard for them.

The next day in the town’s pub, Lucas stirs the hornet’s nest by telling several people
he’s back to write another play about the town and its sick religious elements. He
then labels the town’s people “cow fuckers”, making reference to a bestiality scandal
from the past that he wrote about it in his debut play. He claims that everyone knows
the older boys used to do it but no one will ever talk about it. This brings open
hostility to Lucas and his family.

Back at the farm the family is threatened by a neighbour with a gun. Lucas argues
with his parents who ask him to leave the house because he’s bringing shame on
them again. In the taxi heading back into town the driver tells Lucas that some of the
town’s folk blame him for their sons being locked up. Lucas can’t understand why.
They pass the crash site on the way and the taxi driver also questions what Lucas
remembers but he says he only remembers waking up in hospital.
Lucas moves into a motel. The next day he tries to talk to people in town but they each shut down his conversation. It is a series of dead ends. He visits an empty church and questions where the truth is. Later he has a lonely dinner at the local Chinese restaurant in town, enduring sideways glances and whispers from fellow diners. While walking home from dinner he is beaten up on the street outside his motel. No one comes to his aid.

Angie and Lucas meet in town the next morning for breakfast and argue about Lucas causing trouble. Lucas asks Angie to drive him to the crash scene again. When they get there she confronts him, turning the tables on him to test his memory. She claims that someone died in the accident and challenges him to remember who it was. He can’t. Back at the motel he calls his friend, the director, and tells him he’s getting close to breaking the writer’s block but in truth he stares morosely at the blank screen on his laptop.

In order to bring things to a head, Lucas calls a town meeting to discuss any concerns the town’s people have about his new play. It is attended by a group of people from the town including Lucas’s family. It begins with them discussing his debut play and their disappointment about how it portrayed them. Lucas goads them with more references to the bestiality scandal. He also wants to know who it was that died in the car crash. He pushes them until they snap and an argument breaks out. Facts become crossed and we realise they are on trial as Lucas begins to pit them against each other. Angie finally breaks her silence much to the protestations of the others present. She says the truth is that 12 year old Lucas was tortured and raped by a group of older boys from the town and left for dead on the side of the road. There never was a bestiality scandal. That was the story Lucas must’ve made up when he was recovering and no one had the guts to correct him. She tells him there
was no car accident. His brain injury was from being beaten so badly he almost died. The meeting falls quiet, enveloped by shame.

Lucas confesses that he already knew and always had. He just needed to hear them say it out loud. But what he can't understand is why some of them blame him. That, he says, "is truly fucked up". His mother slaps him across the face and storms out. Angie says he is unbelievable and tells him he's a sick manipulative man.

In the final scene, Lucas is sitting in the Audience watching his play being performed. Above all else he craves the accolades.