

Why is the depiction of 'home' so important in Australian cinema? Are Australian suburbs represented differently to suburbs in other parts of the world? What are the dominant themes in films and television shows set in the suburbs? How have women defined the space of the suburbs? Are the suburbs vestiges of malevolent and dark forces?

'Home is a sanctuary – for a privileged few. For most it's a battleground.'

These words are spoken by Doctor Valerie Summers, the psychologist played by Barbara Hershey, in *Lantana* (2001). She is lecturing on her painful experiences after the murder of her young daughter. She is also hiding the anxiety that she thinks her husband is having an affair with one of her male patients. Her tangled, complicated web of life is symbolised by the sprawling mass of the lantana bush. *Lantana* portrays the lives of five different couples in the same way and shows how they cross and mingle throughout the Sydney suburbs over a period of several days. The writer, Andrew Borell, describes the film as depicting the 'vulnerability' of life and shows characters 'questioning and re-examining' the nature of love and relationships.¹

Lantana is one of a number of Australian films from the 1990s and into the turn of the century that sought to portray life as it is lived by individuals, couples and families with no particular national perspective. Australian films in the 1970s had been concerned with the national identity. As Matthew Clayfield states in his online essay for 'Senses of Cinema':

The 1970s in Australia were a time of social, political and artistic upheaval. The Australian public was actively and passionately searching for a cultural identity that it could call its own. With the intervention of the Gorton and Whitlam governments in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Australian national cinema became a place for this cultural identity to be discovered and cultivated; both notable and commercially successful as a result of its "cultural mission".²

After twenty years or so of this patronage of cinema the national identity issue was less relevant to filmmakers than was the need to be represented around the world. Where once there was a requirement to depict Australia and Australian national life to reinforce the sense of 'home', by the time we get to *Lantana* the suburban lives of the characters are not discernibly different from those of other developed countries.

What is significant, however, is the 'vulnerability' that Borell mentions. Part of this is the sense of the expanse of the Australian geography and how the 'bush' just outside the suburban security can overwhelm people. Valerie Summers dies a lonely death as she flees through the bush from a man she thinks will attack her. The misunderstandings, betrayals, guilt, loss and tangled lives of the characters in *Lantana* might be universal, but the sense that the land itself can threaten and overwhelm a character who is stranded carries with it a particular sense of Australian atmosphere. Even in the relative tameness of a *Neighbours*' plotline the long-running soap often dispatches characters into the bush to test their relationships and set them in a threatening landscape from which they have to be rescued.

Like *Lantana*, *Neighbours* shows the rifts and discord beneath the seeming calm of, in this case, a Melbourne suburb. As well as having very teen-centered storylines, *Neighbours* does not show a very broad range of characters and different social and ethnic types. It tends to stick to the middle-class white experience. In common with *Lantana*, however, it does have strong wives and matriarchs around whom many of the storylines revolve. In *Lantana* the wives and mothers, Paula and Sonya, stand by their flawed and troubled husbands and forgive them, drawing them back into the suburban life with grace and strength. Jane, the woman who has split from her husband and had an affair with Sonya's husband, the troubled detective Leon, finds herself alone and envious of Paula's children and Sonya's husband at the end of the film. Paula is outraged at Jane, who was previously her friend, when she discovers Jane has entered her house (her private domestic inner sanctum) and tidied whilst she was away. This act is more of a betrayal than Jane turning Paula's husband in to the police over Valerie's disappearance. Leon, during his affair and actually in the throws of lovemaking with Jane, has chest pains and violent outbursts. Once forgiven by Sonya his health and happiness are restored. In *Neighbours* also, plots and storylines have tended to figure the matriarch very strongly, across the generations starting with Helen Daniels, then Madge Bishop and on to Susan Kennedy.

A film that on the surface seems very light and entertaining, but actually shows women shunning the traditional and typical suburban values is the internationally successful *Muriel's Wedding* (1994). This comedy drama, using Abba

songs as its plot motivation, shows the two main female characters combating family dysfunction, bereavement from suicide, disability, and financial and self-image problems. They use an escape from the suburbs (the town of 'Porpoise Spit') to the metropolitan backdrop of Sydney as their means of challenging these issues and the notion of 'home' to create a future for themselves. Muriel/Mariel (she changes her name as she alters her identity) finally rejects the neediness and selfishness of her family in order to avoid repeating the tragedy of her mother's life. She does more honor to her mother's memory by breaking free of the constraints imposed on her by her father and his mistress.

'Home' is therefore a contested term in Australian television and cinema. Its function and meaning have evolved since the 1970s when identity amidst the changing society and the challenging landscape was of major concern. The government funded the efforts at asserting national and domestic identity. The values shifted, however, and the message has, arguably become more universal. The aspect of 'home' is expansive as well as intimate. Spaces have contentious meanings and undoubtedly the exterior, as in *Lantana*, hides the troubled and tangled interior of the inhabitants' lives.

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