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# Walking on the Dark Side: Images, Techniques and Themes in Student Short Films



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## Abstract

When it comes time for Australian film students to produce their major projects, they are usually given complete freedom to choose their topics. Having been a lecturer involved with student short film production for over ten years, I have often been struck by the recurring images and themes that tend to emerge.

Recurrent themes are often dark indeed, like suicide, relationship conflict and breakdown, youth turmoil, drug addiction, suburban ennui, and child abuse. Rarely do students choose to visually tell stories about happy romances or create feel-good comedies. If genres are followed they tend to be underworld gangster movies featuring hit men, zombie themes, apocalyptic fantasies, very dark vampire films or stark social realism. Even comedy films have a very black bent.

The images chosen to portray these themes are also dark. Many images have become synonymous with student films, the lengthy shot of a person having a breakdown in the shower, or reflected in a mirror contemplating the meaning of life, suicide in the bath with a character lying in a pool of blood, and more. Moreover the students tend to favour low light or very physically dark surroundings. They prefer night shooting, and locations like laneways, wastelands, warehouses, desolate suburbs reminiscent of film noir. The lead characters are often anti-heroes favouring non-Hollywood style actors — usually dark, dishevelled and angst driven. Students attempt to present these images by using cameras that allow for a lot of depth of field, and the editing style is quick and pacey, with music to match. What, if anything, do these choices of imagery tell us?

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## Introduction

Many youth groups use specialist or 'niche' media for their own purposes and student filmmakers form one of these groups (Thornton, 1995). In this paper I discuss student filmmakers with a view to showing that they produce films that embody a particular kind of visual literacy, one that shares common themes rooted in various contemporary youth subcultures. In the case of film students, they embody and present (and re-present), the mores, attitudes, aspirations and existential themes of these subcultures in their own unique ways through the construction and re-presentation of particular kinds of visual images. Like all representations, says Midalia, these 'are never innocent or neutral reflections of reality...they represent for us: that is, they offer not a mirror of the world but an interpretation of it' (Midalia 1999, 131).

The creation and production of such media helps to construct identity, a collective identity, a public representation of private identities (Buckingham 2008, 11). Film students utilise the media they are passionate about, and within which they operate, with the skills they have acquired. They partake of subcultures and are observers within them; they gather meanings from them and, in turn, create meaning for others both within and outside these subcultures.

## Film students

My starting point in looking at the visual literacy evident in student films is the fact that despite not having any prescription as to what kind of films they should make, student filmmakers, with very few exceptions, create films which exhibit a remarkable degree of common themes and visual language (Franklin 2001). This is a phenomenon in need of explanation.

An appropriate place to start with such an enquiry is with the students themselves. When Franklin (2001, 25) argues that, 'students seemed drawn to narrative situations taken directly from television and other films', he is suggesting that students are following in the footsteps of existing visual literacies but this is only one of many explanations (Hattwig 2012). As film students they have chosen to express their thoughts, ideas and stories visually, rather than as written or oral text. They are intensely absorbed in film language, both as consumers and as producers. In a film school setting, they spend their time exclusively studying the visual, the meaning, and the means of using the visual to create their own stories.

While it is impossible to determine characteristics and commonalities of film students, my reflections on over a decade of film production teaching have given me an insider's perspective on film students' education. Thus it is from these experiences that I can confidently say that the film students I have taught have all definitely shared a deep passion for film. They are avid film watchers and are driven to make their own films. While they could be described as 'digital natives', they choose to express themselves visually in what is now termed 'heritage media'. They predominantly want to create work for the big screen, to be viewed in a cinema. They are mostly interested in creating linear narratives and while their digital dexterity is helpful and interwoven with their visual representations, the technology is a means to an end rather than a driver of the work.

## Common themes

Rather than seeing their creators as isolated entities (as they often do themselves), student films need to be considered in light of the world in which their creators live and operate. In order to investigate what influences lead to a commonality of themes and visual representation, it is necessary to consider the influence of youth subcultures, with particular emphasis on how these translate into a particular visual literacy, a visual presentation and self-representation of the world by young filmmakers.

Cultures provide the maps of meaning, the frameworks of intelligibility, and the things which allow us to make sense of a world. Such meanings are constructed through the shared conceptual maps shared by groups or members of a culture or subculture (Curwood 2012). In any society there is a mainstream culture which is dominant (but not hegemonic) and subcultures which very often have opposition or resistance to the mainstream culture as their mainspring. These subcultures can be very diverse, and we should be cautious in attempting to categorise this diversity too closely. A variety of dissident youth subcultures has now become 'normal' and expected, with mainstream culture generally tolerant, if not fully accepting, of the dissidence. Indeed many forms of dissidence have now themselves become mainstream. Equally, the very concept of subculture is now accepted and incorporated into the cultural milieu. It is fair to say that there is a plethora of youth subcultures even though there is a great deal of overlapping (McCracken 1998, 256). Many young people may not readily attest to belonging to a particular subculture, yet they are nevertheless knowledgeable about the tenets of contemporary subcultures and are intimate with their modes of visual representation and mediated images.

Film students are not necessarily members of a specific subculture, but nevertheless they call upon subcultures in creating their stories and visual re-presentations. In so doing they enact their visual literacy. As acute observers, they can skilfully present, and re-present, their worlds through their visual literacy, at once mirroring their subcultural worlds, mediating them, enshrining them and at the same time creating new ways of seeing.

I next consider the influence of three subcultures that have great resonance in student films.

## Contemporary subcultures

One of the most dominant influences on film students is the indie subculture. Short for 'independent' the 'indie' has in recent years attained a very cool, somewhat elite, status and a cult following. Student filmmaking can be seen to comply with cool indie status, often sharing interest in a plethora of short film festivals and online distribution sites. Newman (2009) argues that 'mainstream' is itself a category constructed by niche- or sub- cultures as a way of having something against which they can define themselves. For film students this is manifested in the tension they experience between their work and Hollywood-style blockbuster movies. This is also where the value of indie cinema becomes apparent, located as it is in difference, in promoting alternative forms of representation in film and story themes, and in the ways that films are made, distributed and viewed. Indie culture is shared among filmmakers and members of the wider independent film community, including, distributors, critics and audience. Thus it can be seen as a subculture that wants to hold the more dominant mainstream culture in contempt, even while it defines itself in relation to it. Indie films can be categorised by such features as low budgets, unique and quirky filmmaking, non-reliance on well-known actors and films where the filmmaker has creative control. Many of the themes and concerns in indie films are observable in student films and although not all film students eschew Hollywood or the mainstream they do frequently come to adopt this indie sensibility when they realise it is the dominant paradigm in their peer group. It is also often an expectation within film schools, and from their audiences, that student filmmakers will produce cutting edge work and filmmaking the indie way is a favoured way to achieve this cutting edge

Much of the Australian film students' preoccupation in story and representation has its roots in grunge culture, a creative expression of anger and protest from younger artists outside the mainstream. It shares many characteristics, such as rawness, spare realism, shocking or explicit imagery with an emphasis on an in-your-face representation of life (Brooks 1998). The films of this genre are often concerned with the 'tragic hero' and the idealised drug user who represents the inherent flaws of humanity. These characters are tragic not only in terms of the struggle with drugs or alcohol but also because of the difficulty they have of fitting into the constraints of society. They either find a path to redemption or death in the journey of the film or story (Scape 2003). These tragic heroes are often situated by filmmakers on the margins of society, living in outer suburbs, unemployed or struggling with domestic violence, child abuse, criminal family connections and lack of educational opportunities. Such films often include detailed graphic violence and rock/grunge/rap music.

Another subculture that can be seen to influence these student films is 'emo', a shortened form of 'emotional' that is now a global phenomenon covering a large range of emotionally charged hardcore styles (Seganti and Smahel 2011). Many of its adherents regard emo as a means of freedom from the corporate dominated music and film industry. They often use media to construct meanings of hipness that can be shared as a means of collective identity creation. Their aim is to find a place in society, to assert an individual sense of self through a subcultural identity and many of the subculture's significant characteristics can be seen in various forms of pop culture, including cinema. While there are no definitive emo movies, there are quite a few that appeal to many people in this subculture. These films include *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987). Much of emo has resonance with German Expressionism, with its representations of mental turmoil and angst, most notably represented in the *Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (2005) and more recently in the films of Tim Burton. Film students are significantly influenced by these filmmakers and often reference their means of visual representation in their own work.

Much of this influence can be discerned in the emotional angst experienced by the main protagonists in student films and also in the visual language chosen to express these emotions. This is evidenced in the use of saturated colours, a leaning to monochromatic shots, dramatic use of contrast lighting, and deep depth of field. This language is also enhanced by a strong reliance on music soundtracks that are part of these youth subcultures, e.g. punk, heavy metal, indie etc.

One way of defining a film student which may help to throw light on their influences and place in youth culture is to see them as cineastes, people geekishly devoted to both seeing and making films. It is possible to discern a film geek subculture, such a grouping has some of the traits of what is now commonly referred to as 'post-geek'. The post-geek can be defined as a superset of mainstream culture as well as the geek and indie subcultures (Purcell-Hewitt 2012). A geek is someone whose interests lie out of the purview of the mainstream, despite being a product of a traditional mass media system. Indie is the alternative to traditionally-created mass media, a way for people to make their own media, using new methods such as digital distribution, without the shackles of old media. The post-geek sits at the union of these subcultures — someone who feeds off both traditional and new media but exists outside the mainstream because they want to do what they love. Film students fall into this post-geek category because they are at once part of the mainstream — aware, or part of, a range of subcultures — yet at the same time partly outside these groups as observers and creators of visual representations of what they observe. As well as meaning-takers, they are also meaning-makers, bringing together a synthesis of the subcultural and the mainstream through their own unique mode of visual literacy.

## An example of the student visual subculture

In order to illustrate these subcultural influences I would now like to analyse one student film that I believe is as an exemplar of what has been discussed. This film was produced at RMIT University, which has a highly regarded film course that has produced many successful filmmakers. It was selected by a panel of film industry judges and fellow film students for an award of best film in its year level. The film, *Sharpen* (2011), clearly demonstrates many of the themes that have been highlighted as being of concern in youth subcultures. I chose this film for close analysis because it resonated with me and was deemed a quality project by industry reviewers and it exemplifies many of the characteristics of student films that I have discussed.

*Sharpen* is narrated by a young man. The audience is led to believe this young man is the filmmaker and that he is narrating his own life experience. It is an account of his dysfunctional family and culminates in the suicide of his mother. Rather than having a narrative story line it unfolds as a recounting of seemingly real events with the narrator providing intimate insights into his family. The film is bleak in the extreme, both in theme and in execution. It relies on the sombre, sardonic and laconic tone of the narrator who is at once an insider and an outsider in the family drama. He is the only hopeful character in the film, the one so far less touched by the family dysfunction. The film has no musical soundtrack but rather relies on silences, broken by menacing sound effects with the dominant one being the ominous sharpening of knives. It is set in the outer suburbs of Melbourne which are resplendent in their bleakness and isolation.

Figure 1 Still from Sharpen RMIT University 2011

Figure 2 Still from *Sharpen* RMIT University 2011

*Sharpen* explores many themes. There is suburban ennui, isolation, insularity, hopelessness and the inevitability of the downward spiral. There is family dysfunction – the single mother with the children who never appear to communicate. The youngest brother, we are told, has never smiled; the sister relieves boredom at parties and by engaging in random sex; the elder brother was a champion boxer and is now a heroin addict; and the mother has attempted suicide twice and is finally successful at the end of the film.

The narrator reinforces the lack of family cohesion and the mother's despair by telling us that she was once a good mother but now he doesn't 'see' her, even though he physically sees her every day. Throughout *Sharpen* the mother is shown sharpening the knives that she eventually uses to kill herself. By having the sharpening of knives running through the soundtrack the filmmaker is suggesting the narrator's mother's mental state has been the main contributor to the family's dysfunction.

Figure 3 Still from Sharpen RMIT University 2011

Figure 4 Still from Sharpen RMIT University 2011

Visually the film is stark and bleak. The colours are very saturated, with an emphasis on near-black monotone colouring. Each family member is presented in a series of very close shots, highlighting their individual despair. We see the younger brother looking out of the frame expressionless, the sister is shown in a series of dark and blurry close-ups as she drinks in bars, the brother throws punches at the screen, while the mother sharpens knives in the kitchen.

There is a graphic scene of the older brother and sister lying on the family couch having just shot up heroin. The sister is in semi-gothic attire resplendent with piercings and black leather.

One of the most dramatic scenes is towards the conclusion, when the family is sitting in their typical suburban lounge room, each sibling is watching television and playing video games without communicating. We hear the sound of the mother sharpening knives off screen. The noise stops and our narrator, who is now on camera as part of the family for the first time in the film, realises something is wrong and runs to the kitchen. His mother has used the knives to commit suicide and is covered with blood. This is revealed to us by close-ups of the knives and extreme close-ups of the blood-soaked towels, which the narrator laconically tells us he threw away as 'they'd be no use anymore'. Previous shots of the mother's attempted suicide are shown with extreme close-ups of pill bottles and a swinging noose.



Figure 5 Still from Sharpen RMIT University 2011

Figure 6 Still from *Sharpen* RMIT University 2011

What I find most bleak about this film is the laconic, removed tone of the narrator, as if this sort of behaviour is quite commonplace and something to be expected. In *Sharpen* we can see all three of the subcultures discussed clearly represented. There is starkness of social realism in the glorification, or normalisation, of hard drug taking; the suburban ennui typical of Australian grunge films; and the deep emo sense of angst and hopelessness, seen in suicide and dysfunction.

At the same time *Sharpen* has some hope as narrator is portrayed as a survivor, which is similar to the themes of some indie films.

Of course, the film is not autobiographical although the filmmaker did shoot the film in his own home. He is re-presenting his own home and suburb which resonates with honesty. The filmmaker uses his visual literacy to represent his cultural views and in so doing re-presents and mediates the despair of some suburbs.

## Conclusion

A subculture provides ways in which to sense of the world and find a sense of identity within it. In this sense subcultures afford meanings. In the case of film students, they see the world, or make meaning of it, through visual frames they put together artfully to present themes that are themselves meaningful.

Thus student filmmakers are producers, as well as consumers, of meaning (Aiello 2006) in that they not only present and re-present existing subcultures but are also themselves producers of mediated culture. They do this by enacting a particular kind of visual literacy to convey meanings rooted in both mainstream culture and an eclectic variety of subcultures. Thus these filmmakers are at once within and outside that variety of subcultures and use their sophisticated visual literacy (gained across the spectrum of mainstream and subcultures) to create an interpretation of their world as they perceive it.

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