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Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy

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Screen Cultures Research Lab, School of Media & Communication, RMIT University

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Research statement

Film Synopsis Mother's Day – Dir: Andrew O'Keefe

A young father's future and past collide when his imprisoned brother forces him to deliver on their vengeful pact.

Mother's Day, a tale of a revenge, is a fifteen-minute short film that explores audience reactions when presented with recognisable narrative and aesthetic traits of genre cinema then both circumvents and exploits those expectations through the use of contemporary stylisation of performance and a recognisably Australian setting. The film's narrative uses patricidal plot elements found in Greek tragedy coupled with black-and-white photography and a chiaroscuro lighting style that hark to American film noirs in the vein of *The Big Sleep* (1946). Yet does the contradictory suburban Australian mise-en-scene and décor displace the film and offer audiences a reinterpretation on the film noir genre? Furthermore, the film juxtaposes the stylised monochromatic aesthetic and naturalistic 'method' performances against a stereotypical "Aussie" character (beer drinking, unshaven, uncouth, cricket-loving, no=hoppers) to create something new.

Mother's Day was selected for screening in the prestigious Flickerfest International Short Film Festival, Australia's largest, in 2013.

Review – Lucy Brown

Despite the title, *Mother's Day* is very much centred in a man's world, exploring the complexities of the father son relationship and the power of familial ties in contemporary Australian society.

The film follows the protagonist, Gary, a recently married young father, trying to come to terms with the recent death of his beloved mother, and struggling with his difficult past. Gary, played by actor Lee Mason is depicted physically and visually as a man in crisis, a lost and conflicted soul.

The film plays homage to film noir aesthetically with beautifully lit black-and-white stylized cinematography and also in the choice of Gary as the central character, a man alienated from society and his family. We learn that his father violently beat and verbally abused his mother in front of him, and from the age of 8 his mother raised him and his brother, Tim. The experience of witnessing this domestic violence and the absence of a father figure in his life provides the audience with signposting of the patricidal plot line. It is clear to the audience that Gary's father is 'the bad guy' and there is no sympathy for his character. He has had a profound negative emotional impact on Gary. His father continually taunts Gary about his lack of manliness and this leads to Gary committing the ultimate act of 'male' violence murder.

The film highlights three traditional male stereotypes. Gary is the soft one, a mummy's boy, his brother Tim, the tough fighter, doing time in prison, and his father an alcoholic and

aggressive waster. These characteristics are exaggerated through the dialogue, and detailed costume and production design elements and create a realistic contemporary setting for a recognizable narrative form.

In common with many film noir classics, *Mother's Day* has a tragic conclusion. Honouring his mother and carrying out his brother's revenge plan has led to his own self-destruction. The audience is left in no doubt about the outcome of this.

A distressed Gary is captured in close up smoking a cigarette, evoking film noir anti-heroes whilst his baby begins to cry –creating an eerie echo. The Greek mythology, the sins of the father conclude a fateful end. Gary has sacrificed his future and that of his young child's.

The film is a useful way to think about the aesthetic decisions we make as filmmakers and how we can reimagine familiar genres, styles and techniques in new ways to engage and surprise the audience. The film sets out to explore audience reactions when presented with recognisable narrative and aesthetic traits of genre cinema and both circumvent and exploit those expectations through the use of contemporary stylisation of performance and a recognisably Australian setting. This is relatively successfully achieved. The sound design is very effectively employed and adds to the intensity and claustrophobic atmosphere of the film. The actors are well cast, particularly Gary but the father and brother feel a little one-dimensional. The father needed to feel more menacing and women do not really feature in the film except as victims.