Designing Suburbia On Screen: Parklands & Travelling Light

Kathryn Millard

Memory and place are preoccupations that run through my work as a filmmaker. In addition to my documentary projects, I have made two fiction films set primarily in suburbia: the short feature Parklands (released theatrically in 1997) and the recently released feature Travelling Light (2003). While both films had their genesis in moments of autobiographical memory, I think it’s more accurate to view them as what Tennessee Williams would term “emotionally autobiographical,” rather than literally based on the events of my own life-story. In addition to the acts of imagination and invention that screenwriting and directing involves, research into the eras and places depicted in the two films played a strong part in shaping their fictional textures and trajectories. Historian Alistair Thompson uses the term “composing memory” to refer to the processes of framing and constructing individual recollection. He writes:

“We compose our memories to make sense of our past and our present lives and in this process there’s a constant negotiation between experience and sense, between public and private memory”. ¹

As a writer and filmmaker, it’s this process of composing memory that particularly interests me. Over the last century film, photography, television and their evolving imageries have become not only the primary tools of recording reality, of capturing and freezing moments in time, but have also become potent metaphors for the processes of remembering. For social or collective memory and for individual memory.

Parklands is the story of Rosie (played by Cate Blanchett), who returns to Adelaide and its suburbs after the death of her father Cliff (played by Tony Martin), a Drugs Squad policeman. Mystery surrounds the last year of his life. Was his car sold? Or, for some unexplained reason, set alight? Why, out of the blue, did he suddenly leave his wife of many years for another woman? Was he a cop on the take? Or an honest man who unwittingly found himself in the shadowlands of police corruption? Prompted by her father’s diaries, Rosie begins her own investigation. As her inquiries proceed however, she finds herself drawn to the textures and silences of her childhood and finds her personal memories more and more at odds with the brightly coloured images of Adelaide’s civic pride. As the story of Rosie’s investigation, Parklands’ narrative is structured around a number of time frames or strands of memory, each with its own colour palette and look.

Martin Scorsese talks about drawing on the film production processes of particular eras to evoke them on film. This is how he explains his decision to film the prologue of Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore in red.

“If the character is really hung up on the movies a lot, I felt then she would sort of remember – half fantasy and half remembrance – if it’s 1948, then the flashback would look as if it was shot as a movie in 1948”. ²

Parklands adopts a similar strategy; its story events filtered through the film production techniques of the eras it represents. Researching Parklands, I viewed many archival films of Adelaide in the 1950s and 60s, most of them commissioned by government departments or prominent local businesses. I was particularly interested in footage of the Botanic Gardens, of the eponymous Parklands, of the (once) annual Flower Day and the John Martin’s Christmas Pageant – images that might
represent a kind of collective memory bank for generations who grew up in Adelaide. So I spent days, weeks sitting in the State Records of South Australia warehouse or the Mortlock Library, watching films projected onto the wall home-movie style. Archivists brought out cans of celluloid, often shaking their heads and advising me that as the films hadn’t been viewed for decades, there was a risk of extensive damage to the film’s emulsion. After a time, I noticed that whenever they uttered these dire warnings, my interest increased. For me, these fragments of film with their broken down layers of emulsion and fading and shifting colours, were particularly evocative.

As a filmmaker, I’m familiar with this breaking down of colour film stocks over time being regarded in a negative light. While much of the writing on film stocks and colour complains and bemoans the unreliability of many stocks, I’m particularly interested in the idea of unstable colour. And this despair over colour’s temporal volatility is not confined to film. For example, paintings by many twentieth century visual artists – including Rothko and Stella – are fading, cracking or staining. Critics often discuss this in surprisingly emotive terms as irresponsibility on the part of the artists, who are seen as pursuing more immediate colour effects at the expense of reliability and permanence. My own interest is less in the moral and ethical dimensions of the arguments around the consistency and reliability of colour materials and film stocks – or colourising black and white film - than in colour instability as a metaphor for the processes of constructing or composing memory.

As Parklands took shape, I found myself more and more interested in the evocative power of shifts and changes in the coloured dyes and emulsions of film stocks. Which colours remained fixed? Which became unstable? How could colour instability itself be viewed as a metaphor for the processes by which memories and identities are formed and re-formed? Why do some memories fade while others take on an increasing brilliance and sheen over time?

An example. A colour that appeared prominent in many of the 1960s public documentaries I looked at was red. This was particularly apparent in A Place To Grow, a promotional film shot in 1963 for Adelaide’s new satellite town of Elizabeth.

Many government documentaries of this era were shot on reversal film (the equivalent of slide film in still photography) with its high contrast and saturated colours, especially primaries. Consequently, a number of Parklands’ childhood memory scenes, set in the 1960s, included red: a red sports car, red sandals, a red balloon. Pools and shades of red bled into the script. Lighting also contributed to picturing the era. In the scenes of childhood memory for example, we chose to light only key objects. Various film stocks and production processes were tested in pre-production. Eventually, we arrived at a combination of shooting on reversal film and processing it as negative. This gave us the unstable look we were seeking. As if the film had sat a while in someone’s back shed for a number of years.

My more recent feature Travelling Light has a somewhat different take on suburbia. Perhaps because its story is not retrospective, not told from the perspective of someone in their thirties looking back on a life they’ve left behind, but in the present (which is 1971 in the film) and from the perspective of twenty one year old Leanne (played by Pia Miranda), desperate for a life beyond suburbia.

British filmmaker Terrence Davies refers to his films Distant Voices, Still Lives and The Long Day Closes as “compilations of sense memories”. And I think there’s something of that idea in Travelling Light. In this film, the Australian suburbs of the early 1970s are evoked through techniques borrowed, in part, from the still photographers of the era. I was looking to
create that silence, that relentless stillness, that sense of waiting that can be part of the experience of suburbia. A woman in a housecoat irons a shirt while a clock ticks in the background; Leanne and next-door-neighbour Gary sit on the back step at night, waiting, hoping, longing for something – anything – to happen; housewives gaze out of windows at a future they’re no longer sure they want.

_Travelling Light_ is the story of two sisters who know they want their lives to be different, but don’t know how they can make that happen. Leanne dreams of being a photographer, and takes a series of self-portraits in styles borrowed from the great names of photography. Her older sister Brownwyn (played by Sacha Horler), is stuck in a dead-end marriage. A tendency to depression, barely acknowledged, haunts three generations of their family. These ideas run under the surface of the story, like an undercurrent. To what extent are conditions like depression inherited? And to what extent are they connected to individuals’ life choices? What are the social and spiritual costs of conformity? Of prosperity and expectation?

The Travelling Light of the film’s title has several meanings. It’s partly about the desire to move on without the emotional baggage of the past. But travelling light is also a key visual motif; seeing light in motion. The film’s narrative is composed around many different moments in which light shifts as part of everyday life. The camera flash of a photo booth; the sudden glare as someone opens a door; car headlamps rippling across the wallpaper of a lounge room; the beam of an overhead projector in an almost empty classroom.

And then there are the infrequent, the less everyday changes in light such as the partial eclipse at Yallaroo, where Bronwyn lives. The characters of Leanne and visiting American Beat Poet Lou (played by Brett Stiller) are especially associated with shifting light. Lou, for instance, is often shown emerging from darkness, dressed in pale-coloured clothing. And as Leanne becomes more confident and articulate, she steps out of the silent shadows and the confines of family expectation. She starts to “seek out the light”, as Lou has urged the young people of Australia to do.

My collaborators and I talked a lot about setting the film in a time that was just before the modern world. A time when change was beckoning, but had not yet arrived. In portraying 1971 on screen, Production Designer Luigi Pittorino and I were conscious of not wanting to make a traditional period film filled with either the kitsch or the iconic objects of the era. Instead, we wanted to create primarily, an emotional portrait of a time and place. Therefore, the film has an almost mosaic-like structure. Individual moments are juxtaposed or placed alongside each other, gradually accumulating until a bigger perspective emerges.

On our first pre-production visit to Adelaide, we began to plot the architecture of the film. We decided that we wanted to keep all the architecture contemporary with the period. We wanted to keep the feeling fairly modern and transient. So for Bronwyn’s house at Yallaroo, a portable, prefab construction was chosen. While settings like the airport and the Channel 8 television studio represented not only the technological promise of the modern world, but also a social or non-domestic architecture.

But of course, production design is not just about evoking a world on screen. It’s also about creating the environments through which the actors move. For the design, we looked at lots of tapes of the various cities’ television _Tonight_ shows. In reproducing the sometimes crude design of the original, myself, the Production Designer and the design team discussed ways of highlighting the film’s thematic subtleties. The motif of light was referenced in the TV studio set’s backdrop of the
city skyline. Where Gary and Leanne ponder the future, while oversized, advertorial props such as coffee tins and aerosol cans gave a theatrical and heightened quality to the scenes. The Channel 8 studio set also plays an important role in transforming the lives of the film’s protagonists.

Lee Freidlander’s books of photographs *Self Portraits* and *American Musicians* were key visual references for the film. From those images, came the idea of a soft, pastel look with warm flesh tones. And hints of more saturated colours such as orange, yellow or the deep blue associated especially with Leanne, with Lou and with a sense of impending change. The majority of *Travelling Light* was storyboarded in pre-production to reference visually some of the photographers of the 1960s and the early 70s. As well as still photographer Lee Friedlander, we drew on the works of Robert Frank, Diane Arbus and Stephen Shore. We also did things like use full body head- to-toe shots – like snapshots – for the scenes where Leanne and Brownyn walk and talk.

Just as I had experimented with different film stocks and looks for different story strands in *Parklands*, I wanted to experiment with the visuals for Leanne’s self-portraits in *Travelling Light*. We spent a lot of time in pre-production testing combinations of stocks and filters with the background and costume colours we planned to use. The scenes where Leanne takes self-portraits were shot on reversal film stock with its saturated colours, high contrast and deep blacks. In cinema, still photography most often refers to the past, to memory. It’s generally presented as black and white and static. But in *Travelling Light*, I wanted Leanne’s photographs to be about her looking towards the future and its possibilities.

These moments are about the act of photographing, the act of imagining the world and your place in it. Leanne’s self-portraits are therefore, not about her being obsessively self-focused, but rather about her trying to project a different, brighter, more colourful future for herself. I think one of Leanne’s more memorable self portraits for many audiences was her attempt at a kind of do-it-yourself surrealism in her family’s suburban kitchen. While her parents are asleep, Leanne poses with a strategically placed fish. There’s a slight shift of colour and contrast between Leanne setting up the photograph and then stepping in front of the camera as we shift film stocks from a low contrast negative to the reversal, with its deeper yellows and sharper contrast. I was looking here for a sense of displacement from the everyday, from Leanne’s suburban, familial surroundings.

Although *Travelling Light’s* influences are primarily drawn from still photography, the film also borrows a little from the American independent cinema of the 1960s and 70s. Films that were essentially character-driven, but were themselves influenced by the French New Wave – especially some of its cinematographic and editing approaches. To give an example, some of the Lou/Leanne scenes were shot with a hand-held camera to create a documentary or *cinema vérité* style. We also made use of flash frames, jump cuts and freeze frames. Although the predominant visual style of the film is perhaps best described as a collage of sense memories and photographic moments with graphic edits, based on matching colours and forms contributing to an almost dream-like flow of images. This visual rhythm is interrupted and counterpointed by the
performed zaniness of Ray Sugars and his entourage on The Tonite Show. Live television is a constant in the lives of Travelling Light’s characters.

Suburbia is a much contested site across Australia’s visual art and screen cultures. In his book Art and Suburbia, Chris McAuliffe argues that in recent decades Australian artists have re-evaluated the suburbs, replacing anti-suburbanism with more positive explorations and interpretations. But to my mind, a new orthodoxy of positive representation is just as disturbing, just as restrictive as the previous takes on suburbia from architect and social commentator Robin Boyd onwards – who described suburbia as a cultural vacuum, an emporium of bad taste. Stories and representations of suburbia must be able to be as diverse, complex, layered and nuanced as the many individual lives played out there.

That said, Travelling Light is a story about suburbia and mental health; about suburbia and the weight of social expectations, about looking through the viewfinder of a camera to try and see a way out. Its suburbia is not a place of grotesque comedy that we can laugh about and dismiss as so obviously over the top. But neither do violence and dangers lurk in every shadow. Travelling Light’s characters are as unlikely to die at the hands of the psychopath around the corner as they are from a stove that’s not been turned off. But they just might die of boredom.

\[\text{i} \quad \text{Alistair Thompson “Embattled Manhood” in Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (Ed.) Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994) pp. 158-173}\\
\[\text{ii} \quad \text{Martin Scorsese “Dialogue on Film: Martin Scorsese” quoted in Lesley Stern The Scorsese Connection (British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1996) p. 117}\\
\[\text{iii} \quad \text{Charles A Riley 11 Color Codes: Modern Theoris of Color in Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music and Psychology (University Press of England) p. 1}\\
\[\text{iv} \quad \text{Harlan Kennedy “Familiar Haunts” in Film Comment Vol. 24 No. 5 Sept-Oct. 1991 pp. 13-19}\\

\textbf{Kathryn Millard is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Media, Macquarie University. As a writer and director, her credits include the feature film Travelling Light, the short feature Parklands, and the television documentary Light years.}