

Be(com)ing Reel Independent Woman

***An Autoethnographic Journey Through Female Subjectivity
and Agency in Contemporary Cinema with Particular Reference
to Independent Scriptwriting Practice***

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This thesis is presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, Murdoch University, Western Australia, 2009

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

Women exert only a modicum of production power in 21st century cinema despite its growing accessibility and spectatorship through the developing technologies of the digital era. In 2007, of the top 250 grossing films in Hollywood, only 10% were written, and 6% directed, by women, and just 16% contained leading female protagonists. Why, after the gains of the film feminist movement, is there such a significant gender imbalance in mainstream film, and an imbalance that is only increasing over time? More significantly, what are the possibilities and limitations for reel woman's subjectivity and agency, in and on screen, in this male-dominated landscape?

As a female filmmaker in this current climate I conduct an autoethnographical scriptwriting-based investigation into female subjectivity and agency, by writing the feature length screenplay *Float*, which is both the dramatic experiment and the creative outcome of this research. The exegesis works symbiotically with my scriptwriting journey by outlining the broader contexts surrounding women filmmakers and their female representations.

In this self-reflexive examination, I use an interdisciplinary methodology to unravel the overt and latent sites of resistance for reel woman today on three interdependent levels. These comprise the historical, political and philosophical background to woman's treatment both behind, and in front of, the camera; my lived experiences as an emerging writer/director as I write *Float*; and my representation of the screenplay's central female character.

I use the multiple logic of screenplay diegesis to explore the issues that have a bearing on women's ability to be active agents in the world they inhabit, including: the dichotomising of female desire, the influence of familial history, the repression of the mother, the dominance of the male gaze, the disavowal of female specificity, and women's consequent dislocation from their self-determined desire. These obstacles are simultaneously negotiated as I map my process of writing *Float* and deal with the challenging contexts in which the screenplay was created. In the course of my scriptwriting investigation, film feminist and French poststructuralist paradigms are considered and negotiated as I experiment whether it is possible for female filmmakers, and their female characters, to overcome the seemingly insurmountable odds facing women's actualisation today.

My research brings to light the critical need for more inclusive modes of practice across the film industry, discourse and pedagogy that are cognisant and respectful of reel women's difference, and allow them to explore their own specificity. The thesis argues that it would be advantageous for female filmmakers to challenge their 'fixed' status in phallogocentric discourse, and to deconstruct their patriarchal conditioning through engagement with forms of identity and writing resistance that recognise the fluidity of their subjectivity, and the consequent potential for change. I also highlight the importance of an accessible and affirmative feminist cinema pertinent to the 21st century, to integrate feminist ideals into the mainstream, and finally bring reel woman out of the margins.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the many wonderful and generous people who have assisted me throughout this extensive research project. In particular:

To my early supervisor and colleague, Dr Ross Bennett, who inspired my interest in scriptwriting, and who encouraged me to pursue this interest further in my postgraduate studies, up to his retirement in 2003.

To my principal supervisor, Dr Josko Petkovic, for his theoretical rigour and feedback, particularly with regard to this thesis's feature film script, *Float*. Thank you for sharing your wisdom and for motivating me to think beyond the mould.

To Chad, for your many committed reads and valuable comments at various draft stages of this thesis. I deeply appreciated your insights, which helped me to refine my argument, and will always treasure the many conversations we had.

To Dr Chantal Bourgault du Coudray, who I met in the very end stages of this research project, yet whose encouraging feedback helped get me over the line.

To my dedicated editor and friend, Lynn Roarty.

To the fabulous ensemble of academic women who made up the many memorable 'Women Writing Away' writing retreats in Jarrahdale, particularly Judy Durey, Lynn Roarty, Tracey Jones, Kathryn Choules, and the facilitator Dr Sally Knowles. Thank you all for your friendship and for your collegiality, which helped to keep me positive and focussed.

I would like to express my enormous gratitude to my neglected family and friends who so often offered me an interested and sympathetic ear, and whose love warmed me when life got cold. Most especially, I would like to thank my remarkable and always supportive parents, Chad and Angelika, for raising me with the honesty and strength I needed to draw on during this personal research journey, my irreplaceable siblings Durrielle, Vernon and Steph, niece Amelie, nephews Leo and Kiel (you were the smiles that reminded me of life), brothers-in-law Guy and Steve, sister-in-law Kiely, and my dearest girlfriends Kim and Susan (our infrequent, yet cherished, dinners kept me sane). I look forward to catching up with you all at last.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my courageous and loving life partner, Niall, to whom I will be forever grateful. Thank you for your patience, your loyalty, your mighty strength of character, your lightness of spirit, and your never-ending housework and sumptuous food, which filled me with the energy and passion to keep going. You handled this with such gentleness and grace.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Niall; the lighthouse I swim to in every storm.