

Year 11 – Module C – Stepping Out

Text – Film – Swimming Upstream and related material

Director – Russell Mulcahey

Description of Module

- In this elective students will explore texts that deal with aspects of growing up and transitions into new phases of an individual's life.
- Students will respond to and compose a range of texts that demonstrate the different pathways into new experiences that extend their existing world.
- They examine the features of texts that show knowledge, attitudes and beliefs relating to individuals who have ventured into new worlds and experiences.

How Swimming Upstream links to the elective Stepping Out

Tony Fingleton is one of five children growing up in the difficult post war period of the 1950's in Brisbane. Tony's fondness for the piano and literature attracts negative attention from his aggressive father. It is only when Tony succeeds in the swimming pool that his existing world takes a different pathway. His journey leads him to a more in depth understanding of himself and the world he lives in.

Historical Background to the Film – Context

The film paints a bleak picture of Australian society in the 1950's. This generation lived through the depression of the 1930's and World War 2. It was an era of deprivation and unemployment was high. Many men like Harold Fingleton (father) were often frustrated by the lack of work and money. They carried a lot of anger. Harold worked at the Brisbane wharves as a wharf labourer. The work was tough, not always available and there were often industrial unrest due to strikes against lowly wages and long hours. An aggressive blokey pub culture existed amongst many working males. Harold's constant unemployment problems and his inability to relate meaningfully to his family paints a broader picture of Australian society at the time.

What is the Film About

The film can be examined from several different levels

- It is the story about a young man who loves to swim and strives to be an Australian champion and go to the Olympics. The film follows Tony's journey from childhood to young adult. His journey is focused in gaining his father's attention and love. By the end of the film he realised his is never going to be recognised by his father so his energy goes into doing things for himself such as university and the Empire Games.
- On another level the story is about a father who has never quite made it and then uses his sons to try and accomplish something that he never achieved.
- It is also a story about a family dominated by an alcoholic father – he sets up a competitive environment for his two sons who compete both in the pool and out for their father's attention.
- The film can also be seen as an exploration of Australian masculinity.

Characters in the Film

Harold Fingleton (father)

Harold is an arrogant, short tempered alcoholic who demands to be treated like the man of the house, he works in a lower class job on the Brisbane wharves to support his family, expects dinner to be served on time and always has a beer in his hand. He teaches his sons to be competitive and to stand up for themselves with violence. He deals with his frustrations through aggression.

Dora Fingleton (mother)

Dora is frightened of her husband and is victimised by the drunk Harold. She ends up a prisoner in her own house unable to talk to friends and voice her own opinion. She feels she cannot leave him as she will not have enough money or anywhere to live. She is a nurturing and caring mother and battles to find money to feed and clothe her five children. Her family comes before her own well being and stands up for her children when they are under the scrutiny of their father. She deals with everything except the constant alcohol abuse of her violent husband. She urges Tony to be strong in the head to protect himself from his father's belittling. She tells him he has the capacity to make something of his life rather than relying on his father and her.

Tony Fingleton

Tony is a sensitive boy who wants to be loved by his father. He plays the piano and reads literature – Shakespeare. Unlike his father who deals with his emotions through aggression and violence he shows his emotions through talking and discussion. His father sees him as being too 'feminine'. Tony chooses not to drink like his father which shows a transition from the traditional Australian male to a new age more sensitive male. Tony develops into the best Australian back stroker of the time. He struggles to get out of Springfield where he grew up. He is near water whenever he needs to clear his head – the beach, the river or the swimming pool.

John Fingleton

Harold gave John fake security and too much praise which in the end was his downfall. He competed with Tony in the pool and also for their father's attention. He and Tony often retreated to the local pool to escape the emotional conflict in their family home.

Harold Junior

Harold was favoured by their father. He was the macho bullying son. His father saw him as epitomising what a man should be like. He torments Tony and in one scene he slams the piano lid on Tony's hands while he is playing the piano.

Film Techniques

Point of View

The story is told from Tony's point of view. Harold's aggression towards him is often viewed from his mother's eyes.

Water Theme – water is symbolic of escape and is a major theme in the film

- **Swimming Pool**
When Tony is young it represents him having fun with siblings. As he grows older it represents the badly needed escape of the harsh reality of a life dominated by the moods of his abusive father. Success in the swimming pool is also the means to win his father's attention and the means to get out of Springfield.
- **Visual effect – water theme inside house – hallway sequence**
The narrow hallway inside the family house signified trauma and confusion for Tony. He is seen floating through the hallway of his family home in one scene to escape the emotional distress caused by his father's rejection. The hallway sequence sees Tony float off the ground and the walls ripple as if underwater then transform into the liberating blue space of the swimming pool
- **Fantasy swimming sequences usually follow conflict – eg When Harold stated he was ashamed of Tony of when he is unable to acknowledge his swimming success.**

Conflict within the family

- The gloomy interior of the timber framed Queensland family home provide a claustrophobic space in which to stage the frequent family confrontations.
- **Camera Shots – framing**
Dora and Tony are consistently framed in the constraints of doorways and windows to suggest their oppressive situations. These shots suggest that they wish to exit the home but are trapped there.
- The ugliness of a violent altercation is viewed through a split puddle of xxxx beer on the floor.
- Disturbing scenes of family conflict – eg the bloody fight between Harold and his two sons. This scene is shot up close and uncomfortably personal through the use of a hand held camera and a beneath the floor camera angle.

Contrast between family drama and swimming scenes/ sound effects

- There is a marked contrast between the harsh realism of family drama and Tony's dream like imaginings and the excitement and tension of the swimming races. The naturalistic style of the pool scenes are in contrast to the scenes inside the house which signify trauma, confusion or escapism.
- Swimming sequences are sharp, vibrant and stylized – these scenes also represent the fantasy world into which Tony escapes – particularly the safety of his underwater sanctuary,
- The race sequences become a focal point which separates the doomed fate of Harold and Tony's escalating spirit. The race sequences are also the point where their two worlds collide. They can be seen to represent the world above the water and the world below. When Tony is in the water the naturalistic sounds of the day to day life are replaced with surrealistic sounds beneath the water's surface, as soon as there is a race or emotional scene these surrealistic sounds are woven into the atmosphere.
- The harsh nature of Tony's daily life contains densely detailed sounds of the neighbourhood beyond the house. Sounds of domestic turmoil are heard – yelling,

fighting, bottles breaking. Dogs barking and sounds of children give a sense of larger context

Other techniques

- Split screen format – combining both swimmers and spectators underwater and above water perspectives sustains the emotional suspense of the competitions. The split screen technique allows two stories to be told at once.
- Techno inspired soundtrack enhanced the kinetic quality of the racing sequences.
- Live action footage from a mixture of Australian Olympic sized pools and the addition of background details such as lights, boats and trains enhanced the life and movement of swimming sequences.

Swimming Upstream

By

Russell Mulcahy 2003

Module C Stepping Out



Outcomes

- Students will explore and understand contexts such as: social, political, cultural and historical both in society and the text
- Students will respond to texts in a variety of text forms – with a strong focus on non-literary texts
- Students will understand and personally respond to issues raised in this module and make links to the texts presented
- Students will develop strategies and confidence in identifying, selecting and deconstructing appropriate related material

Swimming Upstream

“By the ‘50’s the local pool was fast being regarded as an essential community venue for accessible and safe sport, education and leisure...”

The Australian Aug 2-3 2008

This is a film about a boy who, in his enjoyment of piano, books, and success at school, must find a way to gain his father’s attention and respect, and to achieve his dream “to be somebody...” – through swimming.¹ While he has success, his father’s insatiable, passionate need to have *his* dream through others’ achievements drives Tony Fingleton from his beloved brother John, his childhood mate and confident, and eventually leads him leaving his family and country.

The film is set in the 1950’s – Menzies was Prime Minister, Australia was recovering from the war, with a time of relative peace and stability (apart from the Korean War) but there was an increasing fear coming from the nuclear threat and the Cold War between America and Russia.

It was a patriarchal society, where women stayed at home and supported their husbands no matter what, and women such as the independent Billie were the minority. The adult population was investing its hopes for peace and prosperity with the post-war generation.

But with progress there came problems – on the wharves, for instance, increasing mechanisation meant fewer jobs, and so we have the background for the beginning of Russell Mulcahy’s *Swimming Upstream*.

In our study we will examine some experienced that bring about change in a person’s life. Note that while others in the film must inevitably change as a result of the father’s dominance, our focus is on Tony Fingleton.

We will examine closely certain techniques used by Mulcahy to convey ideas.

- The establishing scenes with the use of music, camera angles, shots and contrast
- Interior home shots, mise-en-scene – handheld camera, lighting and framing
- Juxtapositioning of scenes showing the two worlds
- Symbolism
- Use of music

¹This film is based on Tony Fingleton’s autobiography written with his sister Diane.

Establishing scene: the opening movements of a film – establish location, mood, central ideas or motifs. Often long shots or overhead to give a general idea.

The film opens with a high overhead shot of a single swimmer, and moves through to a scene in a public pool with the sounds of children encouraging their brother in his underwater swim.

Note the choice of music – *extra-diegetic* music, synthesised, harmonious, new-age kind of music in which gives a peaceful, calm effect – the idea is that water, for our protagonist, has spiritual associations beyond just being fun and freedom. His music becomes a *motif*² that recurs through the film. Mulcahy says in an interview that it was his intention to create two worlds; the pool, with childhood associations of fun, freedom, fellowship³, and later, adrenaline and excitement – but overall the spirituality of it.⁴ the choice of electronic music promotes that idea. The second world is that of home, a world associated with fear and violence and occasional peaceful and living moments.

What is the effect of the lone swimmer shot? – we realise, by the end of the film, that this boy on his own, as a result of his father’s brutal influence he is alienated from his beloved brother, and he has had to become strong enough within himself to withstand his father’s assaults and the competition (recall his comment to one of his fellow swimmers “You’ll have to do better than that. I’ve been psyched up by experts.”

What do we learn about the pool and the children from this early scene? This pool, we come to learn, is a place of fun and freedom, connection with your siblings, a place where you can test yourself safely without fear; it is, we soon see, a refuge from life’s darker moments.

A voice over tells us that “water changed that ... kept you alive and safe ...”

The happy pool scene is rudely interrupted by Harold Jr’s insistence they go to meet dad and moves through to the children going onto the wharves, which we are told by our voice-over (adult Tony) were part of their world, “the pool, wharves, mother and father...”

Note that number of labourers manually loading, unloading etc.

A long-range shot shows such a figure riding a sling – the children looking up to it, “dad...dad...”

We cut to Dora in an exterior shot, hot day, the drudgery of hand washing for a family of 7 – using an old-fashioned copper – contrast with Billie who is cool and elegant, well groomed and an invitation for tea – we see from Harold Sr’s reaction that she is not welcome.

²Motif – an image, music, sound, object that has significance and is repeated through a text.

³Note that despite their experience of abuse at home the bonds between the children, except John, stay strong, as we see Ron and Diane cheering Tony on at the Empire Games on TV.

⁴Water becomes a support for Tony – consider the scene when Tony “floats” through the house escaping his father’s terrible abuse.

The relative clam of the day is shattered with loud noises – Diane runs to the boys’ room and they retreat to the pool.

Pool shot – enclosed, clam, peace, silence (?) they excitedly race to be first in. – leaping to freedom, fun and safety – music with xylophone, electronic supports the mood – congruous music (meaning it reflects and supports the scene rather than making comment on it).

Interior shots of home – *mese-en-scene*⁵

Scenes at home – show a family with violence. In order to give a sense of something he described as being “visceral” (primitive, to do with the gut) Mulcahy used handheld camera at times which conveys a feeling of unease. From the first shots we see this as well-worn home, with marked paintwork, a labyrinth of rooms, many doorways that various family members escape through. The rooms are cluttered with the stuff a family of 7 needs. Lighting is muted, (compare the light within the house to clear brilliance of the pool). There is an overall claustrophobic feeling to the interior scenes. Characters are shot against frames – door ways, windows, suggesting being at the edge of things while still being part of the violence, something that is reflected in the close-ups of their faces. In the kitchen where the worst scenes are played out, characters are forced into close proximity there is no escaping the violence in this house, even though we often see the younger children being sent off, or pushed out. Rather than this home being a place of refuge the mother and younger children run out of the house, away from the house.

Proxemic range – The most damaging scene – in the kitchen, after the riot on the wharf – interior scene – lightning and storm outside, handheld camera, music builds, the walls appear to trap Tony – “you and your mother... I was tougher...” note the positioning of the characters – within the confines of the kitchen they are at the extreme edges – the proxemic range emphasises the distance between Harold Sr and his wife, and son.

Juxtapositioning

The piano playing scene – *peaceful*, Tony playing for his mother, “I live the minute waltz.” Which quickly moves to a *violent* exterior scene of Harold Sr encourage Jr in his fight with Tony – piano playing is associated with poofs – piano players and sissies, “grow up to be a fairy” – the scene ends with Harold Sr declaring Jr to be “the champ!”

This scene is followed by a pool scene – healing – away retreat, and connection with his brother

Water as a motif

The previously mentioned symbolism of water as a place of safety, fun etc – but for Tony it is more – something special – he undergoes a cleansing ritual in the pool after the bloody backyard fight.

⁵All the visual elements within a frame – setting, props, lighting, costumes, acting style, positioning of actors

In the aftermath of the abuse kitchen scene, “When I was your age I was tougher...” the old extra-diegetic note picks up to a pulsing heartbeat. This moves to a dislocated scene of Tony floating through the house to a dramatic accompaniment with chorus – to the pool itself, where we gather he was retreated for further cleansing.

Note that after a scene of violence we will have a scene in the pool – emphasising the two worlds. The pool is a sanctuary from the atmosphere at home, except when Harold Sr is present – note that comment a John makes, quite liking it when their father is drunk because they don’t have to work so hard....

Ironically while the pool has been a sanctuary in their father’s absence, it is through swimming that Tony achieves a measure of grudging respect from his father.

It is through swimming that Tony will escape.

Note the beachside scene with his mother after John has swum against him, and won. Sitting on the remains of a wreck, looking out to open sky, motif music plus layers of **ambient sound**.⁶ Tony wonders whether he could swim to America. Music is synthesised with building strings. Tony is looking out... beyond his oppressive, violent world which seems to be destroying him, his mother entreats him to be strong... in there. Tony breaks down, “wanted to be somebody... had this plan... then I could... I could just go...”

This scene is repeated when Dora retreats there, looking out to the world that Tony will leave for – motif music again.

Closing Scene

Harvard, newspaper headlines about Dawn Fraser’s wins at the Olympics, “Exactly where I want to be...” cut to joyous memory, water, John smiling, Diane grinning, music big, upbeat.

⁶Ambient sound means the background sounds which are present in a scene or location. Common ambient sounds include wind, water, birds, crowds, office noises, traffic etc. Ambient sound is very important in video and film work. It performs a number of functions including: Providing audio continuity between shots. Preventing an unnatural silence when no other sound is present. Establishing or reinforcing the mood.

Misc notes

First meeting Dora slaving away in the heat – her elegant friend Billie, who is not welcome – she represents female independence as opposed to Dora's mainly submissive placatory behaviour.

Note Harold Sr's comment that he sang when Irish eyes are smiling the first time they went out – he was drunk.

Note little Diane mimicking Dora ironing – the perpetuation of gender specific roles.

After Harold Sr realises his sons are swimmers he demands they turn up at 5 – Tony has a piano lesson, but Harold Sr replies, "That's enough poofter stuff. We're doing something serious"

Regular homophobic comments –

At the pool diving for coins Harold Jr calls Tony a poofter ...

Later, Harold Sr sneers at Tony, "fancy yourself as Esther Williams" – junior swimming champion, synchronized swimming, film star of the 1940s and 50s.

Notice Harold Sr says "We've done it" and takes the trophy after John wins at the Queensland State Championships.

Scene of Tony and John quietly together – tight framing – beside the pool – Harold Sr intrudes and throws *Hamlet* into the pool – his disregard for Tony's academic success and interest is reinforced.

The ugly wharf scene with the boss – handheld camera, extra-diegetic music adds to the drama and violence. The music acts as a transition to Harold Sr coming home very drunk and poisonous. It is not clear. But is implied, that Harold Sr suffered at the hands of this man – "my mother, she was there... and they were animals..." Perhaps Harold's homophobia is more than a simple cultural thing, but results from violent abuse by men his mother brought home. In the following backyard scene with Dora and Tony Dora tells Tony that "he had to do some pretty awful things to survive... hates himself for it."

The scene in the pub – Dora intruding in a man's world – note the camera angles diminishing her and adding the stature of the fellow who challenges her. "this is a men's only bar, missus" and another says, "cant a man have a bit of fun..."