

Griffith University

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Urban girl: writing the female gothic in the Australian landscape

Abstract:

Urban Girl is a creative exploration of the use of metaphor and imagery to create thematic layering in a screenplay by its “power to involve, influence, and instruct by the combination of form and content” (Mehring, 1990). In writing the short romantic comedy, *Urban Girl*, I explore the love travails of a country girl who works in the city. Maddy is the quintessential successful twenty-something corporate girl. Pretty much an urban cliché. But in the love stakes she’s cactus. To make it worse, every time she rents out her spare room, her flat mate finds love. Determined to sort the problem, Maddy embarks on a one-day makeover of her inner-city apartment. The Feng-Shui way. But she doesn’t reckon with the forces of nature to disrupt her plans. *Urban Girl* owes its inspirations to the landscape and characters of my country childhood and the image of the female figure in the landscape - urban or rural. In her discussion of the Female Gothic, Eva Rueschmann (2005) notes that the Gothic in the landscape is both “character and metaphor, setting and psychic space” expressing the “colonialization of the land through stories about women who find themselves geographically and psychologically displaced”. In this script, the imagery of the Gothic with its sense of foreboding and entrapment (Davies, 2016) and the lyrics of the over-the-top country music soundtrack, serve as metaphors for how a young woman may be trapped by roles and expectations that thwart her in her quest for true love.

Biographical notes:

Dr Margaret McVeigh is Senior Lecturer and Head of Screenwriting and Contextual Studies at Griffith Film School, Brisbane. She holds a PhD in Film and New Media Narrative and a Masters in Screenwriting by Creative Practice. Margaret has worked in the Film and Television industries in Australia and the UK, including as Commissioning Editor for John Wiley & Sons Publishers and as a Writer and Education Reviewer for Australia’s national broadcaster, *ABC Splash* online. Margaret has researched, published and addressed conferences in Asia, Europe, the USA and Australia on Screenwriting and Creativity, Women in Australian and South American Film, the development of the Internationalised Curriculum, and the writing and making of Transnational Films. She is co-editor with Carmen Sofia Brenes (Chile) and Patrick Cattryse (Belgium) of *Transcultural Screenwriting: Telling Stories for a Global World* (Cambridge Scholars 2017).

Keywords:

Creative writing – Screenwriting as research – Landscape – Female Gothic – Screenwriting and metaphor

1. INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

A trendy Art Deco apartment. There's been one hell of a party. Draped over the back of a chair is a bridal headpiece that's seen better days. A bridesmaid's coronet hangs over the back of another. Confetti trails over a table littered with empty champagne bottles. The over-the-top country song, "Somebody Else's Lovesong" by Kate Ballantyne, plays on the radio.

SONG

Somebody else's love song is
tearing me apart. Somebody else's
words are killing me. And that
lonesome steel guitar knows every
teardrop, every...

MADDY is a thirty-something corporate girl dressed for a daggy around-the-house Saturday. She is studying an enormous book while eating breakfast. Coco pops and cigarettes. TED is about the same age and is weather beaten handsome in dusty Levi's and genuinely battered RM's. He has the look of a larrikin in his eye.

MADDY

For God's sake. Will you stop
tuning into that Country and
Western steel guitar shit when you
visit.

Ted takes his time deadening the sound. Maddy lights up a cigarette. Ted surveys the carnage on the table and picks up a strange looking plastic object.

TED

Anyway I thought tupperware parties
were out.

MADDY

It wasn't a tupperware party. It
was a shower tea?

MADDY

You know. Like a buck's party with
useful things you can buy for your hope
chest.

TED

But what's this thing for?

Maddy leaps to her feet and paces the room alternatively dragging on her smoke and drinking the chocolate milk from the coco pops.

MADDY

For crying out loud. Give it up will you.

TED

I only asked what it is.

MADDY

It's a lettuce spinner.

TED

A lettuce spinner?

MADDY

Don't you get it? What use would a girl like Liz have for a lettuce spinner?

TED

I was wondering that.

MADDY

Thank God you're going back home soon.

2. INT NEW FARM APARTMENT. LIVING ROOM - Later

Ted is trying to look helpful. Maddy is shuffling through the loyalty cards in her phone case. She throws them on the table one by one.

MADDY

I don't understand it. I'm the girl who's made it. Platinum Card. Qantas Business Card. Inner city apartment and I'm still renting out my spare room and hosting shower teas. What do you make of that?

TED

I'd say you've covered all bases.

MADDY

It's not as if I'm desperate. I know good things are just around the corner. Well that's what my stars say. The man of my dreams is coming from across the water.

Ted doesn't like hearing this.

MADDY

It's a good sign. You know Rick the guy from RSVP. Well he's an American CEO. A man from across the water. And tonight's the night. The first time I'm letting anyone see my place.

Maddy searches in the mess on the table for the book she was reading earlier.

MADDY

That's why I've got to Feng Shui this place today.

Maddy finds the book and holds it up for Ted to see. Ted clearly does not know what she is talking about.

TED

Feng shoe?

MADDY

Feng Shui. It's the latest. An old Chinese thing to make sure your house is helping you live your best life. It works on the flow of chi.

TED

Chi?

MILO, Ted's cheeky red kelpie dog chooses that moment to burst in from the bedroom chewing something that he has tangled up himself in. It looks suspiciously like a push-up bra. He knows what he is doing and heads straight under the table without getting caught.

MADDY

Chi. Like cosmic energy. You arrange things so there is a good flow of chi bringing you things that you want.

Maddy goes back to studying her book. Ted looks around trying to work out what to do next. He spies Milo under the table happily munching on what used to be Maddy's underwear.

TED

I've got to find Milo. All this chi must have spooked him. I'll just check if he's outside.

Ted goes to the door and tries to entice Milo out of the room. Maddy is still studying her book.

3. EXT. STREET - LATER

Ted half-heartedly unties the tarp over the cattle crate on the back of his Landcruiser ute. It is partly packed. Milo jumps in and out of the ute trying to get Ted's attention. Ted stops and stares up at the window of Maddy's apartment. Her silhouette can be seen moving back and forth past the window as the lonesome-cowboy country song "Pride Runs River Deep" by Lyn Bowtell plays.

SONG

Not a sound disturbs the air. For soon it will be coming as the farmer sits and waits for steady soaking rain. There's a breed in the country you won't find on city streets. Their soul cries out for water but their will is so much stronger and their pride runs river deep.

4. INT. BEDROOM - LATER

Maddy and Ted are in paint splattered gear. Maddy's looks like an old bridesmaid's frock. The bedroom furniture is pushed into one corner of the purple room. A painting ladders is set ready to go. Maddy sits on the floor studying the Feng Shui manual. She has a large compass around her neck. Ted is stirring a can of red paint. Milo is asleep at the door.

MADDY

Red for passion. No wonder I was getting nowhere. Purple means stagnancy.

Ted continues to mix the paint. He is methodical. Milo surveys them both from a corner. Ted climbs the ladder and paints with a roller.

MADDY

Ted. I think I've found the real reason.

TED

What reason?

MADDY

The reason. Once a bridesmaid never a bride.

Ted continues to paint. Maddy gets up from the floor and goes into an elaborate ritual of pointing the compass.

MADDY

It says my relationship sector should be in the South-West. According to the compass the South-West is through here ...

Maddy leaves the room absorbed in the compass reading. Ted doesn't move. He foresees what this means. Maddy rushes back in and grabs the paint and roller. Milo wakes to the excitement and barks wanting in on the action.

MADDY (off screen)

I told you this Fung Shui was the thing.

Maddy rushes out with the paint gear.

MADDY (off screen)

Everyone else has been sleeping in my relationships sector... except me.

Ted is left balancing on the ladder.

5. INT. SPARE BEDROOM - LATER

The spare bedroom is finished. It looks like something out of a advertisement for the final of The Block. Maddy proudly contemplates the result.

6. INT. LIVING ROOM - EARLY AFTERNOON

Maddy has a perspex sheet marked with the nine sectors of the Feng Shui Bua Gua grid in her hands. She backs up to the front entrance and holds the grid to get the right alignment. Ted is cleaning up the mess from the painting in the kitchen sink.

MADDY

Now that's the career sector lined up with the entrance quadrant... perfect for business dealings. You know this is so scientific.

TED

I'll be darned.

Maddy continues superimposing the grid onto the room.

MADDY

Each part of the room corresponds to a different sector of your life... this sector is love and marriage.

We see Milo under a dead plant.

MADDY

Can't you do something with that animal? He's always in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Ted beckons to Milo and tries to send him outside. He scampers under the sofa. Ted gets down low and tries to entice him out. Maddy gets her Feng Shui manual from the table and flicks through it again.

MADDY

Plants. I know there's something about plants. It says I've got to have plants to move nourishing chi through the room.

TED

God Mads. Any more chi and there'll
be a cyclone in here.

Ted finally grabs onto something and starts to pull. We
hear a growl from under the sofa.

MADDY

Very funny.

Maddy continues around the room still consulting the book.

MADDY

Round leafed plants. To soften any
sharp edges that interrupt the flow
of chi. And water. For tranquility
and power. What could I get?

TED

Why don't you get a fountain?

MADDY

Cut the crap Ted will you? Try to
think of something useful.

TED

Believe me I am.

MADDY

I know. An aquarium. With
goldfish... Gold for wealth chi.
For my business deal with Rick.

Ted continues to tussle with Milo.

MADDY

And I've definitely got to get
another mirror. It says here
they're the aspirin of Feng Shui.

TED

Aspirin. That sure would come in
handy.

MADDY

Yes, aspirin. They stimulate good chi and reflects bad chi.

Ted finally gets the bra off Milo and looks around not knowing what to do with it.

TED

Can't have any of that bad chi getting in the way.

MADDY

But they can't reflect the main entrance. That would reflect the chi out the door.

TED

Mads. I'm just a country boy.

MADDY

What do you mean?

Ted goes to say something and changes his mind.

TED

I don't think we can do all you want before five. Isn't there dial a handyman or something?

Maddy considers him carefully.

7. INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER

The doorbell rings and Maddy answers it. There follows a MONTAGE of hunky TRADIES to the driving beat of the country song "Somebody Like You" by Kate Ballantyne.

SONG

Someday I'm gonna find someone who can read my mind. Somebody whose love is true. Somebody just like you. I know that he's out there searching for me somewhere.

The Tradies include: a PAINTER with a can of red paint, brushes and a stepladder, a PESHOP MAN with an empty aquarium and a plastic bag filled with gold fish, a GLAZIER with an ornate mirror and a LANDSCAPE GARDENER lost behind

a massive potted Lilly Illy. Maddy is increasingly impressed with each good looking addition.

MADDY

Ted... this Feng Shui really works.

The doorbell rings again. Ted opens the door to reveal two wholesomely good looking Mormons, THADDEUS and SEAN. Before we know it he has ushered them in. Thaddeus and Sean stare at all the activity in the room. They start their spiel and try to hand Maddy a Gideon's Bible.

MADDY

Sorry guys. I'm a bit busy at the moment. How about you come back and save me later.

8. INT. MADDY'S LIVING ROOM. Later.

Maddy and Ted are in the finished room. It is an immaculate shrine to Feng Shui. There are small round leafed plants everywhere, a number of mirrors are strategically hung and an enormous aquarium is being filled by a hose from the kitchen. Maddy is at a table in the corner lighting a collection of scented candles under a hanging mobile of crystals. Ted sits in the sofa twirling his hat in his hand. Milo is at his feet. He slowly gets up and walks towards her.

TED

Mads... I have to finish packing up my flat and get going.

Maddy is deep in concentration and doesn't hear him.

MADDY

Fire the ultimate energizer.

Ted stands behind Maddy and reaches out to touch her. Maddy jumps in surprise. Ted withdraws his hand as she turns to face him.

MADDY

You gave me a fright.

TED

Mads I've got to go now. Back home.

MADDY

Right. You're going. Yes you do that. See ya round cowboy.

Ted puts on his hat and turns to go as Maddy grabs his arm.

MADDY

And thanks. Mate.

Maddy reaches up to tug the brim of his hat. As she does she sees her watch.

MADDY

I've got to get moving. Rick will be here any minute.

Maddy disappears down the hallway. Ted turns to have one last look at the room then he takes the most ornate mirror off the picture rail and re-positions it to reflect chi out the front entrance. The doorbell rings. It is Thaddeus and Sean again.

MADDY (off screen)

Ted? Are you still there? That should be (indistinct). Can you show him in?

Ted looks at Thaddeus and Sean. Shrugs whatever and shows them in. He leaves. The door is unlatched.

9. INT. BATHROOM

Psycho style POV of Maddy's silhouette seen through the glass shower screen. Maddy goes to turn off the tap and it clunks to the floor.

MADDY

Shit!

Maddy turns to open the shower door. It's stuck. She bangs on the shower screen. The room is steaming up.

MADDY

Help. I can't open the door.

10. INT. LIVING ROOM.

Maddy's screams can be heard off screen. Thaddeus and Sean are seated primly on the sofa. They look at each other not knowing what to do. They get up and peer into the hallway.

MADDY (off screen)

Hurry up. Please. It's hot in here!
Ted?

11. INT. BATHROOM

Thaddeus opens the bathroom door and peers in. He can see Maddy's silhouette through the steam. He quickly closes his eyes and edges in. Seamus is behind him, also with his eyes averted so he won't see Maddy. They try to navigate the room and in the melee Thaddeus inadvertently slams the bathroom door causing the lock to jam. They start to bang on the door. Still with their eyes closed.

12. EXT/INT. MADDY'S APARTMENT

Drop dead gorgeous RICK arrives outside the apartment. The screams and banging from the bathroom can be heard. It sounds like an orgy. He opens the unlatched door and strides in. He checks out the living room and starts towards the bathroom when Milo the terrier from hell spears towards him. He retreats and quickly scrambles behind the mass of lilly pillies in the corner. All hell breaks loose. The smoking candles activate the smoke alarm. The fire sprinkler system comes to life and the aquarium overflows.

13. INT. MADDY'S BEDROOM.

Maddy is squeezed up against the shower screen. We can see the outline of her naked body. Thaddeus and Sean are drenched in steam, their shirts and ties no longer pristine. They still have their eyes closed and their backs to Maddy.

14. INT. LIVING ROOM.

Rick is now up on a precariously modern barstool hiding behind the lilly pillies. Milo continues to snarl and bark and Rick starts to hyperventilate. He goes for his Ventolin inhaler. As he takes his first whiff he knocks the stool over backwards. He hits the wall and slides through the still-wet paint.

15. EXT./INT. MADDY'S APARTMENT

Ted charges up the steps from his apartment. He can hear the cacophony. He bursts into the living room, calls off Milo and checks Rick's pulse. Spurred on by the screams and

banging, he rushes into the hallway. In the distance the wail of a fire engine can be heard.

16. INT. HALLWAY

Ted tries the bathroom door to no avail. The screams and shouts continue. Finally he uses his shoulder as a battering ram and the door opens with an almighty crack.

17. INT. BATHROOM.

Thaddeus and Seamus turn around still with their eyes still closed. Maddy is nowhere to be seen. The thumping of footsteps can be heard from the living room.

FIREMAN (off screen)

Everybody out.

18. INT. LIVING ROOM.

Rick opens his eyes to see the fireman dousing the fire with a hose. Then Thaddeus and Seamus run through the room closely followed by Ted who is carrying Maddy wrapped in a bath towel. Ted pauses to look at Rick and gives him a big wink.

TED

Nothing like that water chi.

19. EXT. STREET IN FRONT OF MADDY'S APARTMENT. LATER

Maddy is standing alone in the street like a deflated balloon, clutching her towel. She surveys the scene in front of her. Lined up against the curb is a row of vehicles - Ted's battered Landcruiser ute now completely loaded to the hilt, the Mormons' pushbikes, Rick's Porsche, a Fire Engine and an Ambulance, both with lights flashing. Rick is being loaded into the ambulance. It screams down the street, sirens blaring. Deep in thought, Maddy looks across to where Ted is sitting by himself on the front steps of the apartment block.

MADDY

Maybe she meant a man from the land.

20. EXT. STREET - SUNSET

Ted is tying off a tarp over the back of the ute. Milo is lying along the ledge at the back of the front seat. Ted gets into the ute and we see Maddy in the passenger seat.

The up-beat Country song "Heart's in the Country" by Lyn Bowtell plays as they drive off.

SONG

My heart's in the country, my
soul's in the outback, my haven's
the homestead along an old bush
track. I love to drink in the
spirit, the freedom of the
country...

END OF SCRIPT

Research statement

Research Background

Screenwriting practice as research is a growing field both in Australia and overseas (Batty and McAulay 2016, 1), and in this work I investigate how imagery and metaphor, drawn from the figure in the landscape inflected by meanings associated with the female Gothic, can be used to create thematically layered cinematic stories. The role of landscape in film has been established as both “supporting backdrop” and “aesthetic object” (Lefebvre 2006: 23), wherein “metaphor, meaning and ideology are appropriated into the landscape” (Duong 2014: 262). The screenplay builds on previous work regarding the screenwriter’s use of the female Gothic (McVeigh 2017) and of the landscape as tool for enhancing the creative process (McVeigh 2014; 2015).

Research Contribution

Urban Girl draws explicit attention to elements of the filmic landscape as both setting, narrative device and metaphor as interpreted in protagonist Maddie’s use of Feng Shui, by associating these with meanings inherent in the Gothic mode. The genre of romantic comedy, which is underlined by thematically relevant ‘excess’ country music lyrics, is employed to explore how the elements of the urban landscape both symbolise and thwart Maddie’s central quest for love.

Research Significance

This work contributes new knowledge to the field of screenwriting practice research through its specific use of landscape- and female Gothic-inspired metaphor in the creation of its narrative. Subtext is created from these theories as a means of using practice to challenge, and hopefully inspire new, contemporary Australian female identities on the screen.

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