

Tropfest, masculinity and the gendered everyday

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Following its resurrection in 2016, Tropfest, self-described as “the world’s largest short film festival”, was critiqued for the lack of female directors in the list of finalists, and the lack of women depicted in the films. Over the years, Tropfest has been criticized for the content of finalist films and choice of winners, homophobia, licensing of the films entered, as well as the impact of the competition on Australian short filmmaking in general. Despite this, much of the media surrounding the 2017 festival was positive, noting a significant increase in female finalists to ‘half’. While increasing attention to the gendered structures and practices of the industry (including the Tropfest competition) is important, we also need to pay attention to the gendered content of the competition films, which continue to privilege men and masculinity. In this paper, I compare the 2016 and 2017 winning films, to consider how ‘everyday’ issues of gender and masculinity play out in the representation of the festival and particularly the content of the films. This is considered alongside Trop Jr, the festival for people under 15 years, which has received less critical attention but is significant for thinking about long term change.

Introduction

In February 2017, a Facebook video featuring a story from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s television show *The Drum* about a new judging policy for Tropfest, “the world’s largest short film festival”, started doing the rounds. In 2016, the festival had been heavily critiqued for only featuring one film (out of sixteen) with a female director and a lack of female actors and stories (Ball Santamaria 2016; Kozaki 2016). In contrast, during this segment of *The Drum*, presenter John Barron commented that when names and credits were removed from Tropfest films in the 2017 competition, female finalists “shot up to 50%”. Noting the concept of unconscious bias with regards to the judging of the films, Barron related the Tropfest example to the story of orchestras in the 1970s that had improved their numbers of women when people auditioned behind a curtain. Articles promoting the 2018 Tropfest competition have particularly

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noted the “success” of the changes made in the judging policy and culture of the competition in 2017, with gender equality “achieved” (Tauk 2017; Feltscheer 2017). Indeed, they note the “multicultural spin” of the 2018 competition, “with Mr Polson’s new goal to represent the greater Sydney area” (Tauk 2017) and a “strive to further increase inclusivity” (Feltscheer 2017). While this search for more multicultural filmmakers and stories is admirable, these stories about gender, race and ethnicity can seem overly simple: gender equality has been ‘fixed’, now we can move on to solving issues of race and ethnicity in Australia. And yet, this discussion leaves much untold. In this paper, I want to go beyond this discussion of unconscious bias to address broader issues of gender at play in Tropfest. To do so, I undertake textual analysis of recent ‘winning’ films to explore the content that has been prioritised in the competition. I compare the 2016 and 2017 winners in the Tropfest (adult) and Trop Jr (15 years of age and under) competitions, to consider how ‘everyday’ issues of gender play out in the representation of the festival and the content of the films, particularly the representation of masculinity.

Tropfest, created by John Poulson, began in Sydney in 1993, aiming “to create platforms for filmmakers to generate new content & share their stories” (Tropfest 2018). Held one night a year in summer, films entered into Tropfest must be made specifically for the competition, include a TSI (Tropfest Signature Item) to prove this, and be under seven minutes long. In contrast to many Australian film festivals, Tropfest is a competition, incorporating “celebrity and publicity” (Stevens 2016, 3-4). Celebrity judges¹ and famous alumni are discussed in promotional material for the event and significant prizes are awarded to the winning films.² Tropfest has garnered a significant audience (called ‘Troppers’), attracting an audience of 100,000 in 2016 at Centennial Park in Sydney (Kozaki 2016) and between 35,000 and 40,000 at Paramatta Park in Sydney’s Western Suburbs in 2017. While the ‘spectacle’ of the event is important (Stevens 2016, 186), it is also screened more broadly, with broadcast partners

¹ 2016 Tropfest judges included Mel Gibson, Simon Baker, Rebecca Gibney, Maya Newell, Jocelyn Moorhouse and Don McAlpine. 2017 Tropfest judges included Rose Byrne, George Miller, Sam Neill, Rachel Perkins, Bruna Papandrea and Will Gluck. 2016 Trop Jr judges included Justine Clarke, Madeline Madden, Todd Abbott, Ed Oxenbould, and Damon Herriman. 2017 Trop Jr judges included Justine Clarke, Hunter Page-Lochard and Julian Dennison.

² Trop Jr prizes in 2016 and 2017 included between \$3,000 and \$5,000 in cash and prizes. Tropfest Prizes are slightly more prestigious with prize money of \$10,000 and a variety of opportunities, including a trip to LA for meetings with industry professionals and a car for a year.

streaming the films either on the internet and/or broadcast television and individual films uploaded after the event to the Tropfest YouTube channel. This YouTube channel is a significant part of Tropfest's online presence and is often promoted in the lead up to competitions with future entrants encouraged to view these former winning and finalist films in posts on Facebook and Instagram. For example, a Tropfest Facebook post from 27 September 2017 suggests,

Stuck on how to include a rose into your film? Check our 3rd place finalist from 2016 who had a very creative use of their TSI, a card. In Rick Donald's film, a wannabe Gangster gets what's coming when working an ATM! Watch the full film here: <http://bit.ly/2hxR2ZP>

In advising future filmmakers to view former films, it is possible that successful trends in the competition may be repeated (McGrath 2013). This is a potential issue given that while often celebrated, Tropfest and the films awarded as finalists and winners have not been without controversy (Buckmaster 2017).

Over the years, Tropfest has been criticized for the content of finalist films, the choice of winners, the licensing of the films (with copyright given to Tropfest in perpetuity), as well as the impact of the competition on Australian short filmmaking in general: literature written about the competition has argued that it encourages a particular style of filmmaking, expressing fears that this is tarnishing Australian short film production more generally (King 2003; McGrath 2013). The winning 2013 film, entitled "Bamboozled", was heavily critiqued in the news media for being homophobic, transphobic and generally out of touch, with Will Kostakis (2013) noting that "the world having homophobia isn't a punchline" (see also Rusciano 2013). In 2015, the festival was initially cancelled due to a mismanagement of funds, and when it was "saved" by CGU Insurance (Buckmaster 2017) it was met with the previously-mentioned criticisms around gender inclusion and representation.

Indeed, the male-dominated 2016 competition followed the release by Screen Australia of the "Gender Matters" report. This report turns attention to the statistic that only around 36% of women fill directing, writing and producing roles in Australia, a number which has remained stagnant for the past 30 years (Screen Australia 2015; French 2013), and raises particular issues around career progression following women's entry to and success at film school (Screen Australia 2015). Short film and advances in technology have been touted as enabling greater filmmaking accessibility,

particularly with the growing availability of equipment and software in homes and schools, as well as the capabilities of mobile phones and potential of online distribution (Ellis 2007; Nelson 2015; Nicastri 2018), and yet this has not led to an increase in representation. The absence of diversity both in front of and behind the camera, has been publicly discussed in recent years, highlighting the importance of creating stories that resonate with a range of perspectives (Screen Australia 2015, 2016; Verhoeven & Palmer 2016; French 2014). Indeed, I believe that Tropfest and the problems that surround it are representative of broader cultural problems in film and filmmaking. The few female directors and women featured in 2016 Tropfest films, and greater representation in 2017, reflects research which suggests that more women in creative roles can lead to more women “in front of and behind the camera” (French 2014, 197; Bhavnani 2007) and that men often make films about men (Verhoeven & Palmer 2016). Indeed, Deb Verhoeven and Stuart Palmer (2016) utilise a form of social network analysis “to observe how the film industry operates as a series of creative networks in which male-only or male-dominated creative teams thrive”. Such findings have significance for a film festival and competition such as Tropfest.

In the interests of challenging this problematic filmic culture, I believe it is particularly important to attend to Trop Jr, the Tropfest competition for people aged 15 and under, in which new generations of filmmakers are emerging. Trop Jr is one of a small number of film competitions for young people in Australia (Nelson 2015). Having run since 2008, Trop Jr was initially started to enable young filmmakers who were submitting films to Tropfest to have their work shared widely: “to give them an opportunity to cut through, gain exposure for their work and be inspired to continue making films”, and now “receives more than 300 entries each year” (Nelson 2015, 84). While Trop Jr has not received the media attention of Tropfest, particularly with regards to gender participation and representation, my analysis of these publicly shared YouTube videos indicates that since 2012 there have consistently been fewer girl filmmakers making it to the finals of the competition. In 2016, four of sixteen films involved girls, and in 2017, six of sixteen films. More research is required to contemplate the significant barriers to accessibility and participation in Australian filmmaking in relation to gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality and disability (Screen Australia 2015, 2016). These issues are intertwined and it is important to consider the representations and content privileged within this competition and the industry more generally.

In this paper, I examine the ‘winning’ films in both Tropfest and Trop Jr in 2016, the year in which women barely featured, and 2017, the following ‘successful’ year of change (see Table 1). In contrast to film festivals which “promot[e] themselves as cultural practice and gatekeepers of ‘good’ cinema” (Stevens 2016, 137), Tropfest has often been perceived outside this space of good taste (King 2003; McGrath 2013); indeed, Timothy Nicastrì (2018) describes the festival as “unapologetically populist”. For filmmakers, Tropfest is perceived as an entry point into the industry, in contrast to ‘elite’ festivals, as a former winner, Alethea Jones suggests: “Tropfest is considered more of a lighter and more commercial film festival and not a heavy hitter” (Nicastrì 2018). While instrumental in bringing filmmakers to wider audiences, finalist film choices reflect a committee’s “aesthetic, social or political preference” (Stevens 2016, 146) and curated as finalists, constitute a form of taste making and knowledge production. As a competition with a significant audience, the content produced and awarded should be considered.

	2016 Trop Jr	2017 Trop Jr
1 st Place	<i>Chess People</i> – Yianni Rowlands	<i>Pupils</i> – Nick Ward
2 nd Place	<i>Ding Dong</i> – Isaac Haigh	<i>The Lemonade Stand</i> – Jordan Blanch
3 rd Place	<i>The Suburban Luchador</i> – Oliver Crawford Smith & Oliver Bailey	<i>Dropping the Mask</i> – Niamh Kerridge

	2016 Tropfest	2017 Tropfest
1 st Place	<i>Shiny</i> – Spencer Susser & Daniel “Cloud” Campos	<i>The Mother Situation</i> – Matt Day
2 nd Place	<i>Postcards to Ulay</i> – Tristan Klein & Nick Baker	<i>Meat and Potatoes</i> – Arielle Thomas & Ellenor Argyropoulos
3 rd Place	<i>The ATM</i> – Rick Donald	<i>Wibble Wobble</i> – Daphne Do

Table 1: ‘Winning’ films from Trop Jr and TropFest in 2016 and 2017 that will be examined in this article.

By examining these ‘winning’ films, I argue that there are a range of familiar, ‘everyday’ habits and conventions of gender in both engagement and representation, particularly of masculinity. Filmic conventions are based on performativity: repetition of elements performed so consistently that overtime they become normalised, common sense, natural (Butler 1990). Noting the tendency to not define the everyday, Rita Felski suggests “everyday life simply *is*, indisputably: the essential, taken-for-granted continuum of mundane activities that frames our forays into more esoteric or exotic worlds” and yet, she suggests “it is also strangely elusive, that which resists our understanding and escapes our grasp” (2000, 15). While

literature explicitly considering the everyday is often focused on women, as Felski suggests, “to affirm women’s special grounding in everyday life is to take at face value a mythic ideal of heroic male transcendence and to ignore the fact that men are also embodied, embedded subjects who live, for the most part, repetitive, familiar, and ordinary lives” (2000, 93-94). Not only are men and boys the majority of filmmakers in the finalists of Tropfest and Trop Jr; the films from both competitions predominantly feature men and boys. By attending to the habits of repetition in the representation of everyday masculinity in these films it may become more visible.

In 1998 Rose Lucas commented that “images of masculinity in the cinema may indeed reflect and thus perpetuate dominant social ideas about masculinity; they may equally — and perhaps, at the same time — work to challenge and problematise those dominant representations” (139). This is a hopeful statement, in which she suggests the multiple representations of men and masculinity might lead to change in representations. However, twenty years on, we might question whether this is the case. Consideration needs to be put not only to the numbers of women and minorities involved in the competition as in the media discussions, but also to the themes and content privileged in the films more generally to explore the issues at play here. Breaking the films into prevalent themes, I start by contemplating elements such as violence and action, before considering the representation of emotional men. I conclude by discussing the film which I perceive to most sharply challenge the status quo and hegemonic masculinity, the satire *Meat and Potatoes*, directed by Arielle Thomas and Ellenor Argyropoulos, in order to contemplate the need for broader change in the film industry more generally.

Rehearsing Conventions: Violence, Action

Tropfest is strongly associated with the one gag or gross out film (McGrath 2013; King 2003) and the winner of 2016 might be seen in this light. *Shiny*, made by Spencer Susser and Daniel “Cloud” Campos, is a stop motion animation presenting clothes representing people which are moved on the floor. When we are introduced to the male protagonist, he is dressed in a pale blue suit; he sees a rose and twirls, doffs his hat then bends towards it picking it and putting it in his jacket, with moves reminiscent of Michael Jackson dancing. We then hear a woman’s cry of distress as her handbag (which we later find out contains a diamond) is stolen by two men, and the man comes to her rescue. While there are no ‘bodies’ in this film, his attractiveness (physical or otherwise) is demonstrated when at the end of

the film the woman throws away the diamond the man rescued and kisses him, undressing to her underwear and eventually invisibility. While technically effective and well made, *Shiny* is filled with gross out gags, including farts, vomit, and people slipping in vomit, all combined with an extensive fight scene. *Shiny* draws on a range of conventions to simply tell the story, and many of these revolve around a hegemonic form of masculinity. Indeed, the woman is even presented as a prize (Lucas 1998, 141-42). Masculinity as represented here might be perceived as hegemonic, and through its repetition, reproduces hegemonic masculinity.

In their discussion of the use of the term hegemonic masculinity, Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt (2005) note the ways the concept recognises a hierarchy of masculinities, in a form that “embodied the currently most honored way of being a man” and “required all other men to position themselves in relation to it” (832). This hegemony is “achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion” (832) rather than force, and is not something fixed; not only can this change over time (853), but it can include dimensions of compromise and exchange between hegemonic and subordinated masculinities (848). In *Shiny*, we are presented with a stylish man, who uses violence both skillfully and for protection, who we cannot see, but who is positioned in relation to other thuggish, farting, vomiting males. He is powerful and dominant in multiple ways, physically, sexually and arguably economically: unlike everyone else, the diamond is not his focus. Indeed, his suit connotes his power just as the hoodies of the other men in this context are used to suggest a criminal status.³ While Chris Beasley notes that within the Australian context “muscular working-class manhood is sometimes employed as a highly significant mobilising cultural ideal intended to invoke cross-class recognition and solidarity regarding what counts as a man” (2009, 61), this man is explicitly suited, contrasting with the hoodies of his opponents. In some ways we might perceive him,

in keeping with Kimmel’s listing of four key requirements associated with “traditional masculinity” originally described in the 1970s, including a capability to face anything no matter how dangerous without signs of weakness, a presentation as powerful, authoritative, competitive and aggressive, and a predilection for physical risk-taking involving a potential capacity for violence. (Beasley 2009, 65)

³ These items of clothing while analysed here in an Australian context, may reflect the American context of filmmakers Spencer Susser & Daniel “Cloud” Campos.

That is, this representation repeats long-lived conventions around representations of masculinity that have been familiar for a long time.

Within the 2016 Trop Jr films, I was particularly surprised by the emphasis upon violence and action. Despite the 2015 Trop Jr Competition rules (which applied in 2016) stating, “no violence, sexual references or coarse language”, 2016 films *Ding Dong* made by Isaac Haigh and *The Suburban Luchador* made by Oliver Crawford Smith and Oliver Bailey, are action narratives which draw on conventions of masculinity and feature violence for plot and effect. In *Ding Dong* a group of boys prank an old man by ringing his doorbell. On the second attempt, the protagonist trips, drops his Tamagotchi from a school project and has to run when the old man turns up with a gun and starts shooting. In this case, conventions are upset. While one of the boys comments “he’s just an old man, he’s harmless”, the old man *is* dangerous to these boys: he has a gun, a ride on lawnmower and can throw an axe. Like many of the Trop Jr films, *Ding Dong* seems to have a clear moral: don’t underestimate your elders. As a character, the protagonist might be perceived within the tradition of the larrikin in Australian film, what Kristina Gottschall calls the “masculine, roguish, destructive” character (2014, 862). While we might think of him as just a boy, he also represents a familiar form of masculinity seen on Australian screens, both anti-authority and potentially reinforcing patriarchal authority, “invisible due to his very averageness and his embodied racial and gendered ‘norms’, but also highly visible as a powerful and dominant form of masculinity” (Gottschall 2014, 864). In line with conventional representations of young masculinity, this boy is naughty, pranking the old man, but also mixing self-interest and responsibility: he does not want to get detention for losing the Tamagotchi and thus returns to search the old man’s lawn. While these boys do not necessarily have power, by repeating these stories of masculinity, their actions are legitimised. Conventional understandings and narrative are employed for humour and effect: the boy does not achieve his goal, the Tamagotchi cannot be found and he ends the film in detention.

We can see similar elements in *The Suburban Luchador* which utilizes conventions from action films, particularly *Rocky* (1976) and its sequels, to set up its main character who, after being bullied and having his phone stolen, decides to train for a wrestling competition. The film uses intertextuality and repetition of shots we are familiar with as part of *Rocky* as he trains, getting stronger, before facing a much larger opponent without any sign of weakness: as in Kimmel’s conceptualization of traditional masculinity, he is powerful, aggressive and takes risks (Beasley 2009, 65).

The boy is shown to be the winner of the fight against the odds, defeating the larger man by flicking the buttons from his shirt. Although the film ends before we can be shown whether he beats the bullies, when he walks up to them at the end of the film, he at least appears far more confident. The references to *Rocky* may be seen as parody, but they may also suggest “an important way of being a man ... perpetuating associations between maleness and power” (emphasis in original, Huffer 2014, 215) even as they indicate its instability.

A final film that both draws on and repeats these conventional associations between violence, action and masculinity in comedic ways is 2016 third place Tropfest winner, *The ATM* by Rick Donald. The film presents two men sitting in a car discussing robbing people at an ATM. While the driver of the vehicle (played by the director) is initially suggested to be in control of the job, telling the other man to “leave your morals in the car” and exclaiming “I need someone cold blooded, I don’t need a pussy”, it soon becomes apparent that he is highly inexperienced, planning to threaten the hypothetical victim with a butcher’s knife/meat cleaver and hesitant about robbing anyone. His co-robber questions “are we just going to sit here like a couple of pussies making excuses, we don’t do big blokes, we don’t do chicks” and states “I think you’re a pussy, there’s a whole lot of talk and not a lot of action”. Gender is explicitly utilised and performed in this film: masculinity means action. The driver agrees to attack the next person that comes past and when it is an older woman he is at first hesitant, but eventually agrees. When he gets out of the car, a grunge guitar riff plays as in slow motion he removes his jacket and practices stabbing in the air. Waiting in the car, the co-robber watches open mouthed. However, before the driver can get to the ATM, a woman attempts to rob the old lady and when the driver brandishes his knife, the girl steals it from him and stabs him in the arm, the co-robber waiting in the car exclaiming in sympathetic pain. These men are shown to perform masculinity for each other, proving their (thuggish) hypermasculinity at the same time as it is placed in question. For example, the driver compares his own strength unfavourably to the muscular man standing at the ATM while wondering out loud what kind of protein powder he consumes. The power held by these men in the car is not necessarily hegemonic: the sequence in which they assess the people that pass who they cannot, or should not harm, both undermines their power, and symbolises the privilege they hold as men. That is, *The ATM* expressly plays with conventions to create humour. Indeed, the final ‘gag’ is that the protagonist himself possesses a ‘rape’ whistle, which he blows as the final sound of the film, referring to his statement earlier that “there is nothing girly about those whistles, they are the key in stopping

dangerous situations". In this way, the impossibility of demonstrating vulnerability is continually at play throughout the film, suggesting a resistance to the 'emotional' man. The film takes a satirical approach which might encourage empathy but overall is more for comic effect than consideration.

In contrast to this emphasis upon comedic violence and action, the 2017 winning film, a black and white 'arty' film made by Nick Ward titled *Pupils*, presents an anti-bullying theme. The film critiques bystanders, those who stand by and watch as violence is committed, with boys positioned as both perpetrators and victims within this space. While violence is present, it appears designed to highlight the social issue. Dealing with similar themes, the 2016 winning film by Yianni Rowlands, *The Chess People*, depicts two men protesting a war who find each other through a wall. Upon shaking hands through the space, they break the spell and the wall comes down. While there is violence and destruction in some Tropfest and Trop Jr films, others such as these, encourage masculine responsibility and advocate change. In this way, it might be perceived that such film festivals give young Australian filmmakers an outlet for social activism (Nelson 2015, 82), challenging these conventions of violence and action.

Emotional men: Transgression or repetition?

Another trend that might be perceived in these winning films is emotional men, or men and boys who cry. We see this in the Trop Jr films *The Lemonade Stand* and *Dropping the Mask* as well as the 2017 Tropfest film *Wibble Wobble*. These can be perceived as examples of breaking with conventions for effect and humour, but also as a form of transgression. In her recent research, Beasley has commented on the importance of not always perceiving masculinity in negative ways, arguing that always presenting it as a normal, monolithic concept and focusing on its coercive aspects "obscures other perspectives and thus inadvertently advances a kind of recursive, even naturalized account of the hetero-masculine as inevitably oppressive" (2015, 146). Instead, Beasley advocates seeing masculinity in different ways, to enable further discussion rather than simply shutting it down, suggesting that "transgression in the realm of hetero-masculinity is not necessarily about decisive ruptures, breaks, or fissures" (2015, 150). While it may be questioned whether any of these representations are 'transgressive', men are presented in some of these winning films as sad or in need of comfort.

In *Dropping the Mask*, made by 13-year-old Niamh Kerridge, a man who is unhappy having lost his love turns to alcohol and violence. On the Tropfest website, Kerridge states that she “tries to give her characters heart and make her stories simple” and thus recognizable (Tropfest 2017). The man walks through the streets, angrily beating people in his path. However, he is followed by a dog, and while he initially refuses the dog’s attentions, he eventually finds solace as it licks his tears away. This character changes across the course of the short film and we might question whether such a representation, to quote Lucas, “undermines the lauded heroism of conventional masculinity” (1998, 139), deconstructing categories by presenting this character as somewhat vulnerable. In some ways, this film thematically follows the second prize winning film of 2016, a poetic animation titled *Postcards to Ulay* made by Tristan Klein and Nick Baker describing the love and companionship between a dog and its owner. After the man’s dog is stolen by the government for a space experiment, the owner spends the rest of his days “sending postcards to space, to farewell Ulay”, telling the dog how much he meant to him and emphasising the connection between the dog and man. Indeed, *Dropping the Mask* might be perceived as a prequel to *Postcards to Ulay* and suggests connections between Tropfest and Trop Jr films.

A modicum of vulnerability can also be found in the Trop Jr film that came second in 2017, *The Lemonade Stand* made by Jordan Blanch. This film is comprised of four stories and features two boys who run a lemonade stand where the lemonade is \$10, or free if you tell them a story. The first story is an action thriller spy film, featuring a girl who is tied up but escapes, fighting the attacker, and concluding with her holding a gun. Two stories told by passing boys follow, one which fails to use suitable conventions and is implied to be boring, and another which involves dragons and is declared to be beyond their budget to portray. The final story is about a girl who receives news that her parents have died in a car accident, concluding with the girl tearfully embracing her dog. Having listened to her story, the film ends with the boys running the lemonade stand crying; they embrace and offer her two lemonades for her efforts. While the stories told by the passing boys are dismissed in this film, the others feature independent, capable protagonists and storytellers whose authority/value is affirmed by the lemonade stand running boys in their tears and reward of lemonade. At the same time, their affirmation might seem patronizing; while these boys seem touched by her story, as a comedy, it might be questioned whether we are intended to laugh at their reaction (undermining the emotional response) or empathise with it.

The most explicitly emotional man in the Tropfest winning films is 2017 film *Wibble Wobble*, made by Daphne Do, an improvised piece in which a young man is tidying up his grandmother's house after her death. Another man visits to purchase the fridge but passes when it is older than he expected. Later he returns, saying he will buy the fridge if he can eat the jelly left inside it – he doesn't want to "waste", this "creative" thing that the young man's grandmother made. This is followed by a number of long shots of him eating the large mound of jelly. After a while the grandson joins him but after one bite he leaves the room, presumably overcome by memories, and the film ends with the purchaser nonchalantly eating the plate of jelly while listening to the grandson sob loudly off camera. This film might be perceived as an example of "mumblecore", a "neorealist" style of filmmaking which "features understated, highly individuated, and psychologically complex characters" with "open-ended and digressive" plots and actors who present "a lack of affect and the avoidance of overt displays of emotion" (Alberti 2013, 45). While the grandson unemotionally packs up this house, this is contrasted with the sentimental view brought in by the purchaser. However, the tables are turned when the grandson leaves the room to cry after tasting the jelly; the purchaser does not intervene, or comment, he merely continues to eat. In this way, *Wibble Wobble* draws on mumblecore form, conventions which are often critiqued for dealing with inconsequential issues. And yet, as Alberti (2013, 50) notes, such films can respond "to cultural and cinematic turning points" which are often "registered through the 'mundane vacillations' of quotidian life, inviting and even demanding that the viewer supply the larger cultural significance". *Wibble Wobble* combines the mundane, the awkward and the bizarre to "complicate (and thereby denaturalize) conventional genre understandings of gender performance and identity" (Alberti 2013, 52). Emotion in this film is produced primarily through its absence, the awkwardness of what is left unsaid and the nonchalance represented by these strangers as they perform masculinity for each other. Masculinity is both reproduced and undermined: the persistence in the eating of the jelly, at the same time as the grandson cries, is utterly absurd. In this way, the film repeats the convention of unemotional men at the same time as it contests it.

While *Wibble Wobble* explicitly presents emotion, even if out of frame, this might be contrasted with black comedy *The Mother Situation*, directed by Matt Day, the winner of Tropfest 2017. This film centres around three adult siblings contemplating the impending euthanasia of their mother, and her decision to not go ahead with it and, more importantly, to not sell her house. *The Mother Situation* repeats familiar conversations about

Australian eastern states house prices in the context of the siblings' prospective inheritance. Indeed, the film's comedy is based in incongruity and ends with the siblings waiting impatiently in a room, as though anticipating news of a sick loved one, only to find they are waiting for a real estate agent who informs them of the high price they will get for the house. Their joy, indicating their insensitivity regarding their mother's choices, and our expectations as viewers that they should be emotional or distressed forms the 'gag' of the film. While this is shared by all three siblings, not just the male protagonist Robert played by Matt Day, their callousness and lack of emotion is both critiqued and creates humour. McGrath (2013) critiques Tropfest films, for the "lighthearted, ironic and non-committal approach to trivial and non-trivial subject matter alike" (53). While *The Mother Situation* might be read in this way, it is not "easily understood, digested and liked" with "unanswered" questions (54). *The Mother Situation* is open-ended and political. Produced alongside the debate in Victoria around the introduction of euthanasia laws, Day suggests it is pro-euthanasia (ABC/AAP 2017) and yet it is regarded as evidence of a pro-life position on a US anti-euthanasia website (Schadenberg 2017), highlighting that the film does not deal with complex issues in simple ways. In moving from a sombre mood to callous joy as the film progresses, with the suggestion the Mother is murdered in order to sell the house, the absence of emotion is arguably critiqued.

Eating the fit, educated, hegemonic male

The title of this final section comes from 2017 second prize winner, *Meat and Potatoes*, created by Arielle Thomas and Ellenor Argyropoulos, an apocalyptic tale in which a vegan couple eat the fit engineer who arrives at their camp just as they are about to resort to eating one of the human corpses they share their campsite with. In interviews, the creators explicitly note a number of factors in their setting and focus, self-consciously choosing a setting that is successful and prioritising the everyday:

"We wanted to use the Australian bushland, because that usually resonates on the national festival circuit," said co-director and actor Arielle Thomas. "First and foremost I'm an actor so we really wanted there to be heavy character work and focus on the domestic argument between the couple. Just keep it really simple". (Moloney 2017)

Their title reflects this simplicity: given that there is only human flesh/meat and no potatoes, the title might refer more generally to the ordinary

everyday nature of this food, banal, with connotations of something essential or important (*Oxford Dictionaries*, online, "meat and potatoes"), but the term can also refer to male genitalia (*Urban Dictionary*, online, "meat and potatoes"). In this way, there is a sense to which the title itself suggests a critique of masculinity, the masculinity of representations, and the potential objectification of men, alongside conventions and tropes of heteronormative domestic relationships.

While situated in the extraordinary space of an apocalypse, much of the film is particularly ordinary: the film starts with the couple alone, bickering about which corpse they should eat, the educated one (wearing glasses), or the one who we are told has 'abs'. While the man queries the woman's preference for eating the man with glasses, calling her a snob and commenting "you don't like him? We're going to eat him, we're not taking him on a date", the man's preference for the body with abs is in turn critiqued by his partner: "I'm pretty sure that eating abs doesn't give you abs". They are surprised by the arrival of a man who provides information about the nearest town, fixes the radio, reveals he was an engineer and removes his shirt to scavenge them a rat/mouse for dinner; this man is perceived as more attractive for his suitability as food than as a sexual object. Humour is found in their disregard for his abilities to assist them to survive (his engineering skill, competence, and knowledge of where the nearest town is) in favour of him being literally fresh meat. Indeed, the film ends with the couple eating his bicep and bickering over whether they should have consumed the thigh instead.

The eaten engineer is the hegemonic male within Australian filmic tradition, presenting "a relaxed confidence that is not showy or demonstrative, but ironic, self-deprecating and refuses social hierarchy" (Beasley 2009, 67): he is the 'likable' male, while also representing power and status. But he is also deemed physically attractive: we can perceive this man as a cultural ideal, with the "archetypal heterosexual male body"; "broad shoulders and large chest, tapering down to a smaller waist" a physique deemed "sexually virile"; a body which is "muscular, but not too muscular" and "devoid of fat and hair" (Drummond 2011, 104). This is a very different physique to the male protagonist of the film, who like the driver in *The ATM*, is shown to appreciate the male body. Obsessed with social hierarchy, throughout *Meat and Potatoes* the couple compare the dead bodies and each other in relation to social class, education and appearance: he calls her a "moll", an Australian slang term suggesting promiscuity or unattractiveness; she comments on his insecurity about his weight and appearance. In this way, they perform a critique of masculinity: assessing the men via appearances,

musculature, glasses and clothing, with the line between homoeroticism and their hunger (to eat) continually confused. As Elspeth Probyn suggests, "eating, wanting and having sex with the other are deeply enmeshed. ... In the desire to completely consume the other it is easy to slide from loving to eating" (2000, 97), that is, the slippage between sexual metaphors discussed by this couple is not uncommon. Indeed, it is their assessment of these men that might constitute a critique of film traditions. In contrast to filmic conventions which often prioritise women's bodies and their individual parts (Mulvey 1975; Turner 2006, 114), these men may be perceived as "secondary characters who exist simply as spectacles of desire" (Turner 2006, 115) who are eventually, albeit out of frame, literally fragmented, lumps of meat on display. In this way, in contrast to familiar conventions of filmmaking, perhaps we are encouraged to see the male body here.

While the hegemonic male might be eaten, the male protagonist who may be perceived within the Australian filmic tradition of the 'battler' remains. The battler is an everyday familiar representation, as Kirsty Whitman (2013) notes, "systems of inequality and privilege are rendered invisible when hegemonic groups are given (or give themselves) victim status" (58). As a legitimising position, such representations might even contribute to power: as Whitman suggests "it is this 'averageness', this ambiguous 'everyman' appeal" that enables authenticity and "the legitimacy and entitlement tied to working-class masculinity" (2013, 53). Presented as insecure, aware of his weight and hungry, the male protagonist is consistently shown holding a knife made out of a pineapple tin (which I cannot help comparing to *Crocodile Dundee* [1986], perhaps the most famous filmic representation of an inadequate knife). As Rosalind Gill notes, in considering 'new lads' in fiction, "an unheroic construction of masculinity might be said to represent a *postfeminist modernization of hegemonic masculinity* that allows men to hold on to social power, while presenting them as harmless and troubled victims of a world where women rule" (2014, 200-201). It is this positioning at a disadvantage that enables the perpetuation of advantage.

But as a representation of the gendered everyday, the discussion between this couple both repeats these conventions of masculinity and draws our attention to them; they are made familiar. Indeed, their privilege is made visible – nothing apart from their assertions of hunger suggest they are starving, and they are not looking for food or even a way out of their situation. In this way, the directors take the ordinary and draw attention to it in an extraordinary moment. While their cannibalism seems rather

mundane, a clear choice within the world of the film, as Probyn suggests, "popular representations of cannibalism remind us of how forceful human hunger is, and indeed portray hunger as the great life driving-force. ... The act titillates: Would you? Could you?, even as it makes us ponder how far we would go in order to live" (2000, 82). Indeed, this highlights the ways in which hunger itself is an important concept; as Probyn suggests, "hunger brings with it a swath of symbolic connotations that are central to life as we know it: 'strong desires', 'cravings', 'eagerness', 'greed', and 'poor', 'barren', ... closely linked to appetite, desires and inclinations" and "may indicate that we are hungry for other modes of understanding everyday life" (82-83). In the context of contemplating the gendered everyday then, we can consider the need for other forms of understanding and for contemplating ourselves and others, a critique of the excess of our modern lives in capitalist societies. Indeed, Probyn proposes that "an ethics and practice of restraint is only *possible*, and that it may be the only possibility, within a culture of excess" (102). And yet, the bickering at the end of the film suggests that little change is likely to occur in the future, with their cycle of communication and engagement continuing.

Conclusion

Although Tropfest is only one small space, its high profile in Australia makes it a useful place to explore some of what might be happening in the industry more generally. Within the microcosm of this competition, 'winning' and finalist films repeat trends and conventions of the representation of masculinity and reinforce particular masculine ideals. Indeed, my textual analysis suggests that these films appear to be obsessed with masculinity. As we might see from films like *The ATM*, *Wibble Wobble*, *The Mother Situation* and *Meat and Potatoes*, while they gesture towards transgression, suggesting alternative representations and readings and highlighting gender's performativity, they nevertheless perpetuate dominant ideas. Any momentary transgressions are consistently undermined, suggesting the bounds of hegemony remain firmly in place, even as movement may be implied. Perhaps more significant is that these films indicate a limited range of ways of being a man, repeating conventions of violence, action and emotion with a lack of variety. In this way, Lucas's hope I alluded to in the introduction is perhaps misplaced. While she suggests that "The more cinematic versions of masculinity offered along a full spectrum of 'gender' ... the less fixed and monolithic both lived and represented masculinity need be" (1998, 146), the representations available here are limited. And yet, by considering the content of these films we might make these everyday

representations, the stories, themes and characters habitually repeated and rewarded more visible, alongside the media discussion about who is making the films rewarded in this competition.

Obviously, issues of gender in the Australian film industry have not been solved by Tropfest's changed judging policies, and the efforts begun following the 2016 competition must be sustained for any continued developments to occur. It is perhaps heartening that on a cursory view two of the top three winning films of Tropfest 2018 were refreshing in their content and focus, but it is also significant that this did not translate to the Trop Jr competition where all three winning films were made by and feature boys. That is, issues remain. When participants are encouraged to look to previous films for inspiration and primarily see white men, will they participate? Moreover, might female directors continue to make films about white men to get them noticed given competition trends? For change to occur, it is vital that we include Trop Jr competition in any discussion of gender and diversity in Tropfest, continue to encourage new, different stories, and reward them, rather than repeating those that have become ordinary and everyday within this competition.

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