

On Location: The Imagined Private Interior in Public Life

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Abstract: This paper reveals the interior landscapes of selected contemporary Australian films, such as *The Caterpillar Wish* and *Bad Boy Bubby*, to develop a number of thematic influences on the manner in which domestic and private lives are constructed through filmic imagination. The research uncovers the conditions that contribute to particular scenographic representations of the humble interiors that act as both backdrop and performer to subtle and often troubled narratives.

Such readings are informed by the theoretical works of writer Gertrude Stein, among others, who explore the relationships between the scenographic third dimension and the fourth dimensional performance in the representation of narrative space. A further theoretical thread lies in Giuliana Bruno's work on the tension between private and public filmic space, which is explored through the public outing of intensely private spaces generated through narratives framed by the specificities of found interiors.

Beyond the interrogation of qualities of imagined filmic space is the condition whereby locations, once transformed by the event of movie making are consequently forever revised. These altered conditions subsequently reinvest the lives of those who return to the location with layered narratives of occupation. Situationally, the now reconverted interior performs as contributor to subsequent private inhabitation, even if only as imagined space. The possibility here is that the qualities of the original may be superimposed and recontextualised to invest post-produced interiors with the qualities of the other space as imagined. This reading of film space explores new theoretical design scenarios for imagined and everyday interior landscapes.

On location: the imagined private interior in public life

Whenever I watch movies made in places that I know well and sometimes live in, I usually experience a sense of unease. Shot in familiar places, these sequences of images entwined within someone else's story and re-contextualised through the filmic project, often shock me into a dislocated view of my world. This displacement is further exacerbated through the usual renaming of these places as either identifiably somewhere else or as fictional places over the life of the film. Their spatial sequences are postproduced into curiously superimposed situations to suit the storyline and filmic aesthetic. These new observations of my customary urban and remote interior landscapes of South Australia that are the subject of film sets instigate personal speculations on a collision of associations effected by fictional, locational juxtapositions. Cognitive spatial and material shifts remake known places into sites of transient occupation for the currency of the filmic experience. And when it is all over, when the film crew leaves, the movie has been released, and all returns to everyday life, the vestiges of these altered occupations fade away. Or do they? In my experience, the memory of these fictional events forever resonate in the psyche of the people left behind. Through recollections of images witnessed in film space/time or in the appearance of the material left-overs of the filmed event - a rough stool or an oddly out of place paint job - slight yet changes in the fabric of the place as it was before endure.

In recent times, relatively low budget films produced in Australia by local writers, directors

and production designers have increasingly found favour with domestic and international niche audiences, not in the least due their atmospheric interior landscapes as much as their exotic exterior worlds. Contemporary Australian film increasingly explores the subtle, dark side of lives lived in private. Supporting a range of cultural narratives emanating from the suburbs and the bush, very personalised interior conditions are made evident through the work of production designers who trawl everyday places for sites that promise transformation.

It is apparent that the filmmakers and production designers who hunt out these often very ordinary interiors do so with the express intent to showcase the mundane and the barely-cared-for alongside more out-of-the-ordinary spaces. International audiences may recall the supercharged landscapes and interiors of *Strictly Ballroom* [1992] and *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* [1994]. Their raunchy, gaudy and supersized plots partnered with scenic landscapes result in a self-deprecating comedic air that resonate in the tragedy of lives lived in the margins. The South Australian films examined here engage with narratives of greater complexity and subtlety than the larger than life Australian idiom; assisted in no small measure by the locational devices adopted by home-grown directors and production designers, constrained by meagre resources and selective audiences. Their interiors are often understated and frequently bleak, witnessed in the simplicity of their interiors and in the banality of their exterior landscapes.

This paper presents the interior landscapes of three relatively low-budget contemporary Australian films and a series made for television - *Bad Boy Bubby* [1992], *Alexandra's Project* [2003], *The Caterpillar Wish* [2007], and *Rainshadow* [2007] - to propose a number of thematic influences around how domestic and private lives are (re)constructed through filmic imagination. Potent themes for interior occupation arise from looking closely at the scenarios inferred by the constructed mise-en-scene¹ – the scripted relationships between actor, physical setting and narrative – played out over a backdrop of real life locations, where their situational contexts are paused for the duration of the film shoot. Such situations draw upon theoretical perspectives pertinent to locational films; Gertrude Stein's landscape dramas and the work of Giuliana Bruno on public intimacy and memory in interior filmscapes. These concepts encourage dissociative thinking around relationships between narrative, sequence and occupied space; and they provide the central tenet of this research. Also drawing on George Perec's writing, I seek to foreground the spatial and furnished interior as protagonist in the filmic scenario, within a sequence of lives lived because of as well as within interior landscapes.² It is rare in contemporary film criticism that examination of the physical environment and real locations are foregrounded as essential contributors to the narrative, beyond the primacy of the script and its action/actors.

To introduce these subtle films brief scenarios are fashioned as fragments of the plot; as textual rather than visualised storyboards to begin to convey the qualities of location and scenic construction. No direct relationship to the theoretical readings is assumed; these fragments are punctuations and divergences in the script of this writing, much in the same way that scenic interruptions occur over the duration of the filmic journey. They are simply snapshots intended as textual drivers of this speculation on filmic occupation.

Scenario: thresh-hold

It is early morning as the view slowly unfolds along tidy, uniform suburban streets in a middle class suburb, somewhere that could be anywhere in a number of places.

Anonymity is reinforced at the destination; a continuous façade in a line of identical 90's townhouses arranged around a grassed and barely landscaped park. Two arched porticos suggest the way inside. A clue to which inside is home in the presence of a mechanical shutter - presumably shielding those within from the glare outside the living room - and three potted *ficus*. This doubling condition, one of faintly curious identity in this bland suburb, is a clue to what lies within the future interior, but for now this is barely obvious.



Figure 1: Alexandra's Project: thresh-hold – every-day

Scenario: every-day

It is seemingly morning but the room is shuttered from the sun, lit only by flattening overhead lighting that illuminates an unremarkable living cum dining space with kitchen beyond. Sliding doors open up the space. They are - mimicking the generic furniture - warmly wooden, juxtaposing walls of a dark comforting green with the excessively washed-out carpet where you could lose your footing and your way; an interior landscape of complete ordinariness. Although, it does feel strangely expansive. There is enough room to move around the shelves and sideboards moored at the walls and to negotiate the table and matched chairs marooned in the centre. Everything fits in a featureless late 20th century way. Decorations for a celebration are in process, strung from wall to wall, and the corners are in shadow.

Scenario: switch

Later on, it is seemingly the same room, yet all is in deep, deep shadow. An absence of light, except what escapes inside from the narrow gaps in the shutters. Slits of light define the spatiality of the room as the furniture no longer signifies how it operates – the room is stripped bare. Only a stool – remembered there before in an-other life - a video camera on tripod, television, easy chair and the kitchen beyond. The vestiges of the home and the celebration are stacked in a jumble at the end of the room, behind the place where the future action appears to be about to occur, or has it already happened? In its transformation the room has been remade more spacious, yet a deadening enclosure is powerful, in the gloom.

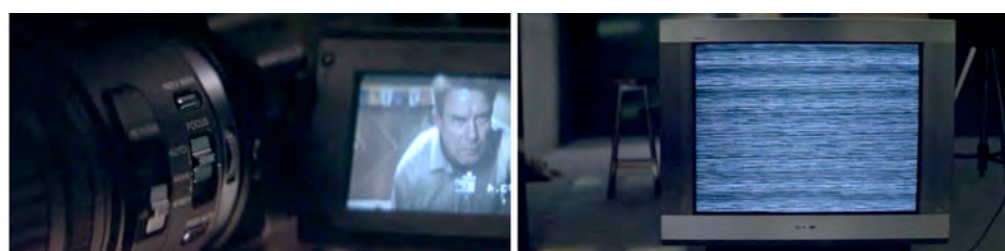


Figure 2: Alexandra's Project: switch – projection

Scenario: projection

The room is in this place and next door in the other place. Real time and recorded time are transmitted simultaneously. What was once the familiar room, my room, our room, is now a parody, merely a set in which to act out a doubled existence. Identical rooms in homes are only made personal through interactions with actor and the furnishings of home. Lives present in clothes discarded, decorations abandoned and video screens populated or blanked out; white noise signifies the end of the life as it was once known. And the shadows, in sharp relief are ever-present on the walls.³

These four scenarios are recollected as re-imagined fragments of the moments in the film *Alexandra's Project* where defining interior conditions unfold. They describe both the situational 'reality' and the relationships between spaces, objects and contexts that support the unfolding narrative. Actors remain mute and subordinate to the material nature of the setting, its interrelationships and dynamics. Everyday spaces have transformed, but in the absence of the performed narrative, one can only speculate on the motivations that have caused the switch. Left only with the rearranged room, explained only through its furnishings and shadowy atmospherics, mundane domestic lives appear to be overturned by events – much in the same way that the furniture has been overturned. Discordant objects appear, placed to reorganise the room's program from happy living room to oppressive and vacant screening space. The dark side of lives lived in private emerges and the room is now reoccupied and altered caught between 'real' and virtual time/space, for this moment, forever.

Beneath-ground: the imaginary real and other readings of private space



Figure 3: Bad Boy Bubby: beneath-ground

Scenario: beneath-ground

Walls, floors and every surface are improbably grey and stained. Docked around the walls, once lush sofas vie for space alongside a rusting kitchen – stove, sink, kettle, pots and crumbling tiles. A grim patterned rug populates the floor, providing the only semblance of warmth. Light from outside mists through a dingy barred window high up in a bleak wall, aided by a barely illuminating globe suspended from a ceiling somewhere above. A single locked door appears the only way of escape. An occupied chair at the scrubbed bare table relieved by two meagre toffees placed just so - the

daily food ration. Immovable under the watchful eye of Jesus on the wall, the room, as captor, awaits too.⁴

Words alone struggle to convey the shifting atmospherics enacted in this scenario of interior desolation. To find a representational method for communicating such ephemeral qualities beyond text, freeze frame or the storyboard employed by most production designers, Clino Trini Castelli's environmental diagrams methodology is a useful technique.⁵ Castelli employs environmental diagrams to move designers and clients out of their learned representational comfort zones. His method requires the preparation of a drawn or collaged plan of the space constructed from an expression of the ephemeral qualities acting in and upon it; qualities that define spatial and material relationships and represent the emotional and atmospheric conditions within, and outside the room. Beyond say, drawing to scale a table and chairs in a dining space adjacent the kitchen to convey the domestic scene, a plan is prepared through developing graphic cues for the smells of cooking wafting in from the kitchen or from the presence of food on the table – the proportion and location define openings into the room beyond and the relational dimensions of the spatial scenario. Daylight pours in from an adjacent window conveying the time of day and local weather conditions are revealed.

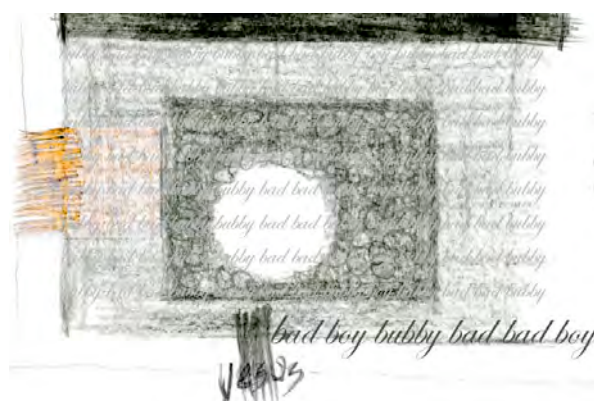


Figure 4: beneath-ground: diagrammed; abject occupation

I experiment with making simple environmental diagrams to attempt mediation between the purely physical (the set/location) and the narrative (the script/storyboard). Over its many iterations the diagrammatic plan is progressively stripped back to retain only the barest elements that provide relief; the darkening light from the window, the anchoring table on the foetid rug, the rancid stove wall - although sans the cooking pot which infers poisonous succor every time it appears –the ever-present hovering icon and the promise of escape through the indistinct boundary. 'Emotional' maps read as sequences of journeys around spaces, seeking out relational scenarios drawn from the fictional plot and from unreliable memories of other uncomfortable spaces; as in experiencing film, the audience willingly projects the personal upon the fictional.

In her writing on architecture and film Giuliana Bruno draws upon Giordano Bruno's fourteenth century thinking on memory landscapes and finds pertinent parallels with readings of contemporary film space; she sees film as an 'art of memory' that itself draws upon memory maps to read places as geographically charted recollections.⁶ Giordano Bruno's memory system enabled a recall of local interior architectures over the life of a processual mapping project undertaken while moving through a series of rooms containing particular objects as prompts in developing memory scenarios. His memory sites were built up through constructing

associational itineraries that engaged the emotions during sequential voyages around rooms. These places built upon an imaginary and relational trajectory of spaces furnished through juxtapositions of object and event/act to construct a composite geography of the interior and a memory archive.

The single stultifying room where the boy/man Bubby has existed for thirty seven years is a barely believable home; a liminal zone between street and deep interior, ground and undercroft, nature and artifice. His natural habitat is an interior world where the absence of an identifiable exterior further adds to his abject claustrophobia and his inability to extricate himself from the situation. Bubby's incarceration – he has never left the place as his mother has kept him captive and in her service for his whole life - is beyond the threads of reality. For Bubby, the room is at once the whole world and its microcosm. In its elemental state, the room maps the bare essentials for life, as he voyages endlessly around the four walls, table and sofa, kitchen and bed alcove. The space is simultaneously real and imagined, home and prison and abject and comforting in its practiced familiarity. We could imagine constructing multiple mind journeys for Bubby around this single space - in the fashion of de Maistre's journeys around his room during a period of incarceration - simply through mapping imaginary scenarios from all the potential interactions between objects, spaces and temporal situations emanating from this singular space.⁷ The impossibility of the situation and the abject nature of the place juxtapose a filmic occupation of imagined reality and realised imaginary.

Yet this room is a real place. This room in this warehouse in the now abandoned industrial zone of Port Adelaide may well have been occupied by the poor who once eked out a living in this grimy port of the 19th century,⁸ but not as home. Later in the film, the room is revealed as possibly a storeroom or anteroom in an old woolstore, in a street where we once made a rejuvenating design studio project for students. It could even be the same building.

The condition of one place transposing into another or seen in place of another, has been commonplace in film since mid last century. From the 1940's Italian neo-realist and French new wave filmmakers sought to break free from the constraints and what they saw as the artificiality of the studio set to make films on authentic locations. This produced a generation of social realist films written around the precise location as an evocation of a believable life, where fictional characters were made more real through the occupation of atmospheric locales.⁹ Yet Cherry and Cullens relate the temporary occupation of late 20th century Prague as the location for 18th century Vienna in the period film *Amadeus* [1984] as problematic. They suggest that a collision of 'visual, temporal and spatial displacement characteristic of film making on location'¹⁰ results in uneasy disassociation in audiences familiar with these cities in other lives.

Abject locational authenticity generates sensory displacement in the minds of both the abstract viewer and the impassioned local and occurs where the actual and the imaginary are subsumed into a third more mobile reality that negotiates between both conditions. When this happens one's sense of known and/or remembered place fluctuates between responding as active participant or as detached observer. New meanings are constructed around the historical and temporal qualities of sites that are subsequently reinvested with multiple narratives of spatial and material occupation. Local memories are tested as new imaginary and usually fleeting scenarios are written on surfaces previously marked exclusively through local intervention.

Focusing on the 'real' location simultaneously enables re-construction of the imaginary place in the mind of those who find the settings in local films curiously familiar, but not always able to be accurately located. Is that the house down the road? Is that café where we ate last week? Is that pier the one I see from my window, everyday? Through the lens of filmed narrative temporary occupation of places made permanent through ordinary daily experience, enables an altered experience of one's familiar landscapes to persist. On location, film space is fictional space that engages with real narrative –the stories of everyday lives. Transformed through filmic occupation locational space remains 'real' but is made fictive when recast as 'other' places in the time/space of the imagined narrative. Such places become actors across multiple scenarios – the real and the imagined – simultaneously. Working with what is already there infers a heightened authenticity, yet conversely, relationships between the constructed plot and the contradictions of real situations are tested when anomalies appear in the location.¹¹

Unpacking production design basics, Jane Barnwell offers two fundamentals of location beyond the place for action to unfold – the *dynamism* and unpredictability of the real and the *interactive* element of the narrative.¹² She regards the set as a 'repeated, persistent, ubiquitous character in the narrative' describing stock uses of certain elements to convey specific narrative situations, such as the use of stairs or doors as pivotal moments of change or status in the plot. When a particular location is used consistently over time, audience expectations for the relationship between location and actor/action are reinforced as gradually the set emerges as mute protagonist.

Crossing-space: interior landscape drama



Figure 5: Rainshadow: crossing space

Scenario: crossing-space

Under the peeling window frames, a rude green shelf cantilevers off an ochre stucco wall, expanding the rough sill in interfere(ence) with the veranda. A place to pause but not to rest; other verandas in this town have easy chairs and tables and places to pass the time but not this place – here you can only stand and prop. The window is

always ajar, open for business but with no obvious wares to exchange. Net curtains shield the darkened interior; as day becomes night, shadows pass sharply and then fade across the façade, light barely penetrating an interior anonymity. An old white teacup sans saucer appears from within, a prompt for conversation and advice from the seer within. The room is never left. At night a red glow of a cigarette the sole light from within.¹³

In the room/house of the unseen occupant the window, sill and veranda provide cues for inhabitation over day and night in the small, dry and bereft country town of Paringa, the location for the television series *Rainshadow*. Behind the façade a life is lived indoors and the narrative of everyday existence is concealed. This life comes to light in the presence or absence of things on the sill and in the slight movement of the curtains. Here the set as protagonist overturns the foregrounding of performance in the narrative. The composition of wall, window, sill, veranda, sun and shadow are the media for crossing between insiderness and outsiderness; an interstitial subtle space for acting out elusive interactions.

Drawing upon theatre practice to expand thinking on the filmic interior Gertrude Stein's concept of the landscape drama offers up alternatives to story and action narratives.¹⁴ Stein's writing and theatre worked on the premise that 'the basic structure of the landscape play is one of relations and juxtapositions, rather than the linear flow of conventional narrative.'¹⁵ Her writings convey much of this non-linear expression, where the sense of things in the world are slowly built up with stops, turns and twists in the language along the way. The opening lines from *Rooms in Tender Buttons* convey something of this slow building.

Act so there is no use in a centre. A wide action is not a width. A preparation is given to the ones preparing. They do not eat who mention silver and sweet. There was an occupation.

A whole centre and a border make hanging a way of dressing. This which is not why there is a voice is the remains of an offering. There was no rental.¹⁶

Stein's conceptual theatre was structured as if moving through an ill-defined landscape where the parameters and content may be determined by the artist [production designer/director], but the method and organisation of viewing and processing information was largely controlled by the spectator, a scenario which results in a more contemplative, relational experience than that offered by sequential linear drama. Stein's approach also underlies the work of Mike Shanks and Michael Pearson, in their collaborations between archaeology and performance art, where the material evidence and the traces left behind and uncovered by the archaeologist are made to coincide with the traces left behind by performances and events.¹⁷ Narrative life and design practices are challenged by, uncovering, and then representing, the narratives and transient events that occur in theatre space and in (interior) landscape space. *Rainshadow's* crossing-space is occupied most of the time with only small traces that infer but do not reveal the narrative. In the cup is invested a range of meanings; exchange, communality and timeless waiting for something, as yet undefined, to occur. And invested in the sill, made large for the express purpose of crossing over and across dissolves the threshold between inner private and concealed worlds; the interstitial veranda and the world of the street.

inter-face: memory and film



Figure 6: The Caterpillar Wish: inter-face

Scenario: inter-face

Light dapples across a patterning of a garlanded garden, once dreamed of, and now captured in a stylized interior garden of the walls. Room upon room unfolds, each wall more patterned, each more ephemeral than the last. No doors are closed to navigation between interior and exterior; an easy transit from pattern to pattern, from inner garden to outer garden. Interrupting the flow are slight objects suspended in space; object that move with the breeze, dazzle in the sunlight, emanating a subtle soundscape as they brush together. Mediating the inner and the outer spaces of transient existences, barely touching the home, ever in motion.¹⁸

To exist as different, as the other, in Robe, a small seaside town on the south-east coast of South Australia, is to live under the confining gaze of small town politics and histories. All is known and navigation of the wide-open streets and washed-out houses is quietly beautiful and impenetrably ordinary. This house of women plays out through sequences of fragmented and patterned interiors interspersed through openings to elsewhere where all becomes curiously superimposed leading to transparency – the window to outside, the doorway to the next room. In moments of anguish, the walls are set upon and broken through. In moments of quiet despair, being within or without is obscured through the diaphanous and reflective objects at the window and the multiple reflections of lives juxtaposed across space.

The production designer Robert Webb relates how the construction of an interior scenario that is believable, that the audience can see/find themselves in is an essential component in visualizing his work.¹⁹ Working around the idea of what places and ephemera people like these would have he sources objects and clues from around the locale. Post the film, these objects are returned locally to exist again as someone's stool or someone's table, and sometimes you, the new owner are told of their temporary life. As a continuing trace of multiple existences, that old chair that once held those people for forty years, for a moment was thrown through the window in a fit of fury in the transient narrative, now finds its way to a place near the fire in someone else's (your) kitchen. The real and the imaginary invested in small, mobile things as both a collection and a means to recollect.

The very public airing of private lives in *The Caterpillar Wish* resonates in Giuliana Bruno's notional 'geographies and cartography of intimate space' that bring an emotional or tender mapping of interior terrains, framed by the routes that pass through them. Passages between interior and exterior are played out on the walls as we are drawn around the house through a sequence of closely framed scenes of the mess of feminine domesticity. Adopting the stance of dispassionate sight-seers, we move through filmic rooms and lives as voyeurs, picking up clues and making self-referential associations.²⁰ Such mappings are inclusive of a montage of compressed and superimposed fictive and 'real' existences that coincide over the life of the film; to be carried away as memories after the show. And more often than not, upon reflection, everyday existences migrate between the fictive and the familiar, much later, long after viewing.

Giuliana Bruno paraphrases the great director Sergei Eisenstein's ideas on the relationships between space and filmic sequencing to suggest that imaginary journeys connect distant moments and far apart places through an architectural - and therefore a spatial - itinerary that operates in its own right beyond the narrative.²¹ Where private sites and places are visited and then re-visited in filmic space juxtaposed against physically and materially present space, the resulting montage of effects and experiences cause a confluence of impressions, and our collective equilibrium is destabilised. We are no longer sure of where we are in the world as our familiar locations are recalled and reinvented over multiple scenarios. As Bruno asserts, private places live in memory and revive publicly in the moving image, over and over again.

Endnotes

¹ Bourriaud, N. (2002) *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How art reprograms the world*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York p.37

² Perce, G. (1999) *Species of Spaces and other Pieces*, Penguin, London

³ Alexandra's Project [2003] – director Rolf de Heer, production design – Ian Jobson

⁴ *Bad Boy Bubby* [1992] – director Rolf de Heer, production design – Ian Jobson

⁵ Domus Academy Winter School (1991) Centre for Design at RMIT, Melbourne

⁶ Bruno, G. (2007B) *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts*, MIT Press, Cambridge, p.23

⁷ de Maistre, X. (2004/1794) *A Journey Round My Room*, trans. Brown, A. Hesperus Press, London

⁸ In 1992 this area of Port Adelaide was generally abandoned but is now subject to galloping gentrification

⁹ Barnwell, J. (2004) *Production Design: Architects of the Screen*, Short Cuts Series, Wallflower, London, p.29

¹⁰ Cherry, D. & Cullens, F. (eds) (2007) *Location*, Association of Art Historians, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, p.1

¹¹ Barnwell, J. (2004), p.29

¹² Barnwell, J. (2004), p.25

¹³ *Rainshadow* [2007] – producer Gus Howard, writers Tony Morphett and Jimmy Thomson, production design – Ian Jobson

¹⁴ Carlson, M. (2002) 'After Stein: Traveling the American Theatrical "Landscape"', in Elinor Fuchs & Una Chaidhuri, (2002) *Land/Scape/Theatre*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor

¹⁵ Lee, V. (2006) *The intention to notice: the collection, the tour and ordinary landscapes*, PhD Durable Visual Record, RMIT University, <http://adt.lib.rmit.edu.au/adt/public/adt-VIT20070202.153732/index.html> p.186

¹⁶ Stein, G (2002/1914) Stein, G. (1914) *Tender Buttons Objects : Food : Rooms*, in Per Bregne (ed) (2002) *Tender Buttons Objects : Food : Rooms*, Green Integer 50, Los Angeles, originally (1914) Claire Marie, New York, p.63

¹⁷ Lee, V. (2006) p.186

¹⁸ *The Caterpillar Wish* [2006], director Sandra Scribberas, production design - Robert Webb

¹⁹ Pers comm. March, 2009

²⁰ Bruno, G. (2007A) *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, Film*, Verso, New York, p.208

²¹ Bruno, G. (2007B) p.18

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Filmography:

Alexandra's Project [2003] – director Rolf de Heer, production design – Ian Jobson

Bad Boy Bubby [1992] – director Rolf de Heer, production design – Ian Jobson

Rainshadow [2007] – producer Gus Howard, writers Tony Morphett and Jimmy Thomson,
production design – Ian Jobson

The Caterpillar Wish [2006] – director Sandra Scribberas, production design Robert Webb,
Palace Films Australia, <http://www.thecaterpillarwish.com>