# Look Both Ways
Film directed by Sarah Watt

Teaching notes prepared for VATE members
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All references are to the film *Look Both Ways*, directed by Sarah Watt.
Purchasers may copy *Inside Stories* for classroom use.
Section 1. Introduction

*Look Both Ways*, directed by Melbourne-based filmmaker Sarah Watt, has won national and international acclaim. In 2005 the film won most awards at the Australian Film Institute Awards, including Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Supporting Actor (Tony Hayes who plays Andy). The film also won awards at renowned film festivals in both Rotterdam and Toronto. These awards affirm *Look Both Ways* as a film of originality, style and complexity.

The film focuses on parallel stories of characters navigating personal crises and the vagaries of human experience. However, I will argue that this is neither a narrative of personal triumph over adversity nor a melodrama of affliction. Nor does the film have any moral prescriptions or earnest homilies on how life should be lived.

*Look Both Ways* merely registers one of many moments in time – little more than a weekend, in fact. It is a small part of a continuum of experience as is exemplified in the kaleidoscopic jump-cut montage at the end which compresses the future of the protagonists. The linking of this moment to the past is also highlighted in Nick’s whole life flashing before him in the early sequences when he ponders his diagnosis and its implications.

All characters are united by their varying involvement in an accident in which a young male has been fatally hit by a train. This event is the centrifugal force that impels *Look Both Ways*.

While the account of Nick, a photojournalist and Meryl, an illustrator, might be regarded as the central narrative, the parallel stories are just as compelling and in their own way complement the primary story. Nick has just been diagnosed with cancer and Meryl is single and low on self-worth. She has just been to her father’s funeral.

There is also the story of Andy, a journalist and single father with weekend access and Anna, a pediatric nurse who is pregnant to Andy. There is the story of Phil, the editor, and his family whom he barely knows as he immerses himself in his job. There is the story of the train driver and his poignant, inconsolable grief and his struggle to come to terms with the acute, almost pathological blame that he bears as the driver. There is the story of Nick’s mother Joan and father Jim as they cope with the finality of Nick’s father’s death from cancer. There is the story of Julia, the young partner of Rob, hit by the train, as she comes to terms with such an unexpected and sudden loss.

The film’s central idea of accepting inherent human limitations and acknowledging individual mortality is evidenced in the visual and conceptual architecture of the entire film. The film is an anthology of melodramas that bleed into and complement each another.

In the web log that is part of the web site for *Look Both Ways*, Sarah Watt, the director, articulates her ideas on the experiences and feelings that underpin the film.

> I remember sitting on a train, thinking about what my fellow travellers weren’t revealing to me … whether they were on the brink of something wonderful or something terrible, whether anyone is ever in neutral mode … whether knowledge held by one person could potentially help another.
I also imagined our train hurtling over the pathetically insubstantial railing on the bridge, and into the chemical storage facility below – killing us all in a poisonous inferno. I thought about whether anyone else was feeling the same way.

I set out to make a romantic comedy, but the stuff of most people’s lives includes what we think of as tragedy, so *Look Both Ways* ended up a bit of both I guess. I like searching for the universal aspects of people’s experience, in both the big and little things. I tried to keep everything as ‘real’ as I could, to allow people to receive the film as part of their own experience, to bring their own lives to it and enjoy it that way.

(Website: http://www.lookbothways.com.au)

**Activities**

- After viewing the film write a personal response to both sets of ideas as they are outlined in the Introduction and the director’s statement.

- Moments in time. Describe 2-3 moments in time when you thought you would be swallowed alive by life (as Meryl is) and indicate if these moments turned out to be false alarms or not as profound as first thought.
Section 2. Ways into the text

a. Key concepts in *Look Both Ways*

The film deals with some of life’s eternal concerns. As a ‘stream-of-consciousness’ exercise, make notes on each of the following concepts before watching the film, noting images and memories that come to mind, and then compare and contrast your notes with those of your peers in group discussion. Most of these concepts are subjective, as you will discover when comparing your individual responses with those of other students. That is, everyone has his or her own experience and understanding of these emotions and states of being.

**Grief**
- Survival
- Compassion
- Love
- Despair
- Loss
- Panic
- Blame
- Spirit
- Self-knowledge
- Desire
- Hope
- Anxiety
- Redemption
- Fear
- Fate
- Chance
- Choice
- Commitment
- Responsibility

b. Contexts

Every text that is studied is inseparable from its contexts. An important context is the time and place in which the film is made, viewed and set. There is a confluence of contexts in *Look Both Ways*.

*Look Both Ways*, because it is a very recent production, has been made at a time when fear is a context in its own right. Meryl articulates this when she is looking at a newspaper and is overwhelmed by the incessant stories on loss and tragedy. She is scared out of her mind and responds by throwing the newspapers in the recycling bin.

Michael Moore in the film *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) interviews Barry Glassner, the author of *The Culture of Fear*. He also interviews Marilyn Manson, who is the object of fear in his own right. Both articulate the idea that we are fed fear as a staple diet and that mainstream media outlets induce fear through their saturation coverage of war, violence, brutality and ‘aberrant’ behaviour. Meryl’s instinctive response is consistent with a person who has an almost pathological litany of fears.
While previous generations have been forced to deal with the fears of war and the poverty of the Great Depression, the fears of the new millennium are perpetually drawn to our attention by media outlets. Fear in this context is, in its own right, a scary mechanism of control. Fear of terrorism, fear of the ‘other’ (eg. asylum seekers, those of ‘different’ appearance), fear of failure and fear of our bodies are just some of the fears that are tangible in 2006.

Activities

Respond to the following:

- List the fears that bombard you and indicate whether, on reflection, you think they are real or exaggerated. Compare your lists with those of classmates.

- Whose interests are served by ensuring that the population is scared?

c. Sarah Watt’s earlier work

While a filmmaker’s body of work is a continuum, each project should be seen in its own right. Inevitably, there will be traces left from earlier work that find their way into later films. So it might be instructive in providing a context for Look Both Ways to view Sarah Watt’s earlier animations. They deal with similar ideas of a sense of optimism triggered initially by loss and private grief.

In Living with Happiness (2001), a young mother finds herself gripped by an overwhelming pessimism that threatens to consume her. Only a freak accident on a lonely beach may be the key to her future happiness.

Small Treasures (1995) represents the experience of losing a baby during childbirth and how a mother makes sense of the tragedy.

- What are the similarities and differences between these short animations and the way in which animation is used in this film to register Meryl’s fears, insecurities and anxieties?

d. First Impressions

A useful way to start thinking about the film after a first viewing is to identify particular images, dialogue or sounds that made an immediate impact on the viewer. Explaining why these small aspects of the film (the microcosm) made an impression, and then speculating on how the emotional effects and traces are left with the viewer, provides a framework for crystallizing an understanding of the film’s broader perspective (the macrocosm). Students of film should always look at the ways in which a filmmaker’s choice of image, sound/silence and dialogue and the combination of these create meanings for audiences.

Delineate your first impressions of Look Both Ways by identifying and recording the indelible and memorable moments in the film. I was taken by the moment in the middle of the cricket match when Nick saw the wedding. Remembering an almost subliminal moment captures the ways in which perception and the straying senses work in humans. There are many moments of distraction in the film like this moment.
The cricket match moment was poignant because it revealed that even when Nick is in an abyss of despair there are other, concurrent lives that are euphoric.

Rule three vertical columns on a sheet of A4 paper and head each as follows:

- What – the image, sound, dialogue
- Why – the reason that the impact was profound
- How – the ways in which the emotional effects were created

Choose 4-5 ‘moments’ in the film which were especially vivid and memorable for you. Analyse and describe them in these columns.

e. The title of the film

Here are a few preliminary ideas on the multiple meanings of the title of the film.

- Implicit in the title is the notion of peripheral vision, seeing beyond the surface and the obvious.
- Other connotations might be the idea of anticipating what’s coming, knowing when to cross the metaphorical road and working out the angles and speed of oncoming traffic.
- It can also mean reconciling the past, the present and the future.
- The title appears briefly beside the railway line, as a sign, in the film. The sign reads, ‘Look both ways before crossing’

Activity

As a metaphor the title can take you in many directions.

- Make your own list of ideas that you think are either explicitly or implicitly suggested in the film’s title. The iconography of the yellow sign with a shark and a train might be a useful starting point.

f. Motifs

A motif is a visual image (or a set of images) which occurs on several occasions in a film and which is important in suggesting parallels or links between the characters and thus indirectly helping viewers to understand more about both characters and themes. It is useful to consciously note where and how these motifs occur, whom they relate to and what they might tell us. These visual cues and clues are integral to Look Both Ways. For example, birds are a powerful visual cue. Images of the manic flight of birds punctuate the narrative as both a kind of hiatus and link between different stories. Yet birds are also naturally free when contrasted with the lives of characters who live in the industrial and residential tangle below.

- Make brief notes about where the following occur and who is involved, and how these symbols and motifs might contribute to your appreciation of the film. Remember what you have learnt about film language and include thoughts about framing, lighting, camera shots etc. in assessing your response.
  - Birds (there are other examples)
  - Cricket
The soundtrack of a film includes dialogue, music, external background sounds (a soundscape) and silence.

Music is integral to the narrative in *Look Both Ways*. Music registers the rise and fall of thought and feeling and complements the visual narrative. In *Look Both Ways*, at some of those moments of reflection, the film provides a kind of interlude that allows the viewer to take stock of the emotional tenor of each of the central characters. The additional effect is that the viewer can also process feelings about characters as the images and music wash over.

Here is a list of the music tracks from the film:

**CRASHING**
(M.Davis/C.Jackson/D.Bradie/D.Tulen) Mushroom Music Publishing
Performed by Gersey

**THIS OLD HOUSE**
(Suzannah Espie) Control
Performed by GIT
**LIGHTHOUSE** (J.Cunningham) The Waifs © 2002
Performed by The Waifs

**ELEVEN**
(L.Miller) Mushroom Music Publishing
Performed by Lisa Miller

**LET ME BE**
(X.Rudd) Control
Performed by Xavier Rudd

**DARK OF MY MOON**
(Gene Clark) Gene Clark Music (BMI)
Administered by Bug/Festival Music Publishing
Performed by Gene Clark

**LONELY**
(M.Dyson) Native Tongue Music Publishing. Performed by Mia Dyson

**LONELY WON'T LEAVE ME ALONE**
(Daly/Pulford) Control/Festival Music Publishing on behalf of Bug Music Ltd
Performed by The Arlenes
Choose one of the songs, listen carefully to the lyrics and write a short response on how the sound complements or reinforces the narrative. The website that allows you to listen to each song in thirty-second grabs is http://www.inertia-music.com/catalogue/35949/Various/Look_Both_Ways_Soundtrack/ Choose from the list of songs above. There are extra songs on the CD release.

Choose three or four other scenes where the soundtrack – whether this is music, silence, natural sounds or a combination – is particularly successful in creating mood and discuss how this effect is achieved. In each case, how does the soundtrack contribute to your understanding of a character or situation?

Please note that a CD soundtrack was released, and this includes all the songs in the film and some additional songs.

h. Mood and tone

Look Both Ways is an interesting film in the sense that it deals with very serious life matters, yet never sentimentalises or vulgarises the affective heart of the film. This is quite a feat of story-telling, because many films would have beaten the viewer over the head with tragedy in a kind of overkill. There is a sense of optimism and hope that is revealed at quite transparent levels in the film, but there are also quieter moments such as the discernible smile on Joan’s face when the news of a five-year-old who is rescued from the Arnow Hill train disaster is televised.

How does Sarah Watt control the viewer’s response to the litany of very real suffering that the film registers? (For example, the scenes in which characters look at the moon are revealing.)

What do you think of the ending?
Section 3. Running sheet and structure of the text

a. Running sheet

A running sheet is a useful tool to help you to follow the film. It is important that you are familiar with characters and with what they say and do, as well as with the narrative sequence of *Look Both Ways*. Assessors like to read responses which are faithful to the film and which are *not* based on inaccuracies, misconceptions and guesswork.

You can produce a much more detailed running sheet if you want, based on each individual camera shot. What follows is a scene-by-scene running sheet, which will be a useful starting point. The key moments and conversations are included in this section as well.

1. Montage of shots of cards and wilting flowers in the aftermath of a funeral.
2. SBS television news report with Mary Kostakidis and footage of a train accident at Arnow Hill. There are unconfirmed multiple fatalities.
3. Title of the film over a blue background
5. Close-up of thirty-something woman (Meryl) deep in thought.
6. She imagines disaster at every turn. She re-imagines the tragedy at Arnow Hill with her involved. These flashes of her mortality are animated sequences.
7. The ‘Look both ways’ sign is highlighted
8. Her attention is drawn to a young man and woman near the tracks as she pulls in to her station. The young man who is building a shed is approached by the young woman.
9. She disembarks and walks through a claustrophobic urban maze, again imagining a train de-railing from an overhead bridge and landing on her.
10. She then imagines being hit by a car as she crosses a road.
11. Her attention is drawn to the work site where she has seen a young man building a shed.
12. She sees the young man and his dog emerge from behind some trees. He is preoccupied with walking the dog.
13. She imagines an assault in which she is attacked by the young man.
14. She looks up at a flock of birds as they disperse.
15. Cut to chest x-ray and a male (Nick) who looks overwhelmed by what he sees as an obvious growth.
16. Staccato images of the male’s life from birth, tantamount to his whole life flashing before him. Some of the snapshots included here are his work with a camera, the death of his father and overseas travel.
17. Conversation with the diagnosing doctor who is reluctant to provide a detailed prognosis.
18. Close up of images of the train disaster at Arnow Hill.
19. Phillip Freeman is an editor at the newspaper where Nick works as a photographer. Nick awkwardly and precipitately tells Phil that he has cancer.
20. The conversation that follows skirts the obvious pain of the revelation. Phil has no idea what to say or do.
21. Cut to a young journalist (Andy) typing a story on male suicide.
22. His sceptical female boss issues a new brief for Arts Diary.
23. Nick and Andy talk and leave together to pursue a story on a death of a young male near train tracks.
24. Cut to train tracks. The location is the same location and the deceased is the same young male who was walking his dog.
25. Camera pans the accident site
26. Meryl is being interviewed by the police.
27. At the conclusion Andy asks Meryl if she saw the man trip. Nick takes photographs, capturing all the key figures in the tragedy.
28. Meryl leaves the accident site with an animated flash image of a train out of control. Nick leaves chastened and a fairly blasé Andy approaches the train driver who has been devastated by the collision.
29. Cut to birds in a flying frenzy.
30. Nick and Meryl intersect and make small talk until Meryl reveals that she has just returned from her father’s funeral. Nick is sympathetic but is brushed aside by Meryl’s matter-of-fact response to her father’s death.
31. ‘Maybe it was meant to be’ is Meryl’s trite catch cry to explain the inexplicable. Her fatalism is unleashed on an overwhelmed Nick.
32. As Meryl departs she recalls another context with young Indigenous males where she has used her throwaway line. She is self-critical, but is unable to control her tongue.
33. Cut to Anna, Andy’s girlfriend who smokes. She offers Andy the results of a positive pregnancy test.
34. Inside Andy’s untidy flat, Andy justifies his lack of commitment and attacks her for smoking. Anna reveals that she doesn’t want a baby and Andy’s lack of sensitivity enrages her. She leaves.
35. Cut to Meryl’s studio apartment. It is also messy. She listens to voicemail messages, one of which urges Meryl to complete a deadline for some artwork.
36. Her sister calls. Meryl is irascible. She is negative about her status as a single woman and her lack of a rewarding job and home ownership. As she talks she paints in water colours. She paints the sea which leaps to life and almost drowns her. Her still painting is of someone (probably her) surrounded by sharks.
37. Cut to flock of birds.
38. First musical interlude that provides the moody backdrop to the lives of characters (‘Crashing’ by Gersey). The film flits from one context to another. From Nick choosing the shot of the train accident involving the solo male, to his partner Julia who is crestfallen near the tracks, to the silent train driver, to Anna watching a current affairs account of Arnow Hill. Phil lights a cigarette as he makes a decision on the photograph to accompany the article on the death and Meryl paints a large canvas frenetically. Nick’s best photographs are all of human suffering. He googles testicular cancer.
39. Cut to birds
40. Newspaper assembly line and the edition with the photograph of Julia taken by Nick
41. Train driver’s son arrives home with this edition in his hand and avoids his insomniac and depressed father who sits silently. The train driver screws up the newspaper in despair.
42. Cut to child at Phil’s. Miriam, his partner writes a ‘to do’ list on the front page. Phil is not attuned to his ten-year-old daughter.
43. Andy calls and assails Phil over his choice of photograph and its
incongruity next to his article which speculates on suicide. Phil dismisses
Andy as being too dogmatic and narcissistic.
44. Nick online looks at sites on testicular cancer. Very graphic drawings and
biochemical representations of the same. Nick has fallen asleep with
printouts. He is shown feeling for lumps and irregularities.
45. He is beset by fears reflected in a retrospective of his own life in which
alleged carcinogens have been ingested.
46. Nick dresses to go running. As he sits he is reminded of his father’s
experience with cancer via a series of flashbacks.
47. Outside he sees reminders of death while running.
48. Funeral arrangements are being made with Julia who looks at coffins
distractedly. Flowers arrive at her grim home.
49. Meryl reads of nothing but death and misfortune and throws the newspaper
out. As she is glancing at the articles she has animated premonitions of
disaster, culminating in the ground opening up and swallowing her.
50. She meets Nick outside. Another awkward, nervous conversation on
Meryl’s father’s death follows. Nick retrieves one of Meryl’s discarded
paintings from the recycling bin.
51. Nick sees death everywhere: the butcher’s window; the workman digging a
hole; the floral tribute to a road fatality; a child suffering from leukaemia.
The child smiles.
52. Meryl paints a delicate bird and spills black paint when a friend drops in.
53. The conversation drifts from mutual loathing of their jobs to star signs to
appraisal of the photograph of Julia. The friend trivialises the photograph
by talking about hair.
54. They go to the local pool. Meryl is intrigued by various body shapes.
55. As Meryl goes for a swim a nosy woman stares obtrusively at the
photograph of Julia that is on the front page.
56. Meryl is transfixed by a young girl floating on the water. Her alarm is
misconceived. She swims, imagining via animation the submarine beauty
until she is taken by a shark (in the animation.)
57. Cricket match. Andy and Nick play in the same team. Andy is resentful and
jealous over the photograph that he feels has been usurped. Andy rants
about the status of photojournalists.
58. A wedding takes place adjacent to the cricket ground
59. Nick is withdrawn. He glimpses a team mate who lights a cigarette. He
pathologises the smoking. He then sees a skin blemish which becomes a
skin cancer.
60. Flashbacks to Nick’s father’s musings on religion which in turn prompts
Nick to ask Andy if he believes in God. Nick sees a potential aneurysm in
Andy’s vehement response.
61. Andy is an atheist and he then asks Nick if he has got anyone pregnant.
‘Not that I know of’, is Nick’s response, to which Andy muses, ‘That’s just it,
isn’t it, knowing.’
62. Wicket falls. Andy goes in to bat.
63. Hospital. Anna works in the pediatric unit. Several references are made in
the short space of time to Anna not having children. The irony is not lost on
Anna.
64. Phil strolls in to cricket ground. Phil talks about the front page photograph
as an antidote for Nick’s gloom. Nick is not interested in this kind of
psychobabble.
65. Nick bats at the fall of a wicket. He is not concentrating, his attention drawn to the wedding, and he promptly loses his wicket much to Andy’s annoyance.

66. Nick walks off the ground last. Cut to a single bird.

67. Second full musical interlude (‘Eleven’ by Lisa Miller). Again the lives of the central characters are drawn together. Meryl marks a spot near the accident she has witnessed; Julie is grief-stricken as she sees the front page and storms outside; the train driver is totally introspective. His son reads Andy’s article on male suicide, perhaps recognizing his father’s symptoms. Phil is chuffed that he has given up smoking and Anna walks through a sprinkler with a new sense of life’s possibilities.

68. Train. Andy receives a call from Cathy, his former partner and the anonymous woman reading the newspaper at the pool. She takes Andy to task over an article he has written on split families, accuses him of not wanting children and then hints that he might ‘top’ himself when she indicates that he may not be able to see their shared children.

69. Birds scatter.

70. Nick’s apartment. He is restless and hot. He picks up Meryl’s painting on the pretext of returning it to her.

71. Nick and Meryl talk after Meryl has imagined being mugged. They talk about the positive effects of painting. Nick reads from one of the cards that Meryl paints. It is an optimistic message. The conversation rises and falls. Nick is not sure of the credibility of his own work. Meryl just paints for herself. Nick compliments Meryl on her work. Meryl is cynical and doesn’t know how to respond to Nick’s genuine interest.

72. The conversation moves to the subject of mortality. Both describe the experience of seeing death everywhere. A subliminal animation of an innocent victim taken by a killer whale frames the conversation which affirms that death is not present when they look at each other. Death is flirted with constantly and should be placed in perspective.

73. Anna contemplates abortion in the face of perceived rejection by Andy.

74. Andy attends mediocre performance of Macbeth (again with its musings on mortality). He leaves and drinks in the foyer.

75. Anna drinks with friends who all have a detached opinion on the photograph of Julia. For them the photograph is one-dimensional.

76. Andy phones Anna who tells him of her travel plans with Emma. Andy feels isolated. ‘Why do people have sex?’


78. Andy watches television. There are only bleak news stories. He puts on some music. The third musical interlude is ‘Dark Side of My Moon’ by Gene Clark. The ensemble stories are woven. Anna sits alone; Phil searches frantically for a cigarette before overcoming his urge; the train driver stands forlorn in a dark back yard; Nick wakes and sees the two forces that drive Meryl via her paintings. Beauty and bleakness co-exist in her work. He writes a note and leaves Meryl.

79. Nick jogs into the night. He finds a stoned/drunk young male who sees a cosmic force in the stars.

80. Meryl wakes. She is disappointed.

81. Birds scatter
82. Andy launches a blistering attack on the owner of the local milk bar when he finds he doesn't have enough money. Andy's outburst is ignored. Andy walks past a church and hears hymns which get under his skin.

83. Cut to Anna and Emma. Anna watches a Sunday service on television.

84. Nick lies on his bed remembering his father’s battle with pain.

85. Nick returns to Meryl. Again an awkward exchange flows. They speak of their fathers’ deaths and Nick invites Meryl to his mother's for lunch.

86. Sunday access for Andy at an art gallery. Cathy, the former partner, makes several demands on Andy before driving off. The children are noisy and difficult in the gallery.

87. Nick's mother has made lunch. Nick rehearses his words about his diagnosis. He dips into the past via his father’s belongings and a children’s book, Castaway. He remembers his father’s last hours in the family home.

88. Polite conversation at the meal table becomes terse. Nick projects his own anxieties. Nick and his mother relate to Meryl who envisages the earth opening up beneath her.

89. Nick and his mother talk about life and death. His mother is more resigned to the inevitability of death and asserts that different people have different responses to it.

90. Cut to Julia who walks along railway tracks. She finds the markers left by Meryl and kicks them away. She then prepares to make a cross of her own.

91. Fourth musical interlude. ‘Lonely’ by Mia Dyson. The train driver’s son brings his father a beer and shares it with him. Andy’s children play; Phil’s daughter’s party brings joy.

92. Nick and Meryl travel home by train. Nick is drawn to the diversity of those on the train, all with their own stories. Nick sees his father's dying moments again. He is totally detached from his surroundings.

93. Andy hands children back to their mother. Anna and Andy discuss the failure of their relationship and possible ways for reconciliation. Anna presents a few home truths to Andy, accusing him of carrying too many agendas instead of just accepting that some things just happen.

94. Anna lights a cigarette and then extinguishes it.

95. Andy visits the home of Julia, stopping outside.

96. Nick and Meryl walk through playing fields. Nick apologises for his lack of feeling and starts to tell Meryl about his cancer which he thinks prevents him from pursuing the relationship. Meryl is distraught, believing she is getting the cold shoulder, and after the revelation has been made she runs off, falls and narrowly avoids a swerving car. She sits on her own.

97. Andy is distressed as he walks along the same railway tracks that Julie’s partner did. Andy narrowly avoids Julia.

98. Nick walks in the same vicinity.

99. A goods train passes. Nick races it to the spot where the tragedy occurred. He either instinctively or co-incidentally finds Andy standing on the tracks. Andy steps back as the train arrives. Is he contemplating suicide or putting himself in someone else’s shoes? Nick confronts Andy who appears to be his usual off-hand self. Andy is taken aback by Nick’s revelation about cancer.

100. Final song, ‘Lonely Won’t Leave Me Alone’ by the Arlenes. Rain falls. Meryl purges herself through tears, Nick’s mother looks fondly at family memorabilia, Phil is content, Anna weeps, Julie grieves.

101. Train driver and son visit Julia with a card and condolences. There are touching moments for both as the healing starts and the blame subsides.
Nick fixates on a floral tribute and sees a kaleidoscope of memorials. Andy makes a decision and Meryl is sprayed by water, envisaging the young boys of an earlier dream when they playfully utter, ‘It was meant to be.’ Nick’s mother watches a story of survival of a young girl pulled from the Arnow Hill wreckage.

102. Nick and Meryl meet in the street. Mutual apology. The narrative beyond the film’s diegesis is in the form of a series of rapid flash images that entail a birth to Anna and Andy, Nick’s remission from cancer and travel for Meryl and Nick.

103. A bird scatters.

104. Credits accompanied by ‘Never Ever Worry’

b. Structure

_Look Both Ways_ appears to meander from one life experience to another. However, in a multi-strand narrative these seemingly discrete stories are all woven together conceptually. The varied human response to fear and loss is the fulcrum of all the stories as people negotiate their sense of isolation and conversely their places in the lives of others.

The film is structured around a series of conversations and musical interludes set to a range of vignettes that embrace all the characters as they cope with private dilemmas and fears. These conversations take place between all the major characters. Some are awkward, some are tender, some bitter, some hurtful, and some lead to flickers of understanding. For example, Anna and Andy speak about agendas in the context of his journalistic license when covering the fatal accident. He argues that male suicide often hides behind these ‘accidents’. Anna snaps at him, ‘Things just happen’, a reminder that over-analysing the human condition is not always best. And Joan, Nick’s mother, asserts in a conversation with Nick that death is not the sum of a person’s life.

There are also the ‘conversations’ that are manifested in whispers or merely eye contact.

**Activities**

Choose a conversation or a silence and explain why you think it matters.

The seemingly discrete stories are woven together in the narrative coda or epilogue at the end of the film in which characters have finally come to terms with their fears. There is a sense of newly acquired self-knowledge in the characters.

Did you find the narrative structure worked effectively?

Is the fast-forwarding of the lives of central characters at the end of the film too intrusive or reductive?

Could Sarah Watt have ended the film in another way without affecting the film’s meanings?
Section 4. Perspective

Nick (William McInnes) reads from the card, which Meryl (Justine Clarke) has illustrated. It is a card with a representation of a shell on the sand, gentle waves caressing the shell. It is the same card the overwrought train driver hand delivers to Julia by way of condolence and redemption. Nick reads to Meryl, ‘We have no light promised us to show our road 100 kilometres away, but we have a light to show us the next footstep and if we take that we will have a light to show us the one that is to follow’.

This simple, affecting sequence reveals one of the discursive elements of Look Both Ways and resonates through the lives of all the central characters as a kind of reminder that perception and understanding in life are best realised by not getting too far ahead or being submerged by too big a picture.

The film invites the viewer to think about the fears and anxieties that sometimes act as blockers or blinkers at times of high-level stress. Each of the central characters affirms the need to process and control these fears and anxieties in ways that do not negate the quintessential human spirit that resides in them.

Look Both Ways is a film of breadth and substance, both in its ideas on mortality and how humans cope with personal tragedy, depression and loss. The film’s use of visual and aural language to support its ideas is also revealed in each of these seminal moments in the film. There is a strong coherence to the narrative as it fuses form and content and reinforces its central ideas.

Look Both Ways presents a mosaic of human responses to events of loss, adversity and fear, caused by ostensible lack of personal control. Those overwhelming moments in humans’ lives are registered with a keen eye.

It is self-evident that loss, tragedy and death will test resolve and resilience, but the film asserts that while suffering is omnipresent, and ‘inevitable’ as Nick’s mother argues, a kind of dangerous, disabling paralysis can set in once the suffering colonises the psyche, the heart and the spirit. Fear and grief are healthy responses to adversity, yet when they are excessive or long-term they become a fog that envelops the person.

There is a complexity in the ways in which characters struggle to come to articulate the meaning of death in all lives. It is a reality and an abstraction that is both avoided and puzzling, perhaps never completely understood, let alone explained. And that is how it will always be despite attempts to control it and make it easy to understand. This avoidance of reductive conclusions, in itself, makes Look Both Ways a film text to be reckoned with.

It is a film which explores the different ways that humans grapple with life’s random twists and turns; the ways in which they try to make sense of what may seem unintelligible, unfair, overwhelming or chaotic. Difficult though it is, Look Both Ways suggests that while change, unpredictability and uncertainty are difficult to navigate they are best placed in perspective and accepted.

Look Both Ways is book-ended by a news report of a train crash at Arnow Hill that has claimed many lives. It is a tragic news story that frames the smaller, more parochial,
though no less significant story of the impact of another separate train accident with a single fatality that touches the lives of multiple characters.

The ensemble of stories that echo and complement each other are also of equal importance in the film. There is pathos in all characters as they get to know themselves through the vagaries of their respective lives – lives that are touched by the death of a young man hit by a train while out walking his dog, the referent of the film.

Nick, the photojournalist who has just been diagnosed with cancer, photographs the aftermath of the tragedy. Meryl, the illustrator, is fatalistic if not nihilistic. She is not coping with being single and is just going through the motions. Meryl imagines disaster at every turn, manifested in animations in which she is eaten by sharks, swallowed by collapsing floors or tunnels. Her ghoulish anxieties are hardly allayed when, returning to the Adelaide summer after her father’s funeral, she is a witness to the fatal accident on a train-line.

Andy, who works with Nick on the same newspaper, twists the fatal accident to a story on male suicide and a speculative essay about depression, showing scant regard for the victim’s widow. The irascible Andy is also lost, separated and afraid of commitment to his pregnant girlfriend, Anna, who struggles with Andy’s lack of response to her pregnancy and his cavalier and world-weary attitude to work and relationships.

Julia, the widow, mourns the loss of her partner killed by a passing train, and the train driver spirals into depressive silence, shattered by his perceived role in the death.

Phil, the editor of the newspaper, grows closer to his partner and children as these tragedies reverberate and bleed into his own life.

*Look Both Ways* is also a film that refuses to prioritise characters even though Meryl and Nick have the most screen time. We see, through different means, into the troubled hearts and souls of several other characters touched by the accident, either directly or indirectly, over the course of a blistering three days next to the railway tracks in inner city Adelaide. The location is akin to a character as it also comes to terms with the lives that it contains.
Section 5. Characters

Genre is important in framing the viewer’s understanding and expectations of both character and narrative.

a. Genre

Sarah Watt describes the film as a seriocomic narrative (a kind of tragi-comedy). Certainly a steady stream of situational, verbal and visual humour in the film alleviates the gravity of a narrative on fear and death.

There is also a strong hint of melodrama in the film as it registers the nuances and vicissitudes of emotion and looks at moral choices made by characters.

Melodrama comes for the Greek word ‘melos’ which means music, capturing the emotional rise and fall, the register of human experience. In general terms other features of melodrama are:

- household as locus
- heightened ‘problems’ such as sexual dysfunction, marital breakdown, alcoholism
- twists and turns of fate, suspense, disaster and tragedy, last-minute rescues and happy endings.
- search for the ideal and self-knowledge
- the process of redemption
- the dichotomy of desire vs. repression
- ambiguous function of marriage as either liberating or repressive

*Look Both Ways* has some of these ingredients, especially in terms of characters making moral choices and seeking the ‘ideal’ and redemption.

Activity

- List the characters down one side of a page
- in columns next to each one, make notes about the choices made, the circumstances and reasons behind each choice and the consequences of each, both in terms of the plot and relationships, and in both the short and long term.

b. Exploring and recognising relationships

It is widely acknowledged that the characters in *Look Both Ways* are very real. Regardless of your age, you will have some knowledge of the joys and tensions of marital, familial and romantic relationships. When watching film there is always a
character on the screen who reminds you of someone you know or have met or feelings you have had.

Individually, choose one scene portraying each of the kinds of relationships from those you found most authentic or revealing in the film. Write brief notes about the selected relationships and why they gave you a sense of recognition.

- Nick and Meryl
- Andy and Anna
- Andy and Cathy
- Phil and Miriam
- Julia and Rob
- Joan and Jim
- The train driver and his son
- Nick and Andy
- Phil and Nick

If you feel sufficiently comfortable or confident to do so, discuss your notes with others, as a class or in a small group.
Section 6. Issues and themes

*Look Both Ways* is a film that merges form and content quite seamlessly. This outline of themes and issues is informed by the strong nexus between form and content.

**a. Honesty**

Meryl speaks in very animated terms about the ‘politeness hostage gene’ that seems to intervene when there is a need for honesty.

In *Look Both Ways*, there are a number of strategies used to mask or unmask confronting situations. Characters either withhold the truth or they sometimes lie, or they avoid or skirt around the truth in different situations and for different reasons. Dishonesty is not always direct. Nor is it always malicious. It can be by commission or omission. It can be a failure to state what you know or suspect, or a tacit agreement to keep quiet or obfuscate.

‘But dishonesty, like excessive and corrosive grief can be a cancer that eats away at the soul.’ (Sarah Watt.) On a sheet of A4 paper, list all the main characters along the sides. Give each a column for ‘honesty’ and ‘dishonesty’. Identify moments in the film in which characters fall into these two categories and make brief notes on the reasons for and consequences of each, as well as your response as a viewer about whether the film as a whole seemed to endorse or criticise that person’s action.

**b. Animations and Meryl’s subconscious**

There are two almost subliminal animations that reveal the complexities of *Look Both Ways* and serve to remind the viewer that film is multi-dimensional and rich in its ideas and aesthetics.

As Meryl who flirts with the concept of co-incidence and the role of destiny in lives walks away from her first meeting with Nick, she slips into her animation alter ego. She utters the line, ‘Maybe it was meant to be’, when trying to piece together the reasons for her experiences and encounters.

This ironic, almost parodic line is to two mournful, young Indigenous males whose poverty resonates in the light of Meryl’s awkward and seemingly superficial explanation of her meeting Nick. Her statement, which she realizes is trite (she mutters ‘Jesus’), is then critiqued as a careless, empty self-indulgence vis-a-vis the boys’ own plight. Their poverty is certainly not meant to be. A sense of moral relativism is affirmed in this sequence and Meryl’s empty words are debunked.

Meryl’s reductive explanations for her own ‘failures’ are never far away in *Look Both Ways*.

The same Indigenous boys come back to mock Meryl at the end of the film when she is splashed by a car that drives through puddles.

**Activity**

- How does the second inclusion of the boys differ from the first time we see them?
Meryl experiences the worst of all possible worlds in her subconscious animations that are the realisations of her own fears. Sharks, crashing trains, gunmen, floors that open up, disabled triplets and AIDS are a few of the nightmares and ghosts that haunt her.

- Choose one of the animations and write a short response in which you discuss the relevance and effectiveness of the animation.
- Why do you think the animations are hand drawn?

c. Memory

There are several flashbacks to Nick’s father in the film. He died of cancer. Nick’s psyche is fixated with these moments given his own diagnosis.

- Trace the triggers for Nick’s memories and what the memories reveal about Nick and his father and mother.
- How are these sequences edited to look different from other sequences in the film?

d. Adjacent worlds

One of the interesting features of the diegetic world of the film is that there are always parallel worlds recorded by Sarah Watt. Sometimes this is through the eyes of characters, especially Nick, as he brushes against that adjacent world.

The film entails a lot of observation of seemingly disconnected threads of existence. Nick, who is absorbed in the knowledge that he has cancer, is suddenly alerted to an extraneous world to which he has been blind in the past. For example, he sees death in butchers’ windows. Similarly, his attention is drawn to a wedding adjacent to the cricket field.

This fleeting glimpse of another possible world is a contrast to the solipsistic world of Nick who is almost the man who wasn’t there and it affirms that the world does not drown in the nihilism that can be triggered in response to a cancer diagnosis. Put simply, it is the idea that someone’s worst day can be someone else’s happiest day.

Similarly, Anna, Andy’s jilted girlfriend feels abandoned and alone, given that she is pregnant and feels overwhelmed by her work in the casualty ward. Yet as she walks through a park of children at play she is enlivened by the fresh, cooling spray of sprinklers. The water energises her, shakes her out of her self-absorbed world.

In both cases, the adjacent world is an antidote to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. What other moments are there in the film when the extraneous world moves in on the private, self-absorbed world?

- Identify at least two similar moments in the film in which this parallel world is evoked and write a short response on the effect of this world on the character.
e. Cityscape

The immediate setting of most of the film is within the claustrophobic tangle of inner city Adelaide. Ugly industrial estates, a confluence of railway tracks, graffiti and clutter exist next to parks and playing fields. The physical setting is a tangible force in *Look Both Ways*.

- Why do you think the filmmaker, Sarah Watt, has chosen this location?

f. Heat and rain

The relentless heat is an oppressive blanket that saps energy and creates a somnolent mood in the film.

- In what other ways does heat play a role in *Look Both Ways*?
- What is the effect of rain in the final scene?
Section 7. Language and style

a. Film language

Film language is the architecture by which films tell stories and trigger responses in viewers. All the elements of filmmaking play a part in this, but of particular importance is editing for particular effects and attention to characterisation through visual means such as costume, and the choice of particular shots such as the use of close-ups to alert viewers to important moments of action or emotional response.

What follows is a glossary of film terms. They provide the syntax and structure for filmmaking. Read what follows and then complete the activity at the end of the glossary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Camera angle</td>
<td>the position from which the camera looks at what is to be filmed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-up</td>
<td>a camera shot that shows a close-up view of the subject filling most of the screen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame</td>
<td>the rectangle formed by the outside edges of a movie screen. To frame a shot is to arrange its composition. A frame is also each separate image in a film.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>the way elements in a shot are arranged in relation to each other and to the viewer: the way they are framed. The director and cinematographer determine this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut</td>
<td>the abrupt transition from one shot to another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing</td>
<td>the selection and physical assembling of the pieces of film which will comprise a finished movie. Editing also refers to the process of fine-tuning a script.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-angle shot</td>
<td>a camera shot which looks down at the subject from a high angle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long shot</td>
<td>a camera shot that makes the subject look small and far away. In reality, any shot which shows a person’s whole body rather than a close-up of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-angle shot</td>
<td>a camera shot which looks up at the subject from a low angle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium shot</td>
<td>a camera shot midway between a close-up and a long shot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montage</td>
<td>a series of brief images put together to tell a segment of a story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan</td>
<td>the slow pivoting of a camera from one side to another (derived from the word ‘panorama’).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screenplay</td>
<td>a film script in completed and sometimes published form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence</td>
<td>a series of scenes that describe a continuing action.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Shoot**

the action of filming something.

**Shot**

any set-up of the camera so that something can be filmed. Also used as a verb, with the same meaning as ‘filmed’.

**Zoom shot**

a shot where the camera appears to move closer to or further away from the subject.

### b. Montage

Montage is defined in the glossary of terms. *Look Both Ways* employs montage regularly.

- Nick’s life flashing before him
- Nick’s reveries on the physiological changes and chemical attacks on his body
- Nick’s abject nightmares that invade him like the cancer that breeds and multiplies inside his body.
- Nick’s reflections on the links between his lifestyle and cancer
- Nick’s reflections on death, floral tributes and tombstones
- Nick’s abstracted thoughts on the train on his way back from his mother’s home

There is also the montage that is used with some of the songs which clearly focuses on what characters are thinking, feeling and seeing.

- Choose one of these sequences in the film and write a response in which you comment on the effectiveness of the montage

### c. Style

There are a number of close-up shots of both Julia who has lost her partner and Anna, Andy’s girlfriend, framed by windows. The viewer looks in on them from a distance.

In the case of Julia and the train driver the use of the camera creates other emotional effects. The viewer only ever see them outside or within walls, the intention being that they are like neighbours seen from a distance. We know they've had the worst thing happen to them, but the film isn’t about them. It is about us and Meryl and Nick and the others. It is about the fear rather than the event, so we never get close to the train driver or Julia. This is supported by shooting them from outside the rooms.

And there are, of course, many examples of montage in the film from the flash image eruption of still images that encapsulate Nick’s life after he has found out he has cancer to the slower montage of sequences that accompany the soundtrack at emotional high points in the film.

### Activity

- *Look Both Ways* is idiosyncratic and fresh in the ways in which it plays with film language. From the glossary above choose two of the terms and describe how they are used and with what effects in *Look Both Ways.*
Section 8. Close study of three scenes

Opening and closing scenes of films are an instructive way of framing understandings. The assessors are looking for responses in which arguments and assertions are grounded in the fabric of the film.

Every opening scene will introduce characters, foreshadow ideas and set up expectations for the viewer. The endings of films reveal any growth in moral courage and/or self-knowledge. A scene in which an epiphanous moment in one of the characters occurs is also worth studying closely.

Activity

View the following sequences which are time coded. Use the prompts provided for each excerpt to develop a close analysis. When responding to the prompts, think about the effects created by the choices of Sarah Watt, the director. Below is a short close study of the opening of the film which you can extend.

a. Omnipresent disaster (0.00 – 3.40)

- the use of a photomontage to create mood
- the news broadcast and its contents
- the close-ups of Meryl and her point of view (who and what Meryl sees)
- the animations
- the heat
- the flight of birds
- the silent shock that Nick experiences
- the breakneck photomontage of his life
- the doctor’s response

The opening of Look Both Ways pre-figures the lives of the central characters. Meryl and Nick are deliberately anonymous characters. The viewer is invited to speculate on the lives and experiences of the two characters and the possible links between the two.

Sarah Watt uses parallel narratives throughout the film and ultimately weaves them together. There is a ‘meanwhile somewhere else’ sense created as each character is consumed by deeply personal and private intimations which are only a part of the full gamut of human experience.

There is a tendency people share that is being evoked here: that individuals look inside themselves and rarely outside themselves. This is a natural instinct or urge for most of us which is not necessarily self-centred, but one which nevertheless separates individuals as it shields them from the lives and pain of others.

The film opens with a photomontage of wilting flowers and cards of condolence and a news report on a major train disaster. The still, darkened interior space, free of human activity, keys the viewer into the idea of death never being far away and reminding us that it is a regular visitor in human lives, either directly or indirectly.

Meryl sits on a train in a kind of reverie. She is still haunted by the death of her father and the animations of her subconscious are an integral part of her fatalistic world.
view. She sees danger and disaster at every turn. It is extreme and almost pathological. These intimations of death and disaster are kinds of Jungian shadows that follow her. She will cast away these shadows eventually.

There is an almost hallucinatory quality in these reveries which are accentuated by the persistent heat of summer. Birds scatter. This framing device is used throughout the film as a hiatus between stories. It also suggests that no matter what the bad news might be or perceived to be that nature and time have a kind of permanence that human experience can never possess.

Nick’s predicament is made transparent via the x-ray which shows a growth. He is mesmerised and shocked by what he sees. His devastation and his fear are palpable. The flash image rewind of his life is the filmic representation of the concept of the whole of one’s life flashing before one’s eyes at moments of crisis or extreme threat. It is a marker that this experience might be coming to an end.

The diagnosing doctor is uncommitted. The possibility of a fatal cancer is a taboo topic even for him. This provides no comfort for Nick. The two discrete characters’ baggage is out in the open. Whatever the links between the two, their emotional states are fragile and their wounds are raw and septic.

c. **Crashing** (14.06 – 18.00)

This is the first musical interlude that provides the moody backdrop to the lives of characters (*Crashing* by Gersey). The film flits from one context to another. All of the musical interludes should be studied closely. They all reveal stages of grief, and conversely, hope later in the film. This early song establishes character without characters articulating what it is they are going through. The following montage of parallel shots should be explored. Make notes on what each character is thinking and feeling

- Nick choosing the shot of the train accident
- Julia crestfallen near the tracks where Rob has been killed
- the silent train driver
- Anna watching television coverage of the Arnow Hill disaster
- Phil lighting a cigarette as he makes a decision on the photograph to accompany the article on the death
- Meryl paints a large canvas frenetically
- Nick’s trawling through old photographs which all record human suffering or resilience in the face of suffering
- Nick googling testicular cancer.

c. **Coda** (1.29.14 – end)

- the birds
- the rain and is effects
- the lyrics of the song
- the tears of both Nick and Meryl
- the pan of Joan’s photographs
- the joy of the party
- the close-up of Phil’s reaction to that joy
- the close-up of Anna’s pain
• the scene in which the train driver offers the card and his hand to Julia
• Nick’s photomontage of flowers and graves
• Andy’s decision to return to Anna
• the reunion and reconciliation of Nick and Meryl
• the final animation
• Joan’s reaction to the news of a survivor of the Arnow Hill train crash
• the children playing in the puddles
• the final photomontage of the future
Section 9. Further activities

a. Background issues

*Look Both Ways* raises many possible issues that are currently the source of investigative, informative and opinionative writing in newspapers and which in some cases are available through transcripts of radio programs.

- How fear is generated and sustained in the community, especially in the aftermath of major contemporary world events such as 9/11, the Bali bombing, the war on Iraq
- The pre-occupation with violence, death and tragedy on television and in newspapers (Meryl is nauseated by the unrelenting coverage of death and how death is prioritised by the media)
- Belief in a divine power (Nick and Andy discuss the existence of God at the cricket ground)
- The search for meaning in our secular society
- Cancer as a major cause of death

**Activity**

Individuals or groups of students could investigate one of these topics and present findings to the class, relating these to aspects of the film.

b. Images and commentary

**Activity**

Use downloaded publicity stills from *Look Both Ways* that can be found at www.lookbothways.com.au Students could prepare a Powerpoint presentation in which they use particular frames to talk about the important ideas in the film.

c. ‘Hot Seat’: a role-play based on *Look Both Ways*

Form your own group in which you ask characters from the film about their motives and actions at various stages of the film. Each student in each group must take on a character’s role as it is perceived and interpreted it in the film. Students must not introduce any personal opinion. You can be asked about your thoughts and feelings at any stage of the narrative, but focus on your attitude to the characters as they are presented in *Look Both Ways*. The rest of the group has to ask the questions to draw out your response. Each person in the group must have at least one role to play and take it in turns to be interrogated. The interrogation for each character should last about five minutes. The group might like to formulate relevant questions for each character before starting the role-play. Some examples follow. You should do the same for characters not included here.

Nick

Why did you find it too hard to tell your mother that you had cancer?

Meryl
Why did you always seem to think the worst?

Andy
Why did you treat Anna in the way that you did?
Why were you standing in front of the train?

Phil
What have you learned about what is important through Nick’s experience?

Train driver
When and why did you decide to visit Julia?
How did the tragedy change the relationship with your son?

Julia
How did you feel when the train driver paid you a visit?

A rehearsed version of this activity could become a formal Oral Presentation for this part of the VCE English course.

d. Creative writing responses

- Write an entry in Nick’s diary while he is recovering from treatment for cancer.
- Julia speaks at her partner’s funeral. Write her eulogy.
- The train driver writes a letter to Julia two months after the accident. Write that letter.

e. Drawing conclusions

Now that you are familiar with the film the following questions might be better answered.

This study guide has deliberately left analysis of some of the ideas for you to consider. For instance, the speculation on suicide and how it relates to Andy’s life, his own sense of isolation and his initial response to Anna’s unplanned pregnancy can be considered in this last section.

- What ideas, themes and issues does the film raise? How are they analysed or explored?
- How does the narrative structure of the film work to support its ideas? Is the film linear? Do we have to fill in gaps?
- How do the physical setting and the cultural context work in the film to develop its themes and ideas?
- Are characters represented sympathetically? Do they change? Are the characters stereotyped? Are they polarised? Do we feel ambivalent about them?
• How do voice, dialogue, action and image (visual cues and codes) and their interaction define character? Look here at the mood created by the use of colour and light or lack of colour and light at particular moments.

• What values seem to be transmitted in Look Both Ways? How is the viewer positioned? Or to put it another way, what are you as viewer invited to accept or reject in the representation of the world of Look Both Ways and its closure?

• Who or what is ‘missing’ from the story?

• What does the film seem to say about children, adults, males, females, and cultures?

• Why do you think certain characters are represented in particular ways?
Section 10. Essay topics

Part 1

The stories of all the characters carry equal weight in *Look Both Ways*. What do you think?

The characters such as Julia and the train driver who say the least in the film are the characters who are suffering the most in *Look Both Ways*. Is this true?

The use of parallel narratives is an effective strategy that complements the story of Meryl and Nick. Do you agree?

How does *Look Both Ways* represent the fears and anxieties of its central characters, Meryl and Nick?

It is Andy who is the most troubled character in the film, despite his knockabout, blasé streak?

Part 2

Fear and anxiety are endemic in contemporary society and must be controlled and harnessed for a healthy life. Is this a central idea in *Look Both Ways*?

Out of nowhere comes either happiness, despair or somewhere in-between. Is this true of *Look Both Ways*?

The strength and appeal of *Look Both Ways* is that it presents a social portrait of ordinary people in ordinary circumstances. What do you think?

Facing up to responsibilities is a fundamental tenet of human experience. Do you agree?

When all seems lost and pointless is a time when the most profound life lessons are learned? Is this true of *Look Both Ways*?
Section 11. Two guided essay questions

Part 1

Topic
The stories of all the characters carry equal weight in *Look Both Ways*. What do you think?

When approaching a fairly standard question such as the question above there are a few guidelines that should be followed. The question demands that, first of all, you identify and define the key terms of the essay topic. In this case the term that leaps out is *equal weight*. It is also essential to translate the terms of the question into words that you feel comfortable with. For example, what does *equal weight* mean? Can it have multiple meanings?

In general terms, one approach that will generate ideas for inclusion in your essay is to interrogate the question. The plan that follows posits interrogation of the question, looking at the nuances of meanings of the terms of the original question.

There needs to be a blend of your own commentary with carefully selected evidence from the film to corroborate your point of view. Each case that you unfurl must be discussed in relation to your central contention and framed in the key terms of the question. Do not stray from the terms of the question. Your commentary must be relevant to the topic at all times.

- Canvass the implications of the question fully at the start, establishing your contention and outlining your key ideas.
- Choose an effective opening.
- Develop your main arguments, with evidence, in succeeding paragraphs.
- Have a topic sentence in each paragraph which clearly identifies what you are discussing.
- Ensure your essay reads fluently by linking each paragraph to the one before.
- Write a conclusion which ties up your arguments and offers a final judgement.

In response to the Part 1 topic above, this is a possible plan

- Nick and Meryl are demonstrably positioned by Sarah Watt as the central characters.
- These characters have more screen time than other characters.
- Sarah Watt has foregrounded their stories in demonstrable ways. For example, their private worlds are represented in sustained visual and verbal ways. The flashbacks of Nick and the animated anxieties are obvious examples.
- However, if equal weight is more than the notion of screen time or the fact that Meryl and Nick’s stories are privileged in the opening sequences, there can be a case argued that in terms of viewer empathy there are other characters whose predicament may pull at the heart strings in truly affecting ways.
- It can therefore be argued that while Meryl and Nick’s stories are fleshed out in many ways the film attempts to create parallel stories that develop and complement each other.
- The stories of those whose voices are stifled by unconscionable grief and who Sarah Watt places at the margins in terms of dialogue or screen time such as Julia and the train driver are stories that are confronting and raw because they
are about characters who seem to have lost all semblance of order and control in their lives.

In this response then, the contention that is being extrapolated on is that although Meryl and Nick are ostensibly the central characters, viewers can identify strongly with any of the other characters even though the viewer is provided with a less substantive portrait. Spectator theory in cinema is applicable here. There are always multiple points of entry for viewers whose values, predilections and emotional compass can intersect with a range of characters.

There are common threads to each of the stories as well. All of the characters are coping with fears and anxieties and loss. The response would outline what each of the characters is experiencing and how these common predicaments and coping mechanisms and survival strategies is a part of a mosaic of potential responses to loss and uncertainty, none of which is particularly more virtuous than the next. There are no prescriptions given in Look Both Ways and all of the characters in their own distinctive ways reinforce this idea that there is a concept of equal weight at play.

Part 2

Topic
When all seems lost and pointless is a time when the most profound life lessons are learned? Is this true of Look Both Ways?

Define loss, pointless and profound life lessons.

Contend that soul-searching usually comes at a time when human beings lose control of their destinies and it is this sense of impotence, failure or alienation that often triggers a re-appraisal of life’s priorities.

- Explain the sense of loss and pointlessness that all of the characters experience without regurgitating the plot.
- Identify the need to look inside the soul and summon the reserves of strength needed to face the future and take new risks. Finding compassion, forgiveness and humility are all part of the process of stepping out of solipsistic templates that become straitjackets in the lives of characters, who by dent of their very ordinariness represent us.
- Reveal the lessons learned by each of the characters. Evidence is very important here. For example, Anna chastens Andy when she accuses him of always having an agenda and urges him to think about the idea that ‘things jus happen’. Similarly Joan, Nick’s mother provides a simple lesson in coping with and placing death in perspective.
- Conclude that this weekend in Adelaide is a watershed moment for each of the characters and that equilibrium will be established as part of an ongoing continuum that also entails moments of disequilibrium.

Sample introduction

There will inevitably be times of loss, futility and alienation in human lives. It is a natural rhythm of human existence. It is part of the emotional register that makes us human. Facing our own mortality or the mortality of those who are close to us will always impel humans to examine their priorities, love for others and fundamental values and principles.
Look Both Ways presents a gallery of portraits that are characterised by varying degrees of loss and pointlessness. Nevertheless, by the end of a weekend of ineffable suffering, doubt, despair, depression and disenchantment, characters are on the cusp of equilibrium. They have made moral choices and managed to step outside of lives that are characterised by either a paucity of spirit, self-absorption or have been blighted by a fickle hand of fate or forces that are beyond their control.
Section 12. Key quotes

These can often encapsulate significant exchanges and revelations. Find the original quote in the film and write a short paragraph explaining its context and significance.

1. ‘Everyone has to find a way of facing their own death’. (Joan to Nick)
2. ‘Shouldn’t I be dumping you if you’ve got cancer?’ (Meryl to Nick)
3. ‘Maybe it was meant to be.’ (Meryl)
4. ‘Things just happen.’ (Anna to Andy)
5. ‘This is not about you, Andy’. (Phil)
6. ‘That’s just it, isn’t it…, knowing’. (Andy)
7. ‘I’m not gonna top myself. (Andy to his ex.)
8. ‘What’s the point of knowing where you are up to if you still have to go through it anyway?’ (Meryl on the seven stages of grief.)
9. ‘I’ve been seeing death everywhere this weekend.’ (Nick)
10. ‘We have no light promised us to show our road 100 kilometres away, but we have a light to show us the next footstep and if we take that we will have a light to show us the one that is to follow’. (Nick to Meryl, reading from an illustrated card.)
11. ‘It wasn’t your fault.’ (Julia to train driver .after the accident)
Section 13. References and resources

a. Websites

This website has trailers, links to bodies such as the Cancer Council, a web log with contributions from major players in the film, review links.

http://www.inertia-music.com/catalogue/35949/Various/Look_Both_Ways_Soundtrack/
This website has grabs of all the tracks that have been incorporated into the film.

http://www.abc.net.au/austory/content/2005/s1397271.htm
This transcript of an episode of Australian Story eliminates a lot of the second-guessing that accompanies talking about and writing on the film. There are interviews with Sarah Watt and William McInnes that affirm their essential humanity. ‘The real McInnes’, provides the viewer with a personal account of the dynamics of the relationship at home and at work.

http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/05/37/look_both_ways.html
This online journal is a refreshing collection of eclectic essays on genre and film. The specific interview with Sarah Watt and Andrew S. Gilbert who plays Phil is insightful and germane.

http://www.acmi.net.au
This site provides information on the availability of films mentioned in the study guide and descriptions of programs for teachers and students.

http://www.metromagazine.com.au
This site has an earlier version of a study guide written by Gary Simmons for the Australian Teachers of Media.

b. Bibliography

Look Both Ways Press Kit, Hibiscus Films.

Karena’s interview with the director of Look Both Ways focuses on the originality of Watt’s ideas, the emotional mindscapes and performances in the film and her experiences as a first time filmmaker.

Brian McFarlane, ‘Film as Text: Look Both Ways’, Australian Screen Education, No. 42.

Section 14. Supplementary texts

There are many possible films that could unselfconsciously be used as companions to Look Both Ways. Here are two recommendations, the first being a film whose characters, context and style influenced the director of Look Both Ways, Sarah Watt. Both films reinforce the idea that experience is random and capricious.

**You Can Count on Me (Kenneth Lonergan 2000)**

A lot happens at once to Sammy, a single mother living in the Catskill town of her birth, where her parents died in a car crash when she was small. Her son Rudy, who is eight, begins imagining his unseen father as a hero. Sammy has a love interest but it is an interest only. She falls into a sexual relationship of convenience with her new boss who imposes foolish rules and her wayward brother Terry arrives for a visit after months of no communication. The boyfriend proposes, the relationship with her boss takes an unexpected turn, and her brother and son bond, not always with positive consequences. When Terry asks young Rudy if he wants to meet his father, a crisis of sorts ensues and brother and sister must re-frame their relationship.

**Buffalo 66 (Vincent Gallo 1998)**

This film is in the American ‘indie’ tradition. The film explores an unlikely relationship between two offbeat characters, Billy and Layla. Billy Brown (Vincent Gallo) has been in jail, but his parents think that he’s married and successful. When he can’t find anywhere in Buffalo where he can pee, he desperately runs into a dance studio to use the toilet. He impulsively kidnaps a dance student, Layla (Christina Ricci) to bring home and show off to his parents (Angelica Huston & Ben Gazzara). The parents just barely remember their son or care about him, but Layla finds something in her kidnapper that is irresistible. They are ultimately mutual panaceas.
Appendix

Awards

Queensland Literary Awards, 2004:
Best Film Script

Discovery Award:
Toronto Film Festival, 2005

FIPRESCI Award, Brisbane film Festival, 2005

4 AFI Awards, 2005:
Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Supporting Actor (Tony Hayes)

5 Film Critics Circle Awards, 2005:
Best Film, Director, Actor (William McInnes), Screenplay, Editing

3 IF Awards, 2005:
Best Director, Screenplay, Editing

Most Popular Film:
Adelaide Film Festival, 2005, Brisbane Film Festival, 2005,
Australian Film Festival, London 2006

Mar del Plata Film Festival, 2006
Best Actress (Justine Clarke), Best Screenplay.

Critics Award:
Rotterdam Film Festival 2006

Critics Award:
NatFilm Festival (Denmark) 2006