

## Marriage, Romance and Mourning Movement in Cherie Nowlan's *Thank God He Met Lizzie*

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**Abstract:** Through a close analysis of *Thank God He Met Lizzie*, a rare example of an Australian romantic comedy/drama, this article demonstrates the central place of loss that still maintains an important role at the centre of contemporary marriage. Expanding on notions of male melancholia that were central to gender representation and desire in 1990s cinema, this article argues that the audience experience of grief in watching the film is dominated by a strong perception of an inevitable compulsion towards an unbreakable stasis in marital relationships increasingly devoid of love and intimacy. Formally and thematically expressed, what is seen as lost in this film is not only the truth and intimacy of romantic love, but the capacity for change and movement that it requires.

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*Thank God He Met Lizzie* (1997) stands out as an extremely rare example of an Australian romantic comedy/drama. Like most romantic comedies, this film is really about the negotiation of an obstacle to union and marital happiness. What is generically atypical

about the film, and the source of its drama, is that this obstacle emerges only once the marriage is solemnized and in the form of nothing more concrete than what we might call the ghost of a girlfriend past. The last few shots of the film present the eponymous “He”, Guy (Richard Roxburgh), and Lizzie (Cate Blanchett) with their children, “slip, slop, slapping” (an eighties promotional slogan for liberal sunscreen application) beside a Mercedes station-wagon in a Sydney beachside car park. Within the span of less than a minute, the camera moves in, very slightly, before tilting up and left, fractionally, framing the actors in a medium shot that will hold them for the last ten seconds before the credit sequence rolls. This final shot is a freeze-frame, the highpoint of a gradual slowing of their motion which began, almost imperceptibly at first, ten seconds into the sequence and continues, seemingly unhindered by two slow dissolves, before reaching its final point of stasis. The image presented is picture-perfect and is the sort of snapshot of domestic bliss that will probably end up on the family piano. Whatever substantial doubts over the question of Guy’s current state of happiness, raised both by his voiced-over letter to his sponsor-child and Martin Armiger’s stingingly melancholic score, the picture itself is one that many spectators understandably associate with desire. The sun, the beach, signs of material comfort and the blessings of children and family togetherness all add up to an idea that many aspire to. This is also an idea that lies beneath and relies upon the expression of divine gratitude explicit in the film’s albeit ironical title. Like this apparent irony, the crushing feelings of domestic ambivalence implied by this final image make a telling impression on us. This image and the marriage that lead to it have such an impact on us because they are so dearly protected by our genuine ambivalence over the question of desire and its relationship to romantic love, marriage, children and family life. The film does not tell us about this ambivalence – it reminds us.

Given what we know about the ups and downs of marriage and divorce rates since the Second World War and what scholars such as Irving Singer have highlighted in the vast historiography of romantic love, the potential incompatibility of romantic love and marriage should be a truism of modern life. At the very least we ought to consider love, as Catherine Belsey has considered it in its paradoxical postmodern form, as “ceaselessly suspected” even if “endlessly pursued” (Belsey, 74). From Belsey we understand love in postmodernity as “naïve”, defined by opposites, contained by a “fundamentalism” of material transformations, commodification and social surveillance. The fundamentalism of marriage and contractual bonds marks desire’s fragility. The interventions of Law are the mark of its absurdity. Another transformation, for Belsey comes through the media and cultural expression. Love is considered silent in its essence. Through the media, however, as Roland Barthes has pointed out, (what it packaged up as) love is endlessly loquacious, even enduringly citational in its banal expression of nightly paraded clichés. Stories and narratives thus place lovers in the passivity and imprisonment of uncharacteristic behaviour, thus becoming victims of this very fundamentalism (Belsey, 73-84). Doubtless we can view *Thank God He Met Lizzie* as just such a banal expression. But the terms of the relationship represented within the film, its practicality and a sense of inevitable doom linked to a relentlessly enduring quality, sustain comparison with much of the essence of Belsey’s portrait and its critique.

There is, of course, an array of theoretical treatments and methodologies contextualising romantic love, any number of which might be employed in relation to *Thank God He Met Lizzie*. In this article I will emphasise certain discourses of

melancholia as highly useful in reading the film, but I do not wish to impose this psychoanalytic approach to advocate the exclusion of others. Accordingly, I find it extremely useful to look to comparative mythology and Joseph Campbell, if only briefly, to provide a summary position on romantic love. This is to employ a working definition, which I have found enduringly communicative of romantic love's essential discourse. Campbell places the origins of the love/marriage divide at the beginnings of romantic love in the troubadour traditions of twelfth century. Marriage in this context was about the power of the family, the church and the state. Romantic love coming in with the troubadours stood in radical distinction to that power. A personal expression, romantic love supported the courage to live one's life according to one's own pattern. Jealously opposed by established authorities, however, romantic love threatened disaster and eternal damnation. As a prime example, Campbell looks to the romance of *Tristan and Isolde*. Campbell's reduction of Tristan's reaction to the news that he and Isolde have drunk the love potion that will bring them together in disaster encapsulates the dilemma. Once Isolde's nurse tells him, "You have drunk your death." Tristan replies:

By my death, do you mean this pain of love? . . . If by my death, you mean this agony of love, that is my life. If by my death, you mean the punishment that we are to suffer if discovered, I accept that. And if by my death, you mean eternal punishment in the fires of hell, I accept that, too. (Campbell 235-6)

The ever-increasing commodification of what used to be called "courtship and marriage", however, coupled with the impossible material expectations of middle-class lifestyles after marriage, have produced an adherence to a perverse contemporary mono-myth of romance – nice boy meets nice girl and they stay nice for the rest of their lives – in order to keep the whole thing going. The simplicity of *Thank God He Met Lizzie's* exposé of that adherence makes the point about the romance/marriage disconnect obvious. Even in its most practical and conservative incarnations such as friendship and companionship, the viability of love and the prospects for intimacy in relationship to marriage, as Guy will experience, is chillingly impossible. In *Seminar XX Encore* Jacques Lacan invokes the notion of courtly love. In doing so he provides an insight into the drama of the unconscious underpinning this incompatibility. For Lacan the aristocratic acts and aesthetics of courtly love are a performance of desire that stand in for consummation. They are a proxy, an alibi for desire itself, giving cause and excuse for the obstacles and blockages that pile up against sexual intimacy. Perhaps the most refined of all forms of perversion, such acts of courtly culture are a potent metaphor for Lacan's general notion that "in the case of the speaking being the relation between the sexes does not take place" (Lacan 138-141). In its own context the more contemporary forms of courtly culture, ritual and commodity concern in *Thank God He Met Lizzie* play an equally perverse role. In Freud's useful phrase to account for perversion, we may read Guy and Lizzie's marriage of convenience, and the social and commodity fundamentalism that support it, as a sophisticated process of deferring desire by "lingering over the intermediate relations" (Freud 1991, 62). What we see in the final freeze-frame image of the film, however, suggests a general and logical reluctance to do anything about their perversion. In this particular era of commodity romance the film's simple, perhaps even banal deconstruction of the love and marriage relationship is, nevertheless, instructive.

I will begin here by outlining the film's general themes. Given the narrative primacy of Guy in the film, I will also highlight the way in which the film relies heavily on Guy's agency, his fantasy of loss and his expression of male melancholia – another of the great cinematic perversions – for its emotional impact. Despite its potency, the concept of male melancholia, however, cannot account for this impact alone. By beginning this article with a description of the film's final slow-motion to stasis sequence, I wish to highlight that the sadness, and perhaps even grief, which dominate the spectator's experience of watching the film are not solely reliant upon the *who* of loss expressed by the male melancholic Guy, but the *what* of loss experienced by both characters and spectators more generally. I argue that what is mourned by the spectator watching the film, in its obvious advancement towards stillness, is not merely Guy's loss of love through his separation from his former girlfriend Jenny (Frances O'Connor), but the loss of the palpable sense of movement that we know Guy once experienced in his life. It was this capacity for movement that also gave Guy and Jenny the ability to present each other the gift of freedom and the gift of movement that it implies. As Laura Mulvey has written of ideas of stillness and movement, this is the trauma of her primary form of "delayed cinema", "the actual act of slowing down the flow of film" (2006: 8) as we have observed it in the final scene. This last minute retardation acts in the service of one particular form of narrative cinema which, Mulvey considers, creates a "desire for the end, elongating the road down which the story travels, postponing the structurally inevitable conclusion" (2006: 144). Mulvey's "two grand conventions of narrative closure that allow the drive of a story to return to stasis: death or marriage" have merged in *Thank God He Met Lizzie* into a drive towards stasis, a sense of advancement towards stillness, Freud's death instinct as a kind of "no fault" marriage (2006, 71).[1]

### **"The trouble with happiness is . . . you remember it."**

Alexandra Long's screenplay begins with Guy's awkward failure to meet a potential partner at a catered affair expressly designed for the purpose. He then continues his misfortune on two blind dates before finally meeting Lizzie in a chance encounter involving a pregnant cat. We see Lizzie and Guy only once together, lounging by some Sydney side waterway, before the wedding plans are in full swing. A priest is brought in; Guy informs his sponsor child Fong Hu; and Guy then buys Lizzie a professionally wrapped engagement present which seems to seal the deal. Only once is Jenny, the "ex", named in discussion and it takes the particular probing of the Catholic priest to raise the spectre of a three shot mini-montage in which she features at passionate moments in their past relationship. The devil of romantic desire seemingly exorcised, the wedding ceremony takes place off screen, and the major part of the film, anchored to the excessive social ritualism of the wedding reception, can then proceed.

The wedding reception is regularly punctuated by expressions of the fakery and cynicism of the event. These moments provide the cues for extended flashbacks of Guy's life with Jenny; their meeting at less sophisticated and less well-catered pubs and parties, embarrassing family get-togethers, the ups and downs of their sexual appetites, the traumas of foreign travel, their fights and, finally, the growing irreconcilability of their differences leading to the bitter-sweet termination of the relationship. Before these

flashbacks are done, the functionality of the wedding is made chillingly explicit when Lizzie's mother Poppy (Linden Wilkinson) produces a forged letter purporting to be from Fong Hu giving an innocent and moving blessing on their nuptials. Knowing it to be a fake, the letter causes Guy momentary terror before he gives into his sense of decorum and continues with his duties at the reception. Later in their hotel room, released of his first night obligations by a tired and emotional bride, that terror is magnified by a speech Lizzie gives him, calmly advocating her need and desire for what used to be known as an "open marriage". Shocked then resigned, "overwhelmed by life's choices" as Margaret Smith has observed (Smith, 48), Guy does not argue the point. The film then cuts to a devastating scene in which Guy sees a vision of Jenny in Martin Place. He approaches her with enthusiasm, only to see the vision first disappear in the crowd of cold and wintry spirits rushing to work, and then become occluded by the family picture postcard scene described above. "The trouble with happiness", Guy writes (and narrates) to Fong Hu, "is you don't know when you have it, you remember it."

### **"Like a horse and carriage"**

Something about *Thank God He Met Lizzie* that stands out immediately, for an Australian film made in the late 1990s, is how banal, unselfconscious and middle-class it seems in its milieu and subject matter. This film is essentially a melodrama of "first world problems." As a film about the basic disconnect between romantic love and marriage, however, how could it be otherwise? And yet what could be stranger in the context of Australian cinema since *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) than a clear and straightforward picture of the persistently questioned, but ultimately unshakable marriage customs of the audience for which it is intended? In this sense, "the melodrama of one bourgeois addressing another" as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith puts it (91), which is present here, relies on a certain sense of the mundane to expose the fact that the most significant of our emotional dilemmas are usually those closest to home. The greatest strangers to us are most often ourselves. In another sense, however, like Noel Coward and David Lean's timelessly affecting *Brief Encounter* (1946), the effectiveness of the film's theme relies on its very simplicity of expression. Any extraordinary estrangement of the audience from the world represented, such as Matthews observes as central to the types of love stories praised by Andre Breton and Surrealist thought generally (Matthews, 37-50), runs the risk of clouding the already complex issue. The obvious message of the disconnect between romantic love and marriage seems so lost in our culture, the clinging to the mono-myth of romance so tenacious, that *Thank God He Met Lizzie* impresses upon its audience the fact that all attempts at mystification run the risk of supporting that very tenacity. Placing this affair amongst the guns of Verona Beach (*William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, 1996), the mentally ill characters jumping off Melbourne's Westgate Bridge (*Angel Baby*, 1995), in the elite world of Henry James (*Portrait of a Lady*, 1997) or even simply making it happen between "old folk" (*Innocence*, 2000) or university intellectuals (*What I Have Written*, 1995), threatens to portray it as something that happens to other people. In its dramatic understatement and lack of hyperbole, in its very middle-class context, a comparatively

rare milieu within Australian cinema, *Thank God He Met Lizzie* demonstrates that the romantic love/marriage disconnect is not portrayed as “their” problem but “ours”.

Marriage, as represented in *Thank God He Met Lizzie*, is a department store gift registry length list of abominations. From the plot description and brief visual analysis I have already presented, we can see that the film’s marriage portrait shows us the manipulation, deception, convenience, emotional entrapment, fear of loneliness, class anxieties, overwhelming community involvement and expectation, nostalgia and compromise that seem central to the institution. Whether any of these characteristics really has the potential to shock any adult who has experienced more than about three weeks of a settled domestic relationship is an important point. As a summary of any important partnership, this *liste de mariage*, might well, at different times in our lives, argue for both the need and the genuine use for the institutionalisation of such relationships. The film itself does not totally shun this point of view. In this context, however, it is testament to the work of the film that these “abominations” do appear shocking and detestable however familiar and even necessary they may be. Beyond what it presents as familiar and practical, however, it is in the way this particular portrait of marriage represents the desire for intimacy in relationships that we see the real source of its conclusions about the abhorrence of marriage. The same may be said for the film’s rendering of even something so basic in marriage as the desire for friendship and companionship.

In their only real moment together as a couple, before they become caught up in wedding preparations, Guy and Lizzie are lounging by the water and talking about how her father, a surgeon, once told her she could become “a doctor, a lawyer or a piece of shit”. Once assured that his own occupational status, or relative lack thereof, will pass muster, Guy begins to admire Lizzie’s once fair hair. Lizzie embarks on a deconstruction of the validity of the adult blonde before Guy attempts to stop her by saying, “Don’t tell me about it. We’ve got the rest of our lives to find out about each other. It will be boring if you tell me now”. In this playful moment, Lizzie presses on, in an intimacy “over-share”, with information about her family history and her first sexual encounter, before Guy stops her mouth with a kiss. At that point the scene dissolves with a high medium shot framing their headless bodies rolling on-top of each other, a clear allusion to the essential biology behind the union which seems to trump all other threatening complications. The personal back-stories of each character, Guy’s relationship with Jenny, and Lizzie’s “married by thirty and then have affairs” agenda among them, will emerge as part of their discourse soon enough. The essential fear and mistrust of genuine intimacy, expressed through Guy’s concealment and Lizzie’s shocking frankness, as part of their marriage is the most disturbing aspect of the film’s portrait of married life. As Cate Blanchett says of the couple, “They sort of don’t want to know about each other.” (Blanchett, “Cast Interviews”) Somewhere between the need to be kept in ignorance and the need to be horrifyingly overly-informed lies the film’s representation of the fear of the line between intimacy, true partnership and marriage. Importantly, this is a fear that the film does not restrict to its portrait of marriage, but one that is also an acknowledged part of its idea of romantic love. Guy knows this fear as much in his relationship with Jenny as with Lizzie. The difference is that with Jenny he has the freedom to express it and explore its implications, however bleak they may be.

Lizzie is the frankness expert in the film and she knows how to use that frankness in the fight against intimacy. When Raoul (Jacek Koman) is teasing her about her pre-ordained vision of a marriage of convenience, she defends herself by saying “you couldn’t expect me to make a commitment like that to someone I knew.” Despite Lizzie’s sophistication in this matter it is Jenny, from the safety of a presumptively directionless, one night pub pick up, who is able to best present the threat of the information/ignorance/intimacy triad. When Guy explains to Jenny that he would like to get to know her before getting involved, Jenny replies, “Oh, see, you are taking a big risk there . . . you might get to know me and find out you don’t like me and then you’ll miss out on a fantastic root.” Of course, nothing about this proffered one night stand suggests any real potential for intimacy. The point made, however, is that deep knowledge of one’s partner threatens emotional intimacy and emotional intimacy is presented in the film as not only a threat to good marriage, but also a threat to good sex. Avoidance of this kind of intimacy may be desirable within a twenty-something relationship and it may also suit the requirements of thirty-something marriage. Just where it leaves the obvious search for intimacy in our lives generally is the film’s insoluble dilemma.

If the scenes with Lizzie provide us a view of the film’s cynicism about marriage, the Jenny flashback sequences speak of love in its romantic mode. The flashback scenes of Guy’s relationship with Jenny may be about the work of nostalgia but they are not nostalgic or rose-coloured in content. Certainly they are warm, colourful, charmingly chaotic, passionate and, above all, full of movement. In their isolation from community interests and lack of middle-class consciousness and decorum, these moments stand in high contrast to Guy’s experience of the formal bourgeois ritual of the wedding and its preparations. For all their relative warmth and colour, however, these moments with Jenny speak of a love that is full of a sweet sort of pain, an affair that is fleeting, potentially fatal (when they are drugged and robbed while on holiday), fading and ultimately lost without the benefit of hindsight. As Guy makes clear in the last words of the film, these moments represent a happiness that is not known but only remembered. Like *Brief Encounter*, the key to the emotional power that this relationship holds over the spectator is the fact that it is represented in flashbacks that are visually designed in a very separate and distinct way from the sequences of the main plot. Most importantly such flashbacks obviously indicate that the relationship is located in time past and that, for all its potency in the present, the relationship is over and probably done with. As is the case with *Brief Encounter*, the “probably” gives the narrative its romantic potential, but this potential is so grounded in the armed camp-like detention of the protagonists’ present life that any real thought of romantic fulfilment is little more than fantasy.

Just over an hour into the film, as Lizzie’s “married by thirty” plan is outed by Raoul, Guy reflects on the scene of his break up with Jenny. The scene is typical of all Guy’s reminiscences throughout the film, but the act of breaking up and the directness and honesty with which the decision is arrived at give the scene a devastating resonance. It is the most moving scene of the film and, in many ways, the most expressive of any real form of love exchange. Common to all their scenes together is the movement of Kathryn Milliss’ hand-held camera, never resting and always maintaining a feeling of uncertainty and high energy in the spectator. As in the moment in this scene when Jenny rushes to find Guy’s hidden photos of Fong Hu, this off-balance movement, like their relationship itself, sometimes becomes disconcerting. Also a feature of all their scenes together, in contrast to

the shades of grey and white of the scenes with Lizzie, is the explosion of colour about them. Whatever mood is portrayed, and in this film mood can move across a scale between joy and horror, the richness and variety of colours provides a depth of feeling and a sense of emotional substance to their scenes together. This colour is matched by their Hepburn/Tracy-like, screwball physicality and a verbal banter routine, as here, when they squabble over Jenny's annoying habit of leaving her clothes on the floor, and the quibble she makes over the plural form of cactus and "other related succulents", in light of her extensive collection of cacti that have now become odious to Guy.

Where the break up scene turns away from the expected levity, however, is when Jenny introduces the issue of Fong Hu, Guy's sponsored child in Vietnam. In all their years together, we discover, Guy has never told Fong Hu anything about Jenny. Challenged over this, Guy babbles on for a moment about Fong Hu's innocence and cultural sensitivities over the question of why he and Jenny are not married. What he does not say or understand about his relationship with Fong Hu, and what Jenny's challenge implies, is that it is a model of the structure of his desire. In the face of the dilemmas of emotional intimacy with Jenny, the distance, cultural estrangement and age gap he enjoys with Fong Hu provides him with an ideal relationship. Ultimately he sidesteps that emotional conundrum, an intimacy challenge to, what we might think of as, his melancholic "crypt" of solitude (Abraham and Torok, 135-6), by introducing the strain of discussion that will end in their separation. This sidestepping is an act of resistance that demonstrates the line against emotional intimacy that they are clearly unwilling, or unable, to cross. That resistance, however, does manage briefly to give way to a mutual expression of a degree of honesty about their states of mind, which makes the scene even more affecting. Guy says he wants space (his crypt), but Jenny counters by pointing out the emptiness and untouchability of this space. Guy longs for the things and the feelings "you can't touch", but Jenny does not want to hear about his feelings – the feelings he now complains he no longer has. Her reaction to this admission is genuinely empathetic, but like a true melancholic, he wants the "magic" back and she cannot see why. In many ways this is a confused, illogical and, in terms of characterisation, inconsistent line of argument, but not incompatible with the truth of the moment as we might expect it to be played. It is at this point of confusion, the clueless moment of "what do we do now?" that they find the "end of the line" and resolve to separate. Jenny bursts into tears as Guy holds her with an expression of exhaustion and sadness.

Jenny and Guy's last and final scene together in the film, in which they announce their break up to Jenny's devastated parents, simply underlines the trauma of the previous scene. The substance of trauma is found in the very basis of romance at the heart of their relationship: that is, the inevitable incompatibility between love, their mutual desires, and the broader, social context of their lives. With Jenny's mind and body moving towards children, this broader context undoubtedly implies the move towards permanent union. This is the very announcement Jenny's parents were obviously, eagerly expecting. But such external expectations of permanent union and grandchildren are the antithesis of romance. What such expectations fail to acknowledge, in their push towards the altar, is the potential for a genuine clash between female biological imperative and male emotional inexperience. Guy's isolationist emotional reticence, frequently expressed in social work and counselling contexts as "men in sheds", and his protection of his "space", with Fong Hu delineating that space, may look like a sit-com joke. That very reticence is, however, an

equally potent combatant in this clash and plays a role, similar to Jenny's desire for children, in breaking up the relationship. What is ultimately, amongst all their scenes in the film, the most strikingly consistent element in the break up scene is the representation of the inevitable demise of their union. If *Thank God He Met Lizzie* shows its portrait of marriage as both lacking in real intimacy and doggedly persistent and unbreakable, the film shows romance as brutally true – honest, but with a lively discourse of intimacy – and hopelessly lost in the empty and intangible space of the past.

## Man Melancholy

As to Guy's "men in sheds" emotional obstructions, it is worth noting that *Thank God He Met Lizzie* was released in the same year as Adrian Lyne's *Lolita*, this co-incidence suggesting the usefulness of the critical territory of male melancholia. Given the dynamics of male impairment and loss, most notably represented in the films of Martin Scorsese and Jeremy Irons, which highlighted a continuing strain of cinematic male melodrama into the 1990s, this context is obviously seductive in reading Guy's lament (Nicholls 2004; 2012). This approach relies heavily on a reading that privileges Guy's point of view and constructs both Lizzie and Jenny as objects of an emotional empowerment through loss that has been the project of male melancholic discourse since *Hamlet* (Schiesari, pp. 5-6).

The scene of Jenny's final appearance in the film might have easily been lifted from *Lolita* or, indeed, any of Scorsese's final scenes of mournful parting in films from *Taxi Driver* (1976) to *Shutter Island* (2010). Prompted by Guy's sadness and his sense of horror when, on their wedding night, Lizzie suggests they pursue an open marriage, the scene cuts to a windy, cold, drab and grey working day morning in Martin Place. Guy is on his way to work when he sees Jenny in a bright red coat, the only real colour in the sequence, walking towards him. Guy smiles enthusiastically as they approach each other but as Jenny appears to see him her expression moves gently from a contented air to one of cold reproach. Martin Armiger's violin and string concerto pauses for seven seconds as the camera is overcranked, shooting Jenny in slow motion until she finally comes to a halt. As the music track resumes and a very brief piano accompaniment is added into the score, Jenny stands staring towards Guy. Although Jenny seems frozen, other city dwellers pass in front of the camera, at first momentarily obscuring our view of Jenny, and then the shot goes to black as if one of these walkers has lingered. When the shot cuts back to the scene of action, Jenny has gone. Guy's point of view shot (although not in his own close up) then remains in slow motion for a few seconds more, before standard cranking returns to the sequence as a whole. But for one jump cut, Guy's close-up is held for an excruciating twenty seconds while his confused state of mind tries to work out where Jenny went and what happened. The sequence then ends with a high, extreme long shot of Guy in the square, looking around, still in his state of confusion, while his fellow workers cross his path from every direction, in their frantic and disinterested walk to work.

The reading of *Thank God He Met Lizzie* as an expression of male melancholia is a compelling one. Certainly Guy demonstrates its key tendencies: a sense of separateness from a conservative and over-bearing group (Lizzie and her world), the trauma of loss (his life and separation from Jenny), a tendency to fetishise and a refusal to relinquish that loss

(his inescapable reminiscences of that life), an outward show of conformity, self-sacrifice and renunciation of that refusal (going through with the marriage when he knows it is a fake), and finally, a consolidation of his personal authority through melancholic display (the attraction of the spectator's prevailing sympathy for him) (Nicholls, 2004, 1-14). Guy duly performs all these tendencies throughout the film and they take up the major part of the film's duration. They are also summarised in the Martin Place scene where, as the man in the grey flannel suit, Guy interrupts his dutiful walk to his Lizzie lifestyle-supporting job to perform his desire, his radicalism, his loss and to receive the mandated adulation and sympathy as the great bourgeois of sorrows. In the years following Daniel Day Lewis' Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence* (1997) and Jeremy Irons' performance as Humbert Humbert, Richard Roxburgh's incarnation of the melancholic Guy is a performance of emotional "sad man candy" that is too similar to shun the comparison.

Implying an unrevised Mulvian representation of visual, and emotional, pleasure for both male and female spectators (1989: 14-28 & 29-38), however, the celebration of male loss in narrative cinema is a discourse that can be equally empowering to spectators across the spectrum of gender and sexual identity. But this is the case because it *is* a discourse. It is the nature of the expression of loss that multiple perspectives leak out. In the case of the Martin Place scene, for example, the dubious nature of Jenny's actual presence in the scene, as opposed to being there as a phantom of Guy's fantasy, has to prompt us to consider whether she was, in fact, in that or in any of her scenes. Could Jenny not simply be a fantasy image constructed by Guy in the face of the intolerable realities of his present situation? Is she, in another sense, simply a substantially unrecognisable version of Lizzie when young, before she got old and serious? Given the lively ambivalence of the discourse of male melancholia, I am not willing to dismiss it as an utterly suitable reading of the film, any more than a variety of other readings. Looking at the film some fifteen years later, however, what strikes me about it now is the very force of that ambivalence. Fifteen years later, older and hopefully wiser and at a distance from the predominant sad men of late nineties art house cinema, the reading of moral and emotional objectification of Lizzie and Jenny in the film seems to me somewhat questionable. In the secondary form of Mulvey's notion of "delayed cinema" she posits a "loose parallel with Freud's concept of deferred action (*nachträglichkeit*), the way the unconscious preserves a specific experience, while its traumatic effect might only be realized by another, later but associated event." As in this quite different notion of "delayed cinema" to that considered above, in a contemporary reading of *Thank God He Met Lizzie* other details that have "lain dormant" can now be "noticed" (2006: 8). In this context and in an updated reading, Lizzie and Jenny may appear to merge in their desires, but no more so than they all merge together with Guy's similar desires for a life of stability, home and family – the "no fault" marriage. Such a re-evaluation may not leave us feeling any more positive about the representation of Guy's destiny with Lizzie, but the film's exposure of the past as equally prone to, and fast moving towards the dilemmas of that present, leaves both it and Jenny as in no way looking like a fantasy or the ideal. Reading the film simply as an expression of male melancholic perversion in the context, therefore, is inadequate. The problem with the male melancholic reading of *Thank God He Met Lizzie* is that it threatens to limit the extent of what is mourned and who mourns. We may feel sadness at Guy's story, but the sadness of Jenny, her family, their friends and, indeed, the implicit grief and lack at the heart of Lizzie's character, echo a more profound and general sense of loss and sadness that is the

experience of the audience watching the film. It is an experience of loss that goes well beyond a generalised male melancholic expression of “poor Guy”, “horrible Lizzie” and “I just really miss Jenny”.

### **“A relationship is like a shark”**

Woody Allen is one of the greatest expressionists of the cinema of male melancholia. In the substance of his various character and relationship studies however, we can see that he is committed to the very general audience experience of loss that I am interested in here. Allen specialises in the charms of the type of break up scene we experience in *Thank God He Met Lizzie*. In his *Husbands and Wives* (1992), Gabe (Allen himself) and Judy (Mia Farrow) conclude a long argument sequence with a final scene of lyrical reminiscence of their life together which leads to a mutual realisation of its ending. It is a sad but sweet moment, typical of Allen’s films since *Annie Hall* (1977), which so often appear to work as a kind of palliative to the sadness and trauma of romantic separation. The reason these films work as great films to watch after a break up, or in the middle of any relationship turmoil, is that they advocate the virtues of change and movement. As Alvy (Allen) and Annie (Diane Keaton) are considering breaking up in *Annie Hall*, Alvy observes that, “a relationship is like a shark it has to constantly move forward or it dies. And I think what we got on our hands is a dead shark.” This is a cute gag certainly, and the role of the humour in these so-called Romantic Comedies is central to their palliative aspect. As Freud points out in his 1928 essay, humour is about assuaging fear and pain, reminding us, “Look here! This is all the seemingly dangerous world amounts to. Child’s play – the very thing to jest about.” (Freud, 1950, 220). Accordingly, this type of humour is never far away from psychological insight, not to mention the many physical acts of movement in Allen’s work, particularly walking. It also relates directly to the privileging of mobility over stasis that I have emphasised in my reading of the Cherie Nowlan’s film so far. It is, therefore, a humorous line of dialogue that helps us understand the very nature of melancholia and loss, in a gender-wide sense and beyond the perversions of male melancholia, as we can read it in the film.

Central to the work of melancholia in classical Freudian terms is the subject’s unwillingness to move on and free him or herself from loss and the past. This “inhibition of all activity” is read by Freud in both psychological and physical terms (Freud, 1984, 252, 263). In the work of Julia Kristeva, we read the logical, and perhaps happy extension of this ceaseless mourning in the ultimate stupor, stasis and immobility of the death drive (Kristeva 1989, 119-128; 2000, 47, 54-5). I am drawn to these ideas of movement, and the lack thereof, by considering more recent work on the idea of melancholia brought to the foreground by a 2011 exhibition at the Dax Centre in Melbourne under the curatorship of Charlotte Christie. In the exhibition book of essays, child psychiatrist Pia Brous looks at the idea of melancholia in relation to psychiatry and neuroscience and highlights the work of Australian biological psychiatrist Gordon Parker. As Brous puts it, Parker “conceptualises the “core” of melancholia as a disorder of movement rather than that of mood.” For Brous this conceptualisation has it that “psychomotor retardation or agitation is the essence.” (Brous, 14)

As we have observed in *Thank God He Met Lizzie*, it is exactly this type of psychomotor capacity and retardation that is at stake. Through the apparently simple strategy of contrasting the Jenny scenes of mise-en-scene colour and camera movement with the creamy, Steadicam and stable diegesis of the Lizzie scenes, and by gradually bringing both to a final point of stasis and freeze-frame, we locate the true centre of despair in the film. This visual manifestation of the “cinema’s paradoxical relation between movement and stillness”, as Laura Mulvey has considered it, has a direct connection to the idea of death and destruction (2006, 71& 104). What is mourned in the film is not Jenny and not the apparent freedom of the youth and lack of responsibility that, from one perspective and in contrast to Lizzie, Jenny seems to represent. When Jenny says of the “magic” that Guy wants to get back, “why would we want to do that?” she really seems to be saying “why would we want to go back to what was before?” What Guy mourns, however, and we join him in this, is this very notion of movement. The symptoms of melancholia in the film are its predominant aesthetic of stability found in the scenes of the present with Lizzie. At the very point when the worst possible expressions of Lizzie’s character become apparent, Guy cannot resist the incredible propulsion towards this stability, a death-drive to a place of still life, where change is impossible.

The scenes with Jenny threaded throughout the wedding reception may be about fun and freedom and romantic experimentation, but the break up scene is not only extremely sad, but the freest and most romantic thing about the film. It impresses such a response on us because it implies the greatest of all acts of mobility, the ability to change. The scene demonstrates that, however dead inside Jenny and Guy have become, however intolerant of each other’s feeling and foibles, at that point in their lives they still have the ability to move on, to change, to break up and explore the positive side of the experience. This break up is so moving because it is the ultimate sign of love, a gift of love and life. In this context, the break up says, “I love you so much that I am willing to set you free and to spare you the pain of the living death of stasis and immobility.” This is the very immobility to which not only the final snapshot scene turns, but also where Guy’s final, perhaps fantastically perverted, vision of Jenny in Martin Place rests, before both fade to darkness.

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[1] Since the early 1970s, divorce in Australian law is all “no fault”. I am using this phrase to highlight the idea in the film that marriage is essentially perverse but that the film’s protagonists are not to blame for it. “Fault” is still part of popular discourse of divorce, but is not part of the legal grounds for divorce in Australia.

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