

You'll Want to Live Here: an intersectional analysis from someone who doesn't

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In 1974, the planned community of West Lakes, situated between Adelaide and the Port River, was opening to prospective homebuyers. Prominent amongst the promotions for this 'most ambitious urban development project in Australia', is a thirteen minute film produced by the South Australian Film Corporation entitled, *West Lakes: You'll Want to Live Here*. The film features then State Premier Don Dunstan stamping the development with his imprimatur from the vantage point of a small plane, in the company of a consultant and the Deputy Premier who extol its virtues and marvels. Don never lived at West Lakes and it's hard to imagine that he ever wanted to, given the myriad ways his person and politics flew in the face of nearly everything a place like this reifies in the social order. But that's neither here nor there, I suppose.

The fact is, I did live there or, rather, a place like it half a world away. In 1975 when I was eight years old, my family moved to the newly opened Villa Venyce, a planned community of canal-front homes as close to Pensacola, Florida as West Lakes is to Adelaide. I escaped my West Lakes/Villa Venyce heteronormative, ecologically disastrous, monosexist and plain old garden variety sexist dystopia and, if you would scoot over a bit Don, I'll take this flight with you and tell you exactly why I did not, do not, want to live (t)here.

Introduction: The Waste Land

The film opens on an upturned, ragged wicker garden chair lying abandoned behind an inadequate screen of spindly, windblown weeds. A dragonfly hovers over muddy flats, suspended in a desolate grey scale of neglect. Carcasses of cars and 44-gallon drums cluster amidst the mangrove spikes. God knows what from God knows where sluices out the end of an elevated concrete pipe, foaming the otherwise stagnant pool it empties into. The nose – so far removed in time and space and medium – crinkles at the smell of it. A B-movie theremin-heavy soundtrack sets the scene to spooky. The film editor must have been distracted lighting another fag: in the midst of the gloom and doom we are treated to a few frames of serene white sand dunes, getting on with their millennia

spanning protection of this singular environment known forever in Kurna Country as Wittonga, reed place.

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME As soon as the dunes appear, they're gone and the narrator leaves the viewer no time to consider them: their beauty, their timescale, their significance; one's own insignificance in the face of all that presence, history, kinship. The narrator – no doubt a barrel-chested man of average height, sporting a stealthy combover of sandy hair, round face draped in scraggly sideburns – begins his God trick. 'The year,' he jumps in with gravity and know-it-all-ness: '1967'. [Shit. His voice is so authoritative. We're going to have to refer to him as Mr Narrator. Also: I was born in 1967. This is getting personal.]

'For decades,' Mr Narrator intones, 'the area that is now West Lakes has been a sprawling, mosquito-infested swamp. A sea of drainage water and rubbish. A haven for hobos, snakes, and [something garbled that sounds like 'swazzgles']'. The narrator is incredulous that these 'seventeen hundred acres, in a prime position just six miles from Adelaide', have gone to the snakes and hobos and swazzgles. The reality is, he lets us know, 'All the reclamation plans put forward were rejected. The job was too big, the land too ravaged, the outlay enormous'. Until, that is: 'In April of '68, a bold but carefully conceived plan was put forward... The job of converting an eyesore, a desolate wasteland, into a superb community by the sea, was finally underway.'

Interlude: In which the grey filter falls away like scales from our eyes

and we find ourselves beside still waters of no longer wanting for a thing, thanks to, we are told, 'close cooperation between private enterprise and state and local governments.' Bold but carefully planned lettering announces our salvation: WEST LAKES. Solid, square, white, sans serif, all caps. Branded onto reed bed background, sparkling and redeemed.

Section 1: *Boy's Own*

Here we meet our heroes. Not knights in shining armour or sheriffs in white hats on white horses (though everyone *is* white, but you knew that because it's 1974 in Australia). Our heroes are pilots and politicians taking off in small planes, and engineers girded with pocket protector shields, pencils flying. You can just about hear the director shouting, 'Annnnnnd... action!'

Propellers sputter to a start! A car swooshes in and stops! Dapper Don hops out, and away they go. We see the pilot's hands and instruments not once but twice: here is bold AND careful in action! Three strapping fellows crammed into comradery fly off to meet their destiny. Don, Des, and Laurie could just as easily be a crew of WWII Allied aces. Or, looking down upon their seventeen-acre clean slate, they are boys at the beach about to launch a castle-making campaign on sand they've wiped clear of seaweed and shells.

Don remarks on how green the football oval is (it isn't); Des and Laurie wax lyrical about the not one but two golf courses (also not green, even on the greens). Laurie pipes up: 'Something like 7,000 trees have been planted already, Don. And that's only a start. It certainly makes a big difference' (it doesn't). We see too much of Des's face, at too close for comfort, and the sound of the plane isn't filtered out. It's noisy, cramped and bumpy. Properly adventurous. Don's hair looks nice, and his stylish checked jacket and paisley tie. Can't see his shoes, but you can just bet it wouldn't do for them to touch down, down there.

Soon enough, we're back at the clubhouse with the other boys. The ones with rulers and tilted drafting desks. They aren't wearing any jackets and, although their sleeves aren't rolled up, we can see that they are *working very hard* inside their big heads. They speak in code: 'The model shows we definitely get thorough mixing without having to worry' and 'We'll get all the mixing we need, even with storm water.' [What is this mixing of which you speak?]

At 3 minutes 46, we see our first female of the species and her young. A woman in flared pants holds the hand of a small blonde-haired boy who gazes up at her as together they step out in promenade across the semi-circular drive of a house that we have been assured by Mr Narrator is *not* part of a huge grid of same sized blocks with same looking houses and *not* part of a speculator's paradise where quickly conceived plans lead to quick profits at the expense of the homeowner. Oh no, West Lakes would be built to the highest standard, says he. She doesn't speak. The gaggle of seagulls we see next lends credence to the claim from Mr Narrator: every precaution would be taken to protect the environment, present and future.

Section 2: Beefcake

So, it is rather alarming that the very next scene features a dredge, that most environment damaging of machines. Beefcake Man One waves the 'Okay, let's do this thing' from the bridge of the

dredge. Beefcake Man Two – there's that bushy moustache and sideburns and full head of hair Mr Narrator wishes he had – gives the thumbs up. It is March 1970, we are told, and now 'the mammoth task begins'. In an obvious demonstration of the number one concern for the environment, the place is crawling with men and machines. They come so fast and thick, it leaves one positively breathless:

Beefcake Man Three isn't wearing a shirt

Four and Five wear hard hats with a side of earth movers

[Machine, machine]

Six is a blondie with a distinctly Tom Petty vibe

Seven – oh, those hands – working the gear sticks on that bulldozer

[Machine, machine, machine, machine]

Full frontal machine.

(Weird segue of man on man, talking across a desk; a lake flushing system is explained in detail without reference to the purpose of the (formerly) endemic mangroves and reed beds that used to do this job in this place, only better. No need to dredge that up here!)

Beefcake Man Eight is welding

Nine through Thirteen are digging

Fourteen – he's a keeper – pushing the shovel of that crane into position, wearing nothing but a cap, some tiny shorts, and boots

Fifteen, Sixteen and Seventeen can't help themselves, they just stare at him

Eighteen has torn the sleeves off his work shirt, a cigarette dangles from his lips and the packet bulges in his chest pocket

Close up now – back to Fourteen and his little shorts and boots, his back a leathery red

[Machine, machine, machine]

Nineteen wears glasses

Twenty sits astride the steel girder, in his Ray Bans, and has a tendency towards the thumbs up gesture

Twenty-One, -Two, -Three, and -Four are in the trenches, diggers digging by hand amongst the machines

Twenty-Five twists that wire, shirt open

Twenty-Six is everyone's dad, pounding and smoking, smoking and pounding
[Machine, machine]
A series of man hands on machines

Women! There are women here! It's Minute 7 Point 4. Look at those gals, not a care in the world, strolling the grassy Man-Made™ esplanade in shorts and a bikini, signalling yet another intersection (on the road to mastery and control of nature and its Others).

InterSection 3: A Little Something for the Ladies

What becomes clear is that what the ladies want is for the men and boys to be happy. Boys are swimming; men are sailing, rowing and playing rounds of golf; little blondie goes to the beach with his mum and runs ahead into the café to grab himself an ice cream. Mum is so happy watching him eat the ice cream, watching him run down to the beach, watching him splash in the water, watching him carry the little tree that the nice man in the nursery gives him, the little tree that is one of the types of trees that are the only trees sanctioned for planting in the mostly tree-less West Lakes – 'all the decisions have been made for you'!

The woman is also happy serving drinks to the men at the picnic table. And she speaks, at 9'.41": 'I don't really know what made us come down to West Lakes,' she says in that toffy Adelaidean accent you hardly ever hear anymore. 'I guess it's just the feeling that everything's so beautifully laid out and planned,' she 'reflects', sounding the limits of her depths.

Fortunately, the man can step in here to clarify things. 'Well, they do things right, that's why,' he says. 'All the streets are beautifully laid out and the cul-de-sacs, they make it safe for the children while they're playing. And they're building bridges.' Which in addition to being an obvious selling point – bridges – provides the opportunity to return for just a moment to a little beefcake to go with your drinks. An image of a bridgebuilding man in a hard hat hovers near the picnic table in the thought bubbles of each man, each woman, each to their own.

Time doesn't permit me to keep going with this level of description; there are four minutes of film left which would take me ten minutes to describe and a lifetime to process. I'll finish with just one more snapshot. A little while after the cul-de-sacs are first mentioned at the picnic table as emblematic of everything good about the place – including their role in keeping the children

safe – viewers are treated to a scene in which a couple of official-ish looking middle-aged men in square front-pocketed shorts and knee high woollen socks showcase this planning feature by driving on the new roads and stepping out to admire them with alarming intimacy. These two men, already branded by their outfits as a little bit ‘creepy uncle’, caress the curvature of the kerbing. Fondle the tarmac. Fiddle with the bitumen. Kid you not. Look up the rather anatomical etymology of ‘cul-de-sac’ and then you tell me: who would want to live here?

This essay was developed from a performance piece presented at the 2022 Postgraduate Conference of the English, Creative Writing and Film Department in the School of Humanities, Faculty of Arts, Business, Law and Economics, University of Adelaide.

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