



# The

# Cup

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# Contents

Why Study Australian Cinema? -	1
Key Media Terminology -	2
Media Puzzle - The Horse -	3
Australia's Ties to Horse Racing -	3
Synopsis -	4
Genre -	4
Narrative Structure -	4
Opening -	5
Inciting Incident -	5
Climax -	6
Resolution -	6
Setting -	6
Focus on Filmmaker -	7
Characters -	7
Themes -	7
Rating -	7
Reception -	7
Other Horse Racing Films -	7
Then and Now -	8

## Why Study Australian Cinema?

It is vital to study Australian media to have an understanding as both a filmmaker and an audience of the culture that influences and insulates our entertainment. In studying Australian cinema, Australian people are able to relate to stories told by those in similar places and surroundings which therefore influence our own. For example, "The Cup" depicts the cultural profoundness of Horse Racing in Australia, as the leadup to the 2001 Melbourne Cup was the one of the most largely media-covered sport stories of our history, and the cultural significance of racing dating back to the making of films such as "Phar Lap" proves that it has made a mark on both our film industry and overall culture. We have some of the most amazing racing stories in the world (ie; "Ride Like A Girl", "Phar Lap", "Queen Of The Turf") and studying film is a great way to be immersed in our racing history and national pride. This is a great opportunity to learn more about our history and support our film industry, as domestic box office currently averages an annual 3% makeup of Australian films.

# Key Media Terminology

## Narrative

In VCE Media, narrative is used to describe the selection, sequencing and construction of the relevant events from a story, whether it be fictional or non-fictional. In narratives, the term 'story' refers to both the explicit and implicit events that contribute to the understanding of narrative.

## Codes

Codes are technical, symbolic and written tools used to structure and suggest meaning in a media text. Drawn from the study of constructivist semiotics, codes function as the building blocks of meaning. They can be either:

## Symbolic

Symbols are signs, shapes or objects that are used to represent something else. In film these are often associated with the mise en scene in terms of the use of colour, props, costume and performance (facial expressions and body language).

## Technical

Technical codes encompass anything about the technical craft of creating a media product. For film, this often involves the use of camera, performance (the acting craft such as accents, etc.), mise en scene, editing techniques, lighting design, sound design.

## Written

Any written aspects of the media product that conveys meaning. In film, this often includes the title sequence (font, colour), credits, any title cards used throughout, and dialogue spoken by characters.

## Conventions

Conventions are rules or commonly accepted ways of constructing a media text/product to suggest meaning. These rules may be related to the media products:

### Form

Conventions of form are the technical characteristics common to a medium, such as the use of hyperlinks in web pages and the allocation of rewards to encourage players to move through a video game. In feature films, this relates to the aspect ratio, duration of screen time, editing, etc.

### Genre

Conventions of genre include any sequence of codes that are common to a particular genre, and are often used to identify a film as belonging to a particular genre. Most recently in contemporary cinema, conventions often associated with genres are subverted and played around with, establishing genre hybrids such as the film *The Host* (Bong Joon-ho, 2006).

### Narrative

Conventions of narrative can be understood as the fundamental building blocks and principles of storytelling that span across media forms such as literature, radio dramas, films and video games. Narrative conventions span the cause and effect sequencing of events; the opening, development and resolution of narrative arcs; the point of view from which the narrative is experienced from; whether the narrative has multiple storyline; the establishment and development of characters; the use of setting to convey meaning; the structuring (or rather re-structuring) of time.



## *Media Puzzle - The Horse*

While the tear jerking story that surrounds the Oliver family is one of the movie's main features, it is undeniable that the star of this true-life story is the horse Media Puzzle. Media Puzzle was born on May 7, 1997 from the Sire Theatrical and Market Slide. Media Puzzle was foaled in the United States, and was sold to Irish Trainer Dermot K. Weld as a yearling. By the age of three, Media Puzzle had already placed in two group one races, including the Irish St. Leger. After suffering serious tendon issues in 2001, he came back miraculously with 2002 marking the best year of his career. Convinced he was prepared to make the journey to Australia, Dermot Weld entered him in the Geelong Cup which he won in spectacular fashion; breaking the long-standing record. Following the Geelong Cup, he was then entered into the Melbourne Cup in which race he would meet his greatest achievement. Sadly, Media Puzzle died in tragic circumstances on June 22, 2006 following the Ascot Gold Cup. After shattering a leg, he was required to be put down and left behind a legacy never to be forgotten in Australian History.

## *Australia's Ties To Horse Racing*

Australia's deep roots in racing trace back to the very beginning of the nation's inception, with three thoroughbreds arriving on Lady Penrhyn with the first fleet on January 26, 1788. Whilst horse racing is the 4th biggest employer in the Nation and an average of \$14.3 million is wagered every year, it is not the financial lure that propels the racing industry to function. It is the triumph, heartbreak, and profound love of the equine species that built our Country's love for the industry. Stories of extreme underdogs such as Takeover Target and Prince of Penzance, Intense displays of success like that of Black Caviar, Winx, and Makybe Diva, and the deeply rooted human-equine relationships between figures such as Bart Cummings are what makes our country's history rich with heartwarming racing stories. It is in recent times that Horse Racing has come under public scrutiny, driven by the belief that it is an inhumane practice that fuels bad gambling habits and animal abuse. History, however, proves otherwise. Ask Noel Callow, who flew 8,000km to retrieve his beloved horse from a farm in Vietnam. Trainer Chris Waller, whose intense love for his horses reduces him to floods of tears each time they reach success. Chautauqua, the amusing story of the horse who decided retirement was in his best interest by standing still as night in the barriers - and was not denied the luxurious life of retirement that he knew he deserved. The heart racing industry, while portrayed in an unfairly negative light, beats solely for the love of the equine which drives thousands of spectators each and every year to experience the thrill. The purpose of this film was to shed light on the significance of these amazing stories that occur each and every year.



## Synopsis

"The Cup" follows the true-life narrative of Melbourne Cup winning jockey Damien Oliver in the lead up to the 2002 Melbourne Cup. Damien Oliver was set to ride the widely talked about Irish horse "Media Puzzle", who was speculated to be a good chance. 7 days before the Melbourne Cup, Damien Oliver and his brother Jason begin riding horses in trackwork preparation for the Melbourne Cup, and whilst in a trackwork race Jason Oliver's horse stumbles, resulting in him flying forwards and sustaining traumatic injury. He was then rushed to a Perth hospital, placed on life support as Damien Oliver and the rest of the family anxiously awaited the outcome of Jason's life. Upon hearing the news that Jason would not recover, the decision to place him off of life support was made and Jason was tragically pronounced dead. This made Damien Oliver question his ability and ethical decision to ride in the upcoming Melbourne Cup, of which took place in less than a week. After much consideration, Damien decided that it was in the best interest and memory of his brother to continue racing, and so proceeded to ride in the prestigious race. As the movie's climax occurs in the Flemington straight, horses charging down, Media Puzzle with Damien Oliver on top flies from the back, crossing the finish line first as Damien Oliver shouts the infamous line "This is for you Jase!", warming the hearts of his family and Australian racing fans for generations still going.



## Genre

"The Cup" fits into multiple genres, mostly being Biography, Drama, and Sport. While drawing influence and conventions from all three, "The Cup" is primarily classified as a Drama film.

This is due to the use of typical Drama conventions, namely the realistic establishment of characters and believable situations. The emotional profoundness of the film, exploring hard-hitting themes such as death, grief, love, and family is also closely associated with the drama genre. The film also closely relates to the Drama genre seen in the ending of the film, which aims to leave a long lasting impression on the audience through emotional triumph.

## Narrative Structure

An example of Cause and Effect is the death of Damien Oliver's brother, Jason, which prompts him to want to withdraw from the Melbourne Cup.

While Damien Oliver is predominantly the character that "grows" the most, those around him such as trainer Lee Freedman also display signs of growth.

The context of which Damien Oliver is at in his life makes it a much more emotional experience for him, following the death of his brother Jason.

The director manipulates the passing of time using flashbacks and (synonymous with conventions of drama) the use of slow motion frames.



## *Opening*

The opening scene features Damien and Jason's father Ray Oliver riding a horse, in which scene he has a tragic accident leading to his death. This gives background and insight into the Oliver family and their struggles, which they sadly repeat later into the movie.

The use of codes convey meaning to the audience, an example being the technical lighting code, of which is dim, dark lighting. This conveys an impending sense of doom, as the reader interprets the heavy and dark nature of the scene through the lighting. The technical code of setting allows the audience to connect the country racetrack to the scene of Jason Oliver's death, creating a sense of Deja Vu and familiarity. Sound codes such as the rough, galloping of hooves are similar to that of a quickly beating heart, which creates tension and anxiety for the audience.

Another opening scene shows the two brothers Damien and Jason in matching costumes. The use of matching costume allows the audience to interpret a sense of unity and similarities between the two brothers. The use of setting in this case, a dark and lively night displays to the audience their sense of status in the world at the time, as they are both famous and well-known jockeys. Damien's positioning, looking attentively and somewhat admiringly at his brother, depicts a sense of strength in their relationship.



## *Inciting Incident*

The inciting incident of the film, when Jason Oliver's tragic racing accident sees him in a hospital placed on life support, is made up of many symbolic and technical codes. The mid shot frame allows for the audience to see Pat Oliver resting both her head and hand on her sons, displaying her need for comfort at such a difficult time. Cool, dim lighting indicates numbness, somberness, and the impending sense of death that looms. Through the symbolic presence of family, this appeals to the audience's sense of relationships and personal connection, thus heightening the emotional turmoil of the scene.





## *Climax*

The Climax of the movie sees the 24 Melbourne Cup runners charging down the Flemington straight, where Media Puzzle sits comfortably at the back of the pack. In this short time, codes are used to convey the importance and significance of this race.

The technical use of Mis en Scene depicts the amount of horses in the field, heightening a sense of anxiety as many horses are capable of defeating the protagonist. The use of technical code sound through galloping hooves raises excitement, with heavy bass creating a feeling similar to that of a heart beating abnormally fast. The symbolic use of the iconic Flemington “Horseshoe” in the straight adds to the sense of prestige and importance that the race holds in the hearts of Australians, thus furthering the emotional significance of the climax.



## *Resolution*

The resolution of this film features Damien Oliver atop Melbourne Cup runner Media Puzzle, after a successful win despite his tumultuous lead-up that nearly prompted him to withdraw. Technical codes used include high angle Camera looking up at Protagonist which adds to sense of victory, and Close up which depicts expression emphasises emotional effect.

Symbolic codes used are the bright colour palette which appears uplifting, as well as matching horse blinkers create a sense of unity between jockey and horse. The Background (sky) creates a God-Like status for the protagonist. Written codes used are the lack of speech which creates a sense of bewilderment, gratitude, and surprise, and the positioning of arms raised in pose is associated with superhero characters, thus conveying victory and success for protagonist Damien.



## *Setting*

### **Flemington Racecourse**

Flemington Racecourse, a highly prestigious racetrack known for its annual running of the Melbourne Cup, adds heightened sense of prestige and anxiety inducing atmosphere that surrounds the lead up to the climatic running of the race. The buzzing crowd and sheer amount of spectators further engages with the audience to induce excitement and climax.

### **Hospital**

The Perth hospital in which the inciting incident of the film is set is portrayed with the technical code of cool, dim, unsaturated lighting to depict the sense of sadness and numbness that surrounds the Oliver family at the time of setting.

### **Perth Racetrack**

The Perth racetrack where Jason Oliver sustains his fatal injury is an open, isolated and grassy area with no spectators apart from the participants. Compared to a buzzing atmosphere similar to that of Flemington, this isolated atmosphere creates a sense of eeriness and loneliness when the tragic accident takes place.

## *Focus on Filmmaker*

Simon Wincer is an Australian film and television producer, active since 1986. His TV career started immediately after he left school, in a job for Channel 7. In 1986, his breakthrough telemovie “The Last Frontier” won a Christopher award, paving the way for the rest of his televised productions of which many specialise in horse racing or equine themes. His first film in this area of specialisation was “Phar Lap”, which received a gross box office of \$9.3 million. Easily his highest-earning box office film is “Free Willy”, clocking in at \$153.6 million.

## *Characters*

Damien Oliver (Stephen Curry)  
Jason Oliver (Daniel MacPherson)  
Pat Oliver (Colleen Hewett)  
Dermot Weld (Brendan Gleeson)  
Trish Oliver (Jodi Gordon)

## *Themes*

“The Cup” explores the themes of grief, perseverance and success.



## *Rating (PG)*

The film was rated PG, allowing it to reach a wide range of viewers. While not widely received by a younger audience, “The Cup” appealed to a much more niche range of viewers; specifically racing fans. Considered an obscure film, “The Cup’s PG rating makes it a much more appropriate film for an otherwise not specified target age group.

## *Society’s Reception*

“The Cup” did not receive an intensely positive stream of reviews upon its release, with reviews ranging from mixed thoughts to negative. Critic site Rotten Tomatoes rated “The Cup” at 26%. On the contrary, Joe Leydon of Variety stated that “Although it canters down a well-trod path toward a predictable finish line, The Cup sustains interest through the smooth efficiency of its storytelling and the engaging performances of its lead players.”. Aisle Seat reviewed the film, ultimately suggesting mediocrity, in saying that it was a “pleasant-enough viewing experience. At the same time, I was never as riveted as I have been by other, similarly-themed films. It makes you feel good without ever truly stirring the soul.”

## *Budget/Finance*

“The Cup” was officially financed \$17.5 million in 2008. Struggles arose with the film’s inception as this was at the time of a global economic crisis, and so according to director/writer Simon Wincer it was difficult to find investors interested in the film. He also sites one of the challenges was finding horses that resembled each of the thoroughbreds depicted in the film, all of which were privately owned and contributed to the large fees required to use these animals. “The Cup” was financially supported by some big companies, most notably Qantas Airways and Holden. In some scenes, Holden cars and logos can be seen as a result of product placement.

The film, approved in 2003, was also delayed as a result of the fatal Equine Influenza epidemic that spread throughout Northern Australian states. During this time, thoroughbreds were severely quarantined and therefore unable to move from state to state as required. This was a costly exercise requiring the individual hiring of horses to play the parts in the film, as opposed to going through a less costly animal hiring agency.



## Other Horse Racing Films

While “The Cup” is a fantastic movie that depicts the tragedy, triumph, and tumultuous emotions experienced in the world of horse racing, there are several other films (both Australian and International) that provide the audience with a similar experience. Worthwhile Australian films in this category include;

Into The Straight (1949)

Phar Lap (1983)

Ride Like A Girl (2019)

International Films;

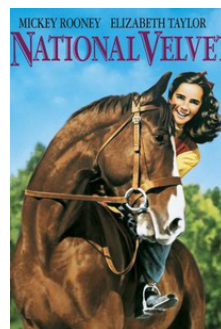
National Velvet (1944)

Under My Skin (1950)

Let It Ride (1989)

Seabiscuit (2003)

Secretariat (2010)



## Then

The bittersweet story of the 2002 Melbourne Cup proved to be an incredibly monumental moment in Australian sport history. Whilst trainer Lee Freedman who trained the widely speculated favourite of the race was disappointed to see an unprecedented loss, he has since displayed his gracious support of Media Puzzle's win and happiness in support of the Oliver family. Had it not been for this race, Damien Oliver himself suggested that he most likely would

have stopped racing. *Now*

Damien Oliver still continues to be a successful Australian jockey, leading the current ladder for current Metropolitan jockeys. Since his ride on Media Puzzle in 2002, he has ridden in every Melbourne Cup since winning in 2013 on Fiorente. He is currently standing at 119 Group One winnings, of which he continues to raise every year.

The National Jockeys Trust Foundation has since been set up as a charity organisation to assist jockeys and families affected by racing incidents. This has helped many jockeys and families, most notably Nathan Berry (Brother of Tommy Berry) who in tragic yet similar circumstances to Jason Oliver tragically died during race trials. The horse Media Puzzle has since tragically died in 2006 following his 26th career start in which he shattered his foreleg.



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