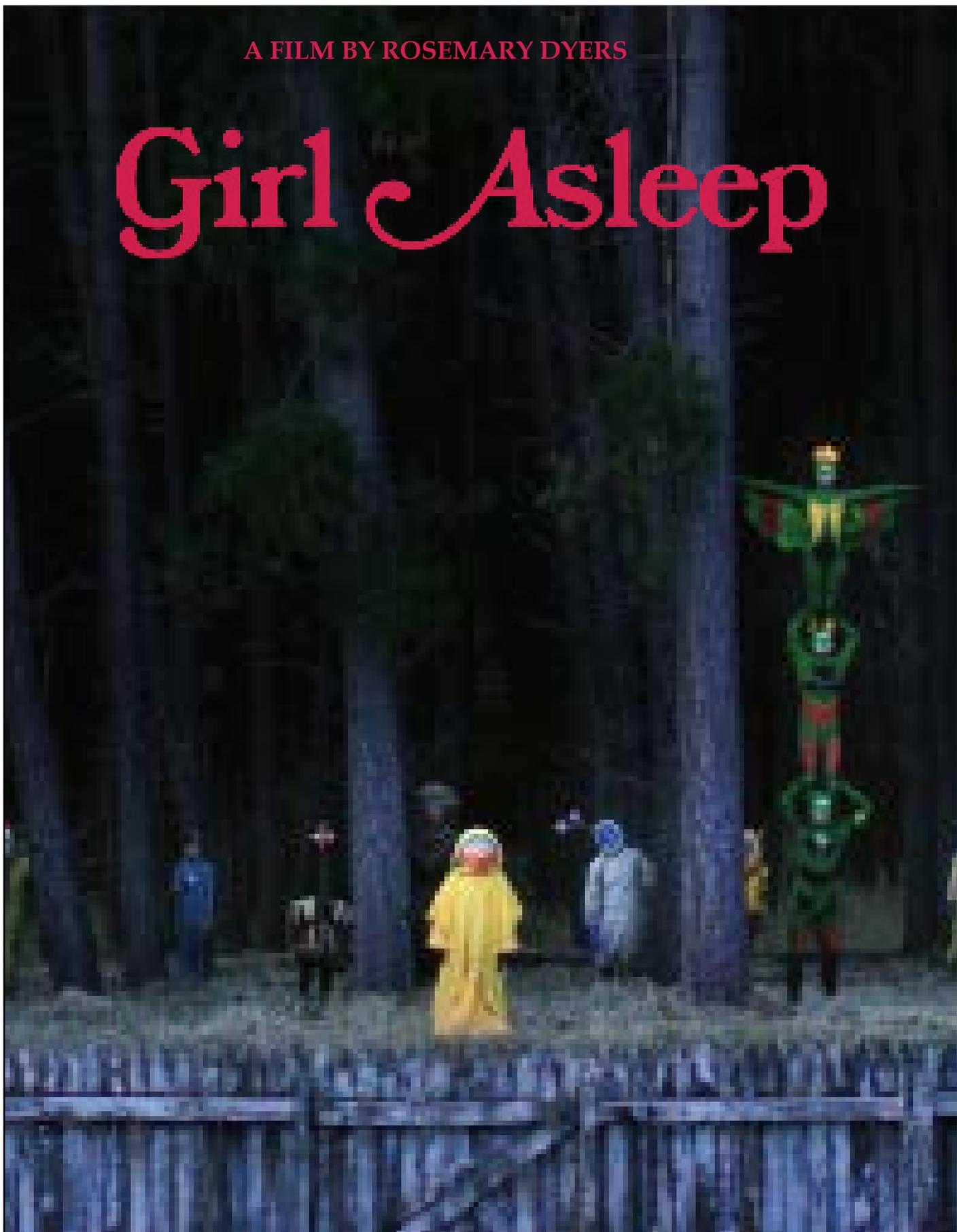


A FILM BY ROSEMARY DYERS

Girl Asleep



A STUDY GUIDE BY REMI WATSON



AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS OF MEDIA

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SYNOPSIS

Introverted Greta Driscoll (Bethany Whitmore) has just moved to a new and intimidating school, and is on the verge of turning 15. Despite her best efforts not to let go of the safety of her childhood, her parents throw her a very unwanted surprise birthday party- and her entire year is invited! Overwhelmed and scared, Greta thinks nothing more can go wrong- alas, that is not the case. An unexpected confession threatens to end her friendship with her only friend, Elliott (Harrison Feldman), her bullies show up at the party, and to top it all off, a strange creature has stolen her most prized possession. Can Greta find her way out of this mysterious world of danger and absurdity, or should she embrace it?

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The purpose of this study guide

Girl Asleep is a worthy entry in the canon of Australia, albeit a newer one. Released in 2015, Girl Asleep represents the youth of Australia and the art that Australian's are capable of producing.

This study guide is aimed for Australian students studying VCE Media (Australian Stories AOS). Study guides will help with understanding the themes, codes, conventions, narrative structure and construction of individual films. This Study Guide can also be used for students studying VCE English, VCE Product design and Technology, VCE Drama, VCE Theatre Studies, and all of the VCE Visual Art subjects.

Why Study Australian Cinema?

The first ever feature length film that was ever made was an Australian film- The Story of the Kelly Gang was produced in 1906. Since then, filmmaking has been a way of Australians telling their stories and preserving their cultural identity.

In the 1920s, Australian Cinema experienced a huge rise in the number of films produced- 163 films were released over the span of those ten years. Shortly afterwards a series of right-wing Prime Ministers decreased the output of the Australian film industry in favour of the growth of the Australian economy. For the next 50 years, few films were released in Australia, and any significant film achievements occurred only in Hollywood.

Fortunately in the 70s, Prime Minister John Gorton established the Australian Film Development Corporation and the National Film and Television Training School which allowed a fresh wave of Australian filmmakers to show the world what Australians could do, given the opportunity. Many classic Australian films such as Crocodile Dundee (Fairman, 1986), Strictly Ballroom (Luhrman, 1992), Muriel's Wedding (Hogan, 1994), The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (Elliott, 1994) and The Castle (Sitch, 1997) gave voice to a plethora of demographics- everything from odd families in the lower class to drag queens! Many of these films followed the story of an 'underdog', which is a convention that has become a staple of Australian storytelling.

Unfortunately, in recent years Australian films have consistently grossed under 5% each year and the industry is struggling to maintain its appeal to local audiences. There could be several explanations for this- some believe it's the subject matter, as Australian films have veered away from family-oriented comedies and toward darker dramas, but economic constraints are almost certainly a big part of the issue. Australian filmmakers have long relied on financial assistance from government agencies unlike other countries that are funded by private investors. The current offset enables investors 40% back from their investment in Australian films, while in the 80s it was 150%.

Studying Australian film can strengthen our cultural identity by championing its role within our multifaceted society, and provide a source of connection between all the diverse peoples of Australia.



Matthew Whittet, Writer of Girl Asleep and actor of 'Conrad' and 'Abject Man'



Still from 'the Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert', 1994

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.



NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

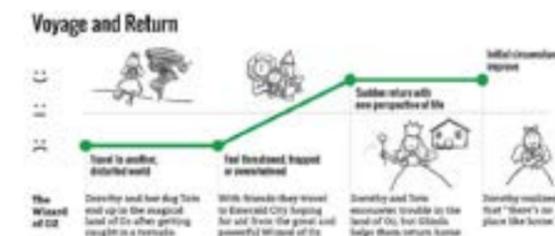
Girl Asleep is a linear narrative that follows the psychological and physical journey of the film's protagonist, Greta.

The film begins by setting the scene (Greta meets Elliott, they become friends, we meet Greta's family, we are introduced to Greta's opinion on having a birthday party).

The inciting incident, the invitations being distributed, occurs roughly a fifth of the way through the film, which is arguably quite late. After Greta discovers the invitations, she returns home and confronts her parents about them. After a family fight, she finally agrees to the party, much to her reluctance.

The rising action ensues from there, including the party preparation, and the actual party sequences.

Despite the party being the initial source of conflict (The mixtape, Greta's rejection of Elliott's advances), the real climax occurs after she's spent a significant amount of time in her dreamscape and fought off the counterparts of the school bullies, when she discovers that the creature that stole her music-box is in fact, herself.



After she discovers this, she talks to Genevieve upon re-entering the real world, and this initiates the falling action.

Her apology to Elliott, and her concluding embrace of adolescence when she switches clothes with Elliott and begins to enjoy her party is the resolution.

This generic arch-like three-act structure makes the narrative linear and easy-to-follow.

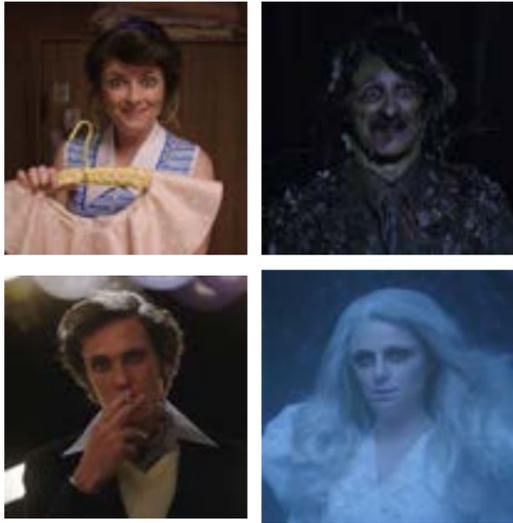
GENRE



Genre refers to the category a film can belong to. To identify a film's genre, we recognise codes and conventions it is using. *Girl Asleep* can be referred to as a 'coming-of-age' drama, a subgenre that focuses on the transition of a child to an adult, and the hardships that come with that change. Other coming-of-age-dramas include *Sex Education* (2019 TV series), *Atypical* (2017 TV series), and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012). *Girl Asleep* has also been cited as a surrealist film similar to *Mulholland Drive* (2001) or *Being John Malkovich* (1999), because of its frequently unexplained oddness (The creatures in Greta's dreamscape) and its unconventional use of beats in time and conversation.



CAST OF CHARACTERS



Bethany Whitmore **Greta Driscoll**
Greta is an awkward and introverted almost-15-year-old who has just moved house with her endearingly uncouth family. She struggles to make friends, and seems to be avoiding 'growing up'. She likes plastic horses, origami, writing letters to her finnish pen-pal (also named Greta), and her precious music-box gifted to her by her mum on her fifth birthday.

Harrison Feldman **Elliott**
Elliott is a dorky and unpopular 14-year-old with questionable social skills. He is bullied by his peers and had no friends before meeting Greta. He is, however, perpetually bubbling over with positive energy, if a little too enthusiastic at times. He also likes plastic horses, in addition to plastic pigs, and parties.

Imogen Archer **Genevieve**
Genevieve is Greta's older sister, who appears to be considerably less awkward, yet less popular with their parents. Genevieve, a fitting parallel to Greta, has embraced adolescence, and brings home her sexual French boyfriend, much to her parent's disapproval. She is introduced as hostile toward Greta, but turns out to be a source of comfort in Greta's most emotional moment.

Tilda Chom-Hervey **The Huldra**
The Huldra is a character created by Greta's imagination, inspired by the photo her pen-pal sent her. She is a solitary and powerful individual that lives in the forest off Greta's property. She is a battle-hardened and beautiful recluse that serves as Greta's guide and protector in the mysterious and dangerous world of her imagination.

Eamon Farren **Adam/Benoit Tremet**
Adam is Genevieve's flirtatious French boyfriend, who casually hits on both Greta and Janet in Genevieve's presence. Adam is the owner of one 'Benoit Tremet' album, a sexy French (fictional) musician that Janet labels as 'way too sexualized for her liking'. It is suggested that Greta finds Adam attractive, and in her dreamscape, Adam takes on the persona of Benoit Tremet, who attempts to seduce her.

Matthew Whittet **Conrad/Abject Man**
Conrad is Greta's embarrassing father, who is depicted as an exaggerated version of the archetypal friendly dad. He is known for his 'dad jokes' and is shown in various unflattering outfits. He clearly cares for Greta deeply, but demonstrates an inability to comfortably show his affection. He regularly gets into fights with Janet, calling her out on being 'cold'. In Greta's dreamscape, his counterpart is 'Abject Man', a disgusting and horrifyingly creepy entity who has unknown intentions- but attempts to win Greta's trust with corny dad jokes all the same.

Amber McMahon **Janet/Frozen Woman**
Janet is Greta's enthusiastic mother, who has possibly sheltered Greta to an extent that is difficult to overcome, but also pushes for her to become more socially active. She is both cold and slightly disloyal to her husband Conrad, as she often fights with him, and flirts with Adam. She is observed to be firm and unyielding, but fragile as well. She is described by Conrad as 'cold', and he makes a point of making references to 'ice', and 'freezing'. This theme is taken further in Greta's dreamscape, where Janet's counterpart is an eerie and villainous frozen woman, alone in a cave full of tinkling music boxes.

Maiah Stewardson **Jade**
Jade, along with her two henchwomen, Sapphire and Amber, is the prominent bully at Greta's new school. Contrasting to other depictions of school bullies in popular media, Jade is at first not outright hostile, but forcefully tries to make Greta part of her posse, apparently using the power of awkwardness to intimidate Greta. Her appearance at Greta's party is the typical bully's climax moment, where she plays a tape that she and her friends made, making fun of Greta. In the dreamscape, her villainous counterpart is, for the most part, no different to the real Jade, except dream-Jade is more ninja-esque, with wolf-like mannerisms.

SETTING



Greta's House

Greta's house also has a semi-stressful atmosphere, but at least Greta knows everyone there. Both her parents seem awkward and incompetent, and have clearly raised her in a sheltered way. Her house is cosy and warm-looking, and the 70s set design really helps with the aesthetic of the film. The house transforms for the party, and the lights, noise and people make it overwhelming for Greta.



The Woods

For the first half of the film, the only shots we see of the woods are just from behind the safety of Greta's back fence- of the tall, thin trees that make up the dense and shadowy forest on the edge of her property. We see the obscure creatures for the first time, simultaneously bright and ominous figures stepping out from behind the trunks. When Greta chases the bird-creature after it steals her music-box, she enters the woods. It is clearly a scary and dangerous place, but her reactions lack real fear, and the cinematography doesn't have some of the conventions of horror- so this feels more dreamlike than an actual horror. Everything in the forest reflects a part of her real life- the Huldra is the same one in the picture she showed to Elliott, the Abject man is a version of her father, the frozen woman a reflection of her mother, the horse she rides on, a plastic toy! Everything that happens in the woods is a reflection of the challenges she is facing in reality.

Setting is an essential part of making a film feel alive because it gives context, depth and background (or lack thereof) to the narrative. *Girl Asleep* is set and filmed in Australia. Both the settings of the real-life suburbia that Greta usually lives in and the surreal dreamworld that she enters seem to pose threats to her and generally take her out of her comfort zone. Although the alternate forest world could be perceived as a negative reflection of her real world, there are some parts of it that feel safer than reality - like the quietness and the seemingly supportive characters (The Huldra, and sometimes Abject Man), and that is perhaps a reflection of how she is living in a fantasy, subconsciously believing that by avoiding growing up, she can also avoid discomfort. Like other narratives with alternate worlds or portals, such as *Alice in Wonderland* and the tales of *Narnia*, the protagonist/s enter this otherworld at a time that is difficult for them, or when they are learning to be something new, and through surviving the fantastical ordeals of this place, they return to reality somewhat wiser.



Greta's School

The first location we are introduced to is the playground of Greta's new school. It is established as hostile through the awkwardness of all the interactions that take place there and the evident bullying inflicted on Elliott, Greta, and even in the background. Many negative interactions happen at school, from the scene in the bathroom with Jade, Sapphire and Amber to the reveal of the surprise birthday party. The initial scene of Greta sitting alone foreshadows the themes of introversion and isolation.

OPENING

Narrative Convention: In this one scene, the two main characters' personalities are established through their actions and words. The setting of the school- a lonely and unsympathetic suburban wasteland- is also introduced. Elliott's rant about how turning 15 is going to 'herald a new era' is also foreshadowing of the events that occur on Greta's 15th birthday.

Technical Codes: There is mostly just background noise for the majority of this scene, implying loneliness and heightening the lack of interaction. The camera also does not move for almost 3 minutes, amplifying the stillness and awkwardness.

Symbolic Codes: In the background there is a soccer ball balancing on the rim of a basketball hoop- perhaps making a subtle reference to Greta and Elliott being somewhere they don't fit in.

Written Codes: Greta doesn't speak much at all in this scene, and Elliott does all the conversation-making. This is to show the extent of Greta's shyness, and the awkwardness of their relationship. Elliot is also very needy, and makes the audience cringe.



INCITING INCIDENT

Narrative Convention: After being dropped to school late by her sister, Greta discovers her mum's secret party planning by reading Elliott's copy of the invitation. This is a recognisable trope, seen in other teen films, where the protagonist arrives at school one morning, and everyone seems to be giving them more attention/giving them dirty looks. They then find the reason/source, and it kicks off the events of the narrative.

Technical Codes: The sequence is slowed down to emphasise her stress in the situation and make it more dramatic.

Symbolic Codes: The date on the invitations is actually 31st of February, which doesn't exist. A subtle but at the same time very obvious easter egg, perhaps only there to further the surrealism of the film.

Written Codes: Elliott enthusiastically greets Greta in his signature style with odd language choices- "With bells on!", excited about Greta's 'party'-which confirms what we may have expected from the papers that the other students were holding.



CLIMAX

Narrative convention: After a long rising action sequence (birthday setup, guests arrive, getting asked out by Elliott, music box stolen etc), the climax happens as one might expect- a confrontation of the evil, in this case, the bullies (although they are only dream equivalents), a fight scene, victory, then a reveal. This happens in many narratives, not just coming-of-age ones. Deadpool, Harry Potter, Guardians of the Galaxy and Porco Rosso are among the many that follow this general structure of climax.

Technical Codes: There is a contrast between the fast-paced, loud action sequence of Greta vs the Bullies and the quietly dramatic reveal of the music-box thief.

Symbolic Codes: Revealing the music-box thief to actually be Greta's younger self implies that Greta feels that she is losing things that are close to her by growing up, and that she needs to let go.

Written Codes: Greta's defiant shout of "I don't care what you guys do to me anymore- bring it on, bitches!" is a predictable line that signifies that Greta has grown more resilient through her ordeals.



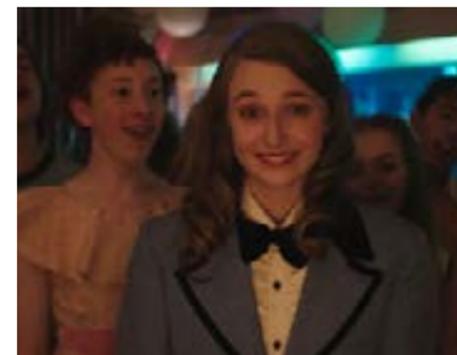
RESOLUTION

Narrative convention: The movie wraps up with Greta embracing her identity and individuality by swapping clothes with Elliott, and then properly celebrating her birthday with all her friends and family. It is the typical 'happy ending', which is both cliched, but still satisfying for the audience.

Technical codes: The gradual swelling of non-diegetic music overtaking the diegetic sounds of the party hints that the movie is coming to a close. There is also a birds-eye shot of a smiling Greta surrounded by her dancing friends, which implies that she has become more confident in her relationships with her peers.

Symbolic Codes: All the characters are clustered around a central figure (Greta), symbolising unity.

Written Codes: Though Janet's reply is a little more ambiguous, the fact that Greta asks if her mum is alright signifies not only that Greta has forgiven her mum completely for forcing the party on her, but has also grown more empathetic and less self-centred.



SOCIETY'S RECEPTION OF GIRL ASLEEP

When *Girl Asleep* was released in 2016, it grossed just \$64,056, released 24 theatres wide. It ran 14 weeks. It had a budget of 1.5 million. That means its return was -76%. It did incredibly badly. However, it received high ratings of 4/5 stars from *The Guardian*, and 4.5/5 stars from *Screen-Space*.



Then

It won the Audience Award for Most Popular Feature at Adelaide Film Festival, won Best Costume Design at the AACTA Awards, Best Film at the AFCA Awards, Age Critics Prize for Best Australian Feature Film at the Melbourne International Film Festival, and both the Grand Jury Prize and the Futurewave Youth Jury Award at the Seattle International Film Festival. It was nominated a further 16 times for various awards. Jane Howard of *The Guardian* said of it "In fact it's in Myers's commitment to eccentricity that *Girl Asleep* – an art-house film made firmly with a teenage audience in its sight – finds its heart." She further states that "The rich colours popping from cinematographer Andrew Commis's 4:3 aspect ratio draw us back into an Australia of the past. Production and costume designer Jonathon Oxlade also embraces the 70s in all of its oddities and excess. And yet Myers always grounds her characters and their stories in a recognisable reality, drawing out delicate and nuanced performances. Even when the fantasy and magic reaches a peak, we still feel passionately engaged with the humanity."



Now

As it has only been 4 years since *Girl Asleep*'s release, not too much has changed. It hasn't had time to become a cult film, nor has it returned much more after its initial release. Why are we studying it, then? It's important for film students to understand that even if a film is well-made and receives numerous awards, there is still no guarantee that you will make much profit out of it. In *Girl Asleep*'s case, a loss was made. This is in part presumably because of its quirky and unusual nature, but also because as an Australian film, it is automatically more likely to fail commercially than an American film- Australian films are released on less than 20 screens upon release, whereas American ones are released on over 400- And of course Hollywood's huge budget and promotion/advertising department.

GIRL ASLEEP'S PRODUCTION DESIGNER: JONATHON OXLADE



One of the key qualities of *Girl Asleep* is the convincing 80s setting and quirky, colourful aesthetic. The costumes too, are memorable- think of the simple yellow cloak and bird-like mask of 'the crone'! The person in charge of set, costume and props is generally known as 'production designer', and in this case is known as Jonathon Oxlade. Jonathon studied illustration and sculpture at Queensland College of Art, and since leaving he has trained with Kid Praha in the Czech Republic with a focus on puppetry. Jonathon has worked for Queensland Theatre Company, State Theatre Company of South Australia, Circa, Kooemba Jdarra, Zen Zen Zo, Arena Theatre Company of South Australia, Polyglot, Bell Shakespeare, Polytoxic, Men of Steel, Real TV Project, The Escapists, The Border Project and LaBoite Theatre as a theatre designer. His career has involved designing everything from *Grug* and *Pinocchio* to *The Wizard of Oz*. Jonathon's first production design for film, however, was *Girl Asleep*. He has also illustrated two picture books.



ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

Carl Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst of the early 20th century. Spend 20 minutes researching his theories and beliefs on the nature of human dreams, and write down any connections you see between those beliefs and the themes of *Girl Asleep*.

Activity 2

Study the costumes of the creatures in the woods. What do they have in common? Now think about how the designs of these creatures have impacted the mood and feeling of the film. Design another character that you could see fitting in with them.



Activity 3

Briefly look over the plot of *Girl Asleep*. What tropes can you identify? List as many other examples in other films of those tropes being used. Why might these be popular tropes? How do the filmmakers avoid making them boring?

Activity 4

A narrative goes nowhere without characters having motivations. Identify the key motives and goals of each of the main characters (Greta, Elliott, Janet, Conrad, Jade, Genevieve, Adam, The Huldra). How might the film's course be changed if one of these motivations was completely different?

Activity 5

Design an alternative film poster for *Girl Asleep*. Things to consider: Visual appeal, Cast/Crew credits, Release date, Reviews, Tagline.

Activity 6

Discover what profession in the film industry would suit you best- watch and complete the 15 minute questionnaire at <https://windmill.org.au/girlasleep/quiz/girl-asleep-quiz/>



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