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Jim
Nick’s father
Died the previous year.

Joan
Nick’s mother
Helps Nick to better understand his father’s death.

Phil
Newspaper editor; Nick and Andy’s boss
Has trouble expressing sympathy for Nick; puts Nick’s photo of Julia on the front page.

Nick
Photojournalist
Discovers he has cancer just before meeting Meryl at the accident scene; works with Andy at The Southern Mail.

Meryl
Artist
Meets Nick at the scene of the train accident and starts a relationship with him.

Andy
Journalist
Works with Nick; believes Rob’s death was suicide; finds out Anna is pregnant.

Linda
Meryl’s friend
Makes casual comments about serious topics.

Anna
Nurse
Has just found out she is pregnant to Andy.

Train driver
Feels guilty about Rob’s death; visits Julia to convey his condolences.

Train driver’s son
A teenager who sometimes has trouble relating to his father.
Look Both Ways is a quirky, multi-layered exploration of the different lives being lived over one hot weekend in an Australian city. It occurs in a world criss-crossed by train tracks, in a small urban community made up of an endearing set of characters. Everyone is undergoing their own problems and trying to find their own way of coping with life events; the ways in which these lives intersect and affect one another provides the material for the film.

Originally entitled Life Story in the script, Look Both Ways raises the issue of what it is to be human in a way that is both humorous and meaningful. The film received much critical acclaim for its ability to tackle the big questions about life and death without being ponderous and dull. Some of the most touching moments of the film are not contained within lengthy dialogue, but rather are conveyed through small gestures and solely visual cues: the clasping of a proffered hand, an ice-cream cone dropped on a driveway, a splash of dirty water over a nearly finished painting. It is these details which stay with the viewer long after the film has finished, reinforcing the fact that ordinary moments have as much place in our lives as the extraordinary ones.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Writer and director Sarah Watt’s inclusion of animation sequences and photomontage provides an innovative way of showing what characters are thinking and feeling. The short clips of lone swimmers being crunched by sharks are instantly understandable by Australian viewers, who can identify with Meryl’s preoccupations. Similarly, Nick’s endless mental picture-show of the causes and progression of his cancer is something that anyone who has ever obsessed about an event in their life can relate to. In another way, the images of menacing stormy seas create a poetic and lyrical visual feel for the film, reminding us that there is more to life than what we see on the surface.

Another film by Sarah Watt, Living With Happiness (2001), shows how the themes in Look Both Ways developed. This earlier short film is an animation that shows a woman who experiences continual paranoid fears about the potential for disaster in everyday life. Worn down by her constant anxiety, she takes a trip to the beach to relax, only to be swept out to sea by a huge wave and nearly drowning before being saved by a child on a surfboard. As in Look Both Ways, it takes a real event of life-threatening significance for the main protagonist to realise that her anxieties have got out of proportion.

Setting

The film is set in an inner city suburb that could be anywhere in Australia. The train disaster occurs in the fictional suburb of Arnow Hill to create a sense in viewers that the events depicted could have happened anywhere in Australia. While Look Both Ways was filmed on location in Adelaide, the film’s setting is not specifically mentioned, and the newspaper, The Southern Mail, does not really exist. Australian viewers will recognise real current affairs and news programs that are imitated in the film. Many of the film’s characters live alone or are suffering from a sense of alienation from others and from society in general.
The interrelatedness of all things

The film is permeated by a philosophical stance that promotes the message that all lives are intertwined. Although the film is not specifically affiliated with a particular area of philosophy or religion, its approach can be loosely aligned with a kind of spiritual belief about life that conceives of a unity that holds everything in the universe together.

The film shows a belief that there are universal aspects in nearly all of our experiences, whether they are large or small. Death is something that we are all going to have to face up to at some point and is one of those large experiences that links people together; the film makes this clear through its presentation of different characters’ experiences with death. Characters also experience small moments of truth where they see or feel something that a wider audience can relate to. So when Meryl glances at a younger, prettier woman in a bikini at the pool (Segment 5) and the train driver’s son tries to make himself as unobtrusive as possible when he returns home at dawn (Segment 4), many viewers will be able to understand and share in their feelings.

This emphasis on common humanity can also be seen in the train scene when Nick and Meryl return from lunch at Nick’s mother’s place (Segment 10). At one point, Nick looks at the other passengers, seeing them as portraits. He notices all the small details about them that give clues as to who they are: their jewellery, the logos on their clothes, and their activities, such as knitting. This series of close-up head and body shots shows the variety of other people who exist in the world, from a wide range of ages, ethnicities, styles and subcultures.

This is an important point. The film could have emphasised people’s differences and sought to show that we are irreconcilably separate from one another, which would have created a bleak, hopeless atmosphere. Instead, the message we take from the film is that we are all linked together through our common fate by virtue of our humanity, which is much more heart-warming and reassuring.
Existentialism

*Look Both Ways* shares its outlook with the broad tenets of existentialism, a philosophy that asks questions about what it is to be human and what the meaning of life is. Existentialism is concerned with the individual’s quest to make meaning and sense out of their life. It often questions the role of death in people’s lives, asking what the value is of life when we are all fated to die one day.

One existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, developed a concept of bad faith, which is the state that humans end up in when they do not assume responsibility for their actions and their consequences. Experiencing bad faith involves feeling anxiety and dread. It can be argued that Andy is a classic example of someone who is acting in bad faith in his relationship with Anna, because he is not prepared for much of the film to accept the consequences of his sexual relationship with her. His denial of the situation may account for his bad moods and belligerence. The film suggests that only once someone accepts responsibility for their actions can they relax and find peace with themselves.

Another value espoused by some existentialist philosophers is the notion that life is full of value because it is only lived once, and therefore it should be lived in the moment. Existentialist writers such as Albert Camus argue that if we no longer believe in a god or an afterlife then this can potentially render life meaningless or absurd. Paradoxically, this lack of religious belief can also make life infinitely more precious, because it is only lived once, with no chance of an afterlife. *Look Both Ways* endorses the idea that seizing the moment and acting according to one’s authentic impulses is a positive thing. The character of Nick, who pursues a relationship with Meryl when chance throws their paths together again, is shown as being rewarded with a relationship and self-knowledge through this pursuit.
Stages of grief

The psychological conceptualisation of the stages of grief is fundamental to the film’s narrative structure and to an understanding of how the characters operate. Meryl actually refers to the seven stages of grief in Segment 7 when Nick asks her whether she is over the shock of the accident and her father’s death. The seven stages of grief are:

- shock or disbelief
- denial
- bargaining
- guilt
- anger
- depression
- acceptance and hope

This framework has been developed by psychiatrists to explain the stages that we go through when we lose someone through death, though of course grieving is not restricted to loss through death. Some psychiatrists and psychologists use a five-stage model, while later practitioners work with a seven-stage model. In Look Both Ways, the grieving process is related to death, most notably through the character of Julia, who can be seen moving from a state of shock and numbness through anger (when she shoves the dog out of the way as she runs from the house), to a state of acceptance signified when she erects the memorial to Rob, and hope that time will heal her pain when she receives the train driver with a feeling of relief and gladness in Segment 10.

Buddhism

Buddhism is a spiritual and philosophical belief system that could be said to inform the overall philosophical themes of the film. Buddhism aims to end suffering. It promotes an understanding that existence involves
suffering, but that this can be overcome or transcended by Buddhist practices that work on purifying the mind. There are Four Noble Truths that are central to Buddhism, which basically move from a recognition that to be alive is to suffer, to a state where adherents manage to find peace. Part of Buddhist teaching involves the Noble Eightfold Path, eight areas that cover practices of ethical conduct and mental discipline that will ultimately lead to the end of suffering. Where the film can be said to share understandings with Buddhism is in its overall stance that life inevitably involves suffering. Look Both Ways does not attempt to present life as being easy and pain-free; rather, it shows the awkwardness, discomfort and hurt that people experience on a daily basis, and it always characterises these as a necessary part of existence.

Fate

The idea of fate is referred to regularly throughout the film. Fate is a power that predetermines events. It refers to what is meant to happen, to a fixed pathway or allocated ‘lot in life’, as though both general and personal destiny had already been decided upon in the larger order of things. A belief in fate presupposes that there is a fixed order in the universe. This idea that fate determines what happens to us is both endorsed and critiqued in the film. See the Themes, ideas & values section and the Different interpretations section for further discussion of ideas about fate in the film.

Arnow Hill disaster as the context for the story

Throughout the film, the Arnow Hill disaster forms a backdrop for the microcosm of life that we witness among the dozen or so characters affected by Rob’s death. The film uses this context of a fictional train disaster as the setting for its exploration of how a local accident affects the lives of a small group of people. Although the Arnow Hill rail disaster is a fictional event in the film, we can all relate to the phenomenon of