



## Pure Shit – The Essay

by Megan Spencer (c) 2009

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Once I was on a national radio panel to review [Candy](#) (2006), the film adaptation of Luke Davies' novel. "Candy is a love story," I began, "between a young man, a young woman, and a drug: heroin."

"Not *another* movie about junkies," the host interrupted, rolling his eyes. "What do we need another film about junkies for? I'm sick of them - what's so good about drug movies?"

I was taken aback for several reasons. Aside from his apparent dismissal of "junkies" as lesser beings not worthy of having a voice or having their stories told, my assumption was, *doesn't everyone like drug movies?*

On the surface movies about drugs (users, traffickers and the related culture) might seem sensational exercises in exploitation. But usually the opposite is true. Some of cinema's most compassionate, moving, funny, dramatic and poetic stories come straight from the human drama of addiction - whether it be to heroin, cocaine, amphetamines, marijuana, alcohol, or even the thrill of the score and not getting caught.

Counterpoint is 'king' in the cinema of addiction: the heady lifestyle of excess meets the seedy physical depths at the end of the rainbow. The rich rub shoulders with the underclass, beauty meets filth, euphoric highs come with gruesome lows, and often the worlds of crime and bohemia intersect.

They may be at once political tracts and tales of body horror. If "cinema is life" as French New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard famously once said, we need these stories from real life, as much as the feel good fantasies that flood our multiplexes.

Fittingly, the French New Wave loomed large for writer/director Bert Deling, the man responsible for Australia's most authentic and entertaining drug movie to date: *Pure Shit* (1975). Goddard's *Breathless* (1960) proved a "revelation" for him.

In the Australian cinema landscape of the 1970s - defined by billowy costume dramas and new film school graduates - *Pure Shit* was a rare exercise in neo-realist narrative and "feral" cinema. Retrospectively billed as "Australia's answer to *Trainspotting*", it is also important to note that before *Monkey Grip* (1982), *Dogs In Space* (1987), *The Finished People* (2003), *Ra Choi* (2005), *Little Fish* (2005) and *Candy* (2006) - before any of these significant Australian drug movies - there was *Pure Shit*. (Or 'Pure S' as it has come to be known after the Censor got to it prior to the film's 1975 release).

Shot on 16mm, made for \$28,000 and funded in part by the Film, Radio and Television Board of the Australia Council, and the Buoyancy Foundation ("an organisation to help drug-users"), it never made its budget back despite the controversy generated on its initial release.

*Pure Shit* details a night in the lives of four heroin users and their relentless efforts to score "a hit". It playfully opens with a close up of a Fisher Price toy roundabout, its lurid plastic colours visually telegraphing the colourful night ahead of the four main characters, Lou (Garry Waddell), Sandy (Anne Hetherington), John (John Laurie) and Gerry (Carol Porter). Swearing, bitching and moaning all the while, they ride around the streets of inner city Melbourne in an old Holden, "busting" chemists, coercing dealers and randomly lobbing up on friends and foes' doorsteps, desperately searching for chemical satisfaction.

Writer Helen Garner makes an infamous appearance as "Jo", a speed-fuelled intellectual with a cleaning fetish, so does comedian Greig Pickhaver (aka sports satirist HG Nelson) as a coke dealer. The film is stolen by Melbourne actor Phil Motherwell playing "Ed", the gang of four's last resort, a rich coke addict who eventually nudes up and drags a fully-clothed Waddell into his pool, in a fit of paranoid madness.

*Pure Shit* is equal parts social commentary and black humour. It grew out of Deling's "desire to write and direct films" for "young people", that he saw as "important', socially relevant and realistic. It was also a reaction to what he and his Pram Factory theatre peers - playwrights David Williamson and Jack Hibberd among them - saw as the government's hypocritical stance towards drug use and addiction - the ineffectual institutional approach towards dealing with the heroin problem, in full swing on the streets of Melbourne in the 70s.

Both a graphic slice of realism and a warning, Deling researched and wrote the script based on friends' real life stories, casting a good deal of them in the film - both professional and non-professional actors alike. Using American filmmaker Robert Altman's "overlapping dialogue" technique, it was made with a decisive 'run and gun' approach, limited resources and plenty of flaws - left in.

In an online interview, cinematographer Tom Cowan (*Orange Love Story*) recalled, "*Pure S* was teetering on the edge of being out of control, it was a crazy shoot... Most of the actors were speed addicts and I was probably the only one on location who wasn't stoned."



He did a great job 'straight'. *Pure Shit* could have been harsh to look at. Instead it's a controlled view of an out of control situation.

On its release *Pure Shit* violently divided audiences and critics. Some journalists hailed it as "the best thing since sliced bread" while others declared it "the most evil film ever made". The Victorian Vice Squad raided the Playbox Cinema on opening night, tearing down posters, while the Censor initially banned the release, on appeal classifying it with an R rating with the proviso that all advertising and promotional materials be submitted before publication.

According to Deling, not only did the Australian Film Commission at the time refuse to take the film to Cannes, it also pulled out of post-production funding. *Pure Shit* became the unwelcome country cousin at the city wedding...

As a then twenty-something filmmaker with something to say, Deling says "these were the things you dream about", likening *Pure Shit* now to "an insect in amber", a time capsule of the political and social climate it grew out of. But it was also a film ahead of its time and clearly influential, predating *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Requiem For A Dream* (2000) by decades. *Pure Shit* is to drug films what was *Mad Max* is to apocalyptic action films: a groundbreaker and an aberration.

It also let "the junkies" speak. We *all* get a voice in a democracy - isn't that so 'Mr. Bit-Of-A-Snob'? Whether we find it 'distastful' or not isn't relevant - it's still one of our stories, whether it's within one's frame of reference or otherwise. They don't have to come to your house, you don't have to give them your money or worry about whether you'll catch their pain and suffering... You just need to listen for it all to work happily. Then you can make your mind up.

That's what's so good about film + art + storytelling.

That's also what's so good about *Pure Shit*.

***With thanks to Bert Deling and Tony Moore, both interviewed for this essay.***

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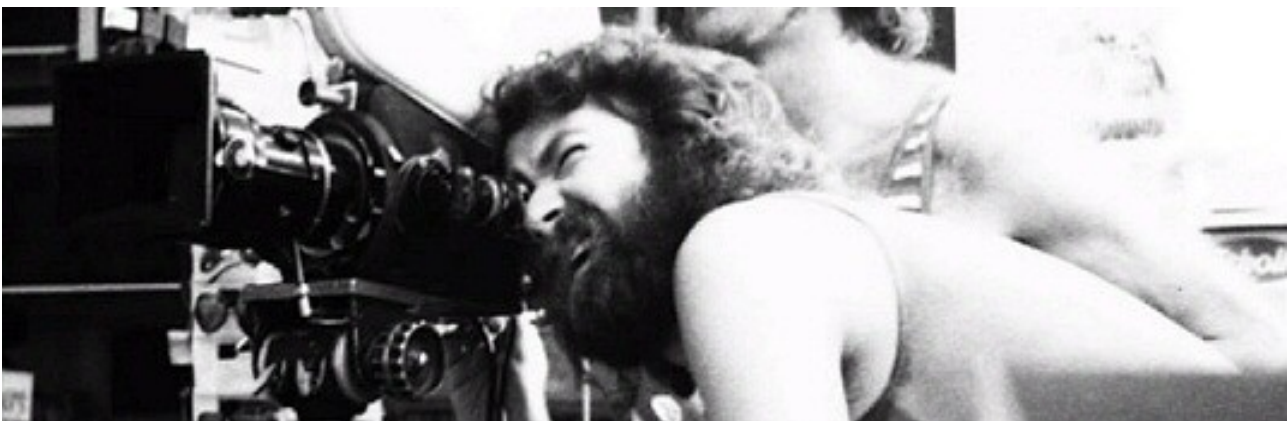
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*All photos/images re-published from the web.*



*Director Bert Deling on the set of Pure Shit.*