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Kenny and Australian cinema in the Howard era

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The "battler" figure has been a popular and enduring character in the Australian cultural imagination, of literature and screen, from the time of *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919) and then featured in the *Dad and Dave* films (1932-1995). It was later "ockerised" for Bazza McKenzie, "Crocodile" Dundee and others. It is a deeply engrained identifier in the national memory, this ordinary citizen, working-class, well-intentioned, hard-working, the underdog who struggles against the world to overcome troubles through an essential integrity. The symbol of the battler has been used to reflect what we hope we are as Australians. My paper is about two more recent battlers on our screens.

In the comedic feature film *The Castle* (1997), the battler figure is domesticated and suburbanised, as Melbourne tow truck driver and dedicated family man Daryl Kerrigan finds an inner strength when he fights to save the Kerrigan family home, and others in his street, from compulsory resumption. Santo Cilauro, from Working Dog Productions, that made this film, calls it a "suburban fairy tale" (cited in Crofts 2001: p.168).

The battler figure is later urbanised, when *Kenny* (2006), a mockumentary feature, follows the life of divorced father Kenny Smyth, a Melbourne portaloo worker, a "knight in shining overalls" except that his job is forever coming into conflict with his disjointed family life. The film's success has meant that the figure of the battler has once more been in the spotlight. The history of the

battler in Australian screens has been long documented, also recently in a 2007 *Metro* article, in which Felicity Collins points to Kenny as one of "conservative recasting" of an "idealized and sentimentalized 'ordinary' Australian". She writes that "the appeal of the film for many reviewers seems to arise from its Australian 'authenticity'" (2007: pp. 84, 90); and, I suspect that this was also the key to its general popularity too.

How did the battler have such a change of luck in just eleven years, from Daryl's assertion that he reckons his is "the luckiest family in the world" to Kenny's reflection that "I sometimes feel like I'm lucky to have this job"? My paper extends Collins' discussion of the evolution of the Aussie battler, and examines changes that have taken place in that figure from Daryl Kerrigan to Kenny Smyth. The period between the releases of these films, 1997 to 2006, almost exactly corresponds with the Coalition Government's Federal rule. My aim for this paper is to address some ways in which audiences of *Kenny* made meaning from that film's representation of the battler.

For a theoretical orientation I turn to the work of German literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss, who proposed that the reader of a text can exist as "an instance of literary history" (Jauss 1975), and that his concept of horizon of expectation be the basis of understanding the meanings that are made from a text. This theory triangulates the author, the text and the audience, highlighting the intertextual associations that are made in order to understand the text.

Texts are meaningful only in critical association – in conjunction, in comparison, in contrast – with other texts, Jauss asserts. These other texts share a set of assumptions, genre conventions, values and beliefs. A text is produced with the author intending specific meanings, but these meanings are changed – and therefore the text is changed – by the audience's interpretation of it, when read or viewed in a particular context that changes according to time and place. The horizons move, and are reconfigured, as the audience experience incorporates new texts and contexts.

With my focus film *Kenny*, these other texts include earlier representations of the battler figure, and also the wider contemporary lives of the films' viewers. Jauss contends that "a work is not an object that stands by itself … it is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers" (1982: p.21). He writes that the "reconstruction of the horizon of expectations enables one to pose questions that the text gave an answer to" (1982: p.28). In my case study, the question I ask is how have the changes in the cinematic figure of the battler been affected by changes in Australian everyday life throughout eleven years.

The Enterprise Culture of Coalition Australia and the Individual

In 2004, John Howard proudly proclaimed that "we've left behind a period of navel-gazing about our national identity". He claimed we were now working toward the goal of becoming an "enterprise culture" (Howard 2004), one of market fundamentalism. Viewers of *Kenny* are reminded of our journey into this enterprise culture when they hear the Bachmann-Turner Overdrive classic song *Takin' Care of Business* that opens and closes the film's soundtrack. And Kenny himself, even as an ordinary plumber, becomes an unwilling delegate for the enterprise culture, when he is sent to a US convention and promotes his work to the world.

I want to delve into the "horizon of expectations" around Kenny, and his audience, in this enterprise culture. One study showed that, in 1995, Australians believed that their unique national characteristics included "a fair go", banding together in times of adversity, generosity, tolerance and larrikinism (cited in Hope 1998: p.25). We can see this in Daryl Kerrigan and his attitude towards his battle for his home. But things have changed since then, and the solo battle of Kenny Smyth to get through his everyday life is now more in tune with the apprehensive national identity shared in the horizon of expectations of many of the film's viewers. There was a general shift away from the group to the individual, from "we" to "me", from the broader interests of society as a whole to the

smaller concerns of the individual. It can be argued that through the Howard rule, Australians were advised, and were content, to settle for a more individualistic view of society, although this is certainly a part of our broader contemporary world: Anthony Giddens writes that "individualism and choice are supposed to stop abruptly at the boundaries of the family and national identity, where tradition must stand intact. But nothing is more dissolving of tradition than the 'permanent revolution' of market forces" (1998: p.15).

There was a general change in film audiences' horizon of expectations, a sense that people steered away from arguing the big points, being more satisfied with trying to get the little things right in their own lives. Some political commentators have argued that the Coalition government was active, and successful, in restricting debate on many issues in the Australian public sphere. Kenny is the perfect example of this: he doesn't complain about much at all. He says that "life is about small victories, the rest is just a distraction", and the Australian Film Commission describes him as "one of the cogs in humanity's machinery" (Australian Film Commission 2006). The film portrays him as one of the little people who concentrate on the day-to-day issues. As Lorraine Mortimer writes, Kenny's fight reminds the national audience of "the fact that we all make worlds for ourselves in the shadow of toxic realities over which we have little control" (1998: p.11). Kenny puts his head down and doesn't argue the big picture, unlike Daryl Kerrigan back in the 1990s, who wasn't scared to take his fight to the highest court in the land, and support his neighbours as well.

National identity is a dynamic and hybrid concept, and the myth of national belonging seemed not to be a collective one any more, as Howard looked to build a climate where "individuals can strive and achieve" (Howard 2001) – as individuals, not as part of a family or a union, certainly not as a member of a class. His model of conservative individualism was a concept of achievement that renounced shared notions. Deborah Brennan argues that the Coalition Government was preoccupied with "re-constituting

citizens as consumers whose primary interests are personal and private…government is reinvented but citizenship, together with policies that bind us together in common cause with one another, is circumvented" (1996: p.15). The enterprise culture may have brought us unprecedented access to global markets, but an upshot was to adjust our national identify: Greenfield and Williams claim that "Howardism has elbowed class off the rhetorical and policy horizon, and out of the permitted ways of imagining the nation" (2003: p.288).

Compared to earlier battlers who had the strength of their family behind them – the Rudd clan behind Dad Rudd's fights, Bazza McKenzie's visit to the UK with his auntie Edna, Daryl Kerrigan's fiercely resilient home life, and even Crocodile Dundee's newly found partner supporting him - Kenny is basically a loner. He lives alone, and has to make many decisions on his own: how to keep his son happy whilst he is working, how to convince his father to have an operation, how to get the best out of his trip to the US convention. His life as a worker in Howard's Australia provides fewer opportunities to get together socially: he can't even participate in his brother's birthday party. His on-screen life shows how our communal and social relationships with one another have become more distanced; his family relationships lie chiefly in mobile phone calls. Kenny represents what the new market-driven economic climate turned many of his audience members into – the person who is forced to drop his family and social lives to go back to work for the hourly rate.

And his hourly rate isn't bad. Certainly, at the end of the Howard era, we are a richer nation than before, but we are more time-poor, there's more of a gap between the richest and the poorest of us, and we're working more hours than ever. The trade-offs for the nation's entry into the modern globalised economy are longer working hours and poorer working conditions, and the overt attack on collective working life that WorkChoices created. But what has Kenny's family gained from all of the country's great leaps forward

in the economy, from this new-found economic security? Here's Kenny, as he sums up the effects on him and his family:

> There's not too much I regret about doing this job. I think I've worked a lot of hours, and it's probably aged me a bit. Some of my mates reckon I'm looking a bit worn. Well, I lost my missus; I lost her out of it. Well, I didn't lose her, I know where she is; she just left me. But, it bit me on the arse pretty hard when she was leaving me. You know, it was one tax I didn't expect to pay in this job, and that was losing my missus. But when you spend more time with other people's poo than you do with your own wife, I guess you've got to pay the penalty.

In the face of this unprecedented prosperity, the balance between obligations to work and responsibilities to family is harder than ever, and Kenny is feeling this change acutely. He knows he's not appreciated by the public, who sneer at him and insult him. Still, he is dedicated to his job, despite the long hours and lack of family support (his brother is embarrassed by him, while his father calls him "a glorified turd burglar"). He says, "I don't do it for the glory, I don't do it to impress people – it's a job. It's what I know, it's my trade". He knows, though, that it's the main element identifying him as a person: "I sometimes feel like I'm lucky to have this job". And that's a very different attitude than Daryl Kerrigan had back in 1997 in *The Castle* – he never talked about his work, and when considering his home, and his family life, says that "you can't buy what I've got", and openly values what he has got: he says "I reckon we're the luckiest family in the world!"

This is the most important point of my case study: how *Kenny* can be understood in the context of the work-family balance that's changed so radically during the Howard era. The introduction of WorkChoices deteriorated home life for many families, with Australian workplaces becoming sites of "family-hostile conditions, including job insecurity, casualisation, unsocial working hours and unpredictable schedules" (Charlesworth 2006: p.122). There are no formal workplace relations at Splashdown, it seems, just fair-

weather camaraderie – as Kenny says, “there’s no pecking order in poo”.

The effects of WorkChoices are really seen in the difference between the home lives of our two larrikin heroes. Daryl always had his wife and family to come home to. One son, Dale, proudly tells us that “our family is very close-knit”. Even Mark Vaile, then Deputy Prime Minister, reported that *The Castle* was one of his favourite Australian films because it shows “there is nothing more important than family and that sticking together through the tough times is what will get you through” (Australian Writers’ Guild 2006: p.29). In *The Castle*, the home, and its role as the heart of the family, is central to the narrative. By the time we take a look at Kenny’s life, it’s his workplaces (now not just across Melbourne but across the globe), which pull him apart from his already disjointed family life. The home scenes in Kenny’s story show him just filling in time between shifts, and getting ready for work. There’s even a difference in appreciation of humour – Daryl’s jokes are shared by his family, but Kenny is often just wisecracking to himself, or, deadpan as usual, to the camera.

Although Australia is more prosperous and more connected to the wider world than ever, we are more fearful about our place in the wider world, particularly since 9/11 and with the wars against terror. It’s a commonly identified theme of the modern era, one that is characterised as a time of uncertainty and anxiety, and now part of our horizon of expectations. Tom Allard wrote that “most would agree that Australians are weary of change, uncertain about their future and suffering a growing sense of powerlessness over their lives” (2001: p.34), and that Howard’s culture of fear reinforced an anxiety about the changing world. In 1996, John Howard famously said that “by the Year 2000 I would like to see an Australian nation that feels comfortable and relaxed” (Howard 1996). But this hasn’t been the case, not with Kenny anyway. By dismantling many of the communal aspects of Australian society, Howard has disempowered people by creating anxieties.

Similarly, the idea of the battler has changed over the past twenty years. In the time of Daryl Kerrigan's challenge in the High Court, the battler was a fighter for equality. Even then, however, it was a step away from reality: Stephen Crofts writes that "*The Castle*'s luxuriant "feelgood" address may have been appealing to those in 1997 whose everyday lived experience – of retrenchment, for instance, or the shrivelling of the welfare state – did not quite tally with the 'relaxed and comfortable' Australian infamously promised by the Prime Minister in his 1996 Federal election campaign" (Crofts 2001: p.166). By the end of that period, the battler wasn't a whiner, wasn't on the dole, and wasn't dependent on a larger group or organisation (a family, a union, or a society, or the state). But he wasn't a fighter, either. Both Daryl and Kenny are enthusiastic about life, but Kenny hasn't got Daryl's drive – he turns down the promotion offered to him. Daryl is a working-class man who stands up for his family, defends them and their home, and succeeds in his defence. He actively exercised his rights to protest and to fight. By the time of *Kenny*, the anger of Daryl has been dissipated, as we watch our 21st-century battler being sworn at, abused, criticised, ignored, getting beaten up (in the boxing ring), and set on fire. "This is the life I've got", he says.

Conclusion

Kenny's affability is at the heart of the popularity of his film. Felicity Collins claims him as "the decent everyman" (2007: p.84). The "innocence of insularity" (Collins & Davis 2004: p.118) that Daryl Kerrigan charmed his audiences with has changed the figure of the battler to Kenny as a result of 11 years of change in our lives, and our nation. As Collins noted, *Kenny* "legitimises the delegation of 'Aussie values' to the safe-keeping of an idealized and sentimentalized 'ordinary' Australian – an imaginary but powerful figure of national rhetoric, much beloved in both the Menzies and Howard eras of national politics" (2007: p.90).

It has long been accepted that "the arts industry is crucial to our self image" (Heilbrun & Gray 2001: p.11), and the changes made to our

arts industries have contributed a great deal to the changing nature of our self image as the battler on Australian screens. But it is more about the bigger picture. As Graeme Turner wrote, "something has happened to the way in which the nation is represented in our cinema, and this may be related to the fact that something has happened to the way arguments about the category of the nation are currently framed" (1994/1995: p.33). *Kenny* was a hit with the audience because it recognised the new configuration of lived experience. This reconfiguration of the Aussie battler resonated with its audience, as it reflected our new national identity – individualistic, lonely and apprehensive, but still humorous and with a heart as big as the whole outdoors. Kenny constitutes a filmic fightback, of a tiny, homespun sort, against Howard's hope that we're all "comfortable and relaxed": the film is prefaced by a Stadtler Lewis quote that "None are less visible than those we decide not to see".

Kenny valorises our essential larrikin nature whilst accepting our contemporary fears and regrets. He redefines the national fiction of the battler. With each re-telling of the battler's story on Australian screens, we observe a shift in the public memory of this figure, as it fits the socio-cultural landscape of the day. The Jacobson brothers reconfigured the battler in Howard's citizens' image, a re-imagined working-class bloke.

The figure of the battler has come a long way since *Dad Rudd MP* (1940) and *The Sentimental Bloke*; and certainly he has metamorphosed since Daryl Kerrigan's time at Three Highview Crescent, Coolaroo, or out at the holiday home at Bonnie Doon, just "enjoying the serenity". With the opening of *Kenny* in 2006, audiences understood the film through their understanding of earlier battlers, but more importantly, their present horizon of experience. And their reading of the film was a generally positive one because of this close relationship of the figure of Kenny to ordinary Australians' lives. With Jauss' horizon-of-expectation theory arguing that media expectations shape an audience's

expectations of the world, perhaps *Kenny* was preparing us for a very different future reflected on Australian screens.

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