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# Kenny: the evolution of the battler figure in Howard's Australia

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## ***Kenny*: the evolution of the battler figure in Howard's Australia**

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This article explores ways in which the low-budget mockumentary film *Kenny* (Clayton Jacobson, 2006) evolves the figure of the Australian battler, from its earlier incarnation in *The Castle* (Rob Sitch, 1997). A surprise hit on Australian screens, *Kenny* is the quietly humorous story of a portaloos worker, one of the 'ordinary Australians' that the Howard government claimed it spoke for. But whilst *Kenny* brought some old-fashioned toilet humour to the box office, he was overworked, underappreciated and apprehensive. The article maps the film from the perspective of its Australian audience, to suggest ways in which this comic but uneasy version of the working-class battler responded to socioeconomic change. It scrutinises the circumstances of the film's Australian reception to examine the legacies of an era in which many people became disengaged from politics, the work/family balance seemed harder than ever, and fear was exploited for political advantage. Such an analysis of the representation of the battler figure suggests that both *Kenny* and *The Castle* present an idealisation of the battler figure, but they do so differently in response to their sociocultural milieu.

**Keywords:** *Kenny*; the battler; Australian film; Australian identity; John Howard

The battler has been a popular and enduring character of Australian screen, from the time of *The Sentimental Bloke* (Raymond Longford, 1919). Such cinematic representations have played an important role in situating the battler as a national type. Two contemporary revisionings of the battler can be seen in the low-budget comedies *The Castle* (Rob Sitch, 1997) and *Kenny* (Clayton Jacobson, 2006). In *The Castle*, Melbourne tow truck driver and dedicated family man Darryl Kerrigan finds an inner strength when he fights to save the family home (and others in his street) from compulsory resumption by the neighbouring airport corporation. Nine years later, *Kenny* follows the day-to-day life of divorced father Kenny Smyth, a Melbourne portaloos worker whose employment perpetually clashes with his family life. The history of the battler on Australian screen has been well documented, most recently by Felicity Collins, who points to *Kenny* as a 'conservative recasting' of an 'idealised and sentimentalised "ordinary" Australian'.<sup>1</sup> This article examines the evolution of the battler figure from Darryl Kerrigan to Kenny Smyth, through the period between the release of the two films, 1997 to 2006, which almost exactly corresponds with the period of the Coalition Government's Federal rule (the years are the first full year and the last full year of Coalition rule). It addresses the ways in which audiences of *Kenny* make meaning from that representation of the Aussie battler, drawing some comparisons with *The Castle*. It argues that the creators of *Kenny* created a successful contemporary battler whose values and circumstances resonated with its audience, partly in parallel with shifting sociocultural contexts.

## The Focus Films

Whilst it is not within the scope of this article to provide a detailed textual analysis, some brief production details of the two focus films are necessary. Both *The Castle* and *Kenny* were battlers of films, independently produced without government funding that went on to be critically acclaimed. Both films were also successful at the box office: as of 2007, *The Castle* was the eighteenth most successful Australian film ever, with takings of \$10.3 million, and *Kenny* came in at number twenty-five, with takings of \$7.7 million.<sup>2</sup> *The Castle* was directed by Rob Sitch, and written by Santo Cilauro, Tom Gleisner, Jane Kennedy and Sitch, from Working Dog Films. It was produced quickly, written in two weeks, shot in twelve days and edited in five.<sup>3</sup> Shot on Super16 film it was made for \$700,000 from Working Dog's own funds.<sup>4</sup> Working Dog had a strong track record of successful television programs, including *Frontline* and *The D-Generation*, and for *The Castle* they cast actors better known for their television roles rather than film – Michael Caton and Anne Tenney in particular, along with veteran Charles 'Bud' Tingwell. The film was the most popular Australian release, and thirteenth among all releases, in 1997. It won an Australian Film Institute (AFI) Award for Best Original Screenplay.

Most reviews in Australia were positive, affirming the film's homespun charm, resonant comic appeal, and nostalgic values. One American critic described it as featuring 'characters who have a rock-solid view of the universe and their place in it, and gaze out upon the world from the high vantage point of the home that is their castle'.<sup>5</sup> David Stratton noted that the reworking of the battler figure in Darryl Kerrigan 'seems to have stepped out of one of the venerable "Dad and Dave" comedies that amused Aussie audiences sixty years ago'.<sup>6</sup>

At the heart of *The Castle* is family. One publicity poster carried the caption 'Ordinary family... extraordinary story'.<sup>7</sup> Cilauro described the film as a 'suburban fairy tale'.<sup>8</sup> He said that the filmmakers wanted the film to be simple, to be about home and family, 'as basic as it gets'.<sup>9</sup> In the planning for the film, the members of the Working Dog team realised that there was 'a place to depict a family that is very loving and close ... where so many films tend to focus on what's wrong with the Australian family, we did the opposite'.<sup>10</sup> Much of the inspiration came from the family histories of the writing team: 'the film is a smorgasbord of our best moments with our own families when we were kids'.<sup>11</sup>

*Kenny* was produced through Thunderbox Films, the company set up by director Clayton Jacobson and his brother Shane, who starred. It was shot on digital HD video, over a period of thirty months, and edited on an Apple Mac computer; Australian distributor Madman's Paul Wiegard described it as 'a genuine guerrilla film'.<sup>12</sup> It was funded to about the same level as *The Castle*, primarily by Splashdown, the portaloo company featured in the film; Splashdown's owner Glen Preusker called it 'the first film funded directly by poo money'.<sup>13</sup> Preusker added that he did not do it 'as a moneymaking exercise. I'm passionate about this country and its culture, and about the people it produces –

not the people in the headlines, but the ordinary people who do ordinary things, and do them well, and take pride in it. That's what I did it for'.<sup>14</sup>

Kenny also proved to be popular with Australian audiences. One reviewer dubbed *Kenny* 'the funniest, most genuine and utterly enchanting Australian comedy since *The Castle*'.<sup>15</sup> Amongst its accolades the film was named Australian film of the year at the 2006 Inside Film Awards. In his career-making role as Kenny Smyth, Shane Jacobson won that year's AFI Award for Best Lead Actor, the Film Critics Circle of Australia Award for Best Actor in a Lead Role, and the 2007 Film Ink Magazine Award for Best Newcomer. As with Michael Caton as Darryl in *The Castle*, Shane appears in almost every shot, and his performance carries the film with its old-fashioned, wry humour.

Like *The Castle*, *Kenny* emphasised the importance of family. The character of Kenny was based on an amalgamation of Clayton, two uncles, two cousins who run a composting business, and the real Splashdown portaloos workers.<sup>16</sup> The production of *Kenny* was also a family affair, with director Clayton, his brother, father, nephew, sister-in-law and brother-in-law all landing roles.<sup>17</sup> The makers of *Kenny* believed that much of the film's appeal came from an identification of its audience with its character: 'Kenny is the guy next door. It's all of us, and I think that's why people connect with him so well, because he's all of us. We all know Kenny', noted Shane Jacobson.<sup>18</sup> Clayton was very aware of the film stemming from a battler heritage: 'I would say our most popular comedies are often referred to as Aussie Battler stories ... the underdog is a well championed character in Oz film. Which may or may not stem from a very recent history of convict white settlement. The struggle for personal dignity and self worth is a strong theme in many Oz films'.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Horizon of Expectations**

In order to identify changes in the battler figure from *The Castle* to *Kenny*, I employ the concept of the horizon of expectations, proposed by Jauss. Although this theory was originally intended for literary texts, it is nonetheless applicable to cinema, and can provide a method of analysing *Kenny* to find the heart of its connection with its Australian audience. The horizon of expectations theory turns to the reception of a text, where the reader takes a prominent role in the meaning-making process. This idea derives originally from a Marxist worldview in which the reader of a text is understood to be on the same level as the author. Jauss's concept of *erwartungshorizont*, or horizon of expectation, triangulates the author, the text and the audience, highlighting the intertextual associations that are made in order to understand the text. Jauss explains the importance of the audience in decoding a text:

In the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees.<sup>20</sup>

Jauss argues that texts are not received into a neutral space, and readers' exposure to previous texts, and to their current experiences, influences the

reading of a new text. For example, a viewing of *Kenny* teases out awareness of earlier representations of the battler figure (such as *The Castle*) and also – importantly for this article – experience of life in Australia in 2006. Of the three triangulated sources of meaning-making – the texts, the author, and the audience – my analysis focuses on audience. Jauss writes that the ‘reconstruction of the horizon of expectations [. . .] enables one [. . .] to pose questions that the text gave an answer to’.<sup>21</sup> The question posed here is: how did the changes in the cinematic figure of the battler from 1997 to 2006 respond to changing sociocultural trends and national values?

By examining sociocultural trends in the wider horizon of experiences of the 2006 Australian audience of *Kenny*, in comparison to the 1997 audience of *The Castle*, this article seeks to highlight the changing nature of the battler image. Four aspects of the horizon of experience of *Kenny*’s audience will be examined to discover, as Jauss explains, ‘how the contemporary reader could have viewed and understood the work’.<sup>22</sup> These four features are a retreat into insularity, an individualist push, an increasingly difficult work-life balance, and a generalised apprehension about life.

### **Big picture, little picture**

Between 1997 and 2006, a change occurred in Australians’ horizon of expectations, a sense that people had steered away from arguing the big points, being more satisfied and at ease with trying to get the little things right in their lives; they left the big picture to the politicians.<sup>23</sup> Social researcher Hugh Mackay maintains that during this period, Prime Minister John Howard encouraged Australians to feel relaxed and comfortable ‘by the process of them becoming disenchanted and disengaged from politics. People are no longer engaged in the big issues. It’s really a case of leave it to him [Howard], leave it to the Government’.<sup>24</sup> Many other commentators argue that the Coalition government successfully constrained debate on many issues in the Australian public sphere.<sup>25</sup>

The life of the battler in this changing environment focuses on the day-to-day issues, and not the bigger picture: the uncomplaining, philosophical Kenny Smyth is a model of this. The Australian Film Commission described him as ‘one of the cogs in humanity’s machinery’.<sup>26</sup> Kenny is one of the little people in Australian society who look after the day-to-day issues, and he said himself that ‘life is about small victories, the rest is just a distraction’.<sup>27</sup> He puts his head down and does not argue the big picture, unlike Darryl Kerrigan, who stood up for his rights, and encouraged his neighbours to fight alongside him in the highest court in the land.

### **The rise of individualism**

A second aspect of the changing nature of Australian society concerns a push towards individualism. Don Aitken notes that we ‘have been advised, and are content, to settle for less, for a more individualistic view of society, a vision of the good life that is based on ownership of things, and a confident selfishness that sees other’s misfortunes as probably their own fault ... we have lost a strong

sense about what our country “stands for”, because that is a statement about “us” rather than about “me”’.<sup>28</sup> This is part of the wider contemporary world. According to Anthony Giddens ‘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’.<sup>29</sup> This is not an unexpected consequence of market fundamentalism. In her incisive essay on John Howard’s value system, Judith Brett commented on the individualist ethos that was at the core of his Coalition Party’s policies: ‘Australian Liberals are modern individualists, and they see traditional societies based on ascribed identities and non-negotiable reciprocal obligations as trapping people, preventing them from participating in all that modern Australian life has to offer’.<sup>30</sup> In *The Castle*, Darryl Kerrigan found it natural to expand his battle to include his neighbours. But things changed during the next nine years, and the solo battle of Kenny Smyth to get through his everyday life reflected the experiences of that film’s Australian viewers. This aspect of the new battler reflects 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.

This push to a self-reliant, individualist drive has been powered by Australia’s move into the enterprise culture. In 2004, John Howard claimed that Australians were now working toward the goal of becoming an ‘enterprise culture’, one of market fundamentalism.<sup>31</sup> Viewers of *Kenny* are reminded of their passage into this new way of life when they hear the Bachmann-Turner Overdrive song that opens and closes the film’s soundtrack, ‘Takin’ Care of Business’:

You get up every morning  
 From your alarm clock's warning  
 Take the 8:15 into the city  
 There's a whistle up above  
 And people pushing, people shoving ...  
 And if your train's on time  
 You can get to work by nine  
 And start your slaving job to get your pay.

Kenny’s journey throughout the film is bounded closely by his work. Additionally, he becomes an unwilling global delegate for this enterprise culture, when he is sent to the Texas convention and promotes Splashdown to the world.

National identity is a dynamic and hybrid concept, and increasingly throughout the period of the Howard government, the sanctioned myth of national belonging seemed not to be a collective one any more. Union and class identity was undermined. Howard looked to build a climate where individuals could ‘strive and achieve’.<sup>32</sup> WorkChoices legislation, introduced into the House of Representatives in 2005, and coming into effect in March 2006, posed a direct challenge to older notions of collectivity and operated to centre the entrepreneurial worker at the heart of national identity. Howard’s idea of conservative individualism was a concept of achievement that renounced class or other affiliations. 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'.<sup>33</sup> The reconstruction of the nation in a neoliberalist framework certainly brought Australians unprecedented access to global markets, but another outcome was to modify Australian national identity. This is reflected in Kenny's life, viewed primarily through the lens of work. It is a representation of a WorkChoices-compliant, non-unionised workforce. At Splashdown, although he works with others, Kenny is, in effect, a solo worker, and has to battle through each day on his own.

A collective workforce, or the working class, is not a common way of representing Australian national identity any more – it is increasingly the case that few representations of working-class life of any kind even reach Australian screens in a big way. This phenomenon is not confined to the Howard era: in a study of Australian screen productions of the past twenty-five years, I was unable to locate many dramatic representations featuring collective working life. Exceptions include the feature films *Strikebound* (Richard Lowenstein, 1984) and *Spotswood* (Mark Joffe, 1992), and the television miniseries *Waterfront* (Chris Thomson, 1984) and *The Bastard Boys* (Ray Quint, 2007). It is important to note that many of these are historical productions, not reflecting the time in which they are produced - as was another well-known feature on the same topic, *Sunday Too Far Away* (Ken Hannam, 1975). There are many documentaries covering this topic, particularly produced by or through the union movement, but none that reached a wide audience. It appears that the only way that Australians are provided with dramatic representations of collectively supported workers is through a historical, or documentary, lens. A legacy of the Howard era is that a purchase on an older, outdated manifestation of collective class has been lost. Australians see this in the changing battler figure, as the expanding role of work in Australian lives changes their self-image, and the collective image is decommissioned from the contemporary configuration of national identity, and out of audiences' horizon of experience.

This self-reliance at work is replicated within the family. Compared to the heritage of earlier screen battlers who had the strength of their family support – the Rudds behind Dad Rudd's fights, Barry McKenzie's visit to the UK with his auntie Edna, Darryl Kerrigan's resilient home life, and even *Crocodile Dundee's* new partner supporting him when they travel to the US - 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 the operation, how to get the best out of his trip to the US convention. His family life as a worker in Howard's Australia provides few opportunities to get together socially with people: he finds it hard to get to his brother's birthday party. His life reflects how family relationships have become more distanced – it seems that his connections are mostly in the mobile phone calls with his wife, son and father. He lives in this new horizon of expectations; he represents what the new market-driven economic climate has turned his Australian viewers into – the person who is forced to drop his family and social lives to go back to work for the pay packet.

Money is not the sole motivation. Like many of his Australian viewers, Kenny's work role provides a strong central focus to his social identity. He knows that he is not appreciated by most of his co-workers, and particularly not by the public, who sneer at him and insult him at every opportunity. 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 is the main element identifying him as a person. This is a very different attitude to Darryl Kerrigan's: he never talked about his work, and when considering his home and his family life, boasted that 'you can't buy what I've got': 'I reckon we're the luckiest family in the world'. Whilst Darryl, the 'backbone' of his family, was proud of his loved ones and celebrated their relationships at every opportunity, Kenny uses his occupation, not his dysfunctional family, to define himself.

### **What work/family balance?**

Luck does not enter into Kenny's life as much as Darryl believed in it. It is undeniable that there have been striking improvements in many fiscal areas of the nation. Australia has become a financially richer society than before, but other aspects of Australian life have changed. In 2006, an increasing number of employed Australians were working a longer full-time week than previously<sup>34</sup>, and the proportion of families with young children in which both parents worked increased between 1997 and 2006.<sup>35</sup> A 2007 Melbourne Institute paper revealed that while the distribution of working hours in Australia had become more varied in recent decades, Australians had an above-average share of long-hours workers within the OECD<sup>36</sup>. A declining quality of life has been a result for many Australians, along with the social costs that accompany the blurring of work and personal lives.<sup>37</sup> The trade-off for the nation's entry into the modern globalised economy is longer working hours and poorer working conditions, and the assault on collective working life that WorkChoices created.<sup>38</sup>

What has Kenny's family gained from the new-found economic security? As he says, he is 'lucky to have this job': 'I've got a full-time job, I work six or seven days a week, and I'm pulling in over twelve hundred dollars'. However there are negative 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 the growing prosperity of the nation throughout the Coalition rule, finding a balance between responsibility to work and commitment to family seemed to be increasingly difficult, and Kenny felt this change acutely<sup>39</sup>. The introduction of WorkChoices had a detrimental impact on home life for many



families, with Australian workplaces becoming sites of 'family-hostile conditions, including job insecurity, casualisation, unsocial working hours and unpredictable schedules'.<sup>40</sup> *Kenny* graphically illustrates the growing work/life imbalance of the new industrial era that is common to many contemporary economies. There are no formal workplace relations at *Splashdown*, it seems, just fair-weather camaraderie – as Kenny says, 'we're all shit-kickers; there's no pecking order in poo'.

The work/family juggle is further seen in the difference between the home lives of the two battler heroes. Darryl always had his wife and family to come home to. One of his sons, Dale, proudly tells the audience 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'.<sup>41</sup> 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 is his workplaces (now not just across Melbourne but across the globe), which pull him apart from his already disjointed family life. The comparative scenes in Kenny's story show him merely filling in time between shifts, and getting ready for work. There is even a difference in appreciation of humour - Darryl's jokes are shared with his family, but Kenny is often just wisecracking to himself, or, deadpan as usual, to the camera.

### **The apprehensive battler**

Although Australian society in 2006 was more prosperous and more connected to the wider world than ever, there was another downside to its entry into the global environment. Alongside a political retreat, the reconstitution of citizens as increasingly individualistic, and a growing work/family imbalance, many Australians were more fearful about their place in the wider world, particularly post 9/11 and with the wars against terror. Ghassan Hage writes about a 'culture of insecurity'<sup>42</sup> that has grown at the end of the twentieth century: 'in the era of global capitalism, the successful growth of the economy, the expansion of firms and rising profit margins no longer go hand in hand with the state's commitment to a distribution of hope within society ... hope is not related to an income level'.<sup>43</sup>

Australian society witnessed a particular manifestation of this loss of hope: as the culture became less egalitarian and more unequal, it became more apprehensive. It is a commonly identified theme of the modern era, one that is characterised as a time of uncertainty and anxiety, and now part of Australian audiences' horizon of experience. 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', and that Howard's culture of fear reinforced people's 'wells of anxiety about the changing world'.<sup>44</sup> It was a feature of his political makeup: Judith Brett argues that 'Howard's leadership style is shaped around combat and control. He thrives in a crisis, is quick to point out threats in the environment and to create division between friends and enemies'.<sup>45</sup>

In 1996, John Howard famously said that 'by the Year 2000 I would like to see an Australian nation that feels comfortable and relaxed about three things: I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about their history; I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the present and I'd also like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the future'.<sup>46</sup> The Kerrigan family, as some reviewers have noted, were generally 'comfortable and relaxed' with their lives, before the disruption of the threat to their family home.<sup>47</sup> But this has not been the case at the end of the Howard era. By dismantling many of the communal aspects of Australian society, Howard disempowered people by creating anxieties. He admitted this himself, saying that his job was 'to govern in the interests of the country' even when that involved 'doing things that in the short term are unpopular, or make people nervous'.<sup>48</sup> Mary Kalantzis believes that this has changed us: 'Mr Howard has managed to change our sense of ourselves. He has made us believe ourselves to be smaller and meaner than we are'.<sup>49</sup> Similar perceptions were reported in the media towards the end of the Coalition rule: a Saulwick poll conducted at the tenth anniversary of Howard's election found that fifty per cent of people surveyed believed that Australia had become a meaner society throughout the period, and fifty-five per cent believed that Howard had acted in a way which has led to a more divided Australian community.<sup>50</sup>

In line with this perception, representations of the Australian battler have changed over the past twenty years. In the time of Darryl Kerrigan's challenge in the High Court, the battler was a fighter for equality. He was a working-class man who stood up for his family, defended them and their home from the onslaught of attack, and succeeded in his defence. He actively exercised his rights as a citizen. Both Darryl and Kenny are enthusiastic about life, but Kenny has not got the same level of drive as his precursor. We watch this twenty-first century battler being sworn at, abused, criticised, ignored, getting beaten up (in the boxing ring), and being set on fire. 'This is the life I've got', he says.<sup>51</sup> At the end of the film, he has no fight in him left, other than the reactionary gesture of filling a man's car with excrement: the anger that Darryl drew his strength from has been completely dissipated in Kenny. The figure of the battler has undoubtedly changed since his earlier incarnations.

## Conclusion

*The Castle* and *Kenny* are both films that resonated with their Australian audiences, particularly as latter-day representations of the battler figure. A comparative study reveals the changing nature of this national type. With its genial working-class hero and its non-government funding, *Kenny* represents the 'ordinary Australian' that the Howard Coalition government said it spoke to.<sup>52</sup> As with earlier battlers before him, Kenny's down-to-earth decency is at the heart of his popularity. The 'innocence of insularity'<sup>53</sup> of Darryl Kerrigan has been changed in the new battler Kenny, with nine years of changing sociocultural trends. As Collins noted, *Kenny* 'legitimises the delegation of "Aussie values" to the safe-keeping of an idealised and sentimentalised "ordinary" Australian – an imaginary but powerful figure of national rhetoric, much beloved in both the Menzies and Howard eras of national politics'.<sup>54</sup>

*Kenny* was a hit with the audience partly because of its humour, scatological and otherwise, and partly, I contend, because it registered the new configuration of lived experience, defined by the mood of the emerging enterprise culture and its associated sociocultural trends. This reconfiguration of the national type resonated with its Australian audience, as it represented a parallel revisioning of the battler – isolated, lonely and apprehensive, but honest and warm-hearted. In this respect it is a frank film: it makes no point of hiding the bald facts of the new existence in the modern economy, with all its consequences, including a diminished sense of social citizenship. *Kenny* valorises an essential larrikin nature whilst accepting contemporary fears and regrets, and in doing so, he redefines the national character of the battler. With each re-telling of the battler's story on Australian screens, we can see a change in this figure, as it fits the socio-cultural landscape of the day. The Jacobson brothers (albeit unconsciously) scrutinised, and then reconfigured, the battler in Howard's citizens' image. As Jauss wrote, the 'next work can solve formal and moral problems left behind by the last work, and present new problems in turn'.<sup>55</sup> The Australian audience's reading of *Kenny* as a battler film has been shaped by its horizon of expectation, and the leading man comes to embody a powerful representation of a contemporary national identity, a re-imagined working-class Australian, who can be understood not by a nostalgic – and unrealistic – collective imaging, but by his aloneness and his deadpan humour.

Jauss writes that 'the theory of aesthetics of reception not only allows one to conceive the meaning and form of a literary work in the historical unfolding of its understanding. It also demands that one insert the individual work into its literary series to recognize its historical position and significance in the context of the experience of literature'.<sup>56</sup> With the opening of *Kenny* in 2006, ten years after John Howard came to power, Australian audiences understood the film in the context of their past understanding of battlers, but more importantly, their present horizon of experience, with the development of the narrative of social and economic citizenship. And their reading of the film was a generally positive one because of this close relationship of the figure of *Kenny* to the reality of many Australians' lives, as well as to the long history of the battler on Australian screens.

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- <sup>3</sup> Peter Malone, 'A House is a Castle', *Cinema Papers*, April 1997, no. 115, pp.10-12.
- <sup>4</sup> Stephen Crofts, 'The Castle: 1997's 'Battlers' and the Ir/Relevance of the Aesthetic', in Ian Craven (ed) *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*, Frank Cass Publishers, London, 2001, p.159.
- <sup>5</sup> Roger Ebert, 'The Castle', Review. 4 May, 1999  
<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19990504/REVIEWS/905040301/1023> accessed 5 December 2006.
- <sup>6</sup> David Stratton, 'The Castle'. Review. Variety Review Database. New York: April 1997.
- <sup>7</sup> Poster, *The Castle* Press Kit, Frontline Television Productions and Working Dog/Village Roadshow, Melbourne, 1997.
- <sup>8</sup> cited in Crofts, 'The Castle', p. 168.
- <sup>9</sup> Malone, 'A House is a Castle', p. 11.
- <sup>10</sup> Paul Fischer, 'A Place by the Tarmac: The Castle'. Urban Cinefile.  
<http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/home/view.asp?a=139&s=Features> accessed 9 December 2007,
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- <sup>12</sup> Michaela Boland, 'Nonpro laffer Kenny kills Down Under', *Variety*, 2-8 October 2006, p.12.
- <sup>13</sup> Sasha Molitorisz, 'Lifting the lid', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 2006, p. 5.
- <sup>14</sup> Derek Parker, 'Putting Product in its Place', *Fast Thinking*, no. 6, 2007, p. 4.
- <sup>15</sup> Leigh Paatsch, 'Weekend Movie Guide', *Herald-Sun*, 6 January 2007, p. W14.
- <sup>16</sup> Interview with LAist, 19 July 2007,  
[http://laist.com/2008/07/19/laist\\_interview\\_the\\_jacobson\\_brothe.php](http://laist.com/2008/07/19/laist_interview_the_jacobson_brothe.php) accessed 4 November 2008.
- <sup>17</sup> Interview with Liz Hayes, *Sixty Minutes*, Channel Nine, 15 October 2006.
- <sup>18</sup> Interview with Liz Hayes.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview with LAist.
- <sup>20</sup> Jauss, *Towards an aesthetic of reception*, p. 19.
- <sup>21</sup> Jauss, *Towards an aesthetic of reception*, p. 28.
- <sup>22</sup> Jauss, *Towards an aesthetic of reception*, p. 28.
- <sup>23</sup> This is not a new phenomenon; back in the Menzies era, this was also observed: 'the fact is that the average Australian, having left his interests in the hands of his leaders, does not take a great interest in the way in which they are managed'. Frederick Eggleston, 'The Australian Nation', in George Caiger (ed), *The Australian Way of Life*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1953, p. 12.
- <sup>24</sup> Hugh Mackay, quoted in Michelle Grattan, 'Following Howard's way to victory in war for a nation's soul', *Age*, 21 February 2006, p. 1.
- <sup>25</sup> See Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison (eds.), *Silencing Dissent: How the Australian Government is controlling public opinion and shifting debate*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2007.
- <sup>26</sup> 'Kenny: Synopsis', Australian Films and Awards – Features 2006, AFC,  
[http://www.afc.gov.au/filmsandawards/recentfilms/cannes06/feature\\_178.aspx](http://www.afc.gov.au/filmsandawards/recentfilms/cannes06/feature_178.aspx) accessed 2 February 2008.
- <sup>27</sup> From 'Kenny's book of quotes' accompanying the DVD of the film.
- <sup>28</sup> Don Aitken, 'What was It For?' The Inaugural Don Aitken Lecture, University of Canberra, 25 November 2005, [www.canberra.edu.au/data/assets/file/0010/23689/inauglecture.rtf](http://www.canberra.edu.au/data/assets/file/0010/23689/inauglecture.rtf), accessed 10 February 2008.
- <sup>29</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: the Renewal of Social Democracy*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 15.
- <sup>30</sup> Judith Brett, 'Relaxed and Comfortable: The Liberal Party's Australia', *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 19, 2005, p. 27.
- <sup>31</sup> John Howard, 'Address to the Enterprise Forum Lunch', 8 July 2004,  
<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/10052/20040821-0000/www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech978.html> accessed 18 June 2008.
- <sup>32</sup> John Howard, Speech, ABC Radio 774, 10 May 2001.
- <sup>33</sup> Deborah Brennan, 'Reinventing government', in A. Farrar and J. Inglis (eds), *Keeping it Together: State and Civil Society in Australia*, Pluto, Sydney, 1996, p. 15.

- <sup>34</sup> Average weekly hours for full-time workers increased between 1985 and 2005. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Social Trends 2006*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 2006, p. 127.
- <sup>35</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Social Trends 2007*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 2007, p.34.
- <sup>36</sup> M. Wooden and R. Drago, *The Changing Distribution of Working Hours in Australia*, Working paper no. 19/07, 2007, Melbourne Institute, Melbourne. See also Iain Campbell, *Cross National Comparisons: Work Time Around the World*, ACTU, Melbourne, 2001.
- <sup>37</sup> For more evidence on this, see Professor Barbara Pocock, Director of the Centre for Work + Life at the University of South Australia, in particular, *The Work/Life Collision: what work is doing to Australians and what to do about it*, Federation Press, Annandale, 2003.
- <sup>38</sup> For more evidence on this, see *An Unexpected Tragedy: Evidence for the connection between working hours and family breakdown in Australia*, Relationships Forum Australia, Sydney, 2007.
- <sup>39</sup> For working fathers like Kenny: in 1999, a study of 1,000 Australian fathers showed that 68% felt they did not spend enough time with their children and 53% felt that their job and family lives interfered with each other. Graeme Russell, Lesley Barclay, Gay Edgecombe, Jenny Donovan, George Habib, Helen Callaghan, and Quinn Pawson, *Fitting Fathers into Families: Men and the Fatherhood Role in Contemporary Australia*, Report prepared for the Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra, 1999.
- <sup>40</sup> Sara Charlesworth, 'Work Family Conflict in the Workplace: Manifestations and Disputes', in Barbara Pocock, Chris Provis, and Eileen Willis (eds), *21st Century Work: High Road or Low Road*, Proceedings of the 20th Conference of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand, Volume 1, Adelaide: University of South Australia, 2006, p.122.
- <sup>41</sup> Mark Vaile, quoted in 'At the Movies with John, Kim, Lyn, Bob And...', *Storyline*, Australian Writers' Guild, no. 15, 2006, p. 29.
- <sup>42</sup> Ghassan Hage, 'Values to have and to have not', *Australian*, 27 September 2006, p. 34.
- <sup>43</sup> Ghassan Hage, 'The shrinking society: Ethics and hope in the era of global capitalism', <http://evatt.labor.net.au/publications/papers/5.html> accessed 7 April 2008.
- <sup>44</sup> Tom Allard, 'It may be a misfortune for many, but it's Beazley's chance to show some leadership', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15-16 September 2001, p. 34.
- <sup>45</sup> Judith Brett, 'The Turning Tide', in D. Modjeska (ed), *The Best Australian Essays 2007*, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2007, p. 322.
- <sup>46</sup> John Howard, in an interview with Liz Jackson, *Four Corners*, ABC-TV, 19 February 1996. [www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2004/s1212701.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2004/s1212701.htm) accessed 15 May 2008
- <sup>47</sup> see, for instance, Evan Williams, 'Suburbia in the Front Line.' Review of *The Castle*, *Weekend Australian*, 12 April, 1997, p. 11.
- <sup>48</sup> John Howard, quoted in Mark Metherell, 'They want tax cuts, not reforms – Howard,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10-11 December 2005, p. 9.
- <sup>49</sup> Mary Kalantzis, 'Australia Fair: Realities and Banalities of Nation in the Howard Era', *Overland*, no. 178, 2005, p. 17.
- <sup>50</sup> Michelle Grattan, 'Following Howard's way to victory in war for a nation's soul', *Age*, 21 February 2006, p.1.
- <sup>51</sup> Other people noticed this as well: Glen Preusker, owner of Splashdown and sponsor of *Kenny*, said that 'I hope the guys who do these tough sort of jobs, and someone's got to do it, will actually be thought of in higher esteem' now that the film has been released. Glen Preusker, quoted in Andrew Bolt, 'Why Kenny is just one of us', *Sunday Mail*, 3 September 2006, p. 50.
- <sup>52</sup> For more on this topic, see Nick Dyrenfurth, 'Battlers, Refugees and the Republic: John Howard's Language of Citizenship', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 84, 2005, pp. 183-96.
- <sup>53</sup> Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, *Australian Cinema after Mabo*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 118.
- <sup>54</sup> Collins, *Kenny*, p. 90.
- <sup>55</sup> Jauss, *Towards an aesthetic of reception*, p. 32.
- <sup>56</sup> Jauss, *Towards an aesthetic of reception*, p. 32.