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Tasha: A practice-based problematisation of Australian comedy cinema's representation of gender, family and nationhood

Vanessa Jean Barnett

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This thesis is presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

October 2, 2014

Abstract

Between 2007 and 2012, 140 fictional feature films were financed with the assistance of Australian film funding bodies. Of these 140 films, only 31 featured female protagonists and of these 31 films, only 8 were comedies (see Appendix B). These figures show statistically, *Tasha,* the creative film component of this research project, is not a typical Australian comedy film; it is the story of Tasha, an unemployed girl from Girrawheen in her early twenties, who has lost her sense of identity. As Australian films such as *Little Fish*, *Candy*, *Jedda* and *Muriel's Wedding* would suggest, this is certainly not an uncommon premise in Australian national cinema. However, this is not all there is to know about Tasha; she is preoccupied, not by a love interest or by a drug addiction, but by ninjutsu, and vigilantism. This is where *Tasha* finds its unique approach to Australian cinema's historic treatment of the woman-centred narrative. That said, beneath *Tasha*'s unconventional surface arguably lies a truly Australian comedy film.

The exegesis component of this project re-interprets Bazin's question, "Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?" (What is cinema?), with a theoretical framework inspired by Australian film theorist Tom O'Regan's influential text, *Australian National Cinema*. The exegesis begins by looking at Australian national cinema as a whole, then narrowing the focus to Australian comedy cinema. O'Regan (1996) describes Australian cinema as a national cinema; a cinema that embodies Australian culture, society and history. The focus is on Australian comedy film texts, and their social, political and cultural contexts. *Tasha*, the creative film project, is what O'Regan would term a "problematisation" of Australian comedy cinema.

The key argument of this project is that Australian national comedy films are uniquely Australian, cinematic explorations of individual identity, socio-cultural identity, landscape and family. Australia laughs about what it knows best, these four narrative and aesthetic preoccupations being central to Australian socio-cultural values and attitudes, to understanding the concept of Australianness. Australian comedy cinema is a problematic genre unto itself. The theoretical component of this project is a profile of Australian comedy cinema's homogenised representation of Australianness. *Tasha* is then presented as an alternative. This investigation aims to both improve, and demonstrate an understanding of Australian comedy cinema as a problematisation of gender, culture, landscape, family and identity.

Tasha responds to the research question, "What is Australian comedy cinema?" by revealing that even an Australian action comedy with exciting stunts and fight scenes, is still a story of an individual's sense of identity, family, and place. Such stories are arguably the hallmark of Australian comedy cinema; this carries a uniquely Australian sense of quirkiness. It remains the domain of the underdog: the battlers, larrikins, and of course the ockers. It still carries the same messages; never forget who you are, who your friends and family are, or where you came from. Despite its unconventional narrative, subject matter, soundtrack and aesthetics, *Tasha* proves to be no exception; it is still easily identified as a truly Australian comedy film.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

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Vanessa Jean Barnett

2/10/2014

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First and foremost, I'd like to thank Edith Cowan University for the opportunity to undertake this creative research project with two crazy dreamers as my supervisors. This leads me to acknowledge the patience, guidance, and more-than-occasional amusement provided by them: George Karpathakis and Tanja Visosevic. It has been five years of hard work, shuffling around Lucha Libra paraphernalia to make room for an extra chair, mispronouncing *Taysh*, and indulging one man's undying obsession with weirdly shaped rocks. In between all this, together we have delivered a beautiful baby called *Tasha*, which unlike *Kang* took more than a dodgy kebab to produce. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, via my very tired brain.

I'd also like to acknowledge the participants in this creative research project, in particular the cast and crew of *Tasha*. Special thanks to my production designer Jessica Surendorff, martial arts choreographer Tim Hamilton, and Alex Nell, who played the title role of Tasha. Thank you for your time, hard work and expertise, as without it Tasha would have been a screenplay.

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Finally, I'd like to dedicate this creative research project to my grandparents, Dorothy and Len Barnett. They were cast and crew of my very first film, *Fat Chance* (Barnett, 1995). The director was a bit green ... but they were spectacular.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Australian national cinema speaks. It speaks to, about and on behalf of Australia. It has helped shape Australia's national identity. Acknowledging and critiquing its socio-cultural impact is vital in order to retain a sense of agency over this significant platform of expression. During an episode of the American television series *The Office* (Einhorn, 2007), a character struggling with the Australian accent impersonates an Australian by uttering the phrase "alligators and dingo babies". In this case, American actors present Australianness to an American audience through simplistic references to *Crocodile Dundee* (Faiman, 1986) and *Evil Angels* (Schepisi, 1988). *Crocodile Dundee* may be a fictional comedy, and *Evil Angels* may be based on a very rare, mysterious occurrence, yet these films are used as instant signifiers of Australianness being active points of identification with the Australian national image. In *"Product Recall"*, Australianness is defined through cinematic projection and reception. This American depiction of Australianness has been informed by Australian national cinema's cinematic projections of nationhood.

The influential French film theorist Andre Bazin (1958) famously posed the question, "Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?" (What is cinema?). Australian film theorist Tom O'Regan made reference to Bazin's question when introducing his text *Australian National Cinema*. This text *reinterprets* Andre Bazin's original question, "What is cinema?" in terms of Australian cinema (O'Regan, 1996, p. 1). This creative research project reinterprets Bazin's question and O'Regan's theoretical framework in terms of Australian comedy cinema. O'Regan defines Australian cinema as a national cinema, a cinema that belongs to and represents Australia. "National cinemas involve relations between, on the one hand, the national film texts and the national and international film industries and, on the other hand, their various social, political and cultural contexts" (O'Regan, 1996, p. 1). The focus of inquiry is on Australian national film texts and their social, political and cultural contexts.

Tasha, the film component of this creative research project, tells the story of Tasha Scrimegour, a directionless, jobless, penniless single female in her early twenties with one talent, that being the martial art of ninjutsu. She rebuilds her faded knowledge and passion of ninjutsu to rebuild her life, her family, her landscape, and her sense of identity. *Tasha* discusses identity, landscape, family, and culture, which are narrative and thematic elements that fit within the context of

Australian national cinema. However, *Tasha* explores its subject matter through a character type unfamiliar within the context of Australian national cinema, the female action comedy hero. As a film, *Tasha* carries hallmarks that identify it as Australian, particularly the use of language, and of course what O'Regan (p 195) refers to as "preoccupations". That said, *Tasha* is not what one would expect of an Australian comedy film; it is a problematisation of Australian comedy cinema.

Australian national cinema has a thematic and aesthetic preoccupation with culture, identity, landscape and family. Australian comedy cinema expands upon these preoccupations with an additional focus on individual identity, as well as socio-cultural identity. It commonly achieves this by placing particular emphasis on Australianness, which is defined by a sense of ordinariness, and Anglo-Celtic male predominance. It is defined by its own unique treatment of these preoccupations. Australian humour is a dry humour; self-effacing and acerbic; painfully aware of how Australia as a nation came to be: and how darkly comical the story is. Through comedy cinema, Australians are understood as defiant; proud, yet egalitarian and close to the point of anti-establishment. Australian comedy cinema celebrates the mundane. Australians find humour in the various forms of desolation the local landscape provides. This is nowhere more evident than in Australian comedies set in a suburban landscape; hence such comedies will be a central focus of this creative research project.

The films examined herein place particular emphasis on the importance of family, and the problematic nature of familial relationships. The exploration of culture in Australian comedy cinema ranges from the idea of Australianness, to Australia's desire to distinguish itself culturally from its British origins, and to its rocky transition into multiculturalism. Australian comedy cinema's problematisation of identity is quite complex. All facets of identity; whether it be national, socio-cultural, individual, or gender identity, have been explored throughout Australian comedy cinema history. Where Australian comedy cinema distinguishes itself from Australian national cinema as a whole, is its treatment of gender identity. For this reason, gender is a key area of inquiry of *Tasha* and its accompanying exegesis. Australian comedy cinema's treatment of all four key themes is reflective of a proud nation still negotiating its sense of identity.

This research consists of two key components: a 45 minute feature film, and an accompanying exegesis. Each component is a problematisation of Australian comedy cinema's treatment of

its aforementioned thematic and aesthetic preoccupations. This project will examine a glaring underrepresentation in Australian comedy cinema's century-long history: strong female characters. *Tasha* explores the nature of Australian comedy cinema by incorporating the motifs, characteristics, as well as the thematic and stylistic preoccupations of Australian comedy cinema into a film that was atypical in terms of its content. The film needed to reflect an understanding of Australian comedy cinema, whilst challenging its boundaries and limitations.

The idea for *Tasha* initially came from a most unlikely, and very un-Australian source: a Nintendo DS game, entitled *Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja* (Suzuki, 2007). Brainstorming the title conjured up images of a long-term Newstart customer who happens to be both obsessed with Asian pop culture, and well-versed in the art of ninjutsu. The idea grew further during the research and development of the screenplay. Central themes explored in *Tasha,* identity, culture, family, and landscape, form the content of this exegesis.

The relationship between these two main components was critical in identifying and presenting the research findings. The film is truly a research outcome in and of itself. It is a product of the research presented in this exegesis, yet it is also a cinematic experiment that tests the boundaries, the conventions, and the nature of Australian comedy cinema. It seeks to provide a response to the research question, "What is Australian comedy cinema?" As a cinematic response, *Tasha* demonstrates that an Australian comedy film is extremely distinct; it is different from a British comedy film, or a French comedy film; and this difference is not found in the aesthetics exclusively. *Tasha* may be a martial arts comedy starring a female protagonist, which this project argues is highly unusual for an Australian film. Yet, in many ways *Tasha* is immediately identifiable as an Australian film. This exegesis endeavours to illustrate the reasoning behind this conclusion.

This exegesis is comprised of seven chapters. Following this initial introductory chapter is an overview of the theoretical framework and methodology adhered to during the completion of this creative research project. This chapter discusses the significant research gaps within the scope of inquiry; as this project intends to address these gaps. O'Regan's (1996) was influential in formulating the primary research question, and constructing the theoretical framework of this project. Beneath the deceptively simple question, "'What is Australian comedy cinema?" lies a framework designed to treat the response to this question as a problematisation.

The next chapter, "Constructing Australian National Cinema", explains the methodological approach for answering the question, "What is Australian comedy cinema?" by looking at Australian national cinema as a whole. This chapter asserts that it is defined by its thematic and aesthetic preoccupation with family, landscape, and cultural identity. Therefore, it is comprised of three sections dedicated to each of these preoccupations. The overview of these three preoccupations is facilitated by a detailed examination of three key films, namely Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* (1955), Bruce Beresford's *The Adventures of Barry MacKenzie* (1972), and Rob Sitch's *The Castle* (1997). These films are representative of, not only different eras of Australian cinema history, but also of Australian national history. Each film is a time capsule of Australian socio-cultural values and attitudes. Each film explores landscape, the idea of family, and cultural identity in unique, historically appropriate ways.

The subsequent chapter, "The suburban family in Australian comedy cinema", marks the point in the exegesis where the focus is narrowed specifically to the Australian comedy film. It examines a specific type of Australian comedy film, hallmarked by its exploration of family, landscape, culture and identity. It further explores three key family figures, namely the mother, father, and daughter. These three figures are discussed through an examination of three comedy films: *The Castle* discussed in the previous chapter, along with *Muriel's Wedding* (Hogan, 1994) and *Suburban Mayhem* (Chapman, 2006). The suburban family in Australian comedy cinema details the exploration by each film of family values in a unique way, but from the same ideological standpoint. This chapter finally examines the family structure, dynamics, and gender role expectations imposed upon the mother, daughter, and father figures featured in each film.

The following chapter, titled "Characterising Australian Comedy Cinema", further narrows the focus of discussion to the role of characterisation in constructing Australian national comedy cinema. A section examines character construction, character types and their evolution over the course of Australian national comedy cinema's 100 year-long history. The chapter endeavours to achieve a deep, detailed discussion of the three key areas of inquiry. The first, Australian comedy cinema's construction and negotiation of the national character focuses on three key character types, namely the larrikin, the battler, and the ocker. The key argument of this chapter is that, while each character type marks an evolution of the Australian type as portrayed throughout Australian comedy cinema history, it remains marked by a glaring commonality in the three; all are white, Anglo-Celtic, and male. The final subchapter, "Negative Actions: The Depiction of Female Comic Violence in Australian Comedy Cinema",

acknowledges a distinct absence of Australian action comedies starring female protagonists. It examines examples of female comic violence in a selection of films, discussing the nature of the violence, the motivating factors behind such acts, including the perceptions of this violence by other characters in the narrative, and its presentation to the audience.

The final, key chapter of this exegesis is titled, "*Tasha* as a Problematisation of Australian Comedy Cinema". Its aim is to detail how *Tasha* is both an exploration and a reflection of Australian comedy cinema and its key characteristics. This is achieved by discussing *Tasha* as a contribution to the discourse on Australian comedy cinema. *Tasha* is evaluated as a problematisation of gender, a negotiation of the woman-centred narrative in Australian comedy cinema, a gendered "renegotiation" of the Australian national type, a response to Australian comedy cinema's representation of the suburban family, and as a cinematic negotiation of Australia's cultural identity. The chapter epitomises the third act, wherein the relationship between *Tasha* and theoretical research are revealed and disseminated.

It is important to investigate Australian cinema as a national cinema, because filmmaking has become more globalised in its creation, its production strategies, and its distribution. As technology creates a more fluid production process, cinema becomes more globalised, and the lines that distinguish between national cinemas begin to blur. This process of evolution makes it imperative that Australian cinema's sense of identity be understood and maintained. It is vital that it remains "a conversation with Hollywood and other national cinemas" (O'Regan, 1996), rather than a replication of it. There needs to be a developing knowledge of what differentiates Australian cinema from Hollywood and other national cinemas.

Is it a complicated task to define the identity of Australian national cinema? What makes *Finding Nemo* (Stanton & Unkrich, 2003), a film about a little fish "battler" set on the Great Barrier Reef, less Australian than *Australia* (Luhrmann, 2008), a big-budget, epic wartime romance starring actors that live and work in Hollywood? Is *Australia* Baz Luhrmann's most Australian film? To maintain a solid concept and understanding of Australian national cinema, the question must be asked, "What makes a film truly Australian?" These questions are addressed through this creative research project.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Having a clear definition of the terms Australian, comedy and cinema both independently and as the description of this project's theoretical focus was key to conceptualising the theoretical framework. The *Macquarie Dictionary* ("Australian, a.1," 2006) defines "Australian" as "of or relating to Australia". "Comedy" is defined as "a play, film, etc., of light and humorous character, typically with a happy or cheerful ending; a drama in which the central motive of the play triumphs over circumstances and is therefore successful" ("comedy, n.1," 2006). "Cinema" is described as "the art of making films" ("cinema, n.3," 2006). The theoretical framework of this project focuses on facilitating an open and interdisciplinary approach to the creative research process. The framework features an open approach to theoretical analysis, conducting an examination of various cultural studies such as film theory, genre theory, gender theory, and ideological theory. Doing so has facilitated a multi-faceted approach that allows for "multiple and diverse points of view" (O'Regan, 1996, p. 3).

The key research question is, "What is Australian comedy cinema?" *Tasha* and its accompanying exegesis explore the question of why and how Australian comedy cinema is problematic. This creative research project argues that Australian comedy cinema is a construction and negotiation of an outdated socio-cultural ideological system. This theoretical position stems from the self-reflexive nature of its practice-based research, and its position in the discourse. It explains the decision to centre its theoretical framework on a research problem presented through the following statement of theory: Australian comedy cinema is a problematic construction and negotiation of identity, gender specificity, and socio-cultural values and attitudes.

Academic and qualitative research theorist Robert Gerber (2008) writes that "demarcating the research field into manageable parts by dividing the main problem into sub problems is of the utmost importance" (p. 6). Further the theoretical framework is not based on a question requiring mere acknowledgement, overview, and analysis. It is based around a problem requiring cinematic renegotiation through creative praxis and the investigative address of key questions; those key questions regard the sub-problems that arguably become manifest and exacerbate the problem of Australian comedy cinema's representational gaps. Arkansas State University Professor Daniel Cline ("Logical structure or theoretical framework," 2011) writes,

"No inquirer can investigate a problem from all perspectives simultaneously. And that is what a logical structure or theoretical framework is all about. It establishes a vantage point, a perspective, a set of lenses through which the researcher views the problem."

The theoretical framework of this text focuses primarily on understanding Australian national cinema through its socio-political context, and its representations. It is very difficult to define what makes a film a comedy as humour varies in style according to gender, cultural and socio-economic factors, both in terms of production and reception. Humour as a concept is universal, yet a style of humour can be unique to a national cinema and this is arguably the case for Australian comedy cinema. To truly comprehend the attributes of a qualitative research project in terms of method, the creative and academic disposition of the researcher needs to be clarified. Addressing this question in terms of methodological approach is important, because it would be remiss to not acknowledge the reflexivity of filmmaking, and the inevitable impact such reflexivity will have on the accompanying critical analysis.

The methodology of this creative project and exegesis is based on the "Research-Question" model as defined by Milech and Schilo's *'Exit Jesus': Relating the Exegesis and Creative/Production Components of a Research Thesis*, which expands on the theories of Mann and Fletcher (2003) in their conference paper *Illuminating the exegesis: A discussion of the exegesis component of the creative thesis in Australian research higher degrees*. This model of practice-led research is often used for creative doctoral degrees. According to Milech and Schilo (2004), three key models are applicable to creative research projects: the Context Model, the Commentary Model, and the Research-Question Model. The Research-Question Model allows for a deeper relationship between creative praxis and theory. Milech and Schilo (2004) indicate this model, unlike the Context and Commentary models, encourages, facilitates, and supports the developing and malleable nature of practice-based research:

> … Both the exegetical and the creative component of the research thesis hinges on a research question posed, refined and reposed by the student across the several stages of a research program. Both the written and the creative component of the thesis are conceptualised as independent answers to the same research question - independent because each component of the thesis is conducted though the "language" of a particular discourse, related because each "answers" a single research question.

This creative research project needed essentially a four step process for completion. The first step required the conduct of a literature review, analysing relevant material, identifying

problems and gaps between them. The next step was to research and write the screenplay of the creative film component of this project. This screenplay would employ findings from the research, whilst acting as a means for the conduct of further research in practice. The third stage involved production of the film, which would be a cinematic exploration of Australian comedy cinema, and its problems. *Tasha* aimed to take Australian comedy cinema into unchartered territory, both presenting and challenging its nature, its representational gaps, and its tendencies. The fourth and final stage was to discuss the results of the theoretical and creative research within this creative research project as a whole.

The theoretical framework and methodology of this text is centred on O'Regan's idea of understanding a national cinema by assessing "not only what its preoccupations are, but also establishing what is not, in order to instead define new presences" (1996, p. 201). In this sense, *Tasha* is presented for examination as a *new presence*. Australian national cinema is assessed here in terms of film criticism, cultural studies, genre theory, gender theory, and social theory. If this project were purely theoretical in nature, with no creative project associated, perhaps national cinema would have been assessed in terms of film economics, that is, industry, commercial viability, and audience reception. However, as *Tasha* is not receiving a theatrical release, and had an extremely low budget, it was deemed neither viable nor relevant to assess its production within this context. This project endeavours to perform or to present its contribution in the discourse of Australian comedy cinema through *Tasha*, then reflect on the way it was presented conclusively through creative praxis. *Tasha* is reflexive praxis – a personal response to a specific problematisation of Australian national cinema. It is not purely the result of quantitative data collection, or any other strictly research methodology of inquiry. The film is no doubt an *experiment* in contribution to the nature of a national cinema discourse.

The genre-specific focus on comedy arose because nowhere else is this gender disparity more noticeable. Australia's comedy films become national treasures, their male protagonists become national icons, and their message becomes deeply ingrained in the national consciousness. As a survey by Hayes (2010) has since confirmed, comedy appears to be Australia's favourite film genre. In his chapter "Problematizing Gender", O'Regan (1996) cites a statement made in 1994 by Ann Britton, then secretary of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance: "women stories are not as interesting to the audience" (p. 289). It is not clear exactly what Britton means by "women stories", but given the nature of the majority of women-centred narratives being

either melodramas or romantic comedies with a relationship focus, it is fair to conclude that "women stories" involve a lot of *talking*, and not a lot of *action*.

O'Regan (1996, p. 289) asserts that upon his "cursory inspection of cinema releases", the proportion of women-centred narratives is "much higher than in Hollywood". While female-centred narratives may be present in Australian cinema, they mostly seem to support the hetero-patriarchal ideology of gender-role specificity, which inevitably limits the opportunity of strong, heroic females in the Australian cinema landscape. During the period between June 2008 to June 2011, from a sample of 495 Australian feature films listed on the Internet Movie Database, two Australian films have been released featuring a female action- hero protagonist, namely *1MC: Some Kind of Vengeance* (Park, 2010), and *Tomorrow When the War Began* (Beattie, 2010). Disregarding the fact that both film's characters are either preoccupied with a romantic subplot or overtly fetishized, even still this amounts to less than 0.5% of the films surveyed. As O'Regan has suggested, female-centred narratives in Australian national cinema are primarily focused on relationships, either with family, or a romantic interest. This research intends to problematize this lack of diversity in female characterisation and cinematic representation.

O'Regan (1996, pp. 291-292) argues that "feminist problematisation of cinema operates on four fronts", those being: a desire and intent to create a "women's cinema", a "feminist" contribution to "different pathways of the cinema", a proposed political and industrial feminist intervention in terms of industry practices and policies, and lastly, "a feminist approach to the depiction of social reality". Given that a major percentage of Australian cinema's monolithic "women stories" are being told by female directors, and that 8 of the 11 members of Screen Australia's senior management are women, perhaps it is not female industrial or political representation which is problematic; it is the cinematic representation of female characters. The 495 aforementioned films surveyed showed that Australian women can be many things, but they are rarely, if ever, heroes.

The methodology behind this creative film project and exegesis was designed to cope with certain realities, without being undermined or restricted by them. These realities were largely straightforward, foreseen, and practical in essence, mainly concerning time and budgetary constraints. An effort was made to create and develop a research project design that did not

appear constrained by these factors, but definitely took them into consideration. The research methods employed were primarily qualitative in nature. Both the theoretical and creative components are contributions to the discourse of Australian national cinema from the perspective of a female Australian filmmaker. This position in the discourse is marked by a respect for, and understanding of accomplished national cinema writers, some male: Tom O'Regan, Stephen Crofts, and Garry Gillard, and many female: Felicity Collins, Jane Landman, Susan Dermody, and Elizabeth Jacka. The existing works of these writers have been closely examined, and their findings have been used to inform both this creative project and its accompanying exegesis. Both components effectively comprise a critical analysis of existing, relevant material, a response through creative practice, then ultimately a critical analysis of the creative response. Ultimately, this creative project and exegesis is a negotiation of its research findings.

2.1 EXEGESIS

Defining the concept of the exegesis in the context of a creativity-based research project is a complex task. The exegesis can be defined, according to Mann and Fletcher (2003, p. 17), as a research report that adequately explains the accompanying creative work. It must contain a "research question" or "hypothesis", details of the project's theoretical framework and methodology, a literature review, and a number of chapters intricately detailing research outcomes, as well as "fully cited resources and an extensive bibliography". These authors cite the University of Melbourne's outline of the written exegesis as being a document required to "describe the research process, and elaborate, elucidate and contextualise the work". They finally decide upon the concept of the exegesis as clarified by Deakin University's (2000) "Advice to Examiners of Higher Degrees by Research: Doctor of Philosophy and Master's Degrees in the Visual and Media Arts", as featured in the University's Guide *to Candidature: Higher Degrees by Research 2000*:

> The role of the exegesis is to present the research framework: the key questions, the theories, the disciplinary and wider contexts, of the project. These things are not necessarily evident - to the examiner or viewer - in the creative work itself. The exegesis here serves to flesh these out, to make them explicit.

In the most recently published version of the document, the guide specifies that the exegesis "should convey clearly the description of the project, how it relates to the field as a whole, how

the project was pursued, what techniques were used and how successful they were, and the outcomes of the research (McCarthy, 2009, p. 1)

As a creative research project, *Tasha* could be described as a problematisation. According to *The Macquarie Dictionary* ("problematise, v," 2006), to problematize something is "to expose and analyse problems in something previously assumed to be without problems: "*to problematise the current assumptions*". *Tasha* both examines and problematizes Australian comedy cinema, acknowledging the constructed and negotiated nature of the genre, and offering up a solution through reconstruction and renegotiation. The theoretical framework was designed to reflect a desire to conduct research, which leads not to just conclusions, but possible solutions. This framework has been informed by O'Regan's (1996) understanding of national cinema analyses. He comments:

> All national cinema analyses situate the cinema simultaneously as a natural object in the film world (its production and industrial context), as a social object connecting and relating people to each other (its social and political context), and discursively through language, genre and knowledges (its representations). (p. 2)

While the films discussed in this exegesis are detailed in terms of their production, industrial, social and political context, there is an emphasis on "representations". Discussing *Tasha* in a political or industrial context is not an area of concentration, as *Tasha* was never intended for theatrical release, and it was technically not a product of Australian government film funding bodies. In his text *Australian National Cinema*, O'Regan writes about analysis of Australia's national cinema in terms of its formations of value, and its manner of making meaning. Viewing Australian national cinema in this way will uncover a consistent effort to promote a national image that is primarily Anglo-Celtic, male, and working class. Adopting this manner of considering it will also reveal its preoccupation with family, landscape, gender, and nationhood.

In his *Text* article "The Creative Writing Kaleidoscope", Greg Nash (2011) asserts that, "Like all other academic disciplines, we have to develop a theoretical framework by identifying and isolating commonalities that all researchers in the discipline can utilise". Nash also echoes Michel Foucault's research philosophy of adopting an "open" approach to analysis. He believes creative research projects to "require eclectic analysis and will not fit into a single disciplinary theoretical framework, but rather moves between, or at least borrows from a number of

disciplines". As Nash's field of interest is Creative Writing, it seems appropriate that his theories on research design certainly apply to the framework for this project.

This exegesis examines the work of a number of prominent Australian national cinema theorists, such as Ina Bertrand, David Callahan, Felicity Collins, Jane Landman, Geoff Mayer, Brian McFarlane, and William Routt, but seminal theorist O'Regan has largely informed the theoretical approach herewith. The theoretical approach he applies is effectively the primary lens through which this creative research project views the problem. O'Regan (1996, p. 1) contends that "Australian cinema is a collection of films and production strategies". He also declares it an "industrial reality", with commercial potential. By nature, Australian cinema is not conceived in an industrial landscape, its films are often borne out of a government-funded budgets. Australian films regularly feature deep thematic content that frequently comments on Australia's sense of nationhood; therefore it is little wonder that O'Regan describes Australian national cinema as "a critical category to be explored" (p. 1). He declares, "The national cinema writer must take on multiple and diverse points of view, and that examining national cinemas demands hybrid analytical strategies" (p. 3). O'Regan in this instance is referring to the need to combine the examination of "policy studies, economic analysis, and textual analysis", a successful examination of national cinema can also mean a hybridisation of different theoretical approaches. As a response, this project combines an examination of various branches of cultural study, including film theory, genre theory, gender theory, ideological theory and social theory.

In his influential text *L'Archéologie du Savoir*, social theorist and philosopher Michel Foucault (1969) argues for an open, pragmatic analytical framework which allows for a multidisciplinary approach to analysis. Foucault (1969) argues this form of analysis:

> Does not replace a logical analysis of propositions, a grammatical analysis of sentences, a psychological or contextual analysis of formulations; it is another way of attacking verbal performances, of dissociating their complexity, of isolating the terms that are entangled in its web, and of locating the various regularities that they obey. (p. 121)

Rather than simply evaluating Australian cinema, O'Regan (1996) looks at how Australian cinema functions as "a vehicle for problem solving", and examines how "knowledge, objects and people brought together in Australian cinema" (p. 5). He addresses the problematic nature of Australian national cinema, areas requiring renegotiation and change. In "Constructing Australian National Cinema", it is presented as a construction, both informed by, and an

informant of Australia's social, cultural, and political sense of identity. This construction is presented as problematic, reflecting O'Regan's approach to problematizing Australian cinema, which focuses on three key areas: problematizing the social, problematizing gender, and problematizing nationhood. These three areas of focus have informed the approach to the remainder of this exegesis, centring on a genre-specific analysis of Australian comedy cinema in terms of its treatment of family, gender and nationhood. In line with the theoretical framework employed by O'Regan (p. 9), the exegesis component of this research concludes with a "self-reflexive examination of my own practice of problematizing Australian cinema"

Tasha and its accompanying exegesis are also a "problematisation of nationhood" (O'Regan, 1996, p. 304). When introducing "problematizing nationhood", O'Regan (1996) asserts that "feminist groups call for national redefinitions incorporating women into the national symbols and myths" (p. 304). *Tasha* is a response to this call. He examines four separate "problematisations" of nationhood: Australia as a "European derived society", a "diasporic society", a "new world society", and a "multicultural society" (p. 305). The primary aim of this exegesis' discussion of nationhood is to address the impact of socio-cultural representation on national image and identity. It will endeavour to problematise the tendency to define Australia as a nation through its cinematic representation. O'Regan (1996, p. 304) writes that "audiences and critics recognise themselves in films and project their society with its own directions and logics". This exegesis will "problematize nationhood" by addressing Australia as a multicultural, *heteropatriarchal* society, based on the theory that Australia's socio-cultural subscription and perpetuation of heteropatriarchal ideologies seem to have survived existing cinematic problematisations of nationhood. Jupp (cited in O'Regan, 1996, p. 305) asserts that "no claim for Australia as a multicultural society can avoid the continuing and dominant Anglo-Celtic, European and English-speaking character of Australian society which will continue into the foreseeable future". He argues this character type is still perpetuated as Australia's national image though Australian comedy cinema, and also remains predominantly male.

A strong focal point of this exegesis is on what O'Regan (1996) terms "gender problematisation. The theoretical component of this project seeks to further O'Regan's problematisation through creative praxis and textual analysis. O'Regan (1996, p. 288) claims, "Women have always been shown in Australian cinema, yet they do not participate to the same extent as men do in creative, technical and administrative positions". This exegesis argues that, while the level of female participation in Australian cinema has changed significantly since

1996, female gender representation has not. Herein lies the problem, and the cause behind the genesis of *Tasha*.

Tasha explores the idea of a female action comedy hero, not by over-intellectualising or politicising the absence of such character types in Australian national cinema, but by naturalising this character type in a film that otherwise reflects the core characteristics of Australian comedy cinema. Cinematic naturalism is defined by theorist Adrian Martin (cited in O'Regan, 1996, p. 202) as being "true to the actual". Meanwhile, O'Regan (1996) claims "naturalism as an ideological strategy attaches film-making to social, political and cultural orders. To be successful, Australian film-making needs to inhere in these orders to some extent". Examining the subject matter within a socio-cultural, psychological and historical context has been conducted in a way that could be applicable to a number of disciplines outside of film and cinema studies. In other words, the theoretical component of this project takes an open, interdisciplinary approach to its area of inquiry. The exegesis features various branches of film analysis: narrative analysis, character analysis, and visual analysis, together with select forms of theoretical critique. It is an in-depth critique of Australian cinema's treatment of socio-cultural cleavages, with a primary focus on gender and cultural identity. Problematisation was frequently the mode of theoretical inquiry for this exegesis. *Tasha* is subsequently presented as a creative work that demonstrates an understanding of Australian national cinema, while highlighting and questioning its representational gaps.

Throughout, the research question has remained concerned with generating a better understanding of the nature and socio-cultural impact of Australian comedy cinema. However, as the process of research and development progressed, the question itself evolved in terms of detail and focus. In order to understand fully the nature and socio-cultural importance of such character types, there was a need to examine them in the broad context of a *national* cinema, before focusing them in terms of a *comedy* cinema. These character types existed *outside* the genre of Australian comedy cinema, and as such they must be examined accordingly. As a result, in the words of Milech and Schilo (2004), the research question was "posed, refined and reposed" throughout the course of completing this research project.

Problems or questions were identified by research, then provided a response through creative practice. Although *Tasha* is a carefully considered, intricately designed creative response to problems identified after a long period of research, it remains, to all intents and purposes, an

experiment, an imperfect film with flaws and weaknesses, and a product of collaboration. The Research-Question model was deemed ideal for this project as it allowed for a deep relationship between the theoretical and practical research components. The creative component of this project is a performance of politics, and engages in a dialogue between practice and theory. Like Australian comedy cinema, *Tasha* is a construction and negotiation of Australia's national identity. The accompanying exegesis is an examination of the construction and negotiation that arguably defines Australian comedy cinema.

2.2 CREATIVE FILM PROJECT - TASHA

Tasha is all about representation; its importance as a text lies within the central character's construction and purpose. *Tasha* focuses on a "representational gap"; that gap being the female comedy protagonist. This work has remained focused upon the area of characterisation in Australian cinema from the outset. Australian comedy cinema remains a construction rather than a representation of nationhood. The constructed nature of Australia's cinematic identity is problematic; it is why Australia's national image is largely Anglo-Celtic, male and working class, and the reason for there being a notable lack of female protagonists in Australian comedy cinema. Comedy is a classist genre, largely produced to protect, and appeal to traditional, patriarchal values; its depiction of family, the suburban family in particular, enables this continuous reinforcement of conservative, restrictive ideology. Historically, Australian comedy cinema has been largely created and presented by Anglo-Celtic men both behind and in front of the camera. It is a genre where race and culture is a point of difference, and always a point of comedy. Therefore, *Tasha* will stand out as a rather unusual Australian comedy film; it questions this representational gap in Australian national cinema through both theoretical and creative problematisation.

O'Regan's chapter "Problematizing the Social" influenced the nature and approach of this creative research project. O'Regan (1996, p. 10) avers, "Australian cinema serves as a vehicle of popular socialisation and as a forum for telling uncomfortable truths about its society", and Australian film is an "object of knowledge" that negotiates "cleavages of ethnicity, gender, race, class and nationhood". *Tasha* is not only a cinematic examination of family, gender, class, and nationhood; it comments upon Australian comedy cinema's negotiation of these cleavages. O'Regan (1996, p. 261) theorises that "film-making is a prime domain in which changing socio-

cultural problematisations occur". The film is a performance of politics, a self-reflexive approach to theory in practice, and practice in theory.

Tasha problematizes the national image by juxtaposing it against a representational gap, the female action comedy hero. When introducing "Problematizing the Social", O'Regan (1996, p. 261) discusses the film *The Adventures of Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert* as an Australia-specific social text. The production's efficacy as a social text relies on "national-cultural-social specificities". Much like the above film, the value of *Tasha* as a social text relies upon its focus on gaps in Australia's cinema landscape. Both films enhance their socio-cultural critique through juxtaposition against pre-existing, pre-dominantly male national types. Both films are, in O'Regan's terminology (p. 261), "vehicles for social problematisation"

To show and explain effectively how *Tasha* is a problematisation of representations in Australian comedy cinema, a theoretical focus on characterisation was required. *Tasha* may appear unusual to an audience, because it will be presented as an Australian comedy film; but it aims to subvert expectations, whilst endeavouring to achieve a level of entertainment value and mainstream appeal. The representation of socio-cultural cleavages in Australian comedy cinema impacts on Australian national identity. *Tasha* endeavours to negotiate mass appeal with a cinematic problematisation of Australian-specific socio-cultural issues. This negotiation is arguably facilitated by comedy, Australian cinema's unique brand of comedy allowing filmmakers to explore ideas without excessive intellectualisation or politicisation.

A large number of mainstream films support patriarchal ideology, but this fact should not dictate that a female making a mainstream film automatically constitutes "adhering to dominant patriarchal ideology" (Sexton-Finck, 2009, p. 31). *Tasha* is a mainstream film facing the realities of an independent budget; therefore it is arguably the epitome of female agency. Through being a mainstream action comedy film, *Tasha* problematizes the "relationship focus" that O'Regan (1996, p. 201) claims is a dominant feature of the "woman–centred narrative". He argues that a major problem facing Australian national cinema is over-representation of the stereotypic "Anglo-Celtic, masculine, heterosexual, and metropolitan"; thus this problem leads to the problem of "sameness". In the realm of Australian comedy cinema, it is not the over-representation, but the celebration of positive Anglo-Celtic, masculine, heterosexual figures that have been systematically politicised through the efforts of government film funding bodies to improve diversity in Australian filmmaking over the past two decades.

"Screen Australia's development and production slates include diverse projects" is listing the "desired result" in their *Strategic Plan 2012-2015* (Screen Australia, 2012). Government-ordered strategies to counter this over-representation has delivered a national film culture and industry that has effectively alienated itself from a nation which arguably still views the national image as Anglo-Celtic, masculine, and heterosexual. In turn, this has led to the rejection of the other, as their increased representation is perceived as politically motivated, and unfairly prescribed. *Tasha* is a highly unconventional argument that Australia can see itself in characters that do not represent the national image, as long as they aren't automatically assigned with a socio-political narrative and thematic preoccupation. This creative research project argues that comedy is a great facilitator for this socio-cultural cinematic negotiation; Tasha (Alex Nell) can be a hero, just as good, loved and admired as any potential male counterpart.

The screenplay for *Tasha* was written after an initial period of research evaluating the Australian comedy cinema in terms of its historical and socio-cultural impact. It has the power to affect social change, and *Tasha* features certain constructive strategies used by filmmakers to achieve this social change through socio-cultural negotiation. Writing and producing *Tasha* was a balancing act between: active problematisation and maintenance of audience alignment; Australian national cinema and Hollywood; defying convention and satisfying the need for the familiar; and the realities of independent film production and dreams of producing a film with mass appeal. The film was the result of a cinematic negotiation in numerous respects.

Though it was construed out of necessity, *Tasha* was produced under circumstances deemed by Blonski, Creed and Friedberg (1987, p. 3) to be characteristic of "women's independent filmmaking". "This was a poor cinema … and its films were short in length". In her chapter "Celluloid Maidens", Jennifer Stott (1987, p. 16) speaks of "celebratory films", which she defines as "films that represent the experiences of women, affirm female experience and explore the self", these being inspired by the "notion that woman is devalued by patriarchal ideology". This project's role is best described by Professor Kirsty Beilharz in her lecture presentation "The exegesis: the role of the exegesis and its relationship to the creative work". Beilharz (2011, p. 5) characterises the creative research project as a '"black box to test an idea". The idea behind this project was that a celebratory film could be produced not necessarily subscribing to representation of the female experience through stark realism and a relationship focus. On the other hand, *Tasha* also offers a new and exciting form of female fantasy.

O'Regan (1996) considers Australian national cinema as a conversation between Australian culture and Hollywood cinema; therefore a novel way to identify Australian national cinema is through its notable representational gaps. *Tasha* is an action comedy because it represents an opportunity to explore a gap in the conversation, offering a positive, rewarding and arguably welcoming performance of politics, instead of an angry, confrontational, cinematic affront. The use of action and comedy allows Tasha's story to be told literally and figuratively; its ideological messages are told through narrative and thematic means rather than lengthy, melodramatic dialogue. Viewing *Tasha* in the context of a PhD creative research component, the film is very much a product of experimental research. Its production is the result of identifying gaps found in the sphere of Australian national cinema and performing according to those identified gaps.

3. CONSTRUCTING AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL CINEMA

For a nation as young as Australia with such controversial beginnings, the national identity is inevitably hastily developed. Australian mythologies and ideologies were cultured and delivered mainly through art, literature, music, and then ultimately cinema. Cinema was the medium best equipped to actualize the most multi-faceted fictional renditions of Australian national culture. Film theorist O'Regan (1996, p. 19) contends the Australian national cinema has encouraged a more concrete national personality, "a sense of citizenship and social identities". Certain cinematic preoccupations have been a strong catalyst for the cultivation of Australianness. Over the last 60 years, Australian cinema's evolving approach to negotiating, and effectively constructing cultural identity, landscape, and family, has been a strong method of constructing nationhood. To understand the changes that have occurred to Australian national cinema's approach to these characteristics over time, this chapter will examine *Jedda* (Chauvel, 1955), the Barry McKenzie films, *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (Beresford, 1972) and *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own* (Beresford, 1974), and *The Castle*.

Australian cinema's negotiation of Australian cultural identity has historically involved addressing three major socio-cultural issues: the assimilation of Indigenous culture; the severance of British socio-cultural ties; and multiculturalism. In *Jedda*, the assimilation of Indigenous culture is symbolically presented, debated, and then ultimately justified by its tragic narrative. The cutting of British ties is a thematic focus of the Barry McKenzie films, which can be read as a cinematic declaration of impending independence from British control. *The Castle* addresses the role of multiculturalism in shaping Australia's socio-cultural identity by immersing the Anglo-Celtic Kerrigan family in a culturally inclusive neighbourhood, then engaging them in a legal battle with the Constitution.

In the last 60 years, Australian cinema's use of landscape, both local and foreign has defined the national image in a number of distinct ways. The sumptuous, indulgent "locationism" of Chauvel's *Jedda* visually introduced Australia's vast, arid landscape to the world. It was also presented to local audiences as a dangerous place, unsafe for civilized people. In the *Barry McKenzie* films, the exotic, densely populated cosmopolitan locales of London and Paris are used to enhance and define the isolated, culturally naïve nature of its central protagonist. These

films also present these locations to local audiences as sunless urban jungles, littered with pompous, cynical, sexually confused undesirables. In 1997, *The Castle* chose the Australian suburban landscape as its primary location, presenting itself as a more honest depiction of the average Australian's surrounds. It used this familiarity to discuss the cultural value of the Australian landscape, achieving this by presenting the Kerrigan family home as a place of which only they understand the true value.

The theme of family and a sense of belonging has historically been a preoccupation of Australian cinema, from Raymond Longford's *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919) and *On Our Selection* (1920), to Rachel Ward's *Beautiful Kate* (2010). Australia's cinematic discussion of family has been directly related to its sense of nationhood and social culture. At the time of its release, *Jedda*'s construction of an assimilated family structure was truly reflective of Australia's social policies of that time. The Barry McKenzie films use familial connection as a device to debate symbolically the relevance of Britishness to Australia's national identity; The Barry McKenzie films also aim to highlight how culturally "unrelated' Australian and Britain had become by the 1970s. *The Castle* presents the viewer with the utopian Australian family, Anglo-Celtic yet culturally inclusive and egalitarian.

3.1 NEGOTIATING CULTURAL IDENTITY

ASSIMILATING INDIGENOUS CULTURE

To plot the ever-evolving discussion of assimilating Indigenous culture in Australian national cinema effectively, films written from a non-Indigenous perspective must be examined. This is partly due to the fact that Indigenous filmmakers have only been producing films in recent decades, but primarily because the focus should be on the attitudes communicated by Australia's ethnic majority. The latter, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics data ("Year Book Australia," 2008), is still Australians of Anglo-Saxon, or Anglo-Celtic descent. In terms of their discussion of assimilating Indigenous culture, the films *Jedda* (Chauvel, 1955), *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (Beresford, 1972), and *The Castle* flagged significant changes in the national attitude towards assimilating Indigenous culture. Out of the three films discussed herein, *Jedda* had the most direct and comprehensive discussion about the issue of assimilation through Anglicisation, and the role it has played in shaping Australia's national culture and identity.

Jedda uses film language to promote the anglicisation of Indigenous Australians. In this film, there is a montage scene where featuring Sarah McMann (Betty Suttor) raising Jedda (Rosalie 'Ngarla' Kunoth) as a "white" girl, clothing her in pretty dresses, teaching her to read and write in English, and bathing her by scrubbing her skin with a white bar of soap. This montage is framed by its cheerful, lilting soundtrack, and the overt expressions of apparent happiness that Sarah and Jedda have found in each other. This scene celebrates Jedda's transition from a naked, unwanted, orphaned Aboriginal, to a happy, anglicised, cherished, immaculately presented "normal" Australian girl who just happens to have dark skin. According to Creed and Hoorn (2001, p. 212), "The Chauvels conceived *Jedda* as a story of '*Pygmalion* in ebony'", referring to the Greek myth which inspired the 1912 George Bernard Shaw play, *Pygmalion*. *Jedda* validates the method and intention of assimilation through anglicisation, with its tragic tale of Jedda's search for her Indigenous identity ending in rape, tribal beating and death.

Jedda communicates the safety of assimilation, and the danger of diversity, featuring a character of multicultural background, namely Joe the half-Afghani, half-Aboriginal stockman. The character of Joe is played by Paul Reynell, a British actor wearing blackface stage make-up. He is rewarded for embracing British, civilised culture by being the only Indigenous central character left alive. The film does beg the question of whether a respect for Indigenous culture should be attempted, but conclusively voices a subliminal message of assimilation and unilateral societal integration. Nearly two decades later, the Barry McKenzie films effectively celebrated the triumph of Anglo-Celtic culture over Indigenous culture. They highlight the effective marginalisation of Indigenous culture by relegating its appearance in the films (ergo its cultural significance) to farcical dream sequences, and casually racist jokes. In 1997, *The Castle* was released, marking a clear redirection of the discourse regarding Indigenous culture, with the Anglo-Celtic Darryl Kerrigan (Michael Caton) loudly declaring, "the country's got to stop stealing other people's land."

Most notable about the discussions of multiculturalism expressed in these three films is that all are at least partially relevant, even today. The desire to anglicise the Indigenous community as seen in *Jedda*, still exists, with Government measures to help the Indigenous community achieve better English literacy and numeracy standards, employment levels, and more civilized housing. However, as it appears in *The Castle*, there is a desire to achieve respect and understanding towards Indigenous culture. Therefore, the marginalisation and racism displayed in the Barry McKenzie films is still present. According to the official ANTaR

(Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation) website ("Racism in Australia facts," 2009), "three out of four Indigenous Australians experience racism in their everyday lives". *Jedda* asks whether it is wise to expect Indigenous Australians to migrate seamlessly from their own ancient culture to a comparatively modern and foreign British culture. The film answers this question unequivocally by awarding the characters seeking to defy Britishness with death.

CUTTING BRITISH TIES

In different ways, the films *Jedda*, *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, and *The Castle* announce a desire for separation from Australia's British background. *Jedda* leans towards British gentility, promoting the anglicisation of Australian national culture, including Indigenous culture; yet simultaneously, Jedda voices a clear desire to explore her "uncivilized" background. The Barry McKenzie films are a declaration of Australianness, and Australia's cultural sovereignty. In them, the British gentility seen in films termed by Dermody and Jacka (1988) as the "AFC genre" is nowhere to be found. In *The Castle*, the central character and the narrative itself questions the Commonwealth Constitution, a strong British legacy. *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* was a cinematic declaration of independence; both Australian and British audiences revelled in its divisiveness.

In 1972, the year *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* was released, Australia had a very different socio-cultural climate. The White Australia policy was still in effect (Windschuttle, 2004), and *God Save the Queen* was still the national anthem, and would continue to be until 1984. The *Australia Act,* which removed all of Britain's legislative power over Australia, wasn't to be passed for another 14 years (Australia, 1986). Britain still had notable socio-cultural and governable control over Australia. *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* was a socio-cultural call to arms, inviting Australians to extricate themselves from a colonialist identity. Dermody and Jacka (1988, p. 87) wrote, "*Bazza* delighted Australians with its anti-Britishness, and the British with its anti-Australianness". In much the same way that his ancestors were relocated, Barry is unceremoniously thrust to the Motherland, armed with little more than a binge-drinking problem and social ignorance.

By positioning the British as a collective antagonist in the narrative, the film plants a firm wedge between Australia and the nation which colonised and claimed it as their own 184 years earlier. Though Barry McKenzie's relatives are in fact British, the film's Anti-Britishness' is, according

to Dermody and Jacka (1988, p. 88), "a repudiation of the old desire to win the mother country's approval". Les Murray (cited in Dermody & Jacka, 1988, p. 88) argues Barry is a message to Britain that all convict descendants have changed is their accent that they were nothing more than the untraveled, culturally barren children of the "poor who got away". During the scene in which Barry (Barry Crocker), restrained by a straightjacket in a British insane asylum, vomits upon the head of British psychiatrist Dr DeLamphrey (Barry Humphries) and triumphantly declares "cop that you Pommy bastards!" The verbal exchange between Barry and the psychiatrist during this scene is a display of comical cultural miscommunication, he misinterpreting Barry's threats to vomit on his office carpet as confessions of a deranged man's sexual attraction to carpet being at the same time amusing and symbolic of Britain's ignorance towards Australian public culture and vernacular in particular.

Jedda, the Barry McKenzie films and *The Castle*, feature cinematic representations of Australia's national attitude towards its British ties. Jedda's rejection of her exclusively Anglicised socio-cultural world is characterised by her desire to go native. She desires to break free, and discover her tragically unfamiliar Indigenous identity. *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* is an anti-intellectualist tirade against British cultural imperialism, an inelegant manifesto of Australia's socio-cultural extrication from Britain. Twenty years on, *The Castle* acknowledges the negative aspects of remaining British ties, namely the Crown's ability to compulsorily acquire residential land. An Anglo-Celtic Australian character such as Darryl Kerrigan would seem to be an odd choice of cinematic spokesman against Constitutional Law. The film is a discussion of Australia's purported egalitarian values, and how they are not suited to a legal framework founded by British Parliament in 1900. Yet, it portrays mixed messages, with Lawrence Hammill (Charles 'Bud' Tingwell), a member of the Queen's Council coming to the Kerrigan's rescue. In their own way, all three films express a national desire to be emancipated from the almost parent-like, authoritative bonds with the British Empire.

MULTICULTURALISM

The issue of multiculturalism features in *Jedda*, *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, and *The Castle*. *Jedda* attempts to be a cinematic study of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, but is at times an almost farcical mockery of Indigenous culture and its customs; it demonstrates a lack of understanding of them. Barry McKenzie was the poster-child of Australia's cultureless

society during the mid-1970s. In 1997, *The Castle* voiced Australia's transition towards a more diverse and culturally inclusive society, but retained the socio-cultural naiveté of the Barry McKenzie films. The natural linking factor for these films is that each of their directors are of a primarily Anglo-Saxon background, even Chauvel, whose French ancestors fled for England in 1605. That said, there is a clear development of cultural understanding displayed by these three films.

Like Barry McKenzie, Darryl Kerrigan is a fictitious, very Anglo-Celtic individual. Both protagonists are character representatives of a homogenous Australia, yet there are notable differences between them. Barry McKenzie is an ocker; jovially racist, and belligerent in his socio-cultural ignorance. *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* is a brutally honest critique of Australian cultural identity; yet its titular character was embraced in Australia as a hilarious, larrikin folk-hero. Unlike Barry, Darryl Kerrigan is presented as a modern, accurate representative of the Australian male, still Anglo-Celtic in origin, but with progressive values and attitudes towards what O'Regan (1996, p. 263) terms Australian socio-cultural "cleavages". In their text *Australian Cinema after Mabo*, authors Felicity Collins and Theresa Davis (2004, p. 119) opine that in *The Castle* "ethnic differences are easily accommodated". Callahan (cited in Rustin, 2001, pp. 104-105), labels central protagonist Darryl "a white natural savage", with a family whose tastes are "associated with dull and pre-multicultural Australia".

There is a strangeness to Darryl Kerrigan's approach to multicultural diversity. During the scene set at his daughter's wedding reception, Darryl concludes his speech full of gently racist Greek jokes by welcoming his new Greek-Australian son-in-law Con Petropoulos to the Kerrigan family, then wishing the guests "kalispera, that's good evening". The facial expressions of Con's parents turn from appearing mildly offended by Darryl's jokes, to warmly appreciative of Darryl's acknowledgement of Con's Greek heritage. There is a larrikinesque quality to Darryl's conduct in this scene; the mild insults are quickly offset by an affectionate multicultural declaration of cultural inclusiveness through basic and mispronounced bilingual communication. Integrating Con into the Kerrigan family is a purposefully designed act of cultural negotiation through cinema. Through this, *The Castle* issues a symbolic invitation for migrant Australians to join Australia's predominantly Anglo-Celtic society.

The character of Farouk represents another of *The Castle*'s cultural negotiations. When meeting with Farouk, Darryl's Lebanese neighbour, who is facing the same compulsory acquisition

order as the Kerrigans, he is determined in his egalitarianism. He at no time comments on Farouk's nationality, leaving it to Farouk to stereotype himself by joking about making terrorist threats towards representatives of Airlink, the fictitious airline attempting to acquire their property compulsorily. While Darryl will not make such jokes himself, he endorses the racial stereotyping by laughing heartily, then responding "yeah, you tell 'em Farouk". Collins and Davis (2004, p. 119) observe, "Farouk enjoys playing with the Arab stereotype, although it's hard to see the same joke being used in an Australian commercial film after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001". By engaging with Farouk's self-mockery, Darryl validates the Arab stereotype which is negotiated by the egalitarian nature of Darryl and Farouk's relationship.

The character of Darryl is a cinematic attempt to negotiate Australia's new cultural identity: a multicultural society with an Anglo-Celtic majority. *The Castle* endorses a policy of integration rather than that of assimilation, a policy strongly discussed and supported in *Jedda*. Like *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, *The Castle* acknowledges socio-cultural differences with racially-charged humour, but champions an egalitarian view of diversity, rather than celebrating cultural divisiveness.

3.2 LANDSCAPE

Landscape has always been a defining feature of Australian national cinema. The Australian desert in particular has been the face of Australia's cinematically represented landscape historically. Filmmakers have capitalised on the Australian landscape's dramatic aesthetic, producing memorable cinematic renderings of places often imagined, but rarely visited. Its vastness, mystery and danger feed the mythology which strengthens the unique iconic status of the Australian landscape. Its depiction of landscape has always been connected to the national subconscious. O'Regan (1996) contends that in Australian cinema "a sense of youth and beginning anew is paradoxically associated with an ancient landscape" (p. 209). The Australian landscape is problematic, being a place of struggle, harsh beauty, and undeniable, inconvenient sacredness. Therefore it is unsurprising that Australian national cinema's depiction of the local landscape has also been problematic in nature.

Films such as *Jedda* and *The Castle* feature depictions of the Australian outback and suburban landscape respectively, but these share a surprising number of commonalities. Both *Jedda* and *The Castle* highlight the unique and dangerous nature of the Australian landscape. Both films negotiate its sacredness and cultural value, acknowledging the problematic nature of Australia's

colonial history. Between the release of *Jedda* and *The Castle* came *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, a film which transports its very Australian, central character into the unfamiliar landscape of the Motherland to undertake some "cultural education".

JEDDA'S CINEMATIC DEPICTION OF COLONIALISM & AUSTRALIA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH LANDSCAPE

Tulloch (1981, p. 209), author of *Legends on the screen : the Australian narrative cinema, 1919-1929*, conveys the essence of Australian cinema typically as relating the "drama of man's struggle against nature in the face of great physical and mental hardship, his eventual triumph, and his magnificent reward". In a chapter entitled "Aftershock and the Desert Landscape", Collins and Davis (2004, p. 82) aver that "when characters traverse the outback landscape in an Australian road movie, of which *Jedda* is arguably an unconventional variation the desert is confirmed as a fitting location for the spiritual crises of a secular society suffering the aftershock of modernity and its colonial underpinnings". They discuss the manner in which cinema portrays the European view of the landscape as alienated, which is evident in films such as George Miller's 1987 television movie *Bushfire Moon*, which depicts British high society refusing to adjust their British customs to Australia's harsh climate.

In *Jedda*, Sarah McMann tries to protect Jedda from the harsh arid landscape surrounding her outback station, just as she endeavours to protect her from the Indigenous culture from which she had been removed. Sarah remarks that it is the duty of white Australians to discourage the Indigenous inhabitants of their stations from going "walkabout", as they return dirty with ruined clothes (Chauvel, 1955). The dangerousness of the outback landscape is first voiced by Sarah, then confirmed by the narrative itself. Barbara Creed and Jeanette Hoorn (2001, p. 214) argue that "Jedda's fall over the cliff can be read in several ways – a physical fall, a moral fall, and a falling back into the other, so-called primitive culture – the fall which Sarah McMann so desperately tried to prevent". In *Jedda,* the landscape is a harsh reality to which non-Indigenous Australians have finally begun to adapt, rather than defy. However, the film adheres to the colonial attitudes towards the desert landscape – that it is a barren, merciless entity, meant to be tamed and pastoralized, not to be encountered alone and unprepared. According to *Jedda*, defying this attitude means the landscape will punish those who seek to explore it.

Jedda's representation of the Australian outback landscape is arguably its hallmark. According to *The Age*'s Paul Kalina (2007), an unnamed American journalist allegedly told Chauvel,

"Australia should do something different, something that nobody else has done before. Something that they cannot get the ingredients for outside your country". Kalina claims that Chauvel's response was to bring Australia and its "stone age men" to the world. In his book *Featuring Australia*, Stuart Cunningham (2008) conveys Chauvel's emphasis on what he terms "locationism", which refers to tokenistic, indulgent landscape vistas which, in the case of the buffalo hunt sequence, have no bearing on the film's narrative and are there for purely visual spectacle. The Australian landscape often entices directors to engage in locationism, Australian examples include *The Man from Snowy River*, and *Australia*. Like these films, *Jedda* presents the Australian landscape as an endless, sweeping natural wonder that is a sight to behold, feared and to be tamed rather than nurtured.

FOREIGN LANDSCAPE IN AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL CINEMA

Australian national cinema's use of landscape in the construction of Australia's national cultural identity occurs at both a local and international levels. At times, landscape is a film's most defining feature, as it is in *Jedda*, but on other occasions, national identity is shaped by the response of an Australian cinematic character to foreign landscapes. *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* and its title character is arguably one such example. O'Regan (1996, p. 250) terms a character such as McKenzie the "innocent abroad", a plot device which by nature "others" the Australian. The film highlights the colourful, starkly unique nature of Australian culture by positioning the colourful Barry in the crowded, cold and darkly dull London landscape, plotting the culture shock that unfolds.

Barry's relationship with the London landscape reveals Australia's national subconscious, commenting, either directly or indirectly, on the national image. This is an Australian filmmaking tradition also seen in films set within the local landscape. The infamous scene in which Barry is swindled by a London taxi driver into taking the scenic Stonehenge route from Heathrow Airport to Central London, makes light of Barry's geographical naiveté, and his overly trusting personality, which is exploited by the cynical taxi driver. The foreign locales of the Barry McKenzie films draw attention to Barry's lack of sophistication, culture, and global awareness. The confusion he displays when encountering the exotic highlights the socio-cultural isolation experienced by colonial Australians up until the 1970s.

FINDING AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE SUBURBAN TUNDRA: THE SUBURBAN LANDSCAPE IN MODERN AUSTRALIAN CINEMA

In the introduction to his book *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*, Craven (2001) discusses the international-to-local shift that occurred in Australian national cinema during the early 1990s. According to Craven (2001, p. 8), "a recognition of the local, and an emphasis on the specifically suburban version of the local in which so many Australian cinema-goers actually live out their lives, helped Australian movie-makers to reconnect with the domestic audience of the 1990s". He states further that "the invocation of suburbia, often seems to have touched upon a sense of national authenticity which had functioned as something of a Holy Grail for the 'official' cinema of the 1970s". According to this analogy, any narrative belonging within the suburban landscape is characterised by ordinariness, realism, and a narrative focus on characters that an audience relates to, rather than aspires to be.

Catherine Simpson (1999, p. 24) author of the *Metro Magazine* article "Suburban Subversions: Women's Negotiation of Suburban Space in Australian Cinema", believes that representation of the outback landscape, as seen in films such as *Jedda,* has been historically an act of "masculine topographies and narrative preoccupations". Simpson also asserts that in the context of Australian cinema, the outback is the domain of men, and suburbia is a female landscape. She rationalises this theory by quoting statistical data which concludes women "spend far more time in suburbia and invest more labour in its upkeep" (p. 24). This theory is supported by *The Castle*, which limits the achievements of Mrs Kerrigan (Anne Tenney) to the domestic space. John Hartley (cited in Simpson, 1999, p. 24) claims suburbia to be known for its "social sterility", and its "aesthetic emptiness". Gary Cross (cited in Simpson, 1999, p. 24) indicates suburbia to be recognised by many as reflective of the "contradictory aesthetic and moral value of residents torn between rural and urban life" (p. 24). Classed as visually bland with no real distinguishing landmarks, the landscape is rarely seen as a focus of films set in the suburban milieu; the spotlight is fixed mainly on character, narrative and visual style.

The Castle signalled a turning point in the manner in which the Australian landscape was cinematically presented. It stands apart from *Jedda* and *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* depicting a suburban, Anglo-Celtic family with a deep, almost spiritual connection to their beloved quarter-acre block. According to David Callahan (2001, p. 106), author of "His Natural Whiteness: Modes of Ethnic Presence and Absence in Australian Film", the discussion of

dispossession in *The Castle* seeks a spiritual alliance with Indigenous Australia, inviting colonial Australians to finally understand the true value of the Australian landscape, an example being the scene in which Darryl proudly gives a property valuer a grand tour of his home. The pride in Darryl's voice and his demeanour when discussing his property is juxtaposed with the unimpressed bemusement of the property valuer, indicating these men to have clearly different concepts of what determines the value of Darryl's suburban "castle". Despite his airport-adjacent, contaminated home being obviously undesirable and even dangerous, the Kerrigans fight to stay within their meagre, non-descript plot within the suburban tundra. This is a battle fought against a government agency intent on compulsory acquisition, the ultimate act of colonialism. The film expresses the opinion that, not only do Australians share a similar affinity with their landscape, but they also should begin to question the relevance of colonialist attitudes towards landscape.

For filmmakers attached to the traditional Australian approach of historical accuracy, realism, and authenticity, the suburban landscape may be too unstructured, or as Ian Craven (cited in Simpson, 1999, p. 25) notes, "less readily constructed as fixed and finished." The potential exists for filmmakers to use the nondescript nature of the suburban landscape to their advantage by adopting a more fantastical approach. Such films are often set in a bizarre, imaginary suburb, often centring on female characters. From *Sweetie* to *Suburban Mayhem*, suburbia has mainly been a woman's world, "bizarre mysterious and even threatening" (Simpson, 1999, p. 25). These films strongly contrast with the more masculine approach of *The Castle*, which renders the suburban landscape with a comforting blandness, full of rissoles, ill-conceived home improvements, and mismatching furniture. Simpson (1999, p. 24) argues that the suburban landscape has been deemed "an unworthy subject for artistic/cultural attention" (p. 24). There could also be a connection between the artistic "unworthiness" of the suburban landscape, and its gender personification. Simpson (1999) further questions the validity of this attitude, contending the suburban landscape to be ideologically, thematically, even visually pliable, and "far from aesthetically empty" (p. 25).

Turnbull (2008, p. 19) describes the bush as being the most predominant locale of choice in Australian cultural history as being a "dysmorphia of the social imaginary because the reality was, and is, that most Australians choose to live in suburbia". Smith (cited in Turnbull, 2008, p. 19) observed that "most Australians, including Australian artists, are born and reared in the suburbs. The suburb is their environmental reality which few, if any, have chosen to describe".

Simpson (1999, p. 24) asserts that suburbia has been historically avoided as the location for Australian film productions as the film would be less likely taken seriously and viewed as prestigious by the local and international film community. However, since the publication of Simpson's article, there has since been a shift in the attitude towards suburban-based Australian film productions, including David Michod's critically acclaimed *Animal Kingdom* (2010).

In more recent years, Australian filmmakers have increasingly opted to set their productions within the Australian suburban tundra. As the majority of Australians reside in suburban areas, it would seem such films to be better positioned to present Australia's national identity. Australian cinematic depiction of the suburban landscape has been historically varied, ranging from the glittery suburban surrealism of *Muriel's Wedding* and *Strictly Ballroom* (Luhrmann, 1992), to the grungy desolation of *Idiot Box* (Caesar, 1996), *Metal Skin* (Wright, 1994), and *The Boys* (Woods, 1998). Clear evidence exists that contemporary Australian national cinema is choosing suburbia over other landscapes as appropriate to tell Australian stories. Suburbia is presented in a number of ways: a suffocating, uninspired tundra; a warm, safe, familiar sanctuary; and sometimes even a fantastical, glittery place where women run wild. Australian national identity is now formed through Australian national cinema's depiction of the suburban landscape, as it allows filmmakers to express attitudes towards Australia's most commonly inhabited space, the landscape with which local audiences are most familiar.

3.3 FAMILY

THE ASSIMILATED FAMILY – *JEDDA*

From the opening scene of *Jedda*, it is apparent family is a thematic focus of the film. Station manager's wife Sarah McMann has lost her baby during childbirth, while her husband was away. A grieving Sarah is then presented with a turna containing a full-blooded Aboriginal baby by one of the "piccaninnies" living at her station. She is informed that the baby's mother died in childbirth and reluctantly accepts the baby girl into her arms, naming her Jedda, and raising her as her own. This was Chauvel's narration of the story, the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children living with white families being tragic orphans rescued from abandonment, raised and treated by their adopted families as their own. *Jedda* was reflective of the assimilative values of its era; it was a statement of Indigenous Australia's struggle to assimilate with the dominant, country-wide Anglo-Celtic culture. Jedda was forced by her adopted mother to choose between

her sense of family home, and culture. She is not entitled to both; she is rejected and punished by Marbuk's tribe for being "of the wrong skin". She failed to truly belong to any possible family structure, because she is unable to completely comply with their respective family values. Tracey Moffatt's *Night Cries* (Jenkins & Karnick, 1995) was an expression in an experimental film response to Chauvel's 1955 epic, Jedda's family life as one of silence, helplessness, cultural isolation and repression.

In the film, Jedda is actively encouraged to partner with Joe, a half-Aboriginal, half-Afghani stockman the McMann's also raised as their own. According to Peter White and Simon Bourke (2001, p. 244), authors of "The Grammar of Cinema: Typography in Australian Films of the 1950s", the character of Joe is "complex and culturally ambiguous … he represents an 'ideal' product of white-black relations". Here Chauvel's familial construction is at its most artificial and culturally insensitive. In *Jedda*, Chauvel negotiates the then uncomfortable, but encouraged process of the Assimilation policy (Neville, 1937). He presents two anglicised Aborigines partnering, instead of a white British man being encouraged to marry an Aboriginal woman, in order to produce lighter skinned children. The message of assimilation is presented in *Jedda* through its discussion of family, the film arguably insinuating that living with McMann as a non-Indigenous woman is the path Jedda should have taken. But she strays from her white family, and is killed at the hands of an Indigenous man. *Jedda*'s narrative suggests it would have been better for Jedda to avoid interaction with Marbuk, and the Aboriginal women on the station.

In *Jedda*, family is artificially assembled and replaced, even cross-culturally. The scene in which Jedda was handed over by one of the Aboriginal women, is dishonest in nature. In reality, if one was to observe the findings of *Bringing Them Home: A report of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their families* (Wilkie, 1997), Jedda would most likely not have been surrendered by the women of her tribe, but taken by force. One of the film's most powerful messages is that to be part of an Australian family, a person must become anglicised. Chauvel endeavoured to present Australia as an exotic cultural melting pot, where white and Indigenous co-exist, neither party engaging in unwelcome interference. According to Karen Fox (2009, pp. 80-81), author of "Rosalie Kunoth-Monks and the making of *Jedda*", Chauvel's wife Elsa tried to conceal how embedded "whiteness" had become within the Indigenous community by giving the lead actors more exotic sounding screen names. Robert Tudawali, who had been living as Bobby Wilson for a number of years, reverted to his

birth name for the film. In the case of Rosalie, she later complained that the name Ngarla was culturally inaccurate and insensitive. Through cinema, *Jedda* aims to project Australia's acknowledgement of Indigenous culture, but it is a false reflection, revealing a lack of understanding.

THE EXTENDED, DYSFUNCTIONAL, ANTIPODAL FAMILY – *THE ADVENTURES OF BARRY MCKENZIE*

The Adventures of Barry McKenzie's examination of family is a cinematic acknowledgement of Australia's isolation, youth, and most importantly, Anglo-Celtic ancestry. The film takes a mocking, satirical approach to Barry's endeavour to reconnect with his extended British family, as well as his English cultural heritage. This sends a clear message that Australia's ancestral link to Britain may be the only connection left intact after decades of socio-cultural isolation. He is only in Britain to collect an inheritance from a relative he never knew, and, as a formality, meets with a very bewildered extended family for the first time. The meeting is painfully awkward, cold and perfunctory. The film announces Australia's emancipation from the values its British relatives uphold: class distinction, British gentility, eloquence, and cultural homogeneity. *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* declares that there is nothing natural about Australia's familial connection to Britain. By presenting Barry's relatives as caricatures, including Monty Python's Peter Cook dressed in drag, this film presents the notion that Australia has maintained a strong British heritage as being absurd.

In his article "*The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*: Comedy, Satire, and Nationhood in 1972", Stephen Crofts (1996, p. 131) describes the film as being marked by defining features of the Oedipus complex, including the "absence of any father figures or authority figures", and Barry's mother's implied concern with the cleanliness of Barry's underwear. He comments on Barry's infantile, regressive behaviour and dysfunctional familial relations, aspects of the film that could be construed as a commentary on Australia's lack of socio-cultural development. Crofts (1996) remarks:

> As a narrative pretext, the film takes the common Australian cultural tour in the mother country: Bazza's father's will stipulates that in this way he is 'to further the cultural and intellectual traditions of the McKenzie dynasty. (p. 135)

Throughout the film Barry sets about defying his father's wishes, refusing to "further the cultural and intellectual traditions" of his family's dynasty (Beresford, 1972). Barry's hedonism,

according to Crofts (1996, p. 135), is not a symbolic defiance of the Father, of the Law, of British colonialism. If his nihilism wasn't symbolic of this, then perhaps it was a message to Australians to let go of British sensibility, and embrace Australianness.

THE "EXTRAORDINARY ORDINARY" FAMILY – *THE CASTLE*

The tagline of *The Castle* reads, "Ordinary family, extraordinary story". Telling a heart-warming, family story that Australians could relate to was a primary objective of Rob Sitch, Tom Gleisner, Jane Kennedy, and Santo Cilauro, *The Castle*'s writing and production team collectively known as Working Dog. As Sitch comes from an Anglo-Saxon background, and Cilauro comes from an Italian migrant family, arguably drawing upon their respective backgrounds was an effective strategy for achieving the cultural inclusiveness to which the film clearly aspires. The extraordinary ordinary was a key phrase used by O'Regan (1996, p. 245) when examining Australian films released during the 1990s. He observes that "many Australian stories focus on people who would be in the periphery". In an interview with *Film Ireland*'s Gretchen Friemann (2001, pp. 32-33), Cilauro reveals that "much of the family dialogue [featured in *The Castle*] was actually based on conversations that Rob [Sitch] had with his father and I had with my father so I'm not surprised that Australians identify with it to the extent that they do". In her erudite article "The Castle, the Garbage Bin and the High Voltage Tower: Home Truths in the Suburban Grotesque", Mortimer (2000, p. 9) concedes: "legions testify that when they saw *The Castle*, they saw themselves, their family, friends or neighbours". . She details her own financially disadvantaged background, openly questioning the motivations of the Working Dog team in creating *The Castle.* She conceded, "When I heard about *The Castle*, about the fight of an ordinary family … I was suspicious". As a result of the team's university education and sketch comedy background, she doubts their ability to construct a realistic story about an ordinary family. However, the Working Dog team was able to construct a realistic story about an "ordinary" family, because the characters are constructed from childhood memories of growing up in 1970s Australia.

The Castle is a markedly enhanced, by its almost mythological presentation of the level of community, and the unity present in modern Australian social culture. Its values and attitudes are clearly inspired by the childhood experiences of the Working Dog team occurring in the 1970s, not in 1997 the year in which the film is set. The clearly constructed nature of *The Castle* reveals itself through Darryl, a man whose 1970s working class values and attitudes are

partnered with a modern socio-cultural awareness, the embrace of his daughter's intercultural marriage, and a desire to understand the plight of Indigenous Australians. He is a man who knows his neighbours, is not suspicious of them, for example, Farouk, the middle-Eastern neighbour who jokingly makes terrorism threats, and is prepared to engage in legal battles on their behalf. He is the neighbourhood protector who, according to Mortimer (2000, p. 10), "does best by his wife, kids, and neighbours". The statistical reality is far different from the neighbourhood picture painted by *The Castle*; which according to 2010 survey conducted by *That's Life* magazine, 60% of Australians do not speak to their neighbours, and almost 40% do not know who their neighbours are (cited in "Most Aussies aren't very good neighbours, survey reveals," 2010). Therefore, "pleasures of recognition" experienced by Australian audiences when watching *The Castle* are clearly nostalgic reminisces of a more communal and neighbourly social culture that no longer exists. Thus it could be asserted *The Castle* is an extraordinary story of an extraordinary family; and it is indeed extraordinary that Darryl is considered an ordinary Dad, Australian, or neighbour at all.

3.4 CONCLUSION

As cinema is largely a fictional medium, it is unsurprising that Australia's cinematically constructed ethos has led to international misconceptions of Australia's landscape, people and culture. National identity is a negotiation and a country's national image is a construction developed through other media interacting with, influencing and reflecting a nation's socio-cultural development. Colonial Australia is young, with a developing sense of cultural uniqueness. Cinema is a youthful art form, Australian national cinema having the same amount of developmental time as other national cinemas. It is, as O'Regan (1996, p. 6) summarises, "a distinct cinema". Therefore it seems fitting that a modern culture should choose to explore and develop its identity through a modern medium such as cinema. Australian film productions are largely produced with governmental assistance, only available to film projects clearly demonstrating cultural merit. Thus filmmakers are given incentive to explore Australia through cinema. They traverse the Australian landscape, presenting interpretations of Australia's culture, its people, and history. In so doing, they are searching for a sense of what truly defines Australia.

4. THE SUBURBAN FAMILY IN AUSTRALIAN COMEDY CINEMA

INTRODUCTION

Muriel's Wedding, *The Castle* and *Suburban Mayhem* will serve as key examples of Australian comedy cinema's depiction of the suburban family. All three films acknowledge Australia's core Anglo-Celtic, patriarchal values, functioning as a unique cinematic response to them. Whether endorsing or questioning the above values, each film constructs a mode of addressing them either through characterization, use of landscape, or thematic and aesthetic preoccupations. The topic of this chapter is discussed through mother, father and daughter figures depicted in the above three key films.

4.1 TRAGIC, ABJECT, PERFECT: MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD AND IDENTITY IN AUSTRALIAN SUBURBAN FAMILY COMEDY

The depiction of mothers and motherhood in Australian national comedy cinema varies in style and approach, but often their narrative journey centres on their marriages or marriage-like relationships, their role as a mother, and their identity as an individual. To examine the nature of such depictions within the realm of Australian comedy cinema, the following will discuss the mother figures in *Muriel's Wedding*, *Suburban Mayhem*, and *The Castle*. They are carefully constructed devices that carry powerful messages concerning marriage, motherhood, and identity.

As the head matriarchal figure of *The Castle*, Sal Kerrigan (Anne Tenney) is the archetypal Australian wife and mother. Sal's compliance with the patriarchal order alternates between being affectionately mocked or fiercely celebrated throughout the course of the film. Sal is the loving, supportive wife of Darryl, and the proud mother of Wayne (Wayne Hope), Steve (Anthony Simcoe), Dale (Stephen Curry) and Tracey (Sophie Lee). This is her identity. Her maternal focus is unhindered by career or other life goals. Her role in the narrative is markedly inconsequential; her decisions and actions do not have any significant impact. The role she plays is juxtaposed against the hardened, career-focussed professional women whose decisions and actions have an exclusively negative impact upon Darryl Kerrigan's quest to retain his family home. Sal is presented as the feminine, maternal ideal, reminiscent of Tenney's role as Molly Jones in *A Country Practice* (Eardley & Matheson, 1999), which brings a nostalgia for traditional, 1950s family values to a contemporary film. *The Castle* was embraced by contemporary Australian audiences as being a warm, authentic portrait of the average Australian family.

In *Suburban Mayhem*, the spectre-like, missing maternal figure Angela (Alison Cox) is idealised by her grotesque daughter Katrina (Emily Barclay), and vilified by everyone else. When a mother figure is absent from a narrative, usually through death or desertion, she is often used or seen as an authority figure, which contrasts with the traditional treatment given to mother figures who are present within a narrative. Absent mothers can be moral police, for example, in *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*; an unconsenting ally in a father figure's quest for control over a devious daughter, as seen in *Muriel's Wedding* after the suicide of mother figure Betty Heslop (Jeannie Drynan); and even held responsible for the failures and shortcomings of the children who revere and emulate her in her absence, as portrayed in *Suburban Mayhem*.

Due to their positioning within the narrative as being generally confined to their homes, mothers are sometimes restricted in their ability to speak for themselves when the narrative leaves the domestic space.

The domestic space is highly symbolic in *Muriel's Wedding*. The family home becomes a psychological prison, where Muriel's mother Betty Heslop's default function is as the forgotten matriarch. Betty is no longer desired by her husband Bill (Bill Hunter), disrespected by her children, and forgotten by herself. Three key scenes in *Muriel's Wedding* wherein Betty takes decisive action are those in which: Muriel writes a blank cheque; Muriel shoplifts footwear at her local supermarket; and Muriel burns the lawn in the backyard. All are attempts to reclaim her sense of self. Betty seeks to restore her identity as an individual, rather than remain the dependent estranged wife. These key moments in the film are deliberate acts committed for individualist reasons, namely for Muriel to experience the thrill of criminal misbehaviour, to facilitate her quest to "be a success"; to allow the pleasure of revelling vicariously in her pleasure at defying at an outraged husband (Hogan, 1994). Unfortunately, Betty's decisive actions result in financial trouble, near-arrest, and ultimately death. Betty presents almost as a cautionary tale against older, unhappily married women taking action to change their lives, as it is far too late for them. Instead, Betty is allowed only to fantasize of a better life.

In her thesis *Screening Mothers: Representations of Motherhood in Australian films from 1900 to 1988*, Caroline Pascoe (1998, p. 5) muses, "The cinema provides a source of information about attitudes towards mothering in Australian society which is not diminished by the fact that mothers are often marginal to the narrative". The mother figures discussed in the following chapter are all arguably marginal to each of their respective narratives; yet they are important modes of expression. They comment uniquely upon Australian socio-cultural values and attitudes towards marriage, motherhood, and gender identity. Cinematic discussion of this nature is often made through the validation, subversion, or reflection of, or upon such values and attitudes.

MARRIAGE

Muriel's Wedding, *The Castle* and *Suburban Mayhem* make very different statements about marriage, marriage in this case referring to Australia's current legal definition of the term. The Australian Attorney General's Department (1961) defines marriage as "the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life." A theoretical consensus exists that *Muriel's Wedding* is a cinematic statement against marriage; a cautionary tale ignored by Muriel for the majority of the film, of the outcome if a female searches for her identity in marriage. Jane Landman (1996), author of "*See the Girl: Watch that Scene*: Fantasy and Desire in *Muriel's Wedding*", asserts that Betty is mentally, spiritually and emotionally absent from her life, due to years of inaction and self-sacrifice. Like Muriel, Betty displays a blind commitment to patriarchal gender roles, despite the misery and disappointment it has awarded her. She is presented as an unfortunate, mistreated, powerless martyr, harbouring a silent rage that explodes violently towards the end of the film. This rage builds as she is denied opportunities to exit her marriage with dignity and pride; she is disallowed any chance to make positive changes in her life. She is instead constrained in the dysfunctional family home, living a life on autopilot. As Landman (1996, p. 111) asserts, fantasy and desire are central themes to *Muriel's Wedding*. Betty has rare moments of decisive action, each of these actions being an irrational statement of her desires that cannot be achieved after spending her life in an unfulfilling marriage in which she has shown control, dignity, and familial attention and respect. They are actions indicative of a once strong, assertive personality now lost after years of marriage. However, as the consequences of her actions suggest, Betty has no hope of being her own hero, or of anyone coming to release her.

Unlike *Muriel's Wedding*, the adherence to patriarchal values is celebrated in *The Castle*, not exclusively through the depiction of Sal Kerrigan, but through its treatment of female characters who live outside the Kerrigan's private, nostalgic universe. Female characters existing outside the domestic space are presented in comparatively negative manners, which further confirms the film's position of exalting women in the domestic space. In *The Castle*, women in powerful, authoritative roles are often presented as unsympathetic, career-focused bureaucrats. Examples of such stereotyping include the council officer (Stephanie Daniel) who interprets the letter informing them of the compulsory acquisition of their home, and the Federal Court Judge (Robyn Nevin) who rules against the Kerrigans. Callahan (2001, p. 105)

argues the juxtaposition of these values against the less admirable values held by those who seek to "compulsorily acquire" the Kerrigan's family home that bolsters the strength of this ideological positioning.

In *Suburban Mayhem*, marriage receives comment mainly through its silence. Unlike *Muriel's Wedding*'s Betty Heslop, the matriarchal figure and central character of the film under discussion, Katrina doesn't really have a physical presence in the narrative. Her mother Angela left the family when she was a child, and the teenage Katrina has already had a daughter out of wedlock. In *Suburban Mayhem*, the absent wife and mother figure Angela is rendered an evil, ghost-like presence. This representation is achieved through various characterisation techniques. Despite her abandoning the family, Katrina's absent mother is only mildly maligned by John Skinner, the "tragic" patriarch of *Suburban Mayhem*. The gentility of John only exacerbates and amplifies the evil antagonism assigned to the female Skinner family members. In absentia, Katrina's mother Angela serves a dual purpose: as the scapegoat for her daughter's failures; and the mythological, powerful idol for Katrina's aspirations. She views her mother's departure from the family as an escape from her father's patriarchal control; however, the film's narrative appears to condemn Angela's decision to leave the family, by asserting that she left for selfish, self-destructive reasons.

As is the case with *Suburban Mayhem*, the key moments in *Muriel's Wedding* when Betty takes action are deliberate attempts at narrative agency. The created outcomes of these decisive actions send a troubling message to any viewer who feels trapped in their own dysfunctional patriarchal marriage. It is too late for somebody like Betty who wants to change a life for the better; her only escape is death. She is marked by her low socio-cultural values outside of marriage, her sexual attractiveness, and youth being deciding factors in this assessment, plus her lack of education and work experience. This message is oddly adhesive to the patriarchal sense of order and value that the film is a statement against. All three films appear ultimately to deliver different key narrative messages on marriage. In the end, Sal, the only one to remain married throughout the narrative, is the only character that achieves a happy ending.

MOTHERHOOD

The following will explore the discussion of motherhood in *Muriel's Wedding*, *The Castle*, and *Suburban Mayhem*; with a particular focus on the matriarch's position and level of agency in the domestic space, the family unit, and the film's narrative. In the case of *Suburban Mayhem*, if a mother figure is absent from the narrative because she has left the domestic space, either through death or desertion, a tendency is for the daughters to maintain a bond with their mothers through emulation, behaving or living their life in a manner of their absent mother would approve. If such emulation does not primarily consist of becoming a responsible wife and mother, the decision to "take after their mother" usually comes at the cost of their relationship with their father. Collins (2003) concurs in that the issue of female authorship in the patriarchal world of cinema "has much to do with the absent mother and women's conditional access to sexuality and culture – an access which is licensed at the cost of becoming their father's daughter". In her article "Missing Mothers/Desiring Daughters: Framing the Sight of Women", Naomi Scheman (1988, p. 73) agrees that neither a daughter's "appropriately feminine sexual identity nor her ability to assume public power is compatible with being her mother's daughter". Although both Scheman and Collins were referring primarily to the sexual tendencies of female characters in romantic comedies, the same sentiments could be applied to Katrina Skinner's relationship with her absent mother.

In *Muriel's Wedding*, Betty's matriarchal status is often defined by her interaction with the family home. The lawn takes on a symbolic role in *Muriel's Wedding*, as she sees it as symbolic of the family unit. Simpson (1999, p. 28) observes, "Like the tree roots in *Sweetie*, the unkempt and uncared-for backyard in *Muriel's Wedding* becomes symbolic of dysfunctional familial relations". Betty looks down at the overgrown, weed-infested grass and reaches breaking point, physically attacking her eldest son for allowing the lawn to become in such a state, yelling "stop embarrassing your father!" (Hogan, 1994). Here she exhibits desperation for her estranged husband's approval, which only fuels her son's response, shouting back that she is "the embarrassment". He looks upon her as an abject failure and the reason for his father's departure from the family unit. Her sense of failure as a matriarch drives her to take her own life. This attribution of heteropatriarchal success and failure does not begin and end with Betty. When Bill's mistress Deidre refuses to replace Betty as the family matriarch, she is ejected from the relationship, and the narrative. After Betty's subsequent suicide, Muriel returns to the

family home to find the lawn completely burnt. When Muriel asks why the lawn has completely disintegrated, her brother mumbles, "Mum burnt it, because she got sick and tired of waiting for Perry to mow it". The film does not show Betty actually setting fire to the lawn, so the audience is not allowed to see Betty reach this critical point in her narrative journey, thus arguably denying her narrative agency.

Tenney's rendition of the Australian suburban matriarch is the polar opposite to Jeannie Drynan's performance in *Muriel's Wedding.* Her role in *The Castle* celebrates patriarchal order, suburban contentment, and nostalgic family values, with; Sal Kerrigan being the centrepiece of its credo. Mortimer (2000), supposes:

> The family in *Muriel*, where the mother's position kills her, is like the underside of the family in *The Castle*, where the good patriarch father is the 'backbone' and the fully supportive wife, Sal…is the other bones". (p. 10)

Collins' (2003) summation of *The Castle*'s comic strategies clearly show the comedy to be primarily a male-oriented force. As a character, Sal is static, a foil for the winsome patriarch. She supports Darryl, no matter what the circumstances, deferring to him to the point of mockery by the filmmakers, who insinuate that while Sal is clearly more intelligent, and probably better equipped to handle their legal situation, there is no place for her in the narrative outside of the home. Even when they travel to their kit holiday home in Bonnydoon, she remains within the domestic confines. Despite her lack of action, and her perceived helplessness, she is both depicted and received as a positive example of the Australian female. These three films present different interpretations of the mother; the abject, the tragic, the ideal. Motherhood defines each character's sense of identity so comprehensively, that their success or failure as a mother arguably determines their success or failure as an individual.

IDENTITY

Within their respective narratives, Betty, Angela and Sal search for a sense of individual identity in markedly different ways. Each approach is a negotiation of Australian socio-cultural expectations, and these negotiations connate powerful messages about them. In *The Castle*, head matriarch Sal Kerrigan is played by Anne Tenney, best known for her role as Molly Jones in *A Country Practice*, which according to Crofts (2001, p. 167), is a soap-opera "with a similarly nostalgic display of 'older values'". Director Robert Sitch (cited in Craven, 2001, p. 167) endorsed the decision to cast Tenney in the role of Sal Kerrigan, because her role as Molly Jones reminds him of his childhood, of "those days I still believed in Father Christmas". She is merely a continuation of what Tenney is best known for, portraying intelligent, yet loveably quirky women who place family above all else. Her role within the narrative is characteristically peripheral: she decides upon such matters as: the colour to paint the ergonomic chairs Darryl has purchased from the *Trading Post*; or the method to be used for decorating the family room lampshade. Such activities are representative of the relatively innocuous, not affecting the course of the narrative. Her individual interests are confined to affecting change in her domain, the family home. Additionally her expression of individuality is merely a "nostalgic display of older values" that, according to Crofts (2001, p. 167), seem out of place "amid the social havoc wrought by neo-liberal post-industrial capitalism". As "Australia's Favourite Film" (Australian Film Institute, 2008), these older values are still embraced as Australian over a decade after *The Castle*'s release.

Muriel's Wedding chronicles Betty's search for her identity outside marriage; motherhood has been theorised to be supplementary to Muriel's own journey of self-discovery. Emily Rustin (2001, p. 134), author "Romance and Sensation in the Glitter Cycle", considers the Heslop family dynamic from the position of viewing Muriel and her mother Betty as allies, as fellow victims of patriarchal marginalisation. She employs this stance in particular when discussing their respective shoplifting incidents, describing the mother's shoplifting as "absent minded", noting how both women were spared punishment because of father/husband Bill's "political sway". However, if one hypothesises that similar to Muriel's behaviour, Betty knowingly steals as a learned act of selfishness and dishonesty for no other purpose than to feel alive, then this would be an acknowledgement of her intelligence and desire for change. Adopting such a theoretical position also facilitates a positive reading of Betty's decision to write Muriel a blank cheque. By writing the cheque, she communicates her own desires and desperation to take

affirmative action in her life. By stealing the shoes, she finally acts upon those desires, though in an entirely unconstructive manner. In his book *something for Nothing: Shoplifting Addiction and Recovery*, self-confessed kleptomaniac-turned-author Terrence Shulman (2003, p. 5) explains, "I felt I needed to be the perpetrator and get back my power. I needed to be on the other side of the fence to experience what it was like to take rather than be taken from." It is not only patronising to assume Betty's actions were unintentional absentmindedness, it also goes against the clear message of the film: to get what you deserve, sometimes you need to steal it.

Suburban Mayhem's matriarch Angela began the search for her individual identity when she "left the family for a life of drugs and prostitution" (R. Davidson, 2006, p. 17). Angela actively breaks the patriarchal order, fleeing marriage and motherhood in suburbia for a life as an individual elsewhere. This decision is treated as an irrational act, the film insinuating the Skinner women to have a family history of severe mental illness. In the film Auntie Dianne (Genevieve Lemon) tells a television journalist, "[Angela] was madder [than Katrina]…it's genetics, I reckon" (Chapman, 2006). An attempt is made to subvert the power, control and malice displayed by Katrina and her mother by blaming her inherited dangerous qualities on genetically-inherited mental instability. Therefore, the opportunity for the female Skinners to own their evil natures, and hence their status as powerful and intimidating individuals, is thwarted by the narrative. In the end, to quote the sentiments of Megan Kirt (2007), an Australian Cinema studies student at Murdoch University, "you felt sorry for all of them".

Betty Heslop is the tragic matriarchal figure of a family strangely obsessed with appearance, status and personal success. She is a maternal failure, noticeably uninfluential on her children, but sharing with them the characteristics meekness and underachievement. The latter are arguably the result of suffering years of psychological abuse from Heslop patriarch Bill. The real tragedy of her story is not her suicide, but the insinuated reasoning behind it. Instead of perceiving her marriage breakdown as an opportunity for new beginnings, she is instead sentenced to an undignified, pathetic, lonely death. This becomes little more than a plot device forcing Bill to reflect and attempt to be a better father. Through this, she is denied her own complete story, becoming a mere chapter of Bill's. The same can be said for Angela; she is the quintessential absent mother who is spoken of, but never really speaks. Sal is also denied any real sense of agency within *The Castle*'s narrative; she knows her place in the narrative, and appears content with its static nature. In her book *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, E. Ann Kaplan (1983) concludes:

> The domination of women by the male gaze is part of patriarchal strategy to contain the threat that the mother embodies, and to control the positive and negative impulses that memory traces of being mothered have left on the male unconscious. (p. 205)

As three films are directed by men, perhaps this position carries weight within this particular context. Yet, two of the three films, *The Castle* and *Suburban Mayhem*, were either written, or co-written by women, so perhaps the problematic nature of maternal representations is socio-cultural, rather than purely gender-specific.

4.2 MONSTER, MARTYR, MENTOR: THE FATHER IN AUSTRALIAN SUBURBAN FAMILY COMEDY

In the book *Ecrits: A Selection*, Lacan (1977, p. 74) defines his term the "Name of the Father" as a symbolic function which is representative of an individual that is "the figure of the law" According to Lacan (1977, p. xiii), this term relates "not to the real father, nor to the imaginary father, but to the symbolic father". Landman (1996, p. 116) lists actual fathers as delegates of this symbolic function, who "share in the cultural advantages of this role's equation with that of master of the outside world or judge". Muriel's father in *Muriel's Wedding* is positioned as the restrictive and enclosing familial force. The key facets of Bill's character defining him as patriarchal monster are: the relationships he has with his children, Muriel in particular; his fraudulent abuse of the advantages that patriarchal values provide; and his ruthless domination of the domestic space.

The Castle's head patriarch Darryl Kerrigan is not a realistic interpretation of the average Australian male. He is a cultural negotiation, an advertisement for the harmonious retainment of traditional values, and Anglo-Celtic homogeneity in the "new Australia". Darryl is a bastion of patriarchal values, suburban insularity and socio-cultural ignorance. At the same time, he is a comical encouragement of socio-cultural awareness and development amongst suburban Anglo-Celtic Australia. He negotiates his traditional patriarchal role as family breadwinner with a steadfast encouragement of his wife's passion for arts and crafts, and immense pride in his daughter's tertiary qualifications. He consolidates his suburban insularity by venturing into the "big end of town" to defend, discover, and ultimately question Australia's socio-cultural values.

Where Bill Heslop is a grotesque critique of the patriarchal monster, and Darryl Kerrigan a celebration of the suburban patriarchal figure, John Skinner is a patriarchal martyr. While his

evil daughter Katrina supposedly triumphs in the power struggle between her and her father, she fails as a female protagonist. Lindop (2010, p. 148) asserts that *Suburban Mayhem* "creates an important alternative image" of the Australian male, which "provides a powerful commentary on masculine biases in contemporary Australian culture". Rather than being critiques of such "masculine biases", the three films in question are cinematic endorsements of them, though they have vastly different approaches in doing so. Each film assigns the main father figure with the task of arguing the importance of these masculine biases, by emphasising their impact on the family.

FATHER AS MONSTROUS, PATRIARCHAL PARODY IN *MURIEL'S WEDDING*

To understand the importance of Bill Heslop as a character is to examine the dysfunctional father/daughter relationship Bill and Muriel share. It is a paradoxical relationship, a relationship marred by abuse and dysfunction. Both father and daughter share the character traits of ego, selfishness, dishonesty, and blind ambition, thereby ensuring Muriel's eventual success as a protagonist. Landman (1996, p. 116) argues that during the film, Muriel masquerades "with Bill's con-man confidence, even trying out some of his more practiced lines". It is fair to say that such positive outcomes result from her acts of paternal emulation. There are, however, many instances where Bill has an incredibly destructive, weakening influence on her narrative journey.

In the *Breakers* nightclub scene, poignantly following the Chinese restaurant scene, Muriel responds to being infamously ejected from her superficial, unlikeable social circle by loudly sobbing. After her friends denouncing her behaviour as embarrassing ultimately to them, she wails, "But I can change…I'm not nothing!" (Hogan, 1994) At this point her friends become effectively aligned with her father, "both as oppressors, and as the object of her retaliatory campaign" (Landman, 1996, p. 116). The same issue is under attack: her embarrassing failure to conform to suburban gender-specific normality, particularly her physical and behavioural inability to emulate her friends, who Landman describes as "hyperfemme caricatures", an effective deferment to patriarchal values". Bill Hunter as Bill Heslop embodies the "ordinary, ugly Australian". Muriel has inherited her father's weight problems and lack of conventional attractiveness; she suffers crippling social and paternal rejection as a result. For her, such social rejection at this stage of the film confirms her father's opinion that she is overweight, unattractive, a "bum" (Hogan, 1994). However, this triggers a focused plan of action to defy

such a defamatory classification. Spurred by patriarchal rejection, and equipped with her father's cunning, she sets out to become eventually the person she wants to be. Therefore, while Bill's influence is arguably unhealthy, it is nevertheless, at times, effective.

O'Regan (1996, p. 248) states that the problem with the socio-cultural discourse of *Muriel's Wedding* is that Australian patriarchy "is unproblematically under investigation". Bill Heslop is undeniably positioned as the primary antagonist of the film. His primary goal as broker of a corrupt land development deal with Japanese real estate developers plays him against an Australian audience, as land ownership and supporting local economic growth are core Australian values. His commitment to and enforcement of the patriarchal order successfully demonises patriarchy, and his cynical enforcement of patriarchal family values cripples his entire family's sense of self-worth. During the Chinese restaurant scene, he verbalises the fact he has no real expectations of them as they are 'useless', and purposefully announces his disappointment at their inability to meet a socially acceptable level of expectation Landman (1996, p. 114) contends that by both claiming credit for Muriel's various opportunities to achieve, then chastising her for wasting them, "he simultaneously lays claim to any of Muriel's achievements and denies that there is any". His patriarchal desire to control and dominate his family is deeply entrenched in Bill Heslop's psyche. He represses the family's progress through psychological abuse. His promotional t-shirt "you can't stop progress" is worn with a cruel irony by his "useless", underachieving offspring (Hogan, 1994). Here lies both the tragedy and the comedy of *Muriel's Wedding*. Bill Heslop becomes a monstrous parody of the Australian patriarch, and any discussion of patriarchal values through him is difficult to take seriously.

A number of characteristics define Australian comedy, and the central characters that exhibit them. O'Regan (1996, p. 234) claims that "parody, irony, self-depreciation and an incapacity to take oneself or others seriously are part of an antipodal strand of Australian comic cinema stretching from *On our Selection* (Longford, 1920) to *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (Beresford, 1972) through to *Muriel's Wedding*" The unproblematic discourse of patriarchal values in *Muriel's Wedding* is facilitated by Bill Heslop's nature. He is, like Barry McKenzie, a grotesque exaggeration, or ockerisation of the Australian male, a freak rather than a complex, believable embodiment of the modern suburban father. He is, like Darryl Kerrigan, an uncomplicated proponent of patriarchal socio-cultural values. Darryl is a pure endorsement of them, and the ridiculousness of Bill Heslop renders him ineffective as a valid argument against them.

In the opening scene of *Muriel's Wedding*, Bill Heslop is in his home office, negotiating a property development deal. At first he is partially obscured by his youngest daughter Penelope practising a dance routine in his office. She is promptly shooed away by him, yelling at her to ask his wife to make him a cup of tea. Penelope obliges, then joins her siblings in the TV room. In a trance-like state, Betty microwaves a cup of tea. Here, Bill is immediately positioned as the boss of the household. Penelope, the youngest Heslop, is the only Heslop Bill is yet to extinguish spiritually; her passion for dance is clearly a threat to Bill's ego, so he actively undermines her development. He is a patriarchal monster, ordering the vibrant Penelope into subservience. Where he is positioned as monster, Betty is positioned as victim, with the remaining Heslop children being positioned as Penelope's projected future. At the same time, the fact that his daughter can twirl her way into Bill's office, situated within the domestic space, almost mocks and belittles the prestige of his ambitions. His home office is a "public masculine" facet of the "private feminine" domain in the domestic space.

The subtle mockery of the private feminine culminates in the closing scenes of *Muriel's Wedding*. Unable to convince Muriel that her responsibility is to take care of the Heslop home and family, Bill is rendered housebound, financially dependent on welfare, much as Betty was financially dependent on him. This feminisation is the result of a dramatic challenge to the patriarchal order, which is, according to O'Regan (1996, p. 248), "graphically represented by the burnt backyard". As a result, his feminisation at the film's conclusion is treated as a punishment for his failures as a husband and father. The film endorses the power of the father figure by stripping its cultural advantages from him.

FATHER AS PATRIARCHAL MARTYR IN *SUBURBAN MAYHEM*

The message from *Suburban Mayhem* concerning patriarchal control in the suburban family home is clear: failing to do so will result in patricide. The scene best illustrating the consequences of John losing patriarchal control features Lilya (Mia Wasikowska) and Katrina in their first interaction outside of the beauty salon. John Skinner's, loving, forgiving nature is juxtaposed with the harsh, Polish patriarchal figure seen in Lilya's father (Ivan Topic). Within this juxtaposition lies a clear message: fathers should teach their daughters to be servile, obedient, maternal creatures, otherwise they will turn against them. O'Regan (1996, p. 198) argues that an emphasis on gender difference or male predominance is a recurring issue in Australian cinema. In this scene, Katrina and Lilya have left the feminine confines of the salon and are driving in Katrina's very masculine Holden Commodore. Their conversation quickly

turns to their respective fathers, after Lilya explains she must return home because her father is expecting her:

Katrina:	'Does he think you're still a baby or something?'
Lilya:	No, he just…'
Katrina:	If it was my old man I'd tell him to get fucked and find his own friends. It's not natural to hang out with your children… it's gross.'
Lilya:	Well he's different. I can't explain it.
Katrina:	Are you rooting your Dad?
Lilya:	No!
Katrina:	Well what's the problem, then?

According to O'Regan (1996, p. 198), "father/daughter, mother/daughter relations with their unusual Oedipal concerns is a "thematic preoccupation" of Australian cinema. The exchange between Lilya and Katrina is poignant because it highlights how unnatural and distorted Katrina's attitude toward family has become. Her comments underline the fatal weaknesses of John's patriarchal rule. It has been so easy for her to defy and conquer her father; therefore she cannot understand Lilya's reluctance to rebel. Starrs (2006, p. 23) agrees that John's daughter Katrina is what academic Barbara Creed describes as the "monstrous feminine", a woman "who refuses to acknowledge the paternal order". She equates paternal love and respect with personal weakness and twisted oedipal desire. Lilya is presented as a positive outcome of traditional, consistent patriarchal control; Katrina is presented as a glaring example of what can occur in its absence. As is the case with her mother Angela, Katrina is presented as a product of John's paternal failure.

John's performance as a father is sympathetically treated as a failed exercise in gender-neutral parenting, while Lilya's family dynamic is clearly juxtaposed as a preferred alternative. In the absence of her mother, she assumes the role with enthusiasm and pride. Her younger sister looks up to her in awe, and appears to be happy and well-adjusted despite her mother's passing. In the absence of a parental figure, the closest family member in gender and age must be assigned this role; there must be a gender-specific model present. American comedies such as *Mr. Mom* and *Uncle Buck* have successfully played with gender-role duality in the past; to date

the gender-specific role has been a difficult source of humour for Australian screen comedy, unless the male is a grotesque transsexual parody such as Aunty Edna and Aunty Jack. In *Suburban Mayhem*, gender-neutrality and duality are presented as a danger to family, and society as a whole. Lindop (2010) contends:

> In Australian film these projected fears are often expressed in an aggressive form of masculinity that emphasises an exaggeration of macho behaviour and violence towards women aimed at restoring the 'proper' subordinated position of women in society. (p. 148)

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the Skinner family's dysfunction is that the age-gender-specific role reassignment occurred *prior* to John's murder; Katrina treats her brother Danny with the level, and type of reverence and obedience that she pointedly denies her father. While she tries unsuccessfully to position herself as matriarchal figure of the family, Danny is clearly the most patriarch-like figure in the film.

In *Suburban Mayhem*, opinions about John's paternal abilities are mostly voiced by a female third party. The same female characters primarily narrate this film; thus they are presented as the film's authoritative voice. Scenes such as the car scene between Katrina and Lilya effectively emasculate John Skinner. He is perceived to be so weak that he is largely absent in terms of being an active voice in the narrative. His long-time neighbour and companion Dianne (Genevieve Lemon) lovingly critiques his parental failings, conceding that he "struggled with motherhood…a child *needs* its mother". The scenes featuring Lilya's family coping relatively well in the absence of mother follow this statement, emphasising John's masculine weakness and failure even further. Through this juxtaposition, the film essentially communicates to the viewer that the issue is not an absence of father, but rather an absence of a strong, masculine father figure. Lindop (2010, p. 150) argues that such "anxieties over the destabilization of masculinity" are "depicted in *Suburban Mayhem* as they are in movies like *The Boys*, and originate from the same repressed Oedipal complexes" and "serve to reclaim masculine power". John's passive approach to parenthood is presented throughout the film as a significantly less desirable alternative to the strict, patriarchal, controlling ethos adopted by Lilya's father. John is mostly spoken of, rarely spoken to, and almost never speaks.

Like Muriel and Bill Heslop, the relationship between Katrina and John Skinner is characterised by abuse. At the hands of Katrina, John suffers such emotional abuse as irrational

misappropriation of blame, name-calling and threats of violence commonly associated with female victims of domestic abuse. Phillip Butterss (1998, pp. 40-41), author of "When being a man is all you've got: masculinity in *Romper Stomper*, *Idiot Box*, *Blackrock*, and *The Boys*", theorises that films such as these portray violence towards women as a dramatic expression of masculine anxiety, an aggressive response to women questioning their subordination. *Suburban Mayhem* does almost entirely the reverse, John appearing vulnerable, trapped, and at the mercy of a female he cannot control. The film's successful invocation of masculine bias leaves him a rare, unfortunate victim of femme-fatalistic rage. This positioning again urges the audience to support the patriarchal point of view; nobody is invited to support Katrina in her quest. Katrina is a threat to patriarchal order in the same way she is a threat to John; they are both the victims of her defiance, when they should be the matters that keep her under control.

THE PATRIARCHAL IDEAL IN *THE CASTLE*

Darryl is an idealisation of a heteropatriarchal national image. Collins and Davis (2004, p. 120) explain, "The Kerrigans, with their rapidly multiplying fleet of trucks, represent the working man's other dream, a successful father-and-son business". His outward displays of neighbourly mateship and egalitarianism humorously misrepresent a society that rarely consummates neighbourly interactions. Darryl negotiates a contemporary softness to the traditionally harsh, unemotional patriarchal figure of Australian cinema, while still maintaining a strict adherence to patriarchal order. *The Castle* seeks to connect to the audience's desire for sentimentality and familiarity within their experience. This is accomplished primarily through its father figure Darryl Kerrigan, whose intricate design invites the viewers to identify personally as a member of the Kerrigan family. He is, according to Mortimer (2000, p. 10), "the good dad", the king of his castle. The pleasure of paternal recognition is found in his ordinariness, dagginess, his endearing cluelessness, but mostly his traditional, patriarchal approach to fatherhood.

Rather than a cultural anxiety about authority, perhaps Australia was longing for a soft, white, protective authority figure such as Darryl. Patriarchal monsters such as Bill Heslop treated the father figure with such animosity and invoking such ferocious patriarchal displacement that Australia was yearning once again to feel safe within the patriarchal order. Darryl steadfastly models gender difference, suburban insularity and ordinariness. The audience is comforted by his masculine treatment of male Kerrigans, and sensitive, soft treatment of the female Kerrigans. All of them look to him for approval by the assertion of his alpha-male status in an

unthreatening manner. According to Callahan (2001): author of "His Natural Whiteness: Modes of Ethnic Presence in Some Recent Australian Films:

> Darryl valorises unreservedly what the knowing audience laughs at: his gimcrack holiday home…his wife's unimaginative and stodgy cooking, precisely things associated with dull and pre-multicultural Australia. (p. 105)

This valorised ordinariness, patriarchy and suburban insularity maybe is laughed at by the "knowing audience". But many Australian viewers embraced it as familiar, a reminder of a childhood that induces a sentimental longing for "dull and pre-multicultural Australia". Most importantly, it establishes feelings of trust for this fictional family, who have important, difficult messages to deliver.

A distinguishing feature of Darryl as a character is the softness he brings to the traditionally brash role of the Australian comic patriarch. His interaction with the domestic space is comically representative of his character, particularly the quirky manner in which he maintains his patriarchal dominance. Throughout the film, his enthusiasm for extensions and other ambitious renovation ideas is meekly challenged and discouraged by his wife Sal. The plethora of unfinished home improvement projects that typify the outlandishly cluttered Kerrigan residence symbolise his amiable domination of the family home's exterior. His treatment of the front and backyard domestic space voices an affable defiance of Sal's wish to have a presentable, feminine, uncluttered home. He gridlocks the front yard with his Holden automobiles, which show the home to be the site of patriarchal rule. Sal's ownership is restricted to the kitchen and dining room space primarily; they are features of her attempts to beautify his ugly and inappropriate *Trading Post* purchases. The playful power struggle between Sal and Darryl typically ends in Sal conceding to Darryl's various whims. The sentimental, non-threatening, loving-yet-sexless nature of their onscreen relationship proves their rare moments of disagreement as being innocuous. The softness of Darryl's personal nature allows him to overrule Sal at every opportunity. Collins and Davis (2004, p. 119) conceding, "Darryl's rule is benevolent and his foibles are tolerated by his knowing family".

Bill Heslop invites the audience to support Muriel in her battle against patriarchal order, and mourn Betty's tragic investment in it. *The Castle* alternately mocks and celebrates Darryl in his "battle against the big end of town". Collins (2007, p. 89) concludes he had "tamed and domesticated" the "transgression that returned to 'ocker' comedy in the early 1990s during the

glitter cycle". Australia's embrace of him confirms Australia's level of socio-cultural investment in the patriarchal figure. Viewers are encouraged to subscribe to his leadership position, standing alongside his wife and children. They are not invited to question the realism of his triumph polarised by the raw, untreated ordinariness of *The Castle*'s visual style which aids the avoidance of such scrutiny. The belief that the audience is encouraged to be cynically amused by the Kerrigan's lifestyle and values is called into question by the Australia Day survey that concluded the Kerrigans and their story best represents Australia as a nation. Darryl is a successful negotiation of patriarchal values in contemporary suburban Australia; he proudly defends Australia's Anglo-centricity while allowing an ethnic outsider into the Kerrigan fold despite the interloper not being "one of their own" (Sitch, 1997). His often offensive socio-cultural ignorance is offset by his benevolence; thus his patriarchy is presented as a non-threatening, natural component of the Kerrigan's background, lifestyle and values.

4.3 IN THEIR FATHER'S EYES: DAUGHTER FIGURES IN THE AUSTRALIAN SUBURBAN FAMILY COMEDY

The following is an examination of daughter figures in Australian screen comedy, with a particular focus on the following three characters: Muriel Heslop (*Muriel's Wedding*), Tracey Kerrigan (*The Castle*); and Katrina Skinner (*Suburban Mayhem*). All three characters are responses to Australia's patriarchal values, and as such are a defining aspect of their character. The narrative journeys of all three characters are navigated by their reconstruction of home, family, and identity. These journeys are all arguably problematic. Tracey undergoes a conventional transformation from Dad's favourite to wife and mother. In the case of Muriel and Katrina, there is an unconventional push to free themselves from suburban, domestic containment, yet the persistence in defining their personal currency through male desire thwarts the transition. Only Muriel truly breaks away, after realising marriage does not equal happiness and success. Familial dynamics play a significant role in the cultivation of each character's identity. Each has a distinct relationship with their father: the relationships are always in the extreme concerning either their father's pride, or their father's shame.

Central protagonist Katrina Skinner is at the core of *Suburban Mayhem*'s discussion of family. Through her, *Suburban Mayhem* attempts to question Australia's unquestioned devotion to family values, yet ultimately reinforces them. In her pursuit of heteropatriarchal domestic bliss, she displays a comically flagrant disregard for core patriarchal family values. Unlike Muriel, her reconstruction of family, home and self is not a story of patriarchal fantasy, eventual self-

discovery and suburban escape; it is a story of destruction: she destroys her family, vandalises and eventually sells the family home; and literally kills her identity as a daughter. As a central protagonist, she is positioned as a hero or role model, yet she is devoid of heroic values or characteristics. She is every parent's worst nightmare, Barclay (2006, p. 14) summarising, "she's the thing parents are afraid of their children becoming" (p. 14). Katrina is not only a horrific daughter figure, she is also presented as a damaging influence on positive daughter figures such as Lilya. As a character, she is almost the polar opposite of Tracey Kerrigan, yet, through her abject characteristics, she too is a cinematic reinforcement of patriarchal family values. Katrina is Australian contemporary cinema's presentation of everything a young female living in suburbia shouldn't be: non-maternal, unafraid, unapologetic, unhelpful, ungrateful, 'unlovable', and most importantly, uncontrollable.

As an exemplar of patriarchal compliance, Tracey Kerrigan is presented as both her father's pride, and his possession to reluctantly relinquish on her wedding day. There is a duality to Tracey's character; while she was raised in an environment of Anglo-Celtic homogeneity, she marries into a migrant family, and is open to Anglo-friendly, international travel and multi-cultural pursuits. She has a "tertiary education" and is career focussed; yet by the conclusion of the film she has abandoned her career to fulfil her husband's wishes of starting a family "right away" (Sitch, 1997). In her case, the points of mockery and celebration are clear: her tertiary education and career in hairdressing are points of derision in the film; and her decision to abandon career for children is celebrated. While Katrina is a monstrous abjection of the princess figure, and Muriel is problematisation of the princess/bride figure, Tracey embodies the hetero- patriarchal ideal of the "newlywed". All three characters explore a discourse on the confines of marriage.

MURIEL HESLOP – THE "SUCCESS"

The story of Muriel Heslop is arguably presented as a feminist success story. She actively pursues, then ultimately escapes from modelled suburban femininity, and the suffocating death-grip of the female suburban space. The problem is, she escapes by becoming her father. As Landman (1996) asserts, fantasy plays a significant role in Muriel's journey; to escape her reality, she has to reconstruct aspects her life artificially to realise her fantasies. Marriage plays a part in her escape plan, as she initially saw marriage as the only way to escape permanently which, according the director P.J Hogan (cited in O'Regan, 1996) was an attitude prevalent in his own upbringing:

> I grew up in a small town and it always seemed to me to be harder for women… when my sisters were younger, they often thought that marriage was the only way of leaving home and establishing a future. They were encouraged that way by my parents. (p. 135).

Muriel's escape is a literal act of reconstruction. To fulfil her narrative goal, she must construct a new home, a new family, and a new identity. The first step in Muriel's journey is achieved through actively changing her landscape. In *Muriel's Wedding*, the suburban landscape is a cultural wasteland; another enemy for Muriel to overcome. The landscapes of Sydney and Porpoise Spit are purposefully presented to elicit feelings of hope and dread respectively when she inhabits each space. Within the suburban world of Porpoise Spit, her offbeat quirkiness and dress sense are viewed as a failure to conform, being the reason for her inability to achieve the suburban female ideal of a normal, desirable bride as embodied by Tania. In Sydney, Muriel is embraced as unique and quirky. By constructing a new home in Sydney, she exchanges a landscape of forced conformity, failure and rejection for a landscape of individuality, success and acceptance. In escaping Porpoise Spit, she claims victory over suburban containment, but the escape is merely physical; the threat of Porpoise Spit looms as a symbol of her true identity.

Muriel traverses three key familial reconstructions during the film. Her initial phase is a positive step towards independence and self-acceptance. She first creates a new family with Rhonda, who also struggles to escape the suburban confines of Porpoise Spit. Muriel does not escape from the blind commitment to patriarchal order, as once her new family dynamic is disrupted because of Rhonda's debilitating spinal tumour, she reverts to the pursuit of her most important fantasy, marriage. She still sees herself as dependent, in need of rescue, rather than someone who can be her own hero, and a hero to others in need.

At this point of the film Muriel performs a second phase of familial reconstruction. She leaves Rhonda at the hospital and enters a Sydney bridal shop, where she, according to Landman (1996, p. 116), "rearranges the key players in her oedipalisation, playing herself as the bride, Rhonda as mother…and Bill as husband". Rhonda, no longer her ideal supportive and protective family, becoming aligned with her mother: weak, dependent, unable to do things for herself; and someone for whom Muriel is morally obligated to care. Strangely, by referring to her future husband as Bill, she aligns herself with Bill's mistress Deidre, a younger, more attractive alternative to her mother, the feminine ideal, and, most importantly, someone who is idealised by her father. Muriel sees Deidre as the one she must become to please her father. Pleasing him occurs as Muriel enters the third phase of her familial construction, the marriage of convenience between herself and Daniel Van Arkle. However, through this phase she learns Betty's truth: defining success through marriage is a dangerous act.

There are two key avenues through which Muriel reconstructs her identity: first through becoming her "father's daughter" in order to defy him; then becoming the bride in order to please him. Collins (2003, p. 172) considers "*Muriel's Wedding* treats the bride as a grotesque figure of crippled female sexuality", and Rustin (2001, p. 135), considers her unsupportive background when referring to her father's psychological abuse, "has fostered both insecurity and fantasy in her". Arguably her intense insecurity fosters the need to invent Mariel, a version of herself that conforms to materialistic and patriarchal values which she has internalised throughout her upbringing. In order for Muriel to truly escape, and in turn become the hero of the narrative, she had to "become her father's daughter". In the beginning, she is, in her father's eyes, a passive failure, an object of disgust. Landman (1996, p. 114), observes this disgust to be portrayed in the Chinese restaurant scene, wherein "the pan of the camera represents father Bill Heslop's contemptuous gaze…Muriel is aligned in this framing with her passive mother"). By the conclusion of this scene Bill has cruelly depicted Muriel as a "useless no hoper, who "can't even type", and more importantly, invests fateful feelings of contempt in her (Hogan, 1994).

The shift from maternal to paternal embodiment occurs when Muriel makes the decision to steal her father's money and escape, first to Hibiscus Island, then to Sydney. Through this critical action she "becomes her father", committing an act of selfishness and betrayal towards her family for personal gain. What follows is perceived as success, elevated sexual confidence

and personal development. According to Rustin (2001), "her father's rage" is one of the key motivating factors of her planned escape to Sydney. One must go further and assert that her planned escape was an act of learned selfishness, as she dishonestly elicits the funds required much in the same fashion as her father did in his role as a politician. In this way, *Muriel's Wedding* confirms the assertion made by Naomi Scheman (1988, p. 73) that "neither appropriately feminine sexual identity, nor her ability to assume public power is compatible with being her mother's daughter" (p. 73). When Muriel "becomes her father", she breaks the entrenched patriarchal belief that women are passive, supportive creatures. She succeeds by believing in her ability to acquire an image of success and power in the same manner of her father.

What best defines Muriel at the outset of *Muriel's Wedding* is her blind commitment to patriarchal values, and her tragic inability to conform to the feminine ideal. She wants so desperately to marry that she plasters her bedroom with bridal magazine clippings, connoting an obsessive preoccupation. Yet, as a result of her offbeat looks and personality, she is constantly reminded that she is not equipped with attributes necessary to take her proper place within the patriarchal order both as a bride, and eventual mother. She finally emancipates herself from the patriarchal order by embodying her father. By leaving her marriage and putting herself before her family, Muriel escapes Porpoise Spit an independent woman full of hope and promise. She is one of Australian cinema's more complex daughter figures, and one of its most problematic female protagonists.

KATRINA SKINNER – A FATHER'S ENEMY

Like Muriel in *Muriel's Wedding*, Katrina Skinner constructs her desired identity through a restructure of family, home and gender role expectations. To achieve this reconstruction, she destroys three families, including her own. Her preoccupation with family is presented as entirely sexual, devoid of moral merit and reason. She champions her absent mother as a victim, and eventual escapee of her father's control. She models herself, both aesthetically and behaviourally, on her mother, and seeks to assume her newly defined role within her familial reconstruction. She also seeks to replace her father John with Brother Danny in the paternal/husband role by killing John in order to sponsor Danny's legal appeals. Her act of patricide is the ultimate act of familial destruction and reconstruction. Her ideal reconstructed family is incestuous in nature, with herself as matriarch and her brother as husband/patriarch... This dysfunctional familial design Katrina desires is, according to Bruno Starrs (2006, p. 23),

"a further example of Katrina's maternal abjection". Barbara Creed (1993, p. 23) relates such maternal abjection to Julia Kristeva's "concept of the abject, which 'disturbs identity, system, order'". Her actions should also be considered a pursuit of her own concept of normality.

The family home is the landscape at the centre of Katrina's reconstruction of identity. She has no sentimental attachment to the home she grew up in; it is a saleable asset to fund the release of her brother. The home is the site of traditional paternal order, incest, father/daughter conflict, and murder. She needs to leave her domestic space to wreak her mayhem, but within the confines she remains weak, under the scrutiny of her father. The suburb of Golden Grove is her kingdom, and the Skinner family home is the only place where she displays any weakness. She goes to any lengths to announce her contempt for the family home, destroying her father's precious birdbath in a defiant act of symbolic destruction on her father's visual projection of suburban tranquillity. It is also a portent of the destruction to come.

Katrina uses her sexuality to solicit violent acts, rather than commit them herself. Lindop (2010, p. 148) asserts that *Suburban Mayhem* is the antithesis of films such as *Romper Stomper* and *The Boys*, films that are "expressions of deep anxieties about feminism's threat to patriarchal hegemony". *Suburban Mayhem* is a nightmarish fable of what can occur when strong-willed women venture beyond the boundaries of male control. John's failure to control Katrina is presented as both a mark of failure for him, and a terrible threat for the quasi-fictional community. As she battles to assume the matriarchal role within her phantasmic new family structure, she no longer views John as a father, but as a rival of Danny, her ideal family patriarch. At this juncture Katrina ceases to be a wild, uncontrollable force of will, and becomes an irrational, mentally ill girl who "cannot be held morally responsible" for her actions (R. Davidson, 2006, p. 18). There seems to be a need to explain her wild behaviour as mental illness, and most importantly, because of extreme familial dysfunction. Any sense of agency is neutralised by insinuations of mental incompetence.

The tagline for the film reads, "There are things in life you can't control…fame, lust, murder…and Katrina." Katrina's role is based almost entirely on Belinda Van Krevel, who is labelled a "femme fatale", and "Evil Van Krevel" in the media for her appearance, actions, behaviour, and family history (Gee, 2007). Ultimately, the insanity of Katrina is only a reinforcement of patriarchal values, and confirms a female's sexuality is her most valuable asset. She is comically cynical in her brutal pursuit of the rewards that come with gender role

compliance, using sex as currency; financial security; servitude; a life of leisure. Director Paul Goldman (cited in R. Davidson, 2006, p. 20) claims, "I loved this strong, transgressive female character who tears up the rule book, trashing the suburban streets of my childhood (our great Australian heartland), trashing all those phoney, sentimental, oppressive family values everyone is trying to peddle us". Arguably, the pursuit of sentimental family values is Katrina's primary motivation; a stay-at-home mother is all she apparently desires to be.

TRACEY KERRIGAN – A FATHER'S PRIDE

An asset separating Tracey Kerrigan as a character from Muriel and Katrina is that she fulfils the feminine ideal. She is married, conventionally attractive, has a "tertiary education" and a career in hairdressing, but expresses her intent to choose motherhood over career eventually. These are all attributes that neither Katrina nor Muriel possess. She fulfils the patriarchal tradition of leaving the family home through marriage. Darryl's pride in his daughter is problematic; it is clearly associated partly with her ability to fulfil the heteropatriarchal ideal, and a dictating factor of her self-image.

As a satirical comedy, there are points of mockery and celebration throughout *The Castle*. Being representative of young suburban working class women, it is telling that Tracey's sites of mockery are her career and education. Even more telling is her point of celebration, the abandoning of her career to have a son who, having already taken up her husband's kickboxing passion, is well into the process of modelling masculinity. Her tertiary education is definitely a point of mockery in the film, her cringe-worthy hairstyles being the epitome of suburban dagginess, which, according to Karl Quinn (1994), author of "Drag, Dags and the Suburban Surreal", was a "stylistic lynchpin" of Australian cinema during the 1990s. This dagginess is also a visual signifier of the insignificance of her qualification. One of *The Castle's* most memorable moments comes during the scene in which Tracey is colouring her mother's hair on the porch of the Kerrigan's holiday kit home while the male Kerrigans are out fishing. The two female Kerrigans are pointedly discussing motherhood, when Tracey informs her mother Sal that as she is serious about her career, and she will not be having children until she is at least 23 years of age. Both her career, and the inevitability of her becoming a full-time mother are mocked in this scene. The Kerrigans, presented in a narrative set in 1997, are celebrated as a contemporary family with which the viewer could identify.

Another aspect that clearly distinguishes Tracey from Muriel and Katrina is that she is a supporting character. The aesthetic and characteristic similarities between Tracey and Sal suggested that Tracey has modelled herself on her mother, who is described by Mortimer (2000, p. 10) as "the fully supportive wife". This "supportiveness" is symbolically demonstrated during the scene in which her new husband Con (Eric Bana) aggressively kicks at a boxing bag while she holds it steady for him. Con yells, "Hold it still, Trace!" while she apprehensively tries to do so without him accidentally kicking her. Meanwhile, Darryl commends Con for the discipline he has for his passion, Muay Thai Kickboxing, while Sal nods in agreement. This scene is effectively echoed in the final stanza of the film, wherein Tracey is holding the same boxing bag for her young son, who has taken up his father's kickboxing passion. Here, she is being supportive to the point of self-sacrifice. She has agreed to fulfil her husband's wish to have children "right away", and is now embodying a fully supportive role, physically assisting her male family members in developing their own passions or interests instead of pursuing her own. O'Regan (1996) relates the importance of "male predominance", which is, "narrative and thematic preoccupations" in Australian cinema:

> These thematic characteristics are importantly underwritten by popular sociological and national descriptions of Australian society that start to emerge in the 1950s and are summed up in the aggressive song from *They're a Weird Mob* 'It's a man's country, sweetheart'. (p. 200)

In his book *Before the Interval*, Bruce Molloy (1990, pp. 74-75) declares that "Australian society has always been responsive to a patriarchal hand", and that (citing examples *Dad Rudd, M.P* (Hall, 1940), *Mr Chedworth Steps Out* (Hall, 1939)) early Australian cinema's depiction of "the traditional role of the Australian wife finding fulfilment in "her man, her children" has often involved a "suburban…frustrated housewife….with a whining voice and an incessantly nagging manner" who vents her frustrations by directing her energies towards housekeeping and family'. Tracey exudes unconditional, voluntary self-sacrifice and support. She is supportive of her husband's dreams and her father's hare-brained schemes. Her decision to follow her mother's footsteps in putting her family first is depicted by heart-warming music, and gentle comedy; it is her happy ending.

Tracey Kerrigan as a character is predominantly conducive to patriarchal values and attitudes, one positive aspect being her albeit comical effort to increase the cultural awareness and diversity of her family. Her decision to marry Greek-Australian Con Petropoulos, is first met with apprehension, then eventual acceptance. The irony is that Tracey's intercultural marriage

most likely came about due to the European Migration Scheme, which was an initiative tied to the now-defunct White Australia policy (Levy, 2008). *The Castle* features a number of humorous attempts by Tracey to encourage her family to embrace multiculturalism. She relays her experiences of international travel and cuisine, exclaiming that "Thailand is full of culture, chockers…oh, Mum…the satay sticks" (Sitch, 1997). O'Regan (1996, p. 325) states that "in the multicultural vision Australia's cultural diversity – its multiethnic and multi-racial reality – is what is currently transforming Australian society and culture". Collins and Davis (2004, p. 112) assert that the formation of Tracey's family, and the development of her multicultural ideals, is in line with the desired cultural image of a modernised Australia, which is turning to "the multicultural suburbs" for a "dynamic, post-national, post-multicultural identity in the 21st century". *The Castle*'s exploration of multiculturalism gives a rare glimpse of modern Australia in a film that yearns for a return to a much older, traditional Australia.

As a character, Tracey is an anomaly. She is extremely conservative and traditional in her approach to family and life decisions, yet surprisingly open-minded in relation to her choice of life-partner and the eventual formation of a multicultural family. She is effectively a socio-cultural large step backward, then a small step forward. Ultimately the inevitability and cinematic exaltation of her decision to acknowledge the insignificance of her career pursuits in comparison to that of her husband is concerning. By voicing her own desire to postpone motherhood to focus on career, Tracey insinuates that motherhood and career do not successfully coexist. In many respects, the supportive nature of her character dictates her ability to make a positive statement regarding the representation of young Australian female characters in contemporary Australian screen comedy. She is instead a fitting member of an overtly ordinary family with 1950s conservative values and attitudes.

4.4 CONCLUSION

Muriel's Wedding, *The Castle* and *Suburban Mayhem* are three key examples of Australian comedy films offering a unique depiction of the Australian suburban family. Each film recognises Australia's prevailing Anglo-Celtic, patriarchal values, yet comments differently on them. *Crikey*'s Alan Davies (2012) contends "the trouble with portrayals of suburbia and suburbanites like this is they apply to the vast majority of city dwellers. Around 90% of residents of Australia's capital cities live more than 5 km from the CBD. In other words, nearly all of us are suburbanites!" According to the 2011 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), 5.68 out of 8.18 million, approximately 70 percent of households, are living as a family unit.

Arguably then, the reason for the Australian suburban family comedy being such a pertinent type of Australian film is that it is statistically representative of Australia. Despite this, only four of the 140 film projects funded by Australian state and federal film funding bodies between 2007 and 2012, could be classified as an Australian suburban family comedy'. The four films in question are *Big Mamma's Boy* (di Chiera, 2011), *Hey Hey It's Esther Blueburger* (Randall, 2008), *Mental* (Hogan, 2012), and *My Year Without Sex* (Watt, 2009). This statistic is relevant despite the fact that a 2008 online poll conducted by the Australian Film Institute (Australian Film Institute, 2008) revealed *The Castle* to be voted "Australia's Favourite Film", and two of the top five favourite films were suburban family comedies. Australian audiences connect with Australian suburban family comedies, because they are more likely to "tell their story".

Muriel's Wedding, *The Castle* and *Suburban Mayhem* negotiate Australian socio-cultural values, and discuss their manifestation in the Australian suburban family comedy milieu. These films also reveal the average Australian suburban family to be supposedly Anglo-Celtic, adhering to patriarchal values. However, these films seem to verify the notion that this representation of the average Australian suburban family is a mere myth portrayed by films such as *The Castle,* are determined to uphold. These films are not lone examples, but are arguably prime examples of Australian national cinema's socio-cultural mythmaking. The Australian suburban family comedy is a rare commodity amongst Australian state and federally funded film projects. Yet, as the three films discussed reveal, such films are complex, vivid insights into Australia's constantly evolving national image.

5. CHARACTERISING AUSTRALIAN COMEDY CINEMA: AUSTRALIAN COMEDY CINEMA'S CONSTRUCTION AND NEGOTIATION OF THE NATIONAL TYPE

Australian audiences love comedy film. Those such as *Kenny*, *The Castle*, *The Adventures of Barry MacKenzie* and *The Sentimental Bloke* are a cinematic celebration of the national character, with roles such as Kenny Smythe, Darryl Kerrigan, Barry MacKenzie and the Bloke being prominent representations of the national image. Though these characters and their respective films come from different eras in Australian national cinema's over one hundred year history, they share obvious commonalities: they are all Anglo-Celtic, male, and working class. They have carried on a century-long tradition of the exclusively common depiction of the Australian national type. The following examines the above films, in particular their contribution to the development and evolution of Australian comedy character types, whether it be the larrikin, the ocker, the battler, or the bloke. The problematic nature of these character types, and how they have continued to be the face of Australian comedy cinema will be examined.

5.1 THE LARRIKIN BECOMES LOVEABLE: THE SENTIMENTAL BLOKE'S *CINEMATIC TRANSFORMATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN WORKING CLASS MALE*

The term larrikin has always had positive and negative connotations, and has always endured conflicting sentiments from cultural commentators. The *Oxford English Dictionary* ("larrikin, n.," 1902) describes a larrikin as, "A (usually juvenile) street rowdy; the Australian equivalent of the 'hoodlum' or 'hooligan'"; *MSN Encarta's World English Dictionary* ("larrikin," 1999) offers three separate definitions of the term, defining larrikin as either "an unconventional or nonconformist person, especially in public life", "a mischievous or playful person", and even a "lout". According to Collins (2007, p. 87), the larrikin is a "key figure of [Australian] national identity". Australian comedy cinema has been a long-time proponent of larrikinism, affording it opportunities to permeate Australia's cultural identity.

The films of Raymond Longford are a cinematic representation of Australia's socio-cultural transition from its past as a colonial settlement largely populated by roguish convict descendants, to its future as a proud, egalitarian society populated by genuine, hardworking, opportunistic people. Through his screenwriting, casting and direction, Longford has been a

pioneer in his approach to cinematically renegotiating the national type. He expressed a national desire for social egalitarianism by depicting an everyman struggling with the realities of a classist Australia. Through the Bloke', he recreates a character with which both working and middle-class Australia identify. The fact that the film is known by his character type rather than his actual name merely enhances his purpose as a character. The Bloke is a blueprint of Australian comedy characterisation; he is an ordinary man trying to woo an ordinary girl, a man aiming to forge a new middle class identity while struggling to suppress his anti-authoritarian, larrikin ways. Audiences are encouraged to laugh at the Bloke's ineptitude, his loutishness, his working class pride. The actors share a comedy dynamic that balances Tauchert's vaudevillian slapstick against Lyell's unaffected naturalism. Longford's commitment to realism in terms of casting, direction and storytelling began a national cinematic trend that continues to this day. Bill Garvin, aka the Bloke, is a canonisation of Longford's efforts to predict, visually and culturally ordinary Australians as quirky and loveable.

Longford (cited in Collins, 2007, p. 86) described Arthur Tauchert as "the most loveable larrikin who ever lived". William D. Routt (cited in 2007, p. 87) questions The Bloke's larrikin status by asserting that *The Sentimental Bloke* "actually deals with the unmaking of a larrikin". Through the Bloke, Longford redesigned the larrikin to be more lovable to mainstream audiences. Collins also argues that the transformation of the urban larrikin into the decent Aussie bloke also occurred as part and parcel of a middle-class effort to overcome the disreputable aspects of cinema" which were then considered to be an unrefined, common form of entertainment. At the same time, Longford strove to retain the film's working class appeal by maintaining the Bloke's friendship with unrepentant larrikin Ginger Mick throughout. This arguably confirms the importance of remaining loyal to the larrikin aspects of Australia's national identity. Tauchert's portrayal of the larrikin was so lovable, that even middle class audiences felt compelled to not only endorse the Bloke as a palatable depiction of the working class, but to identify with him, and consider him an agreeable cinematic representation of the Australian national image.

While there was a notable endeavour to produce a film appealing to the middle classes, *The Sentimental Bloke* remains loyal to Longford's primary cinematic goal of making "films about the working class" (Barrett, 2009, p. 11). Working class characteristics such as loyalty and a lack of social refinement, education, and cultural awareness, are presented as core Australian

values in the films of Raymond Longford. This arguably sparked a trend in Australian cinema that prevails to this day. In *The Dinkum Bloke* (Longford & Lyell, 1923), central character Bill Garvin (Arthur Tauchert) is described as "a wharf labourer, whose head has not been filled with the learning of schools, but whose heart has passed with honours in the University of Life." Class distinction played a large part in *The Sentimental Bloke*'s rendition of the larrikin. The Bloke's lack of social refinement facilitates many of the film's most memorable comic moments. The viewer is invited to revel in the scruffy, larrikin Garvin's hapless attempts to compete socially with upper-class men for Doreen's affections. After a period of courtship scenes between Doreen and Bill Garvin, the film cuts to a scene in which Doreen and Bill, the "Bloke" are dining with an upper-class rival for Doreen's affections. Bill is clearly threatened by the socio-cultural superiority displayed by the man he refers to as "the stror at coot" After insulting his elitist attitude, lack of traditional values, dress sense and affectations via intertitle inner monologue, the Bloke reverts to his larrikin persona and physically assaults the gentleman rival in the street. Despite it being a completely unprovoked attack, the audience is positioned to sympathise with the loveable larrikin. Tauchert's performance as Bill expertly balances the brawling bravado with bruised pride and a broken heart, intricately capturing the Australian values of egalitarianism, pride, and masculinity. Bill's violence is presented as a funny, forgivable moment of weakness.

The emphasis on realism sets the characters of Longford's films apart from other comedy productions of that era, exemplified by Bert Bailey's stage adaptation of the Rudd family chronicles. Bertrand and Routt (1989, p. 21) assert that Longford's telling of *On Our Selection* (1920) encourages the audience to laugh with the characters, rather than at them, by rejecting Bailey's reliance on "physical comedy, melodrama and the portrayal of mental retardation". The "unsentimentalised Rudds", are the opposite of the gentle comedy seen in *The Sentimental Bloke*: it was without cinematic precedent. There is something truly unique about Tauchert's Bloke', Routt (1989, p. 32) describing the character as "insipid... [neither] romantic nor heroic". The ironic twist to Longford's decision to cast Tauchert in the role of the Bloke, according to Long (1976), is that Tauchert comes from a Vaudevillian background, a form of performance-based entertainment that is known for being over-the-top, and its freakishness, rather than a performative commitment to realism. The nature of *The Sentimental Bloke*'s comedy is a balance of both quirkiness and realism, slapstick comedy being counter-balanced with Lyell and Tauchert's comic repartee, their courtship presented as charming, comical yet not unlikely. The comic focus shifts from laughing at Bill's lack of social graces and violent outbursts, to an

alignment with him in his comic quest to woo Doreen. The criminal is no longer a social danger, he is a larrikin looking for love.

Tom O'Regan (1996, p. 243) has commented "ugliness" or "freakishness" is also a hallmark of Australian comedy characterisation. It is not just behavioural freakishness that partly defines Australian national cinema, but a tendency to depict physical "freakishness" or "ugliness" as well. O'Regan describes this concept as the "extraordinary ordinary", referring to Australian national cinema's unique visual and narrative style. According to John Tulloch (1981, p. 49), Longford's use of average, ugly looking actors was significant "in the context of the historical development of screen types". He elaborates that Tauchert and Lyell were described by American film industry figure Gayne Dexter as being "barren of beauty", a "national ugliness" representative of our "inferior production values" (p. 38). Their sense of the aesthetic is vital to the comedy of the film. Theirs is a funny, larrikinesque look (in that it is unconventional and non-conformist. Up until Longford's discovery of Tauchert, the latter Sydney born vaudevillian had never acted in films, which only seemed to enhance realism of his performance. Lewis (1987, p. 10) lauds author of *Australian Movies and the American Dream*, what made *The Sentimental Bloke* such a landmark film for its exploration of ordinariness, a concept that was at odds with the cinematic modus operandi up to that point. Longford's casting and direction practices brought a naturalism to Australian cinema that has defined it ever since.

Longford's larrikin films of the early twentieth century (*The Sentimental Bloke*, *Ginger Mick* (Behan, Hasted, & Kearney, 1958), and *The Dinkum Bloke* (Longford & Lyell, 1923)) are reconstructions of Australian national identity, and a renegotiation of Australia's beginnings. The films are largely populated by Irish and Scottish convict settlers, governed by the British Royal Crown. By examining the seminal classic *The Sentimental Bloke* (Longford, 1919), it can be seen as Australian cinema bringing larrikinism away from the fringe and into the mainstream. The renegotiation of this identity occurs with Bill's journey forward from being a brawling misfit to becoming more civilized in order to be a suitable husband for Doreen. Tauchert's *Bloke* is the quintessential Australian anti-hero, much like Chaplin's *Tramp* characterisation, comically balancing his anti-authoritarian stance and unlawful behaviour with a doddering sense of goodwill and romanticism. The Bloke is a dynamic character who desires acceptance and personal transformation. This desire was mirrored arguably by Australia's desire to forge a new socio-cultural identity. The role these films played in developing the ocker

or larrikin character type is very important, and a pivotal part of Australian comedy cinema history; their contribution to the public perception of Australian national identity is undeniable.

5.2 WHO (DO) WE THINK WE ARE (?): KENNY SMYTHE AS THE AUSSIE BATTLER IN THE NEW AUSTRALIA

The term "Aussie Battler" has long been synonymous with Australian culture. According to the *Australian National Dictionary* ("battler, n.1," 2006), the term battler "describes the person with few natural advantages, who works doggedly and with little reward, who struggles for a livelihood (and who displays courage in so doing)". Myers (1987), asserts that the battler myth is one "we Australians love to identify with". Australian cinema has been instrumental in the development of battler culture since the release of *On Our Selection* (Longford, 1920), the battler remaining a hallmark of Australian cinema. Through Australian cinema's depiction of the battler, one can see the sense of duality present in socio-cultural expectations of a working class, Anglo-Celtic Australian male. The battler is unremarkable yet quirky, hardworking yet not overly ambitious or educated, and loyal, with mostly traditional or conservative values and attitudes. Films such as *Kenny* ensure the battler figure remains synonymous with the Australian national image by positioning it as a socio-cultural deity amongst the heathens of contemporary Australia.

The battler is a carefully constructed male type inadvertently bleeding into the public consciousness and becoming part of the Australian national image. Unlike other contemporary examples such as Darryl Kerrigan, there is an attempt by *Kenny* to modernise the battler into an aspirational, decent Aussie bloke who continues to reflect Australia's desired values and attitudes despite contemporary complications. A duality is present in the character construction of Kenny Smythe. As a divorced father, Kenny is less idealistic than *The Castle*'s representation of the Australian father figure. However, *Kenny* continues the Australian national cinema's trend of depicting Australian males as egalitarian, blue-collar heroes, playing directly into the long-standing idea of Australia's national image. The contemporary edge of being a single father effectively underwrites the continued adherence to the blue-collar myth. In terms of performance and visual style, it negotiates the battler myth through its mockumentary format, which connotes an authenticity typical of Australian national cinema. It also follows the "extraordinary ordinary" narrative structure, identified by O'Regan (1996, p. 198) as a "narrative preoccupation" of Australian cinema. As a representation of the

Australian national image, the authenticity and ordinariness of *Kenny* and its titular character is a carefully constructed illusion that continues the mythological approach to Australian national cinema's depiction of the "average Australian".

Although facets of Kenny Smythe's character suggest a strong ocker or larrikin ancestry, he has been deemed by Collins (2007, p. 84) to be a modern interpretation of the decent bloke; an idealised, contemporary yet "conservative recasting of the national type". He is arguably "softer" and more socially acceptable than Tauchert's larrikinesque Bloke, especially to a contemporary viewership. Kenny, the portaloo worker, is a representative of a declining minority: the low-income, low-skilled, Australian-born blue-collar worker. Australian national cinema's treatment of the battler, presents attitudes dictating that Australians should admire, those who happily undertake unpleasant, thankless, underpaid labour. Australia's embrace of working class characters such as Bill Garvin, Darryl Kerrigan and Kenny Smythe suggests that Australian comedy cinema both exalts and identifies with Aussie battlers. One of *Kenny*'s key comic devices is the juxtaposition of Kenny's serene, even-tempered naiveté against the aggressive, self-righteous indignation of another carefully constructed character type, the "new Australian". The "new Australian" no longer values the battler in Australian society or the national economy.

The most intriguing aspect of a critical reading of *Kenny* finds that Kenny Smythe is hailed as a truly authentic encapsulation of the average Australian, the decent everyman. Lisa Milner (2009, p. 262), concludes that Kenny "represents the 'ordinary Australian' that the Howard Coalition government said it spoke to". He is speaking from the perspective of a socio-culturally disadvantaged, working class minority, but he also speaks to the "new Australian". In *Kenny*, the new Australian is represented by the crowds of middle class patrons who judge him and his presumed social status; they can afford to attend the events requiring the services of Kenny's employer, Splashdown; and they do not appreciate the importance, or the required technical skill of his occupation. The filmmakers of *Kenny* present the new Australian as individualist rather than egalitarian, self-centred rather than decent, and hard work rather than hard working. The role of comedy in the film representation of Australian culture is arguably problematic. Much like *The Castle* and *The Sentimental Bloke*, the focus and nature of the *Kenny* comedy shifts as the film progresses. At times the audience is invited to laugh *at* Kenny with his speech impediment offering cheap, mass comic appeal. A key site of mockery is the preposterous reception of pearls of wisdom from a plump, lisping portaloo technician. As the film progresses, Kenny's speech impediment becomes naturalised, and the site of mockery

shifts to the new Australian. When this shift occurs, Australian audiences begin laughing at themselves.

A number of techniques employed by films like *Kenny*, *The Castle* and *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* construct a completely sympathetic reading of the battler character type, while at the same time building the narrative emphasis around the male characters in the film. Such techniques include a preoccupation with realism or authenticity, blue-collar sentimentality, and the demonisation of classism, culture and education. As a result, the audience is invited to cheer for Kenny, and either dislike or dismiss characters that behave negatively towards him. Another technique is to marginalise strong female characters in the narrative, portraying them as selfish, lazy, and insensitive. The scenes featuring Kenny's ex-wife are clearly constructed from a male perspective. In this scene, Kenny is calm, polite and sensitive towards his rude, unkind, bitter ex-wife. This scene achieves a further shift towards him as both the narrative emphasis and ideal national type portrayed by presenting the female alternative in such an unproblematic, negative manner. During the Melbourne Cup scenes, Kenny is chastised by two women for allowing his son to perform portaloo maintenance; but the same two women are then seen later urinating in the Flemington Racecourse car park. The site of mockery is the hypocrisy of these two reprehensible, affluent women. The humour is bolstered by the visual comedy achieved with the grotesque imagery of these women urinating all over themselves in the middle of a public car park. These scenes feature irrational women devoid of pathos, whilst espousing the virtues of blue-collar labour, and the virtuosity of the men who proudly perform it. There is a clear moral, socio-cultural divide in these scenes, yet in this instance it is illustrated through one that is gender based.

In Australian cinema, the battler figure is largely constructed through an affiliation with the lower socio-economic class, and the underdog, anti-hero narrative. These two factors are co-dependant, as financial disadvantage often plays a role in ensuring the immenseness of the obstacles, which are usually only an issue because of the battler's poverty. Milner (2009, p. 5) states that through cinema, the battler figure has evolved from representing the unionised, low-paid worker, to the modern-day battlers displaying "a self-reliant, individualist drive…powered by Australia's move into the enterprise culture". Australian cinema and culture alike celebrate the battler myth amid much conjecture about what constitutes a battler, as the battler- myth is very much open to interpretation.

5.3 THE NATIONAL TYPE GONE WILD: THE OCKER AS A CULTURAL JAILBREAK.

In the 1960s, Barry Humphries began writing a risqué comic strip titled "Barry McKenzie", which has published by British magazine *Private Eye*. Through his comic strip, Humphries spun tales of a fictional, vulgar Australian male living in London. The comedy of the *Barry McKenzie* films lies in the juxtaposition of the grotesque Australian against British sensibility. Humphries eventually released a book of his works in 1968. While the book was sold in Britain, it was instantly banned from Australia due to its perceived vulgarity. Fortunately, Prime Minister John Gorton wanted to invest in projects reflecting his incredibly strong nationalistic ideals, and as a result the Australian government funded a film version of the book. Outfitted with 1940s attire and vernacular, Barry McKenzie was himself an arguably outdated stereotype even at the time, yet Barry was received by Australian audiences as the ideal spokesperson for their national image. With *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, Humphries wanted to shatter the pre-conceived notions held of Australians. This misconception of Australia's true national image resulted from films directed by Raymond Longford (*The Sentimental Bloke*), Ken G Hall (*On Our Selection*), and Charles Chauvel (*Jedda*), directors described by Barrett Hodsdon (1995, p. 158) as the "stalwarts…of the golden age of early Australian cinema". Collectively, their rendering of the average Australian was cleverly contrived in that they were considered an accurate, believable representation of the national image. Released in 1972, *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* was a statement of freedom, its aim to characterise and essentially cartoonify the Australian male outlandishly, after years of restrictive commitment to believable character construction. McKenzie was the original ocker of Australian cinema. Through the ocker stereotype, Humphries was re-imagining the Australian, just as Longford, Hall and Chauvel had, the difference being that this re-imagining was bold, anarchic, obvious, and ultimately a source of socio-cultural embarrassment.

In his journal article "Anyhow…where d'yer get it, mate?" Robert Crawford (2007, p. 2) concluded that the 1970s ocker "was the latest incarnation in a long line of national types". Crofts (1996, p. 123) claimed the ocker to be defined by its "anti-establishment" roots and ideologies. Allan James Thomas (1996, p. 101), author of "Camping Out: Landscape, Masculinity and Performance in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*" applauds the ocker's "contempt for institutional authority", and Neil Rattigan (1988, p. 100) reinforces this, describing the "ocker stereotype" as a symbol of "non-conformism, irreverence and

impudence". Because of the response from the Australian public was one of reverence and nationalistic pride, the *Barry McKenzie* films were interpreted by many as an attack on Australian culture, or lack thereof. Thus these films came to be considered dangerous as they had been misinterpreted as to be accurate representations of the Australian male and Australian culture in general. Mayer and McFarlane (1992, p. 148) make the interesting point that *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* was a "parodic exploration of the Australian male". Despite this criticism, these films were taken seriously from a cultural standpoint, eliciting hostile reactions from a number of conservative political figures.

The Australian government formed the Australian Film Commission in 1976, which at the time, according to Hodsdon (1995, p. 162), acted as "a protectorate for a whole range of non-commercial film activities and organizations, encompassing fringe film and video production". During this time of Australian film history, the focus of arts related funding shifted from popular, purely entertaining films, to films which facilitated what Hodsdon describes as "a new-found desire for artistic self-consciousness with a search for national identity". Stephen Crofts (1996) opines:

> The feature film came to acquire a strong emotional attachment as that arena of audio-visual production, which would set itself resolutely against Australian vulgarity, anti-intellectualism, and those for whom the ocker seemed to be not just a figure of fun but a point of active identification. (p. 77).

Crofts (1996) considered *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* "an act of exorcism" for comedian Barry Humphries, "wherein he showed his deep loathing of the Ocker". O'Regan (1996, p. 255) also discusses the cinematic act of "othering the Australian". He believes this is a strategic form of character construction, tailor-made to suit both local and international audiences, that manages "British and Australian audiences through a repertoire of stereotypes". Even in the sequel, *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own* (Beresford, 1974), malicious racism is still present as part of the humour, with one scene featuring McKenzie referring to a female African-English woman as an "abo". Humphries and Beresford, the writers of the film, anticipated that the local reception of Barry McKenzie would be of disgust and disownment, audiences laughing *at* him rather than *with* him. Instead, McKenzie was embraced as a folkloric hero in his native Australia, and celebrated as the original cinematic Australian abroad by international audiences. Due to the lack of international understanding of Australian culture, "Bazza" was globally accepted as a true representation of the Australian people. This misunderstanding was certainly

not disputed locally either, as in the closing sequence of *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own*, then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam greets Barry at Sydney Airport with the words, "Welcome Barry. Australia is proud of you" (Beresford, 1974).

Australian Screen Office curator Paul Byrnes (2010) defines *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972) as a satire in disguise, a disguise perhaps too effective for Australian audiences of that period. It seems Australian audiences at the time perceived the film to be a celebration of national identity, rather than a humorous critique. Internationally, according to Byrnes, McKenzie confirmed the British opinion of "the boorish colonial Australian". The political and cultural conflict regarding Australia's national cinema arose when Australian audiences loved McKenzie, despite his being, to use Byrnes' characterisation, "loud, aggressive, unsophisticated, often drunk and crude, barely educated and unintelligible." It is arguable that it was the simple character positioning of McKenzie that ensured this response from local audiences. Assigning him the role as the other naturally elicited sympathy from Australian audiences. At that time, allowing McKenzie to emerge triumphant against "The Poms" was a powerfully symbolic statement of Australia's independence from its British origins. O'Regan (1996, p. 51) agrees also, either intentionally or inadvertently, encouraging audiences, both local and international, to believe in its "Australianness".

Perhaps one of the reasons Australia's public representatives sought to divorce the ocker stereotype from Australia's national identity is that it has been often seen to hold hands with outdated, xenophobic attitudes. Some ocker ideologies, such as being "dinkum" or "true-blue", carry connotations of racial purity or Anglophilic tendencies. More recently, John Jarratt's darkly comic turn as murderous bushman Mick Taylor in Greg McLean's *Wolf Creek* clearly played with the ocker stereotype, depicting a blood-thirsty hunter of human tourist prey. Here the ocker is demonised, perhaps more extremely than usual, but ockerish characters featured in films released in the last 20 years (*Strictly Ballroom*, *Muriel's Wedding*, *Welcome to Woop Woop*, *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, *Wolf Creek*), have been portrayed negatively, as antagonistic characters.

When theorising the cause behind the demise of the ocker film, O'Regan (cited in O'Regan & Moran, 1989, p. 96) suggests "its insistence on signs of disunity and difference, rather than unity and accord, of vulgarity and obtuseness rather than sensitivity and sophistication made it at odds with what was expected from Australian films by the mid-1970s" Perhaps the nascent cinematic canonisation of a relatively well-known Australian cartoon character sparked an

unexpected response from both British and Australian audiences. Humphries himself did not expect Barry McKenzie to be so readily befriended by the Australian public. His intentional rejection of realism when constructing the character seemed to be in vain – as a nation Australia seems to revel in being perceived as über-male, quirky, unpredictable, and overtly Australian. Most of all, Barry McKenzie and Australia's reaction to him seem to reflect a national aversion to being rationalised, or defined. Barry McKenzie seemingly fit the Australian national image quite well.

CONCLUSION

Characterising Australian comedy cinema is a negotiation: of presence and absence; of over-representation and underrepresentation; of canonisation and vilification; and of narrative journeys that end in reward and punishment. At the core of the divide is clearly the issue of gender. The nature, perception and treatment of characters is arguably dictated by their gender, and their willingness to comply with Australia's socio-cultural values, which are agreed to be patriarchal in nature. The examination of these films, and the characters that inhabit them, has almost become a guide for what to embrace, and what to avoid in terms of characterisation.

After examining these character types individually, one can see how they differ and better understand how they fit within the socio-cultural and historical context of their respective eras. It can also divined that even though certain characteristics are exclusive to each character type, distinct commonalities bind them. They all aim to represent the average Australian, and do so through a working class, Anglo-Celtic male character; they all abide by Australia's deeply patriarchal national values; they all elicit feelings of nostalgia in that each longs for an Australia of the past even while espousing key messages that call for socio-cultural change; and they all in some ways are deserving of their immense national appeal, while being problematic at the same time as a result.

The most confounding matter concerns the genesis and perpetuation of the larrikin, the battler, the ocker, and the bloke, along with subsequent character types, such as the bogan. Embedded in this concern is the concept of characterisation, of relegating character to type which seems at odds with Australia's egalitarian values. Collins argues some of the films discussed here, and the character types they showcase, inhabit a "long-standing, popular and, arguably, deeply

conservative strand in Australian film comedy." If this is so, then Australian comedy cinema's representation of the national type is arguably problematic, and deserves to be problematised.

6 WOMEN, ACTION, AND COMEDY IN AUSTRALIAN AND HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

There are a number of Australian action comedies with a male protagonist. *The Odd Angry Shot* (Jeffrey, 1979), *Bad Eggs* (Martin, 2003), *Crocodile Dundee*, *The Crocodile Hunter: Collision Course* (Stainton, 2002), *Dirty Deeds* (Caesar, 2002), *Two Hands* (Jordan, 1999), *Griff the Invisible* (Ford, 2010), *Reckless Kelly* (Serious, 1993) and Let's *Get Skase* (George, 2001) are but a few of many examples. If the question posed, is asking the name of an Australian action comedy film featuring a female protagonist, there will be a struggle to do so; there really are none of which to speak. Then it could be theorised that the world of comedy cinema, violence and women do not mix. Perhaps a cultural view exists that women being exposed to violence, either perpetrator or victim, should never be a point of humour. *Kick Ass* (Vaughn, 2010), *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000), *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* (Reitman, 2006), films from what O'Regan (1996, p. 113) terms the "dominant Hollywood cinema", are prime examples of female comic protagonists operating within the action comedy subgenre to varying degrees of success. Some argue that in Hollywood cinema, the violent woman is present to question or arguably invalidate the patriarchal order. Hillary Neroni (2005, p. 18), author of *The violent woman: femininity, narrative, and violence in contemporary American cinema,* contends that violent women "emerge most forcefully at moments of ideological crisis". As a result, such a character induces a questioning of symbolic gender identities, which in turn destabilizes the ideological order.

The lack of Australian action comedies with female protagonists results in limitations to examining the relationship between gender, sexuality, violence, and heroic protagonism in the context of Australian and Hollywood comedy cinema. In order to understand the nature of the relationship between women and violence in this context, films from Australian and non-Australian cinemas featuring female, or feminine comic violence must be considered. Thus, feminine comic violence will be analysed in the Australian films *Muriel's Wedding*, *Welcome to Woop Woop*, and *Suburban Mayhem*, as well as the Hollywood films *Kick Ass*, *Kiss Ass 2* (Wadlow, 2013), *Charlie's Angels* and *My Super Ex-Girlfriend.* The following discusses how the female characters in question are characterised by their respective films. The discussion of Australian film examples will examine the cause, nature and effect of each character's violent behaviour. It will be found that all of these factors act to exclude women from becoming heroic protagonists within the context of Australian action comedy. That said, the Hollywood films examined herein are not necessarily unproblematic representations of female action comedy heroes either. The central characters are fantastical and highly-stylised, as is the nature of their

heroics. This of course potentially compromises their 'believability' as heroes. All three narratives assign their central characters with a relationship focus, which undeniably brings a softness to the characters and their narrative journey. Nevertheless, these films and their central characters are successful action comedies featuring strong female protagonists, whereas Australian female characters engaging in comic violence are instead marked by antagonism, and are in turn marginalised for their transgressions.

6.1 THE DEPICTION OF FEMALE COMIC VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION IN AUSTRALIAN COMEDY CINEMA

Typically male comic violence is presented and subsequently viewed as funny, ockerish, or even larrikinesque. For example, the bar room brawl scene is a recurrent scenario in Australian comedy cinema, as featured in films such as *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, *Wake in Fright* (Kotcheff, 1971), *Crocodile Dundee* and *Australia*. When such a scene is performed by men, it is typically slapstick, humorously raucous, and undeniably light-hearted and fun in nature. One scene illustrating this is the bar room brawl scene in *Crocodile Dundee*. It is a scene featuring classic slapstick comedy, its purpose being to present the Australian male to an international audience by juxtaposing him against a newly arrived American female. The gladiators are positively characterised, and the nature of their physical violence presents as culturally normalised, most of the bar patrons becoming involved for no explicable reason. In this particular scene, American journalist Sue Charlton (Linda Kozlowski) watches on in silent horror. She presents as vulnerable, foreign, and out of place in this riotous display of Australian physical comedy. She is decidedly excluded from the fun nature of this violence, and arguably this exclusion is predicated on her gender and her nationality.

This scene is distinctly different to the Hibiscus Island Resort bar brawl in *Muriel's Wedding*. There are notable differences in the nature of the violence, the characterisation of the parties involved, the cause behind the violence, and the ensuing consequences. The scene in question features Muriel's former girlfriends Tania and Nicole engaged in what can best be described as a catfight. It is definitely comic in nature, but the humour is largely elicited by the juxtaposition of the catfight against the shots of Rhonda and Muriel singing ABBA's "Waterloo" onstage, fully costumed in shiny attire, and the tropical Queensland location of Hamilton Island, where the Hibiscus Island scenes were filmed. Rather than be presented as an ockerish, naturalised response within the set situation, the violence is a moment of malicious, uncontrollable rage.

The violence is presented as highly unladylike and unbecoming in a social sense, but not necessarily undesirable in an erotic sense; there are definitely sexual undertones to this comic violence. These undertones are inferred and emphasised by the belligerent goading expressed by the male onlookers. Suddenly the male gaze is again in effect; the talent show is no longer on the stage, it is on the ground, and boasting such feats as hair pulling, swearing, scratching, punching, and slapping. The physical altercation is instantly transformed from an intense, physical encounter between two former friends, into a form of erotic entertainment. The nature of Tania and Nicole's violence is directly linked to their cause and effect characterisation. According to Landman (1996, p. 116), Tania and Nicole are "hyperfemme caricatures", guilty of an "over-played femme fatale personae". Their violence is a joke at their expense; a real, emotionally charged fight becomes an erotically violent performance for the male gaze. The altercation itself eventuated because of a dispute over a man, namely Tania's new husband, Chook. Their fight is the result arguably of a form of sexual competition. The scene invites the trivialisation of their violence; it is not a valiant, purposeful act to defend one's honour, as it would likely be seen in a male context; it is a sexy, laughable catfight between two "cocksuckers" with no self-control. That said, the ockerish, overtly Australian uncouthness of the verbal exchange between Tania and Nicole, along with the garish tropical Australian backdrop of Hamilton Island, make this a humorous display of Australian physical comedy that female characters are certainly not excluded from. It is unfortunate that the female action comedy hero as a character type seems to have been excluded from the Australian national cinemascape, an omission *Tasha* seeks to address.

In *Welcome to Woop Woop*. Angie is a comical exaggeration of every bachelor's worst nightmare, a woman who presents as a virginal, innocent, carefree nymphette using the promise of obligation-free casual sex to kidnap a male violently and force him into marriage and fatherhood. Angie as a character is problematic in many ways. In terms of audience response, she is what *In Film Australia*'s Tara Judah (2010) describes as an "overdrawn stereotype" that "deliberately denies a point of access". She is purposely set up as highly antagonistic, and archetypal in terms of gender and nationality – a highly negative representation of the Australian female. There is no middle ground with her; she is either cooking Teddy a post-coital kangaroo and pineapple stew, or beating him senseless. This extreme characterisation

robs her of pathos; she is a monster, an animalistic, sexual nightmare seeking only to please herself and her Alpha male father. She is a character to be laughed at, not with.

As with *Muriel's Wedding*, the violent female is caricatured, sexually attractive yet extremely vulgar. The first love scene of *Welcome to Woop Woop* begins with Angie naked, mounting Teddy, using sexually grotesque catchphrases such as "part me beef curtains", and ending with Angie swinging a blunt object at Teddy's head. There is very little in between, other than a brief discussion of Teddy's marital status. Angie mirrors Tania and Nicole in terms of the horrifically selfish motivations behind her violence. She too, is first in pursuit, then in defence of the patriarchal order. Comedy is apparent in Angie's psychotic, cavewoman-like interpretation of the courtship process. Despite her quirky, offbeat transgressions, Angie still fits the heteropatriarchal ideal; she is sexually desirable, which facilitates her ability to lure Teddy into a hasty, psychotic rendition of the heterosexual marriage. However, she finds she cannot have both; her comically violent methods for maintaining control over Teddy cause him to escape their marriage, which sends her into a murderous, violent rage. At this point of the narrative, she arguably becomes what Landman (1996) describes as a "feminine failure". (p. 114)

Katrina Skinner, notable in *Suburban Mayhem*, shares a number of characteristics with Tania, Nicole and Angie. The difference between her and these characters is her sense of narrative agency, and her role in the violent acts depicted in the film. D. Bruno Starrs (2006, p. 22) describes her as "the master manipulator…manoeuvring the dim-witted men in her life to commit the ultimate proof of their love: murder". This leads to another factor that sets her apart from Angie, Tania and Nicole; she is successful in achieving a sense of agency in the narrative. Yet, she identifies with the others in the use of her sexuality to achieve progress towards her goals. She never works towards her goal, but fuels men's ardour with sexual favours, then dispatches them to act on their behalf. This arguably weakens her as a threatening figure. She is powerless without her sexuality, for only after she seduces a male accomplice does she become a violent threat. Like the other women, she is motivated by a significant man in her life, her brother Danny. Then to rob her of ownership over her violence, she is declared mentally ill, because it simply wouldn't make sense for a female to be so violent, evil, or powerful.

Certain conclusions can be drawn after examining these three films. One clear consistency among the female leading characters seen engaging in comic violence within the films in focus

is that they are all at least partially antagonistic in nature. According to Hilary Neroni (2005), this pattern is also present in a global cinema context:

> Beginning in the late 1980s, depictions of the violent woman began to cross generic boundaries. She has appeared in action films, neo-noirs, comedies and dramas. This widening of the violent woman's berth suggests that the antagonism – the ideological disruption that the appearance of the violent woman marks – has become more dramatically exposed than in earlier eras. (p. 19)

None of these women could be perceived as heroes; they are all presented as what a woman shouldn't be: aggressive in terms of violence, manner and sexuality. All the women are pictured as severe transgressions of the female role model; the manner is cautionary rather than positive. All three are either denied their happy ending, or in the case of *Suburban Mayhem*'s Katrina, her happy ending is not only presented as sick and demented, but also an injustice. Perhaps the most definitive conclusion to be drawn is that of the weakening effect their common motivation has on their violent tendencies and acts. The female characters discussed are all violent in the pursuit and defence of, or frustrated by the loss of a successful male partnership. All three are driven either by jealousy, romantic desire, or both. A male's affections, approval and loyalty are factors that drive them to violence. They are presented as weak-minded, morally defunct, unvirtuous individuals, whose actions are negotiated through negative narrative outcomes. Neroni (2005, p. 22) argues that in contemporary American cinema, the "antagonism of the sexual relationship has become imagined to be increasingly precarious". However, in the context of Australian comedy cinema, violent women are generally motivated entirely by matters pertaining to the sexual relationship. Any association between sex and violence will undoubtedly carry negative connotations, regardless of gender. Until the link between female comic violence and sexual desire is challenged, creating Australian female action comedy heroes will remain a problematic exercise.

6.2 THE FEMALE ACTION COMEDY HERO IN HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

Gender difference in action comedy is not an issue exclusive to Australian national cinema. In "Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness: The Bad girls of Action Film and Comic Books", a chapter taken from *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, Jeffrey A. Brown (2004, p. 74) begs the question: "When women are portrayed as tough in contemporary film, are they being allowed access to a position of empowerment, or are they merely being further fetishized

as dangerous sex objects?". The manner in which such characters are received depends on their presentation, particularly in regard to the nature, context and motivation behind their toughness. Perhaps this is the reason for female action heroes such as *Charlie's Angels*' Natalie Cook (Cameron Diaz), Dylan Sanders (Drew Barrymore) and Alex Munday (Lucy Liu), *Kick Ass*' Hit Girl (Chloë Grace Moretz) and *My Super Ex-Girlfriend*s Jenny Johnson (Uma Thurman) being such powerful and complex character studies.

The 2000 film adaptation of 1970s television series *Charlie's Angels* (Goldberg & Spelling, 1976) follows the adventures of private investigators Natalie Cook, Dylan Sanders and Alex Munday who work for a mysterious millionaire named Charlie (John Forsythe), who, like the television series' version of the character, remains unseen throughout the film. The three "Angels", Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz and Lucy Liu, are all well-established actors in both the action and comedy genre. *Charlie's Angels* is in some ways a positive example of an action comedy film with female protagonists, yet it is in other ways a problematic example. The promotional poster for the film arguably encapsulates this conflict between a female character's heroic status, and the propensity to highlight her sex appeal. The poster features the three "Angels" facing the camera (positioned at a low angle), wearing head-to-toe black. Each figure strikes a physically imposing, non-erotic, confident pose. As figures they could be defined as what Elizabeth Hills (1999, p. 38) describes as "figurative males". Underneath the three figures lies the tagline, "get some action" ("Charlie's Angels (Movie Poster)," 2000). The poster invites the viewer to respect the three central characters as action heroes, whilst acknowledging the tendency to sexualise such characters.

The success of the female action comedy characters in *Charlie's Angels* and *My Super-Ex-Girlfriend* is in part due to the relevant credibility of the actresses who play them. It is a complex task to measure the level of a film's "success" in the context of Australian national cinema, however this is not the case for Hollywood films. Their success is measured partly by critical acclaim, but mostly by financial gain. In his book *Hollywood: Critical concepts in media and cultural studies*, Thomas Schatz (2004, p. 107) writes, "the American film industry has always been like other industries. All have had a common goal: making the highest possible profits". *Charlie's Angels* was indeed a financial success, grossing $303,210,625 at the box office, a return nearly three times its $106,770,148 budget. Drew Barrymore, who both starred in and co-produced *Charlie's Angels*, has developed a reputation for playing both physically and psychologically strong female characters over the course of her 36-year film career. At the age of 9, she played

a child with pyrokinetic powers in the film adaptation of Stephen King's horror novel *Firestarter* (Lester, 1985). Since then she has played a gun-obsessed teen vigilante in *Guncrazy* (Davis, 1992), a fugitive in the Western film *Bad Girls* (Kaplan, 1994), and roller derby competitor Smashley Simpson in her directorial debut *Whip It* (Barrymore, 2009). However, an action comedy protagonist, male or female, needs to have a comic, affable qualities, which Barrymore has displayed over the years in a number of comedy films including *Wayne's World 2* (Surjik, 1993), *The Wedding Singer* (Coraci, 1998) and *Fever Pitch* (Farrelly & Farrelly, 2005), which she also co-produced. As an actress, director, and co-founder of her production company, Flower Films, Barrymore has made long-term, concerted efforts both on and off-screen to establish and maintain her status as a powerful-yet-approachable Hollywood figure, which arguably enables her to be easily digested as an action comedy heroine. Jacinda Read (2004, p. 212), author of “"Once upon a time, there were three little girls...": girls, violence, and *Charlie's Angels*” aligns Barrymore with post-feminism, and what Angela McRobbie (cited in Read, 2004, p. 212) terms “girlie culture”. McRobbie describes “girlie culture” as “a phenomenon of female self-empowerment that emerged in the 1990s, with with movies like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, activist groups Riot Grrrl, and book's like Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Bitch*.” Barrymore's creative and financial control over many of her film projects has also allowed her access to roles that solidify her post-feminist public image. This in turn has had a positive effect on her success as a female action comedy heroine in Hollywood cinema.

Uma Thurman, star of the action comedy *My Super Ex-Girlfriend*, has also developed a strong reputation as an action star, perhaps most famously in her role as The Bride in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* series (a character she co-created with Tarantino). In the case of *Kill Bill*, Thurman has a sense of authorship and ownership of the character she plays, which encourages an active identification with The Bride, named by *Empire Online* as one of the top 100 film characters of all time ("100 Greatest Movie Characters of All Time," 2010). In *My Super Ex-Girlfriend*, Thurman forays into the action comedy genre, playing Jenny Johnson, a woman trying to negotiate a normal dating relationship with her superhero identity as G-Girl. Her superhero powers were accidentally acquired from radiation exposure, and are triggered by jealousy, insecurity, and feelings of rejection she experiences in her relationship with Matt (Luke Wilson). Critical responses to *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* have been mixed. Tamar Jeffers McDonald (2007, p. 107) author of *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, writes that *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* “blends the superhero film and the romantic comedy to poke fun at both cycles”. Adversely, Lisa Purse (2011, p. 81), accuses the film of “using comedy as a containment

strategy…where the display of female super-powers is contained within situations that also manage to subject the action heroine to varying levels of humiliation". Ultimately, this film arguably illustrates the risk of linking an action woman's powers with her emotions. Not only that, *My Super Ex-Girlfriend*'s central character also views her superhero powers as a hindrance rather than an asset, because it they interfere with her romantic interests. Jenny's preoccupation with romantic relationships arguably weaken her as a female action comedy hero.

In *Kick Ass*, Hit Girl as a character is not burdened by a preoccupation with romantic relationships. In the first instalment of the *Kick Ass* series, Hit Girl was a child, therefore she was not sexualised. Arguably this allowed Hit Girl to be recognised for her heroic powers in a non-sexual context. Hit Girl often uses her age and gender as a mask to lure her enemies into a false sense of security; but the central character Dave Lizewski is guilty of the same, a geeky-looking teen in a laughable green and yellow costume hardly cuts a threatening frame. In the first *Kick Ass* film, Dave Lizewski acted as a male counterpart, mirroring such problematic elements of Hit Girl as a female action comedy hero. In the sequel, *Kick Ass 2* (Wadlow, 2013), Hit Girl gives up being a vigilante, becomes a cheerleader, and falls in love with Lizewski. For Hit Girl, reaching sexual maturity effectively cues a shift in her character becoming Mindy, a cheerleader seeking social acceptance from her peers. Mindy's gravitation to these gender role expectations is at times a point of parody in the film, with Mindy ultimately reverting to her Hit Girl persona for the final action sequence of the film. However, in the following scene, Mindy shares her first kiss with Lizewski, and in doing so, loses her male heroic counterpart by sexualising their relationship.

There are common elements in all three films that could be viewed as problematic. Each of the three films feature action scenes with highly-stylised, choreographed violence. Jacinda Read (2004, p. 217), author of “"Once upon a time, there were three little girls...": girls, violence, and *Charlie's Angels*” describes one particular action sequence in *Charlie's Angels* as “clearly choreographed and edited to the music track…punctuated by the Angel's iconic poses”. Read acknowledges and discusses the connection between dance and violence in modern action cinema, but argues films such as *West Side Story* (Wise & Robbins, 1961) suggest this connection is not gender-specific. Comic violence by nature is highly choreographed, as comedy is all about timing. However, there is arguably a difference between action choreography and dance choreography, and arguably *West Side Story* is better known for the latter. A fight sequence should be presented not merely as a choreographed performance, but as a physical conflict

that progresses the narrative. Hit Girl as a female action comedy hero inflicts and incurs the most physical damage, which arguably ratifies her credibility as an action hero.

Perhaps the most problematic element of the Hollywood characters discussed is they are all fantastical and highly-stylised, with traits that are more akin to the superhero than the action hero. They are all characters with alter-egos, unlike male actions heroes such as John MacClane of *Die Hard* (McTiernan, 1988), who gets to be John McClane all the time. Sherrie Inness (1999, p. 47) argues that the female action hero's use of masquerade and disguise is to placate the viewer by softening the "toughness" of her image. In this instance Inness refers to characters such and Charlie's Angels and the Bionic Woman masquerading in highly feminised disguises (as beauty contestants, for example). This serves to infer that the "heroic" side of these characters is just another disguise, an act rather than a characteristic. Nevertheless, the fact that Hollywood cinema has a number of female action comedy heroes to discuss puts it in greater stead than Australian national cinema.

7. *TASHA* AS A PROBLEMATISATION OF AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL COMEDY CINEMA

Tasha, the film component of this creative research project, tells the story of a young woman's quest to regain control over her life through comical acts of bravery and heroism. The film begins at Tasha's local Well Fair office, where she is having a humorously unsuccessful meeting with her young, gangly case manager Ned. Her welfare payments are suspended, so in desperation she contacts her ex-boyfriend Trent to ask for financial assistance. He and his new girlfriend Kirsty aggressively reject her request. Seeing no other alternative, Tasha successfully applies for a $5000 loan with local pawnbroker Cashies. On her way home from Cashies, Tasha stumbles upon two men harassing 11-year-old Stevie on his front lawn. They are Chad and Scott, former members of the Scrimegour Academy, Tasha's family-run ninjutsu dojo. Chad and Scott are taking Stevie's tiny, old television as collateral for his mother Hayley's unpaid Cashies loan. Tasha ambushes Chad and Scott, managing to fight them off with her rusty ninjutsu skills. Tasha enters Stevie's residence to discover that Hayley is a drug addict.

Against her father Greg's wishes, Tasha resumes her practice of ninjutsu. Via a threatening letter, she is summoned by Chad and Scott to meet with Grand Master Wayne Stubbs, who destroyed the Scrimegour Academy years earlier by breaking Greg's arm and poaching all of his students. Tasha receives a letter from Cashies stating that she already owes $1750 in interest. Stevie finds Tasha training in a local park, where he tests her reflexes by throwing various projectiles at her. Tasha gives Stevie a number of shuriken for protection. Stevie follows Tasha to Stubbs Dojo. Tasha agrees to fight Wayne after he offers her $5000. Tasha also agrees to do a photo shoot for Rolph magazine to promote the fight. Tasha is shocked to discover that Rolph is a men's magazine, and her photo shoot is a bikini spread showcasing Kirsty's new swimwear line, Riski swimwear. Tasha abandons the shoot, leading the magazine to digitally composite her head on Kirsty's body, and publish the results. Tasha and Wayne continue their preparation for their upcoming fight, until Hayley and Stevie are once again attacked by Chad and Scott. Tasha responds by threatening to withdraw from the fight. Wayne reveals that he owns the Cashies that approved Tasha's loan, and he knows about the amount of money she owes.

Whilst driving Tasha to the fight, Greg confronts her about the fight. Tasha storms off, tossing Chad and Scott's threatening letter on the front seat. Inspired by her late mother, Tasha fights

Wayne. After reading the letter, Greg races to Stubbs Dojo and confronts Chad and Scott in Wayne's office. Stevie also arrives at the dojo after stumbling across a poster promoting the fight. He saves Greg by throwing a shuriken at Chads arm. Tasha wins the fight with a tap out in the second round after twisting Wayne's nipple, then trapping him in an armbar hold. The film closes with Greg, Stevie and Tasha emerging victorious from the dojo.

As the title of this chapter suggests, *Tasha* is intended to be a problematisation of Australian national comedy cinema. This chapter explains how this problematisation was achieved, and reflects upon the outcomes as they apply to the theoretical framework used throughout this exegesis. A level of understanding will be attained by examining *Tasha* in the following ways: as a problematisation of gender as a gendered renegotiation of the national type as a response to the suburban family in Australian comedy cinema; and most importantly, as an Australian comedy film. The first sub-chapter, examines the most prominent way *Tasha* represents an attempt to negotiate the boundaries of Australian comedy cinema. Statistically, the female protagonists, let alone the female action comedy heroes are a veritable rarity in the Australian national comedy cinema landscape. *Tasha* is examined by reading the character of Tasha Scrimegour as a performance of "representational gaps". Tasha as a gendered renegotiation of the national type, discusses the importance of her gender in her efforts as a character to be a "renegotiation" of the Australian national type, the working class, Anglo-Celtic male. Here she is read as a female larrikin, a character type synonymous with Australian comedy cinema. She is then a response to battler mythology which is, as previously argued, one of the key hallmarks of Australian comedy cinema characterisation. She is a disruption of the national image', by being a response to ocker cinema. Additionally, Tasha is a treatment of the suburban family comedy.

"*Tasha* as a response to the suburban family in Australian comedy cinema" presents *Tasha*'s treatment of the key family figures in the film, and how this treatment is a problematisation of Australian national comedy cinema's characteristic handling of such figures. This is achieved by undertaking an examination of the mother, daughter, and father figures featured in the film. Finally *Tasha* is discussed as an Australian comedy film. Under inquiry will be *Tasha*'s cinematic interpretation of Australian national cinema's characteristics. This chapter will also observe Tasha's "performance" as an Australian comedy film character as defined. Ultimately this chapter details the role of landscape, identity, culture, and characterisation in *Tasha*'s cinematic problematisation of Australian cinema. The film is an effective problematisation of Australian

comedy cinema. The discussion which follows asserts that *Tasha* successfully demonstrates an understanding of the nature of Australian comedy cinema. This section also explains how Tasha, the character, enriches the current understanding of the characteristics, and future possibilities of Australian comedy cinema.

7.1 TASHA THE AUSTRALIAN FEMALE ACTION COMEDY HERO: A PERFORMANCE OF REPRESENTATIONAL GAPS

The following will discuss the action, the comedy, and the heroism of Tasha, the Australian female action comedy hero. The nature of female comic violence is problematic. *Tasha* is a problematisation of the pre-dominant nature of female comic violence in Australian comedy cinema. It was very important to maintain control over Tasha as a comic character and vital to dictate how and why she was a funny character. She does not become sexualised as a fighter, despite the attempts of others to present her as artificial. The characterisation of her as a physical threat is never cause of mockery; in the fight scenes, she may be the other, but she belongs. Any actions that could potentially invalidate her as an action comedy hero are effectively countered by a male character engaging in similar actions. The idea of Tasha as an action comedy hero begins as a fantasy, then slowly evolves to the real as the fight scenes become more real and intense. The choreographed, stylised action in *Tasha* is designed to empower her representationally. Tasha is also a problematisation of female protagonism in Australian comedy cinema. The film is a performance of representational gaps, the key example being the female action comedy hero.

"The Depiction of Female Comic Violence in Australian Comedy Cinema" argues that the erotic nature of female comic violence is problematic. As a response to the pre-dominant depiction of this phenomenon in Australian comedy cinema, Tasha's violence is never exploitative, never unnecessary; like any virtuous hero, Tasha uses violence to rescue and defend. When this is not the case, it is usually a momentary loss of control that is framed as an understandable expression of anger. This is more reflective of male comic violence., When cinematic action women are discussed, their sexuality undeniably robs them of power and agency, which are the cornerstone of Tasha's success as an action comedy hero; she is a physically attractive young female who is powerful, virtuous, undistracted by men and male attention. Her violence is measured, purposeful; and certainly not a performance for the male gaze. The style of choreography differs from the "dance" style of choreography seen in the Hollywood film examples discussed in the previous chapter.

Tasha's performance as an action comedy hero is also defined as and by the way she is juxtaposed with the character, Kirsty. This juxtaposition is not one of masculine being measured against feminine; it is of subject and object; hero and a hyper-femme caricature; and most importantly, positive female model versus a toxic female model. This juxtaposition is central during the scene featuring the phone call between Trent and Tasha, then eventually Kirsty. During this scene the key similarities between Kirsty and Tasha become apparent; the duo commit the same violent act, damaging a mobile phone; they both swear and they are both rude to each other and to Trent. However, in this scene the two characters are separated in appearance, sexuality, behaviour and violence. Their juxtaposition in terms of these factors creates the binary opposition between these two characters. This is the point in the narrative where the relationship between Trent and Tasha ceases. Unlike *My Super Ex-Girlfriend*, I did not want Tasha's actions to be motivated or triggered by her relationship with Trent.

Tasha is a story of growth, of personal belief, of a hero's search for identity. Where in Australian national cinema could a character such as Tasha come of age? As a woman, in the film she becomes a hero, a fighter. Her developing faith in her abilities as a fighter control the nature of her role not only in the fight scenes but also the film overall. Presenting this slow but steady transformation purposely encourages the audience to echo her growing self-belief, and sense of agency. Tasha's violence at first seems fantastic, then it slowly becomes more real. The fantastic violence is employed during the first two fight sequences, the first official fight scene points to her self-doubt entering her unconscious dreaming. The feeling of helplessness she has about her financial situation is manifested in the dream sequence in which she is physically attacked by Ned (Tim Hamilton), her welfare caseworker. In reality, Ned is awkward, gangly, and aesthetically unthreatening; yet in her dream he is demonic, powerful, and unmerciful. In her waking life, he has considerable control over her life situation; this infuriates her. His exercise of this control makes her feel weak and desperate in his presence and this feeling of weakness is transferred to the physical inferiority she displays during the fight scene in question. This is the only occasion wherein Tasha is completely defeated during the narrative, the battle taking place in her mind. The comical use of videogame-style visual and audio effects presents her fear of him as symbolic and imagined. Through highly stylised cinematography, choreography, and comically excessive action, audiences are introduced to the idea of Tasha as an action heroine. This idea is a fantasy that becomes real.

The violence in *Tasha* is at times farcical and comical which is often the case in action comedy, but it is never exploitative, never erotic. Any level of tactical misconduct is either echoed by each fighter, or punished either by a referee, or a narrative outcome. Tasha's misconduct does not reward immoral, violent behaviour. Choosing not to reward such behaviour sends a powerful message: girls can fight, can fight fairly, and can win justly. In the final fight scene, Tasha's nemesis Wayne (Rob Lovas) is the first to resort to fighting dirty (by kicking Tasha in the breasts. This happened for a few reasons, the main one being that it presents Wayne antagonistically, and invites a negative audience response. Wayne is the villain, and Tasha is subsequently the larrikinesque hero who is then permitted to deliver a retaliatory kick to Wayne's crotch. The kick was important, inferring that Tasha's abilities as a fighter were significant enough to compel Wayne to resort to such a tactic. This low-brow fighting tactic was not only comical but symbolic – it links weakness and sensitivity with gender-specificity, and the referee's disallowance of such tactics emphasised the importance of equality in this fight. This scene was designed to be a performance of socio-political values disguised as a genuine fight contest.

Tasha could be perceived as an "unlikely hero". She is physically smaller than her adversaries, and ninjutsu, her chosen martial art, is less brutal than MMA, the style practised by her opponents. To counter this disadvantage it would have been both convenient and somewhat allowable to place a dangerous weapon in her hand during combat. Ninjutsu features use of weaponry such as shuriken, sais, staffs, sickles, spears, knives. She has these weapons in her possession at certain points in the narrative, but she never uses them; the only shuriken-like object she throws is a pirated DVD copy of *Australia.* The fact that she has weaponry assigns her power and agency; that she chooses not to use them serves to amplify this assignation. *Tasha* is an offbeat interpretation of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, or "hero's journey". In the introduction to the 2004 edition of Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Clarissa Estes (cited in J. Campbell, 2004, p. xxvii) writes "It does not matter how long one has lived, for, you see everything begins with inspiration, and inspiration is ageless —as is the journey". *Tasha* references the feel-good, uplifting qualities of such 80s teen films as *No Retreat, No Surrender* (Yuen, 1986), *The Karate Kid* (Avildsen, 1984), *Sidekicks* (Norris, 1992), and the *3 Ninjas* (Turteltaub, 1992). *Tasha* also takes inspiration from action heroines such as Hit Girl (*Kick Ass*), the Bride (*Kill Bill: Vol 1* (Tarantino, 2003)), and Hilary Swank's performance as Louisa Pierce in *The Next Karate Kid* (Cain, 1994). Adopting qualities rarely seen in an Australian film is a cinematic exploration of Australian national cinema. Doing so problematizes it further,

highlighting what the genre arguably lacks – aspirational and extraordinary female figures with traits that are rare individually, and usually absent collectively. *Tasha* problematizes Australian national cinema's tendency to celebrate ordinariness, and to cause socio-culturally the Australian national image through cinema to be ordinary.

The nature of Tasha's physical heroics is a reply to the exploitative, farcical, erotically charged violence expressed by the female characters explored in "The Depiction of Female Comic Violence in Australian Comedy Cinema". During the fight scene with Chad (Phil Casella) and Scott (Andrew Adam), Tasha is feared by Chad, and attacked without mercy by Scott. Her opponents are punished for underestimating her abilities as a fighter. However an endeavour was made to normalise Tasha's violence, her adversaries finally scuttling away in their modified Ford Falcon. The cinematography of this fight scene facilitates the reading of Tasha as an action comedy hero. The initial kick she delivers is shown by a shot of her lower leg. Momentarily, Tasha's action comedy hero is visually genderless, a mysterious figure coming to the aid of suburban serial pest Stevie (Reese Symington). During this scene, the camera looks up at Tasha, inviting the audience to perceive her as heroic.

Character motivation was so important in framing Tasha as the action comedy hero. The motivations between the violent women discussed in "The Depiction of Violence in Australian Comedy Cinema" were primarily selfish, and often sexual in nature. When they are violent, they are violent towards either other women, or passive, non-violent men. The character of Wayne, and the conflict he shared with Tasha is key to ratifying her place as the film's action comedy hero. He functioned effectively as her nemesis, her emotional investment in their conflict being non-sexual, and based mostly on family, pride, and protection. Wayne could *never* be an ex-boyfriend, a potential love interest, a "sex symbol".

Creating Tasha as an action comedy hero was a delicate balancing act. It was vital to construct her through her role in action sequences, the style and nature of her role as a comic character, and her role as the film's central protagonist. Her interaction with male characters was a key factor in maintaining her authenticity as an action comedy hero. At various times throughout the narrative, she was a daughter, friend, enemy, opponent or protector of the male characters in the film. This broad-spectrum of interactions also facilitated her safe guidance through the hero's journey, a narrative path most commonly traversed by male characters. As a result, her

performance as the action comedy hero character type is naturalised within the Australian comedy cinema landscape.

7.2 TASHA AS A GENDERED RENEGOTIATION OF THE NATIONAL TYPE'

TASHA AS A FEMALE "LARRAKIN"

A number of different definitions for the word larrikin have been noted. The following will discuss larrikinism in the pop-cultural sense of the term. *MSN Encarta's World English Dictionary* (Wilentz, 2010) offers three separate definitions of the term, defining larrikin as either "an unconventional or nonconformist person, especially in public life", "a mischievous or playful person", and even a "lout". *The Macquarie Dictionary* ("larrikin, n.3," 2006) defines a larrikin as "an uncultivated, rowdy, but good-hearted person". These definitive characteristics of the larrikin apply to Tasha. She embodies a duality being at the same time unconventional, non-conformist, and very suburban; and she is rowdy, yet good-hearted, sharing these qualities with Bill Garvin, the Sentimental Bloke.

How is Tasha a larrikin? What makes her "unconventional, non-conformist'? Arguably the most non-conformist trait is her gender. According to *The Macquarie Dictionary* ("larrikin," 2003), the term larrikin is somehow associated with the name Larry, a shortened version of Lawrence; thus inevitably, the term has been mainly associated with male figures, imagined or real. It is poignant that one of Australian national cinema's most prevalent national character types is directly linked with a male given name. Name is identity, and this name is undeniably male in origin and socio-cultural association, application, or both. This reading of the larrikin character type is emblematic of the boundaries denying females the opportunity to embody the national image. This is the reason Darryl Kerrigan is Australia's most loved cinema character. As it seems Tasha's gender precludes her from being considered a larrikin, Alex Nell was encouraged to perform Tasha as a larrikin. To inspire a larrikinesque performance, Nell was directed to portray Tasha as unrefined, roguish, playful, defiant, and even very Australian'.

Raymond Longford, director of *The Sentimental Bloke*, was a key influence being a pioneer in renegotiating the national type in terms of self-identification and accessibility. Through the Bloke', he created a character with which both working and middle-class Australians identified; a man searching for his place in civilised society whilst struggling with his anti-authoritarian, larrikin ways. Tasha too faces these ordeals, and utilises both social and slapstick comedy to explore this inner transformation from undisciplined, dole-cheating, cask-wine drinking layabout to focussed, virtuous fighter ready to rebuild the Scrimegour Ninjutsu Academy. The

key was to balance the absurd with the real. Character identification doesn't occur through her quest to defeat Wayne Stubbs and rebuild her family's Wangara-based Ninjutsu "dynasty", but through the motivations and desires behind the ambition. The audience can identify with her financial situation, and her desire for parental pride and approval. These are the narrative and thematic preoccupations of Australian national comedy cinema.

Longford practised this balance of the real and the absurd with his *The Sentimental Bloke*. His commitment to realism, in terms of casting, storytelling and direction, began with his cinematic renditions of C.J Dennis' classic poems, and sparked a national cinematic trend that arguably defines Australian national cinema. John Berenyi (2008) asserts that Australians have a "certain expectation of Australian movies", that they be "down to Earth", concerned with stories about "social issues", and that they are "realistic". *The Sentimental Bloke* contributed to the formation of such generic expectations, the film best displaying Longford's efforts to canonise the ordinary Australian; to create a character designed to present as naturally quirky and loveable. This is how Tasha was intended to be presented; she seeks to balance the quirky with the ordinary. Just as transformation and socio-cultural renegotiation are at the centre of *The Sentimental Bloke*'s character construction, the concept of transformation played heavily on the conceptualization of Tasha. Like *The Sentimental Bloke*, *Tasha* aims to transform the national type to mark emblematically a need for change in Australia's socio-cultural representation through cinema. *Tasha* endeavours to revolutionise the Australian comedy protagonist without rendering her inaccessible. In the case of the Bloke, this is accomplished through "softening" Bill's character through his relationship with Doreen; Tasha is "softened" through her developing relationship with Stevie. Through taking him under her wing, she becomes loveable, claiming a mentor like status which strengthens her position both in their relationship, and the narrative overall.

Tasha features characters with certain working class characteristics, such as a lack of social refinement, higher education, and loyalty. However, an effort is made not to assign these characters with the lack of cultural awareness that has been largely deemed a defining feature of the Australian national cinema's portrayal of the working class. Tasha's cultural awareness is highlighted by linking her love of martial arts with her working class values'; values such as family, loyalty, and a lack of social refinement. Through this exploration there was significant opportunity for situational, social, family, and action comedy. Longford strove to tell the stories of the voiceless, the working class; but also to make these stories present as classless and

egalitarian, accessible to other classes as well. Tasha was definitely depicted as working class, yet she had an outlook more reflective of an ambitious, passionate dreamer, characteristics associated with upper classes. On the other hand, she wasn't exactly "working", in fact the prospect of conventional employment disinterests her. Perhaps she is better described as a much maligned social element, as the larrikin was once: the dole cheat. She was a challenge in herself and the audience is invited to align themselves with such a culturally abject figure – a single, scruffy, dole-cheating female who likes to fight. This alignment was accomplished by showing her changing into a hard-working, goal-oriented individual who seeks to reopen the Scrimegour Ninjutsu Academy, and make an honest, entrepreneurial living. In this way she mirrors Bill Garvin as a socio-cultural negotiation, although possibly more extreme. The way to negotiate this transformation was through comedy, and through a positive projection of such Australian working class values as loyalty, lack of education, and lack of social refinement. To achieve set goals in spite of these socio-cultural disadvantages is perhaps the most Australian of stories.

Loyalty, a trait arguably synonymous with larrikinism, was a major theme of *Tasha*. Tasha displays a loyalty to her chosen martial art, a loyalty to her family dojo, and a loyalty to herself. Class distinction was a central theme of *The Sentimental Bloke*, and larrikinism is often embodied in the working class male. There needed to be a class war of sorts in Tasha, but not based entirely on socio-cultural standing. Class distinction for her was based mostly on affluence. Nobody in Tasha's sphere was especially cultured or educated; money, moral corruption and luck set the characters apart, these elements being central to colonialist literature and mythology. Kirsty and Wayne's motivations and desires were a great comic juxtaposition against those of Tasha. Success with their simplistic and base business ideas relied upon the exploitation of her.

Kirsty, Trent and Wayne are definitely representative of an emerging Australian comedy character type, the nouveau riche, otherwise known as the "cashed up bogan". *Vibewire*'s Tom Langshaw (2012) writes "The cashed up bogan doesn't live in a drab cinderblock housing estate, or a rural outpost honing their hand fishing skills. They're living in McMansions with home-entertainment systems, having long ago replaced their Commodores with Bimmers. We begrudge them their newfound wealth because we see it as somehow having cheated the system, of having leapfrogged income brackets through sheer luck." In 2010, current affairs program *Sunday Night* aired "Boomtown" (Beattie, 2010), which profiled Perth's booming

economy, and the colourful characters at the centre of it. In the report, Bernard Salt, a society columnist for *The Australian* newspaper, labels wealth generated in Western Australia "new money'. According to *Sunday Night*, Western Australia's socio-cultural elite are mining magnates, SMS sex line entrepreneurs, energy drink tycoons, and star footballers. Western Australian dynasties are rarely more than two generations deep, and are often based on high-yield, short-term business models. In this way, *Tasha* is perhaps a West Australian-specific social commentary. Wayne, Kirsty and Trent are definitely representative of this socio-cultural stereotype; they are all antagonistically and comically juxtaposed against Tasha for this very reason. Like *The Sentimental Bloke*, she still fits the paradigm of sympathising with the lower socio-economic classes. She is presented as poorer than her morally corrupt, nouveau riche nemeses, and in certain cases, she is at their financial mercy. But Tasha is an aspiring entrepreneur herself; the difference between her aspirations and those of Kirsty and Wayne is in her desire to rebuild the family dojo being a valiant, honourable pursuit.

In *The Sentimental Bloke*, the socio-cultural national character is not reformed, he becomes more civilised to vie for Doreen's affections. The Bloke remained a larrikin at heart, but desired to forge a new, progressive identity. Tasha also undergoes a civilising transformation, though it does not crush her larrikin spirit. She "gets back into training' after losing her way in a dependant, heteropatriarchal relationship. She aims to rebuild her family dojo, subsequently earning a living from teaching martial arts; she aims to follow her passion. To do that, she needs to pay off her debts, and fight Wayne Stubbs in his arena. All the while she remains quirky, mischievous and irreverent, never taking the situation as seriously as perhaps she should; this approach to her narrative journey is the essence of larrikinism.

TASHA AS A RESPONSE TO BATTLER MYTHOLOGY IN AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL CINEMA

The Macquarie Dictionary ("battler, n.1," 2006) describes a battler as "someone who struggles continually and persistently against heavy odds", "a conscientious worker, especially one living at subsistence level", and even colloquially speaking, a "prostitute". The interesting matter is that apart from "battler" being a colloquial term for "prostitute" meaning, all other interpretations of the word are illustrated with descriptive sentences about men. "Only a battler such as Bob could live here in this wet land and ever hope to survive"; "He had been a battler himself – his family was poor and he had come to the city and worked his way through night school". The consensus of these definitions appears to be that the battler is poor, unambitious, hardworking, and male. *Tasha* reinvents the battler, marginalising it as a peripheral character that Tasha must negotiate with in order to accomplish her narrative goals.

The battler figure is presented through Tasha's father Greg, the stubborn, crippled school traffic warden who has lost all but his pride. Greg is positioned as weak, injured, and failing in his responsibility to exert any control over Tasha. *Tasha* positions the traditional battler figure alongside Tasha to highlight how the battler persona can actually contradict the universal concept of heroism, or heroic values. *The Oxford English Dictionary* ("heroism, n.," 1989) defines heroism as "the action and qualities of a hero; exalted courage, intrepidity, or boldness; heroic conduct". In *Tasha*, the battler is stripped of its traditional position as the central narrative figure. The film presents the battler as a peripheral, sympathetic stereotype, requiring rescue from its central, fantastical, action comedy heroine. This positioning is symbolic of Australia's changing international reputation, after being formerly perceived as a land of battlers, struggling to define itself as an independent nation. Today Australia is prosperous, in a position to help those less fortunate, and an economic stronghold even in times of economic crisis. Australia, with a standard of living that competes with the wealthiest and most powerful nations in the world, continues to cling to the battler personae. In 2002, the Australia Institute (Hamilton, p. x) conducted a survey which concluded that "after decades of sustained economic growth in which average incomes have increase several times over, the 'Aussie battler' has not disappeared from public discourse but has become more prevalent than ever". The report also reveals most Australians surveyed identified as working class (Hamilton, p. 2). Hamilton (2002, p. 26) writes "It is fair to conclude that, using any reasonable definition of 'needs' and 'basic necessities of life', a substantial majority of Australians who experience no

real hardship, and indeed live lives of abundance, believe that they are 'doing it tough'". This model of the Australian national image is politically motivated, informed by a preconceived notion of Australian identity based on colonial hardship, military service and Anglophilic exclusivity, and needing to suffer or "toil" to earn one's place on Australian soil. Australian cinema rarely celebrates individualist heroes. Australians are little Aussie battlers' from humble beginnings, seeming to be content with the perpetuation of this national image. Australians continue to identify actively with characters like Greg, as opposed to characters like Tasha.

The battler has been previously defined as "unremarkable yet quirky, hard-working yet not overly ambitious or educated, with mostly traditional or conservative values and attitudes". Greg definitely fits the battler stereotype, much in the same manner as Kenny Smythe does. Greg's grotesquely mangled arm was a tongue-in-cheek take on Kenny's speech impediment; both are physical and obvious afflictions that interfere with the ability to be perceived as normal'; they cannot help the conditions thrust upon them through no fault of their own. Greg's physical deformity facilitated the comedy and narrative on a number of levels. It both invited audience alignment and provided great opportunities for visual humour. He too is "unremarkable yet quirky", being on a disability pension, but no bludger; he is a battler, working as a crossing guard for a local school to supplement his pension As is the case with Kenny, Greg's choice of occupation is low-skilled, low status, underappreciated public service. Like Kenny, Greg represents core conservative values; he wants Tasha to give up her true passion and drive, stop her "bloody nonsense" and "go out and get a job". His quirkiness is highlighted by nuances in his personality: he is "allergic to hospitals"; he shares Tasha's passion for ninjutsu; and he responds to Tasha's risky exploits with maternal-like nagging, worry, and disapproval.

The battler is a deliberately assembled male type that has inevitably infiltrated the public cognizance, forming part of the Australian national image. It was by arriving at this realisation that Tasha was conceived, not only as a character, but as an ideology, a myth that could potentially be naturalised. Kenny was a deceptive, mythological construction with which Australian viewers and critics alike were enthusiastically aligning themselves. This type of problematic "image-making" arguably invites bolder reconstructions of the national type. *Tasha* is a response to the propensity of Australian national cinema to render the national image in the form of a humble', working class, blue-collar male.

Like Kenny, Greg was highly effective as the carefully positioned, traditional battler figure. He maintains the "hard-done-by", underdog shtick; his impotence serves well in highlighting Tasha's true heroism. In *Tasha*, the battler is relegated to subplot, while the true hero ventures out on her narrative journey to fight on his behalf. Gender-based character expectations are destabilised, and therefore effectively reversed. Tasha was most certainly a response to Australian national cinema's contemporary treatment of the battler figure; the response was definitely to *Kenny* and *The Castle*'s representation of women. In these films, the battler figure is usually pitted against a strong-willed woman, often being presented as an obstacle to overcome. The female characters in *Kenny* are primarily used as a device to enhance audience alliance with Kenny. In a highly comical and exaggerated way, the male battler figure in *Tasha* is often presented as an obstacle to negotiate and overcome.

A FELLOW DISRUPTION OF THE NATIONAL IMAGE: TASHA AS A RESPONSE TO OCKER CINEMA

In the tradition of ocker films such as *Alvin Purple* (Burstall, 1973), *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, *Stork* (Burstall, 1971), and *Eskimo Nell* (M. Campbell, 1975), *Tasha* seeks to cartoonify the Australian, without denying its humanity and pathos. Tasha as a character is an exercise of ocker defiance; she rebels against the gender role expectations assigned to her by Australian comedy cinema. Her quirkiness and irreverent nature nurtures her audience's embrace, reflecting the ocker ethos of characterisation. *Tasha* does not entirely subscribe to this ocker ethos; it rejects the anti-intellectualism and socio-cultural ignorance it celebrates. Tasha is a negotiation of ocker cinema.

Humphries' mission to simplify and satirise the Australian national type outlandishly was a creative catharsis for Australian cinema. After years of "ordinary", overly sentimentalised yet somehow believable Australian stories featuring colonialist ideologies and cultural restraint, Barry McKenzie exploded out of Earl's Court, and into the face of anyone whose knowledge of Australians was restricted only to cinematic representation. He was a re-imagination, a joyously vulgar cartoon brought to life; he was unbelievable in the positive sense. *Tasha* also seeks to characterise and cartoonify the Australian outlandishly. However, instead of rendering the Australian national image as a "site of mockery", *Tasha* problematizes it with affection.

Mayer and McFarlane (1992) deem *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* to be a "parodic exploration of the Australian male". It is possible that *Tasha* will be interpreted as parodic in terms of its comedy, and pure, cynical mockery, somewhat after Humphries; this was not the film's intention. Like *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, *Kenny* and *The Castle*, the site of mockery alternates between Tasha and surrounding characters. In some ways, she certainly fits Neil Rattigan's description of the ocker stereotype, being a symbol of "non-conformism, irreverence, and impudence" (Hicklin, 2013). Deliberate design projected Tasha to represent all these values, and her ocker defiance is aimed squarely at the traditional representation of female protagonists in Australian comedy cinema.

Australian comedy cinema employs quirkiness to elicit active character identification and audience alignment. Since *Barry McKenzie* was a satirical, anti-ocker manifesto, one must assume this was not the intention, but it was most certainly the outcome. Australians were not meant to identify actively with Barry McKenzie, but they did, simply because he fits the national archetype where it counts: he is quirky, heterosexual, proud, nationalistic, Anglo-Celtic yet anti-British, and most importantly, an underdog figure. Tasha needed to symbolise a renegotiation of these characteristics, as she is intended to be a more positive reflection of Australia's national character than Barry who was deemed by many to be a source of deep embarrassment. There is something wonderfully Australian about the defiant embrace of Barry by local audiences; Australians were *meant* to be embarrassed, yet Barry was welcomed as a cinematic cultural attaché. Australian audiences responded to his quirkiness, his politically incorrect, outlandish representation of the average Australian. Like *The Sentimental Bloke*, *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* brings stereotypically offbeat, unsavoury social types into cinema and renegotiates them into characters who define the national type. This renegotiation is so powerful that it changes the national identity; the local reception of *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* and *The Sentimental Bloke* indicates that historically, Australians do not object to being represented by such characters. Tasha is not reflective of the average Australian female, but she represents values and attitudes that are admirable, and are a positive renegotiation of Australia's national identity.

Tasha negotiates the Australian national image through quirkiness and though characters and narrative circumstances that explore the "extraordinary ordinary". Many of the Australian comedies discussed: *Kenny*, *The Castle*, and *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* feature multicultural characters that lack true heart and humanity; they are stereotypes, simplistic stock characters

at which to laugh and jeer. The characters of *Tasha* are created with fondness and respect, even the villains having quirky and offbeat characteristics, as well as pathos. The most static character seemingly was Scott, and the static nature of this character was negotiated by casting a loveable, Egyptian Australian comedian to play him. Even the key antagonist Wayne Stubbs is somewhat endearing; he is such a quirky character that he never quite succeeds as the threatening, villainous mastermind he tries to convey. Wayne Stubbs was hapless, a quality that seems to endear comedy characters to Australian audiences.

Tasha acts as a negotiation of ocker cinema. Historically, ocker cinema has been denounced as an artistic, cultural nadir from which Australian national cinema needed to recover. What followed was an Australian film movement now known as the AFC Genre. Tasha evokes the mass appeal, irreverence and humour of ocker cinema, without succumbing to the temptation to celebrate and effectively endorse the vulgarity and anti-intellectualism for which ocker cinema was denounced. Under modern viewership, it is problematic that characters such as Barry were loved and embraced despite outward displays of malicious socio-cultural ignorance. *Tasha* embraces multiculturalism; it signals a desire to move on from celebrating cultural homogeneity, even among the working class, outer suburban Australians.

Australia's embrace of ocker cinema was a form of rebellion, unsettling the establishment and the intellectuals, whilst delighting local audiences. It was almost as if Australian audiences sensed they were supposed to reject Bazza as a rendition of the national type, but adopted him precisely on this basis. One can only speculate whether *Tasha* would be awarded this same reception, because Tasha seems no more outlandish or offensive than Barry McKenzie as an exploration of the national type. Taking a gendered approach to destabilising and renegotiating the national identity through cinema might be thought of as strange in citing ocker cinema as an important influence. Ocker cinema's treatment of women has often been problematic, from the African-English woman to who Barry McKenzie referred as an "abo" he wouldn't mind sleeping with, to Eskimo Nell, to dear old Aunty Edna, women in ocker cinema have largely been sexual conquests or sexless mother figures. Therefore, the influence of ocker cinema on constructing Tasha was not related to its treatment of women, but its intent to disrupt the national image. Humphries' main intention with Barry McKenzie as a character was to destabilise Australian cinema's interpretation of national identity; and to "shatter the pre-conceived notions held of Australians", both at home, and abroad. The ocker ethos was a hugely important influence while *Tasha* was being written.

7.3 TASHA AS A RESPONSE TO THE SUBURBAN FAMILY IN AUSTRALIAN COMEDY CINEMA

TASHA'S EXPLORATION OF THE MOTHER FIGURE IN AUSTRALIAN COMEDY CINEMA

When it comes to mother figures in Australian comedy cinema narrative, absence is power. Tasha's mother is a powerful authoritative figure, not just being absent but because of it. . The realm of Australian comedy cinema, for primarily comic reasons, presents absent mother figures as moral police, unconsenting supporters of patriarchal values, and the explanation for their children being such abject failures. In each and every presentation the mother figure is rendered an authoritative voice by and in the interests of maintaining patriarchal order. To gain an authoritative status in the narrative, the mother must leave the domestic space, either by death or abandonment. Hayley, Stevie's mother, is a symbolic representation of this effective narrative confinement. Tasha's mother is intended to be a positive renegotiation of all three absent mother stereotypes.

In "Tragic, Abject, Perfect: Marriage, Motherhood and Identity in Australian Suburban Family Comedy", Betty Heslop was identified as a "maternal failure". She was a model of what to avoid when constructing Tasha's mother as a maternal figure. She also had the components of a strong, symbolic character and the 'rage'. But instead of unleashing the fire-power she possessed in a positive, proactive move towards change, she self-implodes, instead delivering a weak close: "Look what *you* did to *me*. Feel guilt about my death". Betty is symbolic of the propensity Australian cinema displays in saddling maternal figures with domestic containment, dependency, victimisation and a toxic sense of guilt. Her character is so discontented with this marginalisation she sets fire to the backyard of her family's castle. Mortimer (2000, p. 10) explains that Betty's "position kills her". *Tasha* explores the mother figure absent in death, but a death resulting from daring, life-fulfilling activities. Instead of saddling her with post-mortem guilt and victimisation, Betty is revered as a mythological hero.

Tasha's mother Tanya employs a form of moral policing. Throughout the narrative, Greg repeatedly moans "think what your mother would say" as a response to Tasha's heroic actions. In this way, she is comically misappropriated by Greg as an unconsenting ally in his amusingly futile quest for patriarchal control. In trying to convince her not to fight Wayne, he quotes

Tasha's mother as saying she wants him to "keep an eye on" Tasha, as "she's got a thirst for danger just like her mother". Here Tanya is presented as the source of Tasha's heroic qualities, such as courage and determination. Greg's presence in the narrative conclusively conveys through actions and characterisation, that these qualities aren't necessarily inherited from him. He is mentally and physically incapacitated; he has a fear of hospitals, is too defeated to reclaim his passion for ninjutsu, and too characteristically weak to control his daughter's behaviour. He is never the heroic parental model Tasha needs to spur her into action.

Tasha's heroism is presented as being inherited from her mother, the three-time "state go-karting champion with "a thirst for danger" that would be "front row centre" at Tasha's "big fight". Even in death, her mother's approval means a great deal, sending an incredibly important message. Scheman (1988, pp. 72-73) concurs that a daughter's "ability to assume public power" is incompatible "with being her mother's daughter". Tasha's mother is presented as a mythological hero that Greg can never compete with as an authority figure. Arguably her absence through death facilitated this presentation. There was an effort to dispel the assumption that Tasha's character is due to the complete absence of a mother figure; even in physical absence, Tanya is still present in Tasha, both in her psyche and in her heroic nature. Tasha is in many ways her "mother's daughter"; a heroic ideal rather than a constant; and a nurturing presence who sacrifices ambition to appease patriarchal expectation.

Scheman (1988, pp. 82-83) argues that a severance of the maternal bond is necessary to obtain a sense of power in the narrative, and to achieve a "happy ending". The author concludes that a strong relationship with a maternal figure denies cinematic heroines an opportunity to fulfil their desires. She also takes issue with "the state of motherlessness (neither having nor being one) that is the requisite for the heroines" (p. 66). Collins (2003, p. 5) argues that access to sexuality and culture "is licensed at the cost of becoming their father's daughters". In *Tasha*, the heroine negotiates both a heroic status, and being "her mother's daughter". While the pretence that Tasha's mother left her family to pursue her goals and dreams seems to sit with a feminist ideology; *Tasha* seeks to avoid the automatic negativity of this that the audience might elicit. *Tasha* asserts that a mother doesn't need to leave the family to pursue narrative goals, which reflects on cinema's tendency to deny heroines a physical maternal bond. Tanya has afforded her the reverence and authority that only a dead parent can acquire through cinema.

In *Suburban Mayhem*, the female Skinners were robbed of agency over their evil nature, because of the narrative's tendency to generate empathy for largely unsympathetic characters. Tanya needed to be presented as the master of her own destiny, to be awarded ownership over her actions and decisions. There needed to be reason, rationale, intent; her death was a consequence of her own brave, daredevil actions. Such things build strength in absent characters. Katrina's mother was maligned by a number of factors: her abandonment of family; her rejection of a kind, gentle husband; and the misgivings of her maternal replacement. To avoid this demonisation, Tanya needed to be valiant; and any negative characterisation had to be avoided as it would have made Greg a martyr.

In *Suburban Mayhem*, Katrina's seemingly delusional thoughts about her father are facilitated by her view that her mother's abandonment was an escape from her father's patriarchal grasp. She is determined to see her father as the enemy, a decision that costs her credibility as a protagonist and disallows her pathos. Unlike the father/daughter relationship in *Muriel's Wedding* and *Suburban Mayhem*, Greg is not positioned as Tasha's adversary. A natural conflict occurred over Tasha's actions, but she never actively rebels against her father simply to antagonise him. Any defiance was committed for her father's benefit or protection; any patriarchal control to escape wasn't present; and fatherly, well-meaning protectiveness was apparent.

Hayley is the only physically present mother in the narrative; thus it was inevitable that Hayley and Tasha's mother Tanya would be a point of comparison and juxtaposition during the narrative. Tanya, like Angela Skinner, is a very strong presence, but Hayley is representative of the abject, maternal failure seen in *Suburban Mayhem*, *Kenny*, or *Muriel's Wedding*, but presented with much more sympathy and pathos. In *Suburban Mayhem*, the pitiable maternal figure is a ghost who has bred a successor in Katrina; and in *Muriel's Wedding*, the mother is a forgotten, zombie-like presence, easy to ignore, an object of unadulterated pity. The character of these mother figures offers little opportunity for change. Their children are grown, and are becoming abject failures themselves. Tanya's influence upon her character was key to Tasha following the hero's path. To emphasise how Tasha's mother subverts the abject maternal failure role, Hayley was placed as an abject maternal figure within the narrative for juxtaposition.

As the maternal figure failure in *Tasha*, Hayley is presented as powerless, in need of rescue, but unwilling to accept it. She rejects Tasha as the heroic figure, wanting only to be left alone in

the prison-like confines of her domestic space. She was obviously in a heterosexual relationship at some point, Stevie being the result, but she is now alone and neglectful of her maternal responsibilities. Hayley is weakened by her addiction, unable to be proactive. After she is beaten up by Chad and Scott for the second time, Stevie drags her out of the house to seek refuge with Tasha. Stevie's actions allude to both his acceptance of Hayley's helplessness, and his faith in Tasha as a protective, parental figure. Hayley is resistant to an alliance with Tasha, as she sees her as a rival maternal influence on Stevie. She sees Tasha's virtue and strength of character as a threat that only highlights her weaknesses further.

Hayley is presented not only as a maternal failure, but a feminist failure as well. She is an anti-feminist character, aggressive only towards other women, and a victim of men. Her character was inspired by other characters such as Tracy Heart (Cate Blanchett) from *Little Fish*, Honey Barbara (Helen Jones) from *Bliss* (Lawrence, 1985), Anna (Saskia Post) and The Girl (Deanna Bond) from *Dogs in Space* (Lowenstein, 1986). These tragic female characters present suburbia as a bleak, claustrophobic universe. Her decisive narrative actions, such as taking out a high interest loan, succumbing to her addiction, and refusing to accept Tasha's help, are presented as being irrational and counter-productive, yet not out of character. In her first scene she is literally on her knees in a filthy living room littered with drug paraphernalia. For the majority of the film, she remains within this world: stagnant, unwilling to change herself or her situation. She passively accepts her static role in the narrative: a "no-good-junkie" mother, weak in will; an abject individual in a fittingly abject situation. This situation is only escaped through the intervention of others; this denies Hayley any sense of narrative agency. Though factors such as age, background and a pre-existing maternal role assigned her, Hayley becomes almost a child-like figure in the familial configuration of Stevie, Tasha and herself.

The strength and nature of the maternal bond shared by Tasha and her late mother Tanya was an important issue when the screenplay was being written. The bond between Tasha and Tanya is indestructible even by death, however Tanya's physical absence necessitated a replacement mother figure for Tasha. The advent of Sindi came as a result of negotiating the physical absence of a mother figure while acknowledging the spiritual presence of a mother figure. Sindi is an interesting exercise in mother figures. As she shares certain physical characteristics with Tasha, marking her as a possible maternal figure for her. Sindi comically inserts herself into Tasha's life as a maternal figure, taking it upon herself to micromanage Tasha in a manner befitting of an overbearing maternal figure. She imposes a sense of judgement on Tasha for

having relied so much on Trent during their relationship. Sindi finds the fact that Tasha doesn't take an active interest in the N.W.A (Neighbourhood Watch Association) objectionable. The latter tolerates Sindi, attempting to feign interest in their conversations, which are always instigated by Sindi. It is she who longs for a sense of family and belonging, who struggles with loneliness and isolation. Sindi's preoccupation with the N.W.A. is a manifestation of her as yet unrealised maternal desires.

Sindi's primary function as a character is to act as a representation of the traditional values espoused by films such as *The Castle*, *Red Dog,* and *Kenny*, while Tasha reflects the insular, less community-focussed socio-cultural values and attitudes of the new Australia. There is a clear generational divide between Sindi and Tasha; each character subscribes to different values and priorities, and has different expectations of self and community. Both are neighbourhood crusaders, each taking their own unique approach to the role. The physical and behavioural characteristics they share establishes a mother/daughter-like bond between them, but this is never strong enough to compete with the bond between Tasha and Tanya.

Reflection on the characters of Tasha, Tanya, Hayley, and Sindi, clearly shows there to be a number of ways to present a maternal figure which explores modes of representation prevalent in Australian national comedy cinema. With each representation comes distinct points of difference. These representations are defined by their physical presence in the narrative, their fulfilment or subversion of socio-cultural ideals attached to maternal figures, and the manner in which and with whom they explore the maternal side of their identity. There are, however, also commonalities in these representations. Each character, whether knowingly, intentionally or not, explores their maternal side, each character acknowledging social expectations of motherhood and its application to them. Failing to do this would have created characters uncharacteristic of Australian national comedy cinema. A negotiation of motherhood is always present in the physical and psychological world of female Australian comedy cinema characters. Whether it is their role as mother or maternal figure, or the concept of motherhood, there is an ever-present expectation that maternal themes and issues will continue to be a significant part of female Australian comedy cinema characterisation.

RE-BUILDING THE SCRIMEGOUR DYNASTY: *TASHA* AS A PROBLEMATISATION OF THE FATHER/DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN AUSTRALIAN COMEDY CINEMA

The Scrimegour Academy was both conceived as a father/daughter, outer-suburban dynasty; a dynasty that was once a source of pride and honour, but now he lies in tatters. The task of rebuilding this dynasty falls to Tasha. The Scrimegour Academy is not just her father's ninjutsu class, it is a familial life force; without it both Greg and Tasha's lives are interrupted. This bond defines their partnership. The father/daughter relationship was a key factor in positioning her as an action comedy hero. Their dynamic relationship is largely supportive, not being defined by the type of power struggle present in the father/daughter relationships featured in films such as *Muriel's Wedding* and *Suburban Mayhem*. Greg, *Tasha*'s main father figure, is not authoritative in nature. He and Tasha's relationship is juxtaposed against the comically heteropatriarchal relationship shared between Kirsty and her father. Tasha is neither defiant to nor compliant with any figure. She is inspired by the memory of her deceased mother, but her narrative actions are directed by her own moral compass. Tasha's ownership of her domestic space was an effective way to prevent her being presented as in any way at the mercy of her father. Both parental figures are a source of comfort and positive influence in *Tasha*. Tasha's physical battleground lies outside the domestic space, and her psychological conflict occurs both internally and with non-familial characters. Father and daughter do have moments of conflict, but these do not have any psychological impact on Tasha or her narrative journey. As a father figure, Greg was employed for socio-cultural negotiation, and as a problematisation of the soft, male authority figure.

Lacan (1977) theorises that the father figure is a figure of law. Therefore, in many of the films discussed (*Suburban Mayhem*, *Muriel's Wedding*), defiance of father can either figuratively or literally mean a defiance of law, of gender role expectations, or socio-cultural expectations. Tasha's actions were not in response to her father's misgivings and disapproval, unlike the acts of daughterly disobedience seen in *Muriel's Wedding* and *Suburban Mayhem*. Greg's resistance is borne out of an ingrained socio-cultural obligation to disapprove of her choice to take on Wayne Stubbs in the Octagon. Greg's misgivings are arguably a socio-culturally guided response.

The father/daughter relationship in *Tasha* is a response to the contentious father/daughter relationships seen in Australian national cinema. There is no stereotypical power struggle in between Tasha and Greg; she loves and respects him, but is free to make her own decisions, thereby feeling it is her duty to protect him. This relationship dynamic is naturalised in *Tasha*. The only time Greg has any true power is when he drives the car. Pulling the vehicle over is him exercising his power so he could prevent Tasha from going ahead with the fight. Instead of assuming Greg is worried about her safety, she reads his objection as a socio-culturally motivated reflex, rather than a genuine protestation. Wayne defeated Greg easily during their confrontation, so understandably Greg perceives Tasha's belief that she can "take on Wayne Stubbs" as irrational, rather than noble or brave. She is insulted as being deemed mentally unstable and irrational, because she rejects being assigned such weak characteristics as those typified by Katrina Skinner, Fran, Muriel and Betty Heslop, Angie and Roslyn in their respective films. Ultimately she triumphs in her narrative journey as a heroic individual, morally supported by her father.

Conversely, Kirsty's positioning and performance in the studio scene is the first and only time her actions have any impact on the narrative; however, there are limitations on her character's ability to act authoritatively. She gains access again into the narrative, a privilege Trent is denied, which results from her father's position of authority. Her power lies almost completely tied to the power of her father: his money, his status and his business associations. When Kirsty arrives at the Rolph magazine photo shoot, she learns that Tasha will be modelling her swimwear instead of well-known WAG, and little-known karate champion, Jessica Bratich. In response, Kirsty immediately summons her father's power as if it were her own. In this scene, Kirsty declares "I am going to fucking ruin you, Craig!", then validates her threat by contacting her father on her pink mobile phone. She does not sense any lack of authenticity in her narrative power; she, as with all the other privileges life afforded her, feels a sense of entitlement. It is power she has rightfully inherited from her father, and will use it to achieve her life goals, as superficial and unimpressive as they may be.

In Australian comedy cinema, father/daughter relationships are often defined by acts of dependency and escape. Unlike *Muriel's Wedding*, *Suburban Mayhem*, or the Dad and Dave films, Tasha does not need to escape from and overcome her father figure to regain control or achieve her goals in the narrative. Her only act of patriarchal escape occurs when she abandons

her father and walks to the dojo, leaving him unable to operate the vehicle properly without her. She doesn't escape her father; she abandons him because he is a distraction at a time she needs to be focused. By abandoning her father, she asserts her authority having the means to make her own way; she alone can complete her narrative journey. She does not need her father, he needs her. She, like Muriel, claims a sense of power at this climax in the narrative; however, unlike Muriel, she does not claim power at the expense of her father. Her exclamation that she believes Tanya would support her rather than echo Greg's disapproval is an exercise in using the absent mother figure as an ideological mouthpiece. Both father and daughter share an acknowledgement of Tanya's position as an absent authority. Greg's posthumous relationship with Tanya is a problematisation of absent mother figures in Australian comedy films such as *Suburban Mayhem* and *Muriel's Wedding*.

Unlike the father/daughter relationships in *Suburban Mayhem* and *Muriel's Wedding*, Greg and Tasha do not subject each other to verbal or emotional abuse. Their relationship is almost like a friendship; they enjoy spending time together, drinking cask wine and watching kung-fu movies. The scene in which Greg is introduced is inspired by the lounge room scenes from *The Castle*. In the latter, watching *Hey Hey, it's Saturday* was a male bonding activity Darryl only shared with his sons. Sal is present during the scene, but does not engage in the bonding; she is preoccupied with housekeeping activities such as cutting out magazine coupons. The father-daughter relationship in *Tasha* is strengthened by mutual interests and respect. This egalitarian relationship subverts Greg's power as a patriarchal figure. Unlike Muriel and Bill, fear does not taint the relationship of Tanya and Greg.

In keeping with Scheman's (1988, p. 67) theories concerning "motherlessness", Muriel is rewarded for her acts of paternal emulation. Paternal emulation is a component of Tasha's character change, but her mother is her strongest influence. In the original screenplay, the final scene of the film, which was cut due to budgetary constraints, features Tasha visiting her mother's grave. In this scene, she lays out some typically masculine items on her mother's headstone, a can of XXXX beer, a packet of Fisherman's Friend, and some go-karting gloves, telling her mother about the fight. This scene reveals that the maternal bond is intact. Scheman (1988, p. 67) quotes literary critic Sandra M. Gilbert, who proclaims that "lost to the daughter… [The mother] nevertheless rules her daughter's life with the injunctions of the culture-mother: "You must bury your mother, you must give yourself to your father". In this context, Scheman supports Gilbert's theory that this parental bond is psychosexual in nature,

and a detachment from mother is necessary for the female character's narrative success. Even beyond the grave, Tasha seeks out her mother's approval. She and Greg share a passion for martial arts, a demonstration of mutual love and respect. Both characters share an idol – the mother figure. The keys to Tasha's successful journey stem from both paternal and maternal influence. Acts of recklessness, bravery and ambition, and the defiance of gender role expectations drive the actions of both parental figures.

Socio-cultural discussion has always been a challenge for Australian national cinema. Social comedies such as *The Castle* have at times been accused by social commentators such as Andrew Bolt (2006) of being preachy as a result of their attempts to integrate challenging socio-cultural discourse into an otherwise flawless endorsement of Australian values. Films such as *Muriel's Wedding* exaggerate their antagonistic characters (such as Bill Heslop) to the point of caricature. While this provides moments of humour, audiences are never invited to empathise with Bill's psychology, his pathos, his human frailty. O'Regan (1996, p. 248) argues that in *Muriel's Wedding*, Australian patriarchy "is unproblematically under investigation, that is the problem". To negate the problematic nature of socio-cultural discussion in Australian comedy cinema, Greg's masculine anxiety is presented as a misunderstanding; it is not merely a socio-cultural, ideological reflex, it is genuine fear resulting from direct past experience. *Tasha*'s socio-cultural discussion endeavours to achieve a sense of balance and integrity. In *Tasha*, audience identification is encouraged with both Tasha and Greg; Greg's backstory includes his role in Tasha's mother's death, which facilitates an understanding of his position, and explains his inability to be objective. Greg and Bill do share similarities: they both want their daughters to "get a job", yet their daughters perceive their father's disappointment to be because of their failure to secure a future based around a heterosexual partnership. This is arguably more to do with feminine anxiety with its blind subscription to gender-based expectations. In the case of Australian comedy cinema's treatment of the father/daughter relationship, it seems the bodies and voices standing in the way of challenging gender-based conformity are both male and female.

The scenes in which Greg is situated in Tasha's domestic space facilitate *Tasha*'s inquiry into both parental figures in Australian comedy cinema. The relationship dynamic between the two is primarily revealed within the domestic space, which is also true of *Muriel's Wedding*, *Suburban Mayhem* and *The Castle*. Father figures are often a significant influence upon the central female protagonist's sense of self-worth, and the relationship they share directly impacts on her

narrative actions. From Muriel's "patriarchal escape", to Katrina's urges to commit patricide inside the family home, to Tracey's entrance to the Kerrigan's living room to seek her father's opinion on her looks, a father figure is central to the daughter figure's desires and motivations.

During his opening scene in *Muriel's Wedding*, Bill Hunter boldly introduces the character of Bill Heslop with his signature gruff machismo. In Bill Heslop's "world", he is Councillor Heslop, and the domestic space is where he holds court, both as a shady businessman and a tyrannical patriarch. The housebound of Heslop children is always exposed to their father's toxic influence. Their ingrained sense of worthlessness facilitates their confinement, and the house's open-plan design encourages his surveillance. Wood (2010, p. 103), author of "Hill's Hoists and Happy Families: Cinematic Yardscapes and Domestic Dreaming", argues that "the family structure is further fragmented by the amount of privacy available within the relatively large house". In the domestic scenes of *Tasha*, Greg is positioned as a guest in the domestic space rather than a co-habitant. Greg and Tasha do not live together, and his presence in the domestic space never extends outside the living room.

Like *The Castle*, *Tasha* is a cultural negotiation; however *Tasha* endeavours to avoid being perceived as an advertisement for retaining Anglo-Celtic homogeneity in the new, multicultural Australia. This is the reason for Greg's obsession with ninjutsu being so important: *Tasha*'s Anglo-Celtic father figure needed to identify with a non-Australian, preferably non-Anglo-Celtic culture, to announce a separation from cultural homogeneity. As a father figure, Darryl Kerrigan models values such as gender role compliance, socio-cultural insularity, and the leading of a simple life. Sal Kerrigan is asked by Darryl and her family to place complete trust in Darryl despite her reasonable doubts about his ability to handle their affairs. Ultimately, thanks to a serendipitous meeting with Lawrence Hammill, QC (Charles 'Bud' Tingwell), Darryl is able to fulfil his role as the film's triumphant protagonist. Lawrence, a male member of the Queen's Council, is certainly representative of Lacan's theory of patriarchal figures. Lawrence's role in *The Castle* appears to suggest that whether it is native title legislation, class warfare, or Australia's sense of nationhood, issues can be solved by looking to the father figure as a "figure of law". In a film that is as much-loved as *The Castle*, such a message could be deemed problematic.

Tasha admires Greg more as an individual, than as a father; they are bound by their love of martial arts, not just their father/daughter relationship. Tasha does not look to him for

protection, she looks to him for kinship and moral support as she faces her narrative obstacles. The national embrace of *The Castle* is an indication that Australians are drawn to the "soft", male, protective authority figure that comes to the rescue. Cashies Man is a fantastical problematisation of such a figure. After the opening scene of the film, Tasha exits the Well Fair office, and stares up at a billboard that reads, "Need cash? Cashies Man has heaps!" The next appearance of Cashies Man in the narrative occurs during the dream sequence where she is fighting Ned her Well Fair case manager in a gloomy forest. In this scene, Cashies Man literally comes to the rescue', defeating Ned, and handing her a promotional pamphlet that reads, "Cashies to the rescue". The following scene shows her leaving Cashies with an approved loan application. The escalation of her heroics runs parallel with the level of financial peril caused by her high interest Cashies loan. Both Greg and the Cashies Man are bearers of a similar message: women should not depend either emotionally or financially upon father figures in order to achieve their objectives.

Greg and Tasha's relationship is not purely supportive. There are times where Greg feels obligated to discourage Tasha's actions in order to protect her. Thus it was important that their relationship be more supportive than combative. The supportive nature of their relationship is identified by actions, not dialogue. When Greg makes a vain attempt to dissuade Tasha from fighting Wayne, he is driving her to the fight venue, a task only possible with Tasha's assistance. When Greg chastises her for getting into fights with Chad and Scott, they are watching kung-fu movies together. When he sees her in her Scrimegour Academy uniform for the first time in years, the expression of joy on his face is undeniable. Greg is not just her "figure of law", as both are devotees of the true "figure of law": the mother. Greg is not socio-culturally homogenous, as an individual, nor as a father. He does not rule Tasha's domestic space, nor does he function as an obstacle. By defying these characteristics of the father figure in Australian comedy cinema, Greg problematizes such figures. At the film's close, the Scrimegour Academy is rebuilt through Tasha's actions. She is responsible for running the academy, and the future of the Scrimegour dynasty is in her hands. Greg, her ever-supportive father, is by her side, encouraging her from this authoritative position.

7.4 TASHA AS AN AUSTRALIAN COMEDY FILM

In May 2012, a test screening of *Tasha* was conducted during a lecture on Australian National Cinema for a Film & Cinema Studies class. While the response was mostly positive, one student declared during the subsequent tutorial discussion that *Tasha* is "everything they hate about Australian cinema." While this statement could be read in a number of ways, it is arguably confirmation that *Tasha* is a veritable cinematic discussion of Australian national cinema. *Tasha* is intended to be a cinematic negotiation of Australian comedy cinema's endeavours to construct and reflect a national identity. The key figure in this "negotiation" is of course Tasha herself. She represents gaps in Australian comedy cinema's depiction of everything Australia's national image; she is female, ambitious, not preoccupied by relationships, and an action hero.

Tasha is a renegotiation of the Australian comedy film. This renegotiation is achieved using a number of comic strategies. One strategy employed is the reappropriation of foreign culture. The film takes inspiration from a Japanese videogame, reappropriating it into the Australian comedy cinema landscape. Another strategy used is "naturalism". The Australian female ninja is naturalised, and Australianised within the context of the Australian comedy film. *Tasha* also problematizes the Australian national image by reinterpreting the dole bludger, a character type often the site of mockery and disdain in Australian comedy cinema. Finally, the use of landscape in Australian comedy cinema is problematized in *Tasha* by cinematically exploring it both visually and narratively as a realm of surrealist fantasy, rather than a vast, featureless, bleak tundra. It is also a cinematic discussion of Australian national cinema; and its construction and negotiation of culture, landscape and family.

Australia has a long history of reappropriating foreign culture, and making it uniquely Australian. One particular example is *The Nugget* (Bennett, 2003). Written and directed by Bill Bennett, *The Nugget* is a fable-like tale of three long-time bogan friends who find what appears to be a $6 million dollar gold nugget on a shared prospecting lease outside Mudgee in Victoria. The instant wealth it brings puts their seemingly solid friendship to the test. In her critical analysis of the film, Ann-Marie Spanjich (2003) writes that *The Nugget* was based on the John Steinbeck novella, *The Pearl* (1954). Bennett (cited in Spanjich, 2003) admitted that he Australianised *The Pearl* after setting out to make a film version of the original story, only to find that wasn't going to be possible. "I found that the film rights weren't available and a started thinking about an Australian equivalent, but in a comedic form". Bennett's Australianisation

of the film involved converting the narrative from a sombre drama into a light-hearted comedy centred on issues of mateship, loyalty, and the trappings of instant wealth. One can only assume that Bennett believed this American story could be successfully told in an Australian way through the use of comic narrative devices, Australian narrative preoccupations, and well-known male Australian comedy actors. Arguably the act of reappropriating the work of iconic American author John Steinbeck for an Australian comedy film was not without risk.

Luckily, Bill Bennett's act of reappropriation and adaptation is not restricted to exchanging the pearl for a gold nugget, even though the title may suggest otherwise; La Paz is exchanged for Mudgee, and a poor Mexican immigrant is replaced by three flannel-clad, affable bogans. *The Nugget* is replete with "Australian" iconography, stereotypes, comedy styling and vernacular, seemingly in an attempt to override the non-Australian nature of the narrative. However, there is something quintessentially Australian about this film, namely its use of the Australian comedy motifs: thematic preoccupations with mateship and loyalty; ocker or bogan archetypes; Australian working class iconography and mannerisms; and the practice of cultural reappropriation. Incidentally, Bennett opts to situate the film in the outback landscape, which is traditionally the setting of dramatic narrative in Australian cinema, *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Noyce, 2002)*, Australia* and *Jedda* (Chauvel, 1955) being a few notable examples.

Like *The Nugget*, the initial inspiration for *Tasha* from the very beginning was not Australian in origin, but the interpretation of it was arguably Australian. The narrative and lead protagonists, in *Tasha* were inspired by a videogame entitled "Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja" (Suzuki, 2007). In his review of the game, *RPGamer*'s Cortney Stone, (2007) writes:

> As the title so blatantly suggests, *Izuna* is the story of an unemployed female ninja and her friends seeking work in a remote village. Upon seeing the village's shining sacred orb, the mischievous title character decides to steal it, even though the villagers told her a few minutes earlier to leave it alone. This angers the gods, for they despise having their shiny orbs molested, and they curse the entire village. It would be simpler to curse only the thieving brat, but that would make the story comprehendible. Izuna sets out to challenge each god, redeem herself, lift the curses, and shame every other female RPG character in history.

"Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja" has a narrative preoccupation with defying authority, alienation, redemption, and reclaiming one's pride and sense of identity. Envisioning an "Australianised" version of this narrative premise began the journey of realising *Tasha* as a film production. The narrative premise, the central characters and the thematic occupations seemed to be tantalisingly adaptable within an Australian comedy film framework. This

premise centres on an ordinary commoner who, according to the Joel Levy (2008, p. 91), author of *Ninja: The Shadow Warrior*, is consistent with ninja mythology as "a parallel part of the ninja myth is that *ninjutsu* developed as a sort of working class or peasant's alternative to the *bushido* of the samurai". Very little of the history and mythology surrounding the ninja archetype is based on actual history. The current understanding or generic representation of the ninja is the result of a centuries-long process of reconstruction, renegotiation, and reappropriation. There are notable parallels between the history of the ninja and ninja mythology, and the history of Australian national comedy cinema.

Tasha is a socio-culturally specific reappropriation of the ninja. The ninja itself is an icon of Japanese culture, yet the label itself has been universally reappropriated by everyone from American comic book writers such as Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, creators of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, to the lead vocalist of South African rap-rave group Die Antwoord. Die Antwoord are coincidentally figureheads of the 'Zef' counter-culture movement described by *MTV*'s Marlon Bishop (2011) as "the downscale culture of blue-collar Afrikaners, the descendants of Dutch homesteaders who have been living in Southern African for almost 500 years." The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Die Antwoord both exemplify the idea of pop-cultural hybridity and reappropriation. The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are the ultimate example of pop-cultural hybridity – four anthropomorphic, pizza-loving, crime-fighting turtles, named after Italian Renaissance artists, who practise the art of ninjutsu from their Manhattan sewer abode. The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles became a global pop-culture phenomenon that was in turn parodied by the Japanese cartoon series *Samurai Pizza Cats*. The term ninja no longer describes a purely Japanese mythological character type; it is now understood as a universal pop-culture icon, and at times a philosophy.

In a feature article Jones, aka Ninja, the lead vocalist of Die Antwoord, tells *Vulture*'s Amos Barshad (2010) "I used to be called Waddy Jones. But I changed my name to Ninja because it's more me. I'm a rapper." Ninja also revealed "when I was a boy, I wanted to be a Ninja. Now I am a man, now I am a Ninja. The girl ninja from Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon was quite spif. I like the way she hid her skills from her master." In *Straight from the Horse's Piel* (Holnaaier, 2010), a short documentary that profiles the band, Jones explains his moniker as being "like Superman is to Clark Kent. The only difference is, I don't take off this fokken (sic) Superman suit". In other words, unlike rapper Eminem's Stan, Beyonce Knowles' Sascha Fierce, or David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust, Ninja isn't a persona, an alter-ego, he temporarily

transforms into a constructed identity that he has become. As Jones declares in a *Pitchfork* interview with Dombal (2010), "[Ninja] not a persona, it's an extension of myself, an exaggerated version of myself". Jones publicly identifies as his interpretation of the ninja, and his band Die Antwoord proudly self identifies as "as a melange of several diverse cultures all mixed into one". What all of the above interpretations of the ninja have in common is a unique, comical quirkiness, a rogue warrior character type, and each is in some way a marginalised representative of the underclass, a socio-cultural cleavage. Therefore, the ninja is a type that is open to being naturalised or Australianised within the Australian comedy cinema landscape.

Rather than merely acknowledge non-Australian, non-Anglo-Celtic cultural interests as found in *The Castle*, certain characters in *Tasha* are defined by them. Muriel's obsession with ABBA is a point of quirkiness, but is never presented as preposterous or laughable. Her love of ABBA is means of escape, a defining feature, an endearing quality. In *The Castle*, Con's embrace of martial arts is a site of mockery, a genuine point of humour. In *Tasha*, her ninja identity can be interpreted as both an endearing, quirky quality and a point of humour. Yet it is also a leveller, a unifier, as it brings positive change to Tasha's life. To her, being a ninja doesn't just involve practising ninjutsu techniques and wearing a Shinobi Shozoku, it is also a point of identity. As a ninja, Tasha has a sense of belonging, a sense of self, and a sense of purpose. The loss of her family's ninjutsu dojo triggers a loss of identity, and explains her descent into underachievement, and a co-dependent relationship. Naturally, a recommencement of ninjutsu spawns a resurgence in her sense of identity and direction; it is the catalyst that aids the progression of her narrative journey. Ninjutsu is an essential component of Tasha's psychology, character arc, and character change.

As is the case with other rituals, compositions, ideologies and pastimes that have contributed to the formation of Australia's sense of national identity, *Tasha* is an exercise in cultural reappropriation. *Tasha*'s exploration of the concept of cultural reappropriation goes further than to merely acknowledge multiculturalism and its presence in Australia's socio-cultural structure. *Tasha* converts ninjutsu, a non-Australian art into a crucial element of Tasha's identity, and the tangible link between central characters. In *Tasha*, martial arts are of notable significance to a diverse range of characters. Within the context of Australian comedy cinema, the unified sense of importance attached to the practice of martial arts presents as comically unusual, and denotes a sense of quirkiness and irreverence. The film is a socio-cultural

negotiation of Australian comedy cinema's treatment of socio-cultural cleavages; characters are unified or divided by their chosen martial art, not by race, gender, or any other socio-cultural divide.

Tasha is a cinematic problematisation of Australian comic character types, the battler and bogan being examples. One particular character type under examination is the dole bludger. *Tasha* approaches its discussion of this somewhat negative Australian type with a level of pathos, achieved by countering Tasha's acts of welfare fraud with a resurgence of her passion of martial arts. This creates a character paradox that humanises her. Even her acts of welfare fraud are a point of humour. The opening shot of *Tasha* shows Tasha's Application for Payment form, which like the Centrelink equivalent, requires her to list her fortnightly job search activity. Her job search activity is obviously fabricated, with job descriptions such as "executive", "professional Googler", and "cask wine taster". Whilst avoiding the inevitable low-skilled, low-income employment that would likely eventuate from any genuine job search activity, Tasha is actively pursuing a passion. She is working towards something important that will afford her personal currency rather than financial capital. She believes ninjutsu will afford her an opportunity to succeed at something, and most importantly, it will allow her to embark on a hero's journey. Not only that, the negative consequences of her flagrant welfare fraud will prove catastrophic, inviting sympathy from the audience, and provide further opportunities to overcome obstacles that are characteristic of the hero's journey. One such incident of incitement lies in her decision to take out a loan with Cashies, a fictional pawnbroker franchise. In 2009, the fifth edition of *The Macquarie Dictionary* added the term "ninja loan" ("ninja loan, n.1," 2009). In this instance, ninja means "no job, no income, and no assets", describing the demographic most targeted by short term, high interest loan providers. In an article entitled "Debt traps in payday loans", Matthew Drummond (2011) details the story of ninja loan borrower Ron Hayes:

> [Hayes] took out a $170 loan from Cash Converters. The loan was to be repaid in a month, along with a $60 fee. That should have been the end of it but somehow it instead sparked a three-year highly dependent relationship. Through 64 loans, Hayes borrowed a grand total of $15,450 and paid $5407 in fees. That's an effective interest rate of 35 per cent. Allowing for the fact that the money was always due in a month, the annualised interest rate on each loan was about 425 per cent.

Tasha's ignorance of the difficultly of a ninja such as herself repaying such a loan leads her into a trap she has no foreseeable way of escaping. Therefore Tasha is a ninja in not only the

Eastern practitioner sense but also in the Western sense too. In the Western sense, Tasha the ninja is a victim; in the Eastern sense she is the hero. Within this character paradox lies another socio-cultural negotiation. Australia is a nation of contradictions, of unity in difference. The character of Tasha is a negotiation of type. She problematizes the dole bludger type, her representation of the dole bludger highlighting the potential for welfare to become a trap, an obstacle in itself rather than necessarily an unquestionably helpful form of financial aid. According to Davidson (2010, p. 30), over half of Centrelink claimants have been receiving payments for over two years. The report also concludes:

Jobless people are more likely to be able to secure low paid jobs – especially casual jobs – than they are to move straight into higher paid, more secure jobs…but many return to joblessness, and many others remain in low paid work over the long term - especially if they were previously unemployed. (p.32)

According to the same report, a socio-cultural bias or stigma is attached to the long-term unemployed. So strong is the social entrenchment of this bludger mythology, that many employers still refuse to hire the long-term unemployed, despite the Australian Government's offers to pay 50% their entire wage" (P. Davidson, 2010). From these findings, one can only conclude that such reluctance to employ the long-term unemployed comes from a collective belief in the dole bludger stereotype. Windschuttle (Eardley & Matheson, 1999) asserts that the Australian public is extremely responsive to inflammatory media coverage concerning dole bludgers because "they represented the conflict between the readers' own desires and the constraints of capitalist society". When a viewer sees Tasha's narrative actions, her status as a welfare recipient may ultimately affect their identification with her. In *Tasha*, they see a dole bludger working hard towards her goal of regaining her martial arts abilities and her physical conditioning. Viewers are encouraged to read Tasha as a hero, defending the young and the vulnerable of her suburban kingdom. Their preconceived notions of the dole bludger may dictate her being seen as an aimless hoodlum, doing nothing of importance on the taxpayer's dollar, all the while making every effort to avoid paid-employment. These negative readings of Tasha are arguably concurrent with the "reader's desires" of which Windschuttle speaks. In reality, a Centrelink recipient fitting Tasha's age, ethnicity, marital status and living arrangements would be afforded an average of $35.79 a day ("Payment rates for Newstart Allowance," 2013). This preconception that welfare cheats are living the dream on such a meagre level of income, is arguably an example of modern Australian mythology.

Tasha is a cinematic, action-comic fantasy set in the outer-northern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia. This location was chosen because *Tasha* aims to represent the new Australia, and suburbia is where most West Australians live. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics:

> In the ten years to 2011, the largest population growth in WA occurred in the outer suburban fringes of Greater Perth. The north-eastern SA2 of Ellenbrook had the largest increase, up by 17,700 people. Canning Vale - East in south-east Perth and Madeley - Darch - Landsdale in the north followed, increasing by 15,600 and 15,300 people respectively. Large growth was also recorded in Butler - Merriwa - Ridgewood (up 14,900 people) in the north-west and Baldivis (13,900) in the south-west.

The question of whether or not Tasha actually owns or rents her residence was never really answered in the film. This is one of several narrative ambiguities intended to invite audience expectations of *Tasha's* landscape, and the central character's place within it. According to Gale Yee (1988, p. 240), "narrative ambiguity is a deliberate stylistic device which engages the reader, seizes the imaginative processes, and creates an interaction with the characters of the story that a more explicitly detailed account does not allow to happen". One of the key characteristics and possible advantages of creating a film within a localised cinema is the potential for the filmmaker to explore the local landscape from a personal perspective, and to share the film with an audience that has a deep understanding of the landscape as well. A local audience watching *Tasha* is likely to question a young single female without a stable income affording the opportunity to rent, let alone own a property in Girrawheen, Western Australia. In a suburb where, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics ("State Suburbs: Girrawheen," 2011), the unemployment rate is 7.1%, significantly higher than the state average of 4.8%, and the full-time employment rate is less than 60%, Tasha's employment status seems to align with the statistical average of the suburb. In actual fact, Tasha Scrimegour's general characteristics seem to align with the same statistical data: 53.7% of Girrawheen residents have Anglo-Celtic ancestry; 49.7% are female; 41.2% are single; 40% claiming to be married and the median age of an unmarried resident in Girrawheen is 27. Yet in this cinematic landscape, Tasha seems quirky, offbeat, and even out of place.

Though the hope is that the film achieves some level of universality, *Tasha* does endeavour to connect with a local audience. The film aims to represent the most populous, culturally diverse, yet cinematically under-represented area of the Australian landscape: suburbia. The fact is, according to the latest Census data ("Estimated Resident Population, Local Government Areas," 2012), 1, 895, 135 people or just over 8.3% of Australia's population, live in the CBD of a capital city; and 2,545,210 people, just over 11.25% of Australia's population, live in either

outer regional or remote areas. Considering the percentage of large budget, financially successful and internationally recognized Australian films set in remote or very remote areas, colloquially known as the outback, it is interesting to note that only 207,138 of Australian residents, or approximately 2.2% of Australia's population actually live there ("Estimated Resident Population, Local Government Areas," 2012). The remaining 18,180,255 of Australian residents, just over 80.37% of Australia's population, live in a suburb. Yet, of the 140 Australian film productions funded by either state or national funding bodies between 2007-2012, only 21 or 15% of the films evaluated, are set or filmed in a suburban location. Interestingly, 32 films representing approximately 23% of the films evaluated, are set or filmed in a rural or bushland setting; this is almost exactly double the percentage of Australians who actually live in such a location. Even more interestingly, 13 films, or nearly 10% of the films evaluated are set or filmed in the outback, which is over four times higher than the percentage of Australian residents who live there. Arid or semi-arid areas of the outback that receive less than 500mm of annual rainfall accounts for 70% of our landscape ("Deserts," 2012).

Tasha is set in the suburbs because not only is suburbia where most Australians live, these are the most culturally diverse areas. According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship's Settlement Reporting Facility (2012), less than 16% of migrants arriving between the 1st of August 2008 and the 31st of July 2013 settled in major cities. Not only that, a report by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (McDonald, Gifford, Webster, Wiseman, & Casey, 2008) states that between 1997 and 2005, less than 10 percent of all new arrivals settled in "non-metropolitan areas" (McDonald, et al., 2008).

Tasha aims to be a film that belongs in the Australian cinema landscape, yet is representative of the current and future Australia. By setting *Tasha* in outer suburbia, the film achieves a connection with Bedwell's (1992) description as the "everyday", not unlike films such as *The Castle*. At the same time, it achieves a sense of quirkiness, fantasy, the dream-like, which places it amongst glitter cycle films such as *Strictly Ballroom*, *Cosi*, and *Muriel's Wedding*. As a cinematic, action-comic fantasy set in the outer-northern suburbs of Western Australia, the film becomes a genuinely unique film celebration of the Australian landscape. *Tasha* is a successful problematisation of Australian national cinema's treatment of landscape, presenting a landscape typically rendered as bleak and mundane in an entirely different way; it has been transformed from a vast, featureless tundra into a quirky, fantastical wonderland.

7.5 CONCLUSION

The focus of this chapter on examining *Tasha* as a problematisation of Australian comedy cinema. *Tasha* as a film, successfully demonstrates a strong understanding of Australian comedy cinema, and Australian national cinema as a whole. The experience of producing *Tasha*, and then reflecting on it as Australian film text, has developed a stronger understanding of Australian comedy cinema. The film is an effective problematisation of gender. It both acknowledges, and attempts to negotiate the boundaries of Australian comedy cinema's historical treatment of gender. Examining Tasha as a female action comedy hero, reveals how *Tasha* is a performance of representational gaps, and how the film exposes the limitations of Australian national comedy cinema. *Tasha* is an invitation to question why such representational gaps exist. Tasha's gender is what differentiates her as an Australian comedy film character, so it was useful to address her in this context.

Tasha is a gendered renegotiation of the national type. The discussion of this assertion intended to make *Tasha*'s gender an issue to others, never to Tasha, or her self-image. The film argues that this gender boundary exists in the realm of Australian comedy cinema, but the film demonstrates that it doesn't necessarily need to be. By making Tasha the hero, and rendering the character fit the national type, as exemplified by her father Greg, passive and dependent upon her, one observes the power of Tasha as a character. *Tasha* is a purposeful exercise in characterisation; it sets an example of what is possible for female characters in Australian comedy cinema.

Tasha problematizes the Australian suburban family as presented in Australian comedy cinema. Examining the mother, father, and daughter characters featured in *Tasha*, applies the same theoretical framework employed in earlier chapter of the exegesis. It is important to understand how the films discussed during this chapter informed the construction, direction, and performance of these characters. Family is a thematic preoccupation of Australian national cinema as a whole, particularly when it comes to Australian comedy cinema. Thus it was important that *Tasha* as a film be no different. However, the film's difference was be found in *Tasha*'s treatment of the character types, and their role in *Tasha*'s efficacy as a problematisation of Australian comedy cinema.

Tasha is a construction reminiscent of Australian national cinema as a whole, and of Australian comedy cinema in particular. It is a cinematic debate of the research question, "What is Australian comedy cinema?" Therefore, it is both an example, and an examination of the Australian comedy film. Like films such as *Muriel's Wedding* and *The Castle*, it is both a celebration and critique of Australian national cinema's preoccupation with landscape, identity, and family. It is a performance of politics, and the performance is hoped to be an amusing exposition of Australian comedy cinema.

8.0 CONCLUSION

It can be argued that Australian comedy cinema is the most honest subgenre of Australian national cinema. *Tasha* is honest in that it reveals a national character, what a nation believes in, what a nation finds laughter and joy in. When describing the nature of British comedy, *Prospect Magazine*'s Stephanie Merritt (cited in Leith, 2011, p. 27) indicates, " I think we do like pathos; we do like the comedy of the loser. We like the comedy of failure—we like characters who are slightly pitiful". In the same *article*, curiously titled "Is British humour dead", British author Sam Leith (2011) comments:

> The idea that national senses of humour can be distinct…is no sort of reactionary fantasy. It is common sense. Humour, in the best sociological and psychological accounts of it we have, is to do with anxiety and with surprise. Both of those things are, one way and another, tribal: they rely on a set of shared assumptions. You don't get a laugh if the taboo you're breaking, or the assumption you're confounding, or the anxiety you're mocking, is not one your audience shares (p. 28).

In the simplest terms, a national sense of humour can be a clear pathway deep into the national psyche; and arguably, a nation's comedy cinema is one of "the best sociological and psychological accounts" on offer. Hence, the importance of creating a solid understanding of a nation's comedy cinema, a research area deserving of deeper, more complex examination.

Forming a better understanding of Australian national comedy cinema has been achieved in this creative research project by addressing key research questions. First, addressing the question, "What is Australian national cinema?", then narrowing the focus to Australian national comedy cinema, "What is Australian national comedy cinema?" The latter is answered through understanding what are the key characteristics of national comedy, and what is absent from this subgenre of Australian national cinema. The response to this key question is the creative film project, *Tasha* and the accompanying exegesis. The nature of this response has been both dictated and reinforced by the nature of the key empirical findings, most of which are of course chapter specific, and will not be readdressed here. However, there are some key outcomes that embody the conclusions drawn by this creative research project as a whole. The following findings encapsulate what has been learnt through travelling this creative research journey.

A highly effective way to both present existing, and produce new film theory is through film itself. *Tasha* is a re-negotiation of a film-type that seems to be most readily embraced by Australian audiences. Films such as *The Castle*, *Kenny*, *Muriel's Wedding*, *Strictly Ballroom*, and *The Adventures of Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert* incorporate features that render them reflective of Australian national cinema. These features are then used as a foundation to incorporate the unfamiliar, the other, and the key thematic messages their presence delivers. This was the primary objective of *Tasha*. Like many of the central characters in the above films, *Tasha* follows the adventures of a central protagonist who one could describe as a loveable "dag", a larrikinesque, anti-authoritarian underdog. Tasha is a character who struggles with her identity, fights to protect her home and family, and negotiate with antagonistic people who try to dissuade her from achieving her desires. She actively defies characters who try to pigeonhole her as someone she is not, and has no desire to be. *Tasha* then incorporates the unfamiliar, the female action comedy hero, into the Australian cinema landscape delivering key socio-cultural messages through a much-loved film type, the Australian comedy film.

Australian national comedy cinema is a cinematic reflection of a nation with a deeply Anglo-Celtic, patriarchal national image. Australians historically have connected deeply with Australian comedy cinema. Of the top five films voted in the Australian Film Institute's online poll for "Australia's Favourite Film" (Australian Film Institute, 2008), three were comedies. The three films were *The Castle*, *Muriel's Wedding* and *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*. According to Screen Australia ("Australia: Top 100 All Time," 2013), as of January 2013, 38 of the 100 highest-grossing Australian films were comedies. These 38 films accrued a box office total of $333,239,688, which accounts for over 41% of the total box office takings of the 100 highest-grossing Australian films. Two of these films, *Kenny* and *The Castle*, resonate with Australian audiences. Newspaper columnists such as Andrew Bolt (2006), Derek Parker (Parker, 2006) and Isabel Hayes (2010) as well as film theorists such as Lisa Milner (2009), Felicity Collins (2007), Huijser Henk (2009), and Stephen Crofts (2001), believe the reason behind this "resonance" is their central characters. Yet, while there is a consensus in this regard, the nature of this character identification is openly debated. The response from those with a more public forum such as the newspaper columnists, is a categorical heralding of these films as the kind that every Australian film should aspire to be. Bolt (2006) muses:

> Kenny, in fact, is rather like many Australians I've grown up with and met, and I like him and the country that produces such people a lot. So, it seems, do the audiences. Without much fuss, this comedy has taken $1 million in its first fortnight, and earned more in the second

week than it did the first. And when that happens - with other Australian films so grim and dour you might as well try selling tickets to a leper show - there might be a lesson in it.

Bolt grew up during the 1960s in rural Tarcoola, where statistically, even as of 2011, the majority of the populace are Anglo-Celtic males. Collins (2007), Crofts (2001) and Henk (2009) deem such films as both critiques, and perpetuators of hegemony, criticise their celebration of homogeneity and ordinariness, and view their mass appeal as somewhat problematic. Collins (2007, p. 154) writes positively, "*Kenny,* as an event in Australian popular culture, legitimizes 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". As has been argued at various points in this exegesis, the mass appeal of such films can be a positive trait in their ability to deliver key messages to an audience. From Darryl Kerrigan's humorous, yet poignant comment about Native Title, to Kenny Smythe's trip to the St. Kilda Gay & Lesbian Pride parade, these films use humour, and the familiarity of the national type to promote the ideology of egalitarianism to all people. They still subscribe to the notion that, while the ordinary Australian lives in a different world to the one in which Andrew Bolt grew up, the national image is still male, Anglo-Celtic, heterosexual, working class, and Australian-born. Hence one of the primary purposes of *Tasha* was to explore whether or not the same resonance would be possible through a protagonist that was not conforming to the Australian national image. One of the main methods to achieve this was to produce *Tasha* as a film belonging to the most popular type of Australian comedy film, the suburban family comedy.

The Australian suburban family comedy is rare, despite their undeniable popularity and relevance to Australian socio-cultural identity. Nine out of ten Australians "live in the suburbs", according to the 2011 Census, and nearly seven out of ten households live as a family unit (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Two out of the top five films voted as "Australia's Favourite Film" (Australian Film Institute, 2008) were suburban family comedies. According to the annual reports of Australian state and federal funding bodies (Boreham, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012; Chambers & Reid, 2010; Chambers & Rowland, 2009; Howie, 2010; Smythe, 2010, 2012; Tosi, 2012), of the 140 Australian state and federally funded projects commissioned between 2007 and 2012, only four, less than 3%) were Australian suburban family comedies. The four films were *Strictly Ballroom* (Luhrmann, 1992), *Muriel's Wedding* (Hogan, 1994), *The Castle* (Sitch, 1997) and *Kenny* (Jacobson, 2006). Of the 53 nominated films mentioned in the official press release for this online poll (O'Brien, 2008), only four were Australian suburban

family comedies. The films in question were *Big Mamma's Boy* (di Chiera, 2011), *Mental* (Hogan, 2012), *Hey Hey its Esther Blueburger* (Randall, 2008) and *My Year Without Sex* (Watt, 2009). Therefore, only two suburban family comedies nominated were not in the top five. To put this in perspective, of the 53 nominated films, 26 were dramas, and only two, *Gallipoli* (Weir, 1981) and *Lantana* (Lawrence, 2001) were amongst the top five.

The Castle is a film with which Australians seem to strongly identify. In a separate survey commissioned by the Australia Day Council of New South Wales in 2010 (cited in Williams & Salter, 2010), 37% of respondents "believe that *The Castle* best represents who we are", and that Darryl Kerrigan was deemed by nearly a quarter of respondents to be their most loved Australian film character. Demographer and social commentator Bernard Salt, who conducted the survey, concluded, "The fact that we are proud of our suburban culture shows self-confidence. We are hardly putting our best foot forward with Darryl Kerrigan but we don't care. Australia is saying, via Darryl, this is who we are and we're proud of it". According to *FilmInk*'s Ashleigh Elliott (2010), "Salt believes these results prove that we love the Aussie battler". These results also reveal both *Muriel's Wedding* and its title character consistently rank amongst the top five as both a "favourite film" and a "character that best represents" Australia. However, as female comedy protagonist, Muriel remains the other in the context of Australian comedy cinema. On the issue of representation, the survey found that "58 percent of Australians believe that Australian films only sometimes accurately represent who we are and captures the real Australia" (Williams & Salter, 2010). The ultimate conclusion to be drawn from this research is that the genre Australians feel best represents them is comedy. Australia's national image, as portrayed through its comedy cinema, is homogenous and worthy of question. It needed to be *problematised*.

Tasha is a problematisation of Australian national comedy cinema. The primary goal of this creative research project was to produce a film that would both facilitate and reflect key research outcomes. At the conclusion of this research journey, it is important to evaluate *Tasha*'s success in facilitating a deeper understanding of Australian comedy cinema through problematisation. In Tom O'Regan's *Australian National Cinema*, there is a chapter entitled "Problematizing Australian National Cinema". In the opening paragraph of this chapter, O'Regan (1996, p. 261) writes, "film-making is a prime domain in which changing socio-cultural problematisations occur, both in front of and behind the camera" (p. 261). Therefore,

reading *Tasha* both as a film text, and as a filmmaking experience is important in understanding it as a problematisation of Australian national comedy cinema. O'Regan (1996, p. 261) points out that *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* was an important cinematic problematisation, because it both embodies the nature of the Australian road movie, a narrative revolving around a physical and symbolic journey having a preoccupation with landscape, identity, socio-cultural issues, and highlights its limitations by "supplying a new angle, a new setting, a novel inflection to an old tale".

The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert is in many ways a product of its environment'. During the period of its conceptualisation, production and release (1990-1994), Australia had approached the end of a lengthy process of repealing state and territory "sodomy laws" which had been in place since colonisation in 1788 (Bull, 1991). Even by the time of the film's release, homosexual intercourse was still a criminal offence under sections 122 and 124 of Tasmania's *Criminal Code Act 1924* (Law Reform Commissioner of Tasmania, 1997). The year of its release also coincided with a landmark human rights complaint (Toonen v. Australia) which ultimately led to the Human Rights (Sexual Conduct) Act 1994 (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 1994). The case put Australia's socio-cultural values, attitudes, and policies under international scrutiny was after being brought before the United Nations Human Rights Committee (*Toonen v. Australia*, 1994). At a time Australia's national character was under examination in this regard; thus a film like *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* truly embodied the power and poignancy of a film's ability to problematise socio-cultural issues. A true problematisation comments upon the problem and then itself becomes part of the solution. *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* achieved this is 1994, and *Tasha* achieves this in 2013 with its performance of representational gaps.

The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert addressed the timely and heated issue of Australia's attitude towards homosexuality by negotiating the presence of the other in a film that is, in many ways, reflective of Australian national cinema. This was achieved in a number of ways. Firstly, it placed a socio-culturally marginalised character type, the drag queen, into a landscape commonly associated with Australia's national image, the outback. The true comic foundation of the film centres on the audience's perception that the central characters do not belong in the outback landscape. *Tasha* inserts a character type typically at odds with Australian national comedy cinema, the female action hero, into an environment synonymous with Australia's most loved comedy films, the suburban landscape. This film doesn't feature outback desert

vistas, bushland, beaches or vast mountain ranges; the dream scene features a three-way fight scene between Tasha and Ned the WellFair Cashies Man; it was the only non-suburban looking environment featured in *Tasha*. This scene was not filmed in a national park, or remote bushland, but at a commercial pine plantation approximately ten minutes' drive from suburban Banksia Grove. This plantation is in fact the site of the real-life suburban nightmare; it is where notorious serial killers David and Catherine Birnie buried Denise Brown, the last of their four murder victims during their infamous, month-long killing spree in 1986 (Kidd, 2001, p. 133). The site is undeniably a fixture in Western Australian suburban mythology being: a notorious dumping ground for murder victims David Brown, Maria Amaro, and David Blenkinsopp (King, 2012; "Man buried then dug up again," 1976, p. 33; "Perth woman acquitted of murder," 2004). It is also where numerous people including 13-month old Vera Reilly and 28-year old Gunar Belte have drowned ("Man Vanishes During Swim In Rough Sea.," 1954; "A toddler's end," 1926, p. 1). It is place associated with fear, danger and even UFO sightings ("July 1999: Gnangara Pine Plantation, Gnangara, Perth, Western Australia," 1999). Not only is the filming location steeped in suburban mythology, this scene was presented in *Tasha* as fantasy. The scene is a symbolic, psychological event, rather than an actual event in Tasha's narrative journey.

Tasha presents suburbia in a fantastical way: colourful, quirky, and a place of unpredictable action and adventure. It *explores* what Graeme Turner (1986, p. 50) describes as a "dominant myth" in Australian film and literature, the problematic relationship between the individual and the environment. He contends further that this relationship is one of "self-surrender", marked by "the construction of enclosure, restriction, and entrapment". Historically, this has been true of Australian comedy cinema's depiction of not only the outback and the bush, but also of Australia's suburban environments. The depiction of these environments is characterised by a physical harshness, which becomes reflected as a psychological harshness.

The Australian outback landscape is presented in films such as *Walkabout* (Roeg, 1971), *Bushfire Moon* (Miller, 1987), and *Jedda* (Chauvel, 1955) as a harsh, unforgiving place of savage beauty, a place dangerous to those for whom it is unfamiliar. The Australian suburban landscape is depicted in films such as *Snowtown* (Kurzel, 2011), *Little Fish*, and *The Boys*, *Cedar Boys* (Caradee, 2009), *West* (Krige, 2007), *Boxing Day* (Stenders, 2007), and *Alexandra's Project* (De Heer, 2005); it is a "construction of enclosure, restriction, and entrapment", where the danger is more psychological than physical. In some ways, the supporting characters populating the suburban

environment in films such as these are part of the landscape. They contribute to the "construction of enclosure, restriction and entrapment", rarely expected to depart from their suburban habitat at the completion of the narrative. Films such as these do not generally portray a positive outcome.

With *Tasha*, her suburban surrounds transform with her along her narrative journey. Her fictional address, 27 Bredhurst Rd, Girrawheen evolves from being a "construction", into an environment actively supporting her progress, rather than restraining it. At this address the narrative begins as the place where she feels isolated, judged, and static and in a general sense, in a state of self-surrender to the mediocrity, anonymity, and loneliness of suburban life; it assumes a mode of representation similar to the one presented in *The Castle*. Her home is ultimately shown to be something precious and sacred, to be defended and protected from unwanted intruders. Finally it metamorphoses into her dojo, her training ground to restore her skills, her physical and mental condition, and her sense of identity.

Like *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, *Tasha* problematized Australian national cinema in the way it explored the theme of family. The film presents two drag queens, Anthony 'Tick' Belrose/ Mitzi Del Bra (Hugo Weaving), Adam Whitely/Felicia Jollygoodfellow (Guy Pearce), and a transsexual, Ralph Waite/ Bernadette Bassenger (Terence Stamp) as a family unit; it has united them with Robert 'Bob' Spart (Bill Hunter), who represents the archetypal Australian male. *Tasha* explores the family theme by placing the daughter figure as the head of the family. In the film *Tasha*, Tasha's father, Greg Scrimegour, is not presented as an authority figure, and the Scrimegour family dynamics include the ever-present, authoritative influence of Tasha's deceased mother. Such a family structure is a 're-negotiation of those often featured in Australian suburban family comedies.

As was the case with *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, *Tasha* also problematized Australian national cinema through its cinematic discussion of identity. By focusing on gender and sexual identity, *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* comments on Australia's socio-cultural identity as a whole. It is a negotiation of Australian national cinema with hat it typically perpetuates or rejects. *Tasha* also endeavours to achieve a similar outcome. In the context of Australian comedy cinema, violent women are often motivated and defined by matters pertaining to a sexual relationship. Any association between sex and violence will undoubtedly carry negative connotations regardless of gender. Until the link between female comic violence

and sexual desire is challenged, creating Australian female action comedy heroes will remain problematic exercise. *Tasha* endeavours to discuss identity in a particularly unique way.

Tasha features both characters and performers from various cultural backgrounds, united in the narrative by their sub-cultural identity and their involvement with martial arts. Many of the characters, including Wayne (Rob Lovas), Chad (Phil Casella), and Ned (Tim Hamilton), were played by individuals formally trained in martial arts, a discipline involving learning physical practices and observing cultural practices. Centring a film narrative on group recreational activity is not uncommon in Australian comedy cinema; there seems to be congruency between such activities and Australian egalitarian ideals. Unlike films such as *Crackerjack* (Maloney, 2002), *Save Your Legs!* (Hicklin, 2013), *Strictly Ballroom* and *Footy Legends* (Do, 2006), *Tasha* features central characters united by their obsession with an individual discipline which is a non-Anglo-Celtic one. Lawn bowls (as featured in *Crackerjack*), cricket (as featured in *Save Your Legs!*), dancesport (as featured in *Strictly Ballroom*), and rugby league (as featured in *Footy Legends*) are all disciplines that originated in Great Britain (Box, 1868, p. 11; Fagan, 2007, p. 5; Perris, 2008, p. 10; Spencer, 1969, p. 33). However, *Tasha* adds an Australian identity to the martial arts discipline by assigning a family-like structure to the two martial arts groups featured in the film (Stubbs Dojo, and Scrimegour Academy). Though Tasha and Wayne fight in the final fight scene, they are supported by their respective "teams", both in the lead up to, during, and after the fight has concluded. *Tasha* aims to re-negotiate Australian comedy cinema as a sub-genre, by incorporating the familiar into the unfamiliar.

Reflecting on the implications and or contribution this creative research project has made to the discourse on Australian national comedy cinema, it could argue the story of a new Australia is told, wherein the Australian female action comedy hero will no longer be an anomaly, with *Tasha* being the first of a film genre. While the film as a whole is a comedy, the action sequences are well-choreographed and skilfully produced because Tasha demands to be taken seriously as an action hero. Her gender is not employed as a novelty or a joke, it is a statement of intent. The manner in which the audience perceives Tasha as an action hero is not something to be controlled. Perhaps Tasha will not be taken seriously as an action hero; she may be seen as just another character in a quirky, offbeat Australian comedy film. It is also possible that the audience perceives *Tasha* as a purely socio-political statement, which hardly bodes well for its success as an Australian comedy. *Tasha* calls upon Australian comedy filmmakers to expand upon the existing boundaries of the Australian comedy cinema landscape. The film shows this

can be achieved while still acknowledging the nature of Australian comedy in its irreverence, larrikinesque characters, its celebration of family, and the powerful messages that can be delivered through this type of film.

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APPENDIX: *Statistical Analysis of Government Funded Film Projects: 2007-2013*

The following is a statistical profile of the 140 film projects that received funding from one or more of the following state and federal film funding bodies: Film Victoria (Film Vic), the South Australian Film Commission (SAFC), Screen Australia (Screen Aus), ScreenNSW, Screen Queensland (Screen Qld), Screen Tasmania (Screen Tas) and ScreenWest. The films have been profiled by genre, narrative and thematic preoccupations, setting, participating funding bodies, and the gender of the film's protagonist.

GENRE

FILM	*ACTION*	*ADVENTURE*	*BIOGRAPHY*	*COMEDY*	*DRAMA*	*HORROR*	*ROMANCE*	*SCI-FI*	*THRILLER*
$9.99									
100 Bloody Acres									
24 Hour Window									
3 Acts of Murder									
33 Postcards									
Accidental Soldier									
Accidents Happen									
Acolytes									
Animal Kingdom									
Arctic blast								x	
At World's End									
Australia									
The Babadook									
Balibo									
Bait 3D									
Beaconsfield									
Beautiful									
Beautiful Kate									
Beauty & the Beast								X	
Beneath Hill 60									
Being Venice									
Big Mamma's Boy									
The Black Balloon									
Blame									
Blessed									
The Boys Are Back									
Bran Nue Dae									
Breeding in Captivity									
Bright Star									
Burning Man									
Cedar Boys									
Charlie and Boots									
Children of the Silk Road									
Closed for Winter									
Coffin Rock									
The Cup									
Daybreakers								x	
Dead Europe									
Death Defying Acts									
December boys									
Drift,									
Dr Plonk.								x	

GENRE

FILM	*ACTION*	*ADVENTURE*	*BIOGRAPHY*	*COMEDY*	*DRAMA*	*HORROR*	*ROMANCE*	*SCI-FI*	*THRILLER*
Dying breed									
Errors of the Human Body									
The Eye of the Storm									
A Few Best Men									
Galore									
Goddess									
Gone									
The Great Mint Swindle									
Griff The Invisible									
Hail									
A Heart Beat Away									
Here I Am									
Hey Hey it's Esther Blueburger									
The Horsemen									
The Hunter									
I Love You Too									
In her skin									
Iron Sky									
Jucy									
The King Is Dead									
The Kings of Mykonos									
Knowing									
Lake Mungo									
The Last Confession of Alexander Pearce									
The Last Ride									
Lore									
Lou									
The Loved Ones									
Lucky Country									
Mabo									
Mad Bastards									
Malibu Shark Attack									
Mary & Max									
Matching Jack									
Mental									
My Mistress									
My Year Without Sex									
Mystery Road									
Nature's Grave									

GENRE

FILM	*ACTION*	*ADVENTURE*	*BIOGRAPHY*	*COMEDY*	*DRAMA*	*HORROR*	*ROMANCE*	*SCI-FI*	*THRILLER*
Needle									
Nim's Island									
Not Suitable For Children									
Oranges and Sunshine									
Patrick									
Personality Plus									
Prime Mover									
The Reckoning									
Red Dog									
Red Hill									
The Reef									
Return to Nim's Island									
Road Kill									
The Rocket									
The Rover									
Samson & Delilah									
The Sapphires									
Satellite Boy									
Savages Crossing									
Save Your Legs!									
The Sculptor									
The Second Coming									
The Secret of Moonacre									
Shadows of the Past									
Sinbad and the Minotaur									
Sisters of War									
The Sleeper									
Sleeping Beauty									
Sleepwalking Theo									
Snowtown									
South Solitary									
The Square									
Stone Bros.									
Storage									
Storm Bound									
Storm warning									
Subdivision									
Summer Coda									
Surviving Georgia									
Swerve									
These Final Hours									
Three Dog Night									

GENRE

FILM	*ACTION*	*ADVENTURE*	*BIOGRAPHY*	*COMEDY*	*DRAMA*	*HORROR*	*ROMANCE*	*SCI-FI*	*THRILLER*
Tomorrow When the War Began									
Toomelah									
Tracks									
The Tree									
Triangle									
The Turning									
Two Fists One Heart									
Two Mothers									
Undertow									
Uninhabited									
Van Diemen's Land									
The Waiting City									
Wasted on the Young									
The Wedding Party									
Wish You Were Here									
Wolf Creek 2									
X									
TOTAL	9	8	11	33	73	15	38	9	44

FILM	*NATIONAL IDENTITY*	*CULTURE*	*FAMILY*	*INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY*	*LANDSCAPE*	*ROMANCE*
$9.99						
100 Bloody Acres						
24 Hour Window						
3 Acts of Murder						
33 Postcards						
Accidental Soldier						
Accidents Happen						
Acolytes						
Animal Kingdom						
Arctic blast						
At World's End,	X					
Australia	X					
The Babadook						
Balibo	X					
Bait 3D	X					
Beaconsfield						
Beautiful						
Beautiful Kate						
Beauty & the Beast						
Beneath Hill 60	X					
Being Venice						
Big Mamma's Boy						
The Black Balloon						
Blame						
Blessed						
The Boys Are Back						
Bran Nue Dae	X					
Breeding in Captivity						
Bright Star						
Burning Man						
Cedar Boys						
Charlie and Boots	X					
Children of the Silk Road						
Closed for Winter						
Coffin Rock						
The Cup	X					
Daybreakers						
Dead Europe						
Death Defying Acts						
December boys						
Drift,	X					
Dr Plonk.						
Dying breed						
Errors of the Human Body						
The Eye of the Storm	X					
A Few Best Men						
Galore						
Goddess						

FILM	*NATIONAL IDENTITY*	*CULTURE*	*FAMILY*	*INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY*	*LANDSCAPE*	*ROMANCE*
Gone		■			■	
The Great Mint Swindle	■		■			
Griff The Invisible				■		■
Hail			■	■		■
A Heart Beat Away						■
Here I Am	■	■	■	■		
Hey Hey it's Esther		■	■			
The Horsemen			■			
The Hunter	■				■	
I Love You Too				■		■
In her skin			■			
Iron Sky		■				
Jucy			■	■		■
The King Is Dead						
The Kings of Mykonos	■	■	■		■	
Knowing			■	■		
Lake Mungo			■	■	■	
The Last Confession	■				■	
The Last Ride			■		■	
Lore		■	■	■		■
Lou			■		■	
The Loved Ones			■	■		■
Lucky Country	■		■		■	
Mabo	■	■		■	■	
Mad Bastards	■	■	■	■	■	
Mary & Max		■	■			
Matching Jack			■			■
Mental			■	■		
My Mistress			■			■
My Year Without			■			
Mystery Road	■	■			■	■
Nature's Grave	■				■	
Needle			■			
Nim's Island			■		■	
Not Suitable For			■			
Oranges and	■	■	■		■	
Patrick						
Personality Plus			■			
Prime Mover	■		■	■	■	
The Reckoning			■			
Red Dog	■		■		■	■
Red Hill	■	■	■		■	
The Reef	■				■	
Return to Nim's			■			
Road Kill	■				■	
The Rocket			■	■	■	
The Rover	■				■	
Samson & Delilah	■	■	■	■	■	■
The Sapphires	■	■	■	■	■	■
Satellite Boy	■	■	■	■	■	

FILM	*NATIONAL IDENTITY*	*CULTURE*	*FAMILY*	*INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY*	*LANDSCAPE*	*ROMANCE*
Savages Crossing	X					
Save Your Legs!	X					
The Sculptor						
The Second Coming						
The Secret of Moonacre						
Shadows of the Past	X					
Sinbad and The Minotaur						
Sisters of War	X					
The Sleeper						
Sleeping Beauty						
Sleepwalking Theo						
Snowtown	X					
South Solitary						
The Square						
Stone Bros.	X					
Storage						
Storm Bound	X					
Storm warning						
Subdivision	X					
Summer Coda						
Surviving Georgia						
Swerve						
These Final Hours						
Three Dog Night	X					
Tomorrow When the War Began	X					
Toomelah						
Tracks	X					
The Tree						
Triangle						
The Turning	X					
Two Fists One Heart						
Two Mothers						
Undertow						
Uninhabited	X					
Van Diemen's Land	X					
The Waiting City						
Wasted on the Young						
The Wedding Party						
Wish You Were Here						
Wolf Creek 2	X					
X						
	45	39	83	56	70	41

SETTING

FILM	*COASTAL*	*FOREIGN*	*LOCAL AS FOREIGN*	*OUTBACK*	*RURAL/BUSHLAND*	*SUBURBAN*	*URBAN*
$9.99							■
100 Bloody Acres							■
24 Hour Window						■	
3 Acts of Murder							
33 Postcards							■
Accidental Soldier		■					
Accidents Happen			■			■	
Acolytes					■		
Animal Kingdom						■	
Arctic blast							■
At World's End	■		■				
Australia				■			
The Babadook						■	
Balibo	■						
Bait 3D		■					
Beaconsfield					■		
Beautiful						■	
Beautiful Kate					■		
Beauty & the Beast			■				
Beneath Hill 60			■				
Being Venice							■
Big Mamma's Boy						■	
The Black Balloon						■	
Blame					■		
Blessed							■
The Boys Are Back	■						
Bran Nue Dae				■			
Breeding in Captivity						■	
Bright Star		■					
Burning Man	■						
Cedar Boys						■	
Charlie and Boots					■		
Children of the Silk Road		■					
Closed for Winter	■						
Coffin Rock					■		
The Cup						■	
Daybreakers			■				
Dead Europe		■				■	
Death Defying Acts		■					
December boys	■						
Drift	■						
Dr Plonk.							■
Dying breed					■		
Errors of the Human Body		■					
The Eye of the Storm	■						
A Few Best Men					■		
Galore						■	
Goddess					■		
Gone	■						
The Great Mint Swindle							■
Griff The Invisible							■
Hail	■						

SETTING

FILM	COASTAL	FOREIGN	LOCAL AS FOREIGN	OUTBACK	RURAL/BUSHLAND	SUBURBAN	URBAN
A Heart Beat Away							
Here I Am							
Hey Hey it's Esther Blueburger							
The Horsemen							
The Hunter							
I Love You Too							
In her skin							
Iron Sky							
Jucy							
The King Is Dead							
The Kings of Mykonos							
Knowing							
Lake Mungo							
The Last Confession of Alexander Pearce							
The Last Ride							
Lore							
Lou							
The Loved Ones							
Lucky Country							
Mabo							
Mad Bastards							
Malibu Shark Attack							
Mary & Max							
Matching Jack							
Mental							
My Mistress							
My Year Without Sex							
Mystery Road							
Nature's Grave							
Needle							
Nim's Island							
Not Suitable For Children							
Oranges and Sunshine							
Patrick							
Personality Plus							
Prime Mover							
The Reckoning							
Red Dog							
Red Hill							
The Reef							
Return to Nim's Island							
Road Kill							
The Rocket							
The Rover							
Samson & Delilah							
The Sapphires							

SETTING

FILM	COASTAL	FOREIGN	LOCAL AS FOREIGN	OUTBACK	RURAL/BUSHLAND	SUBURBAN	URBAN
Satellite Boy				■	■		
Savages Crossing					■		
Save Your Legs!		■				■	
The Sculptor							■
The Second Coming					■		
The Secret of Moonacre			■				
Shadows of the Past					■		
Sinbad and The Minotaur			■				
Sisters of War			■				
The Sleeper							■
Sleeping Beauty							■
Sleepwalking Theo		■					
Snowtown						■	
South Solitary	■						
The Square						■	
Stone Bros.				■			
Storage							■
Storm Bound	■						
Storm warning					■		
Subdivision	■						
Summer Coda					■		
Surviving Georgia					■		
Swerve					■		
These Final Hours					■		
Three Dog Night					■		
Tomorrow When the War Began					■		
Toomelah				■			
Tracks	■			■			
The Tree					■		
Triangle			■				
The Turning							■
Two Fists One Heart							■
Two Mothers	■						
Undertow	■						
Uninhabited	■						
Van Diemen's Land					■		
The Waiting City		■					
Wasted on the Young							
The Wedding Party							■

Wish You Were Here							
Wolf Creek 2							
X							
TOTAL	24	17	13	13	33	24	25

FILM	*FILM VIC*	*SAFC*	*SCREEN AUS*	*SCREEN TAS*	*SCREENNSW*	*SCREEN QLD*	*SCREENWEST*
$9.99							
100 Bloody Acres							
24 Hour Window							
3 Acts of Murder							
33 Postcards							
Accidental Soldier							
Accidents Happen							
Acolytes							
Animal Kingdom							
Arctic blast							
At World's End							
Australia							
The Babadook							
Balibo							
Bait 3D							
Beaconsfield							
Beautiful							
Beautiful Kate							
Beauty & the Beast							
Beneath Hill 60							
Being Venice							
Big Mamma's Boy							
The Black Balloon							
Blame							
Blessed							
The Boys Are Back							
Bran Nue Dae							
Breeding in Captivity							
Bright Star							
Burning Man							
Cedar Boys							
Charlie and Boots							
Children of the Silk Road							
Closed for Winter							
Coffin Rock							
The Cup							
Daybreakers							
Dead Europe							
Death Defying Acts							
December boys							
Drift							
Dr Plonk.							
Dying breed							
Errors of the Human Body							
The Eye of the Storm							

FILM	*FILM VIC*	*SAFC*	*SCREEN AUS*	*SCREEN TAS*	*SCREENNSW*	*SCREEN QLD*	*SCREENWEST*
A Few Best Men							
Galore							
Goddess							
Gone							
The Great Mint Swindle							
Griff The Invisible							
Hail							
A Heart Beat Away							
Here I Am							
Hey Hey it's Esther Blueburger							
The Horsemen							
The Hunter							
I Love You Too							
In her skin							
Iron Sky							
Jucy							
The King Is Dead							
The Kings of Mykonos							
Knowing							
Lake Mungo							
The Last Confession of Alexander Pearce							
The Last Ride							
Lore							
Lou							
The Loved Ones							
Lucky Country							
Mabo							
Mad Bastards							
Malibu Shark Attack							
Mary & Max							
Matching Jack							
Mental							
My Mistress							
My Year Without Sex							
Mystery Road							
Nature's Grave							
Needle							
Nim's Island							
Not Suitable For Children							
Oranges and Sunshine							
Patrick							

FILM	FILM VIC	SAFC	SCREEN AUS	SCREEN TAS	SCREENNSW	SCREEN QLD	SCREENWEST
Personality Plus							
Prime Mover							
The Reckoning							
Red Dog							
Red Hill							
The Reef							
Return to Nim's Island							
Road Kill							
The Rocket							
The Rover							
Samson & Delilah							
The Sapphires							
Satellite Boy							
Savages Crossing							
Save Your Legs!							
The Sculptor							
The Second Coming							
The Secret of Moonacre							
Shadows of the Past							
Sinbad and The Minotaur							
Sisters of War							
The Sleeper							
Sleeping Beauty							
Sleepwalking Theo							
Snowtown							
South Solitary							
The Square							
Stone Bros.							
Storage							
Storm Bound							
Storm warning							
Subdivision							
Summer Coda							
Surviving Georgia							
Swerve							
These Final Hours							
Three Dog Night							
Tomorrow When the War Began							
Toomelah							

FILM	*FILM VIC*	*SAFC*	*SCREEN AUS*	*SCREEN TAS*	*SCREENNSW*	*SCREEN QLD*	*SCREENWEST*
Tracks							
The Tree							
Triangle							
The Turning							
Two Fists One Heart							
Two Mothers							
Undertow							
Uninhabited							
Van Diemen's Land							
The Waiting City							
Wasted on the Young							
The Wedding Party							
Wish You Were Here							
Wolf Creek 2							
X							
TOTAL	30	20	103	7	41	28	17

FILM	*FEMALE PROTAGONIST*	*MALE PROTAGONIST*
$9.99		
100 Bloody Acres		
24 Hour Window		
3 Acts of Murder		
33 Postcards		
Accidental Soldier		
Accidents Happen		
Acolytes		
Animal Kingdom		
Arctic blast		
At World's End,		
Australia		
The Babadook		
Balibo		
Bait 3D		
Beaconsfield		
Beautiful		
Beautiful Kate		
Beauty & the Beast		
Beneath Hill 60		
Being Venice		
Big Mamma's Boy		
The Black Balloon		
Blame		
Blessed		
The Boys Are Back		
Bran Nue Dae		
Breeding in Captivity		
Bright Star		
Burning Man		
Cedar Boys		
Charlie and Boots		
Children of the Silk Road		
Closed for Winter		
Coffin Rock		

PROTAGONIST GENDER

FILM	*FEMALE PROTAGONIST*	*MALE PROTAGONIST*
The Cup		■
Daybreakers		■
Dead Europe		■
Death Defying Acts		■
December boys		■
Drift,		■
Dr Plonk.		■
Dying breed		■
Errors of the Human Body		■
The Eye of the Storm	■	
A Few Best Men		■
Galore	■	
Goddess	■	
Gone		■
The Great Mint Swindle		■
Griff The Invisible		■
Hail		■
A Heart Beat Away		■
Here I Am	■	
Hey Hey it's Esther Blueburger	■	
The Horsemen		■
The Hunter		■
I Love You Too		■
In her skin		■
Iron Sky		■
Jucy	■	
The King Is Dead		■
The Kings of Mykonos		■
Knowing		■
Lake Mungo		■

PROTAGONIST GENDER

FILM	*FEMALE PROTAGONIST*	*MALE PROTAGONIST*
The Last Confession of Alexander Pearce		
The Last Ride		
Lore		
Lou		
The Loved Ones		
Lucky Country		
Mabo		
Mad Bastards		
Malibu Shark Attack		
Mary & Max		
Matching Jack		
Mental		
My Mistress		
My Year Without Sex		
Mystery Road		
Nature's Grave		
Needle		
Nim's Island		
Not Suitable For Children		
Oranges and Sunshine		
Patrick		
Personality Plus		
Prime Mover		
The Reckoning		
Red Dog		
Red Hill		
The Reef		
Return to Nim's Island		
Road Kill		
The Rocket		
The Rover		
Samson & Delilah		

PROTAGONIST GENDER

FILM	*FEMALE PROTAGONIST*	*MALE PROTAGONIST*
The Sapphires	■	
Satellite Boy		■
Savages Crossing		■
Save Your Legs!		■
The Sculptor		■
The Second Coming		■
The Secret of Moonacre	■	
Shadows of the Past		■
Sinbad and The Minotaur		■
Sisters of War	■	
The Sleeper		■
Sleeping Beauty	■	
Sleepwalking Theo		■
Snowtown		■
South Solitary	■	
The Square		■
Stone Bros.		■
Storage		■
Storm Bound		■
Storm warning		■
Subdivision		■
Summer Coda		■
Surviving Georgia	■	
Swerve		■
These Final Hours		■
Three Dog Night		■
Tomorrow When the War Began	■	
Toomelah		■
Tracks	■	
The Tree	■	
Triangle	■	
The Turning		■
Two Fists One Heart		■

PROTAGONIST GENDER

FILM	*FEMALE PROTAGONIST*	*MALE PROTAGONIST*
Two Mothers		
Undertow		
Uninhabited		
Van Diemen's Land		
The Waiting City		
Wasted on the Young		
The Wedding Party		
Wish You Were Here		
Wolf Creek 2		
X		
TOTAL	34	106