

6. Why Do We Make Films? - Inspirations from the Past

In a time when too many contemporary New Zealand films are struggling for relevance (to both the box office and the culture) it's worth remembering that this has not always been the case.

We may agree that the real reason we wish to make films is that we want to have an impact on people's lives, not only our own. But when we start trying to specifically define what types of films we want to make and why it's important that they be made we find it difficult. This has emphatically not been the case in the past – certainly not in early years of our industry.

The history of the first decades of the New Zealand film industry as we know it is the story of a series of powerful ideas that motivated New Zealanders to want to make their own films, and which provided the themes and subject matter for those films.

Issues, for example, of nationhood, of masculine, feminine, indigenous and gay identity.

Our formative film makers probably wouldn't regard themselves as intellectuals. And nor would we because – well we've met them! Thank god they weren't. If they had been they'd all still be getting pissed and talking grand ideas in whatever bars they used to hang out in the 70s and 80s. They'd never have got around to making anything. But they were interested in ideas. They even set up magazines like "Alternative Cinema" in the 70s and then "Illusions" in the 80s to debate their ideas. Film makers wrote books like Vincent Ward's "Edge of the Earth - Stories and Images from the Antipodes". "Film Aotearoa" (published in 1992 and then again in 1996) a compilation of essays, most of them by film makers, shows just how dynamic the cultural and intellectual environment was that nourished New Zealand film in its formative years.

A re-viewing of a film like Sam Neil's documentary "Cinema of Unease" reinforces just how interested in New Zealand, and in being a New Zealander, our film makers have been.

Nothing illustrates just how committed this first generation were to New Zealand film than the fact that a number of the key players were prepared to radically changed their life styles in order to be able to make films. Geoff Murphy, Bruno Lawrence, Alun Bollinger and Martyn Sanderson went so far as to set up a commune in the Hawkes Bay to allow them to live communally, and cheaply, while they worked on their various projects.

These film makers faced great challenges in terms of experience and resources. But they faced other ones which were, in terms of motivations for films making, in terms of provision of theme and subject matter, also great assets.

They were challenged, and blessed, by the fact that they were new. In the mid 70's New Zealand film was a culture that was waiting to be invented. The film makers of this time faced the challenges of acquiring the resources and learning the skills they needed to make films. However they did not have to question whether establishing a national cinema in New Zealand was important to New Zealand, or whether it was an important mission to devote their lives to. That was self-evident to anyone who had an interest film, an interest in their own country, and half a brain in the mid 1970s. When they went to make their films they were blessed by the fact every subject they touched was, by virtue of the newness of the medium, new to film.

A young man or woman interested in making films in the mid-70s didn't have just the desire to help establish a national cinema to drive them. They had the inheritance of the entire 1960s counter-culture in all its multifarious forms to inspire them, and to provide them with a limitless supply of real life drama demanding its place on screen.

They had a recent example of that counter-culture expressing itself on film in the movies that were being made in America at that time, and some fine examples of internationally acclaimed films starting to come out of Australia starting with Peter Weir's "Picnic and Hanging Rock" in 1975. They had the conservative establishment of an older generation of New Zealanders to rebel against and a political environment under Muldoon that promised just enough of a dose of fascism to inspire an artist, without actually seriously endangering his or her activities. It was a rich inheritance.

If you were a woman, Maori or gay, you had another layer of motivations and subject matter to draw on as well.

I don't imagine that that female, Maori or gay film makers were struggling to find stories to tell in the 1980s. Rather I imagine that they found themselves battling to choose between the numerous vital and important subjects that positively roared for cinematic portrayal, and that the forces of prejudice that opposed them only galvanized them in their resolve to tell these stories and to tell them their way.

In recent years we've seen a similar surge onto our screens from the latest group of New Zealanders who've found the self-confidence to take their rightful place in our film culture – the Pacific Islanders, a movement that still has some momentum yet. Even more recently, we are starting to see the same thing from our various Asian communities.

Each of these groups of people has brought something vital to our culture. Each of them has done more than just represent a certain aspect of our society. They have also, by the act of making films, played their own parts in transforming our society – in every case infinitely for the better.

And it's not like any one of these groups have done their dash. However I think it can be said that most of them have done their first surge, and that the burst of energy and creativity that comes from being the first has now somewhat dissipated.

If any person from any one of these groups wants to tell me "hey mate actually we've only just got started" please be assured that no one will be happier to hear this than me. I hope that in our own ways we've all really just got started – together. These days we as people, and we as film makers, are not as sharply distinguished or divided from one another as we once were by gender, race or sexuality. In terms of our normal lives that's a great thing – it's a sign that our society is growing up. We are, for the most part, happy to be different and happy to be different together and that's a great thing.

However the happy fact that our society is in many ways operating in a much healthier way than it has previously is not actually helping our story telling ability right now because the key drivers of identity that provided such strong motivations for film making and such great thematic material and subject matter have lost the momentum of their first expressions.

So when new film makers look around for what is important, they're not actually not quite sure what that is. There is a tendency in this situation to take refuge in discussions of form, or technique and all the

various practicalities that have been discussed. However these ultimately don't hide the fact that unfortunately right now we are struggling for subjects and themes that are worthy of cinema – and that when we find them, we are struggling to find how to tell them.