

## CINEMA OF THE VERY QUEASY: unframing "national cinema"

### I am "Joe Nobody"

So for the record, just so nobody has to waste their precious time trying to dig this up. I write as a watcher of films, video and tv. My journey as a viewer and a filmmaker is as subjective as the next persons, and is confined mainly the films in English. I am there for not reacting in cinematic terms, to me it is all bout content, no matter how beautifully you shoot violence, it is still violence. I have never been to film school, in any country, I have never made "a new Zealand film", although I don't rule it out. I am by my own definition an artist, I have been working in the independent Video community for 5 years, I lean towards documentary. I learnt how to make films (video actually) by the do it yourself method. Jump started by a hands on scholarship program specifically for "queers", many with disabilities, and /or women of color. **At a video access studio, founded by artists 30 years ago**, you can simply pay to use their digital video and editing equipment, or you can volunteer at events and get "video bucks" you can exchange for equipment use. I was inspired to apply on seeing the work of the previous years program participants, particularly **Sheila James "Unmapping desire", 1999**, and **Marg Scotts "Arent you lucky to have brought your own chair", 1999** \*, for their sublime combinations of poetry, art, politics. James piece, about immigration, racism, first world/third world, homophobia; a video poem filmed almost entirely on two women's bodies; in a way which is neither voyeuristic, exploitative, or demeaning. Scott's sarcastically titled doc addressed ableism within the queer community with humor and grit. **I saw what was possible, a form in which self-directed artist make (short but) complex films in their own terms and images.** (\*Distributors Video Out [www.video-in.com](http://www.video-in.com))

I have made 1 doc, 1 mocdoc, and am in post on a feature doc, all in and about Canada, and/or international issues. I have continued to learn from various (publicly funded) internships and courses, discussions and workshops put on by doc and video organizations; working for a couple of filmmakers on films addressing First Nations, and disability issues, doing a bunch of filming and some editing for community groups addressing First Nations, Immigration, and war and other global issues. **I think it is unlikely I would have become a filmmaker in Aotearoa**, these kind of opportunities do not exist on the necessary scale and in such a way as to come to the attention of you average unemployed disabled lesbian. I had been around the edges of the art, writing worlds long enough to know what I had to say from the point of view of a disabled abuse surviving lesbian was really not anything that mainstream was interested in knowing about. NZ may have some of the "most progressive" human rights laws in the world, but they have no teeth and little effect in the workplace. Get to Canada, add "immigrant" to the mix and I now fall into many of the categories of "voices not being heard" which some arts funders are seeking to address. There is still a long way to go, and I do not delude myself things would have turned out this way had I not been white, university educated, have English as a first language, and was initially supported by my partner, was

not working an energy draining minimum wage job. Canada has been very good for me, **am I a Canadian filmmaker? It's hard to say.** Am I a New Zealand filmmaker, I doubt it, am I a New Zealander, whatever that is? I was born and lived there for 30 years.

### **Canadian Women in Film (some)**

Curiously before I left yon birthland, or even imagined making films myself, my **favourite feature films, of those which were screened in Aotearoa, were all Canadian.** Yes I know favourite films say more about me than the films. They were: **"I've heard the mermaids singing", Patricia Rozema, 1987**, Miramax (?), "A young woman with a poor record of career success secures a job as assistant to a sophisticated art gallery owner whom she idolizes. Eventually she learns that appearances are deceptive" ( the latter of which, art fraud a rather "victimless crime"). Particularly I enjoyed the bumbling Polly, and the cutting commentary on the art world. **"The company of strangers", Cynthia Scott 1990**, NFB, "a bus breaks down in the wilderness stranding 8 women, average age 71, through the long days and nights this remarkable group of strangers share their stories". **"Forbidden Love", Aerlyn Weissman, Lynne Fernie, 1992**, NFB, "9 women paint a portrait of lesbian sexuality ( from 1930's on) against a backdrop of tabloid headlines, book covers, and dramatizations from lesbian pulp novels". (www.nfb.ca).

A drama, a docudrama and a doc, **all are peopled almost entirely by women, including lesbians, no one dies, no one is murdered, no one is raped, no one is assaulted, they don't 'turn against each other'. Particularly in the genre of "lesbian movies" ( and books for that matter) no one is murdered, goes straight, disappears or kills themselves.** It is not coincidental all are made by women. Or that such films could be made in a country which from 1974 - 1990's had **"Studio D"**, a National Film Board of Canada production unit focused on films by and for women, under the direction of Kathleen Shannon. Although clearly it did not come easily, "in 1970 after....18 years experience as an editor...with over 200 films to her credit, she was finally able to direct her first film". Despite the fact that "Studio D has won more Oscars to date than any other NFB studio", it was closed in (the 1990's?) I can not pretend to be conversant with the history, breadth or depth of Canadian filmmaking since I simply wasn't here, particularly I am ignorant of the French language filmmaking tradition, and animation in Canada. Despite initiatives and programs by Studio D's and the NFB, CBC, and other funding agencies and artists organizations towards federal, provincial, women's, aboriginal and people of color, to train and produce their own stories, there is still along way to go; and they have only very recently begun to address disability as a factor. **"Racist and sexist prejudices and stereotypes flourish only in people's ignorance of each other's true selves. That's why it's urgent that our media start to reflect the real diversity of our population, and give access to the stories and perspectives of Canadians of all backgrounds and, in particular, the women."** (Kathleen Shannon from a biographical note) .\*(www.nfb.ca).

### **First Nations Women In Film - Turtle Island and Aotearoa (some)**

I was very moved by the screening, in Aotearoa, of **Alanis Obomsawin work, "Kanehsatake 270 Years of Resistance"**. About the Oka crisis in 1990, "Behind Mohawk lines that gruelling summer, producer and director Alanis Obomsawin, herself an Abenaki Indian, endured 78 nerve-wracking days and nights filming the armed standoff between the Kanehsatake Mohawk people of First Nations, the Quebec Police and the Canadian Army", ([www.wlu.ca](http://www.wlu.ca)); won 13 awards and international acclaim, and was seen by 23 million. She directed her first film in 1971, atleast 13 films and series, and a previous film "**Incident at Restigouche**" (1984), "begins with a photograph of a line of men, who I believe are officers of the Quebec Provincial Police, raiding the small Micmac fishing community of Restigouche", ([www.sensesofcinema.com](http://www.sensesofcinema.com)). In an incident surrounding Micmac peoples struggle for their fishing rights. "For many years (she) sat on the Canada Council's First Peoples Advisory Board. She was also a board member of Studio One, the NFB's Aboriginal unit, and served as an advisor to New Initiatives in Film, Studio D's program for women of colour and First Nations women". ([www.wiftnewzealand.org.nz](http://www.wiftnewzealand.org.nz)).

In a similar style as the above, the filmmaker as eyewitness, resonates with the work of Maori woman filmmaker **Merata Mita**, who has also been making films for 30 years, "Her most acclaimed and controversial film is **Patu!**. **It is a piece that documented the violent protests surrounding a tour of the South African rugby team Springbok in 1981.** So controversial was the documentary that it was not released for several years". ([www.wiftnewzealand.org.nz](http://www.wiftnewzealand.org.nz)). Similarly "**Bastion Point Day 507**", 1980, "The film documents the occupation of Bastion Point in the struggle for Maori land rights. The protest began in 1977 when the government proposed to subdivide Maori land in the centre of Auckland city. Ngati Whatua people occupied the land, built living areas, and planted crops. The film concentrates on the 507th day of occupation when the protesters were forcibly removed. This was the only film crew permitted in the occupied area.

**Merata Mita writes: "This film is the total opposite of how a television documentary is made. It has a partisan viewpoint, is short on commentary, and emphasises the overkill aspect of the combined police/military operation. It is a style of documentary that I have never deviated from because it best expresses a Maori approach to film making."** ([www.filmarchive.org.nz](http://www.filmarchive.org.nz)). **Merata Mita was "the first Maori woman to direct a feature film, MAURI (1988)**, Merata's oeuvre has highlighted faces and experiences of indigenous peoples of the Pacific on the screen and behind the camera, circulating more complex and contemporary indigenous portraits". ([www.wiftnewzealand.org.nz](http://www.wiftnewzealand.org.nz)).

The first feature film, written and directed by a woman First Nations filmmaker in Canada was **Shirley Cheechoo, "Bear walker" 1999.** A complex story made from the

point of view of 3 sisters, at the mercy of violent spouses, employers, federal and on Reserve police. One of the sisters, in a "Bear walker" trance, finally snaps and takes the ultimate act of self-defence, other perpetrators are dispatched by their own stupidity and an energy of repayment in kind, which is sweeping across the area - the Bear walker. For me this film is in the genre of "telling our stories", from the point of view of women, "this is what we are up against", these are "our voices".

**Who do you make films for?** Shirley Cheechoo's film "Bear Walker", was originally called "Backroads", and was originally without an animated sequence/motif which visualizes the " Bear Walker". She added these after test screenings with non First Nations people indicated they did not 'get it'. The story, mythology was perfectly obvious to First Nations people, so to them the final film came across a little heavy handed.)

There will always be nuances which go by, and are only perceived or understood by those who may have lived within a certain culture, **Mandrika Rupa** had to be point out to me that 3 generation of Indian women characters in her short film "**Naya Zamana**", 1996, "narrative about a working class girl's silent and sweet rebellion against cultural expectations, resulting in cross gender antics", were all speaking different languages or dialects, and the implications of that.

### **US Media Colonialism**

Newly arrived in Canada, upon finding out where I arrived from, the first few years many people said immediately oh "**Xena Warrior Princess**". To which I looked back at them in stunned-mind-boggled-disbelief. This is the media age, no one said oh Janet Frame, or Grace Potiki, such great writers. Shocking as it was to realize many North Americans define countries by what they see at the movies. Having the advantage of knowing what is not being told and seen, some idea of who is not getting to tell their own complex stories in their own terms and images ( and languages for that matter). I feel compelled to offer my analysis, while realizing others have no doubt said it all before, and probably better.

Yes the star of the action adventure series "**Xena Warrior Princess**", Lucy Lawless is an actor from NZ. Lets be clear this is an American production, based on a greek myth, merely filmed in NZ. It is not to my mind a NZ program, I watched it occasionally in Canada purely for comedic value, to see Tauwi and Maori actors dressed in silly costumes, speaking in American accents, in a greek story, shot in the pacific, jogging through the manuka and toetoe. (and hoping for their sakes they were getting paid really well to do it). Oh yeah we've come a long way baby...If Vancouver is "Hollywood North" the cheaper look alike for US cities on film sets, Aotearoa landscape is, well anywhere US film crews want it to be /says it is. I always found it particularly incongruous that such "mythological epics", as "**Xena**", "**Hercules**", "**Lord of the Rings**", "**The Last Samurai**"\*, were made in a country so rich with its own indigenous

mythology, equally as epic, dramatic, full of star crossed lovers, and wars, if that's what you are looking for. Which Hollywood is, not that I am suggesting for one minute Hollywood or anyone else, plunder these mythologies like they do everything else in their wake. These stories belong to the indigenous people of Aotearoa, and it is up to them to decide if and how they will tell them in film. Notwithstanding that Aotearoa was colonized in the 1800's, and things have pretty much gone down hill from there, and that NZ film funders for years have not funded Maori to tell their own stories, with very few exceptions. So most of the films made in NZ with government or private funding are stories made by and about "the descendants of the colonizers" - of which I am one, whether in NZ or Canada. \*I have not rated any of the above as frankly I have not seen them, and doubt I ever will, there is nothing I have seen in movie trailers, or reviews that remotely interested me.

This 'second wave' of media colonization which has swept Aotearoa was particularly evident when I was last there. In most major cities there were huge props, eg creatures from "**Lord of the Rings**" **Trilogy**, **Peter Jackson**, attached to or towering over inner city landmarks such as Movie theatres. On the desk of every Tourist Information Centre in every tiny town, was the book to buy, detailing all the locations it was shot at. Including some which are fragile rare protected ecosystems. In fact **the country has been renamed "Middle Earth"**, the national (although privatized) airline, proudly proclaims in its publicity and on the side of it planes "the airline to Middle Earth". How can a film rename a country?! Notwithstanding that it had already been renamed "New Zealand" by a passing 17th century Dutchman. I realize the government, and private industry eager for overseas film and tourist dollars is happy to collude with and facilitate this bizarre process, and some people are happy to find work and possibly training, and opportunities in the industry. I myself have not seen any evidence this is strengthening the development of an indigenous or national cinema. Soon the paraphernalia pertaining to the future filming of "**The Hobbit**", and "**King Kong**", will be taking over a small town near you.....

Just so you don't think I am completely ignorant of cinematic convention I can tell you I could as a child tell the difference between US and UK programs even before I turned to sound up, differences in lighting and development, made the people in UK films look slightly green, and in US films slightly yellow!!! Or maybe the tv just needed adjusting.

### **Deeply Disturbing Rating System of NZ Film**

**I have rarely seen a New Zealand film I did not find deeply disturbing**, and not in a good way! Certainly those which make it into the movie theatres. **So I am talking here about mainstream dramas, although I am aware there are other streams of media such as docs from both independent filmmakers and/or activists; made for tv; indigenous media; feminist filmmaking; short and experimental work; these are not**

**mutually exclusive categories.** From what I have seen so far, mainstream NZ filmmaking is not a tradition I relate to, like, wish to inherit, emulate, or even use as a starting point to rebel against. It is in some ways as irrelevant to me as the serial killer, war, obsessed American violent ( particularly towards women) action Movies which dominate the movie theatres and tvs of North America. It would perhaps be more accurate to define the mainstream NZ drama as emulating this form. Still **people in Canada define me as a NZ'er, and align me with "my national cinema"**. Hah! So to simplify things I have come up with a **Deeply Disturbing Rating System of NZ Film, with DDDDD, being the most disturbing.** DD may mean I have no problem with the film, but it is disturbing, nonetheless and deals with very disturbing themes, sometimes this is necessary, although it has to be considered in the context of what, if anything else is being made at the time ( that is less disturbing). For a long time, a tiny number of feature films have been funded each year in NZ. As well as whether documentary is better suited to the disturbing nature of the topic, making the treatment of it (possibly) less gratuitous.

I tend to agree with actor and former NFU drone, **Sam Neill's** interpretation, which he put forward in his 1995 documentary review (for the British Film Institute) of the same name, NZ has a **"Cinema of Unease"**. A nation of people uneasy seeing themselves on film, has historically deferred to US and UK media domination, styles, and themes, and still does. **What films have been made in NZ, about NZ stories, are foreboding, disturbing, their portrayal of Maori is appalling; and too often involve a. murder; b. untimely death, particularly of women; c. rape; d. abuse of children; e. assault of women; f. women and/or children being abducted and /or held against their will; g. violence between men; h. massacres; i. Suicide; j. prostitution; k. women have only a pseudo power of manipulation.** This may be true of many movies, and other media, eg books for that matter, some people will say "well that's what makes good cinema", I say why do you even think like that? What is particularly disturbing is the victimized and "voiceless", degraded roles this places women in over and over again. (As an aside I have noticed in the past few years what few mainstream movies I have seen, many also have a completely irrelevant "stripper scene", involving a character never to be seen again). What does this mean about NZ, I do think in some ways it reflects a very disturbed national psyche. It is a very violent country, seething underneath the surface, around the kitchen table. History is a brutal combination; take one culture with a long history of violence "once were warriors"; enter another with an equally bloody war history intent on colonization by violent domination. Fight for several decades; come to some bloody kind of defeat by starvation, disease and control; try to live peacefully on this blood soaked soil; uniquely isolated in the middle of the ocean. It is true for such a small country there are way too many mass murders per square km - father, son, grandfather wakes up, murders entire family, community, turns gun on self. Even reported statistics rate child abuse, suicide as very high, that's what we know about. Go to counseling people, don't make it into "entertainment"! That just perpetuates it as "normal".

### Contemporary NZ Film (some) that were Internationally Released

So after I had established none of the above US series were in fact NZ; the following were the films Canadians most often mentioned to me as being part of some 'nz national cinema'. Or they talked about movies of the time, which were widely released outside Aotearoa.

An "**Angel at my table**", **Jane Campion, 1990**, people were moved by the film, but were somehow completely ignorant of the subject, Janet Frame's many brilliant novels, beyond her autobiographical writings. I have no real quarrel with this movie, as I understand neither really did Janet Frame. It is based on her life, a somewhat tragic one, poverty, shyness, the death by drowning of 2 of her sisters, and her mother, the hideously inhumane world of the "insane asylum", and the torturous shock treatment she received repeatedly there. Her being spared at the last minute from psychiatric "brain surgery", by her book winning an award, her eventual triumph as a writer. For all these reasons, it is none the less deeply troubling, I could not call it entertainment.

DD. b. untimely death, particularly of women; e. assault of women; f. women and/or children being abducted and /or held against their will, i. suicide

"**The Piano**, **Jane Campion, 1993**; "**oh the landscape**", well the wonderful landscape does not change the fact in essence it is a film about a disabled woman in 1870 who is forced into prostitution to regain the only "voice" she has - the piano. Add in attempted rape, and mutilation, to the mix, nearly drowning, much of which witnessed by a girl child, for me it has very little redeeming features. I hated every minute of it. Naturally people were surprised I was not at all excited by this film, in fact I watched it with my thumb on fast forward, there's only so many acts of prostitution I want to see. DDD. c. rape; d. abuse of children; e. assault of women; f. women and/or children being abducted and /or held against their will; j. prostitution. k. women have only a pseudo power of manipulation.

With some hesitation people mentioned "**Heavenly Creatures**", **Peter Jackson 1994**. "Is based on the true story, set in Christchurch New Zealand in 1954, of two girls, Juliet Hulme and Pauline Rieper, who murdered one of their mothers. ([www.nzfilm.co.nz](http://www.nzfilm.co.nz)). To be fair this is a sympathetic portrayal of two young women who fall into an intense relationship, under very difficult circumstances, and living in an extensive fantasy world, commit murder to avoid being separated. I believe this treatment was because it was based quite closely on the book "Parker and Hulme" by lesbian activists and academics Julie Glamuzina and Allison Laurie. However, I am always mindful of the fact, prior to this movie, Peter Jackson made his name making "splatter" horror movies, involving bloody deaths, and in a way this is too. For that reason I have never watched the end, we know what happened. You can not underestimate the real effect the crime had on young women and their parents at the time, who for decades equated lesbianism with murder, if

I was going to make a lesbian themed feature film, this would not be it. Consider for a moment the hundreds of straight themed films to be made in NZ, and this one, of maybe 2 - "**Desperate Remedies**", **Peter Wells, Stewart Main 1993**, the other to be made, both by men, and perhaps equally bizarre.

DD. a. murder; b. untimely death, particularly of women; d. abuse of children;

**Once Were Warriors, Lee Tamahori, 1994**, "is a violent love story set against a contemporary urban backdrop". ([www.nzfilm.co.nz](http://www.nzfilm.co.nz)). How anyone could describe this movie based on, and from the point of view of, the extremely violent character "Jake the muss", as a love story, is beyond me. To me it's a gang film for a US audience, set in a Maori family. It may be based on a book, by Alan Duff, who based it on his extended family, (in a town I partly grew up in), it may be true to life, directed and acted by Maori. It may deal with the effects of colonization, but people in North America missed whatever point it was trying to make and said "wow Maori people are really violent", personally I think family violence is pretty universal, look in your own back yard dude.

Leonie Pihama, filmmaker, researcher and educator, of MOKO Productions, "The group aims to educate cinemas main funding bodies on their responsibilities for how the world views Maori. Leonie was critical of the violent and volatile Maori in "Once Were Warriors", and the dirty ill-kempt buffoon in The Piano". (Taiawhio. Conversations with contemporary Maori Artists. Ed Huhanna Smith). There is a very long history, some 100 years at least of Pakeha making films "about Maori", in an anthropological, other, or objectifying, oversimplified, romanticized, cultural and/or mythological rip off, degrading way.

The women in "Once Were Warriors", are battered, sexually assaulted, and finally the daughter by now partly living on the streets, hangs herself from the clothesline. For me one of the differences between say this and Shirley Cheechoo's "Bear Walker", is from whose point of view the story is told, and the eventual outcomes for the characters.

DDDD. Thumb on the fast forward. a. murder; b. untimely death, particularly of women; c. rape; d. abuse of children; e. assault of women; f. women and/or children being abducted and /or held against their will, g. violence between men, i. suicide

**Finally, "Whale Rider"2002, Niki Caro, yes I say calmly that is a NZ film.** Something I could be proud of. I liked it a lot, it is true to the small Maori communities, I lived in as a child. Based on a book written by Whiti Ihemaira, in the 1980's, for his two young daughters, in response to their dismay at all the boy action movies of the time. The story in turn based on a traditional story, of the area the film was set in, as far as I hear, the people are happy with the film, and its non Maori director."It is set in a small New Zealand coastal village where Maori claim descent from Paieka, the Whale Rider. In every generation, a male heir has succeeded to the chiefly title. The Chief's eldest son, Porourangi, fathers twins - a boy and a girl - but the boy and his mother die tragically in childbirth. The surviving girl is name Pai. Grief-stricken, her father leaves her to be raised by her grandparents, Koro and Flowers. Koro, the Chief, refuses to acknowledge Pai as the heir" ([www.nzfilm.co.nz](http://www.nzfilm.co.nz)). 12 year old Paieka does eventually triumph but not

without nearly dying in the process, before she is rejected and neglected by her Grandfather; with a message for everyone that no one person can lead a people.

No one is raped, murdered, nor kills themselves!

D. b. untimely death, particularly of women;

### **Men in Film in Aotearoa/NZ (some)**

Lets go a little further back into the disturbed psyche of "nz cinema" to the first NZ first NZ films I ever saw. To try and understand where this "tradition" comes from.

**The first NZ feature film I remember seeing was "Sleeping Dogs", Roger Donaldson, 1977.** Supposedly it kick started modern NZ cinema. When it was made I was just 10 years old, although I doubt I saw it then, it would have been a few years later, on tv, it is very violent, I was appalled. Mostly I remember all the bright red blood of bullet wounds, and some one falling into the swimming pool.

" A dark political action thriller that portrays the reaction of one man to the formation of a totalitarian government, and subsequent guerrilla war, in New Zealand. Its timely release and politically relevant plot proved very popular with New Zealand audiences at the time. Some of its images are frighteningly realistic when compared to television footage of the 1981 Springbok Tour protests, just 3 years later. (encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com). Referring to the now infamous police "Red Squad", which brutally bludgeoned peaceful protestors at every available opportunity. It was the first NZ feature film to be released in the US. Made with the support of the newly formed NZ Film Commission, which was set up in the 1970's to fund the production of NZ Films. Previously The National Film Unit operated, as a government-funded producer of short films, documentaries, and publicity material ; (and propaganda from 1941 on ) (www. encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com)

DDD. a. murder; b. untimely death, particularly of women; violence between men; h. massacres.

### **Smash Palace, Roger Donaldson, 1981**

" Once an international Grand Prix racing star. Al returned home to take over his father's business, a car-wrecking yard called Smash Palace, located in a remote part of New Zealand.... For Jacqui, this is the end of her life with her husband. She leaves him, taking their daughter with her, and begins a new, happier life as a teacher. Meanwhile, her relationship with Ray continues to develop... One day Al finds the two of them together. He has a violent fight with his wife and then brutally makes love to her against her will ...Al prepares a hideout deep in the bush, and then he goes to Jacqui's house and takes the little girl with him ...Suddenly Georgie becomes ill. When she grows delirious Al is forced to drive her into town to seek medical aid, but he is spotted by a patrolling police car. In order to escape he takes a shopgirl hostage, again at gunpoint. Father, daughter and hostage hole up in a shed in the middle of Smash Palace, surrounded by armed police... Ray brings Jacqui to the scene. Already driven to distraction by the disappearance of her daughter, Jacqui defies orders and runs out in front of the policemen so that she can see

her husband. He hands Georgie over to her, and he is persuaded to exchange the hostage shopgirl for Ray. As the two former best friends come face to face, Al puts a noose around Ray's neck and attaches it to his shotgun"...( www.nzfilm.co.nz) ..thats not even the end... I can't believe anyone let a child even act in this film!

DDDDD. c. rape; d. abuse of children; e. assault of women; f. women and/or children being abducted and /or held against their will; g. violence between men; k. women have only a pseudo power of manipulation.

### **The Scarecrow, Robert Whitehouse, 1981**

"One Summer's morning, 14-year-old Ned Poindexter and his friend Les discover that their chickens have been stolen. At the same time, 250 miles away in the city, a teenage girl is found floating in a pond - her throat cut. The Scarecrow. Magician and murderer, hypnotist and sex maniac, he insinuates himself into the heart of the town, somewhere between the pub and the funeral parlour. Prudence is soon the object of his lust. The significance of this is lost to everyone except the audience, as (he) calculatingly eliminates interim victims - the eccentric, the deranged, the aged, as he advances inexorably towards his prize". (www.nzfilm.co.nz)

DDDD. a. murder; b. untimely death, particularly of women; c. rape; d. abuse of children; e. assault of women; f. women and/or children being abducted and /or held against their will; g. violence between men; h. k. women have only a pseudo power of manipulation.

**Vigil, Vincent Ward, 1984,** "In a remote valley a farmer dies. In his wake comes a hunter. The farmer's daughter watches him. He starts a relationship with her mother and helps her grandfather to build a strange new invention. To the child he is a predator. She must expel him from her valley". (www.nzfilm.co.nz) He is a predator! This film shot in hill country has a creeping isolation, the portrait of the girl is very voyeuristic, in one scene, his true motives towards her are implied, it is less "dramatic" than "Smash palace", but has a very similar sense about it. DDD. b. untimely death, d. abuse of children.

### **The Quiet Earth, Geoff Murphy, 1985**

"Centres around a scientist called Zac who wakes one morning to discover he is alone in the world. The discovery of two survivors, first a Joanna , and then Api sets the scene for a critical struggle for survival, and a "love triangle". The only reason they are all still alive is they were all dead at the moment the world changed, eg one had attempted suicide, one was being held under water in a river by a jealous husband of a lover. Zac and Api calculate that only by blowing up the satellite station where the experiments have been carried out, will they destroy the grid and prevent the Effect from occurring again". (www.co.nz). DDD. a. murder; b. untimely death, particularly of women; violence between men; h. massacres; i. Suicide; k. women have only a pseudo power of manipulation.

I could go on and on but suffice it to say that far too many NZ publicly funded feature films of this era are described as "thrillers". Falling into the uneasily violent category

from this time are: **Runaway, John O'Shea, 1964**, A nightmare chase across the scenic splendor of a wild continent". Sam Edwards in "New Zealand film 1912-1996", calls it "archetypal New Zealand cinema. Its elements, Man Alone, Man on the Run, Man against Man and Landscape, Man Against the Odds, its sea, bush, and mountain settings and the full range of iconographic images, make it quintessential Kiwi myth". Really. **Pallet on the floor, Lynton Butler, 1984**. Rape, murder and blackmail result when the town's most beautiful woman gets married. **The Lost Tribe home, John Laing, 1984**, On a sinister island, a woman seeks her lost husband but finds a bizarre night of terror. **Dangerous Orphans, John Laing, 1986**, Three handsome orphans seek vengeance for a murder. Death and mayhem result from their efforts. **No One Can Hear, John Laing, 2001**, The lives of a sedate suburban family turn rather gruesome with the arrival of a house-guest who is not what he seems to be. ( www.nzfilm.co.nz). Even In **Ian Munes "The whole of the moon", 1996**, Marty a Maori female character, street kid, who has no family who visit her, dies at the end, despite the fact both her and the other main character, a white middleclass male are in hospital. In **"Topless Women Talk about their lives", Harry Sinclair 1996**, an experimental drama not really related to the title, the weird "Ant" stabs one of the female characters. This portrayal of Maori as "total losers", casual violence towards women, who are always the one to die, is like a national cinema formula.

Helen Martin in "New Zealand Film 1912 - 1996" says of "Cinema of Unease".. "there are many films, themes and genres not mentioned at all, (the shaggy dog tale, the pot-boiler co-production, the film reflecting Pacific Island culture, the urban comedy, the feminist thriller, the Hollywood clone..." certainly **"Came a hot Friday", Ian Mune 1984**; and **"Good-bye Pork Pie", Geoff Murchy 1980**; **"Send A Gorilla", Melanie Rodriga, 1988**, "The busiest day in the year for three young women and their singing telegram service. St Valentines day"; (www.nzfilm.co.nz), are in the comedy drama, or road movie genre, some others I have attempted to address...

### **Women in Film in Aotearoa/NZ (some)**

Perhaps in response to these deeply malevolent movies, or in the genre of, are what has come to be called "feminist thrillers", or dramas which attempt to subvert the genre, or address important issues. For me it still, mostly doesn't work.

#### **Mr Wrong, Gaylene Preston, Robin Laing, 1984**

"Meg buys a Mark 11 Jaguar. But she hears strange noises and discovers that it's haunted by a strange woman and a sinister man. She tries to sell the car, without success. Then she has to learn to defend herself against one of the ghosts" (www.nzfilm.co.nz)

DDD. a. murder; b. untimely death, particularly of women; e. assault of women; f. women and/or children being abducted and /or held against their will;

#### **Perfect Strangers, Gaylene Preston, Robin Laing, 2003**

"Romantic thriller, a pair of unconventional lovers in this darkly funny, deadly serious

story." ([www.nzfilm.co.nz](http://www.nzfilm.co.nz)) I have not seen it, asking around it seems the perfect strangers meet at a bar, go back to his place - a boat, she wakes up to find the boat is moving, to an isolated cabin. What happens there is open to interpretation, he is very possessive, she may or may not kill him, and then falls in love with him. All I can say is I am glad I am not straight, and do people really think like this? Depending on your interpretation its either very funny and clever, or same old same old.

a. murder; b. untimely death; f. women and/or children being abducted and /or held against their will;

Certainly these are not the only films Gaylene Preston has made, her documentaries (also with Robin Laing), **BREAD AND ROSES, 1993**, (about Trade Unionist and MP Sonja Davies); **'War Stories Our Mothers Never Told Us, 1995**; **Titless Wonders**, women with breast cancer; and the comedy drama "Ruby and Rata" 1990, do not really fit into the cinema of unease, yet to me 2 of her 3 dramas do, even if with a feminist twist, they are both "thrillers".

**Sweetie, Jane Campion, 1989**, this is perhaps her most successful film in terms of achieving what it set out to do. It is about sibling rivalry between 2 sisters, family dysfunction, the price one pays to be "the favourite", - incest and being forced to remain a child. There is no illusion that anything is going on other than what is actually happening, that Sweetie has been driven "crazy", has no way to change things, has the power only of "acting out". That is perhaps for me where it also falls down, Sweetie can create havoc in response to her situation, but she can not work out how to stop it. (technically this may be an Australian film, you can argue about that later). Ultimately I kind of like it, but again it is not something I could watch often.

DD. d. abuse of children; e. assault of women; f. women and/or children being abducted and /or held against their will; j. prostitution; k. women have only a pseudo power of manipulation.

### **Crush, Alison Maclean, 1992**

"Wreaking havoc is brash Lane, whose reckless driving leaves her fellow traveler, Christina, hospitalized and in a coma. After deserting Christina at the scene of the crash, Lane proceeds to invade the lives of novelist Colin and his teenage daughter, Angela - first inviting the girl to spend a wild evening with her, and then seducing her father. As Christina slowly recovers, Angela is determined that Lane confront her guilt. She so successfully plants the seeds of paranoia that suddenly nothing is clear. Who is the greatest threat - Lane or Christina?"([www.nzfilm.co.nz](http://www.nzfilm.co.nz)). Ultimately Christina is portrayed as a wheelchair using "psycho", Lane toys with Angela's attraction for her, there are some particularly bad Hollywood formulaic "love scenes", every 20 minutes or so, between Lane and Colin. DDD. b. untimely death, particularly of women; e. assault of women; f. women and/or children being abducted and /or held against their will; women have only a pseudo power of manipulation.

### **Broken English, Gregor Nicholas, Robin Scholes, 1996**

"Ivan is a domineering Croatian migrant father who will do anything to destroy the relationship of his daughter Nina with a young Maori..Eddie.. In an attempt to escape the overpowering influence of her father, she marries a Chinese political refugee for money and leaves home. Ivan learns of Nina's marriage of convenience and is enraged when he discovers Nina is pregnant to Eddie. Desperate to reassert his control, over Nina". (www.nzfilm.co.nz). It has moments of humour and attempts to address complex issues of race, but it can only be described as incredibly violent, the fights between Ivan and Eddie go on forever, Nina is sealed in the house by boards nailed over her window etc. DDDD. d. abuse of children; e. assault of women; f. women and/or children being abducted and /or held against their will; g. violence between men; prostitution; k. women have only a pseudo power of manipulation.

### **In conclusion**

Am I comparing apples to oranges? A mainstream NZ feature film cinema, with Canadian documentary and activist based, cinema, or short films , made by women. Something I could not and did not access in Aotearoa because it doesn't exist, it does not reach the audience, I was not inside that community then? Am I not conversant enough with Canadian cinema to know how truly awful the history of women, First Nations, people of color, in front of and behind the camera really is? Maybe, that's for those who know to discuss. For me the point is I lived in NZ and NZ films I found even remotely watchable did not appear on my radar until the early 1990's, and not with any regularity. The films I really liked came around the same time period to my local cinema from Canada, I had no favourite NZ film. In 20 years of watching media, that says something.

Are women more inclined towards documentary, or as the poor cousin of feature film is that where we find themselves cornered?

Is the question of 'national cinema' irrelevant, I know it is not, despite the universality of some forms and issues that can cross borders, I know there exists filmic histories in languages, cultures I do not fully understand, if at all.

Who indeed am I writing this for, (I've given up on why). What am I trying to explain to who? Your average person in Aotearoa has never heard of "Forbidden Love", even if I consider it one of the best movies ever, (neither has your average Canadian). Who in Canada ever saw "Sleeping Dogs", or "Sweetie".

Politically in Aotearoa with the conservative right wing leader of the National Party, insisting "we are all one people", wishing to extinguish Maori their rights as the first people of the land, and leader, academic, Ranginui Walker (NZ Listener), by way of return wryly pointing out if "we are all one people, that one will be Maori". I am still waiting for the day, when we get to see in mainstream theatres the indigenous cinema of

Aotearoa, and Canada, waiting to see many more Maori stories in their own terms and images, major films written and directed by indigenous women, and women of color, telling their own stories. I am sure it is being made, if not funded, already. I am sure there are many films out there, which already exist, I have never seen, the ones which don't make it to the mainstream, by less well known filmmakers. I hope one day to see them too.

I see how I try to emulate my role models in filmmaking, in the main "Canadian", since those are the ones I am most aware of, however consciously or unconsciously. To attempt to bring a multiplicity of women's voices and images, backgrounds, ages and languages, to the screen, on any subject, particularly "our elders". To the audience I know is waiting, has been waiting, like me, all these years to see and hear them.

**Meg Torwl April 2004**