

Book review: Updates from 2011

DOUBLE VISION: ART HISTORIES AND COLONIAL HISTORIES IN THE PACIFIC

Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche (eds)

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In my critique at-a-distance of the elite white Australian perspectives I detected in *Double Vision* I intimated what I can now say with certainty: living in Australia is not optimal for developing anti-colonial awareness. Dancing on the books as I do here, I hope it is not just homesickness to imagine that in Aotearoa, average levels of understanding of the issues raised in my article will have outstripped my learning since I left in 2001. Unable to continue working directly on New Zealand art and art history, I have compensated in the forum of film. I instruct a unit on Postcolonial Cinema at Deakin, which includes a module on Māori film and film theory. These comments then revolve around New Zealand's contributions to indigenous film and film studies, which are starting to be recognised internationally and intertextual with the recognition accorded Māori and NZ Art.

New Zealand has recently lost a number of important intellectuals and artists active in the 1970s-2000s, from whom I learned much: Michael King, Judith Binney, and filmmakers Barry Barclay and Merata Mita.

In my review (p. 72) I mentioned Rangi Panoho's opinion that colonialism often takes the form of nostalgia and the perception of 'tribal culture' as a *passive* presence. Such Pākehā complacency has been comprehensively challenged in Aotearoa in many fields. Originally initiated mainly by Māori, with notable collaborations from a few Pākehā, such challenges as Panoho's appeared on the cusp of important developments in Pākehā understandings of how we contribute to and perpetuate colonialism. An assured Māori creative blossoming in films, art, novels, music, theory, anthropology, and many levels of cultural performance informed them.

In 1992 Barry Barclay had already made *Tangata whenua* (1974), *Ngati* (1987) and *Te rua* (1991)¹. He published *Our own image* (1990) and in 2002 addressed the Film, Television and Media Studies programme at Auckland University on 'Celebrating Fourth Cinema' (2003). Barry often makes his points with deceptive simplicity. My students love his explanations of how to make films in a Māori way, such as, 'Get that camera out of here, we're making a film!' In lieu of years studying social semiotics and the social creation of meaning, Barry's elegance offers grounds for re/asserting "it's all metaphor" without relinquishing a political stance².

Many New Zealand feminists know the value of male collaborators, and a lot of us have experienced the pains and joys of collaboration between Māori and Pākehā in feminist and queer activist spheres. Often it is less the formal learning than those little incidental unexpected gestures, challenges and remarks that teach you the most. And you get that hanging with people.

Given that lots of ‘hanging’ looks to have been going on, I can guess that in 2011 many non-Māori New Zealanders will have less trouble than we did in the 1980s with Gayatri Spivak’s seemingly puzzling answers to her question, “Can the subaltern speak?” (1987)³. I now find it easy to comprehend her idea that (coloniser/elite/white) privilege is our loss. She answered in essence, ‘Only when colonised and coloniser are in each other’s presence, *and on the former’s turf*, can the oppressed and marginalised ‘speak’ in the sense of their messages and meanings being heard’ (my interpretation and italics). In New Zealand terms, this happens as former oppressors become biculturally competent, a process that has been going on for a while in unlimited everyday environments that are either Māori-centric or, increasingly bicultural. I will be interested to hear the feedback on this remote-sensing of mine.

Barclay offers so many important lessons. I will grab a couple. His assertion that all language is metaphorical, carrying the implication that everyone’s perspective is valuable and dialogic, strikes me as a perspective most likely to develop in people who live simultaneously in more than one ‘world’. His ideas on ‘Fourth’ or indigenous cinema are evidenced in his films. Their subtleties are familiar if you’ve spent time on a marae. It’s not just about the presence in his films of children and elders, the visits of carvings and tukutuku weaving. It’s something more subtle that Barry calls ‘interiority’ (borrowing from Panoho). Basically this is about having been on Māori turf and living pro/Māori lives long enough that the enculturated person will take her marae with her².

Meanwhile, Merata Mita was working away on her many documentaries such as *Patu!* (1983) and the unique *Mana waka* (1990) edited on Turangawaewae Marae with Annie Collins and the advice of the elders. Not the least of Merata’s contributions are her understanding that images of Māori belong to the people, her writing about New Zealand’s ‘white neurotic film industry’, and her ideas on how we might decolonise and indigenise the screen, published in *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand* (2000)⁴.

To me, the above-mentioned films have apparent Māori centres. I think they are successful in drawing diverse audiences into a dialogue and a co-presence in Spivak’s sense. In Barclay’s and Mita’s work I notice that making a Māori film in a Māori way also involves shooting back at colonisers and their descendents; a ‘look’ in which we are enabled to ‘see ourselves’ differently. To quote the 1990s slogan, ‘we are all someone else’s ‘Other’ ’.

Anthropologist, Jeff Sissons (2005), who has lived with Māori in remote locations for extended periods, has been eloquent on the key issue of what happens when Māori or any indigenous groups are able to assert their senses of time and values into the everyday world of a dominant group. He writes about “the burden of authenticity”, which indigenous artists and film makers can feel when they are constantly called upon and expected to represent a whole group, or some univocal ‘Māori’. He also addresses what happens to Pākehā complacency when Māori history, stories, time, images, art are actively placed centre-stage, as happens in Māori films like *Ngati*. What was assumed to be ‘primitive’ and ‘past’ becomes relevant and present. He argues that the effect is to unsettle and displace arrogance and complacency⁵.

For me, Mita summed this up in her observation that she could not assume her continuing presence was secure in her homeland. I thought about it and realised that I did not assume I could not come home to ‘my country’, or that my experiences literally could not be ‘heard’ there. This resonated for me with Michelle Erai’s (2004) account that for her, as a Māori lesbian, living in exile was preferable to living in New Zealand⁶. At the time I read it as identifying as a Māori *lesbian*, (the emphasis on the latter), was most uncomfortable. Now I can see it was both.

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References

- 1 Barclay, B. (1990). *Our own image*. Longman Paul: Auckland.
- 2 Barclay, B (2003, July). Celebrating Fourth Cinema, *Illusions*, 35, 7-11.
- 3 Spivak, G.C. (1987). *In other worlds: Essays in cultural politics*. Methuen: New York.
- 4 Dennis, J. and Bieringer, L. (2000). (eds.). *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Victoria University Press: Wellington.
- 5 Sissons, J. (2005). *First peoples: Indigenous cultures and their futures*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.
- 6 Erai, M. (2004). 'Exile, Māori and lesbian', in L. Alice and L. Star (eds.) *Queer in Aotearoa/New Zealand*, (pp.35-46). Dunmore Press: Palmerston North.