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Cultural Copy: Visual Conversations on Indigenous Art and Cultural Appropriation

## Representing Multiculturalism in a Bicultural Nation

### The Question of Diversity in Aotearoa/ New Zealand

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## **‘Cultural Copy’ Acknowledgements**

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# Representing Multiculturalism in a Bicultural Nation

## The Question of Diversity in Aotearoa/ New Zealand

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### Abstract

*Historically, New Zealand has always represented itself as a bicultural nation of Maori (indigenous peoples) and Pakeha (white settlers), and this is reflected in its national cinema. But since the introduction of the Immigration Act 1987, New Zealand has increasingly become a multicultural and globally networked nation. However, this is rarely reflected in its national cinema, which largely continues to operate within a bicultural framework. Given this historical context, this paper explores the tension between what is called the 'Maori Cultural Renaissance' since the 1970s on the one hand, and the increasing demands for inclusion of various migrant communities on the other, in relation to the dominant Pakeha culture, using New Zealand cinema as a case study. The combination of a very small population (4 million), a relatively remote location, and advanced economic liberalisation means that producing a national cinema is always going to be a struggle in the face of global competition. The majority of films produced in New Zealand are therefore heavily reliant on government support. This in turn means that funding decisions are often based on official versions of nationhood and national identity, and the institutions responsible for these decisions are dominated by Pakeha. This paper discusses the impact of this situation on the content of New Zealand cinema, and the ways in which debates about multiculturalism and biculturalism are framed in this context, before drawing some conclusions about its wider impact on how the nation imagines itself and projects itself globally.*

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism and Biculturalism, Migration and Indigeneity, National and Cultural Identity, New Zealand Cinema

### Introduction

Historically, New Zealand has always represented itself as a bicultural nation of Maori (the indigenous population) and Pakeha (white, but more specifically British, settlers), and this is reflected in its cinema as well as its wider media environment. The New Zealand context is characterised by a number of factors that inform this bicultural emphasis, setting it apart from other postcolonial settler societies such as Australia and Canada. During the 1970s and 80s, two main factors came to play a major role in the way the nation imagines itself: the 'Maori Cultural Renaissance' and fundamental changes in its immigration policy. The former was initially spearheaded by some very vocal protests and demands about land rights and ownership, which eventually forced a 'full' recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi as the founding document of the nation in the late 1980s. This set the Treaty settlement claims process in motion, which is ongoing. Although the emphasis of this process is on land, it does move significantly beyond the concept of land as property in a Western sense; integral to the indigenous understanding of land is what that land represents in cultural and spiritual terms, and it is thus often about collective ownership. So Treaty claims are increasingly also about ownership of, and access to, the airwaves for example, which can be seen as an extension of the

right to self-expression and the right to be understood.

When applied to New Zealand cinema as a case study, this process can be seen to have a major influence on various cultural funding institutions, including the New Zealand Film Commission, which plays a vital role in New Zealand cinema. The combination of a very small population of just 4 million (and therefore a very small domestic market), a relatively remote location, and advanced economic liberalisation means that producing a national cinema is always going to be a struggle in the face of global competition. Given this situation, the majority of films produced in New Zealand heavily rely on government support, as very few of them will recoup their production costs, let alone make a profit.

The second major influence on the New Zealand context was the change in immigration policy in the 1980s. The 1987 Immigration Act significantly widened the focus of attracting migrants, which had until then effectively been a 'whites only' policy, although not officially (Bartley, 2004). The source nations became largely insignificant as the emphasis shifted to a combination of skilled and wealthy 'business' migrants, which in New Zealand's case meant a shift in immigration source nations to predominantly Asian nations. This had a considerable and rapid impact on a nation of less than 4 million people. In other words, New Zealand has become a



multicultural and globally networked society in a relatively short space of time.

These two factors combined create a persistent tension between biculturalism and multiculturalism in debates about nationhood and national identity, which consequently informs the ways in which nationhood is negotiated and represented in a New Zealand context. This paper explores the ways in which these debates are framed discursively, using New Zealand cinema as a case study to illustrate the everyday consequences of these debates.

The concept of 'culture' is stubbornly ambiguous and slippery in contemporary discourses, both in relation to constructions of nationhood and of race and ethnicity. It is precisely this ambiguity which makes it an attractive concept to appropriate in a variety of contexts and as part of a wide range of political discourses. For this also makes it a highly flexible concept. It is hardly surprising then that the concept of multiculturalism, with its prominent 'culture' component, is similarly and frequently appropriated for different strategic reasons, often in equally vague terms, to the point where it became a 90s 'buzzword' within social-cultural debate.

As Bennett observes, 'multiculturalism has served variously as code for assimilationism and cultural separatism; campus marxism and ethnic nationalism; transnational corporate marketing strategies and minority competition for state resources; radical democracy and cosmetic adjustments to the liberal-democratic status-quo' (1998, p.1/2). It consequently has a close relationship with that other 'buzzword': globalisation. 'Multiculturalism is in many ways an epiphenomenon of globalisation. (.) The word itself has had a diasporic career, entering and inflecting numerous national debates about the politics of cultural difference, the "limits of tolerance", and the future of the nation-state' (ibid, p.2). These different debates relate to different aspects of globalisation which can be roughly divided between economic discourses and cultural discourses. The former are concerned with competition for skilled labour on a global scale, while the latter relate to debates about for example national and cultural identity.

In a New Zealand context, multiculturalism has a particularly uneasy relationship with biculturalism, with the latter often being privileged in official versions of nationhood.

### **Biculturalism vs Multiculturalism: Positions and Contradictions**

The discourse of multiculturalism (and to a lesser extent biculturalism) allows for diversity, but often in a narrow definition of that word. The underlying principle is still homogeneity in the name of the nation, this time in terms of values and ideals. As Goldberg notes, 'the *fact* of great heterogeneity,

where it is acknowledged at all, is taken to necessitate the *aspiration* to a set of unifying, homogenizing ideals' (1994, p.20).

Keeping this 'aspiration' factor in mind, a crucial distinction can be drawn between multiculturalism as a lived reality, and multiculturalism as a state policy. Stratton talks in this respect about the difference between everyday multiculturalism, 'the mixing, merging and reworking of cultural forms in people's everyday lives' (1998, p.34), and official multiculturalism. This is an important distinction: everyday multiculturalism relates to hybridity and a potential third space, whereas official multiculturalism (or biculturalism) tends to fix cultural identities as a kind of 'mosaic'. Official multiculturalism has this 'fixing' effect because of its need to define cultural identity. As Stratton & Ang rightly argue,

The problem with official multiculturalism is that it tends, precisely, to freeze the fluidity of identity by the very fact that it is concerned with synthesising unruly and unpredictable cultural identities and differences into a harmonious unity-in-diversity. So the metaphor of the mosaic, of unity-in-diversity, is based on another kind of disavowal, on a suppression of the potential *incommensurability* of juxtaposed cultural differences (1998, p.157).

Stam similarly distinguishes between what he calls 'the multicultural fact and the multicultural project. (.) Multiculturalism as historical fact is as banal as it is indisputable' (1997, p.188).

This is a particularly important distinction in a New Zealand context, where multiculturalism, particularly in the urban centers, is clearly an undisputable fact. 'As an empirical statement of fact, New Zealand is multicultural in that it has a diverse population who identify as Maori, Tagata Pasifika, Pakeha, and New Zealanders of Asian origins' (Fleras & Spoonley, 1999, p.235). However, it is on the level of 'official multiculturalism' where the concept is mainly contested, for it is here that issues of representation, both political and cultural, come to the fore and where boundaries are drawn which define the spaces in which multiple cultures are allowed or not allowed to manoeuvre.

Kymlicka makes an important distinction between what he calls 'multination states (where cultural diversity arises from the incorporation of previously self-governing, territorially concentrated cultures into a larger state) and polyethnic states (where cultural diversity arises from individual and familial immigration)' (1995, p.6). New Zealand can be more or less seen as a combination of these two descriptions. Discourses about multiculturalism and biculturalism often ignore this distinction, which results in seeing multiculturalism and biculturalism as bipolar opposites that rule each other out. Following from this line of thinking is the often stated idea that 'multiculturalism must wait its turn'. But Kymlicka's



distinction makes clear that the objectives of both are very different.

In relation to 'multination' states, 'national minorities typically wish to maintain themselves as distinct societies alongside the majority culture, and demand various forms of autonomy or self-government to ensure their survival as distinct societies' (1995, p.10). In a general sense, this has resulted in the bicultural framework in New Zealand in response to the 'Maori Renaissance'. By contrast, in 'polyethnic' states, 'cultural diversity arises from individual and familial immigration. Such immigrants often coalesce into loose associations which I call "ethnic groups". They typically wish to integrate into the larger society, and to be full members of it. (.) Their aim is not to become a separate and self-governing nation alongside the larger society, but to modify the institutions and laws of the mainstream society to make them more accommodating of cultural differences' (ibid, p.10/11). This relates directly to Champagne's distinction between civil rights and indigenous rights (2004). Where indigenous rights are focused on group rights (self-determination and autonomy), civil rights are mostly about individual rights to self-fulfilment, and Champagne rightly argues that the civil rights framework does not fit with indigenous rights. In short, while discourses of biculturalism are mostly framed in terms of indigenous rights (at least from a Maori position), discourses of multiculturalism tend to be framed in terms of civil rights. It is precisely the failure to make this important distinction clear that frames the debates in a New Zealand context, and allows the government to appropriate either discourse in opportune ways.

Debates about biculturalism and multiculturalism in New Zealand are often framed in an either/or fashion, and within this framework, New Zealand has made a 'choice' to pursue biculturalism as a state policy, at least in official terms. Since the above mentioned Maori Renaissance, the Treaty of Waitangi has occupied a central place in this official policy. As Pratt asserts, 'the Treaty of Waitangi cemented into New Zealand culture and political life the idea that relations between Maori and Pakeha- colonisers and colonised- should be conducted on the basis of a 'partnership of equals' (1999, p.316).

It is the 'choice' element that makes this idea problematic in that it is prescriptive and hence ideological in nature. For a start, it raises the question of who made this 'choice' and for whose benefit? And who gets excluded as a result of this 'choice? 'A prescriptive rather than descriptive definition, official biculturalism in New Zealand marginalises ethnic minority groups who do not see themselves represented under the umbrella term "Pakeha", while at the same time presupposing a homogeneous "British" culture as the binary

opposite to Maori' (Nola, 2000, p.207, see also Mohanram, 1998, Ip, 1998). In other words, biculturalism excludes important sections of New Zealand society, at least in official discourses.

It is precisely this underlying binary structure that leads for example Thakur to the following conclusion: 'The debate in New Zealand is about biculturalism, not multiculturalism: the two are mutually exclusive. The Maori are the oldest immigrants to New Zealand, and Pakeha the second oldest. Groups which are neither Maori nor European are frozen out of the debate on the identity and future of the country and disenfranchised with respect to the politics of multiculturalism. They are rendered impotent in setting the agenda of the debate or defining its conceptual vocabulary' (1995, p.271/272). This raises a number of issues.

Firstly, it draws attention to a temporal hierarchy which biculturalism establishes. This hierarchy ultimately tends to lead to a situation where 'biculturalism is seen as the central platform from which a future multicultural society will be launched. The argument goes like this: in order to develop a model of ethnic relations that can answer to the democratic demands of a whole range of minority groups, it will first be necessary to develop representational structures that will empower the largest minority group' (Maxwell, 1998, p.199). It is in the reaction to this argument that the confusion between the different 'culturalisms' as official policy and everyday experience becomes clear.

Consider for instance the following statement by Rajen Prasad (former Race Relations Conciliator): 'I don't think it's as simple as saying, "First achieve biculturalism, then we'll look at multiculturalism". One can't wait for the other' (quoted in Nola, 2000, p.207). Indeed, everyday multiculturalism does not wait, but official multiculturalism is a political project and it is therefore possible to put this project on hold, or to 'silence' it in mainstream discourse. The effect of this is that some groups are constructed as 'late comers', or in Bhabha's words, 'by being "after" the original [Pakeha and Maori], or in "addition to" it, gives it the advantage of introducing a sense of "secondariness" or belatedness into the structure of the original' (1990, p.305).

Another aspect of Thakur's critique of biculturalism is the idea that Maori are the first in a long line of immigrant groups. This is problematic because it denies Maori special status on the basis of indigenous rights, and it ironically mirrors a common Pakeha discourse that constructs settlers as 'simply extending an ancient line of voyaging and settling rather than interrupting, as colonizers, an established world' (Williams, 1997, p.25). And as Fleras & Spoonley argue, 'unlike voluntary immigrants, indigenous peoples such as Maori did not voluntarily consent to be ruled or dominated. Nor did they expect to have language and culture eroded because of colonialism or assimilation' (1999, p.246). Of course the

'voluntary' aspect here is a matter of degree and is not always as straightforward as they imply here, but it does draw attention to differences between 'indigenous' and 'multicultural' positions.

Whereas a 'multicultural' position argues that biculturalism is too limiting, and not inclusive enough, an 'indigenous' position is often based on the idea that biculturalism does not go far enough in terms of its inherent promise of power sharing. Mohanram draws attention to this power aspect when she writes that, 'the concept of equitable power-sharing, so desirable for both Maori and Pakeha, is ultimately revealed to be something that can be initiated only by Pakeha, because it is Pakeha who control the resources' (1998, p.26). Because both 'culturalisms' in their official guises can be seen as prescriptive ideologies, they can, in practice, often be seen as strategies to 'manage diversity'.

As Pearson argues, 'such ideologies preserve fundamental power differentials by masking class (and gender) divisions with a gloss of "ethnic difference". Ethnic communities, real or imagined and their "leaders", are co-opted into the state and polity and are encouraged to view themselves as part of nations that are, in reality, still dominated by the monocultural core values and practices of their ruling classes' (1996, p.249, see also Stratton, 1998). 'Ethnic difference' refers here to culture in the narrow and material sense of the word. In relation to biculturalism for instance, Walker identifies this slippage and argues that there are two versions of biculturalism: 'The Pakeha version, which means learning a few phrases of Maori language and how to behave on the marae, and the Maori version, which entails Pakehas sharing what they have monopolised for so long, power, privilege and occupational security' (quoted in Maxwell, 1998, p.198).

In other words, if 'culturalisms' are seen in this narrow sense, the issue of power becomes elided from the equation. Mohanram indicates how this is beneficial from a Pakeha point of view. 'Commonsense or popular understanding of this term bicultural suggests that it is the Pakeha who initiates and deploys power-sharing in order "to do the right thing". In their bicultural relationship with Maori, Pakeha are transformed into democratic, liberal, generous, culturally sensitive citizens' (1998, p.26). The way in which institutions like the New Zealand Film Commission operate exemplifies this relationship on a day-to-day basis.

To argue that biculturalism and multiculturalism are incompatible and cancel each other out is to accentuate their differences and to ignore their similarities. To some extent, both these positions are attacking Eurocentrism, albeit for different reasons. From a multicultural position, the aim is to 'graft bits of diversity onto a mainstream core' (Fleras & Spoonley, 1999, p.246). In other words, it

is aimed at creating a space to firstly recognise and respect cultural diversity, and secondly to incorporate this diversity into mainstream society and culture. This is what Charles Taylor has called 'the politics of recognition' (1992/1994).

In short, it is aimed at inclusion where there is perceived exclusion. And inclusion here does not mean assimilation. On the contrary, by stressing diversity, this aim contains an implicit critique of assimilationist policies and attitudes. According to Mfodwo for example, 'the current spectrum of ethnic identities in New Zealand cannot be assimilated into various forms of subordinated Anglo-centric identity that have hitherto been the dominant modes of diversity management in New Zealand. There are currently too many non-European "others" in New Zealand who cannot be made over into some manageable version of Englishness' (1997, p.100). From a multicultural position then, the aim is not in the first instance to overthrow the existing political structure, but rather to modify it.

From an indigenous position however, the aim is not so much to be incorporated into an existing political structure, but rather to reconfigure that structure and create a position of power from which to define the structure. This does not just apply to politics proper, but also to institutions throughout society. Because of these different aims, and because they are often used in overlapping and confusing ways, Fleras and Spoonley propose a new term, 'bi-nationalism', which draws on Kymlicka's distinction between 'multination' and 'polyethnic'. This is interesting because it recognises the possibility of simultaneity of both these projects, as opposed to a 'one first, then the other' argument which I believe is ultimately unsustainable. They propose a 'multiculturalism within a bi-national framework' (ibid, p.248). I believe this distinction is helpful because it recognises both the similarities between multiculturalism and biculturalism as well as the differences, and it allows for a potential open-endedness of the outcome.

I say 'potential' because that depends for a large part on how such a social-political objective gets defined and by whom. The main reservation about Kymlicka's thesis relates to the perception that it is too monocultural, which similarly applies to Fleras & Spoonley's model. It leads to a kind of mosaic of 'fenced-in' cultures, with the dominant culture, as largest piece, firmly in the center. As Stratton argues, 'the policy of multiculturalism is organised according to a metaphorical spatial structure in which migrant, 'ethnic' cultures are peripheral to the core culture' (1998, p.10). This underlying essentialist and often narrow notion of culture makes it problematic and leaves it open to a frequent slippage between culture and race.

This also makes it vulnerable to various critiques. These critiques 'share a conception of a "culture" as a discrete and integrated entity, and a belief that certain

cultures are less compatible than others. (.) The consequence of this line of thinking is that certain cultural groups, usually marked by visual racial signifiers, are more acceptable within Australian society than others' (ibid, p.14). This is part of Stratton's analysis of the Pauline Hanson phenomenon in Australia, but it has been a common discourse in New Zealand as well. The underlying logic is that 'certain cultures are incompatible and that this incompatibility threatens the claimed unity of the Australian national culture. Race then becomes a marker of that cultural difference' (ibid, p.64).

Ranginui Walker's (Professor Emeritus at The University of Auckland, and frequent commentator on 'Maori issues' in the mainstream media) critique of multiculturalism is a good example of this slippage. What starts off as a critique of multiculturalism as a perceived threat to biculturalism, quickly turns into a process of selection where some 'cultures' are seen as more desirable than others. He begins with the earlier mentioned idea that 'multicultural ideology is a direct negation of the Maori assertion of the primacy of biculturalism' (1995, p.286). This is followed by a critique of immigration policy as purely based on economic considerations under the guise of a liberal rejection of racial factors in immigration policy. This position appears to have a considerable amount of traction in the New Zealand context, which becomes clear when we look at New Zealand cinema.

### **Focus on New Zealand Cinema**

In terms of the ethnic composition of its population, New Zealand is clearly a multicultural nation. However, this is rarely reflected in its national cinema, which largely operates within a bicultural framework. The film *Broken English* (1996, Gregor Nicholas) is an important exception to this, in that it deliberately sets out to represent a multicultural New Zealand. But in hindsight, the film has proven to be an exception to the bicultural rule, of which *Once Were Warriors* (1994, Lee Tamahori) and *Whale Rider* (2003, Nikki Caro) are clear examples. But even then, the film represents a Pakeha perspective on multiculturalism where otherness is clearly defined against a Pakeha yardstick.

The production personnel of *Broken English* consisted mostly of Pakeha New Zealanders, while the film features virtually no Pakeha characters. This raises issues of power and representation. In other words, who has the power to define who, and for whose benefit? Although *Broken English* represents a number of different ethnic communities in New Zealand (Croatian, Maori, Chinese and Cook Island), these communities are ultimately not represented by and for themselves, but rather on someone else's terms. In addition, these representations are mostly directed at a

mainstream (and thus largely Pakeha) audience. This situation may easily lead to 'exotic othering', and while the film does this to a certain extent, it is also ambiguous in this respect. When quizzed about this, director Gregor Nicholas argued that he did not want to treat these communities with 'kid gloves'. However, this in turn leads, in the absence of Pakeha characters, to a situation where these communities are positioned to some extent as a 'social problem' (as carrying 'baggage' into New Zealand), literally removed from mainstream society. Within this cinematic 'ethnoscape', the film displays an extraordinary concern with 'cultural detail' (such as food rituals, dance and colourful clothing), which ultimately leads to representations which rarely move beyond well-entrenched stereotypes.

Within the overall context of New Zealand cinema, *Broken English* can be seen as an important text and as part of a postcolonial negotiation of nationhood and national identity. The problematic ways in which it engages with its subject matter serve to illustrate the complex nature of such negotiations. The film presents a version of New Zealand which is culturally and ethnically diverse. In this way, it moves away from hegemonic versions of New Zealand which are still to a large extent framed in either monocultural or bicultural terms. In part, this can be seen as a direct result of relatively recent changes in immigration policy, which have created an increasingly diverse population, particularly in Auckland where the film makers are based and where the film's story takes place.

On one level then, *Broken English* can be seen as an important attempt to bring different minority groups into the mainstream, and thus represents an inclusive version of the nation. However, the problematic ways in which it does so, again illustrates the complexities involved in such a project. Although partly due to the constraints of film as a medium, and the resultant pressures of presenting complex subject matter in approximately one and a half hours, the film ultimately positions the different ethnic groups it represents outside of the mainstream. The fact that it is one of the only circulating cinematic versions of New Zealand nationhood which engages with ethnic and cultural diversity, only accentuates this.

In terms of future challenges then, I would argue for the importance of wider access to the means of representation. This is not to say that Pakeha film makers cannot make films about other ethnic groups, nor that only members of a particular ethnic group can adequately represent that group, for this is an argument that ultimately leads to essentialist notions of culture and identity. It is merely to argue for an expansion of the channels through which national and cultural identities can be constructed, and to make them more inclusive. This would put more emphasis on power sharing and dialogue between different social groups that make up a New Zealand in transition to a postcolonial nation.

## Conclusions

The apparent lack of cinematic diversity in New Zealand can be seen as a result of the dominant and institutionalised discourse of biculturalism in the New Zealand context, which not only sees diversity primarily in bicultural terms, but also as existing in opposition to multiculturalism. I would argue that the framing of the debate in these terms, serves to perpetuate the dominant position of Pakeha in New Zealand power relations. 'One line of argument is that New Zealand remains a monocultural society, in outcome if not intent. The ground rules of society are inescapably rooted in Eurocentric values and structures; the game plan is unmistakably tilted towards perpetuating Pakeha power and culture' (Fleras & Spoonley, 1999, p.235). The main problem in the present debates about biculturalism

and multiculturalism is that it allows Pakeha as the dominant group to have it both ways. On the one hand, the discourse of multiculturalism can be appropriated to negate indigenous rights by positioning Maori as 'just another ethnic group', while the discourse of biculturalism on the other hand can be appropriated to negate civil rights by positioning all other groups as 'late comers'. Recognising the important distinction between civil rights and indigenous rights would provide much needed clarity and focus to the present debate, and would allow for the possibility that multiculturalism and biculturalism can exist in conjunction rather than in opposition. This would be a far more inclusive and productive way to position New Zealand in a global context.

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