

Book review: *New Zealand film – an illustrated history*. Edited by Diane Pivac with Frank Stark and Lawrence McDonald (2011)

Review by Joe Citizen

This book is not entirely sure who its target audience is. It looks like a coffee table book, but doesn't read like one. Written by a veritable who's who of filmmakers and critics, it neither provides critical analysis nor practical advice. Whilst it does look pretty with lots of pictures and great graphic design, overall it fails to live up to its promise and provides little more than a sanitised and superficial account of history. New Zealand film is, after all, a fairly wide claim, but it is not unreasonable to expect more than a conservative chronological recitation of 'who' and 'when', without perhaps exploring 'why' and 'how'.

Unfortunately *New Zealand film – an illustrated history* reads like an archivist's catalogue in its mind-numbing and tedious obsession with notational details. That it has been produced in association with the Film Archive may account for this tendency, for it seems almost singularly unaware of its own "culture of display" (McCarthy, 2007) or takes its own position as being self-evident. There is undoubtedly room for both general audiences and for those who are looking for something a bit more substantial, considering the presence of archivists and academics who have contributed to its eleven main chapters. Perhaps this is why it reads so dryly, for although filmmakers have contributed to its pages they seem to have been side-lined as single paged inserts. It has attempted to bridge the gap between the literary and the audio-visual medium of film through photographs, different coloured pages and a sampler DVD, but one cannot help thinking that a history of New Zealand film could've been better illustrated with more than an endless array of promotional shots and two minute long cinematic snippets.

The general collation of information is undoubtedly its crowning achievement, but its decade by decade structure is profoundly limiting. With such a wealth of contributors it seems odd that each is restricted – with the exception of those writing about the 1980s – to such a teleological conceit. This organisational strategy over-emphasises the preoccupations of feature filmmaking, and simultaneously marginalises non-commercial filmmaking. Attempts to address this microcosmic othering through the

tokenistic insertion of coloured pages mainly describing prominent individuals are paternalistic and deeply frustrating. The result is a scattergun approach to the interweaving strands that make up film in New Zealand.

It is left to individual contributors working within their chronological chapters to engage with the bedrock issues of filmmaking. Ann Hardy reminds us of Merata Mita's (1992) contention that 'the New Zealand film industry until that time had been "a white, neurotic one"' (p.243) and Frank Stark reiterates Barry Barclay's assertions relating to the political dimension of filmmaking for Maori, in a reference to *Ngati*. Further investigation of Maori culture in film, however, is disjointed because of the linear fixation. Also absent is a basic chapter or segment (more than a paragraph or two) that discusses representation or identity politics for the screen.

Considerable portions of the book orbit around authorial obsessions centred on funding relationships, and their much overused but seldom defined correlate, 'industry'. Frank Stark's comment in the final chapter perhaps summarises this fascination: 'for all the rhetoric surrounding new funding initiatives and new technology, the main issue for many in the industry remained the familiar difficulty of raising money in a small market.' (p. 300) Whilst this discourse is undoubtedly important, a wider political analysis is needed particularly for the more recent decades. Small forays are ventured by some authors. Geraldene Peters charts the bureaucratic governmental influence that helped to shape the content of the National Film Unit's *Weekly Review* during the 1940s, but her exploration of the Grierson subtext that 'helped to project a government's vision of 'New Zealandness"' (p.105), is left largely untouched by other authors. Frank Stark discusses the impact of 'Rogernomics' during the second half of the 1980s, however it is left to Lawrence McDonald in his chapter on the 1970s to consider the tensions and contradictions between popular culture and officialdom; and Ann Hardy's chapter on the 1990s to inject some semblance of critique with her explorations of the wider film culture in New Zealand and commercial imperatives. Her quote from former film commission head Jim Booth that 'New Zealand features are overwhelmingly, bloody-mindedly uncommercial' (p.244), tantalisingly offers the possibility of an examination of causative factors, but no such appraisal is offered by her or anyone else.

If New Zealand films have been dogged by a historically adverse funding climate, where is the overall exploration of why filmmakers continue to attempt to produce 'uncommercial' films? What else influences them? Presumably New Zealand film is an articulation of wider social and cultural discourses, but attention is rarely paid to the motivations of New Zealand film practitioners. Underlying tropes are paid no more than lip service, with references to *Cinema of Unease* (1995) being foremost. The contributors tend to relate certain types of genre production with a certain default fiscal relationship, rather than subjecting them to any critical examination. Where are the discussions about what may or may not constitute New Zealand notions of humour, equity or adversity?

Equally unsatisfying is the emphasis on feature filmmaking after the advent of television, which reinforces film industry concerns and sensibilities. Popular filmmaking in New Zealand has a long history centred on short film production by film students, competition entrants, and others. Almost every region of New Zealand has communities of short filmmakers producing every conceivable type of film and hosting their own screenings and support networks, although *New Zealand film – an illustrated history* makes little mention of this. Some, like Bruce Babbington in his early 1980s chapter, offer a different insight to the received wisdom that 'the making of short films has been the obvious step on the route to feature making'. He rephrases Peter Wells (1982) that 'there are smaller, committed audiences for whom the short film is an end in itself because of the greater aesthetic density, experimentalism and radicalism possible in a form less commodified than the narrative feature.' (p.203) Observations like this are scattered throughout the book, but again, because of decade by decade structure they are offered by individual authors as supplementary topics rather than subjects in themselves. Their attempt to cohesively write about a decade in a single chapter necessitates a broad strokes approach that has the effect of pitching short film production as an alternative, rather than being seen as having value in and of itself. Had the editors of the book asked multiple authors to write on the same decades, or on overarching themes, then perhaps short films and other non-feature film works may have been given more prominence.

Throughout, a basic premise of the book remains unexamined: What is, and what is not, a film? Experimental filmmaking in particular is given so little attention - aside

from glancing 1970s references to *Alternative Cinema* and the experimental filmmaker Martin Rumsby – that one could be forgiven for thinking that all New Zealand filmmakers are resolutely focussed on achieving such mainstream status as director Peter Jackson, who garners an entire chapter to himself. This seems entirely at odds with the plethora of short dance films, experimental works, moving image art installations and music videos that have not screened as theatrical releases but nevertheless manage to circulate throughout New Zealand and overseas.

This lack seems inexplicable. It's as if the book is a specimen frozen in amber. Where are the arguments, the passion, the heated debate? There is no mention of the imminent sense of change that galvanises popular filmmaking, no mention of the influence of the internet, no YouTube, no Facebook, no mash-up VJ culture, nor anything to do with camera hacks or homemade steadicams and fonefilms. Interactivity is strangely absent, the influence of videogames non-existent, and the recent immersive video techniques found in 3D films or 360 degree video, completely ignored.

Again, we return to the question of who is this book written for? It seems in danger of being rapidly outdated even as it hits the shelves, as its scope is limited to an old-fashioned sensibility that has yet to engage with the technological convergences that threaten to reconceptualise filmmaking as it has been historically thought of. If this book had been commissioned as a documentary film, then some discussion would've invariably addressed who the target audience is meant to be. It is quite possible that despite its slick presentation, a large number of people will be put off this book as they already possess the contemporaneous knowledge the authors apparently lack.

Neither is there any discussion offered about how to make films. Many authors obliquely refer to the do-it-yourself necessity of making films on limited budgets, and tend to frame their discussions as a binary tension between the needs of 'culture' and commercial imperatives. However, references to production notes, costume and make-up sketches, logistics, locations, lighting and sound innovations are few and far between. Film is not just the finished product, but also the processes of production – it is, after all, a notoriously collaborative art – so a general discussion

about New Zealand crews and the obstacles that they have overcome would surely have been relevant.

New Zealand film – an illustrated history concentrates on cinematic releases rather than telefilms. Although Lawrence McDonald chronicles the impact television had on filmmaking practitioners by fostering new skills through the production of television commercials, telefilms are for some reason afforded less weight by other authors. This seems particularly true for those who are concerned with chronicling times characterised by a post liberalised market. There is an element of irony here, for it seems odd that when so many authors refer to issues related to funding films, no discursive critique is offered with regards to the role of broadcasters acting to protect commercial interests. Indeed, the entire furore that surrounds the relationship between NZ on Air and broadcasters, and the inherent contradictions of a state broadcaster that had to simultaneously meet its public service obligations under the 2003 broadcast charter whilst being required to turn a profit, mysteriously escapes analysis almost entirely; only Ann Hardy manages to allude to it briefly. It seems somewhat disingenuous for a book that claims to be ‘comprehensive’, to sidestep how New Zealander’s might see themselves on screen, particularly with regard to the practice of funded documentaries not being aired, or being aired at unfavourable timeslots. A more sustained discursive analysis relating to on-screen representations and informed cinematic notions of what constitutes the relevant identities of a nation is absent, with the notable exceptions of the single topic inserted pages and an introduction by filmmaker Roger Horrocks. He manages to integrate a more comprehensive discussion about nationalism, counter-culture and Maori-Pakeha representational discourse, in a book that otherwise gives avoids anything but the most superficial of treatments.

The lack of reference to television seems additionally ironic when one considers the scope of its contributors who are comfortable across both platforms, but for some reason have limited their discussion to theatrical releases. Roger Horrocks has a stab at it– he tells us that ‘Necessarily, our story focusses not only on fiction feature films but also on short fiction films, non-fiction newsreels and documentaries – genres that, until recently dominated local film making.’ (p.5) Ignoring the tautological aspect of this statement for a moment, there is none- the- less no explanation offered as to why it is not considered necessary to discuss commissioned or

reversioned telefilms, or other types of filmmaking such as experimental, installation based or fine art practice.

Ultimately, *New Zealand film – an illustrated history* represents something of a milestone – as the acknowledgements section recognises. It looks like it has been a long time in the making, and it has tried to be inclusive, even if for the most part it does so superficially. The sampler DVD is a great touch, with extracts from the film archives and elsewhere that perhaps are not seen by as wide an audience as they deserve. Many of the clips are just a bit too short – they're not so much a taste as a lick – and while the inclusion of their New Zealand Film Archive reference numbers is helpful, it would have been good to have some description or instruction as to how to use this information. From a practical perspective, the DVD itself really needs a cover rather than a small foam insert to hang on, as it easily becomes lost. Perhaps the moving images presented in the DVD needed to be better referenced to the writing, so that it complements the book rather serving as an addendum. Or perhaps this book really needed to be a website and operate in the same way that *Te Ara encyclopaedia of New Zealand* does, with its interconnecting articles, cross referenced web pages, and multiple access points for readers of all types. Instead, it has chosen a singularly linear approach to represent what is otherwise a non-linear medium.

References:

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