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## New Zealand Film Industry: Building Culture and Identity

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Professor Wales

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New Zealand Film Industry: Building Culture and Identity

Below Australia, as close to the bottom of the populated world as one can go, lies the small country of New Zealand, the true “land down-under.” New Zealand offers close to 103,500 square miles of picturesque and varied landscape, along with a population of less than 5 million, as of the 2016 census. Despite its isolated geography and small population, the country has made a large international presence, especially in the film industry. The development of the New Zealand film industry is unique, beginning soon after the birth of film itself but refraining from substantial growth until recent years. The passion and perseverance of the Kiwi filmmakers have pushed film in New Zealand past economic and social challenges to be regarded as nearly fundamental to growing and keeping the New Zealand identity.

The first “New Zealand-domiciled”—locally-produced—motion picture screened in New Zealand was made by Professors Hausmann and Gow, entitled *Sandow the Strong Man*. It was played at the Opera House in Auckland on October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1896, projecting short films of moving life, and by November 20<sup>th</sup> had toured through the country to Dunedin (“Films”). Film took the country by storm from the first screening forward. However, video pieces stayed with a small-scale documentary style through much of the industry’s early history, with no large numbers of fiction films being made until the New Wave of the late 1970s (Fox). Most of the films screened in New Zealand during the early years were imported from abroad, namely the United States and Great Britain (Dunleavy 24, 27). The average New Zealander was an avid audience member,

visiting the cinema twenty-three times a year by the mid-1940s, but New Zealand-made films had yet to make the majority of the shows viewed (“Films”). The minimal amount of Kiwi films is largely attributed to the prevailing attitude of both the government and civilian people. Though New Zealand had become an independent country in 1840 with the Waitanga Treaty between Maori and British leaders, its independent status was not established until 1947 (Dunleavy 27). Even then, international entertainment influenced local reception of New Zealand pieces, creating an attitude called “cultural cringe,” in which “everything interesting or important only happens overseas” (Dunleavy 27).

Adding to the prevailing negative attitude, funding for such expensive endeavors as movies was scarce, especially in a country with so small a population, thus filmmakers ran into the problems with accessing basic resources. Private wealthy investors were few and far between, considering the common trend of New Zealand films losing money (Dunleavy 71). Also due to the small population, as well as the lack of an “independent public regulator presence,” the New Zealand government could be closer to issues, in that the government could directly fund certain projects or needs (Dunleavy 19). With film, however, the country’s leadership did not provide public funding (Dunleavy 26). Thus a vicious cycle of pleading for funds in all stages of production stood in the way of early filmmakers.

Regardless, the ingenuity and perseverance of early filmmakers pushed the local industry into the spotlight by the end of the twentieth century, though the process was long and grueling. Learning filmmaking occurred on the job in an informal environment, making it difficult for local filmmakers to go international, and those storytellers who did leave New Zealand sometimes did not return (Jones 46). The Depression led to a halt even in government documentary films, while the years during the war saw the use of film for wartime information

and propaganda in the National Film Unit (Jones 32). The 1950s and 1960s, following World War II, were years of a “dead-man’s land” for Kiwi film, partially because of the beginning of publicly-funded television (Martin 1). Foreign funding for films in New Zealand was used, but often the deal turned into a Hollywood movie being made with New Zealand as a location, rather than a “New Zealand story” (Martin 1). Pioneer filmmaker John O’Shea equates it to an entertainment colonization of the world by Hollywood (Dunleavy 26). Even though foreign projects brought in revenue to the country, if too many projects were scheduled across the country, the productions experienced a shortage of employees (Jones 45). Further, because of the small size of New Zealand, it is easily affected by changes whether in weather, business, or technology. As a result, the country is a useful test community for new ideas, which can lead to situations where the international forms the nation more than the local, to the point where, as O’Shea puts it, “We barely knew where we were—except as part of ‘the Empire’” (Dunleavy 26). According to Mr. John Callen, who has more than forty years of experience in the New Zealand film and theater business, cultural cringe was still a widespread perspective in the middle of the twentieth century: “This was basically a refusal to accept that any artistic endeavour in NZ could never match that of its British or American counterpart” (Swart). Only five New Zealand-dominated fiction feature films were made between 1939 and 1972—all directed by either of two visionaries: O’Shea and Rudall Hayward (Dunleavy 27). The films were regarded as oddities among the local population but were “loved nonetheless” (Swart).

Due to lack of resources on both ends of production, a distinctive New Zealand “can-do-it” attitude emerged: directors had to help with set design, lighting, camera work, sound, and any other job that had to be done. Filmmakers learned to approach problems with the eagerness to find a solution creatively and with resources already available, which was key to seeing the

stories made and viewed (Jones 56). The passion of the filmmakers who have driven the industry forward reflects in the perspective of Roger Horrocks, New Zealand leading screenwriter and scholar: “When growing up in the 1940’s and 1950’s, I was so crazy about films, as almost all New Zealanders were in those pre-television, pre-internet, pre-PlayStation days” (Horton).

New Zealand’s cultural invisibility experienced in the post-WWII decades pushed the industry to its renaissance in the 1970s, exploding once government funding began in 1978 with the creation of the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) by Parliament act (Martin 3). The commission came about from “outsiders”—those who had few opportunities to participate in New Zealand television, and insisted that the government had the “duty to support” the miniscule film industry (Dunleavy 71). Lobbying took place at the beginning of the 1970s, with the notion of a film commission presented at Queen Elizabeth II’s Arts Council’s national conference. The only official film agency then was the National Film Unit (NFU), and the lobbyists proposed a national screen organization to coordinate the NFU and fund various industry needs (Dunleavy 72). This led to the Film Industry Working Party and eventually to the NZFC. The film that launched the NZFC was *Sleeping Dogs* (1977), the directorial debut of Roger Donaldson and career-launch of Sam Neil—both of whom went on to successful New Zealand and international careers (“Films”). The effect of the NZFC was so drastic that some debate whether the film industry existed before the commission was formed (Dunleavy 72). Even so, the NZFC could only fund medium-sized projects: multi-million-dollar budgets still belonged to the realm of foreign films. Between 1977 and 2002, forty New Zealand and foreign joint-funded films were made (Jones 39). The commission was designed to help filmmakers move from an amateur level to major feature production; the problem was that New Zealand’s market size could not handle massive productions, so artists who made the transition often moved to Hollywood (Jones 46).

Early styles of fiction film revolved around dark or taboo subjects. This included stories about the native population of New Zealand, the Maori people, who were looked down upon as inferior to the white settlers. Love stories between the indigenous people and European Kiwis, especially in the prevailing “noble savage” theme, were both enlightening and shocking to those who wanted to keep the British moral of old (Swart, Dunleavy 28). Feminist themes began to rise in the 1970s and 1980s, along with the emerging presence of female directors like Gaylene Preston, Alison MacLean, and later Jane Campion (“Films”). Themes of biculturalism and deconstructionism also emerged in the 1980s (Dunleavy 28). In general, geographical isolation and a unique cultural history led to an equally peculiar film industry style (Martin 1). According to Roger Horrocks, four themes arose: a gorgeous landscape used first for exotic tones, and later as symbolic; horror and fear; rites of passage; and the macho perspective of the Kiwi male culture (Martin 1). Kiwi humor prevailed as one that focused on tongue-in-cheek parody and self-deprecation, with immense amounts of satire, especially toward genre films (Martin 1).

After *Goodbye Pork Pie* (1981), the first New Zealand film to gross over \$1 million (“Films”), government film funding saw a downturn in the late 1980s and 1990s, as political and economic changes, along with population increase, led to less screen production support (Dunleavy 28-29). Nonetheless, groundbreaking film achievements were made during these few decades including New Zealand’s first horror film, woman director, science fiction film, experimental film, and animated feature, along with local box-office successes like *Mr Wrong* (1985) and *Once Were Warriors* (1994) (Martin 4, “Films”). Near the turn of the century, however, the country saw a massive flow of funding into the country, prominently due to the production of the three-part series *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*). The three films grossed close to 3 billion dollars, while production costs had a total budget of slightly less than \$300 million

(“Lord of the Rings”). New Zealand Director Sir Peter Jackson was successful for multiple reasons: he had control of the entire project as one of the writers, director, and part of the producer team; he used his own facilities of Wingnut Films, Weta Workshop, and Park Road Post Production; locals would generally work for low wages to be a part of the project; he had a ready actor source; and he was able to keep costs down with his “can-do-it” ingenuity (Jones 54). The *LOTR* series pushed the boundaries on what New Zealand film production could handle and become one of the most successful franchises in history. It has produced spin-off industry success, especially in tourism, as evidenced by how the city of Wellington was renamed “Middle Earth” during Christmas 2001, and the town of Hobbiton is now a working tourist attraction (Jones 6). Essentially, Sir Peter Jackson brought international awareness to “the mouse that roared into the film world,” as Callen puts it (Swart). He went on to make *King Kong* (2005) and *The Hobbit* franchise (2012-2014). Nevertheless, the *LOTR* films are not generally considered “New Zealand films,” because they were funded by the American company New Line Cinema and reside on the list of films originally made for an international audience (Dunleavy 20). The movies are not included on the list of films that shaped the New Zealand identity, though the films did generate massive amounts of revenue and enthusiasm for the growing industry.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the New Zealand film industry has continued to grow and change. The industry celebrated its one-hundred twentieth birthday in October 2016, measuring over 750,000 video and audio recordings collected at Nga Taonga Sound and Vision (“Films”). Economic success steadily increases: the screen industry’s revenue progressed to \$3.3 billion in 2016, with double the feature film production and post-production revenue in Wellington, going from \$289 million to \$644 million (“Screen Industry Survey”). Maori filmmaking has increased with the works of Barry Barclay and Merata Mita (Fox), as well as

with *Whale Rider* (2002), directed by Niki Caro. Pacific Island and Samoan culture progressively appears in cinema as New Zealand increases in cultural variety, shown in the popular comedy *Sione's Wedding* of 2004 ("Films"). Taika Waititi, a Maori director, has emerged as an influential New Zealand filmmaker with his films *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016) and *Boy* (2010), which have gained the number one and two spots for highest grossing films in the local box office, respectively ("Films"). He has followed the pattern of other successful New Zealand directors in progressing to international projects with *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), which he made in conjunction with Marvel Studios (Dockterman). However, the current trend is not one of leaving New Zealand for Hollywood, but rather traversing back and forth as New Zealand is becoming more and more of a "global" industry (Jones 57). Audience members remain avid cinema attendees, with New Zealand ranked second in the world with Australia—behind the United States—in 2011 cinema attendance (Martin 1).

The New Zealand government considers the film industry, specifically in the making of "New Zealand stories," as a culturally valuable, even nationalistic project for fostering and marketing the national identity (Jones 14). This being said, as more and more international communities interact with Kiwi filmmakers, the definition of the "New Zealand identity" becomes progressively difficult to define. On the one hand, it is challenging, if not impossible, to measure national identity and "localness" objectively (Dunleavy 25). On the other hand, New Zealand itself was initially formed by a mixture of Maori and English cultures, along with a preference for foreign ideas (Dunleavy 25). The country's history is marked with the impacts of international cultures, especially in the realm of films. The current definition of "New Zealand-domiciled" films consists of movies made by and for New Zealanders, presenting distinctly Kiwi themes; those Kiwi themes, however, have been highly influenced by New Zealand's



interactions with foreign communities (Dunleavy 25-26). The push for “New Zealand stories” by the NZFC, as well as other government funding programs, has led to more and more young filmmakers moving to other sources of funding, as well as debate over whether the government is becoming closed-minded in determining what is a fundable “Kiwi film” (Swart).

The essential factor when it comes to a nation’s identity, as it pertains to film, is a matter of voice. Along those parameters, the New Zealand voice is unique. Callen describes the New Zealand humor as more subtle than American or Australian, self-deprecating but currently possessing a certain pride that contrasts the “we’re not worthy” attitude of the past (Swart). New Zealand, with less than five million people in population, has a small voice in comparison to the larger voices of the entertainment world. It is precisely for this reason that New Zealanders have the drive to tell stories, for “often a smaller nation will cut through all the babble and deliver a simple yet telling message” (Swart).

To conclude, New Zealand’s film industry journey, along with the development of its voice, is unique. Historically, the film industry began slowly, with few feature films being made until the government began helping fund films with the New Zealand Film Commission. The industry expanded quickly with both international and local stories in the 1970s, and has continued to grow up to the present. Local New Zealand film has been a large factor in fostering the identity of the entire country, both in its storytelling style and in the “can-do-it” perspective carried by its people. Tension continues between the impact of the international community and the preservation of a unique New Zealand identity. Regardless, New Zealand represents the tail of the film industry, according to Callen, and “It won’t be long before this tail will be able to wag the international dog” (Swart).

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