Impure Cinema conference, Leeds Art Gallery 2010

**Abstract: ‘From process to product: intercultural collaboration in the making of *Whale Rider*’**

Dr. Virginia Pitts, University of Kent [v.t.pitts@kent.ac.uk](mailto:v.t.pitts@kent.ac.uk)

*Whale Rider* (2003), adapted for screen by Niki Caro from Witi Ihimaera’s novel, tells the story of a Māori girl who struggles to overturn patriarchal resistance towards her future role as a leader. Following critical acclaim and an Oscar win for Keisha Castle-Hughes, the film’s considerable commercial success sharpened local debate already sparked by the Pākehā status of its director[[1]](#footnote--1). Dialectical conceptions of cultural difference underpin much of that commentary, as do assumptions about power relations on set and positivist dismissals of the indigenous spirituality guiding the production. This paper seeks to expand the scope of that debate by exploring the very nature of the intercultural collaborative processes established between Caro, Ihimaera, Taumaunu (Cultural Advisor), and the elders of Whangara (home of the Whale Rider myth).

While New Zealand’s cinematic history proves that intercultural collaboration may replicate processes of colonial assimilation, my interviews with the two key collaborators on *Whale Rider* reveal processes characterised by a sophisticated awareness of what distinguishes and what connects peoples from different cultures, extremely high levels of mutual respect, and the democratization of traditional screen production culture in accordance with Māori spirituality and protocols. This, in turn, triggers a higher degree of shared authorship than is the norm in mainstream cinema production. The resulting film demonstrates the potential for indigenous mythology to address contemporary concerns, and interweaves the respective naturalistic and symbolic registers of New Zealand cinema and Maori storytelling paradigms without retreating in to exoticism. I thus argue that the ‘dialogic’ mode of intercultural collaboration undertaken in the making of *Whale Rider*, in which differentiation is understood as ‘simultaneous resemblance and difference’[[2]](#footnote-0)*,* manifests in a specific permutation of aesthetically hybrid cinema that carves out a constitutive ‘third space’ in the New Zealand national canon.

Biography: Dr. Virginia Pitts

Virginia Pitts is an academic and filmmaker dedicated to fostering dialogue between critical enquiry and creative practice. She combines approaches associated with practice-based research with more established qualitative methodologies to explore the permeability of borders between cultures and between mainstream and experimental or marginal cinemas. Virginia’s PhD examined the nature and impact of cross-cultural creative and financial collaborations on New Zealand National Cinema. She recently completed a short narrative-dance film exploring dialogism as a model for human interaction and is completing an article exploring the relations between technology, creativity and policy in low budget digital feature filmmaking. Virginia’s own screen production work spans drama, documentary, screendance and various hybrid forms for both film and television. Her films have been selected to screen at many of the world's top film festivals, toured US art galleries, and sold widely to television. Virginia is currently exploring forms of embodied engagement with cinema, both in the screen development process and in the viewing experience, to inform the development of a feature-length screenplay.

1. Pākehā is the Māori word used to describe a New Zealander of European (primarily British) descent. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Holquist, M., 2002. *Dialogism* 2nd edition, Oxon & New York, Routledge [↑](#footnote-ref-0)