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Technologies of culture: Digital feature film-making in New Zealand

ABSTRACT

This article provides the first overview of contemporary low-budget digital cinema in New Zealand, the first decade of which has resulted in a body of fiction films that contest the national cinematic canon in terms of thematic and representational emphases as well as narrative and aesthetic strategies. To investigate the causes and consequences of these departures, the output and methods of New Zealand's digital feature film-makers are explored, revealing how shifts in creative processes and increased access to the means of production enabled by low-cost, lightweight digital video intersect with the proliferating cultural affiliations of emerging film-makers to produce change. I thus argue that the very ontology of digital video and associated medium-specific practices are increasingly integral to culturally and aesthetically pluralistic projections in New Zealand cinema. As a consequence, I also argue for public investment in the sector and the alteration of funding policies designed.for large-budget productions so that a tier of film-making ripe for experimentation and innovation can exist in fruitful dialogue with more mainstream fare.

KEYWORDS

digital film-making
convergence
technology and creativity
New Zealand cinema
small nation cinema
funding policies
film-making process

INTRODUCTION

This article provides the first overview of contemporary low-budget digital film-making in New Zealand. As a case study of digital cinema in a small nation

1 Though worthy of attention elsewhere, the documentary output of New Zealand's digital cinema sector is beyond the scope of this discussion.

2 My use of the term 'mainstream' in the New Zealand context refers to those feature films fully financed by the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) or co-financed by the NZFC with international investors. While the NZFC is, to all intents and purposes, the nation's mainstream film financing agency, the fact that New Zealand cinema sits outside the mainstream in a global context renders my use of the term relative.

3 For a list of feature films made in New Zealand (including information on NZFC investment), see the NZFC document *Feature Films Made in New Zealand Since 1939* (Anon 2009a).

4 On the technological relation, see Chandler (2008), Ihde (1979) and Mowshowitz (1976).

context, the sector is both situated internationally and the degree to which the fiction feature output departs from the national cinematic canon explored.[1] The attention to *fiction* digi-features here is designed to investigate the potentially porous divisions between 'mainstream' and 'alternative' cinema.[2] Because feature-length fiction films have been the mainstay of the commercial film industry, production processes designed to maximize costly resources coupled with a dependence on the principles of dramatic narrative storytelling to engage mass audiences are both long established. However, despite their commercially standard length, the majority of New Zealand's low-budget digi-features have been produced outside mainstream funding structures, meaning the film-makers have not been compelled to meet financing criteria formed around more commercially oriented practices in development and production. This remains true for the five digi-features discussed here that received a contribution from the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC), as these projects were not developed under the auspices of established script development committees.[3] Hence, all of these digi-features simultaneously occupy 'mainstream' and 'alternative' spaces that cannot be defined dichotomously.

Central to my focus on the medium-specific elements of the digi-feature sector is a consideration of technology and materiality in relation to creativity. Consequently, while some film-makers use digital video (DV) instrumentally in order to fashion a product as close as possible to the 'reel thing' or as a stepping stone to more mainstream practice, those works that reflect the broader industry's drive to iron out distinctions between digital and celluloid production are of less relevance to this study than those that demonstrate how the medium-specific qualities of DV can be harnessed to reshape creative acts and processes.[4]

TECHNOLOGY, PROCESS, CREATIVE OUTCOME

The most significant of these processual shifts have been either enabled by the low-cost, lightweight and light-sensitive qualities of DV (and especially mini-DV) cameras, enforced by the lack of production funding, or result from an ultimately productive symbiosis between the two. As Malcolm Le Grice points out, the modernist compulsion to demonstrate a direct relation between 'the special characteristics of a medium, its aesthetic components and its "language"' ignores the centrality of process to that relation (Le Grice 1999/2001: 310). He argues that '[. . .]with any technological art, it is the processes rather than the material which provide the most fruitful source for consistent or intrinsic properties' (Le Grice 1999/2001: 312). Hence, as Holly Willis observes in her study of international digital cinema, many film-makers have happily accepted the rough visual quality of mini-DV in order to create the 'sense of immediacy and intimacy' made possible through processes associated with DV technology (Willis 2005: 22). This is certainly true of the New Zealand digi-feature sector, in which challenges to conventional industrial production processes are triggered not only by low-cost technology but also by the convergence of amateur, professional, commercial, independent and artist's cinema.

As is the case internationally, the employment of a more artisanal production mode characterizes this convergence. Of the 25 New Zealand digi-features viewed for this article, over a third of the film-makers have edited as well as written and directed their films, often also performing other production roles; over a third have also produced or co-produced their work; and over a quarter have acted in the films they directed. Internationally, directors such as Mike

Figgis, David Lynch, Lars Von Trier and Steven Soderberg have pushed this artisanal mode further by operating the camera themselves on either some or all of their digi-features. Surprisingly, however, only two of the New Zealand digi-feature directors have taken up principal camera operation on their own films. In an approach similar to that advocated by Figgis (2007) and Lynch (2006), Campbell Walker operated the camera on *Little Bits of Light* (Walker, 2005) in order to facilitate a more direct and intimate relationship with the actors. Elric Kane, on the other hand, operated the camera on *Kissy Kissy* (Kane and Greenhough, 2007b) in a conscious attempt to fulfil Alexandre Astruc's concept of the *caméra-stylo* and demonstrate how low-fi digital technology can facilitate the development of a new kind of auteur (Greenhough, in Kane and Greenhough 2007a). Auteurist development is also evident in the emergence of the 'digitalist', described by Willis as a director who can work creatively across the registers of film, music and design that are merging in digital cinema due to the 'flow and mix' of digital code (Willis 2005: 18). Jeremy Mayall, for example, crosses the registers of music video and narrative cinema in *They No Longer Sleep Alone* (Granville and Woollen, 2009), a cinematic rendition of an album by his band, Howard, which plays out in full on the soundtrack. Not only did Mayall come up with the original concept for the film, he was also the composer, sound mixer, producer and casting director, whilst performing an acting role and helping with lighting, set design and gripping. However, perhaps New Zealand's only true feature film digitalist in Willis' sense of the term is Derek Pearson, who performed an extraordinary range of creative and technical roles on his special-effects-driven science fiction digi-feature, *Event 16* (Pearson, 2006), about the effects of a portal that opens up time. Apart from his credits as writer, producer, director, co-camera operator, editor, track-layer, foley artist, sound designer, mixer, composer and music performer, all 700 visual effects were designed, edited, composited, colour-graded and animated by Pearson using Adobe products (Photoshop, Premier and After Effects) on a domestic PC. His special effects work also makes him the only New Zealand director in this sector to fully embrace what Lev Manovich (1995) terms the 'elastic reality' made possible by the ability to composite, animate and morph images digitally. While the democratization of film culture made possible by the development of low-cost technology is to be applauded, Pearson's film does illustrate certain pitfalls in the overly technocentric approach to film-making that often marks the convergence of amateur and professional practices. As he readily admits, Pearson realized after the first week of shooting that, in his rush to master all the technology, he failed to teach himself how to properly develop a script or direct actors (Pearson n.d.).

Although multitasking is the preferred way of working for some digi-feature film-makers, for others it is simply a necessity brought about by extreme budgetary and scheduling constraints. The majority of the nation's digi-features are, after all, either self-funded and made on budgets of only a couple of thousand dollars, or (co-)funded with small grants from Creative New Zealand's Screen Innovation Production Fund (renamed the Independent Filmmaker's Fund).[5] One film-maker even funded his film, *Futile Attraction* (Prebble, 2005), by requesting donations through an Internet campaign, and received contributions ranging from 30p to £1000. Recalling the film collectives of the 1970s, communities of independent digital film-makers have thus formed to support each other's endeavours, such as the Film Production Group based at the University of Auckland, the Te Aro Valley film-makers in Wellington, who

6 *Uncomfortable
    Comfortable* was shot
    on BetaSP rather than
    DV. However, it is
    worth mentioning as
    it triggered
    Campbell's cycle of
    improvised
    digi-features, which
    have also influenced
    others in the sector.

co-own equipment and work on each others' films, and the cluster of artists and enthusiasts that congregate in and around the films of Florian Habicht.

One of the more significant departures enabled by lightweight technology is the development of actor-oriented creative processes. In particular, actor improvisation has been employed in various ways in over a third of the films to explore or challenge conventions in storytelling, script development, characterization, performance and cinematic language. The boldest of these experiments have been undertaken by directors Amarbir Singh and Campbell Walker, neither of whom wrote or worked with screenplays at any point in the making of their four feature films. In *1 Nite* (Singh, 2004a), a multi-narrative focusing on an immigrant Sikh taxi driver, the actors improvised all of their dialogue around a specific goal the director provided moments before each scene was shot. In this way, the details formed around the broader objectives and the performances retain a freshness and spontaneity made possible by the immediacy of the actors' responses and the non-intimidating nature of the two-member crew, who could react to the actors with an agile camera by shooting in available light and without separate sound equipment (Hopkins 2004; Singh 2004b). Campbell Walker adopted a similar method in the making of three improvised relationship dramas, and is the only director to acknowledge the actors' co-authorship of such films in the credits. In two of his films, *Uncomfortable Comfortable* (Walker, 1999) and *Little Bits of Light* – both about difficult or disintegrating relationships – the actors improvise in two-handers that express the minutiae of human interaction and the ennui of dysfunctional relationships to excruciatingly claustrophobic effect.[6] In his third film, *Why Can't I Stop This Uncontrollable Dancing* (Walker, 2003b), the actress in the central role improvises responses to being stalked across a range of solo scenes in which the handheld camera suggests the voyeuristic impulses of her unseen stalker. Walker says he chooses improvisation as a way to capture 'simple, real, moments' on screen, and achieves this by using a minimal crew, real time and exercising patience during the take (Walker 2003a). In this way a film can be 'discovered' rather than preordained, a process similarly embraced by Iranian film-maker Abbas Kiarostami who, in his film *Ten* (Kiarostami, 2002), relinquishes traditional forms of directorial control to facilitate a more fluid type of creative process. As Adam Ganz and Lina Khatib point out, film-making in which cameras can roll for extended periods triggers a style of acting that is 'less about performing[...]and more about the condition of being observed[...]' (Ganz and Khatib 2006: 28). Such innovation in the creative process is clearly enabled by technology: the low cost of DV stock allows shooting to a very high ratio, while the ability to run 60–90 minutes of tape through a camera removes the need to constantly stop shooting and change tapes or film magazines, thereby reducing crew requirements and allowing for the long takes and uninterrupted filming necessary for an actor-oriented production process. The same freedom is clearly also available to those using tapeless digital cameras. In the New Zealand context, such actor-led approaches had hitherto been confined to devised theatre. Singh and Walker have therefore broken new ground in the nation's cinema, and even those digi-feature directors who do not centralize improvisation techniques tend to be more open to actor input during the production process than those working in the better funded mainstream.

A different type of actor-led approach was undertaken by Keith Hill in the making of his digi-feature, *This Is Not a Love Story* (Hill, 2002a), about the affair between an aspiring writer and a married actor. Citing Mike Leigh's methods as an influence, Hill explains that the screenplay itself was developed through

extended improvisations that drew on the actors' storytelling and character-ization skills for the writing process (Hill 2002b).[7] An alternative approach to improvisation was undertaken for *The Waimate Conspiracy* (Lewis, 2006), a fully scripted fiction–mockumentary hybrid about an historic Māori land claim. In this case it was the camera operator, Gerard Smyth, who improvised in order to enhance the documentary quality of the footage. To guarantee a spontaneous response to the unfolding action, it was agreed that Smyth would neither see the script nor be present during any discussions about it at any stage in the process (Horse n.d.).

Even more radically, a complete reversal of dramatic film-making process occurred in the making of *Woodenhead* (Habicht, 2003), about the journey taken by a dump hand to escort his boss's daughter to her arranged suitor. For this film, the art school trained director pre-recorded all of the scripted dialogue and completed the sound design and mix prior to shooting the pictures. On screen, the actors either mime very roughly to the pre-recorded dialogue or simply perform relevant actions while the dialogue plays out on the soundtrack as an internalized exchange. Aside from an impulse to experiment, evident in his previous short films, Habicht reversed the production process in this way in order to cast on-screen characters for their idiosyncratic look without being concerned about their ability to deliver lines, which he had performed by professional actors and voice actors (Matthews 2004; Smith 2006).

Triggered by developing technologies, these conscious reworkings of creative production processes have contributed to aesthetic, narrative, thematic and generic departures in many of the finished films. In the case of *Woodenhead*, a surreal effect triggered by the reversed sound-image recording process is coupled with striking black and white cinematography to recast New Zealand's gothic tradition as a hallucinogenic spectacle of feasting, magic, corruption, deceit and oddly innocent perversions. Where the gothic tradition in New Zealand cinema normally features troubled or culturally dislocated Pākehā,[8] often positioned in an unforgiving landscape (at times alongside dangerous outsiders), German-born Habicht draws from a range of Central and Eastern European influences to fashion a carnivalesque fairy tale in which the unlikely duo at the centre of the story traverse a perilous countryside peopled by grotesque and solitary circus-like figures.[9] In scripting a cast of apparently archetypal characters who career from one unselfconscious desire to the next, Habicht discards the moral certainties of the Germanic fairy tales he draws from. Striking tonal clashes are also wrought from the disjuncture between the kindly tones of a motherly voice-over narration and the unbridled appetites playing out on screen.

Another especially striking intervention in traditional New Zealand cinema – which has no tradition of social realism – is the blackly comic *Christmas* (King, 2004a), a slice of life narrative about the depressed and apparently directionless lives of a family who have congregated in cramped conditions for the festive season. The film achieves an excruciating degree of naturalism by allowing the awkwardness, avoidance, boredom, inanity, silence, conflict and pain of strained family relations to play out in extremely long static takes peppered with occasional outbreaks of inane giggling. The naturalism of the film is also distinguished by the camera's veristic gaze upon atomized family members engaged in very private acts (such as masturbation and suppository insertion), and this voyeurism is augmented by a curiously quotidian abjection that presents family members dribbling, bleeding, defecating, vomiting and miscarrying.[10] In common with the improvised digital films, *Christmas* features

7   In 2002 the NZFC financed the development of a screenplay from actors' improvisations under the direction of Ian Mune and Vicky Yiannoutsos. However, the resulting script did not receive NZFC production finance.

8   Pākehā is the Māori term for New Zealanders of European descent.

9   Examples of New Zealand's gothic tradition include *The Scarecrow* (Sam Pillsbury, 1982), *Vigil* (Vincent Ward, 1984), *Crush* (Alison Maclean, 1992), *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993), *Jack Be Nimble* (Garth Maxwell, 1993), *Rain* (Christine Jeffs, 2001) and *Snakeskin* (Gillian Ashurst, 2001).

10   I refer here to abjection in the Kristevan sense (see Kristeva 1982).

a meandering plot that prioritizes character interaction and tone over narrative momentum, explores conflict without necessarily contriving resolutions and achieves a certain 'authenticity' of performance that comes from casting 'real' people performing in real time. King considers it crucial that he cast people 'located in a specific time and place' who 'carry life experience and depth that is visible to the camera' (King 2004b). His second digi-feature, *A Song of Good* (King, 2008), about the struggle of a young man to put his life back on track after raping his middle-aged neighbour, is more conventionally shot but furthers King's commitment to addressing difficult issues through an uncompromising social realism spiked with black humour.

The aesthetic austerity of *Christmas* is also evident in *Kissy Kissy, {Dream} Preserved* (Kang, 2006) and Campbell Walker's improvised films. In these films, the coverage of extended character interaction in real time via a single static shot results in a reduction of cinematic artifice that serves to heighten the voyeuristic verité effect. Discussing the similar use of real time in Kiorastami's *Ten*, Geoff Andrew points out how the 'dead moments' that occur during these long takes 'enhance the impression of documentary authenticity' (Andrew 2005: 48). The way such film-makers create a space in which character interaction can freely play out not only blurs boundaries between documentary and fiction, it also recalls various film-making trends from the tableaux of some of the earliest cinematic offerings, such as *Sortie des Usines/Leaving the Factory* (Lumière Brothers, 1895), through the celebration of the long take and use of non-actors and improvisational techniques that thread through a number of rebellious cinematic movements (including post–World War II Italian Neorealism and the new waves that arose in the late 1950s in Britain, Brazil, Czechoslovakia, France and Japan as well as in Taiwan in the 1980s and Romania in the 2000s), to the footage captured by today's ubiquitous surveillance cameras and webcams. As viewers experience the unfurling of events in real time, the image, as Sean Cubitt puts it, 'slips away from the organizational control of narrative' (Cubitt 2004: 22), and reminds audiences that highly directional protagonist-driven narratives are but one possibility for cinema. This renewed emphasis on time as a raw material in digital cinema leads Mexican film-maker, Arturo Ripstein, to assert that the medium is witnessing a transfer of ownership from the photographer to the director. He says: 'You don't tell stories with images, you tell stories with time. And time has a beauty that is concrete through the digital medium' (Ripstein, cited in Sterritt 2004: 42).

Experiments with temporal and spatial manipulations that push beyond pure naturalism have also been employed by many New Zealand digi-film-makers. In the thrillers *Memories of Tomorrow* (Tripurareni, 2005) and *Five* (Tripurareni, 2007), such manipulations explore tensions and connections between dream, nightmare, paranoia, fantasy and reality. In *Orphans and Angels* (Brodie, 2003), about an innocent young woman who slides into drug-induced submission to her controlling boyfriend, the action in location-based sex scenes at times suddenly shifts into a theatrically lit studio. These shifts create a stylized aesthetic that arrests the narrative and augments the voyeuristic gaze of the film-maker/audience while introducing a non-naturalistic space that is similarly utilized for the depiction of dreams and nightmares. In *{Dream} Preserved*, about a young Korean over-stayer unable to gain properly paid employment and forced to sleep in an old fridge, a series of time-space disjunctions expressing the central character's dreams and disappointments render narrative cohesion secondary to the articulation of his inner life.

In another departure from more mainstream New Zealand films, most of which are single-protagonist narratives, a significant proportion of the digi-feature film-makers are crafting multi-narrative structures. Apart from *1 Nite*, discussed above, other multi-narratives include *Blessed* (Douglas, 2002), in which the characters have in common some association with a city brothel and whose lives are connected by an angel who soars through the Wellington skies; *Kissy Kissy*, in which a series of slackers connected by their involvement with a failed film shoot drift between homes, jobs and relationships; *Offensive Behaviour* (Gillies, 2007), in which four plot lines converge in what transpires to be an increasingly hysterical pitch to a weary film producer for a schlock-comedy extravaganza; and *Down By the Riverside* (Killen and Davison, 2007), in which characters from two distinct time frames converge in the unravelling of a murder mystery.

Many of the digi-feature film-makers also favour slice-of-life stories displaying a much less rigid adherence to the rules of dramatic narrative structure and momentum than is the norm in New Zealand cinema. Though this is especially true of the improvised films, the makers of the scripted film, *Kissy Kissy*, also deliberately eschew the rising three-act structure. For Kane and Greenhough, the decision to employ a drifting narrative containing unfulfilled conflicts was made to express what they consider to be a passive–aggressive suppression of conflict in New Zealand culture (Kane and Greenhough 2007a). In *1 Nite*, the emotional intensities of the multiple meandering plot lines are, conversely, very skilfully structured to peak in close synchronization as a means to augment the tragic climax of the main character's story arc. In contrast, Campbell Walker almost entirely discards dramatic storytelling conventions in favour of observing minute adjustments in the dynamics of human interaction. In the case of *Little Bits of Light*, the psychological stasis induced by the depression and codependency of the two characters is shaped by improvisational techniques that discourage forward momentum and deny dimension or scope beyond microcosmic character interaction. The determining potential of technology on authorial intention, process, content and style is thus amply demonstrated in this film.

The non-neutrality of technology is also evident in other ways. Not only was Singh, for example, inspired by the potential of lightweight and light-sensitive technology to enable spontaneous improvisation from his actors, he also felt that the rawness of the DV image could express the street life in his film more effectively than celluloid (Singh n.d.). In this sense, Singh's approach chimes with that of many DV practitioners around the world who integrate image degradation into their storytelling (Willis 2005: 22). Dick Whyte, co-writer of New Zealand digi-feature *I Think I'm Going* (Greenhough, 2003), also asserts that DV has 'its own quality, its own ontology' and chooses to exploit its potential for 'stillness' and the 'meditative' (Whyte 2003). Campbell Walker's preference for the ability of DV to capture the 'rhythm of reality, the sound, the space' (Walker 2003a) reflects trends triggered by the Danish Dogme 95 movement, which spawned clusters of independent DV film-makers across the globe advocating a return to what is (perhaps problematically) termed 'the "real", the organic and the authentic[...].' (Willis 2005: 24). Similarly, Ripstein describes the great virtue of DV as 'Truth. Fundamental truth. It has a raw, ferocious beauty that you never can achieve in another medium. It is a wilful break with photographic material' (Ripstein cited in, Sterritt 2004: 42). As Jon Dovey (2004) observes, the fact that the digital image is widely accepted as a primary form of 'truth telling' is linked to the proliferation of digital images of ourselves

11 For a discussion of this pattern of reconfiguring the global at the local level in New Zealand cinema, see Williams (2008).

12 For Pākehā-directed renditions of Māori–Pākehā dynamics see, for example, *Rewi's Last Stand* (Rudall Hayward, 1940), *Broken Barrier* (John O'Shea, 1952), *To Love a Māori* (Rudall Hayward, 1972), *Other Halves* (John Laing, 1984), *Ruby & Rata* (Gaylene Preston, 1990), *Crush* (Alison MacLean, 1992), *Desperate Remedies* (Peter Wells and Stewart Main, 1993) and *River Queen* (Vincent Ward, 2005). Geoff Murphy's *Utu* (1983) breaks the mould by presenting a narrative of Brechtian scope in which biculturalism is both the answer to and the terrible price of colonization.

13 As we go to press, the first feature film both written and directed by an Asian New Zealander is due for release. *My Wedding and Other Secrets* (Roseanne Liang) is based on the director's biographical digital documentary, *Banana in a Nutshell* (2005), about the reluctance of her Chinese family to accept her Pākehā boyfriend.

on mobile phones, family videos, closed-circuit television monitors and broadcast television (Dovey cited in, Ganz and Khatib 2006: 32). As demonstrated above, the pairing of such 'truth telling' with gritty naturalism evident in many New Zealand digi-features is both technologically driven and influenced by global trends, in particular the pared back production processes and aesthetics advocated by the Dogme 95 Vow of Chastity. In this sense, New Zealand's independent digital films share with the nation's more mainstream sector a tendency to reshape rather than reject global trends in cultural production.[11]

Representational emphases in New Zealand cinema are also shifting in a number of ways through the use of low-cost digital technology. Because many of the digi-feature directors either hail from or choose to film outside of the major cities, there now exists a broader range of regional imagery that offers fresh insights into some of the nation's smaller communities. Given that, historically, the majority of New Zealand films have been set outside the main cities, the more significant departure in the digi-feature sector lies in the range of contemporary urban imagery presented. Especially notable is the work of immigrant film-makers, Amarbir Singh and Stephen Kang, who have captured the nocturnal underbelly of inner city Auckland with an arresting combination of artistry and raw naturalism. As a result of these (and other) choices of urban locale, the digi-feature sector also includes rare representations of the nation's street denizens such as prostitutes, buskers, street performers, bar dwellers, homeless people and taxi drivers. Consequently, the geo-social repertoire of New Zealand cinema is expanding through the work of the digi-feature film-makers.

In terms of New Zealand's cross-cultural dynamics, the abiding obsession with relations between Māori and Pākehā in the nation's largely Pākehā-authored mainstream cinema has not been replicated in the digi-feature sector. Although *Christmas* centres on a mixed race Māori-Pākehā family, the only digi-feature film-maker to explicitly address the politics of bicultural relations is Stephen Lewis in *The Waimate Conspiracy*. Contrasting with Pākehā film-makers' historical emphasis on either romantic or doomed bi-cultural couplings, Lewis' film exhibits a highly developed consciousness about the potential irreconcilability of culturally specific knowledge systems under Pākehā law.[12] At the level of self-representation, however, the fiction digi-feature sector is thus far tainted by an almost complete absence of Māori and Pacific authorial voices despite advances made in the broader New Zealand screen culture to enfranchise Polynesian film-makers. The exception is Gregory King, who is occasionally identified as Māori in the public sphere in spite of his preference for not declaring his identity in terms of culture or race. However, a more positive characteristic of the sector is the growing presence of Asian authorial voices, which have not found expression in the nation's mainstream beyond one feature film (*Apron Strings*, Urale, 2008) co-written by an Indian immigrant, Shuchi Kothari.[13] Given that Chinese and Indian communities have been established in New Zealand since the 1860s and, according to the 2006 census, Asian peoples constitute 9.2 per cent of the total population (and 20 per cent in the largest city, Auckland), this is clearly a very belated and partial inclusion. Countering the negative Othering of Asian characters previously projected in films such as *User Friendly* (Nicholas, 1990) and *Broken English* (Nicholas, 1996), the Korean, Chinese and Indian digi-feature directors of the 2000s are constructing a range of Asian characters whose flaws are either integrated into more sophisticated characterization strategies, offset by the sheer range of Asian characters within the story or, in the case of all but Tripurareni's

films, the centring of Asian characters in the narrative.[14] As a result, Asian and other immigrant film-makers have created a new cache of cross-cultural representations with the potential to both intervene in well-established patterns of (national) identity formation in New Zealand and contribute to new inscriptions in the national imaginary. A number of 'firsts' have also been achieved by these film-makers, including the first Bollywood-inspired multicultural musical, *Be Sharp See Flat* (Woon, 2006), the first feature-length film focusing on New Zealand's Korean community (*{Dream} Preserved*), the first film about a Sikh immigrant (*1 Nite*), and the first culturally hybrid German–New Zealand fable (*Woodenhead*). At once transnationally connected and nationally specific, these films neatly exemplify Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto's assertion that cinema cannot simply be 'discussed in terms of "inside" and "outside" the national boundaries' (Yoshimoto 2006: 255).

DEPARTURES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite the processual shifts and departures in form and content evident in New Zealand's digi-features, the sector includes neither the provocations of grand multi-platform digital projects such as *Cremaster Cycle* (Barney, 1995–2002) and *Tulse Luper Suitcases* (Greenaway, 2003–2004) nor the bold aesthetic, technical or narrative experimentation of films such as *Timecode* (Figgis, 2000),[15] *Russian Ark* (Sukorov, 2002),[16] *Ten*,[17] and *Dancer in the Dark* (Von Trier, 2000).[18] There is also minimal evidence in the New Zealand digital sector of either the desktop aesthetic or the convergence of film-making, video art, animation, print design, music video and live club events identified by Willis on the international scene (Willis 2005: 4). Nevertheless, while the New Zealand films discussed here may appear somewhat tame and tied to an indexical identity when compared with offerings from less conservative and better funded screen production cultures, the interventions being forged remain significant. As with New Zealand's more mainstream cinema, art-house films have a significant presence in the low-budget digital sector. However, the gothic landscapes of much of Pākehā-authored art-house cinema are largely confined to the horror digi-features. The Pākehā 'Man Alone' that recurs in New Zealand film and literature materializes in only one digi-feature, *The Waiting Place* (2001), by Chilean immigrant film-maker, Cristobal Lobos. This 'Man Alone' archetype, named after John Mulgan's 1939 novel, is an antihero who typically mistrusts society, eschews women and family life and in whom violence is often latent.[19] Pākehā male directors in the digi-feature sector are also increasingly eschewing traditional mate-ship scenarios and presentations of misogynistic sexual violence. Additionally, the sector is witnessing the creation of generic hybrids unfamiliar to New Zealand cinema, including 'domestic social realism' (Gregory King's films), 'magic–social realism' (*Blessed; {Dream} Preserved*), 'improvised relationship study' (Campbell Walker's films), 'carnivalesque–fairy tale' (*Woodenhead*), mockumentary–fiction (*The Waimate Conspiracy*) and 'soft porn–arthouse–thriller' (*Orphans and Angels*). This genre-bending reflects similar genre expansion in international digi-feature film-making, arguably triggered by the mockumentary–horror hybrid, *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sachez, 1999). Also notable is that none of the low-budget digi-features are literary adaptations, whereas in the ten years following the establishment of the NZFC approximately 25 per cent of the films funded were adaptations of literary works by New Zealand authors and in the subsequent sixteen years

14 Tripuraneni chooses instead to mainstream his Asian characters.

15 *TimeCode* was shot with four cameras simultaneously recording four convergent strands of a story and is edited to include the stories in four frames within the frame.

16 Set in the St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum, the 87-minute single shot that constitutes *Russian Ark* chronicles over 300 years of history using more than 800 actors and three live orchestras.

17 *Ten* is made up of ten scenes filmed by two cameras attached to the interior of a vehicle to cover the actors' dialogue, much of which is improvised. The director either sat in the back seat or followed in another vehicle, having chosen not to interrupt the performances before they were complete.

18 For *Dancer in the Dark*, Von Trier shot some scenes with as many as 100 miniDV cameras – the idea being to gain as much coverage as possible with the minimum of takes in order to prioritise the actors' performances. His next film, *Dogville* (2003), utilized a theatrical set and was shot by a bank of cameras suspended above the action.

19 Various permutations of the 'Man Alone' archetype can be found, for example, in *Sleeping Dogs* (Roger Donaldson, 1977), *Bad Blood*

(Mike Newell, 1981), *Smash Palace* (Roger Donaldson, 1981), *The Heart of the Stag* (Michael Firth, 1984), *The Quiet Earth* (Geoff Murphy, 1985), *In My Father's Den* (Brad McGann, 2004) and *Out of the Blue* (Duncan Sarkies, 2006).

20 The Aro Street Video Shop in New Zealand's capital city, Wellington, champions all sectors of the nation's cinema, and its online purchasing option ensures international availability of DVDs by New Zealand film-makers.

21 See Cubitt (2004) on the human–technology relation in terms of control, whereby the technology is 'an instrument of humans, and that instrumental relationship defines the user and the used as subject and object' (2004: 88).

22 Despite the advances forged as a result of on-screen improvised performances, the sector as a whole has not escaped its share of films featuring over-written scripts and erratic or mannered performances.

approximately 21 per cent of NZFC-funded features were literary adaptations (McDonnell 2008: 135). The low-budget digital cinema sector is thus liberated from an archaic dependence on the cultural capital associated with literary and dramatic sources and also, potentially at least, from the straightjacket of narrowly conceived narrative strategies rooted in literary or dramatic tradition.

Although the sector as a whole has yet to achieve critical mass and includes films that may be described as falling below traditional standards for theatrical release, most have screened at local film festivals and are available to purchase, and some have also won awards.[20] More important to this discussion than the marketing challenges or commercial viability of the films is the space opened up by the sector for experimentation. Indeed, we have seen that a more experimental impulse is frequently prioritizing innovation and risk-taking over traditional strategies for audience engagement. Enabled by both the technology and the absence of commercial pressures, boundaries are being pushed to include some unusually austere works, many of which interrupt the subject–object dichotomy between film-maker and technology by adopting more aleatory creative processes than those common to traditional (instrumental) approaches to film-making.[21] As a result, some of the work showcases very natural performances deriving from exploratory improvisational techniques, while boundaries between fiction and documentary are also becoming increasingly porous through processes that favour 'capturing' over 'constructing' fictional events.[22] Additionally, new connections are being forged between theatre and cinema, especially in terms of content creation, performance techniques and a renewed interest in the affective power of real time over elliptic cinematic time.

Given that mainstream cinema absorbs from its peripheries, and digi-feature film-making is positioned on the fringes of New Zealand's mainstream, there is enormous potential for the innovations taking place in the digital sector to invigorate the nation's film industry and broaden the cinematic culture. This potential for productive inter-penetration is also noted in John Sundholm's observation that, since the advent of digital technology, a revival of experimental film-making has led to a 'movement beyond the persistent dichotomy of classical narration versus art-cinema narration' in the broader film industry (Sundholm 2006: 83). However, in order to trigger a dialogue between these overlapping sectors and realize the 'powers of digitality (to) inspire new cinematic forms and stylistic possibilities' (Rodowick 2007: 180), there is a need to adequately fund both the production and the exhibition of the work. Because the low cost of independent digital film-making removes the necessity to reach mass audiences, the opportunities offered by this relative absence of commercial pressure are manifold, leading Ripstein to 'seriously believe' that DV film-making will trigger 'the first artistic revolution of the 21st century' (cited in Sterritt 2004: 40). For this to occur, it is crucial that the sector not only be supported but that it retains the capacity for innovation. Hence, financing of the films needs to be released from certain criteria attached to public investment in larger scale productions. For example, development benchmarks and production processes evolved to achieve commercial viability for bigger budget films need to be updated to accommodate the potentialities of low-cost production, for which smaller niche audiences can provide the financial return required to recoup costs. In the New Zealand context, one criterion in need of such modification is the demand for 'production-ready' scripts that have 'received feedback from NZFC Development Staff or another equivalent third party' (Anon 2009b: clause 1.2) as it effectively excludes the unscripted forms of development and production that increasingly animate the digi-feature sector. Additionally, if

future low-budget funding policies replicate current criteria requiring New Zealand content and New Zealand nationals in key creative, technical and acting roles – based on Section 18 of the New Zealand Film Commission Act 1978, and referenced in both NZFC and Creative New Zealand 2009 guidelines (Anon 2009c)– the contribution of new immigrant communities to the development of the nation's cinema will remain restricted. Free from such prescriptions, however, funded low-budget digi-features may be unshackled from what Mark Williams calls 'the anxious over-compensations of a defensive nationalism' (Williams 2008: 184) and 'redundant' ideas of nation which often plague criteria formulated by government funding agencies (2008: 194). Furthermore, as Willis (2005: 15) points out, independent cinema has always functioned, at least in part, to explore subject matter, market segments and distribution opportunities ignored by the more commercialized mainstream. A vibrant and multifaceted national screen culture therefore depends on supporting such explorations, both in production and in exhibition.[23] Because low to mid-range budget digi-features can be screened using E-cinema projectors rather than the more expensive D-cinema technology, re-equipping existing exhibition environments need not be prohibitively expensive. The scope and reach of New Zealand cinema could also be expanded by equipping locations beyond traditional theatrical outlets, such as marae (traditional Māori ceremonial meeting spaces), community centres, galleries, universities and outdoor locations. There are thus both commercial and cultural imperatives for the investment of public funds in low-budget digital production and exhibition facilities.

Contra predictions that the digital age will precipitate the death of cinema (see, e.g., Greenaway cited in Coonan 2007; Dixon 2003; Usai 2005), I argue that the digital sector provides opportunities for a 'rebirth' of cinema in small nations via the inclusion of a low-budget tier potentially free from restrictive funding policies and the stranglehold of archaic commercial imperatives and thus a tier of film-making ripe for experimentation and innovation that can exist in fruitful dialogue with more mainstream fare. Exemplars from around the world demonstrate that such optimism is not misguided or unduly utopian. Although the democratization of film-making made possible by low-cost equipment may result, on the one hand, in a glut of poorly conceived and executed works, it also increases the number of good films produced (Kogen 2005: 83) and, from among the less than startling offerings, 'true art' does and will emerge (Ripstein, cited in Sterritt 2004: 42). As demonstrated here, this is as true of the New Zealand digi-feature sector as elsewhere. Also evident is the degree to which technical innovation and related medium-specific practices are becoming integral to increasingly pluralistic cinematic projections at both cultural and aesthetic levels. I therefore argue that the current overhaul of longstanding national and cinematic orthodoxies in New Zealand cinema is due not only to the increasingly transnational and poly-cultural affiliations of the digital sector's film-makers but also to the very ontology of DV. This is not to assert a simplistic technological determinism, but to argue that the richer and more heterogeneous film culture emerging in New Zealand results from a set of mutually conditioning factors, of which the intimacy, low-cost and low-fi aesthetic of DV is becoming increasingly crucial. As the distinction between celluloid and digital becomes more firmly recast as a distinction between high-end and low-end digital film-making, it is also crucial that the low-budget sector captures a share of the public spend and is permitted to function as a site for exploration and innovation.

23 A compelling argument for subsidizing low-budget digital exhibition facilities is made by Lauren Kogen (2005) in her study of the loss-making Spanish film industry which, she argues, can be revived via independent, exhibited digital films.

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