



This work has been submitted to **NECTAR**, the **Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses and Research**.

Conference or Workshop Item

Title: The representation of trauma in contemporary New Zealand cinema

Creators: Wilson, J. M.

Example citation: Wilson, J. M. (2012) The representation of trauma in contemporary New Zealand cinema. Invited Presentation presented to: *Trauma in Contemporary Culture*, School of the Arts, The University of Northampton, 10 February 2012.

Version: Presented version

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/5228/>



The Representation of Trauma in Contemporary New Zealand Cinema

In introducing the concept of trauma as evidenced in a number of contemporary NZ (and to a lesser extent Australian) feature films, I begin by referring to the current debate in postcolonial studies, about the relevance of trauma theory as a category for analysis of colonial/postcolonial texts.. A major difference in orientation between the two disciplines, according to Irene Visser in a recent article, is that contemporary trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth , drawing on Freud, and his theory of the **universal primal and hence structural (ie indelible) human traumatization**, foreground the atemporal, the human and universal; postcolonial criticism as a praxis, by contrast, takes into account the specific political and historical contexts of texts which grapple with imperial violence and colonial sovereignty (**such as J.M. Coetzee's 1980 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and Mohsin Hamid's 2007 one *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***). A further difference lies in the Eurocentric nature of much contemporary trauma theory by contrast to culturally specific work in Postcolonial studies, which has an anti-European critical strain in its interrogation of the histories of violent occupation and the resistances to it (Boehmer) ; postcolonialists like Leela Gandhi have suggested that it should take account of non western knowledge systems (epistemologies and ontologies) for understanding psychic disorders relating to trauma; and to consider for example, the possibility of recuperation through indigenous systems of healing and belief, because in the current Eurocentric focus on the pervasive and continuing after effects of a traumatic event—as evidenced in the post-traumatic stress syndrome

and associated melancholia--there is some resistance to acknowledging spirituality as a sustaining healing force in general.

Visser's call for greater attention to the historical dimension in addressing the need to revise trauma theory for use in postcolonial analysis, brings me to one problem that I have found in examining contemporary New Zealand postcolonial cinema. Can the universalist and transgenerational approach of E. Ann Kaplan, Cathy Caruth and others enable postcolonial readings of case studies in texts which might not provide much historical contextualization? Chronic and collective cultural trauma according to Geoffrey Hartman and Ann Kaplan, found in cases of genocide, slavery, rape, and in wars and terrorist attack -- e.g. Vietnam, the US post 9/11 -- is in the case of colonization caused by cross cultural conflict and violence. Traces of past events are passed on from generation to generation (Kaplan, 46) through indirect recall. In colonial contact zones like New Zealand and Australia, this approach argues, traumatic residues run through both indigenous and white settler cultures emerging transgenerationally, as an aftermath in the psyches of the colonies' descendants. For the indigenous Maori and Aborigine, traumatic after-shock can be traced to, e.g. settler theft/appropriation of native land and the NZ land wars in the 1860s, and e.g. the dispossession experienced by the children of the Stolen Generation in Australia in the period 1910 to 1970. Both groups suffered extensive loss of their own culture and language. The white settler who perpetrates violence on the indigene, is, according to Franz Fanon, Kaplan, Visser and others, not be equated with the victims, the abject of history, and can be differentiated as experiencing indirect trauma; a haunting caused by their anxiety over the nature of

the settlement, and a troubling unease caused by guilt, due to the fact that history repeats itself, comes back to disturb the present, bringing with it certain kinds of affect, such as guilt, melancholy, shame (Cherie ?).

In indigenous film-making traumatic symptoms appear which show a minority people struggling to survive, suffering both individual and social dislocation, such as personal abuse through drugs, rape, theft, loss of identity—most notably the recent Australian film *Samson and Delilah* (2009) directed by Warwick Thornton, about two teenagers who are forced out of their community and go on the road, open to exploitation by others and self induced drug abuse, eventually learning to care for each other, also and to a lesser extent, *Once Were Warriors* by Maori director, Lee Tamahori (1994), about a ghettoized, dysfunctional Maori family which lives in a chaotic present that represents a decline from the glorious warrior past. In white settler/ Pakeha cinema of New Zealand symptoms of trauma appear most notably in young female protagonists; such as the hysteria of the two women in Peter Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures*, and Jane Campion's dislocated, psychically disturbed heroines of her early films, *Sweetie* and *An Angel At My Table*. But the problem is that if this kind of cinema is evidence of a transgenerational set of symptoms, and a collective, memory, it does not explicitly identify such individual cases with historical causes associated with colonization. Rather we as audiences and witnesses of psychic disorder have to allegorise or generalize about these affective conditions, in order to read them as symptomatic or reflective of imperial violation, and providing the specific historical and political contextualisation that is so important to postcolonial studies. Sometimes the

narrative resists such a reading, *Once Were Warriors*, e.g. has been criticized for not being truly postcolonial because it offers no evidence that the family's dysfunction is a direct result of the unassimilable and violent wounding of colonization, only that a fall from the heroic pre-European past has occurred. (Transmissability)

In examining two films made in the late 1980s, *Mauri*, directed by indigenous film maker Merata Mita in 1988 and *Sweetie* directed by Jane Campion in 1989 -- I hope to establish parallels between the individual case and the collective cultural wounding caused by colonization, although the problem of representation is ongoing, as Kali Tal notes in relation to stories by holocaust survivors, asking if there is a connection between the individual psychic trauma and the cultural representation of a trauma. I will suggest that, despite their enormous differences, their heightened attention to behaviour attributable to unassimilable traumatic incidents might be read in the context of a hybridised Maori Pakeha culture entering a transitional revisionary stage in relation to its colonial past..

***Mauri* (directed by Merata Mita, 1988)**

This is the first full length feature film directed by a Maori woman, and the first made entirely from a Maori perspective. The title *Mauri* refers to the life principle or force, linking the individual to the Maori kinship system and cosmos. The story, set in 1953, concerns an interethnic marriage between a Maori woman, Ramini and a white farmer Steve Semmens, who sees the match as a way of restoring the local Maori whanau/tribe to their land – which he now lives on and farms – after being unjustly dispossessed by his racist father. But the circumstances under which the

marriage occurs undercut this idealised celebratory moment. Ramini is in love with the Maori hero, Paki Selwyn Hemapo, and in fact has fallen pregnant to him just before her marriage. Paki has rejected her brutally, but as we find out his past misdeeds have made him haunted by guilt. Living a life of petty crime in the city he has been part of a botched bank robbery and in escaping in a hot wired car, he accidentally kills a Maori hitchhiker he had picked up, when the car goes over the bank, Instead of turning himself in he steals the identity of the dead man and then returns—in this disguise-- to the district which he lived 20 year earlier (to Ramini and her hapu). Paki's violation of the mauri (life force) of the dead man—he steals his carvings, medallion, wallet and coat -- cause him psychic pain and the effects of this trauma, appear in flashbacks to the scene of the accident, to images of heroic action, historical scenes of the Maori Battalion fighting in the 2nd world war in Italy, and on one occasion to a group of warriors performing the haka challenging him to act honourably. Paki confesses his crimes to the matakite (family seer) , Ramini's grandmother Kara, who is also the aunt of Rewi Rapana, the dead man. She tells him he must ceremonially cleanse himself, a ritual obligation for breaching tapu (the sacred) at the site of the crash, Her words are: 'You must remain a fugitive until you have put right the wrong you did to my nephew. Go to where he is (site of crash) and take his medallion and his taonga (treasures including his sacred Mauri),. You ask for forgiveness. The Pakeha doesn't understand our tapu (codes of the sacred)'. He does this, although it does not prevent him from being subject to western justice, and the film concludes with him being handcuffed by two Maori cops, although raising his fists upward, either a gesture of defiance against this oppression (like the

Black Panthers) or of resolution, to suggest that the healing has worked an internal cure, and that he has recovered his personal mana (power, aura) even though he must now pay his debt to society.

The film was made when the Waitangi Tribunal, set up in 1984 to adjudicate land claims by Maori widened its powers, as reparation for land taken during colonisation and acknowledgement for colonial injustices continued, and as the new official policy of biculturalism was enforced. To this extent the willingness of the Pakeha farmer to give the land back to the Maori images the good will behind the Treaty revisionary agenda, while the cross cultural marriage has been read as metonymic of the desire for national inclusiveness. But also suggests that this comes at a cost, because Maori autonomy is threatened, by a danger from within. Paki's story invites an allegorical reading: the weakening of the birthright and the erosion of Maori culture are imaged in this figure of the Maori who becomes divided against himself, exacerbated by the urban drift which began in the 1950s, dislocating him through separation from the land and the whanau,. The two Maori cops who put personal ambition first, represent institutional threats as well as divisions within the tribe. In the context of the late 1980s when land reparations were initiated by the Pakeha, the entire film can be read allegorically as being about Maori loss of identity and as offering a challenge to assert one that is clear and unambiguous.

***Sweetie* (directed by Jane Campion, 1989)**

In stark contrast to *Mauri* is *Sweetie*, Jane Campion's first feature made when still a graduate at Sydney Film and TV School. Focusing on a rivalry between two sisters

(loosely based on Jane and her older sister Anna), who both show weirdly neurotic behaviour, the film has been described by Kathleen Hughes as a 'quasi psycho-analysis of a dysfunctional family' (54), pointing to a trauma which has been kept in the background in keeping with Campion's other films, like *An Angel at My Table* and *The Piano*. In this case there is a hint of incest between the father Gordon, and the crazily unhinged Sweetie (Dawn) when she was younger, but key moments of the narrative have been suppressed, so there is no continuity information or exposition. The heroine Kay is seen in the first section, imaged from her point of view, as superstitious, phobic, sexually volatile, first attracted to her boyfriend, Louis, then frigid due to her various phobias, particularly her irrational fear of trees, stemming from a tree in the back yard that became the sisters' 'palace' when they were young (A tree house). This a genealogical metaphor for the family tree, which takes shape in the form of Sweetie's unexpected arrival into Kay's life by breaking into her flat, and as a form of symbolic condensation—characteristic of Campion's method -- it animates the major thematic links in the film. In the second section the family past is alluded to in ways that suggests explanations for the sisters' behaviour, esp the sycophantic relationship between the father (Gordon) and his daughter Sweetie,-- he has fantasies of her talents when young and encourages her to perform-- and Louis, Kay, Gordon (father) go into the outback where Flo, the mother, is working. In the third section there is a shift of tone and motivation as father decides to put Sweetie into a home, she reacts by climbing into the family tree house, and smearing herself naked with black paint leading to her tragic death in a fall from the tree.

The surrealistic style and psychic content of *Sweetie* contrast radically to the pastoral realism and melodramatic romanticism of *Mauri*. Its opening aesthetic is designed to reflect the controlling elements of Kay's disordered state of mind, superstition and mysticism (McHugh 56)—her fear of walking on the cracks, her visit to a psychic and belief in the occult, play with chance (5 tails in tossing coins for Louis to win her affections), --a subjective narration conveyed by dreams, mental states, point of view shots and voice over; as McHugh points out, off centre framings, discontinuous editing, and highly noticeable camera movement, create a surreal visual world that matches Kay's neurotic sensibility. But once Sweetie appears it becomes less strange as Sweetie is a bizarre accompaniment to Kay in the external world, as one with draws and other acts out. Yet the film is full of arcane and eccentric plotting, characterization and dialogue, prompting the Sue Gillett to say 'it generates an apprehension, a re-membering traumatic response, very much through and not in spite of the lack of a scene'. This may be a response to the dark family secret of illicit sex, even incest on the part of the father, as is implied in Champion's 1982 short film *Peel—an exercise in discipline* (Fox 54), although as Alistair Fox shows in a psychoanalytic reading, the film also elaborates the psychodynamic influences within the trouble family, the effects of emotional deprivation on the children, while also attempting to satisfy impossible narcissistic desires.

TO conclude what can these two unlike films have in common and how can this approach that analyses them as case studies of traumatic symptoms, illuminate their connections and what kind of contribution does it make to trauma theory's

role in relation to postcolonial studies? Like other postcolonial texts, both suggest that trauma is to be resisted - by therapeutic and healing processes in *Mauri*, and in the act of artistic creation in *Sweetie* -- even though their ambivalent endings suggests that trauma does not disappear entirely. This seems to confirm the argument of Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, in *Postcolonial Trauma Novels* a special issue of *Studies in the Novel* (2008), that trauma theory with its Eurocentric orientation and containment in melancholia, does not provide the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonial/postcolonial world. Secondly, can they be convincingly positioned in relation to the aftermath of colonisation, according to the transgenerational model I have outlined? They are both set in the 1950s when the trend of Maori urbanization began and when *Campion* (often considered an Australian director) was growing up in Wellington. If anything the answer lies in the historical moment of their production within a year of each other as debut feature films by women producers in the late 80s. This was an era when race relations were being radically revised, and the myth of New Zealand's racial egalitarianism was being overturned. There was a raised consciousness about the traumatic after effects of imperial violence and colonial sovereignty due to settler anxiety about the way colonial history had been written, all of which threatened settler autonomy as subject and demanded a rewriting of the New Zealand imaginary (Cherie).

In *Mauri* the links with postcolonial adjudication over land reparations and the consequences for Maori autonomy can be inferred from the plot and so some connection with political events and recent history can be made, In *Sweetie* the

connection is more of a construction: the surrealist representation of Kay's pervasive affective anxiety, show how Campion's visual art relates on a symbolic level to her family background, as well as by elaborating the subjectivities of the objectifying self. In interviews she has said how she hopes the audience will participate with such subjective states and hence, Fox argues, help validate those experiences which prompted her to make the films. Arguably, then, the visual images of psychic disorder in *Sweetie* can be read figuratively as metonymic of the indirect trauma of the coloniser and the growing need during the 1970s and 80s, for increased legitimation of the Pakeha at a time of major transition. As New Zealand history entered its postcolonial episteme the earlier foundations of nationalism were challenged, and the dominance of European historical narratives was threatened, leading to narrative instability, and hi/storylessness (which allows the fantasy of the dual biculturalism under the sign of the Treaty—see Cherie). *Sweetie's* narrative discontinuities and ellipses due to recurrent symbolic displacement and metaphoric condensation, are not just transgressive of Hollywood narrative and formats, as Kathleen McHugh points out. They can also be read as metonymic of the Pakeha's loss of master narratives and of narrative coherence following the reassessment of settler identity in relation to the past during this decade. Yet Campion's transgressive mode, the flouting of convention and crossing of boundaries, offers hope because suggesting alternative values to those of the family/world that has failed. *Sweetie's* visual imaging of the divided self is possibly a complement to the concerns about the doubled indigenous identity that are explored in *Mauri* as well as anticipating Campion's later films

which more explicitly deal with colonial rupture, trauma and anxieties, *An Angel at My Table* and *The Piano*. In conclusion trauma theory is a useful tool for analysis of these texts, in that it that enables connections to be made between examples of Maori and Pakeha cultural and personal displacement and the historical transitions of the time and vey different ways of dealing with it, without necessarily offering an explanatory framework that would satisfy the criteria of postcolonial studies.

Works Cited

E. Ann Kaplan, "Traumatic Contact Zones and Embodied Translators with reference to Select Australian Texts' in *Trauma and Cinema, Cross Cultural Explorations*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, Hong Kong UP, 2004, pp. 45-63.

