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THE TRANSLATION OF NEW ZEALAND FICTION INTO FILM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the topic of literature-into-film adaptation by investigating the use of New Zealand fiction by film-makers in this country. It attempts this task primarily by examining eight case-studies of the adaptation process: five features designed for cinema release (Sleeping Dogs, A State of Siege, Sons for the Return Home, The Scarecrow and Other Halves), one feature-length television drama (The God Boy), and two thirty-minute television dramas (The Woman at the Store and Big Brother, Little Sister, from the series Winners and Losers). All eight had their first screenings in the ten-year period 1975-1985.

For each of the case-studies, the following aspects are investigated: the original work of fiction, a practical history of the adaptation process (including interviews with people involved), and a study of changes made during the scripting and shooting stages. The films are analysed in detail, with a focus on visual and auditory style, in particular how these handle the themes, characterisation and style of the original works. Comparisons are made of the structures of the novels and the films. For each film, an especially close reading is offered of sample scenes (frequently the opening and closing scenes). The thesis is illustrated with still photographs - in effect, quotations from key moments - and these provide a focus to aspects of the discussion. Where individual adaptation problems existed in particular case-studies (for example, the challenge of the first-person narration of The God Boy), these are examined in detail. The interaction of both novels and films with the society around them is given emphasis, and the films are placed in their cultural and economic context - and in the context of general film history. For each film, the complex reception they gained from different groups (for example, reviewers, ethnic groups, gender groups, the authors of the original works) is discussed.

All the aspects outlined above demonstrate the complexity of the responses made by New Zealand film-makers to the pressure and challenges of adaptation. They indicate the different answers they gave to the questions raised by the adaptation process in a new national cinema, and reveal their individual achievements.

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PREFACE

As a research topic, the relationship between film and literature can be dealt with in a variety of ways: for example, by concentrating on one film in exhaustive detail or by surveying hundreds of films. I chose to examine the films based on fiction made within a single national film industry during the last twelve years. One reason was the availability of material: the films were on hand and so were the people. It was a convenient body of material in terms of research feasibility and practicality. There was also a rich body of work: over the ten years 1975-1985, 54 feature-length films were completed in New Zealand (which included three non-fiction films and eight with more-or-less significant 'off-shore' input). Of the 54, 13 (or 24%) were literary adaptations. In addition, dozens of short dramas were produced in New Zealand in those years, including some 20 adaptations. The topic was big enough then to give some variety but close together enough to give focus as well. As representative examples to study in detail, I chose six features along with two 30-minute television dramas.

By the standards of overseas industries, the proportion of feature-film adaptations (24%) is about average. This percentage was higher here in the late 1970s when there were fewer scriptwriters and when confidence in original scripts were even lower. Some novelists, such as Maurice Gee and Sue McCauley, have written film scripts, so there has been a rich process of interaction. Within the New Zealand film industry, interest in local fiction as a source of material continues to be widespread. That so little overseas fiction has been used is evidence of the extent to which the New Zealand film industry is (or is attempting to be) distinctively local.

A growing number of people are now teaching New Zealand films. Comparisons between the two media (film and fiction) are becoming more common, but there is still a shortage of background material and detailed documentation. Questions on this subject were a regular feature of the University Entrance English examination between 1977 and 1985. They have also been an important component of the new School Certificate English prescription and are of growing importance in the University Bursary English examination, especially now that this is taking over the role of University Entrance. There are also many Sixth Form Certificate courses in film, most of which have a large New Zealand component. Local film adaptations have then become an important part of English teaching in our schools and universities, yet the subject is often taught superficially. This tends to be not the fault of the teachers, but the result of a shortage of training and resources.

The topic of adaptations provided me with the opportunity to examine a significant part of our recent cultural history from which very little data has been recorded. Up until now, New Zealand films have not received adequate documentation. Such historical information will become more difficult to reconstruct as time passes. My interest in New Zealand's cultural history helps explain why I chose a national cinema. This is, perhaps, a rather arbitrary way of limiting a field of study but it does offer a sufficiently coherent and isolatable context.

One last reason for the choice of topic is that New Zealand cinema over the last dozen years can be regarded as a new feature-film industry. After the silent film period, New Zealand features ceased to be made regularly. There was a brief spurt of production in the mid-1960s, but no new 35mm features were made between 1966 and the release of Sleeping Dogs in 1977. By studying New Zealand films, therefore, I was able to observe the creation of a film industry, which was forced to ask basic questions about what it was doing. I was able to follow the development, the trial and error process of finding answers to those questions. It is not surprising in such a situation that so many film-makers turned to a resource that already existed: New Zealand literature. A series of basic questions about adaptation ^{was} thus being explored in this country between 1975 and 1985.

The present thesis is necessarily more introductory than most, since it has had to establish basic facts, make a preliminary map of new territory, and lay the groundwork for the more closely focused work that hopefully can be done later. It does not embody new interpretations of material often covered before. Much work has gone into gathering information contained in the case-studies (for example, interviews with key figures and a study of script changes). One thing I discovered in the course of my research was the amount of material disposed of, once a feature film is completed. There is now a New Zealand Film Archive which is doing an excellent job of collecting films and scripts, but its endeavours are limited by its lack of budget and by the tendency for film-makers to rush on to their next project. Few film-makers have the space to store old documents, or the time to sort them out.

I have used the Auckland and Christchurch newspapers as the chief samples of New Zealand opinion on the case-study films, and sometimes the Wellington papers also. 'National' opinion, as in the NZ Listener, is also charted. The eight case-study films were, of course, selected from a greater number of adaptations, and I should add that some films have not yet been released

in New Zealand at the time of writing and so were not considered (for example, Among the Cinders, The Quiet Earth, Pallet on the Floor, Jewel's Darl, A Fitting Tribute). Some were released too late for detailed consideration (in particular, Came a Hot Friday). It is a difficult subject in which to make generalisations as each adaptation has done something new, reflecting its particular period in cultural and economic terms, or the different values of the adaptors, or different definitions of target audience, and so on. There was, however, sufficient coherence for me to formulate some basic questions about adaptation.

I decided not to make a full-scale analysis of any novel that had already been the subject of several detailed studies (for example, The Scarecrow and A State of Siege). I looked more closely at those novels on which little analysis had been published - in particular, Sons for the Return Home, Other Halves, The God Boy, and Smith's Dream. As for discussing films in detail, I have regarded this as a crucial exercise and have attempted it in all cases. Close readings of New Zealand films continue to be conspicuous by their absence. Here, more than in most countries, films tend to be regarded as a disposable art or as casual entertainment. Reviews are mostly brief and often written by people with little specialised knowledge of the medium. My belief that such matters had not been adequately dealt with elsewhere, at least not with regard to New Zealand films, provided the initial impulse for this thesis which is (to the best of my knowledge) the first Ph.D. in New Zealand in the area of film studies.

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Brian P. McBurnell

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E kui ma, e koro ma, o roto o nga iwi o
Te Whakatohea, Ngati Awa, Ngai Tuhoe,
o Te Arawa hoki.

He mihi tenei na ta koutou mokopuna, mo wa
koutou awhina, manaki i a ahau i te wa e
haere ana ahau ki te kura wananga.

Ka nui te mihi, te tangi ki a koutou katoa;
no reira tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou
katoa. Nga ta koutou mokopuna Brian McDonnell.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

ECU	Extreme close-up	RS	Reaction shot
CU	Close-up	POV-shot	Point-of-view shot
MCU	Medium close-up	DOP	Director of Photography
MS	Mid-shot	NZBC	New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation
LS	Long-shot	<u>Sons</u>	<u>Sons for the Return Home</u>
ELS	Extreme long-shot		

SECTION ONE

INTRODUCTION