

ARE FILMS DANGEROUS?

A MAORI WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE ON 'THE PIANO'

The following is an extract from a paper delivered at the Moving Image Centre seminar series 'A Different View - A seminar on Feminist Film and Video Practice', Auckland, February 1994.

*Leonie Pihama Lecturer,
Te Tari Matauranga,
Education Department,
University of Auckland*

Clearly books can provide positive, self affirming messages about ourselves and our world, similar statements may be made in relation to film. Such is the power of the literary and visual fields. So, how then, in light of such attributes, are books [films] dangerous? "If books [films] do not do these things, do not reinforce values, actions, customs, culture and identity, then they are dangerous... If there are no books [films] that tell us about ourselves but only tell us about others, then they are saying 'you do not exist and that is dangerous... However, if there are books [films] that are about you and they are untrue, that is very dangerous... If there are books [films] about you but they are negative and insensitive so that they are saying 'you are not good', that is dangerous" (Ibid.:60).

Patricia Grace's discussion provides a framework to engage in an analysis of the ways in which film making contributes to both the construction and marginalisation of images of Maori people. In line with this framework, are films dangerous for Maori people? At this historical point in time I would contend that many films/videos made in Aotearoa are dangerous for our people. Those films that are constructed and controlled by the colonial gaze are dangerous for Maori people. Those films which continue to perpetuate negative belief systems about Maori and which contribute to the

reproduction of stereotyped images of our people are dangerous. Very few films/videos, outside of those made by political Maori film makers, construct Maori people in anything other than the 'you do not exist', 'you are no good' categories or are located within stereotyped assertions of who we are. Such a statement will seem harsh to some, to some it will confirm what you have already heard from others, to some it will merely validate and support what you have yourself articulated. Such statements are not new, but they continue to be marginalised by dominant discourses. Maori people struggle for a voice through which we may present our own images. Where we can control the re-presentations that are offered internationally as our realities.

A clear example of the types of definitions and control in regard to imagery of Maori people can be seen in the recently acclaimed film 'The Piano'. There is little doubt in my mind that Jane Campion is a film maker of incredible ability and repute. However, the depiction of Maori people in the film leaves no stereotyped stone unturned. What we have in 'The Piano' is a series of constructions of Maori people which are located firmly in a colonial gaze, which range from the 'happy go lucky native' to the sexualized Maori woman available at all times to service Pakeha men. The perception of Maori people given in 'The Piano' is that our tipuna (ancestors) were naive, simpleminded, lacked reason, acted impulsively and spoke only in terms of sexual innuendo, with a particular obsession with male genitalia. For Maori people 'The Piano' is dangerous. It is dangerous in its portrayal of Maori people that is linked solely to a colonial gaze, which is uncritical and unchallenging of the stereotypes which have been paraded continuously as 'the way we were'.

Constructing "whiteness" out of "blackness"

Toni Morrison (1992) in "Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination" explores the construction of what she terms "impenetrable whiteness" within the American literary tradition. Morrison engages in an examination of the role that Africanism plays in the development of American literature, particularly the marginalisation of issues of 'difference' and 'race', and argues that what has been constructed as the American literary tradition has been defined and controlled by the "dominant cultural body", i.e. white America, in the form of "literary whiteness".

Analysis such as that articulated by Toni Morrison is relevant to film and video making in Aotearoa in that a critical struggle that Maori are involved in is that related to our images and the ways in which we are presented and re-presented by the dominant voice. Crucial to this struggle to regain our voice, to move from the margins, is the presentation of frameworks of reviewing and deconstructing the types of images that have been seen to constitute 'the Maori' image. This does not merely involve the analysis of Maori representation as removed from Pakeha imagery rather it demands critical analysis of how the representation of Maori people contributes to both the definition of Maori and the definition of Pakeha. It involves a process of deconstruction which highlights the effects of the perpetuation of particular definitions of 'being Maori' and how those in turn validate and support particular constructions of 'being Pakeha'. It is revealing the dualisms which serve to validate the colonisers belief in their own superiority.

We can move again to an analysis of the Maori characters in 'The Piano' for illustration of the power of the construction of racial dualisms. The Maori characters are the background against which images of white are positioned. We remain the 'natives' who provide the backdrop for the 'civilised'. Our dialogue is centred upon sexual service which is 'raw' and 'crude' as opposed to what is

(supposedly) 'erotic'. The images presented in 'The Piano' say much about colonial perceptions of the indigenous people, as these perceptions have endured to the 1990s. They also say much about the colonisers themselves as they position themselves in opposition to Maori people as 'Other'.

Voices from the Margins

Maori people struggle to gain voice, struggle to be heard from the margins, to have our stories heard, to have our descriptions of ourselves validated, to have access to the domain within which we can control and define those images which are held up as reflections of our realities.

In 'The Piano' the imagery of Maori people is located firmly in colonial constructions and hence we receive not solely the messages surrounding the 'uncivilised savage' mentality, but we receive all the subtle, and not so subtle, messages about the place of our tipuna (ancestors). Maori women were the 'sexual servants'. It is the Maori women who cook for Baines in line with a colonial agenda which focused on Maori girls as house servants. Maori men are irrational, naive, simpleminded and warlike. It is Maori men with whom Baines attempts to do his suspect land deals, which again fits neatly in line with colonial expectations that men are the owners of property and therefore the decision makers in regard to its usage or sale.

These are the types of colonial discourses which Maori people struggle with and against, these are the types of colonial discourses which have informed film makers, in particular Pakeha film makers, as to how we should be presented. These are the colonial discourses which find contemporary expression in feature films like 'The Piano' and which are then sold to the world as an authentic depiction of our people. These are the portrayals which

add to the perpetuation of belief systems that undermine not only our position in this country but also our intelligence.

Equally as vital, to the identification of processes by which images are invented, created, recreated, is that of revealing the assumptions upon which the visual constructions take place. That is, identifying how and by whom our work is informed.

"The question we should be asking is what informs the mythologies and symbols? The answer has to do with the stance of the participant within the dominant culture, within the colony" (Langton, M.1993;35)

Such questioning seeks to uncover underlying assumptions upon which our epistemological positions are based. How and why do we view the world the way we do? What informs our perceptions? Given that history in this country has, in the most part, been recorded and interpreted by the coloniser we must actively seek to critically analyse the "iconising and mythologising" that we are presented with (Langton 1993). It necessitates a depth of analysis that reaches into questions which seek to unmask modernist metanarratives that validate beliefs that eurocentric constructions of history, and in particular of the histories of the colonised, present the 'one true' interpretation.

Deconstruction of texts in such a way may be linked to a decolonising project. Merata Mita (1992) presents such a project as a process which involves decolonising the screen, demystifying the process and indigenising the image. It is a process which is inherently political in that it challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding the presentation of Maori images, whilst going beyond visual critique to asserting a need for Maori people to access production processes with the idea of accumulating

indigenous images which give voice to our own creations. The potential of such a project is the evolving of anti-colonial perspectives which interrupt dominant colonial discourses.

The struggle for the control of our images parallel our struggles for resources, for support, for acknowledgement of work produced, for the freedom to produce those films, which cater for the needs of Maori people generally. All of these struggles are in some aspect linked to a struggle with dominant discourses that have had their historical foundation in colonial ideologies and which ultimately served to justify the act of colonisation and the dominant position of the coloniser. For myself, as a Maori woman who has both a political and cultural interest in the construction of image there are clearly struggles involved, there is also the knowledge that just as books/films are dangerous they can be equally powerful. It is that which I believe calls Maori film-makers to invert the negative constructions that have so long dominated, to assert our own definitions, to present and re-present, to create and re-create, to provide the images that we define as part of our realities in ways that we determine, as it is we that have most to gain.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- * LANGTON, M. 1993 Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television..., Australian Film Commission
- * MORRISON, T. 1992 Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, Vintage Books, New York
- * PARAHA, G. 1993 He Pounamu Kakano Rua - Construction of Maori Women: A Visual Discourse, Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Auckland
- * SMITH, C. & PIHAMA, L. 1993 A Nice White Story: Reviewing The Piano in Broadsheet Magazine, January 1994, Auckland

