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Mobile Labour beyond the Film-Set

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Mobile Labour Beyond the Film-Set

**An exegesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of**

Masters

**in
Fine Arts**

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New Zealand.**

Tim Barlow

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Abstract:

This exegesis follows a trajectory that starts with Jonathan Beller's observation that the contemporary spectator now 'labours in the image'. Essentially, Beller suggests that vision and perception of the screen image is the fundamental value-productive labour for the modern spectator. The central argument of this exegesis is to refute Beller's concept of the 'looking as labour'. I suggest that sensual, corporeal and phenomenological perception, as embodied in a range of labour practices surrounding the physical film-set, has the potential to offer slippages and ruptures in the homogenising cinematic mode of production of the 'screen image'. This is developed through analysis of how my own, and some other artists' practices explore unexpected areas: marginalised and forgotten histories, new narratives, material realities and imaginings. Therefore the narratives that unfold in the exegesis range across film extras' personal stories, reports of communities' interactions with film-sets, artists' re-creation of classic film-sets, archival research and my own industrial film production experience and exploration of abandoned sets. Starting with the 'looking as labour', the exegesis moves to a consideration of 'labour in the film-set' to a concept of 'mobile labour beyond the film-set'. Notions discussed include forms of the underground, film noirs, the world fair, crazy house and film-set ruin. Through discussion of my own work and that of other artists and theorists, this exegesis illustrates the ways in which the cross-fertilisation of these concepts can lead to far more variegated, and dynamic, uses of 'labour' than Beller suggests. Artist's brought into the discussion include Peter Brosnan, Krassimir Terziev, Sean Lynch, Goshka Macuga, Abbas Kiarostami and Pierre Huyghé, while critics and theorists mentioned include Susan Stewart, Michel de Certeau, Vivian Sobchack, Martin Heidegger, Paul Virilio, David Pike and Henri Lefebvré.

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Prologue:

In 2004 The Last Samurai was filmed around the Taranaki region of New Zealand.¹ In addition to Taranaki getting ‘star fever’ it gained international media attention along with millions of dollars in foreign investment. So successful was this production’s attempt to lend the area a sense of identity that local venture capital trusts were established with power companies and the New Plymouth District Council as stakeholders in an effort to ensure future film investment in the region.

When I arrived in New Plymouth in 2007 to design Anthony McCarten’s film Show of Hands there was an aura resembling a Wild West movie script in the city itself. A new oil boom was fueling the economy and speculation of all kinds was rife. However, the company Fat and Thin Productions’ vastly ambitious seven film package, starting with an 18 million dollar film based on war hero Charles Upham,² was foundering, eventually going into receivership in 2008, reportedly owing \$1.4 million in taxpayer-funded investment.

Our low budget drama did get filmed, partly due to much generous local support, including that of a car-yard owner who drove a leather-studded late model Harley-Davidson ‘trike’ and had a genuine Colt .44 slung around his office chair.

Another benefactor to the production, a real estate agent, approached me mid-way through the filming, to ask if I could leave the car-yard set standing as he had a church group (his own) that would rent it; they thought it would make the ideal buildings and grounds for the congregation. This set had been designed for a camera and a character; more specifically, a corrupt and paranoid secondhand car-dealer was required to view every angle of his car-yard from his office window, so it struck me as ironic that a fundamentalist Christian pastor would find the set so appealing. I had to inform the real estate agent that this set was fake, that it leaked, and that it was in fact a temporary structure that bypassed all building codes, but strangely this still did not deter him. It turned out we had created the ideal church structure by

¹ Passages in italics are used when describing, often anecdotally, the unfolding of my own practice.

² Company making Upham film goes broke. 2008. 3news.co.nz.

hiding all the windows in the old warehouse, adding the mock-modern glass front showroom and installing bright floodlights in the yard.

As with many film productions, at completion of filming we had three days to bulldoze the structure down and return the old warehouse to normal; thus there was no time for further negotiation with the church group.