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**FRAMING WOMEN -**  
A View on Film, History and New Zealand

A thesis presented in partial  
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### ABSTRACT

*Framing Women* takes a culturalist approach in examining the history of gender politics in film and discusses the impact of feminist film theories, with particular reference to the work of New Zealand women filmmakers.

Chapter 1 examines the production process and the difficulties faced by independent filmmakers. It explores the dynamics of the classic Hollywood film and the implications for women of its traditional narrative codes.

Chapter 2 traces the artistic roots of film, revealing the origin of the cultural myths and stereotypes which are still prevalent today, while chapter 3 looks at modern film theory and its influence on feminist film criticism.

Chapter 4 focuses on New Zealand film and the position of women in its development, with particular attention to the work of Melanie Read, Gaylene Preston, Jane Campion and Alison Maclean.

Inferences are drawn as to the future of feminist film criticism and the effect of the changing roles of women in society on their representation in the media.

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## FRAMING WOMEN

### A View on Film, History and New Zealand

*"On this account, culture is a site of struggle and contestation amongst different groups. A culture is conceived as a network of institutions, representations and practices which produce differences of race, ethnic heritage, class, gender/sexual preference, and the like. These differences are centrally involved in the production of meaning."*

David Bordwell, Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory, 1996.

## INTRODUCTION

Film is a complex medium. Firmly rooted in the artistic history of western culture and sharing its inheritance with the visual, literary and performance arts, it is also highly technological and inheres in the economic, social and political fabric of its time. To focus on gender in relation to film and, furthermore, to examine its evolution in a particular post-colonial society is an attempt to interweave a myriad strands into a single mesh and thus observe women's contribution to framing culture.

To this end I have elected to take a culturalist approach. Cultural Studies characterises culture as a contest between differing values and considers inequities of gender, class or race etc. as being naturalised in culture. They are then represented in the media in a way that obscures the economic and political causes of the inequality.

Economic and political factors have always played their part in the development of the arts. It is fair to say that, historically, it has been requisite that artists either possess a private income or receive sponsorship from wealthy patrons. The convictions of the dominant order, therefore, have always influenced artistic expression, their various ideologies so pervasive that they appeared to be part of the natural order of things rather than a construct

For over 2,000 years, a prevailing ideology in most cultures and classes, has been the secondary status accorded to women. Needless to say, at times they have been barred from practicing the arts but could, under certain circumstances, patronise them. Social upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries meant that women in western cultures have managed to moderate their predicament somewhat, but inequalities still remain. Theatre and film often reflect and support the dominant ideology and through them it is possible to trace women's progress.

In New Zealand, like other former colonies of the British Empire, the movement toward a sense individual national identity which occurred after World War 11 was reflected in its art, literature and cinema began to express that pursuit. This articulation of a new idiom was to provide women filmmakers with the opportunity to also express their unique perceptions.

## CHAPTER 1

*"What we saw implicitly carried the message that because we were somehow strangely absent from the screen our own culture was somehow unworthy and we ourselves were less than worthwhile."*

Sam Neill, *Cinema of Unease*, 1993.

HERE COMES HOLLYWOOD

New Zealand film has its place within a context of established filmic traditions, and for most of this century it is the Hollywood film which has dominated screens around the world. New Zealand filmmakers, therefore, have had to contend with the might of the Hollywood myth factory, myths which have codified the roles and behaviours of women, both on-screen and off. As no western filmmaker can claim to have been free of the influence of the classic Hollywood film, any examination of New Zealand film must incorporate an exploration of the implications for those who wish to present a discrepant perspective.

The financial demands of making a film have a direct bearing on the capacity of filmmakers to produce the films they want and so the economics of movie production have often influenced the artistic direction of the cinema. As a popular art form, film has the capacity to attract huge audiences and this exacerbates the pressure on filmmakers to offer formulaic products.

By 1912 cinema had developed from being a novelty into a popular art form in its own right. Early films had no sound, of course, but the era of silent film, which lasted until the first 'talkies' appeared in 1928, was one of experimentation and individuality, its proponents drawn by the potential and vigour of a new medium

The very first film shot in New Zealand was produced during this period. In 1913 the famous French film pioneer, Gaston Melies, produced and directed **Loved by a Maori Chieftess** and went on to direct two more that same year, both with Maori themes, **Hinemoa** and **How Chief Te Ponga Won his Bride**.—There is no known footage of these films, or any film shot in New Zealand, until **The Birth**

of New Zealand in 1922, of which only fragments are left. Produced by Mr. F. Jackson and Mr. H. E. Bennett of Cinema Enterprises Ltd., Palmerston North, **The Birth of New Zealand** was the first known locally produced film. Rudall Hayward, often referred to as 'the father' of New Zealand film, was a member of the crew. He was to direct six silent films, mostly with Maori themes, two of which were called **Rewi's Last Stand**, one in 1925, the other, in 1940, a reworked version with sound.

However, the development of sound and the technological improvements in filmmaking increased the complexity and expense of film production. European filmmakers, independent of Hollywood, continued to explore personal expression; prior to World War II German and French directors gained widespread respect. Great Britain, too, had developed a significant film industry. By 1932, however, there was little economic competition for the gloss and technical expertise of the Hollywood film.

The history of the Hollywood is one of an increasing market share and by the thirties, the so-called 'Golden Age' of Hollywood, it was experiencing conspicuous economic success.

Hollywood could churn out films through the studio system which, powered by ambitious men, created a film culture that embraced a prevailing ideology of mono-culturalism and patriarchy. After the outbreak of the Second World War, when European and British filmmakers were unable to export their films, Hollywood's lead became entrenched.

The Hollywood film dominated the local cinema in New Zealand, too, people repudiating their own cultural uniqueness in favour of the exotic world of American fantasy. It was a phenomenon which lasted well into the fifties and sixties. As John O'Shea pointed out in A Charmed Life, "Visual images that contain local content tend to be regarded as strangely unfamiliar and find popularity hard to achieve." (Dennis & Bieringa 15) To understand the options available to local filmmakers, it is necessary to examine the various factors which constitute film production.

### Making Movies

There are three general phases in the production of a film: preparation(pre-production), shooting(production) and assembly(post-production).

Preparation includes developing the idea and acquiring the funds to make, distribute and publicise the film. In a studio production many people may be involved in pre-production, for instance the Producer, who manages the production; the Executive Producer, who acquires the finance or literary rights etc; the Line Producer, who actually organises the film itself; the Associate Producer, who communicates with the technical personnel; and the Writer.

During the shooting of a film, the shots are not necessarily filmed in continuity but are assembled in the right order later by the editor. The shots are inscribed on strips of celluloid, called frames, which must be the appropriate width or gauge. The standard professional gauge is 35mm but in the 1960s 70mm was often used for spectacular effects. Independent filmmakers tend to use 16mm for reasons of cost but, as image quality will often deteriorate when a film shot on one gauge is transferred to another, they face problems when enlarging their negative to 35mm for commercial theatrical release. For example, New Zealander Geoff Murphy's film **Wild Man** (1977), "very cheap and it showed" (Dennis & Bieringa 134), was shot on 16mm film.

The director manoeuvres the actors and decides the framing of the shots. With skilful manipulation of the tools at his/her disposal the director engraves the film with her/his particular style. Realism and formalism are terms often used to denote particular styles of filmmaking, realism being the attempt to create an illusion of objective reality while concealing the filmmaker's manipulation of that reality. It is a style which is deliberately unobtrusive and emphasises content. Formalists, on the other hand, are intentionally subjective and consider style to be as important as content. Often referred to as expressionists, formalist directors attempt to convey inner states and will distort objective reality to do so. Realism is the preferred style of directors of the classic Hollywood film and all their expertise was geared toward this end.

Like a painter, the filmmaker arranges the frame of a shot, framing is the art of composition. The theatrical term **mise-en-scene**, which translates as 'staging the action', is used to describe the director's control over what appears in each frame and includes the setting, lighting, costume and props. In a big budget production, however, many other personnel are involved including production designers, art and set directors, set

dressers, costume designers, camera operators, sound recordists, lighting technicians and crew.

Editing takes place at the end of each day's filming, the 'dailies' or 'rushes' being assembled by the film editor into a rough cut. Many women filmmakers begin their careers as editors, such as Melanie Read, director of the New Zealand feature film **Trial Run**(1984), who has said that this was the only future envisaged for her, as a woman, during her training at film school.

The most specialised division of labour in the production of films is demanded by the studio process. The studio is "a company in the business of making films" (Bordwell & Thompson 9) and the classic studio system of Hollywood in the thirties and forties has frequently been compared to a factory assembly line. At its peak, Metro Goldwyn Mayer (MGM) produced "forty two feature films a year on twenty two sound stages and one hundred acres of backlot standing sets"(Monaco 209). Technicians worked regular shifts for a set salary, as did actors and directors. The studios often had a 'stable' of young actors, most of them women, on contract. Unlike directors today, who may make only one film a year, the studio directors often shot over thirty films and only directors who had achieved some fame and recognition were allowed to be involved in post-production. The studio heads were concerned with the commodity value of their products and did not wish to produce films which were different but rather to repeat formulas which appealed to their target audience:

"The study of Hollywood is more a matter of identifying types, patterns, conventions, and genres amongst a great many films than of intently focusing on the qualities of each individual movie."(Monaco 211)

In comparison, independent film production is often on a small scale; the filmmaker supervises every production task, from preparation to assembly, and may actually perform many of them personally. The filmmaker often has to rent equipment and must obtain financial backing separately for each film but the advantage is that the product need not be influenced unduly by the demands of big business. Similarly, a collective film production is also small scale and may be financed by arts organisations or members' personal resources. It is a group project, several film workers participating equally, and while there may be a specialised division of

labour (Director and Camera Operator, for example), the group shares common goals. The political movements of the late 1960s inspired the efforts of collective and independent filmmakers who strove to break free of the constraints of the studio system. This was reflected also in New Zealand where there was an surge of independent filmmaking in the 1970s, including the work of Geoff Murphy, Merata Mita and Geoff Steven amongst others.

Independent filmmaking's greatest disadvantages are in the areas of financing, distribution and exhibition. In the thirties and forties, the major Hollywood studios had complete control over the film process from production through to exhibition. Hollywood studios still have ready access to finance and can contract to large distribution companies who have agreements with successful commercial theatres. Films made by independent filmmakers or groups, however, are usually distributed by small specialist companies to 'art houses' which rely on regular and loyal audiences to generate a profit. Experimental films, though, are mostly sponsored, and are screened for specific audiences, though some art cinemas will show them as a short before the main feature.

In New Zealand, during the seventies, independent filmmaker Stephanie Beth screened **I Want To Be Joan** (1978) around the country, showing it to community organisations and women's groups, and Shereen Maloney first screened **Irene-59** in 1983 at a Rotary Club luncheon.

Despite the difficulties, independent filmmakers prefer having the freedom to tackle subjects which the commercial cinema ignores and to have some artistic control over their work. Recently a trend has emerged for foreign films, which have had some success on the art house circuit, to be moved into mainstream theatres, with some spectacular results. **The Piano** (Jane Campion, 1993) is just such a film. It was to receive acclaim and make unexpected profits for its producers.

The Hollywood studios themselves received a major setback in the 1950s when television finally became available to the public. It had an immediate impact on the film industry, resources shrank and the studios merged. Eventually, new conglomerates were formed. The structure of the American film industry began to change and control no longer rested in hands of just a few men; a woman, Sherry Lansing, was even made head of production at Fox.

Film became just one of a vast range of entertainments which includes television, video and computer games.

Cinema, however, is a shared experience and can involve the audience on a number of levels. For this reason, it has the capacity to define and mediate cultural norms:

"Because film is such a widespread popular phenomenon, it has played a very important part in modern culture, sociopolitically. Because it provides such a powerful and convincing representation of reality, film also has a profound effect on members of its audience, psychopolitically." (Monaco 217)

This sense of the political and social value of film, inspired the post-war development of national film industries in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, Australasia. In many countries the local film industry is subsidised by government and in New Zealand, a Film Commission was established in 1978 for just this purpose.

Many of the independent filmmakers of the sixties and seventies were inspired by the work of the French 'New Wave' directors. The New Wave was a reaction against what was seen as American cultural imperialism and its proponents attempted to present film as more intellectually challenging art form. Directors, such as Godard, Truffaut, Chabrol and Rohmer wanted to explore inner realities and sometimes experimented with psychodrama as a film form. Often formalist in style, New wave films aimed to involve their audiences in discourse. Jean Luc Godard, in particular, was influenced by the plays of Bertolt Brecht but his work confused or even bored some audiences who, conditioned by the Hollywood film, expected films to do all the work for them. New Zealand filmmaker John O'Shea, when talking about his 1960 film **Runaway** (Dennis & Bieringa 30), admitted to being influenced by the French New Wave and applied their techniques in a rather self-conscious way. Local reaction varied from confusion to anger.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the New Wave directors was that they proved that films could be made inexpensively no matter what the audience. At the same time, the invention of light, portable 35mm cameras gave filmmakers greater mobility and they no longer had to work in large studios. Filmmaking was again an accessible art.

Though these changes have meant that world markets are more open to competition and that there is more room for independent producers to operate, conglomerates still dominate American production. The Hollywood film, even in the major film producing nations of Europe, accounts for over half the audiences and the industry remains a monolithic and conservative influence.

To understand the appeal of the classic Hollywood film and the power of its basic ethos, one needs to examine its form in detail. The Hollywood film sends repeated and definite messages which women filmmakers, in particular, seek to deconstruct, but these messages are inherent in the form itself.

### Going to the Movies

All art forms arise because the human mind is constantly trying to make sense of the world and seeks a recognisable order in things. An art work provides us with "cues" to its intention and from them we can make predictions, draw conclusions and construct order out of a variety of images.

These cues, however, are not random; they are organised into systems. Form, then, "is a specific system of patterned relationships that we perceive in an artwork" (Bordwell & Thompson 42). The extraction of order is what involves an audience in the action of a film, and it is in this participation that film theorists find evidence of the ideological influence of the medium.

The form that has remained dominant in Hollywood film since 1913 is the traditional narrative. Brian McFarlane and Geoff Mayer refer to "the extrinsic norms of the Hollywood cinema" (17) as coherence; a strong initial exposition which provides the basis for regular audience involvement; goal-oriented, character-centred stories; narrative repetition, retardation and redundancy; a morally polarised, emotionally excessive form; and multiple motivation which obscures the narration process.

Film viewers understand the cues provided by the initial exposition and draw certain inferences. They expect narratives to have a beginning, a middle and an end with a denouement two thirds of the way through. Psychologically, people are fairly literate regarding the conventions of the form:

"Stories surround us. In childhood we learn fairy tales and myths. As we grow up, we read short stories, novels, history and biography. Religion, philosophy and science often present their doctrines through exemplary stories: the Judeo-Christian tradition's Bible and Torah are huge collections of narratives, while a scientific discovery is often presented as the tale of an experimenter's trials and breakthroughs. Plays tell stories, as do films, television shows, comic books, paintings, dance, and many other cultural phenomena." (Bordwell & Thompson 64)

The conventional narrative begins with a certain situation, a number of changes have their effect and a new situation arises which brings about a conclusion. The ability to contain a narrative schema and to read narrative cues may be innate but it is also learned through experience, just as the capacity to read a written language is learned.

Semiotic approaches to film criticism, for instance, are based on the hypothesis that film is a language. Roland Barthes saw the cues provided by narratives as cultural codes, connoting the mythologies (stereotypes) and ideology of the society which produced it. The codes "function endlessly to repeat what has been written in other books and portrayed in other films, and so to reproduce the existing cultural order." (Silverman 239)

A distinction that needs to be made is the difference between **story** and **plot**. The story of a film, sometimes called its **diegesis** (from the Greek, meaning 'recounted story'), includes all the events portrayed or inferred by the action. The plot, however, includes the story but also contains nondiegetic elements, such as background music or credit sequences, which augment the viewer's comprehension. Sometimes referred to as its **discourse**, the plot, then, is what a film is saying, its message to the audience. In terms of Roland Barthes semiotic theory; story comprises the semic, proairetic and hermeneutic codes, which move events forward, and plot the symbolic and cultural codes, which give them their wider significance.

As regards the representation of women in the classic film, Barthes' codes contain several implications. The cultural loading of the cues in any genre film, for instance, prescribe women into roles which are then

interpreted as a norm - as is made evident in an examination of the domestic melodrama. Women filmmakers, including those in New Zealand, have striven to deconstruct these codes so to expose their operation.

The genre film, be it a domestic melodrama (women's weepie) western, gothic horror film, musical comedy, thriller or film noir, supplies familiar cues and the audience expects certain conventions to be employed. In the case of the thriller or film noir, for example, the visual cues would be in the low-key lighting, the tight framing, the use of tracking shots to suggest pursuit and the urban settings. These conventions were deliberately manipulated by both Melanie Read in **Trial Run** (1984) and Gaylene Preston in **Mr Wrong** (1985) when they wished to subvert the essential sexism of the thriller genre

In the classic Hollywood film it is the personality of the major protagonists which determines the course of events. While external factors may provide a catalyst for action, the narrative is invariably character-centred. The prime causal factor is psychological, it is the character's responses to their situation which motivate other events in the story. So that their motivation is completely intelligible, the characters act and speak in a highly emotional way. The plot then manipulates time to present only the significant causal events and is therefore, by its nature, morally polarised. The character traits of both 'hero' and 'villain' are made very obvious, a legacy of the melodramatic origins of the form.

This resolution of the narrative, its closure, is crucial; McFarlane and Mayer see it as fundamental to audience expectations:

"Central to these expectations is the role of the climax, the emotional and/or physical pivotal moment within the narrative structure that occurs just prior to the resolution." (15)

Most analysts of narrative structure pay a lot of attention to 'endings'. Even Peter Brooks in Reading for the Plot, which does explain some aspects of the process of plot, "defines the beginning in terms of the end". (Byars 110) In the romantic film, of course, the resolution will take the form of the classic happy ending, usually with the establishment of a long-term, heterosexual relationship.

Brooks sees the plot of narrative as being about boundaries, either of time or the "internal logic of the discourse." However, Jackie Byars contends that he "stopped short, failing to consider the other sorts of boundaries created and enforced by plot - especially gender boundaries." (110) She adds that an ending like "And they got married and lived happily ever after" calls attention to the "overlay of narrative and social coding." (110) Byars postulates that, as the classical Hollywood film has only two plot lines as a rule, one of which always ends with the formation of a heterosexual couple, "the ideological nature of the plot structure becomes abundantly clear." One of the significant features of the New Zealand film, **Mr Wrong** (1985), is in its parody of the expectations of such a plot line.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis explained narrative as a particular expression of ideology and "as social institutions are called into question, so are the narrative forms that legitimate and support them." (cited by Byars 111) In their endings, narratives posit "ideological solutions" to the contradictions which have driven them forward. When describing the nineteenth century novel DuPlessis showed how the narrative stifles the female protagonist and represses her pursuit of selfhood, so that she is dependent. Male dominance is reinforced and, while this may be resisted, "the plot structure is a powerful ally."

For Brooks meaning and recognition are effected by closure, 'endlessness' reduces the significance of the narrative. Byars argues that "the sort of narrative dominated by its ending indicates a valorization of the discrete, the individual, the masculine." She cites Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan in asserting that females "are more flexible; they are less concerned with judgment and more concerned with relationships and connection than males; their (ego) boundaries are more fluid." (110) Many films by women filmmakers, including **Trial Run** (Read, 1984) **Mr. Wrong** (Preston, 1985) and **Crush** (Maclean, 1992) attempt to defy these conventions of narrative closure and its implicit motivation.

However, with its emphasis on melodramatic stories and situations, the classic Hollywood movie has the ability to involve and divert its audiences. Richard Maltby has even suggested that it is promiscuous and in A Brief Romantic Interlude quotes Parker Tyler in talking about "its will to make indiscriminate numbers of people indiscriminately happy." (Bodwell & Carroll 436) Classic Hollywood, says Maltby, "deals in economies of pleasure

rather than the aesthetics of organic forms." The satisfaction of going to the movies, then, is not so much an aesthetic pleasure as an opportunity to escape daily life:

"In every Hollywood movie there are coincidences, inconsistencies, gaps, and delays, which are registered by the audience as digressions or as opportunities for what Pauline Kael calls the most intense pleasure of moviegoing, the 'non-aesthetic one of escaping from the responsibilities of having the proper responses required of us in our culture.'" (436)

In Hollywood films, much is portrayed that is redundant to the narrative but entertaining for the audience. In other words, coherence is sometimes sacrificed to commerce. A movie's 'consumable identity' as a commodity, may also lead to the viewer being drawn to some aspect of the movie, other than its story. The movie may have been promoted for its special effects or large budget. Audiences could be attracted by a particular performance, the mise-en-scene or the fame of the star:

"In the heyday of Hollywood, the female star's image as glamorous goddess was carefully cultivated. A controlled release of information about her private life surrounded her with an aura intended to enhance her screen characterization and the standing of the studio." (Macdonald 111)

Maria LaPlace cites Richard Dyer who "maintains that stars become identified with or are constructed along the lines of various social types and stereotypes." (Gledhill 147) The "ideology of beauty" is not a new concept but advertising in the twentieth century began to suggest that it required some assistance from clothes, cosmetics and grooming. Women were told that to win and keep a husband, care of their looks was essential and the female film stars of the time were always beautifully coiffeured, made up and dressed, both off-screen and on. It is significant then that in *Mr. Wrong* (1985), New Zealand woman filmmaker, Gaylene Preston, deliberately chose a heroine who did not conform to type.

The cultural coding of women is most evident in what have come to be seen as typical Hollywood films - the domestic melodramas, otherwise known as 'tearjerkers' or 'women's weepies'.

### Time for a "Woman's Weepee"

The domestic melodrama features a woman at the centre of the action and is highly emotional and morally polarised. The moral order, according to Noel Carroll in The Moral Ecology of Melodrama, is "presented as part and parcel of the nature of things as a causal force or as a regulatory force with causal efficacy." (Landy 189) In a domestic melodrama the prevailing sexual mores are validated and any aberration by a female character results in disapprobation and suffering.

At the same time, women in these films are presented as representatives of 'ideal' beauty. So while they titillated the sexual interest of their audiences, the films of the 1930s, 40s and 50s also disguised the sexuality of their characters. Only the femme fatale, destructive and dangerous, was overtly sexual. In speaking about the Hollywood 'Production Code', which was in force until the sixties, Richard Maltby says:

"The primary site of private pleasure to be simultaneously concealed and disclosed in public was sexuality, and Hollywood developed particularly intricate strategies of ambiguity and antimony in its expression and repression." (Bordwell & Carroll 447)

The content of melodrama is, to quote Marcia Landy, "a constant struggle for gratification and equally constant blockages to its attainment." (14)

The development of the genre, however, was a matter of business. The studio executives were convinced that women made up the majority of the film audience. As Maria LaPlace, in Producing and Consuming the Woman's Film, points out:

"As a production category, the woman's film occupied an important place in the Hollywood studio system by virtue of its immense popularity and profitability - during the 30s and 40s such films were churned out at a fantastic rate at both the A (quality) and B (low- budget) levels." (Gledhill 138)

As it featured a female protagonist, the women's film was centred on the domestic, traditionally the woman's domain, and concerned itself with family, home and

romance. The domestic sphere was considered the appropriate place for the expression of strong emotion so relationships are the main concern of the domestic melodrama. Action, which belongs outside the home, was considered a predominantly male province.

The representation of the independent woman (or "woman alone" as Jackie Byars terms it) has undergone some changes over the years. In the 1930s actresses like Bette Davis, Katherine Hepburn and Joan Crawford specialised in roles which portrayed strong and intelligent women. They were not subservient or submissive. James Monaco suggests that this image of women was often one of equality and that independent women were portrayed actively engaging in various occupations, including the traditionally male-dominated professions such as the law, journalism and medicine. He adds that, while one can detect numerous stereotypical limitations:

"...for most of us to compare the thirties in films with the sixties or seventies is to realize that despite the awakened consciousness of contemporary women, cinematically we have only recently regained the level of intelligence of the sexual politics of even the mid-thirties." (169)

However, during the 1930s and 40s, the women's film also idealised self-sacrifice; even when faced with death, a woman showed courage and nobility. In Tales of Sound and Fury, Thomas Elsaesser posits that the domestic melodrama, while dealing with questions of emotional and moral identity, often presents the failure of the (female) protagonist to take control of her situation. The characters are acted upon and "melodrama confers on them a negative identity through suffering." (Gledhill 47) In the woman's film women waited for their men, resolutely accepted loss or struggled to provide for their children. Motherhood, in fact, was a recurring theme.

Christian Viviani, in Who Is Without Sin: The Maternal Melodrama in American Film 1930-1939, sees it as only natural that "maternal sentiment be granted a privileged place." (Landy 168) in domestic melodramas. Melodrama is moving because it makes reference to situations, feelings and emotions which everyone has experienced. These sensations, though, must be "juxtaposed, telescoped, multiplied, in order to maintain the pathos at an intense level."

In the women's film, Jeanine Basinger believes, there are "exactly four kinds of mothers" who are judged according to social mores:

1. Unwed (who are among the most common in the woman's film)
2. Perfect (who are few and far between)
3. Sacrificial (who are faced with more serpent's teeth and reasons to give up their children than you can possibly imagine)
4. Destructive (who show remarkable talent at their speciality)" (392)

During the 1940s while the war continued, women were the predominant movie audience, and the maternal melodrama flourished "in a filmic world where femininity was organised between two poles: the pin-up and the mother." (Viviani in Landy 169)

The accepted idea of the mother was that "all mothers were good and that all women should be good mothers." (Basinger 392) Of course, it was not a realistic representation of women's experience but that is often the case with women's films. In the New Zealand film *Trial Run* (1984), Melanie Read worked against this sentiment in the character of Rosemary, leading protagonist and mother of two, who is shown to have priorities outside of her obligations to family and no wish to sacrifice herself to them. At the same time, she is neither destructive or perfect.

After World War II, the established social order began to tergiversate as "women of all ages, races, marital and maternal statuses, and socioeconomic classes flooded out of their homes and into the workplaces of America." (Byars 79) Publicly, however, women were being encouraged back into the home. During the war they had been needed to replace the male labour force, but as the men returned and needed work, women were persuaded that they could best serve by raising a new generation. As Jackie Byars points out, "popular mythology would have us believe that these women returned to work exclusively in their homes, but this was not the case." (79)

As America confronted the perils of the Cold War and "the nuclear threat," films of this period began to reflect a new conservatism in relation to their portrayal of women. Jackie Byars argues that:

"As increasing numbers of women entered the paid labor force, changes in the social status of women threatened male supremacy, and the stereotype of the Woman Alone changed." (76)

The public images of stars like Marilyn Monroe (silly, seductive and dependent) and Doris Day (chaste, sweet and decent) became representative of the roles available to women and the familiar dichotomy of virgin/whore continued to influence plots. Marriage was promoted, almost as a career option, in films of the 1950s. It was seen as the ultimate happy ending and women alone were presented as unhappy or neurotic. It is pertinent to remember that these films were also flooding the New Zealand market at this time. The impact of this message on a society bereft of young men after the war cannot be underestimated.

The domestic melodrama survived into the sixties but lost its prominence due to the stress within the film industry itself and the cultural transformations of the time which made it unfashionable. Also, television had picked up the form and it metamorphosed into 'sitcoms' which still beam out the now familiar ideology night after night.

With the advent of the Vietnam War, the domestic melodrama staged a return to the cinema screen however, as it always seems to do in times of national crisis. Even more than in the fifties, it presented a false image of the actual experience of women. In fact, many women were becoming involved in feminism, but that would not have been apparent from the films produced by Hollywood during the late seventies. The 1980s and 1990s have seen films beginning to respond to the reality of feminine experience, probably due to the influence of independent filmmakers. In New Zealand, for example, women been active in the development of local filmmaking.

However, the question arises as to how and why the conventions of narrative and the melodramatic impulse have proved such a force in popular culture. To find an answer, one has to examine the roots of this phenomenon in the society and art of the nineteenth century, in which film had its genesis.

Chapter 2

"The novels in question not only endlessly project the same images of women, but they repeat the same masochistic narratives."

Kaja Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics, 1983

NEW OIL FOR OLD LAMPS - FILM'S CULTURAL LEGACY

The cinema first appeared in the nineteenth century milieu of art and literature so it was congruent that it should continue the traditions of art forms already established, in particular the photographic portrait, the Victorian novel and the melodrama. The appeal of film to diverse audiences can be explained in terms of the nineteenth century classification of the arts when forms were labelled as either practical, environmental, pictorial, dramatic, narrative or musical. Film covers a range of these elements from the practical (the technology) and environmental through to the pictorial, dramatic, narrative and music. Women were firmly positioned within these forms so that along with the aesthetics, went an interpretation of femininity that spoke of centuries of inculcation.

Highlighting the Pictures

The conventions of the visual arts regarding colour, light and composition, are readily apparent in film which inherited much of its use of imagery and symbolism. Sometimes filmmakers have even been intentionally iconographic and mimicked paintings in their shots.

In a discussion of the work of American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce, Kaja Silverman stated that "The most obvious icons are photographs, paintings, sculptures and cinematic images" (19). To explain how meaning is communicated Peirce constructed two interlocking triads, the first triad being 'sign', 'interpretant' and 'object' which stood for the word or picture being considered (sign), the original object to which the sign referred (the object) and the resulting thought about that word or picture (interpretant). Peirce's second triad consisted of 'icons', 'indices' and 'symbols' and explained the many different signs that the human mind can absorb. The

iconic sign often resembles the original object in many ways, it may even share some of its properties (as in a religious icon). The indexical sign is connected to its object as a matter of fact, its interpretation is straightforward, but the symbol is a sign whose relation to the object is entirely arbitrary, though associated with collective ideas.

The most ample signs, Peirce remarks, are those which combine all three elements, iconic, indexical and symbolic, such as a painting or a cinematic image; but it is important to remember that all signs can acquire added meaning:

"It should of course be emphasised that signifiers of all sorts, even the most purely iconic or indexical, can either become conventionalized, and so provide a base for the accretion of additional meaning, or depend on convention from the outset." (23)

This concurs with Myra MacDonald's view that art history tends to "stress the collective baggage that our culture invites us to carry with us" (30). Nevertheless, art historians ignored the issue of gender until the 1970s. MacDonald cites the 1972 publication of John Berger's Ways of Seeing as signalling a change of emphasis. Berger explored "continuities in the visual representation of women from fifteenth-century oil painting through to 1970s advertising and magazines." (31) Basing his argument not on psychology, but on history, Berger related this evident power relationship to economic and social structures. He claimed that western art poses women, in various stages of undress, for the benefit of the masculine spectator. Women, he believed, "have internalised those ways of looking at themselves that permeate this tradition." Berger's conclusion, coincidentally, paralleled that of feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, posited in Visual and Other Pleasures in 1975.

In a different approach, Marina Warner explored the Greek and Judeo-Christian myths through "centuries of sculpture and painting". (32) She demonstrated that images of women have "repeatedly signified qualities of a symbolic nature" so that they have become the bearers of meaning beyond themselves, such as justice, peace, sorcery, war and the downfall of humanity. The images have not embraced who the woman herself is, "'woman' springs to life only when culture decides the apparel through which she is to be seen."

The icon of the madonna, depicting the paradox of a virgin who is also somehow a mother, is a classic symbol. The sanctity of the virgin and the potency of the mother are recurrent themes of art and myth. The madonna assumably redeems Eve, the first woman according to the Judeo-Christian tenet, who was responsible for the expulsion of man from the Garden of Eden. As Myra MacDonald points out, the dangerous aspect of femininity has appeared in various guises:

"The Harpies, part bird and part woman, swooped down and carried off their victims; the Sirens lured men to their deaths, and the snake-haired Medusa turned anyone who looked at her to stone. Deviousness was often part of the act. In more recent times, women who were regarded as beyond the moral pale were demonised as witches, female vampires or she-devils." (23)

It is of course the Judeo-Christian creed which has predominated in western culture for almost two thousand years. Western metaphysics, according to French semiologist Jacques Derrida, has always organised itself around a central transcendental figure (in semiotic terms, the signified), but "this signified changes constantly - thus the monad, center of Neo-Platonism, yields to God, center of Christianity, which in turn gives way to consciousness, center of Romanticism, etc." (32) He adds that, though the central signified is the essential reference point in the system of belief (the 'signifying system'), it is understood by its adherents as existing independently of that system. Derrida contends that none of these central signifieds exist apart from the system they helped to determine. His hypothesis might usefully be applied to most mythologies, past and present.

Many mythologies are manichaeistic, interpreting the universe in terms of polarities and accentuating the behaviours which might prevent a human from erring. When referring to the work of Roland Barthes, however, the term 'mythologies' becomes a little problematic for his definition concerns the perpetuation of cultural codes or stereotypes. These versions, however, correspond to each other in as much as they both deal with the formation of behaviours by means of ideology. Modern mythologies are manifest in film but, as Derrida points out, we, the spectators, are positioned within the ideology so it is often difficult for us to discern them.

It is not only through the pictorial arts that women have been constrained, in literature, too, the history of their representation tells a similar story.

### Illuminating the Stories

As Brian McFarlane and Geoff Mayer point out in New Australian Cinema, "The cinema did not invent the aesthetic norms that determined the distinctive presentation of the classical narrative system." (16) The requirement for coherence and continuity was established in the short story by the middle of the nineteenth century, just as the 'well-made' play was expected to have narrative 'bridges' between one act and another.

Because film has such obvious narrative potential, the novel was to be a major influence on its development, though in many ways, film is a more total experience. The tension of a novel lies in the relationship between the story and the way it is written, the author is part of the process. A novel allows a greater emphasis on the person of the narrator; it is difficult for film to duplicate the ironies of first-person narration.

In a film the tension lies between the fiction and the apparently realistic image. The viewer must therefore be more active, selecting detail and drawing conclusions. Jacques Lacan suggested that "meaning emerges only through discourse" (4) and indicated that signification must be considered in relation to the subject (the reader or viewer in this instance).

Lacan's theory itself reads like a classic narrative, beginning at birth and moving toward the subject's integration into the culture of its society, through the stages of territorialisation of the body, the mirror stage, access to language and the Oedipus complex. The acquisition of language and the Oedipus complex belong to what Lacan called the symbolic order.

Each stage in this narrative is conceived of in terms of lack; for instance, at birth, the child must separate from the mother. Actually, Lacan dates loss from pre-birth; he believed that the human subject is originally whole, but loses its sexual androgyny, and is "reduced" to the biological state of being either a man or a woman. This biological dimension, Lacan believes, absolutely determines the subject's social identity:

"Finally, Lacan shares with Aristophanes the belief that the only resolution to the loss suffered by the subject as the consequence of sexual division is heterosexual union and procreation." (152)

Incidentally, this notion of wholeness through sexual union, is one shared by many of the constructors of narrative, both literary and cinematic, and dates back to the twelfth century when sexual love was regarded as an ennobling ideal which promised abiding unity. Patricia Mellencamp, in A Fine Romance (18), believes that the romance of popular novels and Hollywood films are rooted in this tradition of courtly love but it had aesthetic and ethical rules, not necessarily related to marriage or reciprocity. It was when Romanticism rediscovered courtly love in the late eighteenth century that feelings not ritual took precedence.

By the Victorian era, romantic love took its place in a post-industrial economy which separated work and home. New ideologies developed concerning women's subservient status, they were considered weak and unfit for paid employment or education and the place of upper and middle class women became the marital home. Working class women however were employed in menial occupations, but they were seldom the subjects of romances.

Hollywood adopted the conventions of romantic love, "complete with contradictions" (Mellencamp 218), and promulgated the idea of one 'true love'. According to Lacan, the sexual conditioning of the culture shows the subject the "way" to "sexual fulfillment", but as Kaja Silverman points out, "the notion of an original and unqualified wholeness is a cultural dream." (154)

Lacan suggested that the child experiences a second loss when it differentiates itself from its mother and becomes aware of living in a separate body which he termed "pre-Oedipal territorialisation". The caregiver then directed the incoherent energy of the child's libido into acceptable channels, so that these drives could later be "culturally regulated". The child experiencing a lack of, say, the breast, which was its first erotogenic zone, perceives the loss and finds compensation through the "imaginary".

Between the ages of six and eighteen months, Lacan opined, the subject realises that it is both itself and other, a discovery exemplified by seeing its own reflection in a mirror. Because the reflection displays a coherence that the subject lacks, it represents an

ideal image by which the subject constructs a fictional identity. This "mirror stage" creates a conflict between loving the coherent image the mirror provides, and hating the image because it is external not internal, a fiction. This "oscillation between contrary emotions" (Silverman 158) characterises relationships while the subject remains "trapped" in the imaginary order.

The imaginary is a term used by Lacan to describe the means by which the subject balances identification and duality. It precedes the symbolic order but continues through it. The symbolic order establishes the differences that are part of the culture and the imaginary makes it possible to find one's own place in it.

The mirror stage is supposedly neutral, ideologically, but the child's identification with the image takes the same form as later identifications which are socially determined. During the Oedipus complex, for instance, the parents function in much the same way as the mirror does and the child experiences the same ambivalent feelings. Perhaps the mirror stage, with its concept of 'ideal' image, is culturally instigated and is only realised in retrospect, from a position within language and within the symbolic.

Kaja Silverman cites Madame Bovary as an example of a novel in which emphasis is placed on the cultural sources of ideal images such as "churches, schools, the marketplace, literature." (161) Passages from this novel remind us that the subject sustains identity only through the "constant repetition of the same identifications" by which it first found itself. Emma, the main protagonist in Madame Bovary, continually reads novels because they are the sorts of books which had earlier defined her identity. These novels, however, reiterate narratives of love, persecution, loneliness, death, heartache and tears.

The imaginary order, and the part played by the mirror stage, are aspects of Lacan's theory that are frequently mentioned in the study of film:

"The important role played by visual images in the identifications of the imaginary order has made this part of Lacan's model particularly rich in implications for the study of film. Indeed.....Christian Metz in Le Signifiant imaginaire has defined the cinematic signifier as an imaginary one - as one which induces by means of

visual images the same sorts of identifications which occur early in a subject's life and within which absence plays the same structuring role." (Silverman 159)

Steven Heath refers to the cutting and editing, or 'negations as he calls them, which are essential if a film is to achieve 'suture' or narrative coherence, as working "through the constant intimation of something which has not yet been fully seen, understood, revealed; in short, it relies upon the inscription of lack." (213) This supports the central premise of the classical narrative film, which is absence and the suffering of loss, and these conventions prescribe the representation of women.

The narrative tradition of the novel is shared by melodrama and in The Melodramatic Imagination, Peter Brooks illustrates that "the melodramatic mode is an inescapable dimension of modern consciousness." (vii) The melodrama attempted to introduce, on stage, the emotional immediacy and feminine sensibilities of the novel but could only do so through excess:

"Melodrama pillaged happily in epic, legend and history for its subjects, but the principal source was probably always the novel, the genre to which it is so closely related, the first medium to realise the importance of persecuted women, struggling to preserve and impose the moral vision." (86)

### Spotlight on Drama

The violation of innocence was the most common theme of the early melodrama and would be presented in structures such as "quest/escape" and "fall/ expulsion/ redemption" which were also subjects of the romantic novel. Victorian melodrama originated from the French melodrama instituted by Guilbert de Pixerecourt but it was through its American manifestation that it came to dominate the popular cinema. In tracing the fundamentals of the melodrama its influence becomes very clear.

In The Melodramatic Imagination, Peter Brooks explicates the history of the melodrama, and the ideas to which it gave form. Brooks finds an ethical dimension in melodrama which cannot be overlooked despite the hyperbole and excess of much of its performance:

"I remain largely convinced by my own arguments that melodrama is a form for a post-sacred era, in which polarization and hyperdramatization of forces in conflict represent a need to locate and make evident, legible, and operative those large choices of ways of being which we hold to be of overwhelming importance even though we cannot derive them from from any transcendental system of belief." (viii)

Brooks suggests that melodramas, with their overstatement and sensation, matter to us because they evoke the conflicts and choices which shape our lives. They allow us to believe that our lives are important, regardless of their restraints and triviality.

Pixerecourt was largely responsible for the establishment and codification of the aesthetic principles of the form, yet his melodrama was also "radically democratic". He wrote for an audience which comprised members of all social classes. Melodrama began during the French Revolution and was important in post-revolutionary France where church and state were no longer regarded as complete sources of wisdom. It provided moral and social certainties in an environment of radical change - a function it still assumes in film at times of national crisis as we have seen from our study of the domestic melodrama.

The melodrama, according to Peter Brooks, represented "a democratization of morality and its signs" (44). This democracy was evident in the character of the villain who was often a tyrant and oppressor, while the innocent and virtuous were democratic, regardless of their class, and believed in goodness over privilege. While the melodrama often depicted a feudal society, it usually showed the powerful to be the perpetrators of evil, it supported the weak against the strong. Its basic premise was to pay homage to virtue.

It is nobility of soul and heroic self-renunciation which allows morality to triumph over the forces which would undermine it. In Pixerecourt's melodramas this conflict does not exist purely for pathos and excitation but is an indication of the issues at stake. Melodrama is built on manichaeism and is fundamentally polarised, just as it is in the classic Hollywood film.

In order to articulate their message melodramas are coded. They use a language of signs, for instance, when objects such as a cross, grave, flood or other disaster function symbolically, though the audience does not

necessarily have to think too deeply about it. Gesture too is used to effect in the melodrama, the facial and bodily expressions emphasising not only the character traits of the protagonists but their emotional responses as well. Even the verbal language in melodrama a language of signs in that the vocabulary is one of "clear, simple, moral and psychological absolutes." (Brooks 28) The characters pronounce their moral judgements directly and explicitly, and morally-loaded adjectives abound, such as 'honest', 'virtuous', 'respectable' or 'terrible', 'wretched', 'cruel', 'tyrannical'.

Central to the melodrama is the character of the villain who must repeatedly ignore the moral message so that it can be constantly reiterated. The excessive way in which melodrama expresses itself is used to indicate the depth of the struggle. One can see how this style of presentation continues today both in the genre film and the television situation comedy. Modern melodramas, too, leave no room for ambivalence.

The villain is the active force in the plot of a melodrama. In a "post-sacred universe" evil must be personalised, personality alone carries the message. The villain is a clearly defined characterisation, there is no ambiguity, and his cape, moustache, concealed dagger and sallow complexion announce his role in the drama even before he speaks. The villain's moment of triumph, when he drives out innocence, is almost an imitation of the original trauma of Freud's 'primal scene', and melodrama brings us "close to the experience of dreams" (Brooks 35) with its narcissism, self-pity and intense emotionalism. Freud believed that dreams had their own rhetoric which treated words and concepts as concrete images.

Sigmund Freud's topography, The Interpretation of Dreams divides the mind into three areas: memory; the unconscious; the preconscious (Silverman 55). Memory supplies the unconscious with its raw material, but the unconscious is not accessible to consciousness except in a disguised form, such as dreams. Freud claimed that this was because the unconscious mind only comes into existence when we first become aware of cultural prohibitions and then must repress those aspects of our psyche which might contradict them. The preconscious, however, contains memories and knowledge of the cultural norms which can be recalled to consciousness, and movement between conscious and preconscious is fairly fluid.

Freud opined that the unconscious and preconscious should not so much be seen as a psychic geography but as processes. He associated the unconscious with what he called the "primary process", which seeks an immediate release of tension; and the preconscious with the "secondary process," which attempts to block that release. Like melodrama film imitates the experience of dreams. Kaja Silverman contends that film gives space to the primary process because "one of the registers of its inscription is that used by the unconscious in the production of dreams." (85)

The unconscious is driven by the pleasure principle and would have desires or wishes fulfilled. Dreams are a way to express unconscious desires, they are "wish-fulfillment many times over". However these desires must be made acceptable to the preconscious so they are disguised by means of 'condensation', which makes one object in the dream stand for many of the prohibited, unconscious desires; and 'displacement', which moves the psychic intensity from the prohibited object to one which is permissible to the preconscious. Film has the capacity to not only depict condensation and displacement of desire but to do so in a familiar language.

The narratives projected by dreams are 'transparent', that is they erase all signs that they are fictional. If one should become aware of the narrative, and then dismiss it as 'only a dream', it indicates that the dream has failed to disguise the latent content sufficiently. By denying the dream we pacify the preconscious. Realism in film also attempts to disguise its fictional status, any awareness of the filmic process will distract audience attention and they will remember that it is "only a film". A film is a fantasy where often an unobtainable desire is obtained, and it was perhaps because of this that Hollywood came to be known as the 'dream factory'. Although usually used in a pejorative sense, it is an allusion that psychology corroborates.

Jean-Louis Baudry (cited by Joan Copjec in The Compulsion to Repeat (Penley 230), proposed that the activating force of the cinema was the compulsion to repeat a former condition, a desire and a nostalgia for "a former state". Cinema was therefore like a dream, the fulfillment of a wish for identity and oneness. However, psychoanalysts would suggest that a dream can sometimes be more of a nightmare, a return to a trauma that needs to be healed. Dream or nightmare, a film, with the trials and tribulations of its characters, is one which is being

realised safely outside of our own heads. Melodrama, like dreams, externalises psychological conflicts.

The original structure of melodrama, as laid down by Pixerecourt, is a familiar one in film, for example: Act 1, the violation of innocence; Act 2, the exposure of evil; Act 3, the overthrow of evil. Act 3 is very physical, requiring:

"duels, chases, explosions, battles - a full panoply of violent action which offers a highly physical 'acting out' of virtue's liberation from the oppressive efforts of evil." (Brooks 32)

It is intriguing to notice how many modern action films include a chase scene in the final third.

The structure of Pixerecourt's melodrama also included particular settings. For instance, there was the enclosed garden, representing the space of innocence, into which the villain enters. Another popular scene was the banquet or fete, usurped by the villain (most often at the end of Act 1), in his moment of triumph. The eventual vindication of virtue often occurred at a court, tribunal or public hearing at the end of Act 2 - also a recognisable feature of many screen melodramas. A young heroine usually represented virtue but in the classical French melodrama she did not necessarily have to be a virgin - unlike the later American model.

In the melodrama, when virtue is threatened, it is unable to speak up. Very often this is because of family vows and duties, these pacts are always absolute in melodrama. Virtue is passive, it resists rather than struggles, and must wait for recognition. This is in accord with the behaviour expected of female victims in Hollywood films, that they cannot speak for themselves but must wait for rescue.

Melodrama first appeared in England in 1801, in translation from the French. Drama in nineteenth century England was mainly the work of men of the theatre rather than men of letters and dramatists were poorly paid. The writing of melodrama was therefore left to hacks, who enjoyed no copyright protection, and seldom ventured beyond the tried formulas. Melodrama in England was essentially an entertainment for the industrial working class. As cities grew so did its audience and melodrama remained essentially democratic even when it later became a fashionable entertainment for the upper classes. There

were several genres of melodrama including the various sub-species of domestic melodrama.

The domestic melodrama presented an ideal, a world where dreams were fulfilled. It was paradoxical in that it combined realistic settings with sublimely unreal content. Many domestic melodramas presented idealised versions of rural village life and no doubt their popularity was a response to the poverty of urban existence for the working class. The villain of the village melodrama was often the squire or landowner, the upper classes often being portrayed as heartless seducers and oppressors.

Family relationships were also significant to this genre. Sometimes, a faithful daughter was falsely accused, sometimes she died of her struggle, forgiveness being granted posthumously, and sometimes she even went mad. The crises and tribulation which could beset a woman in English melodrama were innumerable. The heroine was often 'saved' by a hero and love triumphed. The connection with film is obvious.

The melodrama moved to America where, again, it adapted its form to fit a new milieu. America had no aristocracy, it was republican and democratic and melodrama was very compatible with the democratic sensibilities of Americans. It was the moral dimension of the form which attracted audiences. Melodrama's stress on emotion as a sign of "moral and social value" (Gledhill 24) appealed to most Americans, regardless of class and education, and the class conflict of European melodrama was often transposed into "country/city oppositions".

The villain of the early American melodrama was a cosmopolitan hybrid, a 'city-slicker', it was the country that stood for virtue. The country represented America's egalitarian ideals which, coupled with the idealisation of the extended family, produced a form of domestic melodrama that has remained popular into the twentieth century. The American melodrama had an appeal which crossed classes and countries but it took different forms depending on its audience.

In urban areas with largely affluent audiences, the melodramas became steadily more spectacular as technology improved. In the lower class districts, however, newly-built melodrama houses presented simpler fare; and outside of the cities, touring companies specialised in the more traditional forms.

These factors prepared the way for film in a number of ways. Firstly, films were able to reach a wider audience in even the smallest centres; secondly, the spectacular effects of the sophisticated urban melodrama were easily encompassed by film; and thirdly, the cinema could present scenes more realistically. This realism was eventually to supersede the more histrionic elements of the melodrama and developments in characterisation became a central feature of the film melodrama.

To achieve subtleties of characterisation in silent films, music and gesture was substituted for dialogue. It is pertinent to note that melo means music, so from its inception, music had been integral to melodrama. In England and, to a lesser extent, France, music was a means of avoiding restrictions on dramatic theatrical performances.

In silent films music provided an emotional counterpoint, and the soundtrack of a film has continued to be an essential part of the plot. Music is a form of punctuation in film; it function as part of the structure but it also conveys emotional content. In some ways music substitutes for action because, as Mary Ann Doane says, "emotion is a realm in which the visible is insufficient as a guarantee, the supplementary meaning proffered by music is absolutely necessary" (Landy 296). She adds that the discourse of a melodrama, for instance, aims to achieve what psychoanalysis does for the unconscious, to make meaningful something that is outside meaning. Music represents the ineffable, that which cannot be easily expressed, and fills the gaps for which verbal, written and visual language are insufficient.

The enduring popularity of melodrama, in whatever form, speaks of a need for an ethical order that is located securely in the everyday world of people's lives. That the lives represented on stage or screen are often glamorous fictions does not lessen that appeal. The question remains of how that 'morality' is interpreted, which in turn depends on the ideology of the filmmakers and their backers.

In general, the history of theatre is a history of misogyny, as Lesley Ferris discloses in Acting Women. She contends that argument and discussion about the nature of women have been recurrent themes in western drama, but that women had no part in their 'image-making'. Even the ancient Greek comedies of Aristophanes portrayed women as lacking individual identity, they were "reduced to signs" that were "created

and controlled by male playwrights and male actors" (Ferris 26). Female characters were represented by their costume alone which was already a social code in itself, the delineation of women was therefore passive.

Women were also depicted as adulterous and devious, the source of much of the farce in these Aristophanes' comedies. Levi-Strauss and others have demonstrated that women are not so much objects in their own right but "mediums of exchange, tokens for maintaining (patriarchal) social and cultural meanings". (Silverman 179). The notion that women exist as signs, in contrast to men who use signs, is significant when one recalls that for centuries only men were allowed on stage.

In the theatres of ancient Rome, female performers were primarily 'dancing girls' or mimes and, in certain circumstances, appeared naked. A common theme of Roman mime was infidelity and this, coupled with the nudity, led to an image of women as slaves to their sexuality. It was at this time, in terms of women performers, that the professions of acting and prostitution became indissolubly linked.

When the early Christian Church gained ascendancy, it eventually banned all theatre. In order to survive, many performers became nomads travelling with troupes, such as the Commedia del Arte, across most of Europe. They often included women among their performers and managers but this again was predicated by economic necessity. The roles for women were generally less defined than those of men.

It is ironic that when theatre reappeared in the middle ages, it was a result of dramatised story-telling within the church. By then, the performers were almost exclusively male. The only exception to this rule occurred in southern France where the Cathars practiced their faith. Though Christian, they were not Catholic, and women in their society were allowed privileges of inheritance and self-determination unheard of in the north. Women were even allowed to preach, they had a voice. The Cathars were annihilated in the thirteenth century by Pope Innocent III and all of their cities destroyed.

In 1588 there was a shift in the papal attitude to secular theatre but while Pope Sixtus V no longer condemned the entire profession, he specifically banned the appearance of women on stage and labelled female performers as morally suspect. From that time the

conduct of actresses' personal lives has been as much a topic for discussion as their performances.

At the time of the Restoration, women returned to the English stage, a tradition Charles 1 brought back from the court of France. It was a change which had revolutionary potential. Not only did it break the code of of women's silence but it created the possibility for social mobility and independence for female performers. Women in the theatre could earn independent incomes. This was to draw creative and determined women to acting as a profession and, in the course of time, to acting in film. Though their roles in plays from the time of Restoration comedy through to Victorian melodrama had objectified and codified women, the potential remained for them to effect a revolution in ideology. It took many years, though, before women actually "spoke" in terms of creating and directing the vehicles for their work.

Theatre's great advantage over film is that it is live and contact with the audience is immediate. This interaction was fundamental to the theories developed by Bertolt Brecht and in the 1920s and 30s. In his 'Epic Theatre, Brecht wanted the actors and audience to enter into discussion, he did not want the audience to suspend disbelief, and employed a device he called the 'Estrangement Effect' to challenge the norms of social interaction. Brecht's theories became part of the revolution in filmmaking in the sixties and seventies which, along with other cultural shifts of the time, helped independent filmmakers around the world to break free of the restrictive codes of classical tradition.

Film has the capacity to be considered either low or high culture, depending on how formulaic it is. Generally, independent filmmakers are more likely to explore the boundaries of their craft and produce films on the leading edge of development. In the 1960s film began to be seen as an artistic medium warranting serious attention, and women were in the vanguard of new theories about film and its place in society.

Chapter 3

*"An introduction to a collection of feminist literary theory would be obliged to describe the obstacles faced by feminists confronting the long and established history and its criticism. Film theory however, has had a much shorter history, and is thus less 'institutionalised'."*

Constance Penley, The Lady Doesn't Vanish, 1988

New Lamps for Old - Theories of Film

The female experience of culture is different to that of males, and film theory offers a way for women to express what they have always known, that their experience of film contains contradictions. The current developments in feminist film criticism and filmmaking are best understood in relation to the history of film theory as a whole and it is apposite that it be examined from two perspectives; the first, to provide an overview of the developments in film theory as a whole and the second, to establish the place of feminist film criticism in those developments.

As a discipline film theory is a fairly recent phenomenon. There had been little scholarship or research in film studies prior to 1970, and most critics used literary models of plot, character and theme in their interpretation of film. For the most part, film was considered 'the movies', a popular art which did not warrant serious analysis. By the time film appeared in the nineteenth century, the arts had become ends in themselves and abstraction, 'pure form', was the criterion by which they were judged. Under the influence of Modernism, which was predominantly high-brow, the arts developed away from realism and experimented with form; cubist painting and the literature of James Joyce are good examples. Influenced by advances in technology and its idea of progress, nineteenth century artists had formed the concept that some art was more advanced than others, which gave rise to a differentiation between 'high' and 'low' (popular) culture.

Film is part of popular culture. Like ancient myths it is relayed orally and visually; it does not require literacy in reading or a formal education. Films also

speak to our unconscious and the genre film presents us with recognisable heroes and villains (Jungian archetypes of good and evil), upholding cultural norms by tapping into a universal aspiration for myth. This sociopolitical dimension of art, that is its ancient connection to the community (the populace), has always provided a balance for the aestheticism of 'high-brow' forms. Over the twentieth century, the so-called popular arts have increased in importance especially with the rise of the technological arts - photography, film and sound recording.

During the 1950s and 60s, emphasis was placed on individual creative endeavour in the criticism of these arts and auteurism, with its focus on authorship, was the predominate approach to film. The director was considered the major contributor to style and content; the emergence of the New Wave directors in France and the documentaries of John Grierson and others in Britain gave credence to the this approach. Auteurist critics would observe shots and framing techniques, for example, and categorise the style of certain directors. The major disadvantage of this school of criticism, however, was that most films require the creative input of many different specialists, not to mention the scriptwriters. Also, in the pragmatic world of filmmaking, not every director necessarily has purely artistic aspirations.

In the late 1960s, as the influence of French structuralists spread to England and America, a more academic approach to film studies developed. Structuralism afforded a theoretical frame of reference by which academics could measure both the aesthetic and sociopolitical nature of film. Women participated more freely in the application of structuralist theories because the work of Metz, Bellour, Baudry, Heath and others, notable for its iconoclasm, was an ideal vehicle for investigations of film by feminist critics. From 1979 to 1988, their increasing body of work testified to their progress in a field previously dominated by men.

Structuralism emerged in a postmodern environment which, with its emphasis on design, marketing and consumerism, mingled popular and 'high' culture and opened the way for participation by more marginalised groups. It was an environment in which film could be taken seriously. The basic tenet of structuralism is that an individual is controlled by social and cultural standards which are governed by deep-seated structural polarities. It was a diffuse movement which, in Britain, was disseminated through the agency of the Birmingham Centre for

Contemporary Cultural Studies and its theoretical film journal, "Screen". Structuralists were a diverse group and included, among others, Christian Metz, a semiologist; Louis Althusser, a marxist; Roland Barthes, a cultural critic; and Claude Levi-Strauss, known for his work on social-anthropology and one of the first to be translated into English.

Levi-Strauss interpreted film as being like myth in that it functions to resolve the contradictions and dualities of existence. In his work he made the distinction between nature, which is unregulated, and culture which subordinates it to certain rules. In this regard he preceded Jacques Lacan in the conception of a symbolic register. Levi-Strauss examined the cultural prohibitions against incest, for example, which he regarded as a universal phenomenon, and concluded that they helped structure relationships (not only within a family but within a group of families) by setting up a system of marital exchange in which women were the privileged commodity. The continuation of cultural order, therefore, depended upon the observation of prohibitions against unregulated impulses. Levi-Strauss emphasised the parallels between ethnology and semiotics, as the strictures of cultural identity are structured through the use of signs and symbols. Both myth and film use these signs and symbols to communicate meaning.

Semiotics is the name given to the systems of signs that communicate meaning, including all forms of language. Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, named two parts of the sign: the "signifier", that which refers to the "meaningful form"; and the "signified", which is the idea evoked by that form. Christian Metz, considered film to be a signifier which is "imaginary" (in the Lacanian sense), a visual substitution for an absent object. Metz claimed that film is like a language because it communicates. It achieves this in two ways: syntagmatically, when the units of a filmic chain follow each other in order; and paradigmatically, where the relationships are associative not sequential.

Roland Barthes defined two levels of signification, the denotative and the connotative. The denotative signifier has a clear relationship with the signified, but the connotative signifier carries additional meanings. Barthes identified connotation with the operation of ideology or "myth" which deploys signifiers in order to express and justify the dominant values of the time. He was also convinced that the meaning of photographic signs

depended upon the linguistic "copy" by which they were surrounded.

Although Barthes' thinking influenced their approach to textual analysis, it was Althusser's ideas on ideology that found most favour with British structuralists. Although he was a marxist, Althusser adjusted his position on economic determinism, attributing power instead to social institutions such as education, the family and media, which he termed "ideological state apparatuses"<sup>(1)</sup>. Applying Lacan's model of the 'symbolic' order, Althusser suggested that when a child first accesses language, and is ostensibly learning denotation rather than connotation, it is already positioned within ideology, and that it is absurd to posit any use of language which is free of it.

Althusser defined ideology as "a system of representations which promotes on the part of the subject an 'imaginary' relation to the 'real' conditions of existence" (Silverman 48). Unlike linguist, Emile Benveniste, who defined 'discourse' as a signifying transaction between two people, Althusser proposed that discourse could also consist of an exchange between a person and a cultural agent, such as film. The agent "hails" or speaks to the person, who then may recognise his or herself in that speech, the result of which is "interpellation".

Myra Macdonald states that while feminists could relate to Althusser's ideas on ideological constructs, some members of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies became concerned about his ideological determinism. Coming from a background mainly in sociology, they began to stress the importance of making a clear distinction between the textual subject, that is the position the reader (term meant to include the viewer) takes in relation to a text; and the social subject, referring to the wider social identity of the reader. They substituted the notion that texts invite readers to "adopt a temporary persona, or a temporary subjectivity" (36), rather than forcing them into a relationship.

The determinism of Structuralism was, in a way, pessimistic offering little prospect for an individual to effect change.

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<sup>1</sup> MacDonald, M. - Representing Women, 1995.

However, the growing influence of psychology on film theory, with its emphasis on individual processes, was to presage the advance of poststructuralism into the field. The pre-eminent psychoanalytic influences within cultural and film studies have been Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939) and Jacques Lacan (1901 - 1981).

According to Kaja Silverman, "The Freudian subject is above all a partitioned subject"(132) and its parts operate from different imperatives. In the operation of the 'Pleasure Principle' for instance, which Freud considered a prime motivator of the psyche, the unconscious will attempt to avoid 'unpleasure' through gratification of desire, but the preconscious will attempt to rationalise those desires in the light of cultural prohibitions. When confronted with an increase in tension, that is 'unpleasure', the mind attempts to substitute experiences which will decrease that tension. The relief and rest which follows the release of tension constitutes 'pleasure'; for Freud pleasure is the absence of unpleasure.

Freud later divided the subject into three parts, 'id', 'ego' and 'super-ego'. The id is unconscious, partly repressed, and is instinctual, unruly and passionate. It always obeys the dictates of the pleasure principle. The ego comprises a part of the id that has acquired reason. It is formed by a succession of identifications which follow the same pattern: an object is loved and taken inside the ego in the form of an image or a sound etc.; the ego then re-fashions itself after that object in order to gratify the id.

The super-ego is the result of the first and most important of these identifications of the ego, that with the father. This identification differs quite significantly from those that follow. The son identifies with the father, realises that he cannot be like him and, along with the image of the father, internalises an ideal image of him, which stands alongside the ego and becomes the super-ego. The Oedipal crisis results from this inability of the ego to identify completely with the father. The father is not only the focus of the son's desires but also the person who inhibits them. The paternal position then is one of potency, privilege and repressiveness which in turn is supported by the institutional patriarchal inhibitors, such as the state, religion and education.

Sexual difference played a central role in the Freudian model and Freud concentrated almost exclusively on the

male. He referred to the male sex organ as superior and posited that the female subject acknowledged its importance. He associated the male with aggression, voyeurism and sadism and the female with passivity, exhibitionism and masochism.

The male and female subject are compelled to follow separate paths as a consequence of the Oedipus complex.

When a son becomes aware of the cultural imperative to be like his father, he competes with him and, at the same time, makes his mother the object of his desire. He misbehaves and his parents chastise him, which the son interprets as the threat of castration. He begins to see his mother as being castrated, experiences a fear of being castrated himself, overcomes his enmity for his father and abandons his mother as a love object. According to Freud, the 'normal' male child will then define himself in terms of the dominant patriarchal values.

Film theorist, Raymond Bellour, saw the male oedipal journey transposed onto the course of all Hollywood narratives. Bellour delineated three codes within narrative action. One is that advance depends on condensation and displacement (as in dreams); secondly it is constructed by sequences, not shot by shot; and thirdly it induces identification by repetition. Castration fears are mitigated in film by voyeurism (associated with sadism), in which the guilt associated with the mother is transferred to another object which can then be controlled by the voyeur; or the threat is alleviated by fetishistic scopophilia, in which a fetish is substituted as the object of desire. Bellour considered the female spectators' pleasure in viewing such films as masochistic. For Metz, cinematic codes direct the scopophilic drive and create an identification with the camera, so that the viewer sees himself as a purely perceiving subject.

The female subject's experience of the Oedipus complex is, of course, different to that of the male. She realises that she is without a penis and thus excluded from cultural privilege. She then turns away from her mother and toward her father, and will only find relief from her sense of inadequacy through a heterosexual relationship and motherhood. As the female subject never moves beyond her Oedipal desires she fails to acquire a superego, the result of which is moral deprivation. The notable feature of Freud's theories was that they posited

the male experience as normal and the female experience as fundamentally aberrant.

Jacques Lacan too placed importance on the male and his experience of the Oedipus complex. Lacan linked the birth of desire with the subject's entry into the symbolic order and the emergence of meaning. The acquisition of language and meaning alienates the subject from the 'real'. According to Lacan a signifier, such as the word 'father', marks an alienation from the 'real' in that it bears only some relation to the physical father. Instead the signifier is supported by other signifiers such as phallus, law and mother etc. Desire originates because the subject is alienated from his own being and becomes aware of his difference from the objects with which he had earlier identified.

Lacan sees desire as 'impossible', as it can never be gratified and is directed toward ideal representations which will remain always out of reach. On entry into the symbolic order the subject is encouraged to make certain identifications, with the mother and father for example. Lacan defined the paternal signifier, what he called the 'Name-of-the-Father, as the all important one - which again underlines the relationship between the acquisition of language and the Oedipus complex. As the family is a set of symbolic relations, and concepts like mother and father also signify cultural positions, the actual mother and father may not be equal to the task. When the subject confuses its actual parents with their symbolic representations, these identifications, along with their retroactive influence over the mirror stage, induce a sense of inadequacy and lack. The subject discovers itself to be symbolically 'castrated'.

The Oedipus complex determines the subject's future relationships, both with itself and others. Others will be loved only if the subject believes they are capable of making up for its lack and inadequacy, so desire is not only impossible but also narcissistic. Unlike Freud, the privileged term for Lacan was not penis but 'phallus' which, while it includes the actual penis, symbolises much more. Lacan used the term to describe all those values which are opposed to lack. The phallus is a signifier of those needs the subject relinquished on his integration into culture, but it is also a signifier for the privileges and positive values which define male subjectivity within patriarchal society.

The mother plays a critical part in the process since it is her lack that defines the father as potent. Lacan

believed that the female subject does not experience as complete an alienation from the real as the male does, which also means that she does not enjoy as full an association with the symbolic. She signifies castration by not having a phallus but continues to 'be' the phallus, by not having experienced the symbolic castration. As is apparent, Lacan never quite resolved his contradictions concerning the female subject.

Stephen Heath proposed that cinema channels desire by presenting images with which the audience can identify. Camera movement, soundtrack and framing all perform an indexical function and direct the gaze and therefore the desire from one shot to the next. In this way suture is works in the same way as the classic narrative the processes of editing, lighting, and framing, amongst others. Suture is to film what coherence is to classical narrative and they are both products of the manipulation of some form of language.

Michel Foucault, asserted that both psychology and ethnology are encompassed by semiotics, as neither culture nor the unconscious can be approached apart from a theory of signification. Because they dismantle the inner processes of the individual and analyse cultural affects, he also believed them to be two of the most important discourses for effecting 'deconstruction', a term favoured in the poststructuralist approach.

As poststructuralist trends emerged in the 1980s, the regard for psychoanalytical film theory began to diminish. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s semiotic and structuralist theories were applied in the study of films from every period of film history and from a variety of nations but feminists, and others, began to question the fact that subject-position theory made no provision for the agency of the viewer who could criticise and resist ideology.

Like psychology, poststructuralism is concerned with subjectivity but contends that rational enquiry into meaning and interpretation is a pretence. Poststructuralists claim that, if everyone is affected by ideology, there is no position outside of it from which to offer objective criticism of texts. Each person comprises not one but many competing identities: child, parent, sibling, worker, lover, spouse etc., which are exposed to many conflicting discourses. The term 'discourse', unlike the more neutral term 'language', suggests the way in which

language and social practices are fundamentally interconnected.

The early work of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes on the "endless commutability of signs" (26) prepared the way for an approach which saw the subject as a product of discourse, with no essential 'I' from which to form an unchangable self. Michel Foucault first questioned the stability of individual identity in The Order of Things. He posited that "man as we know him is the product of certain historically determined discourses, and that by challenging those discourses we can 'dissolve' him." (Silverman 129) Foucault suggested that the manipulation of power in western societies is conducted through discourse; that our perception of the world is systematically constructed through language.

Foucault argues that discourse is "not something we use but something we perform". He asserts that because we participate in the construction of discourse, we are also responsible for the ideology it evinces. It is only through understanding this that complex issues of power can be dealt with, by 'deconstructing' them. In terms of the criticism of text, deconstruction is often referred to as 'reading against the grain', an operation in which "the reader resists the obvious textual subjectivities on offer and searches instead for inconsistencies, gaps and illogicalities, to produce a subversive reading" (Macdonald 47).

A disadvantage of the poststructuralist approach is that it can sometimes create more than a little circumspection in theorists about the position from which they offer criticism. If the 'I' is constantly shifting, how can one be sure that one's opinion are not ideologically programmed or will not alter with events? With its emphasis on the covert, the less transparent, poststructuralism has tended to assume an aura of mystery, and its origins in the world of academia has engendered a reputation of elitism. These considerations favoured the development of culturalism as a more accessible school of film criticism

### Culturalist Perspectives

Culturalism is "proudly populist" (1), its theory generally less convoluted than poststructuralism and more 'user-friendly' (a typically culturalist term). Both subject-position theory and culturalism are engaged in

explicating the power relations reflected in the popular media, but culturalism can lay claim to a greater pragmatism.

To a culturalist, the psychic and social functions of cinema are controlled and directed by the work of culture. Possibly as a result of the shifts in perception which occurred in the 1980s, the term culture has come to be used to cover all aspects of social activity, and is now frequently substituted for 'ideology' and 'society' in film theory. At the same time, culture is seen as the means by which marginalised groups can survive and resist their subordination.

The most widely known form of culturalism is Cultural Studies which, although committed to social change, proposes that it is in everyday activities that ordinary people that negotiate cultural forces. The culturalist sees people as social agents, being acted upon by the many social activities in which they participate. These activities, culturalists suggest, are can be understood only in historical terms. By this they do not mean the grand sweep of classical tradition but the events which trace people's beliefs and behaviours at particular crucial moments.

Apart from Cultural Studies, there are two other strands of culturalist theory. The 'Frankfurt' school, for instance, focuses on the transformation of public and private life over the last two centuries and examines the changes wrought in social experience. The Postmodernists, on the other hand, emphasise the dominance of multinational capital and the fragmentation of contemporary life. Fredric Jameson, a writer who has discussed the postmodernist trend, explains that the focus of postmodernism is the mass media and its capacity to endlessly divert and entertain.

Culturalists agree, however, that the object of study is not texts but the uses made of texts. They contend that typically average people often read against the grain in a far more effective way than many academics do. Moreover, most people are not wholly influenced by what they read or see in the media and they are not fixed in a static position. They are "much freer agents than subject-position theory allows" (David Bordwell 8). For this reason, ideas about subversive films have given way to the notion of resistant readers

Culturalism is diverse and open, in keeping with a media-literate, computer-friendly, space-age society. It

allows for the application of auteristic, sociological or subject-position theory, when appropriate, to a wealth of material from virtually any film period or genre. Rather than view a particular film in isolation, a culturalist will consider it in relationship to all other aspects involved in going to the cinema.

Clearly, the scope of film criticism appears virtually inexhaustible and its potential has been recognised by feminists who, according to Constance Penley (3), discovered in film "a seemingly perfect object for study".

### Focus on Feminism

Cinema provides a visible example of the construction of ideology, and in it one can see the unconscious operation of gender difference. Feminist film theory was an outgrowth of the resurgence of the women's movement and was supported by established feminine scholarship, in a variety of disciplines, and developed in an environment of experimental feminist filmmaking. At a time when social values of every kind were being questioned and re-evaluated, with far-reaching effects in terms of social behaviour and cultural norms, feminism expressed a distrust of established modes of articulation. In relation to film, it was fairly scathing about the auteristic, 'great man', school of film criticism. It is probably redundant to point out that issues of gender were not a great problem for males at the time or that interpretation processes have "undergone at least as radical a shift in the course of this century as forms of representation" (Macdonald 2).

Feminist film theory first appeared within the field of sociology. Mainstream sociology tackled issues of gender by focussing on the key areas of family, work and pay and the devaluation of women's role as mothers, wives and workers. Sociologists believed that femininity was acquired through socialisation and the development of a concept of self. The media were seen as playing an important part in the setting of stereotypes which promoted a very limited number of role models for women, and sociologists promulgated the idea of substituting positive role models instead.

Stereotypes like the houseproud housewife, dumb blonde or neurotic career woman, which encouraged misogyny, survived by undergoing superficial changes as the need

arose. They operated just as ideology does, by containing a kernel of truth which masks its own value system. Tracing dominant stereotypes gives a fair indication of changing ideologies. For instance why in films of the thirties was the focus on the 'vamp', in the fifties the 'dumb blonde' and in the eighties the 'superwoman'?

In 1973 American writers Marjorie Rosen and Molly Haskell both produced sociological surveys of women in the cinema. They examined the chronological development of dominant roles for women in Hollywood films and related this to social developments in what has been dubbed as the 'images of women' approach. Both Rosen's Popcorn Venus and Haskell's From Reverence to Rape are still in print and obviously have wide popular appeal. Their approach was based on the assumption that films actually mirror society and reproduce the dominant ideology (patriarchy) simply and directly, but at the same time they asserted that the stereotypes produced did not reflect the lives of 'real' women, which meant that there was some discrepancy in their conclusions.

Annette Kuhn (4), herself a erstwhile sociologist, suggested that the relationship between film and social change is not a simple one but requires a probe beneath the text's surface to explore its hidden structures which, when revealed, disclose the film's ideological operation. In other words, Kuhn preferred to focus on text rather than context as Rosen and Haskell had done. Sociological approaches to film criticism did, in fact, give way to textual analysis which was inspired by the semiotic and psychoanalytical theories of the structuralists.

The basic thrust of the structuralist argument, that the operation of ideology is subtle and complex, was first adopted by English feminists through their connection with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

The foundation of feminist structuralism, or textual analysis as some preferred to call it, lay in the work of Claire Johnston, who introduced concepts of semiotics in "Notes on Women's Cinema" in 1973 (Erens xvii). She argued that women do not represent themselves on screen, especially in Hollywood films, they are merely signs to all that is 'non-male'.

Johnston's philosophy is discussed at length in The Place of Woman in the Cinema of Raoul Walsh, which she co-authored with Pam Cook. In studies on the work of

Dorothy Arzner, they demonstrated how the system could be dismantled from within (Erens 19). Claire Johnston promoted the idea of a counter-cinema as a positive solution to the rather pessimistic prognosis of structuralist thinking. It was an idea supported by many feminist theorists, including Jane Gaines (Erens 75) who also had a more culturalist viewpoint, and admitted that the concept might be a little modernist and elitist.

As the seventies advanced more women took up filmmaking. Initially, their interest lay mostly in documentaries, partly because they were less expensive to make but also because they wanted to deal with issues that were pertinent to their experience. It was at this time that New Zealand women also began to experiment with filmmaking and, like their overseas counterparts, began with documentaries.

Commentators, such as Eileen McGarry, warned against believing that the images in a documentary were representative of 'reality'. She claimed that documentaries also use the coded language of film simply because they have to be composed and shot (Erens viii). Later, Christine Gledhill, whose position was more deconstructive, pointed out that in approaching fiction film, feminist film theory would have to come to grips with realism, as the dominant expectation, if their films were to have meaning for a wider audience (Erens ix). Elizabeth Cowie, in The Popular Film as Progressive Text, made a case for investigating the progressive potential of the narrative film form (Penley 104), a challenge which Jane Campion was to meet in both An Angel At My Table and The Piano.

Laura Mulvey was a filmmaker who experimented with Peter Wollen in making films which would work against the narrative tradition, in a sense to decode women. Mulvey also produced one of the best known and most debated feminist commentaries on film, Visual and Other Pleasures, which was written in 1975. Appropriating the work of Freud and Lacan to surprisingly feminist purposes, as a small group of French and English feminists were beginning to do, she defined the ways in which men consciously and unconsciously control film in order to create images that satisfy unconscious desires. She examined the ways in which cinema uses the image of women to ameliorate male castration anxiety by means of voyeurism, sadism and fetishism. Mulvey emphasised the importance of the scopophilic gaze and averred that men

were the bearer of the gaze, women the objects to be looked at:

a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in has been split between the active/male and the passive/female..... the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness." (19)

Mulvey added that the male viewer identifies with the male character on screen, the one who controls the action and "the look", and concluded that Hollywood film has a text-spectator relationship that excludes women.

It was a bleak view indeed but one that is supported if one considers the usual image of women in films. Almost every female protagonist with whom we are to identify is slim, pretty and well dressed; the obese or aged are either comic, sad or maudlin and their role is usually peripheral. Middle-aged women are practically invisible and, while this may be changing a little, her role is often as a parent. There is little place for independent, happy active women who do things of importance and they are seldom placed without the context of a relationship. Similarly motherhood and female sexuality have been circumscribed by unrelenting repetitions of oedipal narrative themes. Mary Ann Doane, in Film and the Masquerade, recognized the risk taken by theories which attempt to redefine a feminine 'specificity', because patriarchy, after all, has "ceaselessly constructed its own metaphors of the feminine body". (Erens 41)

Laura Mulvey's 1975 article raised questions about female spectatorship which she did not entirely answer. As many critics were quick to point out, she failed to consider the pleasure derived by female viewers when watching a film. The position of the film spectator, both that constructed by film and the viewer, was a hotly debated subject during the 1980s.

Laura Mulvey published her own response to these criticisms in Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (29) in which she shifted from her stance that narrative cinema offered no place for the female viewer, but said that women either adopted a masochistic female position by identifying with the

female object of desire, or experienced a transsexual identification, by adopting the male position and becoming an active viewer of the text. For some this did not go far enough and in many of the responses to Visual and Other Pleasures, the influence of poststructuralism begins to be apparent.

The move to poststructuralism began in the examination of the textual subject and its relationship to the social subject and, with this in mind, critics began to explore what it was women found pleasurable in the narrative film.

Janet Bergstrom rejected the idea that female viewers identify only with females, and males with males. In Rereading the Work of Claire Johnston, she challenged the dichotomy of active/male, passive/female and posited the possibility of bi-sexual responses (Penley 80).

Commenting on Foucault's statement that power is ceaselessly contested, Mary Ann Doane, in Film and the Masquerade (44), stated that femininity carries its own charge which cannot be repressed. She cites Stephen Heath's opinion that there is always an excess that escapes the narrative system and it is in that the female spectator finds satisfaction. Doane was referring to the way viewers can 'read against the grain' and find the gaps and contradictions in narrative, a phenomenon which gave impetus to the emergence of cultural studies.

Critics began to argue for a model of 'negotiation' in response to text and Christine Gledhill suggested that negotiation avoids colonised, alienated or masochistic positions of identification (Macdonald 36). Teresa de Lauretis proposed that it was not so much bridging the gap that was necessary but coming to terms with the contradictions (Erens 288).

Jane Gaines in Women and Representation (Erens 75), cites Gledhill as saying, in response to feminist criticism of the classic narrative film, that a simple rejection of the form would not make viewers more aware of the ideology behind the images, rather that critics should discover where women resist the text. B. Ruby Rich also saw women as active participants in the creation of meaning; under patriarchy, she believed, women's viewing is dialectical, a process of absorbing and reprocessing (resisting) the film's representations. Works could be appropriated for other than their intended purposes by providing insights into patriarchal culture or by producing pleasure for female viewers (Erens 268).

Discussion and conjecture continues but the impact of feminism has begun to influence the plots of narrative film. **Thelma and Louise** is an example of a Hollywood film with two women protagonists, who escape their personal relationships and take to the road themselves. A female version of the male 'buddy' movie, **Thelma and Louise** breaks film convention; first, by portraying real discourse between women and secondly, by having the women take action in the face of difficulties. Similarly, the British television series **Absolutely Fabulous** portrays its middle-aged female characters as determined, self-centred and hedonistic, definitely not the silent or invisible type. Edwina is even a negligent and unsympathetic mother who places many priorities before her daughter. The show is a comedy, so the characterisation is exaggerated, but it is certainly is a refreshing change in the representation of women.

In **Trial Run**, **Mr. Wrong** and **Crush**, New Zealand women directors Melanie Read, Gaylene Preston and Alison MacLean have attempted to subvert genre plots towards feminist ends. Jane Campion, too, has a history of directing films which accentuate the experiences and potential of women. The history of New Zealand women filmmakers is one which represents the movement toward a more self-determined image of femininity.

Chapter 4

*'..perhaps the time has come to re-think women's cinema as the production of a feminist social vision. As a form of political critique or critical politics, and through the specific consciousness that women have developed to analyse the subject's relation to socio-historical reality, feminism not only has invented new strategies or created new texts, but, more important, it has conceived a new social subject, women: as speakers, writers, readers, spectators, users, and makers of cultural forms, shapers of cultural processes.'*

Teresa de Lauretis, Rethinking Women's Cinema, 1987

New Zealand Film -  
Sitting on the Edge of "Gumboot Culture"(\*)

In a discussion of New Zealand film in the 1980s Roger Horrocks noted, in The Tradition of the New, that the "best work of the decade came from women, Maori and gay filmmakers" (Dennis & Bieringa 71). Their marginalised position in society provided new and interesting perceptions, and experiments in filmmaking arose from a belief that the mainstream commercial cinema neglected the diversity of human experience and the wider potential of film. Experimental New Zealand films reflected the impact of structuralism and other forms of theory prevalent at the time, and introduced New Zealand audiences to new cultural ideas.

However, the very nature of seventies filmmaking in New Zealand, the director's capacity to control all facets of production, also sustained an auteristic approach to film criticism. In her investigation of gender imbalances and the dominance of "white male discourse" in accounts of New Zealand film history, Deborah Shepard concluded that the auteur theory, with its focus on directors, partially explained the bias (13). Traditionally women involved in filmmaking have been confined to tasks such as editor, actor, designer etc. Roger Horrocks recalls that the National Film Unit echoed this assumption "when it

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\* Gaylene Preston (Dennis & Bieringa 166)

routinely informed job applicants that 'directors are generally men and editors are generally women.'" (Dennis & Bieringa 71)

An early example of female inconspicuousness is provided by the experience of Rudall Hayward's first wife, Hilda. A photographer in her own right, she helped him extensively on the production of his silent films, in management, casting and editing, but her name does not appear in any of the credits. In a letter written to Hilda in 1923 while she was still his fiancée, cited by Shepard in Gender Imbalances, Rudall Hayward said:

"If (the theatre manager) knew that a girl had been trusted to despatch the film I think his language would burn the theatre down." (13)

Hayward made his last feature film, To Love A Maori (1972) with his second wife, Rimai. It was his first colour film and the first colour feature made by a New Zealander in New Zealand but the cinematic techniques in this film were of uneven quality and it was not a success. His wife, formerly Rimai Te Miha, was a major influence on the plot of To Love A Maori and its intention was to inform the public of the difficulties faced by young Maori coming to the city from their rural communities, a prevalent situation in the fifties and sixties. Though Rimai Hayward had produced and directed several documentaries while the Haywards were overseas, in New Zealand she was often regarded merely as his assistant. Deborah Shepard suggests that the "hierarchy of filmmaking, which positions the feature at the top and the documentary at the bottom", could account for the marginalisation of women as filmmakers. (13)

Kaja Silverman, too, suggests that it is a question of ownership of discourse (Erens 309). In the classic Hollywood film, and I would suggest its international copies, women are often denied an active role in discourse. They may talk a great deal but, as Myra Macdonald points out, while men just talk, women nag, bitch, gossip, whine, scream and murmur, all of which helps establish them in stereotypical roles of mother, siren, patient sufferer, innocent etc (44). In a feminist approach to filmmaking, women speak aloud. It is up to them to tell their own stories. When reflecting on women in film the pertinent question appears to be whether there is a female aesthetic as such. Is it one which addresses the spectator as a woman and, if so, how does one prove it? It is clear that, in a feminist film,

the main protagonists will be women and that narrative expectations will need to be deconstructed in order to exhibit a female perspective.

In New Zealand, the experimental ethos of the sixties and seventies created an environment in which women could explore their filmic voice. It began in earnest during the 'International Year of Women' in 1975 when a variety of films were brought to New Zealand, as part of a women's film festival which included New Zealand's first feminist documentary **Some of My Best Friends are Women**. While not a financial success, the festival proved an inspiration and from 1975 to 1981 a number of projects were initiated, including Stephanie Beth's **I Want To Be Joan** and Gaylene Preston's experimental video **How I Threw Art Out The Window** in 1981. Preston went on to become a leading figure in New Zealand women's filmmaking.

To fully appreciate the position of women in the New Zealand film industry, one needs to explore its development over the last fifty years. In recent years Hollywood has come to take an interest in overseas filmmakers and New Zealand directors and screen actors have received international recognition, a far cry from the plight of filmmakers in the New Zealand of the 1950s, when even local audiences considered indigenous films to be an inferior product.

Prior to World War II, New Zealand film was very much in the English or American classical mode, apart from some experimental avant garde work by New Zealand artist Len Lye in London. The silent films of the Haywards, while being fairly culturally sensitive for the time, and incisive and dramatically powerful, were of a melodramatic and paternalistic nature. This approach reflected New Zealand's colonial roots, as did all artistic endeavour at that time.

In *A Charmed Life*, John O'Shea alludes to the predominance of the colonial influence in the arts until the thirties, when poets and novelists began to express a sense of national identity (Dennis & Bieringa 15). John Mulgan's seminal work, *Man Alone*, appeared just before the second world war and, even today, its theme of individualism, isolation and stoicism continues to provide material for New Zealand novels, plays and films.

Merata Mita who, in the eighties, made brilliant and incisive documentaries from a Maori perspective, was to remark that the perennial theme of New Zealand films, of

white man or woman at odds with the environment and his/herself, was etched into the national psyche. It led her to describe the New Zealand film industry as a "white, neurotic" one and she found it curious that the films "failed to analyse and articulate the colonial syndrome of dislocation that is evident in such works" (Dennis & Bieringa 47). Eventually, filmmakers shifted from a focus on landscape to explore the realities of urbanisation, and the expression of sexuality and relationships in film became more liberal.

In literature, the trend toward a uniquely New Zealand expression gained impetus in the 1950s with the work of Sargeson, Frame, Baxter and others. Local cinema, however, was dominated by the classic Hollywood film. Still, the "colonial cringe" did not entirely account for the lack of local film production. New Zealand had a small, relatively isolated population and the local market alone could not support a film industry, especially with the advent of television. It was not until the establishment of the New Zealand Film Commission in 1978 that New Zealand filmmaking could substantially advance.

However, moves to establish a local film industry first occurred during the Second World War. Stanhope Andrews, a member of the Wellington Film Society, arranged a visit to New Zealand by legendary British documentary-maker John Grierson and persuaded Prime Minister Peter Fraser that locally produced documentaries would aid the war effort by boosting morale. Subsequently, Andrews was appointed producer at the Government Film Studios in Miramar, which was renamed the New Zealand National Film Unit. The NFU became a recognised national institution and was the starting point for many film careers - Sam Neill's for example.

However, after the war, the main focus of the NFU became the production of documentaries for the Department of Tourism. Several members of the unit were not satisfied with the bureaucratic organisation and political agenda of the unit, they had hoped for a more artistic approach. Roger Mirams and Alun Bollinger were the first to leave to establish the independent Pacific Film Unit.

In 1949, Roger Mirams decided to make a documentary for the Pacific Film Unit about the Maori. John O'Shea persuaded Mirams to let him write a feature drama instead, that they would jointly produce and direct. Mirams instantly agreed and **Broken Barrier** was begun.

Inaccurately promoted as "the first New Zealand feature film", **Broken Barrier** was a classical melodramatic narrative about a white boy who falls in love with a Maori girl.

The Pacific Film Unit became Pacific Films, on the departure of Alun Bollinger, with the specific intention of making feature films. It wasn't until 1960, however, that **Runaway** appeared followed by a musical, **Don't Let it Get You** in 1966. **Don't Let it Get You** failed in both New Zealand and Australia, despite good reviews because by the time the film was released, television had usurped the cinema as the most popular form of entertainment.

At first television was the monopoly of the New Zealand Broadcasting Service, which would not accept the work of independent filmmakers and also excluded the NFU. It was not until 1970 when, through the efforts of Tahu Shankland, independent filmmakers were able to produce films for local television, and talents such as Geoff Murphy, Roger Donaldson, Ian Mune, Tony Williams and Sam Neill came to the fore. Later a new Minister of Broadcasting, Roger Douglas, decided that the market could not support the cost of local production and Pacific Films and the other independents turned to making commercials in order to survive.

Roger Donaldson and Tony Williams accumulated enough capital through their work in advertising to invest in films of their own. Donaldson's **Sleeping Dogs** and Williams' **Solo** were both released in 1977. Geoff Murphy and Geoff Steven, on the other hand, attempted innovative methods of funding which enabled them to continue filmmaking. Geoff Steven directed **Test Pictures** in 1975 and Geoff Murphy **Wild Man** in 1977.

Geoff Steven's backing came from Alternative Cinema Inc. which he created with John Daly-Peoples in Auckland in 1972. New Zealander Len Lye, when in London in 1934, found he was unable to afford film equipment and came up with the idea of a film co-operative. Lye failed to raise the money but it was an idea which endured and, in the communal spirit of the 1960s and 1970s, his notion found fertile ground. Alternative Cinema obtained premises in Hobson Street and, with co-operative effort plus occasional Arts Council grants, created a busy film studio. It did not limit itself to experimental work but defined 'alternative' as those films which stand between the amateur and the commercial. Many filmmakers perfected their craft at Hobson Street, Merata Mita, Geoff Murphy

and Martyn Sanderson were among those who had offices there and the co-operative survived for 13 years.

Geoff Murphy, who lived on a commune at Waimarama with Bruno Lawrence, Alun Bollinger and others, recalls that independent filmmakers used all manner of stratagems to fund their films (Dennis & Bieringa 134). Part of the funding for Murphy's **Wild Man** came from television, as part of the **Blerta** series, and some from the Arts Council. Amazingly, it earned \$100,000 and was only a slight financial loss.

Roger Donaldson, on the other hand, managed to persuade investors that **Sleeping Dogs** could make a profit and worked with a budget of \$400,000 but, despite its obvious success with audiences, **Sleeping Dogs** was a loss financially.

It was evident that, regardless of box office success, independent filmmakers could not survive without some financial assistance. **Wild Man** and **Sleeping Dogs** had proved that New Zealand audiences would respond well to local films which supported moves toward establishing a New Zealand Film Commission.

With the establishment of the commission in 1978, Geoff Murphy was assisted in making **Goodbye Pork Pie** (1980) and **Utu** (1983) and Roger Donaldson with **Nutcase** (1980) and **Smash Palace** (1981). The Film Commission also supported **Angel Mine** (1978), **Skin Deep** (1978), **Middle-Aged Spread** (1979), **Sons for the Return Home** (1979) and **Beyond Reasonable Doubt** (1980). Most of the early Film Commission projects were dominated by filmmakers rather than producers.

What distinguishes New Zealand film of the seventies is the idealism and dedication of its proponents. The way the projects had to be financed meant that filmmakers had control over all facets of production, doing a lot of the design and editing work themselves, which left them free to explore film as an art form, rather than a purely commercial product. They usually had an ideological stance, appreciating the capacity of film to effect social change.

Nevertheless, as Barbara Cairns points out in *A Late but Glorious Start*, "if there was little on the cinema screen at the time that affirmed New Zealand experience as a whole, there was even less affirming the experience of New Zealand women". (14) While it was often

adventurous and experimental, the New Zealand film industry in the early 1970s was also almost exclusively male. Gaylene Preston recalls that when she returned to New Zealand in 1976 the conversation still seemed as male as ever and at Pacific Films they called her 'Bruce' so that she would feel part of it. (Shepard 96)

Preston first met Geoff Murphy and Alun Bollinger while working at Pacific Films and was drawn to their creativity, but when she asked "Al Bol" who did the housework at his commune and he replied, "Oh the chicks do that", she realised that there was no place for her in their circle at that time (Dennis & Bieringa 167). Both Murphy and Bollinger were later to work with her on **Mr. Wrong**, Geoff Murphy as co-writer and Alun Bollinger as camera operator. (Incidentally, Bollinger was also to be cameraman on Jane Campion's **The Piano**.)

Deborah Shepard, in Writing a Woman Film Maker's Life & Work, points out that Geoff Steven's documentary concerning the New Zealand film industry from 1975 to 1981, **Cowboys of Culture** (1991), included only one woman (not a filmmaker) and displayed an exclusively male viewpoint (96). Yet Geoff Steven's **Skin Deep** was one of the first New Zealand feature films to portray an empathetic view of the dilemma of an independent woman.

**Skin Deep** contains an implicit criticism of New Zealand male attitudes towards women which is unusual in a film directed by a male. It is a woman, Sandra Ray, whose viewpoint the audience often shares - "You men work it out the way you want to" - and it is her response to small-town mores that transmits Steven's view of the small town macho mentality. Sandra Ray arrives in Carlton from the city to be a masseuse at the local health club and finds herself the only woman in a male enclave, for women are not encouraged to attend the gym. Not a typical beauty, she is tough, self-contained and an independent provider to her mother and daughter. When the town erupts into violence, she is the scapegoat. Russell Smith interpreted **Skin Deep**, as a "cinematic redefinition of pakeha male identity", the male protagonists of the film in crisis because they "cannot handle an independent woman and the sexual desires she arouses" (19).

Later films by male directors, namely **Smash Palace** (Roger Donaldson, 1981), **Utu** (Geoff Murphy, 1983), **Constance** (Bruce Morrison, 1984), **Desperate Remedies** (Peter Wells and Stewart Main, 1993), **Once Were Warriors** (Lee

Tamahori, 1994), and **Heavenly Creatures** (Peter Jackson, 1994) also explored aspects of feminine experience with varying degrees of success in their interpretation. It is difficult for males to enter the female perspective, having not encountered personally the limits imposed on women by societal structures.

It was 1983 before The New Zealand Film Commission produced a feature length film by a New Zealand woman, **Patu!**, Marita Mita's now famous documentary on the 1981 Springbok Tour. Melanie Read's **Trial Run** followed in 1984 and Gaylene Preston's **Mr. Wrong** in 1985, both deconstructions of the thriller genre. Gaylene Preston later produced **Ruby and Rata** with Robin Laing in 1990. This established their credibility as filmmakers, but Preston and Laing have continued to experience difficulties in financing their films.

For many women filmmakers in the 1980s psychodrama was a favoured form, as it reflected the feminist philosophy that "the personal is political". In general, though, its populist appeal was limited. Most of the early commission films, directed by men, relied on realism and were strongly narrative in the classical style, though one or two attempted some experimentation with expressionism. Women filmmakers such as Maree Quinn, Kathy Dudding, Jane Wright, Gillian Roberts and Aileen O'Sullivan preferred to produce films which examined the emotions, conflicts and anxieties of the feminine experience. Psychodrama offered the main alternative to realism and expressed a concern for inner reality and used dreams, fantasies and myths in a metaphorical and suggestive style.

In **Just Passing Through** produced by Sandi Hall (script) and Judy Rhymer (director) in 1984, the relationship between psychodrama and women's spirituality was explored. This was also the theme **Timetrapp**, a ghost story which Melanie Read completed after the death of the original director Sally Smith. Melanie Read, Alison MacLean and Jane Campion are the most prominent filmmakers to have been influenced by psychodrama. Read's **Hooks and Feelers** (1982), concerned childhood trauma, while her feature film, **Trial Run** (1984), included flashbacks and dream sequences. MacLean produced the remarkable and surreal **Kitchen Sink** (1989) before making the feature **Crush** (1992) which also explores aspects of spirituality, and Jane Campion's experimentation with psychodrama is evident, especially in **Sweetie** (1989) and other early films.

At the beginning of the 1980s, despite the existence of a film commission, New Zealand filmmaking was in a precarious position. Private investment was necessary if the film industry was to continue. The director of the Film Commission, Don Blakeney, then initiated a scheme which was to become the 'tax-shelter' period of New Zealand filmmaking. The mechanisms of the shelter enabled investors to claim \$132 for every \$100 of the money they had invested, regardless of the success or failure of a film, a film did not even have to be released in order for a profit to be made. This created a boom in the film industry and attracted foreign investors, often with little interest in film as such, who found ways to further abuse the system.

The power shifted from filmmakers to financiers and the idealism of the seventies was replaced with a cynical pragmatism. The size of crews increased, efficiency and job satisfaction declined, but wages rose dramatically. As Geoff Murphy suggests in The End of the Beginning, "The public lowered its expectations of New Zealand films. We were losing our audience." (Dennis & Bieringa 148) Nonetheless, in John Barnett's opinion, the abundance of tax money enabled us to create an infrastructure from which we still benefit (Churchman 64). Technical skills were honed and international festivals, like Cannes, began to include more New Zealand films.

The decision by the New Zealand Government to end the tax shelter brought an immediate decline in the film industry.

The government did not consider the cultural or economic function of indigenous film to be particularly valuable and when the abuses of the tax system became obvious, they reacted to the "outburst of moral outrage" (Dennis & Bieringa 148). By October 1984, the tax shelter had ended and no local private funding remained for filmmaking. While co-productions or foreign investment are still a possibility, films so produced are necessarily a more international product, and public money is not spent when the New Zealand cultural aspects become so diluted.

After the stockmarket 'crash' of 1987 investment decreased further, but NZ on Air (no longer NZBC) occasionally funds films it considers "will extend the range of drama on television" (Churchman 31). This has included Gaylene Preston's **Bread and Roses** in 1993 and **War Stories: Our Mothers Never Told Us** in 1995. **An Angel**

**At My Table** (1990), directed by Jane Campion, was produced by Hibiscus Films in association with TVNZ and the New Zealand Film Commission, plus the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Channel 4. In the 1995-1996 year, 58% of NZ on Air's television funding went to independent filmmakers so, one way or another, the industry survives.

### Women Making Films

In this examination of New Zealand women filmmakers, I have included only those films which have been financed locally, which excludes Jane Campion's most famous work, **The Piano**, although the film must be taken into account as an indicator of her artistic development. I have chosen instead to examine Campion's **An Angel At My Table** as well as **Trial Run** (Melanie Read), **Mr Wrong** (Gaylene Preston) and **Crush** (Alison MacLean) as these filmmakers have managed to achieve a critical reputation while speaking with a particularly feminine voice.

I have not given emphasis to Maori or gay filmmakers, though their contribution was crucial to the development of the industry, because the issues which inform their work are complex in their own right and deserve focussed attention. Similarly, I have concentrated on feature films rather than documentaries, not because I consider one more worthy than the other, but because it is the feature which attracts the most public notice and it here that women need to balance their re-structuring of the narrative codes with the demands of commercialisation.

#### Melanie Read and Trial Run (1984): Working Against Classical Narrative Codes

Melanie Read's political questioning has always informed her filmmaking. For her the challenge in **Trial Run** was to "create a new film language" (New Zealand Film Makers at the Auckland City Art Gallery). In order to question a genre, in this case the suspense thriller, one has to question the language of that genre such as shot construction, editing techniques and soundtrack. While Melanie Read is a radical lesbian feminist, she did not market her film as such because it was not made from that point of view. She wanted **Trial Run** to be accessible on a mainstream, as well as a political, level.

Melanie Read was born in Kuala Lumpur of an Eurasian mother and British father. The family moved to Sydney in

1961 and Melanie finished her schooling in Australia. She enrolled at Ravensborne College of Art and Design (Film and Television School), London, in 1972 after attending a film summer school in Sydney.

At film school, Read realised that, as a woman, she was being "groomed" for work as a production assistant which was, in fact, was her job in television when she returned to Australia in 1974. In 1976 wrote, directed and edited her own film **Curiosities**, but she was dissatisfied with it and destroyed the negative.

Read moved to New Zealand in 1977. She found New Zealand exciting because the "hierarchies weren't as intricate and well-defined":

"The situation for women filmmakers seems to have been different in New Zealand because the industry developed later. When the new wave of political awareness came in Australia, the industry was already entrenched. So it was harder to make themselves heard. In New Zealand, the feminist awareness was there before the industry developed so they were able to have more impact. Women filmmakers here tend to be more political. Here we seem able to make a mark on the mainstream."

(New Zealand Film Makers)

She was to edit several films between 1977 and 1984 and wrote and directed a number of documentaries. She worked on five different projects in 1980 including a stint as co-writer on **Goodbye Pork Pie**. She was an actor in **Jocko** (1981) and **One of Those Blighters** (1983), helped direct **Came a Hot Friday** (1984) and was advisor to the director on **Bounty** (1984) until, eventually, she was able to direct her own feature film, **Trial Run**.

The diegesis of **Trial Run** concerns a woman, Rosemary Edmonds who moves to a cottage on the coast on assignment to photograph rare yellow-eyed penguins. While there, she continues her training as a middle-distance runner, to a schedule devised by her son, James, on his computer at home, 1500m being calculated to the nearest public telephone box.

Rosemary's cottage, however, seems unsafe from the start. Strange and disturbing events ensue, her flower garden is destroyed, her photographs vandalised and her windows broken. Rosemary is even attacked by her neighbour's dog.

Rosemary's family and her friend, Frances, visit often and try to persuade her to leave when a suspicious fire nearly claims her life but Rosemary is determined not to be intimidated. The climax of the film occurs when James stumbles in injured and, pursued by the unknown attacker, Rosemary runs to the telephone box to summon help.

Frances, accompanied by Rosemary's family, drives to her aid and accidentally runs over the pursuer, who is revealed to have been James all along. Flashbacks provide images of James committing the acts and at this point the film ends, with a close-up of the bemused look on Rosemary's face.

**Trial Run** is a psychological thriller, but Rosemary Edmonds

is not the usual woman victim. For many feminist film theorists the thriller and horror genres epitomise voyeuristic sadism, the punishment of women, in reaction to the castration complex. Jane Gaines states in Women and Representation, that:

"Psychoanalytic analyses of the horror film show agreement on one point - that the female vision, whether perception or discernment, is jeopardised in this genre. Punishments inflicted on female characters..... may serve as a warning against female occupation of male points of view." (Erens 80)

Melanie Read's heroine, however, is independent, capable and courageous. Rosemary is a respected photographer as well as a "respectable wife and mother". Her publisher makes it clear that the decision to send Rosemary to photograph the penguins is based on the quality of her previous work. At the same time Rosemary, as portrayed by Annie Whittle, is a sensuous, caring and responsible woman. It is a modern and feminine perception of the diverse roles that women play in their daily lives, as opposed to the stereotypical images usually presented in films, especially thrillers and horror movies. When Rosemary is under threat she does not simply scream and hope for rescue but copes with the unexpected events with resolve in spite of her fear.

The offer of an interesting assignment to photograph the yellow-eyed penguins is a professional opportunity Rosemary does not want to refuse but it means that she will have to live apart from her family for six months. The opening scenes establish Rosemary's domestic milieu

and it is obvious that the decision is a difficult and unusual one. Her publisher's advice, to "tell them, don't ask them", is in contrast to the usual cultural expectations of mothers, that they sacrifice their own endeavours to their children.

Rosemary's son, James, encapsulates this expectation when he tells her that "Mothers don't go on holiday for six months", and he does not acknowledge the importance of her work.

Both James and his sister, Anna, oppose their mother's move to the country. They presume that their mother's wishes are secondary to theirs. Later in the film, when Rosemary is alone and feeling under serious threat at the cottage, Anna phones her and the audience shares Rosemary's relief at having some contact with the outside world. However, Rosemary is not offered support; Anna has phoned because she has been left alone, is frightened by it and pleads with her mother to come home. Melanie Read is demonstrating the underlying assumption that mothers cease to have their own needs.

Rosemary's husband, Michael, is amenable to the move but there are indications that Michael has not always been a faithful husband. Rosemary's friend, Frances, infers it and Rosemary's flashbacks to stills of Frances and Michael increase the conjecture. A dinner party conversation about being able to "pretend" that things haven't happened further implies that certain events have been buried. Michael's appearance with a wrapped bunch of flowers, which he claims he bought for Rosemary but will now have to give to Frances, renews suspicion. Michael then tells James he is will be away for two hours but, as we discover later, it is not Frances he visits. It is Frances who provides a comment on husbands in general when the police constable suggests that Rosemary needs a man about the house: "Used to be a series on telly called 'A Man about the House' - it was a comedy."

Rosemary has a rewarding and open relationship with Frances who is unconventional and free-spirited. Frances represents the single, independent and creative woman of the eighties. It is Frances, rather than Michael, who takes a genuine interest in Rosemary's work and it is she who stays at the cottage with Rosemary after the fire in the darkroom. Frances is with Rosemary when she finds her photographs vandalised and is at the cottage when the windows are broken so she actually shares Rosemary's experience and understands the danger she appears to be in. When Frances has to leave Rosemary alone in the house one night, she suggests that Rosemary call Michael,

Rosemary responds with a slight shake of the head. Frances is the one who alerts Michael and drives with him to the cottage in the closing scenes of the film. By implication, *Trial Run* suggests that women are the ones best able to offer each other support and help.

Frances also shares Rosemary's concern for the environment and is the only one to join her in the hide to watch the penguins. In the opening scenes of the film, Rosemary tells her publisher that it is the birds who are beautiful, not her photographs, she just points the camera. She is clearly content to observe the rhythms of nature and becomes familiar with the habits of each penguin. She attunes so well that she is immediately aware when the dog, Smiley, threatens them. Her desire to protect the penguins even over-rides her fear of Smiley and, with Frances' help, she physically tackles him.

This capacity to reach beyond one's usual limits when life is threatened is echoed in the film when marathon runner, Allison Roe, is seen to comment that she could only cut five minutes off her running time only "if my life depended on it". When James is revealed as Rosemary's tormentor, flashbacks include a repetition of this statement as an explanation of his behaviour; he was determined to make his mother run faster and finally succeeded when she thought he was in danger.

Running is an interest Rosemary shares with her children and while she is away James becomes obsessed with improving her progress before they race in two months time. It is his way of holding on to her. When he triumphantly tells his father that Rosemary is meeting the goals he calculated and that the computer has been "spot on", Michael drily reminds him that Rosemary "had something to do with it". James regularly sends Rosemary details for her training schedule and his highly technological communications are a striking contrast to the simplicity of her rural environment.

This dichotomy between the feminine values of interdependence and relationship and the linear, male emphasis on the material is furthered emphasised by Alan West's attitude to the penguins, for example. He has done nothing to protect those which were on his stretch of beach, he does not consider them his responsibility, and Rosemary works on Mrs. Jones' property instead, where the penguins still flourish. West's dog represents the aggressive, male side of nature and its attacks on the

penguins, and West's indifference to them, are paralleled in the attacks on Rosemary herself. She also feels endangered.

Alan West clearly resents Rosemary's independence, her obvious physical strength and her enjoyment of running. He does not control his dog's fierce aggression towards her, apparently relishing it and, later, makes pointed comments about "women's lib". West tells Rosemary that Smiley, which seems an incongruous name for the dog, does not like women but Mrs. Jones claims that she has had no trouble with him. Mrs. Jones, however, explains that West trained the dog to dislike his former wife, who had left him to live alone in the cottage and later died there.

The presence of a woman in the cottage is evident in its furnishings and the neat flower garden. Flowers, traditionally a feminine symbol, are a recurring motif in **Trial Run**. They make a lovely garden in the beginning but are deliberately cut down and later appear thrown over Rosemary's floor. Together, Frances and Rosemary repair the garden in an act of healing but, in Michael's hands, flowers again become a signal of betrayal.

When Rosemary's flowers are cut and the neat wood pile she has stacked strewn around, she begins suspect that she is the target of a campaign of terror. She hears noises in the night and begins to have nightmares. One night she has a vision of the ghost of Mrs West. When she prints a photograph taken of herself on the beach, after she was nearly hit by a branch falling from the cliff, she realises that it can only be the work of her attacker. Then the fire breaks out in her darkroom and she finds herself locked in.

In **Trial Run**, as in any thriller, the suspects abound. Alan West is the obvious choice until he rescues Rosemary from the fire. Michael, too, comes under suspicion, as does Frances and Mrs. Jones, who is quarreling with West over the land on which the cottage stands. Melanie Read deliberately exploits the cultural expectations of the genre, so that James is the last person Rosemary suspects even though the clues are obvious in retrospect.

Read's challenge to cultural conventions extended to her casting. In **Trial Run** women play roles more often assigned to men, such as the policewoman, the estate agent, the publisher and the reporter. Almost eighty per cent of the film's crew were also women and Whittle's

training program was devised by a woman runner, Allison Roe. For designer, Judith Crozier it was the first opportunity she had been given as production designer and her approach was a feminine one, focusing on the familiar domestic detail that can become so threatening when there is a suspicion of hidden danger.

The cottage, which had a "spooky" feeling from the start, was moved to the isolated location, and Crozier began designing the interior by thinking about the person who had lived there before Rosemary. She wanted to create a physical presence rather than just a spiritual one and used colours like apricot and pale torquoise, which would suggest that this was not Rosemary's own home, as well as odd props such as tiki candles and a gnome in the garden:

"The script gave clues to the woman who had lived on her own there and died. So the cottage was dressed with articles I thought she would have had, like a half-knitted cardigan, old magazines, photographs, home-made lampshades etc." (Lang 3)

The interior of the cottage was consistently filmed in high-contrast lighting so that it remains dark and shadowy, in keeping with the cinematic conventions of the genre. The interior shots, either close up or middle shots, maintain the intimate style necessary to a psychological thriller. In a classic scene of the genre, a nervous Rosemary is seen to be startled by her own reflection in the window.

Read attempts to combine this realism with a more expressionist approach, to give **Trial Run** a nightmarish, sinister quality of menace. In the night scenes, the camera tracks in toward the cottage like an intruder, looking into windows at Rosemary and closing up on doors and latches. However, the dream sequences tend to be less effective as the very low blue lighting often obscures pertinent detail and the point is lost.

The wide pans of landscape and beach highlight the isolation of the cottage and its darkness is contrasted by lingering long shots of the natural landscape in bright sunshine. Close-ups of Whittle's face inform us of Rosemary's reaction to this space. **Trial Run** is about contrasts and the cinematography emphasises that theme.

Read makes use sudden jump cuts to emphasise the changes in Rosemary's environment and to re-inforce the sense of unease. In the opening shots of the film she uses a

montage effect, juxtaposing shots of Rosemary at home in suburbia with desolate and haunted images of the cottage to establish a future threat. In a similar way, flashbacks are used to explain Rosemary's story, images of still photographs repeated in displays on the walls. Rosemary's constant adjustment to the challenges facing her is reflected in her contemplation of these images.

The foreboding tone of the soundtrack is a constant reminder of hidden danger and the score for piano and percussion by Jan Preston is quietly menacing. Natural sounds of sea and birds, which emphasise the Rosemary's isolation, steadily become more strident so that she is unable to tell whether they are human or animal. Bangs and rustling noises assume threatening dimensions. The motif of running feet, first heard in the opening montage, becomes a signal of danger. Later, when they are heard round the cottage at night, the camera rests on sheets flapping in the wind so that, like Rosemary, the audience cannot be sure of exactly what they have heard.

The tension builds slowly in **Trial Run**, it is rather more contemplative than the usual thriller, and Read resists closing it with a classic denouement. Rather, in a deconstruction of narrative expectations, she makes her ending low-key and a little enigmatic. In New Australian Cinema, McFarlane and Mayer consider this refusal of strong narrative closure as a reason for the lack of resounding commercial success for many of the independent Australian films (53) but it is in accord with the feminist principle of working against the classic narrative codes. The issue of blame and the melodramatic overthrow of evil are passed over in favour of a more reflective view of the complexities of human interaction.

In the closing sequences of **Trial Run**, Rosemary makes the climactic dash to the telephone booth and reaches the target time James had been manipulating her into achieving. Her realisation of James' culpability is shown through the flashbacks but no overt comment is made. The audience is free to experience their own reactions.

Perhaps the fact that it was Rosemary's son who was attempting such a level of control over his mother is Melanie Read's final comment on the position of women as they seek to balance self-determination with the emotional bonds of motherhood and relationship.

Gaylene Preston and Mr. Wrong(1985):  
Reforming the 'Cinderella' Complex

Adapted from a short story by English writer Elizabeth Jane Howard, **Mr. Wrong**, like *Trial Run*, is a subversion of the thriller genre. Gaylene Preston exposes its essential sexism, by illuminating its emphasis on power, sex and death. She updates the sexual politics of Howard's original story to include an examination of violence towards women, thus making a comment on the popular myth of women waiting for rescue by Mr. Right (or Prince Charming or even the knight on a white charger).

Gaylene Preston was born in Greymouth, attending Colenso High School in Napier from 1960 to 1965, and enjoyed a stable, secure childhood. However, she never quite believed the accepted view that marriage was to be her primary life path and, though none of her family were particularly interested in the arts, involved herself in the performance arts taking part in both music and drama.

While at the Ilam School of Fine Arts Preston did not study 'Moving Image' at art school because by the time she realised that it was a film course she had already taken all the wrong options in her first year. Instead she became interested in art and drama therapy while working part time at the Calvary Psychiatric Hospital in Christchurch, Preston suggests that she always found it difficult to be in New Zealand and in an interview, Reflecting Reality, explained:

"My experience as an art student in new Zealand was that most of the important discussion was happening at the pub, in the public bars. I was one of the women who went into the public bars, though it was frowned upon. The conversation was in very loud voices, male voices with their backs to me. It was not considered that a woman would want to join in the discussion, and if she did, that meant that she was sexually interested in somebody.....That is not an environment I would have become a filmmaker in, I am sure."

(Dennis & Bieringa 166)

Involved in political activism and looking for a more stimulating intellectual life, Preston travelled to Cambridge, England, in 1969 which, at the time, she considered "the hub of the intellectual universe". Instead she found it fairly elitist and, with her

husband, turned her attention to alternative radical politics.

In 1970 she became assistant librarian at Fulbourn hospital near Cambridge, establishing its first art and drama therapy programme. She made her first film as part of a weekly drama workshop and was intrigued with the effects that could be obtained through editing and sound. At St Albans in 1973, Preston gained a Diploma of Art Therapy, becoming a pioneer member of the British Association of Art Therapists. In the course of her work she made **Draw Me A Circle**, a thirty minute nurse training film, and later, when she became a teacher at the Brixton College of Education, she continued to explore aspects of filmmaking.

After seven years in England, Preston became homesick for New Zealand and returned with "\$500 and a suitcase". Her sister introduced her to John O'Shea who directed her to the Avalon television studios. It was not an option which appealed to Preston so she travelled the country taking colour slides for three months until, in Auckland, WEA commissioned a film about the community use of Beresford Street Primary School. John O'Shea then offered her work with Pacific Films as Art Director. No-one was sure what an art director did but, as all movie companies which produced commercials had one, they had concluded that they must be necessary. In 1977, Preston directed three episodes of **Shoreline** for Pacific Films **Toheroamania**, **Dat's Show Biz** and **Water The Way You Want It**.

When Preston was made redundant from Pacific Films she drew cartoons or took theatre photographs and was sometimes an art director, until Warwick (Waka) Attwell asked her to direct and co-produce **All The Way Up There** (1978). **All The Way Up There** was documentary about Bruce Burgess, a 24 year old spastic, climbing Mt. Ruapehu with mountaineer Graeme Dingle. Funded by the Ministry of Recreation and Sport and CIP (the first CIP-funded documentary), it was a supporting film to **Middle Age Spread** (1979) and later screened on television. It was sold to Encyclopaedia Britannica and was shown on TV networks in the U.S.A., Britain, Holland, Sweden, Denmark, Malaysia and Switzerland.

Preston was also art director on **Middle Age Spread**, and was involved in writing, producing and directing a number of projects until she wrote and directed her own experimental video, **How I Threw Art Out The Window**, for

the Women's Gallery exhibition in 1981. In 1982 she directed and produced **Making Utu** and in 1983 was one of the co-ordinators for **Patu!**. During this time Preston also produced and directed two music videos and a documentary, **Imagine**, which appeared in 1984.

That same year, Gaylene Preston began work on **Mr Wrong**. John Maynard refused an offer to produce and she began to look for women to work with, first considering the wives ('the chicks') whose children were now grown, until eventually Robin Laing agreed to join her. Most of the crew were the children, wives and ex-wives of her film peers though Graeme Tetley and Geoff Murphy also helped her with the screenplay.

After its release in 1985, **Mr Wrong** was screened in Canada and the United States (there titled **Dark of the Night**) and was released on video in France, Spain and Japan.

The main protagonist of **Mr Wrong** is Meg Alexander, new to the city, flatting with her cousin Val and flatmate Samantha (Sam), and working in an antique shop. In order to visit her parents in the country, Meg buys a second-hand, pale blue, Mark 11 Jaguar, after being convinced by the salesman that it is an ideal "lady's" car.

On the way to the farm, when she stops to rest, she hears choking noises coming from the backseat which stop when she puts the light on. That night, in bed at home on the farm, she dreams of a pale, distressed woman with a moving train in the background and then of being pursued down a road by a vehicle with its lights on. She is still shaken when she wakes.

That day she meets Wayne Wright, the son of a neighbouring farming family who have moved to the city, and visits her old schoolfriend Edith. The next day, Meg begins the drive back to town. It is raining and she picks up a woman hitchhiker who looks remarkably like the woman in her dream, especially as she is first seen standing in front of the moving train. A man also jumps in the car unexpectedly and becomes menacing and offensive. Meg insists he leave after the woman mysteriously disappears.

Back at the antique shop, while wrapping parcels in newspaper, she finds an article about Mary Carmichael who was found murdered, and recognises the photograph as her

woman hitchhiker. On checking her car's ownership papers, she finds that it was previously black in colour and owned by Mary Carmichael. She begins to suspect that her other hitchhiker is a murderer.

Meg attempts to sell the vehicle but Mary haunts it and it refuses to unlock for men. Then she tries to return it to the car yard but the salesman refuses to accept it. Meanwhile, 'Mr. Wrong' stalks Meg, phoning and watching the shop until he discovers her address. He sends her a single red rose wrapped in plastic, identical to that sent by Wayne whose interest is more romantic. While Meg is dealing with all this, an ex-boyfriend of Sam's, Bruce, attempts to rape her.

When she accidentally locks herself out of the flat at night, she begins to drive to Wayne's home for help only to discover that she is being followed. In an act of bravado, reminiscent of a classic chase sequence, she eludes her pursuer who, in a touch of irony, is revealed to be Wayne attempting to offer assistance.

Suddenly, Meg realises that the male hitchhiker is in her car. When he threatens her, Meg attacks him with the car cigarette lighter and escapes. The car follows her down the road, as it did in her dream earlier, but then seals its doors on the killer, hurtles past and crashes in flames. The ghost of Mary Carmichael smiles at Meg and walks off into the night.

Gaylene Preston sets Meg up as the classic thriller victim: female, isolated and threatened by male violence, but Meg is not petite, frail and passive, she is competent and self-contained; she does not crumple and deals with her crises alone in a sensible, no-nonsense manner. For instance, she competently fixes the lock on the back door after Bruce's rape attempt and takes steps to defend herself when under threat. As Meg searches the house at night she wields the statue her mother has given her of the Venus de Milo, the classic idealisation of feminine beauty - a witty and multi-layered comment on where women really find their protection.

Apart from being haunted by a ghost, Meg herself is also living halfway between worlds. She is no longer at home in the country but is still alien to the city. The fact that she works in an antique shop in the city suggests that Meg must deal with out-moded cultural constructs before she can create a new way of being.

It is Meg's ordinariness which is extraordinary. She is not the stereotypical beautiful leading lady, she is not slim or glamorous but homely and a little old fashioned. She wears unsophisticated clothes and cooks traditional meals. Meg is unmarried but does not have a string of boyfriends like Sam, whose only interest in Meg is to suggest a change of hairstyle; nor she does she have a career like Val, who is too busy to spend time with Meg though she means to. Meg finds herself spending a lot of time alone.

**Mr Wrong**, as a social comment on the nature of everyday threats to women, includes the fear of being alone. As Meg says to Wayne: "Why do I take fright at everything?" Toward the end of the film, when she must drive the car again, she tells herself firmly that she has "nothing to fear but fear itself", perhaps Preston's comment to the community of women at large.

In **Mr Wrong**, as with **Trial Run**, the ordinary domestic reality of women can assume threatening dimensions. Even washing lines in the wind become sinister in context. Mrs. Alexander's washing line, for instance, recalls the fence Meg was parked beside when she first heard Mary Carmichael, the spot where Mary was murdered as it turns out. It is also a washing line, symbol of imprisonment by domesticity, that her friend Edith is struggling with in the wind when we first see her. She warns Meg that contact with nappies can cause pregnancy.

Mirrors, too, intensify the unease. When Meg is in her bedroom in the city, her mirror alerts her (and us) to the fact that Bruce has opened the door and entered her room and has probably watched her dressing. To use reflections in this way is a classic film technique which Preston exploits more than once. At the farm, for example, when Meg sees the car shaking in the morning after her dream, she is frightened and creeps up to it, catching sight of her reflection in the car's exterior. When her mother's face suddenly appears in the car window, Meg almost screams. Again, home alone at the flat, when she notices a movement outside and switches off the light, it is her own face she sees reflected in the window.

This recurrent theme of reflected identity also features in Alison MacLean's **Crush** and Jane Campion's **An Angel At My Table** and **The Piano**, and perhaps indicates the way a woman's fears are often internalised and her search for

identity formed by how she must appear in the world, where women's powerlessness is accepted as the norm.

In **Mr Wrong** Preston also demonstrates how women are conditioned to accept that they are, in some way, responsible for the behaviour of men. For instance, it is Meg who feels she must apologise when she insists the male hitchhiker leave the car, despite his threatening innuendo about the dangers to woman travelling alone. He suggests that women who pick up hitchhikers are asking for trouble, that women are provocative, and responsible for male excesses and violence. Also, when Meg arrives at her flat after the visit to the farm and is startled to find Bruce, Sam's boyfriend, lying on the sofa asleep, she discovers that he has let himself in and made himself at home, drinking their beer and watching television while he waits for Sam. Still it is Bruce who hectors Meg, expecting her to make him a cup of tea, and has to be quietly reminded that it is actually her flat. He presumes a right of possession simply because Meg is a unattached woman. Yet she feels guilty about being unkind to him even though he has also succeeded in making her burn the meal she was cooking. Even after Bruce's attempted rape, when he makes a drunken phone call to suggest he visit and apologise, it is Meg who comforts him, telling him to sleep it off. The irony is that the audience know that Mr. Wrong is in the house and even Bruce would be welcome at that moment. Another example of female obeisance occurs when Meg defers to Martin's hostile reaction the programme she is watching and turns the television down. Although it frustrates her and regardless of her obvious inner strength, Meg finds herself prey to an automatic deference .

Many of Meg's problems are seen to arise from the fact that she has no male protector. In this regard, Preston deliberately leads the audience on, setting up the romantic expectation that Meg will find a partner, only to prove that it is not the viable alternative to self help. For example, after Meg meets Wayne Wright (Mr. Right?) she is shown running through the paddocks, happy, arms outstretched, in a parody of a romantic film. Her mother has already questioned her obliquely about her love life but has been disappointed. Later when Wayne sends her the rose, Mr. Whitehorn, her employer, suggests that she is 'courting'. When Bruce calls Meg a "bitch" and "ugly", Wayne is quick to tell her that he doesn't think she's ugly but "quite nice" really. In a classic melodrama the obvious union would ensue but in **Mr Wrong** the other side of marriage is presented by Meg's visit to

Edith who, clearly constricted by a life of nappies and housework, affirms that Meg's free and unmarried state is the enviable one.

In any case, Wayne does not become a priority for Meg, his timing is never quite right, and he does not seem to see Meg in any context but the romantic one. In a comic gesture, Preston has Wayne arriving at Meg's door when she is already nervous, dressed in bike leathers and helmet. He looks as much an alien invader as the rest of the males in this film, but, at the same time, resembles the 'knight in shining armour'- in Wayne's case, without the white charger!.

It is no coincidence that both Mr. Right and Mr. Wrong send Meg identical red roses.

The male characters in **Mr Wrong** do not inspire affection, Even Mr. Whitehorn, who is homosexual, presumes Meg is making sexual advances when she asks him to give her a lift home and is impatient with her anxiety about the car. The salesman's retort, when Meg wants to return the Jaguar, that "It's the price you women have to pay for changing your minds all the time" is one of many hints of everyday misogyny which is revealed in the film. The salesman treats his secretary in a similarly cavalier fashion. Martin, Sam's latest infatuation, is patronising and domineering. As Meg is eating her home-cooked meal, watching an item on television about self-defence for women (Preston was once refused funding for such a project), Martin informs her that the whole idea of women being so aggressive is disgusting, such training is not necessary, that these women are capable of killing him. It is interesting to speculate how much the programme influences Meg when she later manages to defend herself against Mr. Wrong. To varying degrees, all the men in **Mr Wrong** assume a right to invade Meg's privacy, but in no way do they suggest either safety or protection, rather the reverse.

Preston makes use of several motifs to illuminate the underlying themes of **Mr Wrong**. The most obvious is the large luxury car, a classic male symbol of dominance. It refuses to unlock for men and is a traditionally feminine pastel blue. When Meg convinces Edith that she has actually bought a "Jag", Edith's first response is an envious "You didn't go South just to blow your nose did you?", but when Meg tells her that both her father and Mr. Whitehorn have asked that it be parked "round the back", Edith rejoins with the pithy comment that it is

"reverse penis envy ... they can't stand you having a bigger one".

Meg's mother reacts to the car by observing that it is "very grand". She asks "Are you sure its not too much for you?" and then tries to domesticate the car by cleaning it. Mr. Alexander and Wayne look admiringly at the engine but when Meg accidentally presses the horn, Wayne bangs his head on the hood much to her father's chagrin. Probably, the ghost of Mary Carmichael was at work again, defending herself against male intruders. In **Mr Wrong**, the car becomes a symbol of female assertion.

When Mrs. Alexander is putting a gift of raw meat into the boot of the car, she remarks that it is big enough for a body and thus introduces another of the film's motifs. The meat, when it is lifted out of the boot, bloody on the white wrapping, suggests the fate of Mary Carmichael earlier. Then, when Meg chops it into pieces, Preston's use of close-up creates a sense of alarm, so that we almost expect Meg to also be hurt. In Meg and the Space Invaders, Jo Seton draws a parallel between the meat and the roses. She suggests that the rose, encased in plastic, and the meat "encapsulate the two extremes of male treatment of women; the rose symbol of the 'protective' (i.e. restrictive) gilt-cage hothouse atmosphere of romantic love, and the raw, bleeding meat, symbol of the dehumanising reduction to mere flesh".<sup>(26)</sup>

The soundtrack of **Mr Wrong** supports these two perspectives. On Meg's drive to the farm, after she has first heard Mary Carmichael, the music is in the classic 1940's thriller mode, forboding and slightly melodramatic. However, as the danger intensifies it becomes progressively more threatening and is broken only by Meg's radio which plays romantic music. One piece, especially, highlights the silliness of the romantic myth, a jolly 1930s rendition about marriage which plays while Meg works in the kitchen and is totally at odds with what is happening to her.

An interesting feature of **Mr Wrong** is that the music is so traditional, further emphasising Meg's dislocation from the modern city around her. At the same time, the dark tones of the music alert us to the fact that all is not as it appears, an appropriate counterpoint to the basic tenet of the film, that culturally coded behaviours, which are accepted as normal, often hide the realities of violence toward women.

Like **Trial Run, Mr Wrong** exploits the classic cinematic techniques of the thriller, with a hint of film noir in the prowling tracking shots and high contrast lighting. Certain cliches are appropriated, like the silent menace of Mr Wrong standing outside the shop, or the dramatic irony of the audience knowing he is in the house while Meg tells Bruce not to visit. Preston pays particular attention to domestic detail in her regular establishing shots, the realistic style of the film emphasising that it is in the familiar and ordinary world that Meg is threatened, nothing is glamorised. There is the play of contrasts - the brightness of the city streets, for example, with the yellow glow of Meg's room or the dull colours of the flat. There is only one area in which Mr. Wrong so obviously does not succeed and that is in the use of special effects. The exploding car at the end for example, evidence of a low effects budget, detracts from the impact of the close.

At times, **Mr Wrong** seems to struggle with trying to say too much; the mix of genres, issues and eras creating too many shifts of focus, thus compromising the tight structure of tension. However, it succeeds as a social comment and Preston's heroine remains self-affirming and independent.

Jane Campion and An Angel At My Table (1990):  
"an inspirational gift to her homeland" (\*)

**An Angel At My Table** was Jane Campion's first New Zealand feature film and is based on the autobiographical trilogy of New Zealand novelist Janet Frame: To the Is-land (1983), An Angel At My Table (1984) and The Envoy from Mirror City (1985). When Campion chose the task of interpreting another artist's experience, she said she searched for "a grammar of the brain that had to do with the story" (Mellencamp 174) and chose to be faithful to Frame's narrative patterns. The result is an interpretation which is rich in experience and artistry.

Jane Campion was born in Wellington, the daughter of Richard and Edith Campion who were eminent in the theatrical life of New Zealand, forming its first indigenous touring company, The New Zealand Players, in 1953. Jane was absorbed by theatre and film, making and presenting plays from an early age. While a teenager,

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\* Campion, Jane. (Botes & Lang 10)

Jane received a Super 8 movie camera from her father and he credited her with being a "genius" when she showed an ability to splice film correctly. She has said that she and her sister delighted in showing off and seeing themselves on screen. (Dennis & Bieringa 94)

Jane became aware at an early age of the powerful position her loving father had in the family (Dennis & Bieringa 94). She recalls that her mother was obsessed with love and it assumed a primary place in her education of her daughters. Edith Campion was also subject to severe depressions which was to have a lasting effect on Jane's approach, making her think deeply about issues. In a gesture of love and respect, Jane was to dedicate **The Piano** to Edith.

Jane Campion attended a private girl's school, where she rebelled against what she considered the tyranny of unnecessary regulations about dress and appearance. She has said that school was a "real trial" to her and she hated it, "I could not behave myself. Could just not be good.." (from The Grass is Greener television interview, 1990). Jane went on to attend Victoria University where she studied for a BA in anthropology. This was to later inform her work on **The Piano** in which she contrasts the social norms of two cultures, that of the Maori and the British colonists. At Victoria, she became interested in the work of Claude Levi-Strauss whom she felt "helped reveal to her 'the extraordinary wisdom of the unconscious'" (NZfilm, 40, 5).

Feeling limited in New Zealand, Campion left for Europe in 1977. She had always had a love of art history, particularly the paintings of the renaissance, and travelled first to Italy and then London. She studied painting and sculpture at an art school for a year but became very interested in film, finding that modern avant garde cinema expressed essential truths about life. She obtained a place at the Australian School of Film and Television and moved to Sydney where she has since lived. Jane Campion admits that she feels more at home in Australia:

"It's to do with the greater expansiveness of the people. You can show off there. New Zealanders are humble and work really hard. They don't scream their own praises." (NZfilm, 40, 5)

At film school, Campion made her first experimental film, **Tissues**, with a Super-8 camera and went on to make a

number of short films, including **Passionless Moments**, **Girl's Own Story** and the award-winning **Peel**, about the "condensations and displacements of family antagonisms." In 1986, she directed a feature film **2 Friends**, concerning adolescent girls, followed by **Sweetie** in 1989, a low budget film which Campion not only directed but contributed to the camerawork and co-wrote the screenplay.

The plot of **Sweetie** concerns a woman with marital problems, who is visited by an uninhibited and eccentric sister. It examines the dynamics of power in the nuclear family and deals with the question of incest and the father-daughter relationship. Patricia Mellencamp believes that the film is placed "somewhere between Freud and the Brothers Grimm, only radically revised: the point of view belongs to a woman." (173) Many of Campion's films are set in suburbia and investigate the ways in which female sexuality and identity are delineated by family structures.

On its release **Sweetie** was a resounding success not only in Australia, but in France and the United States where American critics dubbed it "surreal", a "crowning achievement" and "audaciously unreasonable". (Nzfilm, 40 12) Campion often portrays those aspects of feminine experience usually neglected by cinema and finds a way into the dark side of ordinary, everyday life. She has said that she doesn't find "the darkest tale bleak if it's true and adds that what she finds repulsive "is dishonest crap put together for entertainment" (The Grass is Greener television interview).

**An Angel At My Table** is a gentler film than any of Campion's previous work. It portrays Janet Frame's sensitivity and confusion and is Campion's salute to a fellow artist and compatriot. Laura Jones was responsible for the screen adaptation of Frame's work and the film was originally shot as a three-part television series.

Produced by Bridget Ikin of Hibiscus Films, who was later to produce Alison MacLean's **Crush**, **An Angel At My Table** was filmed on location in New Zealand, Spain, France and England. It screened on New Zealand television in 1991 and appeared in the United States that same year as a feature film structured as a trilogy.

Episode One of the trilogy, set in Oamaru, covers Janet Frame's childhood and adolescence, and her burgeoning love of language. A variety of factors impact on the

sensitive child: the family's poverty, her father's rages, her brother Bruddie's epilepsy and her sister Myrtle's drowning. Uncomfortable with the physical changes of puberty and feeling herself to be unattractive Janet turns to the isolated pursuit of writing, the one gift she has that attracts positive attention. Her academic ability wins her a scholarship to Teacher's College and she leaves home for the first time.

In Episode Two Janet finds the social demands of training college a torment, in contrast to her sister Isabel who is able to quickly immerse herself in student life. Janet finds that she too frightened even to face a class of school pupils and leaves college. Depressed and suicidal, she is diagnosed as schizophrenic and institutionalised for eight years. She receives over two hundred electric shock treatments and narrowly escapes a leucotomy when a doctor realises that she is the author of a prize-winning book of short stories, The Lagoon. She is released but suffers another tragedy when Isobel drowns. However, another sister introduces her to Frank Sargeson who offers a shed in which to write, arranges social welfare payments, gives advice on publishing and makes her more comfortable in the company of strangers. Owls Do Cry is published and Sargeson helps Janet obtain a literary travel grant.

Episode Three begins with the childhood memory of the four Frame sisters looking over the sea and singing "To France", (The song provides the theme tune for the film, and is part of Janet's fantasy life.) Frame sails to England and attempts to become part of the intellectual life of London. She then moves to Ibiza in Spain where she meets other writers and has an affair with an American college professor and writer, Bernard. He returns home at the end of his vacation, leaving Janet feeling abandoned. She discovers that she is pregnant and later miscarries on her return to London. She has used all her grant and struggles to earn a living, suffers a relapse and is admitted to a psychiatric hospital. The psychiatrist informs her that she was mis-diagnosed and that she had never been schizophrenic. He encourages her to write, arranging a welfare benefit so that she does not have to find a job. Faces in the Water is published in London and receives good reviews. On learning of the death of her father, Frame returns to New Zealand, a recognised and well-respected writer.

The episodes are linked by sound and visual motifs. Trains, for example, are harbingers of change. From the window of one Jane sees the madman on the platform,

another carries Isobel to her death in Picton and then brings her coffin home, yet another carries Janet to London. The sea also forms a backdrop to her life, drowning her sister but carrying her to Europe, and in Spain she swims naked in it. On a cliff overlooking the sea, Janet and her sisters sing 'To France' the tune of which, first heard over the opening credits, is reprised at several points through the soundtrack in a variety of arrangements. This tune is a reminder of the inspiration that Janet first found in fairytales. Another recurring image is that of Janet Frame, portrayed in three different countries, seated alone on a park bench, dwarfed by large trees - isolated, lonely and unsure. Trees take on many guises in **An Angel At My Table** and provide clues to Frame's mental state, from the happy frolic in the old trunks where the family photograph is taken (from which Myrtle disappears) to the eerie silver bark of her moonlit fantasy.

When **An Angel At My Table** opened in New York, Jane Campion said, in an interview for the Village Voice, that "the mythologies of our lives begin with childhood images" (Mellencamp 174) and, for Frame, these were related to fairy tales and nightmares. Patricia Mellencamp considers Campion's films to be gothic:

"In Jane Campion's Gothic fairy tales, violence, desire, and obsession are lodged in the everyday, the familiar, the family. Fairy tales unexpectedly turn into nightmares that are very real. beneath the veneer of the family lies violence, daily horror." (175)

Janet reads "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" to her sisters in bed and the fairy tale becomes a metaphor for the film: of sisters united, despite the restrictions of patriarchy, until a prince separates them, in this case death. While Janet is reading the story, the camera pans the girls' shoes on the floor and later the sisters act out the story in the moonlight.

Janet's first copy of Grimm's Fairy Tales is lent to her by her friend, Poppy and she tells Janet that it is her "special book". Poppy is to be the only close friend Janet makes outside the family and they share a close fantasy life. Their families separate them after Janet inadvertently talks about sex at the dinner table. This leads to Myrtle, who Janet and Poppy have watched having sex, being beaten by her father which, for Janet, becomes a confusing and traumatic introduction to issues

concerning sexuality. After Poppy goes Janet remains as lonely and isolated as ever.

For Janet, the real world becomes dangerous, and dreams and fantasies dominate her inner life. To her it is the contact with the vitality of the outer world that contains hidden and cataclysmic danger. Janet notices, as her eldest sister Myrtle matures, that she smokes and wears trousers. Janet admires her, finds her beautiful, mimicks her movements in front of the mirror and enjoys the ritual of brushing her hair. When Myrtle is drowned, Janet finds solace only in the world of her imagination. Similarly she is inconsolable when Isobel, self-willed, vital and sociable, also drowns.

The family, Frame's only security, is the scene of tragedy and violence. Each change fills her with dread. Even the familiar New Zealand landscape sometimes appear strange and threatening but there is no-one around her with whom Janet can share her perceptions. Jane Campion conveys Frame's perspective by making use of voice over and by presenting impressionistic images of events so that the viewer shares glimpses of Frame's formative experiences - the death of her twin at birth, sleeping four abed with her sisters, tattered clothes, Bruddie's epileptic fits, the schoolboys' taunts, Janet alone in the playground, the pleasure when she is recognised for her poetry.

Janet is constantly the observer, never joining in, always on the fringe. She notices that socially able girls secure praise for mediocre performances and she is aware of being physically unattractive, her bright curly hair a particular bane. She is shy and awkward in company but when she writes she feels connected. Frame survives through her work, her only effective means of self-expression and creativity. Campion builds the narrative, layer by layer, so that the audience understands the place of writing in Janet Frame's life.

While she is still quite young, Janet decides, "I have made up my mind not to be a teacher. I'm going to be a poet." and her decision to attend Teacher's College is one that is socially rather than personally predicated. It is the obvious choice for an academic achiever and her family is proud of her. Janet, however, feels more isolated than ever especially after Isobel moves into a flat with other friends. The only bright note for Janet is when her favourite tutor tells her that he admires her writing. She performs in front of her mirror, repeating to herself, "You have a real talent for writing, Miss

Frame. You have a real talent for writing". However, the tutor also observes her disintegration and becomes convinced that she is mentally unbalanced. When he recommends she go to hospital she trusts him enough to agree. Only later does she realise that she has been placed in a psychiatric ward. On the day of her release, she refuses to return home, and is institutionalised in a mental home where she stays until the doctor who has read her first book recommends her discharge. Frame's helpless passivity and almost self-inflicted victimisation occasionally make one impatient with her but Champion manages to sustain audience sympathy by faithfully representing Frame's personal truth that only in writing could she find her voice.

When Janet can share her love of writing, in the company of Sargeson and friends for instance or when she talks to Dr. Lane about it, she is able to relate. Both men are understanding enough to arrange her means of support so that she can continue. A shared interest in writing is also the basis of her relationship with Bernard, with whom she experiences another brief respite from isolation, until he lets her down.

Campion's feel for the period covered in Frame's autobiography, and its exact recreation, helps us construct Frame's world. Small but potent details are observed and Champion's care in casting even the smallest characters, to convey the most subtle of idiosyncracies, add depth to the interpretation.

As *An Angel At My Table* was made on a relatively low budget, and intended for television, tight shots are favoured and close ups used to focus the attention. Extreme close-ups, for instance of the children's eyes in the school scenes, are used to express added intensity. Frame's reactions to events are also shown in close up and Champion frequently cuts from the action to Frame's face to emphasise Frame's point of view. Often Champion uses half lighting, so that one side of Janet's face is shadowed, which underlines her feeling of living in two worlds. On the other hand, pan shots have a narrative function by replacing Janet's voice, an example being the pan over the rows of empty desks while Janet stands alone in the corner. Champion's style is distant, the style of the observer, she makes no personal comment but allows Frame to dominate the narrative.

The indoor sets in the film are kept simple to enhance intimacy but outdoor shots are wide and long, often

depicting Frame, small against the landscape. The opening shot of the film, an extreme long shot of Frame on a long straight road evokes the idea of a her life as a journey. It is immediately followed by a low-angle shot of a dark looming figure which we come to realise is Frame's mother and that Frame is the baby. The shot is a foreboding one and tells us immediately that Frame's road will not be an easy one.

Campion's love of classical art is apparent in her wide shots of landscape, the composition and colour an aesthetic pleasure. She also presents surreal images, for instance those of household objects, out of context, grouped in unfamiliar relationships and often these will indicate a time of dislocation for Frame. Campion also uses colour and light as a tool to express Frame's inner state. For instance, the dingy environment of the Frame home, with its dull, dirty colours, is crowded and confining, high contrast lighting providing gloom and shadows. This is in complete contrast to the bright sunshine of Sargeson's garden or the clean, sparkling blue and white of the Mediterranean.

The part of Janet Frame at various ages was played by Alexia Keogh, Karen Fergusson and Kerry Fox. Kerry Fox found Jane Campion to be "a rare and precious director" who would go to great lengths to achieve the best performance from her actors (NZfilm, 40, 13). Campion trusted the actors and allowed them to believe in their own methods of reaching it. Fox found she read and re-read Frame's work in order to understand the character.

It is an extremely demanding task to attempt to put a written narrative on film and Jane Campion's dedication to verisimilitude makes hers one of the most successful attempts. Occasionally, the impressionistic style of the film and the use of straight cuts, which create the necessary pace through the years, disrupt the coherence of the narrative and some events are missed completely. Often the characters' motivation is inferred rather than explained. Yet Campion's respect Janet Frame and her appreciation of her artistic integrity is evident in the exquisite detail of her interpretation.

**An Angel At My Table** was the first New Zealand film to compete at the Venice Film Festival and sold to forty eight countries, creating a new demand for Frame's work, especially the autobiographies. It brought New Zealand art to the attention of the world and established its

cinematic identity. The film won seven awards at the 1990 Venice Film Festival, including Special Jury Prize; was judged Most Popular Film at the Sydney Film Festival; Best Foreign Film by the Australian Film Critics Circle; and gained the International Critics' Prize at the Festival of Festivals. Kerry Fox was awarded Best Actress at the Valladolid Film Festival, Spain. At the New Zealand Film and Television Awards the film won prizes for Cinematography, Screenplay, Director, Best Film, Performance in a Supporting Role (Martyn Sanderson) and Female Performance (Kerry Fox). In 1991 it was awarded the Otto Dibelius Film Prize and Most Popular Film at the Berlin Film Festival, and voted Best Film by the Union of Critics, Belgium.

Campion's 1993 film **The Piano** was to win the Palme d'Or at Cannes and be nominated for best picture at the Academy Awards. While it did not receive this prize, it was awarded three Oscars, one for best supporting actress (Anna Paquin).

The international budget for the film gave Jane Campion an opportunity to expand, and **The Piano** was a tour de force. Though it was not financed from New Zealand **The Piano** was filmed here, its story set in the time of early European settlement. Two of its leads, Sam Neill and Anna Paquin, are New Zealand actors.

With **The Piano**, Campion managed to combine a strong classic narrative with a feminist exploration of issues around self-expression and the masculine assumptions of ownership. The issue of colonisation is central to the plot. Ada has been sold to Stewart by her father and travels to New Zealand to be his wife. Stewart is only interested in how Ada will fit into his life. He does not understand Ada's need for the piano, and his inability to care and his impotency when faced with his own powerlessness are contrasted to Baines' sensitivity. When Ada is unfaithful, Stewart locks her in the house. When she disobeys, he chops off her finger. He later tells Ada that he only "clipped her wing a bit".

Stewart also treats the Maori with rough contempt but they are revealed to be emotionally rich, sexually aware, and spiritually powerful. Baines has a close relationship with the local Maori and is they who transport him and Ada away from Stewart.

Ada is mute, her daughter acts as her voice, but when Ada begins the affair with Baines, she sends Flora away. Flora is lonely and angry and her determination to

maintain her hold over her mother, while it has tragic consequences, ultimately results in Ada's freedom. Thus Flora is portrayed both as an angel of destruction and liberator.

The piano, Ada's only means of self-expression, also shields her from any real contact with life. On the beach at sunset, it even looks like a coffin. Ada actually decides to die with her piano when it falls into the sea but once she experiences the silence of drowning, she chooses life and frees herself from the ropes. She leaves the piano behind, accepts Baines and eventually begins to learn to talk again. Ada realises that there will be plenty of time for silence after death.

Campion's cinematography for **The Piano** was a masterpiece of composition, each frame carefully drawn. A range of textures and colours combine to produce a truly multi-sensory experience. The primeval New Zealand landscape is lovingly portrayed; even the mud, which so inconveniences the settlers, has a living quality. It is as close to painting with a camera as it is possible to achieve. Stuart Dryburgh, Director of Photography, who also worked with Campion on an **Angel At My Table**, clearly understands her vision.

With **The Piano** Campion proved that an art film with feminist sympathies could achieve international recognition, and even supercede the Hollywood films. It is sure to have provided an inspiration to women filmmakers everywhere.

Alison Maclean and Crush(1992):  
Sexual Power Games

**Crush** is a psychological thriller about sexual power games and the loss of innocence, set against the backdrop Rotorua's steaming geysers and boiling mud. The focus of the film is on the operations of power and dependency within relationships. Alison Maclean says that she was interested in exploring " the ways that a person, a woman, for example, can dominate another person through other than physical force" (Bilbrough 9).

Very little biographical detail is known about Alison Maclean, she no longer lives in New Zealand and apparently prefers her work to speak for itself. She has confessed to being drawn to topics that are "uncomfortable, areas that feel unsafe for either men or

women", was interested in exploring the "ambiguous, contradictory sides of sexual politics" (Dennis & Bieringa 78).

Maclean was concerned that women filmmakers not be limited by political correctness and her first short film **Taunt** (1983) was a parody of the classic thriller chase sequence, the male pursuer and the female prey being played by the same actor. **Rud's Wife** (1986) and **Talkback** (1987) followed. Maclean released **Kitchen Sink** in 1989 and when it was chosen for competition at the Cannes Film Festival, her reputation as a filmmaker was established.

With almost no dialogue, **Kitchen Sink** begins with a woman pulling hair from the plug in a sink. It turns into a small creature and then a full-grown man (or Monster) and a relationship develops. With its surrealistic and dreamlike presentation, **Kitchen Sink** evokes myths and fairytales. It is a sophisticated, amusing and well-structured film, cleverly repeating motifs of hair, water, eye and razor.

These motifs, particularly those of hair and water, re-appear in **Crush**, which, like **Kitchen Sink** has a dream-like quality. Alison Maclean maintains that **Crush** is a fable and intended the film to have an air of mystery. Maclean wrote the screenplay of **Crush** with the assistance of Anne Kennedy and also credits her attendance at a Sundance Institute Workshop for input into both the script and direction of the film.

The story of **Crush** begins as Christina, accompanied by her American friend Lane, is driving to Rotorua to interview Colin Iseman, an erstwhile novelist. Lane takes the wheel, rolls at speed on a bend and Christina is crushed under the wreckage. Lane leaves her there and continues to Colin's house where she meets his daughter Angela.

Lane spends the day with Angela, who is fascinated by her. She gives Angela a red velvet dress and invites her out, much to Colin's dismay, who thinks Angela is too young for nightclubbing. Lane is reckless and has to escape the advances of two men, including Horse the Maori musician from the club. She spends the night in Angela's bed and meets Colin in the morning.

Angela and Lane visit Christina in hospital but leave when they see her badly injured and in a coma. Angela

develops a crush on Lane which turns to disgust when Lane begins an affair with Colin. Colin is obsessed with Lane, who becomes callous and dismissive, and leaves him.

Angela begins to visit Christina alone and talks to her constantly about Lane's treachery. Christina is severely brain-damaged and her recovery is slow but eventually Angela is able to invite her to spend a weekend with at a bach. Lane is uncomfortable in Christina's company and Colin begins to appreciate the dynamics of their relationship.

Lane begins to lose her attraction for him.

On a bush walk Angela and Colin leave the women together. Lane kisses Christina, asking for forgiveness, and encourages Christina to leave her wheelchair and walk. On a lookout overlooking the river, observed by Angela, Christina suddenly lurches towards Lane and pushes her over the railing to her death.

The title of the film, **Crush**, while referring to the car accident which injures Christina, also plays on the issues of relationship, for instance Lane's crushing effect on Colin and Angela and the destructivity of her relationship with Christina.

Maclean has said that she started with the characters in the film, and particularly Lane, because she was "interested in creating a woman who was absolutely an anti-hero". (NZfilm, 46, 2)

A femme fatale is usually one dimensional but Maclean wanted to attempt something more interesting. Marcia Gay Harden was cast as Lane because she already had some of the qualities MacLean wanted to represent, a charisma and a sexual presence.

Lane is amoral, for her relationships are a game and sex a source of power. Christina's opening line, "Do you want my skin?", referring to the chicken she is eating, hints at the vampiric nature of Lane's interactions, that she uses others to make herself feel alive.

The film opens in media res, the audience joining in a dialogue already begun. Lane and Christina's relationship is clearly an established one, there is an intimacy in their conversation. There is also an evident tension between the two women, Lane's comment on the emptiness of the landscape receiving the swift retort, "You'll fix that, won't you Lane?"

Lane seeks stimulation and takes pleasure in intrigue and danger. To keep herself amused, she does not hesitate to read Christina's notes on Colin but her interest is in the man rather than his work and she immediately categorises him as sexually available. Lane drives with the same disregard for limits as she is to show in all her subsequent actions. Distracted by the sight of a female statue at a roadside stall, she drives the car off the road, causing a serious serious accident - the first evidence of her destructive potential.

Lane does not attempt to help Christina but checks into a motel for the night. The next day, she goes to Colin's "ugly house" where she meets Angela, who mistakes her for Christina. Angela is mowing the lawns and, at first, Lane thinks she is a boy as she is wearing denim dungarees and a baseball cap. It is the first suggestion of sexual ambiguity, an underlying theme in **Crush**.

Angela is unaware of her feminine identity, at this point she is an innocent. She is responsible and sensible and has clearly picked up many of her late mother's domestic responsibilities. With Colin, she has established a safe, if dull, routine. As Colin is not at home, Angela takes Lane on a tour of the attractions of Rotorua but when she tries to explain some of the features of Maoritanga to her, Lane responds that the less she knows about a place, the more she likes it. This would be true of her personal relationships as well. Lane enjoys the stimulation of the unknown.

Angela discovers that Christina is in hospital but by now is in Lane's thrall. Lane has told her that she is too pretty to be a boy and, finding in Lane the epitome of female allure, Angela cannot resist visiting her at the motel. It is the beginning of her loss of innocence. Lane's room is dark and shadowed because, according to Lane, the landlord is always watching her and she has to draw the curtains.

Lane invites Angela out to a nightclub and gives her a red crushed-velvet dress to wear. As Colin later points out, the dress is too big for Angela, Lane is pulling her into experiences for which she is not ready. Standing in front of the mirror with Angela, Lane removes a false eyelash (how much more of her is false?), puts it on her top lip and plays the man to Angela's girl. It is an action which implies that Angela's attraction for Lane has a sexual basis, which Lane is willing to exploit. Later Lane is to tell Angela that Christina "does not

like men", which suggests the sexually ambiguous nature also of her relationship with Christina.

At the nightclub, Angela and has to search for Lane in the carpark where she finds her with a strange man. Lane has left Angela alone in the club which parallels Lane's earlier abandonment of Christina. Later, while Lane dances with Horse, the Maori singer, Angela moves around the dance floor in the invasive embrace of a stranger. Horse returns with the women to the motel and falls asleep on the bed. It is a deliberately sordid scene, a further indication of the erosion of Angela's innocence.

When one of the men attempts to break into Lane's room later that night, she steals Horse's car and returns to Angela's home where she spends the night with Angela in her bed. It is here that Colin finds her in the morning.

Colin is soon enthralled by Lane but Angela is revolted by their affair. She begins to visit Christina and on her return one night, she tells Lane, "you have to stick to your girlfriends, they last longer because there's no sexual pressure. They're a lot more spiritual .. I think". Lane's only response is to say that you can't make a statement like that and then put "I think" on the end of it.

Angela now becomes as destructive as Lane and encourages Christina to hate her as much as she does. She tells Christina that Lane is an animal, by which she means that Lane observes none of the accepted codes, a feature she found attractive before the affair with her father.

At the hospital Angela meets Horse, who has also been hurt in an accident. She relates to him as another of Lane's victims but he, too, manipulates her sexually, playing upon her inexperience. In an echo of Christina's earlier words he says, "You might even find a little skin."

In **Crush** Maclean presents sexual manipulation as a primary source of power. Lane's hold over Colin lies in her intense eroticism but when he wants to establish his own power, by securing some claim over her, she leaves him. In an ironic twist, she has to live in a crumpled car in a wreckers yard until she returns to Colin because she finds she cannot cope without him.

Maclean has said that the characterisation of Colin was made deliberately weak because she did not want him to be

a driving force in the plot, as so often happens in films when a male character is present. Her intention was that **Crush** be an exploration of the dynamics of female relationships and it is the female aspect of power which dominates the film. The female characters are the ones who apply the pressure.

The very nature of the landscape against which the film is set is one of earth under pressure, of subterranean heat waiting to explode to the surface. Rotorua forms a visual metaphor of the passions bubbling below. In the car before the accident Christina tells Lane that New Zealand is a pre-lapsarian paradise", that there are no predators and no snakes, " just this totally benign paradisaical world." She adds that New Zealanders seek to uncover the germ of evil, to find the snake, "that's the New Zealand psyche, looking for serpents." It is Lane who comes to represent the serpent in paradise.

In an interview with Miro Bilbrough, MacLean stated that, while Lane is not a typical American, she is "the things that are sexy and dangerous about America personified" (8). The climax of the film, when Christina exacts her revenge, is an intentional statement of the film's purpose to challenge the cultural might of America. The primeval landscape portrayed in the film suggests that New Zealand, young and still forming, is under pressure from the influences of larger nations like America. Lane, as an American, symbolises that threat and Christina, a New Zealander, is destroyed by her carelessness. Angela, adolescent and unformed, also falls prey to her amorality.

However, Angela's first sexual experience is with Horse, who as a Maori, represents the native spirituality of New Zealand. Throughout **Crush**, Maclean juxtaposes the crass commercialisation of the Rotorua area with the older and deeper significance of its inhabitants. Television images of the haka and a Maori Concert Party establish this unique identity. At the hospital, the pakeha doctor affirms the spiritual value of Maoritanga, saying that if Christina is to recover she will need her whanau. Sickness is not only of the body but of the spirit (wairua) as well.

In her seduction of Colin, Lane parodies the culture, suggestively swinging the pois in an almost hypnotic dance. Ultimately, however, she is defeated by the New Zealanders. The implication is that Lane's power fails because it lacks an integrity of spirit.

The unconscious motivation of the characters in **Crush** is expressed through the motifs of hair and water. Hair is the most obviously sensuous and animal part of the human body and symbolises the uncontrolled aspects of our psyche. For instance, when Angela is disgusted with Lane, she pushes her hair down the plughole in the basin (a reverse of the scene from **Kitchen Sink**). On the other hand, Angela gently combs Christina's hair as she convinces her of Lane's guilt and treachery. Lane's enticement of Colin depends upon his acceptance her offer to cut his hair (an allusion to Samson and Delilah perhaps). Lane kisses Colin still holding the sharp scissors in her hand.

Water, in contrast, represents cleansing, a return to the innocence of the womb. After she abandons Christina, Lane is shown in a bathtub, removing the signs of the accident. At the close of the film Christina, in retribution, sends her to die in the river. In **Crush** water continually gushes from the ground and steam drifts in the air.

Another recurring motif is the mirror. For instance, at the scene of the accident Lane picks up the broken wing mirror and looks into her own eyes, at the motel she does the same with the mirror on the wall. Both Angela and Christina seek re-assurance from mirrors as they search for a sense of their own identity. Colin, also, checks his haircut in the mirror when Lane arrives, a gesture that betrays his vulnerability.

When she wishes to signify power and vitality Maclean favours the colour red. In the opening scenes Lane wears a bright red leather jacket but after she returns to Colin she has changed into a white jersey. By the time Christina meets her at the bach, she has merely has a red tartan rug over her knees. It is also a red dress that Lane gives to Angela. Most significantly, in the closing scenes, when Christina stands up from the wheelchair, a bright red skirt appears beneath her coat.

Maclean chooses to use a lot of high-angle shots in **Crush**, giving an omniscient view of the landscape and the long straight paths through the thermal areas. Often her composition of frames suggests alienation and uncertainty and she creates a surreal quality. The shot of the hospital at dusk, for instance, emphasise its kafkaesque lines; and its location on a hill, without surrounding foliage, suggests the isolation and confinement of

Christina's life there. Many shots of the characters show them alone and small against the landscape and tracking shots often give a sense of pressure. The music by New Zealand band, The Jean-Paul Sartre Experience, underscores the dark and brooding tone of the film.

The narrative structure of **Crush** does create problems for the viewer. As the audience is given so little information about the characters, it is hard to relate to the intensity of their attachments. The audience feels very little involvement or empathy.

The melodramatic nature of the scenes in the hospital as Christina's struggles to regain some of her faculties, aided by a saint-like Angela, also tend to detract from the main focus of the film. As Donagh Rees' performance of Christina is so strong, Lane's domination of the action is somewhat diminished. In a discussion about the actors in her film, MacLean stated in the interview with Bilbrough, that it was Donagh Rees' performance as Christina which actually surprised her. Rees brought to her part a "strong, stubborn will" that was not in the original script (8).

Yet, despite its flaws and ambiguities, **Crush** broke new ground in its depiction of amoral and powerful women, and in its exploration of latent bi-sexuality. Sexual assertiveness and control ceases to be a male prerogative in this film.

**Crush** was selected for competition at Cannes in 1992 and at the New Zealand Film and Television Awards won Best Female Dramatic Performance (Caitlin Bossley), Best Female Supporting Performance (Donagh Rees), Best Soundtrack, Best Film Score. It screened at the Sundance Film Festival in the United States and opened in two London cinemas in March 1993. It was released in France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Korea and Australia.

*"People ask me, 'Have you been discriminated against working in the film industry?' What a stupid question! Women are 51% of the population and they're still called a minority. There's a feeling abroad that we're into the post-feminism era. What the hell is post feminism?.....Well we haven't done feminism."*

Gaylene Preston (in an interview with Deborah Shepard).

### CONCLUSION

As long as women continue to be involved in the making and viewing of films, they have the power to influence its development. Women filmmakers in the late nineties are operating in a very different environment to that of the seventies, and they will need to continually revise their strategies and balance their political agenda against the commercial realities of the time. Filmmakers like Campion have proved that it can be done.

The New Zealand film industry may not be as hidebound as those in larger countries but gender imbalances are as ingrained in New Zealand society, they are a product of history. Issues surrounding patriarchy have informed the lives and work of women filmmakers. Theirs has been a road of experimentation as they have attempted to create and exhibit new cultural models.

The continuing attraction of traditional melodramatic modes for female viewers, the perennial issue of female spectatorship, has never been satisfactorily explained so no doubt the future for feminist film criticism lies in research on film audiences, In Film Studies and Grand Theory, David Bordwell suggests that the time has come for an empirical approach to film theory, what he terms "Middle-level Research". Empirical studies have been carried out on filmmakers, national cinemas and a variety of genre. Feminist, gay/lesbian, ethnic and postcolonial perspectives have been revealed after long being ignored by conventional film history (Bordwell & Carroll 27).

However, Bordwell contends that all middle-research research is problem based, rather than doctrine-driven. He adds that in the "Post-Theory era", in-depth investigation will produce the sort of debate that will

enhance our appreciation of cinema. Though many feminist theorists support an empirical approach, the issue of female representation in film is one which will continue to drive their investigations into film theory. Their ability to effect change lies in women insisting on reading films in a critical and informed way.

The culturalist view is that meaning is located in the audience, not in the text:

"Resisting readers can be read. And the reading of such readers can itself be 'historicized' through consideration of advertising campaigns, exhibition circumstances, and the multifarious discourses that circulate through a culture." (Bordwell & Carroll 10)

The position of women in society is constantly changing. In schools and tertiary institutions, females are achieving in areas long held to be the prerogative of males. As women take more dominant cultural roles, they will further resist conventional stereotyping and eventually influence their representation in film, advertising and television. Generally, television remains a bastion of patriarchal values and it is here also that women filmmakers need to work in order to further their re-construction.

Women filmmakers are, and will continue, re-formulating the narrative codes which have delineated their roles and representation in the past, having discovered that in order to change an ideology, it is necessary both to re-write and re-read it.

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