
VISUAL MEDIA REVIEWS

NEGOTIATING THE *PŌ*: THE HAWAI'I INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL, 8-15 NOVEMBER 1996

Alexander Mawyer
University of Chicago

Is THERE A CURRENCY of human experience? Distinguished by the theme 'When Strangers Meet,' the sixth Hawai'i International Film Festival presented films from around the Pacific, and many of the worlds other oceans, that negotiated precisely this question. While mainstream Australian, Japanese, and Korean works were the centerpieces of the festival, I found most poignant the productions of two groups of young filmmakers who responded to the challenges of self-representation, of artistic integrity, and of overcoming the problem of formulating locality in this century of moving images and shifting boundaries of identity. Compiled as *From Sand to Celluloid* (1996, Australia), a set of short features by Aboriginal Australians, and *Pacific Diaries*, shorts from American Pacific Islanders, these two series did not speak to the transcultural politics of highly dispersed and competitive Pacific Rim populations or the local commodification of art in the search for global recognition, as one might suggest many of the festival's films did. However, these films well characterized the quality, intensity, and affirmational spirit of cultural identity of the films at the festival. Furthermore, the relation of these films to the national cinemas showcased at the festival illuminated some of the character of our times.

It almost goes without saying that the history of filmmaking has roots as deeply entwined in human imaginations and communicative conventions as

any art. Plato, a deeply postmodern philosopher and already writing in an epoch of frission, pastiche, and montage, seems to have well understood the character of filmic representation in his descriptions of the semiotic cave. In this limestone theater of images, a slave is positioned facing a wall onto which a flickering lantern-light's play of light and shadow is cast. Bound to his seat, the slave is fastened in such a way that he is unable to turn his head and thus cannot determine whether the projection results from the back-lighting of actual events occurring out of view or represents the illusory sleight of hand of some shadow puppeteer. Indeed, perhaps this is the relation of the individual to culture generally. As human beings awash in a sea of information, we are all bound to perceive the world through a cultural lens synchronized to our movements so as to prohibit any looking back through the glass. Now, on the cusp of the centenary of filmmaking in the Pacific--and almost a century after the first film festival in the region, held in the Auckland opera house in 1898, which was incidentally the same year Edison produced the first film in the Pacific with a short from Hawai'i--any glance or engagement with representations and images of Pacific Islanders and their cultures reveals precisely the limitations Plato described. Filmmakers and anthropologists, actors and audiences are all forced to struggle with communicating deeply subjective human experiences. As if this were not problematic enough, contemporary film production does not occur in a historical vacuum. Rather, new films may be seen as focal points for all that has passed in the same vein. For Pacific peoples, the juxtaposition of past and present is particularly troubled since, as anyone who has ever pondered *White Shadows of the South Seas* (1927), *South Pacific* (1957), or *Cannibal Tours* (1987) knows, so rarely has the camera allowed what we all, consciously or not, wish to believe--that the image on the screen is shadow and not illusion. Thus, the tension between these two elements has more to it than some film critic's debate over the ontogeny and communication of meaning in works of mechanical reproduction. The essence of Plato's cavern of images is both the anticipation of the epistemological quandary of an audience *and* the suggestion that a critical facet of the film experience is the matrix of power relations emplaced by such mediations.

An aspect of these relations is the circulation and distribution of films: the notice paid, the audiences entertained. In the film industry, metaphorically generalized to some single signifying process, festivals such as the Hawai'i International Film Festival are responsible for reinterpreting and reversing the cinematic illusions of culture and place created by the institutionalized centers of film and image production in Hollywood, London, and Paris. Perhaps more than any other festival, the HIFF creates a space in which nonindustrial and alternative voices may circulate uniquely local mean-

ings with the same aura of legitimacy, if only for a few weeks, as any Hollywood film. While works from the Middle East, mainland United States, and western Europe were screened, the festival clearly constructed a cinematic matrix of experience in which films from Pacific locales could be viewed within a framework of self-representation and local issues. As anyone with interest in filmmaking in the Pacific knows, a bare minimum of scholarly attention has been paid to the history and role of Pacific film in establishing contemporary relations between peoples and states.

The group of short Aboriginal Australian features titled *Sand to Celluloid* ask a great deal of their audience and of themselves. Indeed, they demand their audience take notice of the conjunction of cultural representations and social relations in national matrices of ethnic privilege and position, precisely the perspective so frequently overlooked. These six directors have found an answer to the question of how the perennial search for the cultural self is circumscribed by the representations of others and do not seem to have much liked what they found. Initiatives of the Australian Film Commission, *Black Man Down*, *Fly Peewee Fly!*, *No Way to Forget*, *Payback*, *Round-Up*, and *Two Bob Mermaid* captivate their audience in a cinematic dreamtime in which the truth of contemporary Australian society is clarified from the chaotic patterns, events, feelings, and uncertainties of daily life.

Each of these films forced me to sit back and take stock, and even if your concerns are somewhat different from mine, you'll find something in one of these shorts that speaks to your experience. My favorites included the humorous *Round-Up*, directed by Rima Tamou, which follows the fortunes of two stockmen (Australian cowboys) whose constant brawling winds them up in a big-city hospital sharing the same room. Released from the hospital at the same time and forced to survive in the harsh wilderness of metropolitan Australia, the two men--one a white Australian and the other an Aboriginal man--discover that they are not as different as the color of their skins had led them to believe. *No Way to Forget* might refer as well to the film itself as to director Richard Frankland's experiences as a field officer during the royal commission investigation into Aboriginal deaths in custody. An award winner at the 1996 Cannes Film Festival, *No Way* left me as haunted as the main character, Shawn, by his experiences during a long night drive between Swan Hill and Melbourne. The film ends when Shawn leaves us with the chilling rejoinder, "The deaths still occur, the mothers still cry, the children still ask me of their fathers, and the community still rings when a death in custody occurs." *Two Bob Mermaid* is a touching reminder that social identity is not black and white. The hero, Koorine, is a young Aboriginal girl who dreams of being a swimming star and who "passes for white" at the segregated swimming pool. Breathtakingly beauti-

ful cinematography captures the humor and pain of growing up between worlds.

The Pacific Islanders in Communication series *Pacific Diaries* also explores issues of identity that arise in periods of cultural transformation. The two films from the series shown at the festival, *Happy Birthday Tutu Ruth* and *The Samoan Heart* (both 1996, United States), brought empathetic tears to the eyes of more than one member of the audience. *Happy Birthday*, by Ann Kirk and Carlyn Tani, is a powerful portrait of a remarkable woman at the time of her ninetieth birthday. The film chronicles the hardships and pleasures of her life as a taro farmer, limpet picker, and great-great-grandmother. Tutu Ruth artfully blends wisdom, experience, and humor to share a brief glimpse of Hawai'i through her eyes. *The Samoan Heart*, directed by Ruth Tuiteleapaga, documents the difficult path two Western-trained artists walk between innovation and custom in their art and daily lives. In American Samoa, where traditional culture, the *fa'a Samoa*, remains a vibrant practice increasingly in competition with American goods and values, the choice of these two artists to search for the heart of their identity in the heritage of their ancestors was like a shell carillon for an audience struggling with the same issues.

There was one other film showcased in the festival and directed by a filmmaker speaking from outside a national cinema. *O Tamaiti (The Children)*, by the New Zealand filmmaker Sima Urale (1996), seemed to operate outside the boundaries of both culture and nation while remaining firmly located in both. *O Tamaiti* shows the world of adult relations, work, time, and space through the eyes of a young child. Eleven-year-old Tino reminds us of an existential freedom many of us, trapped by feelings of futility, may have forgotten. Much like the shorts in *Sand to Celluloid* and the short features in the *Pacific Diaries* series, *O Tamaiti* may well fit into a curriculum seeking to explore issues of local identity and culture in a world increasingly organized around national and transnational institutions.

Recent recognition of the role of film in the creation and maintenance of connections between self and other, between image and representation, between local and national cultures has led to the emergence of the international film festival as a forum in which occurs constructive discourse concerning the communicability of unique cultural elements as well as universal human conditions. Of these festivals, graded by breadth of cultural vision, surely the Hawai'i International Film Festival ranks as one of the world's finest. However, as much praise as I otherwise have for the festival, it is utterly clear that the position of indigenous filmmakers in relation to regional or larger national film industries found a perfect metaphor in the presentation of this festival itself. For instance, the underrepresentation of

Hawaiian-produced or -directed films at a festival that draws much of its attractiveness and *mana* from an implicit if appropriational association to the idea of "Hawai?" and the romanticized notion of its people and their culture was highlighted by the inclusion of glossy big-budget films like *Piliialoha* (1996, Japan) and *Hawai'i's Last Queen* (1996, United States) that may reflect the values and perspectives of their Japanese and New England, respectively, filmmakers more than the Hawaiians they represent. Indeed, given the economic reality that connects Japanese and Hawaiian peoples, *Piliialoha* might easily be read as plainly offensive. In this film a young Japanese boy is magically transported back in time, where he befriends a Hawaiian child of the same age. The two boys set out on a quest to find a magical herb that will cure the Hawaiian boy's dying mother. When the herb is finally found, only one challenge remains. Defying any sensible narrative convention, it is the Japanese boy, the heroic tourist, who secures the herb and saves the mother when the Hawaiian boy is too scared to go farther.

I cannot help considering the festival's theme again, "When Strangers Meet." For those of us in large, ethnically diverse, and postcolonial nations, sometimes the strangest strangers are the ones in our own backyards. This may also have been the case at the Hawai'i International Film Festival and stranger relation between the festival's intention and presentation, I cannot imagine.

a

FILMOGRAPHY / VIDEOGRAPHY

Duncat, Vivian, dir. and writer

1996 *Hawaii's Last Queen*. Prod. Margaret Drain. Video documentary, 50 min. Boston: Distributed as part of the series "The American Experience" by WGBH Educational Foundation (tel. 617-492-2777 ext. 5950).

Kirk, Ann Marie, dir.

1996 *Happy Birthday, Tutu Ruth*. Prod. Carlyn Tani. Video documentary, 27 min. Honolulu: Distributed by Pacific Islanders in Communication (tel. 808-591-0059).

Sand to Celluloid: The Aboriginal Short Film Series

1996 16 mm, also available on VHS and PAL, 90 min. Includes: *No Way to Forget* by Richard Joseph Frankland; *Two Bob Mermaid* by Darlene Johnson; *Fly Peewee Fly!* by Sally Riley; *Round-Up* by Rima Tamou; *Payback* by Warwick Thornton; *Black Man Down* by Bill McCrow. Australia: Australian Film Commission (tel. 61-2-9321-6444).

Toyokawa, Takanori, dir.

1996 *Piliialoha*. Prod. Nobuhiko Eto. IMAX, 32 min. Tokyo: Distributed by Benesse Corporation (tel. 81-425-56-0611).

Tuiteleapaga, Ruth, dir. and prod.

1996 *The Samoan Heart*. Video documentary, 27 min. Honolulu: Distributed by Pacific Islanders in Communication (tel. 808-591-0059).

Urale, Sima, dir. and writer

1996 *O Tamaiti (The Children)*. 35 mm, 15 min. Auckland: Distributed by New Zealand Film Commission (tel. 64-4385-9754).