

Dominion Screen Types and Local Beauty Spots: New Zealand's Pre-war Community Films.

Minette Hillyer

The Narcissism of Place

Internal Affairs files associated with the New Zealand Censor's office record a minor scandal circulating around the first of Rudall Hayward's community comedies, *Hamilton's Hectic Husbands* (1928). Rejecting the titles *Hamilton Husbands*, or *Hectic Husbands*, (he suggested instead the pithy *Military Defaulters and Others*), the Censor's report of 17th May, 1928 draws attention to sensitive issues of local pride that could be at stake:

I felt sure that [the title] probably had its origin in some local scandal at Hamilton and its definite locale would give offence to those who were not concerned in the matter, by casting a suspicion on all husbands in the town. That it was based on some local incident was practically confirmed by the violent anxiety of those concerned in the production, to retain the word "Hamilton" ... In the desire to make a local "hit" the producers overlooked the effect that a picture with such a title would make on audiences in other cities. Hamilton would get a reputation of being a "gay" place in its worst sense (Hayward).

The actual reputation enjoyed by Hamilton's husbands aside, this incident demonstrates that, in 1928, interest and investment in representations of local communities in New Zealand was strong. In part, this speaks to the relatively small numbers of films made by local filmmakers, a situation which was only exacerbated by events to come. The decimating combined effect of the talkie and the Depression ensured that the National Film Unit's work in the 1940s was essentially the only local production until the feature-length drama, notoriously absent, re-emerged in 1952 with *Broken Barrier* (O'Shea 1952). On the verge of the (virtual) abyss, the film showing scenes of New Zealand life necessarily takes on weightier qualities than the sum of its parts may suggest.

A sensitivity to the "definite locale" in which a film is shot, on the part of filmmaker and Censor, however, is not simply a response to lack. Naming "Hamilton" as the

site for this drama, Hayward *and* the Censor participated in “locality building” (Appadurai 1998: 183), or the transformation of “space” into “place” (de Certeau 1988: 107) which is profoundly modern in precisely the sense that the New Zealand of 1928 was, and sought to be: “inherently colonizing” (Appadurai 1998: 183), only awkwardly Modernist. As the work of Simon During, among others, illustrates, naming in the context of Aotearoa-New Zealand throws the illogic of modernist teleology into relief (During 1990). Film made in New Zealand before 1940 — when John Grierson and the war together enacted profound changes in our cinema — meanwhile tends to fit uneasily into patterns described for the mapping of the national imaginary by later historiography. While it is now common to describe the interwar period as one of “cultural awakening” (Barrowman 1991: 1), such descriptions rarely include film in that cultural production which is said to have stimulated a sense of organic nationhood in New Zealand. Nonetheless, the fantasy and transport enabled by the pictures brought home in living detail the tensions associated with portraying an identifiably local, contemporary culture. The production of culture in our interwar cinema is at once historically anomalous, and time-bound; generic, and entirely local. In fact, in a period “uncluttered with ‘classics’” (Dennis 1993: 6), the most local films take on the project of representing an apparently awakening national culture. As Arjun Appadurai writes, the work of producing neighbourhoods is often at odds with the production of the nation-state: with the “spatial and social standardization that is prerequisite for the disciplined national citizen” (Appadurai 1998: 191). Nonetheless, it is my contention that the community-based films of the teens and twenties, rather than the more-feted features and documentaries, offer the best chance of accessing a culture which aspired to be local to this nation, both historically and spatially.

This project was not without its shortcomings. Appropriate to the “spatial and social standardization” demanded by a national culture, the treatment of women, the absence of Maori, and the depiction of class and apparently natural privilege in the films can all prove problematic for contemporary viewers. Certainly, our films reflect the difficulty of creating cultural fictions in which the ‘New Zealander,’ (meaning here, the Pakeha), was required to be both Pioneer, and Indigene. Martin Blythe has identified the productive tensions at work in New Zealand cinema of the time as “a crucial three-way collision between British, Maori, and American cultures” (Blythe 1994: 19). Typically, Blythe’s “collision” played out in the ‘legendary’ Maori subjects favoured by feature filmmakers, the American feature film favoured by audiences, and the British film favoured, in 1928, by legislation. Meanwhile, the period 1920-

1940 took in both the hey-day of the silent picture palace, and its collapse; and if the movies were popular, they were not commonly regarded as art and, almost certainly as not good for you (Barrowman 1991: 50). The New Zealand film itself, when viewed in terms of chronologies of foreign film, is marked by slippage and contradiction: histories masquerade as scenics, scenics as narratives, silent film persists well after the establishment of foreign talkies, and early film genres well into the classical period.

Perhaps appropriately then, the community-based films that were made in New Zealand from the 1910s to the 1930s can be characterised by a kind of modesty. Typically, films would be shot and screened within a number of days; the timeless vistas of government scenics, the legendary pretensions of epic “native” romances, and even the tales of contemporary colonial fortunes which were favoured in local feature films of the period were replaced by good pictures, and a good return. Most often this allowed for glimpses of blushing local beauties, or beauty spots which if bold in their delivery were nonetheless modest in their reach. In part, this reflects the quick, commercial nature of the beauty contests, the screen tests, and the community comedies which filmmakers increasingly turned to as the economic climate depressed in the late 1920s. For a period, Rudall Hayward and Lee Hill literally chased locations for their community comedies, and occasionally collided: Hayward made *Natalie of Nelson* (1928), Hill made *Nellie* (1928). More often, however, each of the two tried to reach locations first, in the knowledge that this style of filmmaking only rarely bore repetition – at least, that is, in the same town. Rudall Hayward described *Betty of Blenheim* (1928) (a Lee Hill film) in the style of ‘one that got away’: “I got to most of the towns first, but occasionally I was beaten to it...” (Hayward 1962). Other one- and two-reelers, like the beauty contests which toured districts soliciting votes from audience members, survive as momentary cinematic foot-prints of still larger communities; knowing, but effective flashes of the nation-building cinema which one sloganeer of the time referred to as the “lighthouse of the frontier” (Editorial 1928).

Their success, probably more than a proof of cultural loyalty on the viewers' part, reflects the immediacy, and egotism of commerce. Rudall Hayward attributed it to a combination of narcissism and the excitement of a new, and singular event.

"Altogether we scooped in practically everybody... we got everybody in the town practically 'gee'ing on this thing, and the result was a foregone conclusion. You couldn't keep them out of the theatre with iron bars" (Hayward 1962). The fact that

the community comedies, which are the only variant of this genre with aspirations to narrative, are so repetitious as to be formulaic — and deliberately so — is nonetheless a reminder that this was a mediated singularity. While the setting (or, in the case of contests, the contestants) provide a point of difference from town to town, the characters and even locations available are almost entirely standardised. The films' content, like the manner in which they were made, reflects the attraction of cinema's ability to capture the instant, and the appeal of watching reality at just one remove. If the films are singular, or unique, then it is as a function of their capacity to capture moving, transitory life.

The ability of an image to 'capture' real life has, however, proved to be contentious. Critics of Walter Benjamin's project of privileging images as the repositories for social meaning have argued that the photographic image suggests reification in its tendency to "disclose the art of bending" and by association, of stopping time (Peters 1997: 25). Likewise, the cinematic image could be seen to be characterised by a tendency to fix meaning. The literal movement contained in a film frame is mitigated, in this view, by film's dependence on a single, and comprehensive, external real. Cinema, as Benjamin claims, offers us an apparently unmediated experience of the real by virtue of the "most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment" (Benjamin 2003a: 264). The community-based film, enacting relations of moving and stopping that can be said to define the cinematic image in its most basic sense, meanwhile adopted a sense of reality as sufficient to the day and place. Given that the narrative action is slight, at best, the location of these films takes on extra significance. By stopping somewhere, and sometime, Hayward's "Hollywood on Tour, Girl of our Town" films, and their contemporaries, make of "our town" the mark of reality. In all these community-based films, locality is a means to anchor the diegesis — no matter how slender the narrative — to reality. This view of place is one that allows the act of *stopping* to enact the uniqueness, or singularity, of a situation, albeit that all its elements other than the town itself are pre-determined and infinitely repeatable.

These films differ from earlier variants of the local actuality film by presenting some form of constructed narrative. This might take the form of a story, as in the community comedies, or a narrative created through a film's interactions with the wider community, as in films of beauty contests or screen tests which were accompanied by direct action (here, voting) on the part of the spectator. In the simple actuality film, on the other hand, cinema purported to project a direct,

unmediated link to the real world it portrayed. Miriam Hansen quotes Robert Allan in describing the interest in this type of film as "narcissistic". "Public interest was captured by the work of the camera team and the reproduction of scenes from people's everyday lives, the possibility of seeing oneself or someone familiar on the screen." She goes on to argue that, while in these early films the viewer invested the screen with the properties of a mirror,

later, narratively mediated forms of identification — with characters, star images, and the look of the narrating camera — ... effectively displaced interest in local and personal representation from the institution of cinema, relegating it to the private province of 'home' movies (Hansen 1991: 31).

The community-based films made by Hayward and his contemporaries, meanwhile, fall somewhere in-between. Jonathan Dennis, describing New Zealand cinema of the silent period as "local, personal and irregular" (Dennis 1993: 6), suggests that our silent film production, in general, could be classified as home movies. Certainly, the practices and affect – what Hansen describes as the "partial pleasure" associated both with early cinema and the equally primitive "private province of 'home' movies" (Hansen 1991: 31) - finds expression in many of the practices and tendencies which marked the community-based film.

Thus, advance advertising for Rudall Hayward's community comedies emphasised the opportunities to participate, both, potentially, as a star, and as a town. Notices sent to local newspapers recorded that the "well-known pioneer New Zealand film-producer" would shortly be arriving,

for the production of a complete comedy-drama film entitled "A Daughter of _____" which will be enacted here against a background of chosen local beauty spots, by a cast of entirely local players, assisted by the fire brigade and well-known citizens. It will be entirely a _____ film, and suggestions for suitable backgrounds will be welcomed by the producer.... (Community comedies).

The advertisements record the play between formula and distinction which characterises the community comedy. In one sense, it appears to have been the 'sameness' of the production, from Auckland to Te Aroha, which established the

worth of the venture: claiming to be "entirely a _____ film", the advertisement at once conjures pride in the distinctive qualities of (the every) town, and the expediency with which 'its' film may be made like every other. The enthusiasm of towns which had previously filled the blank was recorded, along with the support of prominent citizens — "On two occasions the daughters of titled ladies have played the principal feminine role" — and the opportunities the proposal offered for "ambitious amateur theatrical folk" (Community comedies). Most of all, the advertisements prey on the delight which Hayward clearly saw was inspired in people by seeing themselves on screen. While Hansen places this type of film much earlier than the community comedies made in New Zealand, their success here in the late 1920s indicates a persistent interest in the local, which was not displaced by "narratively mediated forms of identification" (Hansen 1991: 31). At the same time, interest in the films can be attributed to more complex factors than simple narcissism. Certainly, the community comedies tend to cram as many locals into frame as possible: Rudall Hayward's films typically make use of around twenty of "the cream of local debutantes," twenty more "rough riders" (Community comedies), and even larger crowds of townspeople in an election scene. The stock characters and scripts available to them also indicate, however, that a mirror-image actuality did require some adjustment before being accepted into the "realm of cinema." Similarly, the women appearing in *Beauty Contest* (maker unknown, 1929) present themselves under various guises, no doubt according to fashions of the day. The snake charmer, the fortune teller, even the so-called ordinary girl as which contestants appear, can be seen as reflections of their entrance into a fantasy realm enabled by the cinematic apparatus.

If there is narcissism at work in the community-based film, it might however better be described as a narcissism of place, than of the individual. The films, in general, describe a sense of community that would be denied by a strictly individualistic, or narcissistic gaze. In the first instance, the very act of viewing "our town" on film opens a way of viewing, as Benjamin would have it, from "all four cardinal points" (in Buck-Morss 1989: 25), and despite the intention of creating backgrounds of the town, the parochial nature of the films suggests a means of re-discovering both the place, and the community. As a consequence, it is as members of a community that the spectator-participants of the films are addressed. An advertisement for *A Daughter of Christchurch* reads breathless with excitement over the completion of the film, (not to mention the captive audience it should attract), with a collective address that assumes a strong identification with the place. "At Last! At Last! At

Last! Here's Your Own Film... Made in Christchurch. You're All In It. Come and See It". Likewise, potential participants in the films were titillated by advertisements promising "local beauty spots", and a "beautiful residence" to take its place in the pantheon of the "most magnificent residences in the Dominion"(Community comedies); that is, by seeing the place, as well as the people.

In part, this appeal to a collective results from the films' close links to commerce. *A Daughter of Christchurch* is preceded by commercial endorsements for the companies providing taxicabs and Miss Kinsey's frocks, which can be distinguished from current cinema advertising by the fact that the local companies are, here, understood to have assisted in the production of a film belonging to this community. Likewise, whole actuality films — *Happy Faces at the Duchess Theatre Last Saturday* is a prominent example, in which paying to see the pictures one week becomes the attraction of the following week — are premised on the notion of recycling consumers. However, the clinical tag of 'consumer' seems insufficient to describe the address of such open, and endearing films. In the first instance, an advertisement of this kind serves as a reminder that the cinema itself was a community venue, and not merely a commercial one. Thus, it might be more fitting, despite their undeniably commercial nature, to describe the address to community members here and within the film as being directed at citizens, rather than consumers, in as much as they are often solicited via their civic functions, and rewarded for simply 'belonging'. It is then particularly apt that the crowd scenes in Rudall Hayward's community comedies have as their motivation an election rally, albeit a fairly rowdy one, and in every one, our local man ends up getting the girl.

Dominion Screen Types

Have You a Screen Personality? If So -- New Zealand Needs You!

— "Hollywood on Tour" Company advertisement.

If the imagined spectator-participant solicited by the community-based film is pushed to straddle the commercial and communal, the local and the standardized, so much is generally true of those conditions of life which we call Modern. In what Appadurai would describe as the "production of locality" the neighbourhood (or here, "our town") is not only the context for the production of locality, but created by the cultural production of local subjects (Appadurai 1998: 185). In this sense, it is the

community-based film's apparent failings of narrative and technique that enable it to contribute to a local, and modern culture. The films' disjointed, (or disappearing) narrative lines, the tension between the setting's uniqueness and its expendability, force viewers outside the diegesis, enabling what Benjamin might describe as a "progressive" reaction to the work of art: namely, the "immediate, intimate fusion of pleasure – pleasure in seeing and experiencing – with an attitude of expert appraisal" (Benjamin 2003a: 264). The films are, in this view, made comprehensible at least in part by their repeatability as a ritual event, and as a recognisable cultural form.

With the importance of the particular local setting beyond question, for commerce *and* community, the sense given by the community comedies, for example, is nonetheless often that the towns themselves function primarily as sites for pre, or re-enacted entertainments. Accordingly, *A Takapuna Scandal* (Hayward 1928) is opened with slapstick, and denies anything other than the silliest of intentions.

Foreword. You have seen "The Birth of A Nation". You were amazed by "Intolerance". You were thrilled by "Ben Hur". THIS FILM has no connection with any of these. — Hector
— By the way, we forgot to mention that the title has nothing to do with the picture, neither is there a plot, which shows how modern we are.

Rather than the Great Art of an *Intolerance*, or a *Ben-Hur*, the film takes its clue from its star, Hector St. Clair, "The London Pantomime Comedian." While this film deviates slightly from the formula of the "girl-of-our-town" genre which its title suggests, in particular in using a foreign star in the title role, the vaudeville inheritance it displays is common with the other, more standardised community comedies. Each embellishes a basic love plot with plenty of physical comedy; the community comedies climax with a chase scene, in which Motorised Mayhem meets with horsing around (and other mismatched metaphors), as our hero — Bill Cowcockie — and local "rough riders" rescue the local girl from the evil clutches of Freddie Fishface, the rapacious reporter. The temptation to dredge up risible rhyming descriptors is encouraged (really) not only by the films' intertitles, which pun shamelessly, but by the general spirit of chaotic, music-hall entertainment. Children gather to watch the action (and push their heads into frame), the main characters'

whiteface is prominent, and in Dunedin Freddie Fishface's moustache begins to fall off, while the Christchurch actors begin laughing even in more serious scenes.

References to entertainment forms, like pantomime, traditionally associated with the working class can, of course, have more profound implications. Miriam Hansen's argument that "moments of alterity" in the filmic text can lead to an "alternative organisation of public experience" (Hansen 1994: 233) is based on the premise that the "mobilisation of the gaze... promises nothing less than the mobilisation of the self, the transformation of seemingly fixed positions of social identity" (Hansen 1991: 111). In a similar vein, Hansen and Janet Staiger both argue that viewing (early) cinema intertextually is a means of examining its class-specific functions; more particularly, they claim that the viewing, or legibility of cinema always depended upon intertextual knowledge (Hansen 1994; Staiger 1992). Contrary to the notion of cinema rising phoenix-like from the nickelodeon, trumpeting a new 'universal' language democratised by its (working) class-specific heritage, they argue that in fact early American cinema, at least, tended to privilege a middle-class audience. Staiger goes on to argue that

the signifying practices that develop into the classical Hollywood film mode were not due to an attempt to woo a middle-class audience to all movie theatres, but that *just the reverse* is the case. The textual continuity perceived by later historians is a result of the expansion of the audience to include the working class, immigrants and rural audiences, to make moving pictures a mass medium rather than one accessible to just a privileged few (Staiger 1992: 102).

In New Zealand's community-based films of the 1920s, cinema is promoted as a means of *escaping* class, through the tantalising persona of the Film Star. No doubt this has always been a characteristic of the movies; the promise of defying "seemingly fixed positions of social identity" (Hansen 1991: 111) is a heady one. If, however, earlier film had come to woo the working-class audience, it makes sense that films with such strong stylistic resemblances to mass popular entertainment forms should promise an *intertextual* "mobilisation of self" (Hansen 1991: 111) in addition to the perhaps more typical diegetic one. Even generically, the beauty contest and the screen test are based on this kind of seduction; an advertisement for Rudall Hayward's community comedies, meanwhile, describes "the *value* of

Local Community Films" (*italics mine*) as being the opportunity they provide for "discovering ... Dominion screen types" (Community comedies). Almost euphorically, the advertisement manages to suggest that this would be of value not only to those discovered, but also to the nation. Its headline both tantalises and calls to arms: "Have You a Screen Personality? If so - New Zealand Needs You!", while the text suggests that the legislation which emerged as the Cinematograph Films Act, 1928 would provoke a boom in the local industry, necessitating the immediate readiness of many thousands of "Dominion screen types".

Dale Austen, the star of *A Daughter of Dunedin* and *The Bush Cinderella*, Miss New Zealand 1927, and winner of a three month contract with M.G.M., provides probably the clearest example of the patriotic delight that could be mobilised upon discovering one such "type". By the same token, the "Hollywood-on-Tour" film is carefully distinguished from the 'screen tests' earlier perpetrated on an unsuspecting public, and which, as Ted Coubray recalled, were sometimes made with the film looped in the camera (Coubray 1980). Advance publicity thus begs us to "REMEMBER THIS IS A COMPLETE GENUINE PRODUCTION TO BE MADE BY THE ONLY PROFESSIONAL FILM PRODUCER AT PRESENT OPERATING IN NEW ZEALAND..." Our fears allayed, the process of seduction — or, at least enticement — can resume: "Those who have played in Mr Hayward's community comedies in other centres describe it as the 'fun of a lifetime.' For some it is the Great Opportunity which knocks but once!" Fun, fame, and what's more, it could really all come true! "The producer will have quite a number of good-looking young people to choose from when he arrives, and the leading role should not be difficult to fill..." (Community Comedies). While the fraudulent screen tests had indicated that movie stardom was beyond the reach of the community player, these more substantial works put it back, if not at their fingertips, at least within the realm of possibility.

If the "Hollywood-on-Tour" publicity materials prove anything, it is that dreams of movie stardom in the 1920s, as today, can be very real. To ask whether the community-based film provided a realistic forum in which to pursue them is perhaps, however, to understand this too literally. Whether the participants in community comedies and the like were really motivated by the desire to move on to further screen stardom is a moot point; in many, if not most cases, it seems likely that their dreams were fulfilled simply through this brief access to the star-making cinematic apparatus. Certainly, the products of their labours demonstrate a fascination with

the transformative technology of film: "the desire of the present-day masses to 'get closer' to things spatially and humanly" (Benjamin 2003a: 255). Regardless of the outcome, merely by appearing on screen the 'ordinary person' experiences a moment of transubstantiation, Hollywood-style.

While the reference is to Hollywood, it is possible to trace this impulse, again, to earlier cinematic codes: to what have been described as the "behaviouralist" tendencies of early cinema. Noël Burch's theory of the "Primitive Mode of Representation" and the suggestion of public ownership of images through what he refers to as the "prodigious 'circulation of signs'", or copying of themes and even whole films (Burch 1990: 224), can easily be found in the repetitious, exhibitionist community-based film. The trope of revelation through a newspaper ad is, for example, common to Hayward's community comedies and local features; in *The Bush Cinderella* (Hayward 1928) Margaret Cameron learns of her lover's death through the newspaper, and Mary Makepeace Cameron of her inheritance, while in *A Takapuna Scandal* Hector learns of his beloved's party, to which he has not been invited. Similarly, it seems likely that the 'spinster chase' scene in the Hayward community comedies was copied from that in *The Adventures of Algy* (Smith 1925), which in turn could have been copied from *Personal* (McCutcheon 1904), or either of two copies of that film of the same year. (Hansen 1991: 46) If there were need of further proof of the "prodigious circulation of signs" (Burch 1990: 224) even into the 1920s in New Zealand film, this may suffice! Meanwhile, the technique of using newspaper announcements to further narrative action might have resulted from a desire to move outside the intertitle format, to internalise some of the narrative. If so, this would point in the opposite direction, to the "diegetic absorption" that Gaudreault links to changes in narrativisation from the "early" to "classical" period (Gaudreault 1990: 279). Again, in this light, the community films fall somewhere in-between established narratives of cinematic modernism and primitivism; as de Certeau writes of the modern subject, they are opportunistic, "making do" in the time and place of their creation (de Certeau 1988: 29).

Certainly, all the films — both those with a 'story' and those without — are marked by qualities of display. In the case of the story film, this takes the form of the slapstick comedy described earlier, which vies with, and frequently threatens to overwhelm the more legitimate narrative; accordingly, Hayward's films are subtitled "A Community Comedy Burlesque". While most manage to work through some, (albeit the same), story, the tendency to abandon this in favour of spectacle is

strong. *A Takapuna Scandal* is in a sense scandalous even in the freedom with which it admits this as fact. The film works over, (but barely through), the main elements of the other community comedies — a beautiful girl, a hopeful suitor, a revelation through the newspaper, a party, a chase, and finally, a union (and here, wink to camera) — but really makes light of the need for a story at all. By opening with a roller-coaster ride, (and floating journey over Auckland which verges on the sublime), the film — ("neither is there a plot...") — sets a speedy and often incoherent pace for what is to come. In other films, the fascination with the cinematic apparatus is the essence, (and substance) of the film. A 1927 newspaper advertisement for a matinee screening of *The Call of the Wild* (featuring "Buck the marvel dog") is accompanied by an "Announcement Extraordinary" — "All children attending this Matinee will be photographed by the "movie man" (Community comedies) — the footage from which became *Happy Faces at the Duchess Theatre Last Saturday* a week later.

The notion that entire films could be made of people's fascination with the cinematic apparatus returns us to Miriam Hansen's comments suggesting that this mode of filmmaking may not be what we now understand as cinema at all (Hansen 1991: 31). Certainly, at the time, filmmakers seem to have viewed the "quickies" in a very different light from their other, more 'serious' work. While all New Zealand filmmakers took on commercial work to make ends meet, Rudall Hayward made probably the most consistent attempts to create 'art' of cinema. His assessment of the community comedies in 1962 is, in some ways, slightly dismissive: he seems to attribute their success above all to a kind of naïvete on the part of the spectators. "It was only necessary to make a moderately good film... and then it would sell plenty of tickets. Even in a big town like Christchurch... you'd think they'd be too sophisticated... but the contrary proved to be the case" (Hayward 1962). The failure of the sound film to take root in this genre – Rudall Hayward later described his attempt, *Hamilton Talks*, as a "very bad film" (Hayward 1962) – could likewise be seen as a consequence of its simplicity. It is possible that the film was defeated by its own technology. While they aspire to be something other than home movies, the taint of amateurism is one that the films themselves do not seem unduly troubled by; in fact, they solicit it.

Moreover, in doing so they call on a well-established "culture of amateurism". Patricia Zimmerman, in her study of amateur filmmaking, records that in the 1920s the idea that, with hard work, natural ability could be translated into fame, was a

common enticement to the "amateur theatrical type" — so much so that a body of literature was directed at this aspiring star. In particular, she writes that the "type" was presumed most often to be female; women were seen both as peculiarly suited and peculiarly attracted to movie stardom. Thus, in 1922 "one writer instructed amateur actresses that they could become stars if they possessed beauty, personality, charm, temperament, style, and the ability to wear clothes" (Zimmerman 1995: 53). The requirements for the women in the community comedies were similar, and, initially, appear to be considerably less exacting than those for the men, who were asked at least to possess the ability to "drive a car", or "ride well," in addition to certain physical qualities. The female lead, meanwhile, was to be "A Young Lady with good even features, dark eyes, good teeth, slender and graceful, to fittingly represent the heroine" (Community comedies). Certainly, those dark eyes are well used: our first glimpse of the heroine has her seducing scores of men with a single glance. On reflection the woman's lot may not be the easier one, given that in addition to her remarkable feats of seduction, "to fittingly represent the heroine", she also emerges as the representative of the place. The titles of the community comedies show the institutionalisation of that indefinable association of woman and home which also appeared in the characterisations of Pakeha women in local features like *The Bush Cinderella* through the (similarly) indefinable, (similarly) 'feminine' qualities of grace and beauty. To "fittingly represent" then, the woman of the community-based film is ultimately a more serious character than the man. There are moments of comedy associated with her seductive eyes, and a chase scene involving a group of desperate unwed women; however, generally, the woman's function is weightier. Like the women in *Beauty Contest* this woman is styled as both the ultimate amateur — the possibly naïve aspirant to fame and 'stardom', (with all its associations of beauty and glamour) — and, by the same token, the guardian of something even more sacred. As the "daughter", even the namesake of "our town", the woman here becomes another anchor to the community, and moreover the reality of that place.

Images of Our Modern Dreamworld.

A chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. Benjamin 2003b: 390

Some measure of the extent to which at the time of its making the community-based film was taken to be a 'real' and current document, reflective of local places and national culture, can be found in the Censor's response to *Hamilton's Hectic Husbands*, reproduced above. Miriam Hansen's argument suggests that this situates the community-based film at a kind of temporal disjuncture between home movie and narrative work (Hansen 1991: 31); the Censor's comments indicate that if we were 'still' making home movies, we wanted to reserve the right of any proud amateur to flip through the family album with some decorum. That it was required, moreover, that all these "quickies" be censored individually, (despite the stock script), assured the difference and integrity of the very local, against all attempts to prove otherwise. The films themselves may have been commercial, even opportunistic ventures, but the Censor (our lighthouse-keeper?) persisted, with this ruling, in reminding us of the community behind the community comedy. It is possible that this continued focus on the local in New Zealand filmmaking could be attributed to a substantive lack of opportunity for filmmakers to develop in different modes of cinema. On the other hand, the American film that dominated our screens and thus provided some model for our own film production, itself retained qualities of the early cinema work — "moments of alterity" — as Hansen herself estimates, until 1930 (Hansen 1994: 233). This is in fact a commonplace to national cinemas, albeit to varying degrees. If the New Zealand community-based film, or in fact, our cinema of the period in general tends to favour of the mimetic (re)presentation of place, this could be seen as a function of a less assured sense of the "nation-civilisation" than that, for instance, of the (cinematic) USA. American cinema's ability to co-opt generic fictions for history — "crime with gangsterism, adventure with the western, had the status of pathogenic or exemplary historical structures..." (Deleuze 1997: 149) — suggests a fundamentally untroubled representation of nationhood, which New Zealand's often awkward tales of place and history were apparently not at a point to emulate. To view our community-based films in this light is then to propose a logic that would have them as signs of immaturity: a naïve amateurism still far from

emerging from the restrictive swaddling clothes of what Hayward described, in seeking participation in his films, as "lusty childhood" (Community comedies).

Such an evolutionary view of New Zealand cinema, however, would have by association all production before *Broken Barrier*, certainly before the *Weekly Reviews*, as the obscure and insignificant by-products of an underdeveloped culture. Leaving the extreme paternalism of such a view to one side, it would also suggest a failure to move beyond a kind of abridged bibliography. While the community-based film demonstrates a persistent identification with the real referents of place and community, it is not simply characterised by a pre-, or even pre-erlibidinal fascination with its own mirror image. The 'home movie' then, is in this case the bearer of something other than raw amateurism. Likewise, if the community-based films 'mark off' places, they are also engaged in often complex treatments of time. The lack of narrative progression in many of the films, the sacrifice of cause and effect in favour of a push-me pull-you burlesque, as seen, for example, in *A Takapuna Scandal*, cannot be attributed then to a failure to understand the rules of storytelling. The epic works that are referred to in its "foreword" – *The Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance*, *Ben Hur* — are signs precisely of its knowingness. Rather, the style of narrative in this film, as in others of its genre (I am including here, the 'non-story' community-based film), recognises the place of the spectator in enlivening real-life referents. Moreover, it is arguable that the films are marked *materially*, with the consequence of representing something greater than the sum of their parts. Benjamin's view of film as the representative technology of the modern age is not determined simply by a kind of technological determinism, but by the conviction nonetheless that in its materiality, cinema might provide " a politically explosive answer to the sociohistorical form of the child's question: 'Where did I come from'? Where did modern existence, or, more accurately, the images of the modern dreamworld come from?'" (Buck-Morss 1989: 275).

Jacques Aumont, in a discussion of the "mobilised gaze" effected by cinema, touches on the implications of the relationship that always exists between spectatorship, and filmic time:

From the outset filmic time was given as a time to which one submits and simultaneously as an acknowledged, identified time. Unable to escape the time of projection, we nevertheless accept this time, recognise it as our own, and experience it as such. This

is the meaning of Jean-Louis Schefer's famous description of the cinema as "the only experience in which time is given to me as a perception" (Aumont 1997: 245).

However, in styling filmic time as inescapable, Aumont is led to conclude that the film spectator "has been condemned to immobility... Ironically, the motto of the variable eye can be said to echo that of the early photographers: "Don't move!" (253). In contrast, the spectator of the community-based film is not only an active one, but a constitutive element in the *event* of the film itself. The fixed positions for spectatorship allowed for by a classical cinema are then inappropriate to both the style, and the reception of these films. Most particularly, a universal application of arguments of this kind fails to acknowledge the ease with which the community-based film both solicits and makes light of the shibboleths of (a) national, or even local identity. Certainly, local places and people figure prominently in securing the films' success. However, to suggest that spectators were moved simply by an inviolable, and paralysing pride in their own image is to suggest a form of narcissism extending beyond the bounds of reason. It pays to remember that many of these films were comedies, all of them adventures, and, as the "Hollywood-on-Tour" company itself had it, "the fun of a lifetime!"

Thus, the community-based films are generally marked by an ability to make light of pretensions to the 'as-seen-on-film' grandeur of the cinema epic. The standard first intertitle of the "girl-of-our-town" film plays with the sophisticated citizens of the town, even in Christchurch. Over shots of quiet city streets, and probably itself screening on a Saturday afternoon, the film opens with a good-natured reminder of the match that New Zealand audiences would be obliged to make between 'movieland' and "our town". In this case, however, the audience were neither required to transport themselves to historic "Maoriland" nor to forget their (even marginally) urban existence. Again, the films claim to be entertaining based on their efforts to capture moving, transitory life. "It was Saturday afternoon in the great throbbing metropolis ... Getting more like New York every day." *A Daughter of Dunedin* continues with a sequence of film rolled backwards: "A really progressive little town. Always forwards in going backwards..." If in the 'real' cinema, as exemplified by the American feature film, the streets of New York or Chicago were the gritty site for a nation's coming of age, or the glamorous site for a nation's path to fortune, the community comedies recognise that for the majority of the local audience, they were really no site at all. The streets of "our town" meanwhile, were in some ways, probably too familiar to be

interesting. Films like *Luna Park* (Coubray Brothers 1928), or *New Zealand News and Views #1: T & G Building* (NZ Government Publicity Office 1928), provide for the mobilisation of this enervated gaze by granting the viewer an aerial perspective on their perhaps too-familiar city streets. *A Takapuna Scandal* meanwhile goes one step further, by posing Hector St. Clair as a floating flâneur, who – unmoored from his Northern, archotypically Modern roots – "goes botanising" not on, but *above* "the asphalt" (Friedberg 1994: 61). If, as Deleuze argues, the (real) Hollywood feature purports to present in itself the "whole of history" (Deleuze 1997: 148), the "Hollywood-on-tour" community comedy and its contemporaries allow themselves the treatment of minor events, "the chronotype of the local, particular, graphic..." in which, Homi Bhabha writes, "(n)ational time becomes concrete and visible..." (1994: 143).

Ultimately, this treatment of local time and place could be seen not as a failure to meet up to the cinematic standards set by the feature film, but as both more "historical" and more "cinematic". In one of the most famous passages from his "On the Concept of History", Walter Benjamin wrote: "The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again" (Benjamin 2003b: 390). His emphasis here is the need to redeem ourselves through the fullness of our past; the treatment of history becomes a kind of salvage operation, "for it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image" (391). The notion of our threatened film heritage lining up purgatorially in judgement may appear a little far-fetched. However, it is also true that any consideration of cultural history, and perhaps particularly one which takes, as this does, the material traces of culture as its starting point, is engaged in a kind of judgement.

It would be itself naïve to claim that the community-based film somehow liberates the viewer from all fixed spectator positions, nor would it speak to the role these films play in articulating a national culture. However, what the community-based film might provide for is some coincidence between the moment-to-moment contemporaneity of the filmic image, and that of "the time of the now." Moreover, in its insistence on treating the present, and the actual, the community-based film has the potential to reveal Benjamin's "splinters of Messianic time" to the present-day viewer through the film of an earlier era; to enable the viewer to grasp "the constellation into which [their] own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier

one" (Benjamin 2003b: 397). In the context of much of the other film production of the period, which treats New Zealand as a site for 'ancient', or 'timeless', but ultimately de-animated narrative, the community-based film provides an opportunity to view history as a living, contemporary concern. While "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history," these films assert that neither should it ever be regarded as condemned to history. More ambitiously, they could also be seen as coming closest to the promise that film itself contains to enable the transubstantiation of experience, the mobilisation of the gaze, and - even by "stopping some place" - to explode "this prison-world" (Benjamin 2003a: 265). In their insistence on treating the present and the local point of experience, film of this kind could then be regarded as providing the "images of [our]...dreamworld", that are most emphatically, and euphorically modern.

Note on the contributor

Minette Hillyer is a lecturer in Media Studies at Victoria University of Wellington.

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