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The NZFC's Diversity and Inclusion Strategy: Towards the Normalisation of Diversity in the New Zealand Screen Industry (2018-2022)

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Abstract: In 2022 the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) published its first fully comprehensive diversity and inclusion strategy (DIS), He Ara Whakaurunga Kanorau. The ambitious strategy aspired to draw together the existing framework of individually focused diversity funds, with an overarching set of policy intentions aiming to position filmmakers from underrepresented groups at the forefront of the agency's funding strategy. This article looks at how the NZFC aims to normalise its work in the diversity space through the creation of targeted funding strategies, and how the agency's idealism, most notable in the breadth of the DIS and its sometimes-nebulous content, can clash with the work of individual filmmakers that do not assimilate with the artificial framework. However, institutional intervention in the film industry undoubtedly plays a significant part in creating a vibrant national cinema for Aotearoa New Zealand that gives voice to many filmmakers who might have otherwise not been heard.

Keywords: Public film funding; national cinema; New Zealand; diversity; inclusion; public policy

Introduction

Founded in 1978 "because New Zealanders have a right to see films related to what is important to New Zealanders" (Waller 1996, 3), the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) was responsible for helping create a sustainable New Zealand film industry and remains the country's lead public funding body for film. Sparked by the domestic and international success of Roger Donaldson's privately financed debut *Sleeping Dogs* (1977), the NZFC's first tranche of films was concerned primarily with the theme of the angry and isolated Pākehā man against a troubled environment. This quickly became the defining feature of the country's early national cinema. However, many early New Zealand films featured a diversity of on-screen stories long before the creation of the NZFC, forged through the country's troubled history of colonialism. After the founding of the screen agency, the rapid expansion of New Zealand's film industry and subsequent development of its national cinema quickly evolved beyond the white male perspective, but without losing its dominance. Throughout the 1980s the first films by women filmmakers were released, and the production of the first Māori film, Barry Barclay's *Ngāti* (1987), ultimately led to the development of Barclays' concept of Fourth, or Indigenous, Cinema, shaping the burgeoning national cinema of the country.

By 1997 the NZFC took a major step forward in helping filmmakers from culturally and socially underrepresented groups realise their stories for the screen, via a major funding boost from Helen Clark's Labour government in 1999. The extra funding led to the production of some of the most successful New Zealand films both locally and internationally, including *Whale Rider* (Caro, 2003) and *Boy* (Waititi, 2010), both of which were focused on Māori issues, but with the existing impact of colonialism remaining

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omnipresent in the background. Successful films made by filmmakers from underrepresented cultural and ethnic groups led to the introduction of the first official NZFC diversity policy *Te Paepae Ataata,* the Māori development fund, in 2008. By 2010 the focus had shifted beyond the uneasy biculturalism of the 20th century, to focus on the multiculturalism defining it in the 21st century, with the production of the first NZ/Sāmoan and NZ/Chinese feature films, *The Orator* (Tamasese) and *My Wedding and Other Secrets* (Liang), both in 2011. More successful films led to further official policy developments, most prominently the gender policy in 2015, which aimed (successfully) to award women directors with 50% of the production funding, and in June 2022, the release of the first all-encompassing diversity strategy, called *He Ara Whakauranga Kanorau, the Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for 2022-2025* (DIS).

This article is focused primarily on the period 2018-2022 during which the NZFC published the more comprehensive Māori Response Strategy, *Te Rautaki Māori*; the one-off *125 Fund* low-budget feature film initiative, specifically for women filmmakers, launched to commemorate 125 years of women's suffrage in 2018; and the DIS itself. First though, it is worth taking a brief look at how the national cinema of New Zealand was shaped by the work of the NZFC. Key here is the space created by the agency (thanks chiefly to the intervention of key filmmakers such as Barry Barclay and Merata Mita) for Tangata Whenua, and how contemporary Māori identity has been shaped in tandem with the national identity of Aotearoa New Zealand since the country gained independence.

Interviews with the two CEOs that oversaw these major developments, Annabelle Sheehan (2018-2021) and David Strong (2021-2022), are key sources, supplemented by interviews with other NZFC personnel involved in policy development and implementation: Tayla Hancock (Policy Advisor), Dale Corlett (Head of Talent Development), Mladen Ivancic (Chief Financial Officer) and Leanne Saunders (Head of Development and Production). These interviews and their corresponding policy documents reveal how the NZFC aspires to promote diversity through a mix of focused funds and broader strategies, but with mixed results.

Between 2018-2022 the distance between the NZFC's aspirations and the applied practices of filmmakers created a palpable tension. This article focuses on two case studies demonstrating this tension in different ways: a production company promoting women in film, and the first film/TV series from New Zealand's trans community, explored through the experiences of the project's producer, Craig Gainsborough. Separately, the case studies offer two distinct experiences of filmmakers from underrepresented groups, whilst together they demonstrate the emphasis that public funding bodies place on artistic authorship of films as cultural commodities. Technically speaking, the producer or production company 'owns' the film, in that they control the commercial rights. In real terms, the film is considered artistically owned by its director. *Ngāti*, for example, is considered a Māori film because it was directed by Barry Barclay, who was Māori, but its producer John O'Shea was Pākehā. The emphasis placed on the artistic ownership of the film by the public funding body can mean the producer's role is lessened or overlooked. Historically, as this article explores, the film commission prioritises much of its funding

strategies around directors, not producers, which offers a limited understanding of how and by whom a film is made and thus how a national cinema is formed.

The first case study is Miss Conception Films, a production company run by Ainsley Gardiner and Georgina Conder. Miss Conception aims to produce and promote New Zealand stories focused on women (MCF, n.d.), and during 2018-2022 the company released two of the country's top 20 most successful films at the local box office: *The Breaker Upperers* (Sami/van Beek, 2018) and *Cousins* (Gardiner/Grace Smith, 2021). Women of colour directed and wrote both films and Māori women starred in the latter production, which was adapted from Patricia Grace's 1992 novel. In *The Breaker Upperers* the filmmakers cast women in key roles and aimed at onscreen representation that clearly reflected modern New Zealand. Despite its success, Miss Conception continues to experience ongoing friction with the NZFC as a funding body (Conder 2022). Issues include development grants which favour screenwriters and dissuade people from underrepresented groups from becoming producers.

The second case study is *Rūrangi* (Max Currie, 2020/21), a hybrid project initially produced as a web series with funding from NZOA, then later re-edited into a feature film with finishing money for theatrical release from the NZFC. Filmmakers and actors from the trans community made *Rūrangi* the first TV series/feature film focused on trans issues in New Zealand. Producer Craig Gainsborough explained in an interview how the filmmakers' pioneering roles gave them both an opportunity and responsibility to support the wider gender-diverse community. However, Gainsborough considers that the project was classified as niche and so funding from public bodies was limited in comparison to more commercial projects. The cast and crew were therefore all required to work for lower than standard rates, exposing a disconnect within public funding bodies between mainstream content and the tokenism often associated with diversity projects.

The article culminates with the publication of DIS, which makes it evident how much emphasis the NZFC is placing on policies designed to support filmmakers from underrepresented backgrounds in 2023, but which in real terms offers little in the way of concrete objectives.

Chief among the findings here is that intervention by the funding agency is required to help create a vibrant and sustainable national cinema, both for the dominant Pākehā cinema and for those from culturally and ethnically underrepresented groups. However, significant resources are required to create any kind of notable achievements for any underrepresented group. *Te Rautaki Māori*, for example, is a major financial investment into Māori filmmaking that has clearly defined outcomes, such as investment in the feature film *Muru* (Kahi, 2022), whilst *Rūrangi* is limited in its impact because of the continued limitations of its budget. Similarly, despite the fanfare around the release of the DIS, what filmmakers are yet to see is a normalisation of people from diverse backgrounds working on both sides of the camera, which is vital to telling stories that reflect the people of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Creating a National Cinema

Film historian Roger Horrocks identified the recurring motif of the angry and isolated young Pākehā man facing off against a troubled environment as a key theme for the New Zealand national cinema of the late 1970s and early 1980s, as evidenced through the early films supported by the NZFC such as *Solo* (Williams, 1978), *Smash Palace* (Donaldson, 1981) and *Goodbye Pork Pie* (Murphy, 1981). Horrocks encapsulated them into four key themes, still prevalent in contemporary New Zealand cinema: "landscape; horror or 'unease'; adolescence or rite of passage; and Kiwi male culture" (Horrocks 2011, 20). However, many of the earliest films had also engaged with on-screen diversity, particularly on the continually thorny subject of race and ethnicity. In fact, many of the country's pre-industry titles, such as *Rewi's Last Stand* (Heywood, 1925/1940) and *Broken Barrier* (John O'Shea, 1953), were focused on the "uneasy biculturalism" between Māori and Pākehā (Horrocks 2011, 18). Although a Māori director did not make a feature film until *Ngāti* in 1987, the pre-existing work in this space helped pave the way. Geoff Murphy's seminal film about the New Zealand land wars, *Utu* (1983), for example, was influenced by *Rewi's Last Stand*, and although Murphy was from a Pākehā background he was careful to include as many Māori filmmakers as possible in the crew, including his future wife and the first wahine Māori to make a feature film Merata Mita (*Mauri* [1988]), and as his first assistant director Lee Tamahori, who would go on to make *Once Were Warriors* (1994). When considering the ongoing relationship between Māori and Pākehā, it was little surprise that the advent of Barclay's concept of Fourth Cinema challenged the very concept of national cinema, originally devised by Andrew Higson as aiming to explore and construct the notion of nationhood "in the consciousness of the viewer" (Higson 1989, 36). Rather than nullify it, Fourth Cinema aimed to augment the limitations of Higson's definition by expanding it to include the perspective of indigenous filmmakers as separate from that of non-indigenous. Barclay vocalised the concept using the metaphor of a colonial ship pulling into a bay, and he posed the question: "What happens when the camera is shifted from the deck onto the shore?" (Barclay 2003, 13).

However, because public funding continued to be dominated by Pākehā filmmakers well into the 21st century, the political economy of cinema in New Zealand was such that the NZFC needed to make major interventions to ensure that the people of the country were going to be able "to see films related to what is important to New Zealanders" (Waller 1996, 3). The agency's first official diversity policy was *Te Paepae Ataata*, the Māori development fund, in 2008, and following the success of Taika Waititi's films *Boy* (2010) and *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016), the agency began to expand its work with the Māori community, leading to the launch of *Te Rautaki Māori* in 2018.

Focussed funding: *Te Rautaki Māori* and the *125 Fund*

By the end of 2017 the NZFC's relationship with diversity had become one of the key drivers of its funding strategy, and by 2018 a new strategy aimed at Māori filmmakers was launched. Outgoing CEO Dave Gibson hosted four hui with Māori film industry stakeholders in Rotorua, Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch throughout the latter part of 2017, which informed the Māori Response Strategy paper presented to the board in December 2017. New CEO Annabelle Sheehan oversaw the launch of the *Te Rautaki Māori* fund in April 2018, and the strategy was central to her identity as CEO. Sheehan pointed out that she and her team aimed to build on what Gibson had begun and "add

some very specific funding programmes to what was a policy notion" (Sheehan 2022). The NZFC's relationship with the Māori film sector was instrumental to this process, and in June 2018 producer Karen Te O Kahurangi Waaka-Tibble was employed as the inaugural Pou Whakahare, a role established to assist in the implementation of the new fund. Additionally, the Māori screen organisation Ngā Aho Whakaari helped design the fund in collaboration with the NZFC.

As part of *Te Rautaki Māori*, the *He Ara Development Fund* was relaunched in 2018 with new guidelines that inadvertently exposed inconsistencies in how producers had been supported across all of the NZFC's development funds, by trying to redress the balance for Māori filmmakers. *He Ara* offered established writers (with a producer of Māori and/or Pacific Island heritage attached) grants of up to $50,000 to develop Māori and Pacific Island stories (NZFC – HA 2018). The expectations beyond general slate development though were vague, and there were no tangible outcomes required so the programme's success was hard to gauge and by 2021 the fund had become inactive. However, the new 2018 guidelines stated that 50-70% of funding was required to be allocated to production company overheads (PCO)[16], rather than almost exclusively allocated to the screenwriter. In contrast, the agency's *Early Development Fund* (EDF) (open to all New Zealand based filmmakers) guidelines state that applicants can "apply for non-recoupable grants of up to $25,000 per application" but, the "Producer or lead applicant fees [are] (typically no more than 10% of the award)" (NZFC – EDF 2022). This undervalues the work that producers offer to the development process, particularly those at the emerging level. The changes to the *He Ara Development Fund* therefore show an understanding that producers are a key part of the development process with their own financial responsibilities. The NZFC initially created its script development fund to ensure that writers were offered fair payment for their services, but in more recent years the inadvertent impact of favouring writers has meant that it is not possible to make a living as a producer without being able to support oneself financially via other means. Despite being discontinued, the new guidelines of the *He Ara Development Fund* exposed an understanding that the rules of all the development funds need to be updated to allow those from lower socio-economic groups greater access into the industry[17].

The launch of the $2.5 million *He Pounamu Te Reo Māori Feature Film Initiative*, aimed at films produced in Te Reo Māori, is the NZFC's biggest step forward in terms of Māori representation. The first film with production funding committed[18] was Tearepa Kahi's second feature *Muru*. Former NZFC CEO David Strong considers it a testament to the strength of the film that it opened the New Zealand International Film Festival (NZIFF) in July 2022. He explained that having a New Zealand film, predominantly in Te Reo, in the main strand (not an ethnic strand) of a major film festival shows "we've normalised language, that we've normalised being a New Zealander" (Strong 2022). This was the realisation of Sheehan's intention to create tangible results through *Te Rautaki Māori*. "Sometimes I think you've got to be really straightforward and say, you've got to back it with money," she said, "because in the film industry that's the only way you get things made and to make things is to build skills and stories" (Sheehan 2022). Although $2.5 million is a substantial commitment to make to one production, the level of exposure this production has received both in New Zealand and internationally has been hugely

valuable. In offering "a response to the 2007 Tūhoe raids" (NZFC – MURU, n.d.), not a re-enactment, the film has an important political message alongside its entertainment value. The greater exposure made possible by the level of NZFC investment means more people will see the film, increasing its influence on emerging filmmakers both Māori and non-Māori.

The NZFC is tasked with allocating funds to meet the objectives of diversity while government funding has been frozen. There has also been a dearth of commercial successes, like 2016's *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, that are capable of subsidising other productions. Larger focused initiatives on the scale of *He Pounamu* have replaced devolved development funding with no tangible results. The NZFC's intention is to secure quicker, more visible results, like that of *Muru* opening the NZIFF. *Muru*'s director Tearepa Kahi is an experienced filmmaker who previously made documentaries (including 2016's *Poi E: The Story of the Song*) as well as the successful feature *Mt. Zion* in 2013[19]. With many of the NZFC's funding strands now aimed at emerging filmmakers[20] and nothing equivalent to Film Fund 2 to help support mid-level directors, the *He Pounamu* fund has helped Kahi bridge the substantive nine-year gap between his first and second feature films. Kahi is just one filmmaker, and the $2.5 million awarded to *Muru's* team of Māori filmmakers (writer Jason Nathan and producer Tame Iti are also Māori), was a sizeable risk to take on just one film in an environment where cinema attendance is constantly jeopardised by the draw of streaming platforms and closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While Dave Gibson claimed that no film was turned down due to a lack of available funding, Sheehan admitted that during her tenure, "sometimes you have a greater call on the funds than [there are] funds available" (Sheehan 2022). With less funding at its disposal, the NZFC decided to fund fewer, larger projects which directly produced feature films for theatrical release. *He Pounamu* is a critical step forward for Māori and Te Reo representation. But large-scale funds are limited in the number of filmmakers they can support and, unless by the miracle of intersectionality, also the number of underrepresented groups.

Despite their potential to limit the diversity of voices, one-off large-scale funds are popular amongst filmmakers and are effective in providing opportunities for the emergence of a new and original voice (Conder 2022). Another such fund is the $1.25 million *125 Fund*, developed under the NZFC's gender policy and launched in 2018 to commemorate 125 years of women's suffrage in New Zealand. *125 Fund* guidelines require only "the director and at least one other key creative is a woman" (NZFC – 125 2018), but of the three films funded, all had entirely female key creative teams (director, writer, producer), and female leads – with excellent results. *The Justice of Bunny King* (Gaysorn Thavat, 2021) was selected at major film festivals around the world and sold into 15 regions internationally; and *Poppy* (Linda Niccol, 2021) won awards at international film festivals, and was the first New Zealand film to feature an actor with Down syndrome in the lead role.

Beyond the key creative roles, *Bunny King* also employed a female cinematographer, editor, line producer, casting directors, production designer and costume designer, alongside women in the five key acting roles. By offering such opportunities, it not only gave women filmmakers valuable industry experience but normalised their employment

in many of the main production roles. Reviews of the film, such as the one in *The Guardian* in February 2022, demonstrate the skill of the filmmakers in bringing "real depth and layers of emotional intelligence to the issues" (GUA – BK 2022), praising the work without highlighting women's high level of involvement with the film's production as anomalous. The *125 Fund* awarded a third grant to *Hawk Mountain* (Loren Taylor) which Miss Conception Films was to produce[21]. Georgina Conder believes the focused nature of the *125 Fund* led directly to clear viewable outcomes and measurable successes. She suggested the NZFC should continue operating it as a low-budget diversity fund which could focus on a different underrepresented group each year (Conder 2022).

Major interventions by public funding bodies can be effective in achieving wider representation of ethnic and cultural minority groups in the film industry. Sheehan considers that with strategies like Screen Australia's *Gender Matters* launched in 2015, major policies in Sweden and Italy and the NZFC's own gender policy, agencies around the world are making concerted efforts to increase access to women in the industry. One successful production company, whose chief focus is the development of stories by and about women in New Zealand is Miss Conception Films.

Miss Conception Films

Miss Conception Films was registered with the New Zealand Companies Office in 2015 by Ainsley Gardiner and Georgina Conder. The first two films the company released were the feature documentary *She Shears* (Jack Nicol, 2018) and the low-budget feature *Reunion* (Jake Mahaffy, 2020) which were directed by men, but focused on stories about women. Conder explained that it is the company's intention to place women in the key creative roles, but they do not discount supporting male directors. Gardiner was an established producer when she founded Miss Conception and Conder had worked as her line producer on *Eagle vs. Shark* (2006) and *Boy* (2010). The pair first met as interns at Larry Parr's Kahukura Productions in 2000 and both consider these intern placements their access points into the industry. As one of the only working Māori producers at the time, Parr contributed significantly to the New Zealand industry, choosing to work not specifically on Māori films but realising the visions of key New Zealand directors such as Roger Donaldson (*Sleeping Dogs*) and Ian Mune (*Came a Hot Friday* [1985]). Conder continued working at Kahukura until the company went into receivership in 2002 and often joined Parr in his producer meetings with the NZFC. She claimed that working for Parr not only helped her build her list of key contacts, but as a woman, the film industry only took her seriously because of her association with him. This illustrates the importance of both an access point into the industry and of a mentor figure for anyone from an underrepresented group. In her words:

> [As a woman] I think I was disrespected and not taken seriously at the beginning, for sure. Never by funders [though]… because I was always with Larry. They knew me right from the beginning with Larry, so I had a different relationship in that way, and [my relationship with] Larry opened doors for me (Conder 2022).

Despite thirty years of combined industry experience and EDF funding awarded in 2015, the two producers initially struggled to support themselves while developing their early

projects due to the limit on the producers' allowance from the development funds. This is a perennial problem for producers without independent financial stability trying to establish a slate of projects. EDF guidelines, which cap the PCO at 10 percent of development funding (NZFC – EDF 2022), are partly responsible for this. Conder considers that in 2022 freelance producers in New Zealand still come from higher socio-economic backgrounds because of the cap on the PCO. Those whose cultural background aren't Pākehā or European tauiwi are disproportionally affected by the need to support themselves. The *New Zealand Socio-economic Index 2018* (NZSEI-18 2022), published by Stats NZ in 2022, notes the mean income for Pākehā is the highest of the five main ethnicities studied[22] (NZSEI-18 2022, 51). The costs associated with feature production in New Zealand are offset by the NZSPG, and often producers choose to write the grant into their budget. However, the NZSPG can only be accessed *after* production is completed, so cash often is accessed via a bank loan (which includes interest) in the short term. The producer and the director are often expected to defer their fees to avoid further interest, and to keep the above-the-line budget down. Deferred fees help cash flow a production but can take many months to be paid, or may not be paid at all if a film fails to be completed. This delayed payment structure and financial uncertainty can dissuade those from less affluent backgrounds from becoming producers.

When Miss Conception began making films in 2015, New Zealand producers were still predominantly male and from an Pākehā background. Of the New Zealand feature films released between 2013 and 2015, 86% of the producers were Pākehā with just 6% Māori; and 64% were male and 36% female[23]. By the time the NZFC published the *Ethnicity – Head Count Method 2019/20* in December 2020, 60.1% of projects approved for development or production funding had Pākehā producers, and 27.7% Māori. If measured as a proportion of the population, representation of Māori is striking – New Zealand's population reported 70.2% European heritage and 16.5% Māori (EHINZ 2018) at the 2018 census – but of course this followed decades of underrepresentation. The NZFC's intervention appears to be making a difference. Similarly, the *NZFC Feature Films Funded Information on Gender over five years 2014-2019* published in September 2019 showed that "in the 2018/19 financial year at least one female producer is named in 93% of all feature film production funding applications" (NZFC – GEN 2019).

Despite these improvements, Conder states that Miss Conception has a mixed relationship with the NZFC, and that the agency still lacks a of proper understanding of what a producer offers to an independent film project (Conder 2022). Continued funding support means Miss Conception has been able to produce films, but agency bureaucracy has at times made the process unnecessarily complex. In the FY 2016/17 the NZFC awarded the company $100,000 from *Boost*, a strand launched in 2014 to "grow the industry by getting more films made more quickly" (NZFC – AR14/15). *Boost* aimed to support "the growth of producers and screen businesses who have a slate of strong projects to develop" (NZFC – BO, n.d.). It negated the need to apply for individual pockets of EDF funding by consolidating development funding into one place, to increase the speed of moving scripts into production. But as always, bureaucracy interfered. *Boost* was also project dependent, so all funding needed to be allocated during the application process and each project was then subject to the same guidelines as EDF funding.

Conder considers this a major error on behalf of the NZFC for two reasons. First, and as previously discussed, the cap on the PCO undervalues the work of producers during the development process; and second, the EDF guidelines are heavily out of date. For example, the NZ Writers' Guild recommended fee rate for screenplay drafts has risen from $17,000 in 2006 to $25,000 in 2021 (NZWG – 06, 2006/ NZWG – 21, 2021) and EDF funding has remained unchanged in 20 years. An EDF grant remains capped at $25,000 per application (NZFC – EDF 2022), so after script development, there is invariably no PCO money left from *Boost* at all. Conder sees this as part of the NZFC's ongoing lack of understanding of the complex nature of the producer's role at all stages of the project.

There have been obstacles, but Miss Conception's achievements speak for themselves. The company has theatrically released six features (documentary and fiction) between 2015 and 2021, and works hard to normalise the presence of women in the film industry. *The Breaker Upperers*, released in 2018, had a crew comprising over 70% women and all heads of department (HODs), with the exception of lighting, were women (Conder 2022)[24]. Miss Conception shared producing credits with Carthew Neal's Piki Films, and the level of representation was a conscious decision made on behalf of both production companies to ensure more women were given roles on both sides of the camera. The film's co-writer/directors Madelaine Sami and Jackie van Beek, both women, played the lead roles and five of the top six cast were played by women. While characters' ethnicities have no major impact on the story, a range of ethnic diversity was represented on screen. The filmmakers intended that making ethnic diversity unimportant in narrative terms would normalise it. The crewing and casting process was made more complex though, by seeking to reflect New Zealand's diverse society. Just as they would rediscover when casting *Cousins* three years later, the lack of substantial roles for people (particularly women) of colour limits development opportunities for talent and means the acting pool is relatively small, necessitating a longer and more in-depth casting process. Conder explained that a short montage sequence of couples breaking up was highly complex to arrange (partly because of the high costs associated with hiring some of the actors). "We paid the most ridiculous amounts of money for people doing cameos," she said. A group of successful New Zealand actors, including Oscar Kightley, Pax Assadi, Chris Parker, Yvette Parsons, and Lucy Lawless, all employed to show the multiculturalism and diversity that makes up modern New Zealand, feature in the sequence, appearing on screen for just seconds.

The Breaker Upperers performed well at the box offices in both New Zealand, earning NZ$1.8 million (NZFC – 20 2021), and Australia, where it made USD$1.5 million [NZ$2.3 million] (IMDB – BUPS, n.d.), later selling to Netflix who licensed it for 190 countries (not including NZ and Aus), an important revenue source in the online streaming era (Conder 2022). Multi-region sales may not be as lucrative as they once were for films (Netflix offer a fixed fee, not one per region) but, Conder explained, 20 years ago it was much less likely the film would have been shown in 190 countries. Conder is also careful to press that there is little in the way of financial return for film investors in the contemporary era. Producers licensing their films to just one company (i.e., Netflix) may mean fewer parties clipping the ticket in the process, but the limited choice of major streaming platforms[25] means it is likely to be less lucrative. Selling films to streaming platforms like Netflix can be

as unreliable as selling films via sales agents into different territories. It may be a simpler process, but sales are in no way guaranteed. Mladen Ivancic explained why, "The David Farrier documentary *Tickled* (2016) sold for a lot of money to a streamer, and more recently *Coming Home in the Dark* (James Ashcroft, 2021) has sold for a modest amount, but it's really random, [and] most films don't get picked up by streamers" (Ivancic 2022). Miss Conception's sale of *The Breaker Upperers* is therefore a notable achievement.

The success of *Cousins* was different to that of *The Breaker Upperers*[26]. Based on Patricia Grace's novel of the same name, the story tracks the very different coming-of-age tales of three wāhine Māori cousins, and Grace's in-depth psychological exploration of the wāhine Māori experience across an entire generation is a key text in the New Zealand literary canon. The story deals with complex issues and their specific impact on Aotearoa New Zealand, including the impact of colonialism on Māori culture and historical abuse in state care. The filmmakers predicted *Cousins* was a story that would perfectly fit the NZFC's remit to fund films that represent the people of New Zealand, although its themes would not make it as easy to sell as the light-hearted *Breaker Upperers*. They understood that while it may connect with a local audience, its cultural specificity could make it much less likely to resonate with foreign ones. This proved correct, and the film was a success locally but gained limited overseas sales, comprising a theatrical release in Australia, a limited theatrical release in the USA and UK, and a Netflix release in both the latter territories.

Cousins had proved a difficult text to adapt and took twenty years to come to the big screen, held up by NZFC bureaucracy as much as creative difficulties. The NZFC first supported an adaptation in 2001/02 with development money paid to Grace herself and director Merata Mita, who had optioned the book. The same team was supported with five further rounds of development funding between 2001 and 2009, with director Gaylene Preston also coming on to help the development process, ultimately unsuccessfully. Miss Conception picked up the lapsed option in 2015 and developed the project with Patricia Grace's daughter-in-law, the writer/director Briar Grace Smith, adapting with Gardiner. It took two further rounds of development funding (NZFC – COU, n.d.), and another five years for the project to find its way to the big screen. Conder considers that the NZFC's ongoing involvement in the script-writing process made this amount of development necessary. The agency's opinion that the protagonist in *Cousins* was too passive lengthened the development process in 2015, but ultimately this scrutiny led to the film being made. During the long development process the film accrued more debt due to bureaucratic practices at the NZFC, which dictated that the project continued to be liable for the development loans paid to previous teams[27]. Gardiner and Conder therefore had to contend with a much higher above-the-line budget than anticipated once they were finally granted production funding.

The producers aimed to position *Cousins* as a mainstream film appealing to a broad New Zealand audience, so they planned to apply through the main production funding strand rather than through *Te Rautaki Māori*. The NZFC decided to allocate production funding from *Te Rautaki Māori* anyway, despite the minimal amount of Te Reo in the film making it ineligible for the *He Pounamu Te Reo Māori Feature Film Initiative*. The filmmakers worried that *Cousins* was "taking money [away] from another film that might not get funded"

(Conder 2022). As Leanne Saunders explained, the NZFC "has found it difficult getting applications [to *Te Rautaki Māori*] but they continue to come through the main front [main funding strand]" (Saunders 2022). The NZFC saw a high-profile project like *Cousins* as a chance to boost the visibility of *Te Rautaki Māori,* which had received fewer applications than expected. Desray Armstrong suggests that while the launch of a fund may act as a beacon for fledgling filmmakers, filmmakers need to spend several years gaining experience making films before they feel ready to apply to such specialised funds.

Miss Conception Films has explored many different types of stories on screen, but always with women at the centre. *The Breaker Upperers* and *Cousins* are very different films both in aesthetic and commercial terms, but they both centre on women's stories. By using the NZFC funding made available to them, under the focused strands such as the *125 Fund* and the more general *Boost* fund, the company has honoured its intention of getting stories about women front and centre on New Zealand screens. Another production noted for its pioneering promotion of a majorly underrepresented group is *Rūrangi*. The hybrid feature/TV series was created by and about the trans community in New Zealand, and it benefited from the inclusion of interns funded through the Talent Development team at the NZFC. The series was made on a limited production budget and the cast and crew worked for below the standard rate.

Rūrangi – the Weight of Representation

Producer Craig Gainsborough first became aware of *Rūrangi* when it was a one-page – unnamed – concept jotted down during a writers' brainstorming session at the New Zealand Media and Entertainment (NZME) production company (Gainsborough 2022). With his background in ethical representation in the law sector, he understood the importance of authenticity of voice, and in 2018 he brought the project to his friend the trans writer and actor Cole Meyers. He then licensed the intellectual property (IP) from NZME in 2019. The team decided to approach Oliver Page, a more experienced writer, to help with script development. Meyers and Page took alternating passes until the third draft when Page "stepped back from his role so that Cole could really just start to own it" (Gainsborough 2022). Meyers allowed his experiences being trans to provide the authenticity of voice so important to the project's success. A more experienced scriptwriter working with a less experienced one is a traditional screenwriting practice often employed in Hollywood, but typically the process is done in reverse with the more experienced writer employed to polish the draft. Comparing *Rūrangi* to *Born to Dance* (2015), another New Zealand film directed by a filmmaker from an underrepresented background, Māori actor Tammy Davis, the difference between the employment of an authentic voice in the script is clear.

Born to Dance was Davis' feature debut and is the story of a teenage Māori boy desperate to become a professional hip-hop dancer, against family expectations and the limitations of his lower socio-economic background. Māori playwright Hone Kouka originally wrote the script, but the producers[28] hired American Steve Barr and Pākehā New Zealander Casey Whelan to polish the draft. As a result, while the film employs a similar level of on-screen diversity to *The Breaker Upperers*, the dialogue was assessed as "cringe-worthy" by *Metro* in its September 2015 review (Met – BTD 2015).The film is entrenched in the

American influence of other dance films such as *Step Up* (Anne Fletcher, 2006) and the *Stuff* review claimed, "*Born To Dance* tells a story we've seen set in Los Angeles and Brooklyn a hundred times" (Stu 2015). The producers aimed to sell the film to a North American audience by hiring other writers, and because the film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2015, it was partly successful. Flush with synthesised Auckland urban slang, the script lacked authentic on-screen representation, and only helped to enhance stereotypes of Māori as drug dealers and clowns. The *Rūrangi* team were determined to avoid this type of approach to the project (Gainsborough 2022).

Rūrangi started out as a web series with five seven-minute episodes and a total production budget of $650,000 – $300,000 from NZOA, and $350,000 from private individuals and arts patrons. A further $750,000 was raised through deferred fees and in-kind payments from technical equipment companies and post-production facilities (Gainsborough 2022). A project of this size would usually require a much higher budget and even with this generous support from the filmmaking community, Gainsborough said that making the series was "pretty intense… there's a huge personal cost to doing stuff without a proper budget" (Gainsborough 2022). Gainsborough blames the funding bodies for the stress the team endured, saying they still display a tendency with 'diversity projects' to award less money than 'mainstream projects', a tokenism which shows how they undervalue the project. He said, "[funders think,] 'We're going to raise them up by giving them this money… lucky them,' it's like [we're] a charity case" (Gainsborough 2022). The lack of proper funding also made the burden of representation the project carried even heavier. *Rūrangi* was the first title of its kind in New Zealand and although the trans community valued the opportunity to see their stories on screen they were also "worried and scared about how they were going to be presented" (Gainsborough 2022). Delivering a quality product was of vital importance which added to the pressures of the filmmaking process.

Rūrangi proved a success; the Berlinale's Series Market chose it to be one of only two New Zealand series screened in 2020[29]. To capitalise on the opportunity to sell it to the international market, Gainsborough's team decided to adapt it into a feature film and the NZFC awarded them $85,000 from the feature production strand to fund the adaptation (NZFC – RUR, n.d.). The film version subsequently screened at several specialist festivals around the world including BFI Flare London LGBTQ+ Film Festival and the Hong Kong Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, as well as selling to streaming service Neon. The NZFC had originally supported the project much earlier through its Talent Development team by funding six gender-diverse interns for a total of $36,000 (NZFC – RUR, n.d.). However, owing to a disconnect between the NZFC departments, the project did not come to the attention of the feature film team until much later. Gainsborough considered the internships a key aspect of positioning *Rūrangi* as a flag bearer production for the gender-diverse community and helping develop gender-diverse representation in the industry has been the lasting effect. As Gainsborough stated, "Since creating season one, and now onto season two, the number of openly gender-diverse people in the film industry has skyrocketed. I'm looking at our team and we've got gender-diverse heads of department (HOD) now" (Gainsborough 2022). Previously, there had been no gender-diverse

filmmakers afforded the level of professional development to gain the necessary level of experience to take on HOD roles.

The NZFC then supported the development of *Rūrangi* season two with $80,000 (NZFC – RUR, n.d.) and it was subsequently commissioned by NZOA with a budget of $2 million for six 22-minute episodes (industry standard for commercial TV) (Gainsborough 2022). In comparison, NZOA awarded the mainstream drama series *Vegas* (dir. var., 2021-) $6 million for six 44-minute episodes for its first season (NZOA – VEG, n.d.), a discrepancy of $1 million pro rata. The *Rūrangi* team are therefore still forced to pay their cast and crew below industry rates because it is not considered a mainstream series. The team never considered making a second film version of *Rūrangi* because the longer form narrative format that TV provides better suits the themes they are interested in exploring, but this decision means the team could not continue to offer the same development opportunities for the trans community. There is no centralised Talent Development team at NZOA, which means the *Rūrangi* team need to fund the trans filmmakers' internships directly from the central budget. This suggests that the NZFC considers diversity and representation a more pressing issue than the NZOA, although the NZFC is a much larger organisation. As an agency, the NZFC is actively placing a centralised focus on diversity, which has ultimately led directly to the publishing in June 2022 of the agency's first diversity strategy.

He Ara Whakauranga Kanorau, the Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for 2022-2025

Launched on 1st June 2022, *the Diversity and Inclusion Strategy* aims to "Place diversity and inclusion at the heart of all we do attracting and empowering stories and storytellers that are fully reflective of Aotearoa" by an agency that is "an industry leader that fosters a diverse and inclusive environment for the Aotearoa screen sector" (NZFC – DIS 2022, 2). CEO David Strong said the intention of publishing the strategy was "to enable anyone to thrive and be sustainable, to tell the stories that suit them" (Strong 2022).

The five main outcomes of the strategy are:

1. "The NZFC has a workplace culture that is diverse, inclusive and equitable
2. We understand the makeup of our industry and see progress in diversity and inclusion
3. NZFC practices, processes and services are accessible
4. Talent and skills development opportunities are equitable and inclusive
5. Diverse realities are represented on and off camera"

(NZFC – DIS 2022, 18-27)

Generally, the strategy lacks the specific tangible initiatives Sheehan considered key in the formation of *Te Rautaki Māori* or the *125 Fund*. Plus, activities that have existed at the agency for several years already are included in the strategy, so little that is new is added, such as: "scholarships to filmmakers from underrepresented communities" (NZFC – DIS 2022, 25). One action point particularly relevant here though is the need for a "review of the Funding Assessment Process and Policy" (NZFC – DIS 2022, 27). As discussed above, some producers are inhibited from working in the industry due to outdated guidelines for

some of the major funding strands such as EDF and ADF. The strategy notes that they aim to have the review complete by December 2024, but the target is still "to be developed". In fact, no substantial targets have been added to any of the five outcomes listed above that would help realise them in practice in the filmmaking space. This suggests that the benign and idealistic policy lacks the substantive weight to make any real difference on a practical level to diversity in the industry.

The document does, however, acknowledge the recent "shift in focus globally for diversity in screen stories" (NZFC – DIS 2022, 11). This is an important point to make, but any subsequent policy will need to be developed in tandem with specific communities to be properly effective given the tendency in the film industry to support the most experienced and dominant voice. In its current state the document offers no evidence that this collaborative approach will be adopted. Craig Gainsborough is supportive of the shift toward diversity in screen stories but is also wary because he fears underrepresented communities will not be able to make any reasonable changes to the projects being produced. As he said, "What authentic representation comes down to is the level of power that those communities have in the decisions around their representation on screen" (Gainsborough 2022). Gainsborough explained that *Rūrangi*'s success has seen a rise of trans stories being developed, but the issue is that "they're being brought to the trans community by people who are not trans. They're not coming from the trans community" (Gainsborough 2022). He explained that non-trans filmmakers have attached trans consultants to their projects, but in a manner that is perfunctory and still caught in dominant attitudes towards the community. Consultants face pressure to bow to senior showrunners because they are "used to just shutting up and going with the flow because they're too afraid to speak up" (Gainsborough 2022). The NZFC shows a cultural will to acknowledge the need for underrepresented communities to tell their stories in the DIS, stating, "It is vital to make space for underrepresented cultures to be able to tell their own stories authentically and where appropriate, seek collaborations rather than superficial consultation" (NZFC – DIS 2022, 10), but again, it is not explained how this will be achieved. Gainsborough suggests that "there's an element of consent culture which needs to be brought into the power and decision-making process" (Gainsborough 2022). If consultants from an underrepresented community are included in a project led by filmmakers not part of that community Gainsborough suggests an enthusiastic 'yes' should be required on any key cultural decisions, rather than an agreement by silence. This will help protect the vulnerable and their stories.

Although lacking tangible results, the attempt made to implement a diversity strategy of any kind is a key step forward in supporting and encouraging those from underrepresented groups to be recognised as having stories to tell. Conversely, this also means that any groups not included in the NZFC devised definition of underrepresented groups may be further dissuaded from trying to tell their stories. Yet as the NZFC are keen to point out, their diversity definition is a living one and likely to evolve over time (Hancock 2021). The key result is that an acknowledgement by an industry leader gives credence to those underrepresented groups who previously considered themselves unworthy of industry attention.

Conclusion

From 2018 the NZFC introduced major interventions to the industry in the form of the *125 Fund* and the *He Pounamu Te Reo Māori Feature Film Initiative*, two funds that aimed to produce New Zealand feature films made by distinct voices from underrepresented groups. The NZFC's decision to focus funding on large-scale feature productions created more immediate and tangible results in the form of specific features like *The Justice of Bunny King* and *Muru*, but as a consequence, fewer filmmakers were awarded funding because of the focused nature of the funds. The NZFC deemed this necessary during the difficult financial period caused by COVID-19 and a lack of increased funding to the arts. By introducing *Te Rautaki Māori* and the Pou Whakahare role to administer it, the NZFC has shown itself to be more in touch with Māori filmmaking than ever before. The limitations of the fund is that it serves just one underrepresented community when there are many that need NZFC attention. Also the industry needs to acknowledge that filmmaking voices take time to develop their own style. *Te Rautaki Māori* may encourage new filmmakers to begin their practice, but as most filmmakers begin their journey with short films in the talent development space and there is currently no direct connection between this space and the feature space, results will be hard to gauge.

Similarly, the gap between the funding body and the filmmaking community becomes more visible the further developed the work in the diversity space becomes. The publication of the DIS, for example, lacked any tangible initiatives to develop the relationship with diversity and exposed the agency's difficulty in engaging with all identified underrepresented groups in one overarching strategy. The one-off large-scale production funds are only one aspect of the NZFC's funding strategy, whilst the blue-sky aspirations delivered in the DIS are overly idealistic and become immediately counterintuitive to the working practices of filmmakers. There is also much work to be done on funds outside of the diversity space. As seen in the example of Miss Conception Films, the traditional development funding strands need updating so they do not work against producers from underrepresented groups working in the industry.

Despite this continued friction, the intervention by the agency into the industry and the ongoing development of bold and original stories being told by filmmakers have had a major influence on the types of films and TV content on New Zealand screens. These include, most recently, the development of filmmaking voices from the underrepresented trans community thanks predominantly to *Rūrangi*. As *Rūrangi* demonstrates, filmmakers are often required to make major personal and professional sacrifices, such as working for lower rates to have a noticeable impact in an underrepresented area of the screen industry. Funding agencies are not always willing to support new and original projects purely to help develop filmmakers' voices, and many filmmakers, including Ainsley Gardiner and Georgina Conder, consider investment in voices rather than individual projects the key to creating a thriving local film industry.

As seen in the examples of Rudall Heywood, John O'Shea and Geoff Murphy, the national cinema of New Zealand has become more inclusive owing to the intervention by the filmmakers themselves (rather than simply by the NZFC). The NZFC is making a concerted effort to normalise diversity both on screen and behind the camera, and when a major

financial commitment is made, such as *Te Rautaki Māori*, then the results become clear and major titles such as *Muru* add to the country's canon. The agency though is not a production house, and the development of the national cinema comes from the stories created by the filmmakers. Titles such as *Cousins*, which is a film focused purely on issues associated with one New Zealand demographic (just as previous key titles such as *Once Were Warriors*, *Whale Rider* and *Waru* were), and those of films such as *The Breaker Upperers*, which complements this singular focus by normalising the range of gender and racial diversity both in front of and behind the camera. The films produced ultimately define the national cinema of the country and in the contemporary era, the NZFC is making the best effort at fostering the widest range of diverse filmmaking voices possible, to make the films properly representational of the ethnic and cultural make-up of the country.

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[16] Production company overheads can range from the costs of optioning source material, paying a translator, the cost of office space, rent, printing, computer costs etc., or the simple cost of living (food, power, rent).
[17] In October 2022, the guidelines of *Advanced Development Funding* (ADF) are currently being revaluated, but there are no announced plans to offer the same attention to EDF.
[18] As the offer is still noted as being conditional the amount of production funding awarded is currently unavailable, but the fund offers $2.5 million per annum.
[19] *Mt. Zion* was developed as part of *Te Paepae Ataata*, the three-year Māori development fund, in 2012.
[20] Key programmes include *Fresh Shorts* (fully funded short film making programme); the Trainee Producer/Director Internship Scheme; the MIFF Accelerator Programme (aimed at filmmakers looking to transition from shorts to features); and EDF.
[21] The project's future is currently unclear.
[22] Pākehā, Māori, Pacific Islanders, Asian and MELAA (Middle Eastern, Latin American and African)
[23] This time period was before the NZFC officially collected data on their filmmakers, and the stats have been devised from a list of the 38 films released during this period. This table is included in the appendices.
[24] For *Cousins* in 2020-21 they ensured that all of the HODs were women, a process which included enticing Jo Bollinger out of retirement to be the film's gaffer (head of lighting) (Conder).
[25] Alongside Netflix, in New Zealand, there is Amazon Prime, Apple TV, Disney + (who also own Hulu), and Neon.
[26] The film has made $1.6 million and is the sixteenth most successful film ever at the domestic box office. *The Breaker Uppers* is at number fifteen, making $1.8 million.
[27] Previously, Advanced Development Funding (ADF) was due to be repaid on the first day of principal photography, but at time of writing the guidelines for ADF are being updated and are unavailable. The past funding decisions page, which totals all monies paid to *Cousins,* however, does not indicate that any development costs have been repaid (NZFC – COU, n.d.) although this likely indicates that the film has not officially gone into profit yet.
[28] The film's producer Leanne Saunders has been the Head of Development and Production at the NZFC since 2017.
[29] The other series was the high-end TV adaptation of *The Luminaries* (Claire McCarthy, 2020), adapted from the Man Booker Prize winning 2013 novel by Eleanor Catton.