

Peter Limbrick, *Making Settler Cinemas: Film and Colonial Encounters in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010.

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The first pages of Peter Limbrick's *Making Settler Cinemas: Film and Colonial Encounters in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand* describe his encounter with a scrapbook made during the production of *The Seekers* in the Bay of Plenty in the early 1950s, and entrusted to him by its maker almost sixty years later. His first person narration of this event takes the form of a lovingly thick description of both the book, and the kitchen table in Whakatane at which he reads it. It also provides a purposeful illustration of an idea central to the book: that the film historian is him- or herself embedded in history. More than a convenient way in to the bigger story to follow, then – a narrative hook – this attention to the stuff surrounding and enabling the practice of film history sets the tone for a work that tells a very different story than the literature on New Zealand cinema preceding it.

It should be noted that this is not a book exclusively about New Zealand cinema. Rather, the book places New Zealand cinema in a prominent relationship to two other “settler cinemas”: that of Australia, and the United States. The book is written in three parts. Part one is focused on films made in the USA by Merian C. Cooper and John Ford between the late 1920s and the late 1940s: *The Four Feathers* (Cooper, 1929), which recreated a story of British Imperial conquest in the Sudan, shot in part on location in California, and the Argosy Westerns – primarily one of the ‘cavalry trilogy,’ *Fort Apache* (Ford, 1948) – in which the same production team made stories of American Empire on the Western frontier. Part two studies Ealing’s Australian Westerns, produced at the end of World War II by a British company shooting in the Australian outback, seeking to profit both from the Imperial history between the two nations and from the more expansive locations Australia offered. Part three moves to two films made in New Zealand – *Hei Tiki* (Alexander Markey, 1935), and *The Seekers* (Ken Annakin, 1954) – both of which were made by itinerant producers and directors – one American, the other English – and both of which told stories of colonial conquest and settlement featuring a Māori cast playing historically fantastic versions of themselves, and supported by local crew. Each section is also focused around a particular theme, all of which straddle the case studies: namely, gender, space, empire, and history. Thus, the book covers a period that is significant both in film historical terms – moving from the early sound period, through the consolidation of the studio system, to the expanding markets of the postwar period – and, more significant here, for the changing Imperial relations encompassed in it. The films themselves are all transnational in one way or another, involving the translation of stories, the movement of capital, and the shifting stakes of reception highlighted by cinema’s movement between sites.

While works treating both Australian and New Zealand films are relatively common in this small field, the inclusion of the United States in this work – and with this, the still novel assertion that it is, itself, the site for a “settler cinema” – shifts the centre of gravity away from a national or regional cinema model, to a more complicated consideration of cross-cultural encounters. This is not, then, a “New Zealand cinema book.” It is one in which New Zealand is nonetheless central. The book both begins and ends here, and is informed, more generally, by a perspective born of experiences and conversations from this part of the world. The book’s claim is at once that the cinema of New Zealand, Australia and the United States is shaped by a shared history of colonial encounters, and is therefore transnational in character, and that cinema in general is best understood through the various encounters that it in turn provokes and enables. To begin his narrative at a kitchen table in Whakatane is in this sense to assert the significance of local encounters in a way that local readers may even recognize.

In broader terms, Limbrick’s encounter with the scrapbook demonstrates his commitment to what he describes later as “encounters with the past in the present...[and] attention to leftovers” (p.206) in the writing of film history. While there are precedents in the international literature for works dealing either with films leftover from (or out of) the standard historiographies – such as “ephemeral” or “orphan” cinema – or with the ephemera surrounding the film text, this style of film historiography has not featured prominently in studies of the cinema made here.¹ With some notable recent exceptions,² in the book-length literature featuring New Zealand cinema these “leftovers” have tended to include films made before the 1970s, with Rudall Hayward’s work in the teens and 1920s and *Broken Barrier* (1952) acting as metaphorical stepping stones to the developing national film industry of that time and after. For

this reason alone, Limbrick’s book – which studies films made between 1929 and 1954, and not those by Hayward or O’Shea – makes a significant contribution to the field.

More substantially, by moving away from questions of authorship and the apparent indigenization of a settler experience or point-of-view, *Making Settler Cinemas* offers an alternative to a prominent narrative about the earlier cinema made in New Zealand. This narrative, broadly speaking, proposes that by providing exemplary texts and evidence of industry, cinema history should operate in the service of a story of a national coming-of-age, or what Limbrick describes as “national becoming” (p.143).³ All of the films which Limbrick writes about – not just those made in New Zealand – are marginal to their respective national cinemas, revealing the stakes of his claim when he implies, in the same discussion, that all cinema is tied to expedition (p.142). By the same token, Limbrick makes the case that cinema, per se, is emblematic of settler colonialism, by virtue of its industrial, technical, and cultural valences (p.37). He does so, however, without the benefit of the ‘good’ settler text.

A recent critique of Limbrick’s book reveals precisely the tension which this change in perspective can create. In the introduction to the recent co-edited volume *New Zealand Cinema: Interpreting the Past*⁴ the authors assert that one can find in the films “produced from New Zealand by New Zealanders” a “unique” and apparently authentic perspective, and that as a consequence “it is to Rudall Hayward that one must turn in order to perceive the preoccupations and representational strategies that are truly characteristic of settler cinema in this country” (p.21). The suggestion implicit in this critique is that Limbrick’s book fails to account properly for our, or even a national cinema, muddying its boundaries with the inclusion of peripatetic authors, and culturally ambiguous and often offensive narratives.⁵ Notwithstanding the scale of Hayward’s achievements as the *only* consistent and locally resident feature film *auteur* in this period, such a stance is problematic in failing to find any way to account for the significance of films which were made here in large quantities by people other than, and less apparently worthy than Hayward: the search, in this work, for a “Father figure” for New Zealand cinema – found by apparent consensus in Hayward (p.21) – conflates the “preoccupations and representational strategies” of this country and its cinema in this period with those of a single, and not coincidentally Pākeha man.

Limbrick’s work thus differs from others in its neighbourhood precisely because of its determined lack of interest in the conception, or rearing of a “national cinema,” a project and category which, as Limbrick argues, demands linear, progressive narratives and features apparently stable film texts (pp.13–15). Rather, his effort is to localize, to specify, and to complicate the film text, without losing sight of his inquiry into cinema’s “movement between sites” or the “cinematic traffic” which he argues is characteristic not just of settler cinema, but settler society more generally (p.5). In his discussion of *Fort Apache*, for instance, Limbrick considers the significance of spatial practices – the control over and knowledge of space – in establishing (im)proper settlement. Discourses of space, he argues, make settler colonialism visible in narrative film (p.89). The ability to map, contain, or otherwise realize space is of course an attribute of cinema more generally; here, Limbrick works through this question using the granular matter of a case study in situ, and specifying the particular qualities of a settler cinema. His interest then is not in the effect of one, more dominant (film) culture on another, but in the cross-cultural traffic crystallised in the various “encounters” which cinema enables. He pursues this goal by examining the ways in which

the film text is located in history, necessarily differing in its different sites of encounter. To this end, the book studies not just the text, but its production, distribution, reception, and perhaps most significantly in the case of the New Zealand-made material, its re-exhibition, at a remove of a generation or more from its first screenings. Thus, while the book is organized around a series of case studies of feature films, it differs from studies which, in presenting series of exemplary texts or auteurist narratives, seek to establish something like a national canon. By shifting focus to the extratextual materials surrounding film texts, and by featuring films with “ambiguous genealogies” (p.128) this book argues for an understanding of film, not as text or narrative, but as site of encounter, much like the reading of a scrapbook with which it opens.

Something like a scrapbook, this is a work that rewards patient reading. It's also characterized by the good yarns and adventure stories that its filmic subjects would probably applaud, and by lucid, and satisfying close analysis; this aside, it took time – at least for this reader – for the logic and complexity of the argument to hit home. At first encounter, the choice of filmic subjects or national case studies can seem expedient. Limbrick is a New Zealander, trained in Australia, and resident in the U.S. Why else, it could be asked, these nations, and not, for instance, Canada, to name only the most prominent English-speaking alternative? There are small, but revealing intersections between the films and film productions he has chosen to study: for instance, Merian C. Cooper's plans to shoot in New Zealand – to “make war canoes and use them” (p.70) – or the links between the first of the Ealing Westerns, *The Overlanders*, and the *Four Feathers* (p.108 n.33), which enrich and support the argument. As for the question of which nations to study, Limbrick addresses this himself in the introduction to the work: more than this well-reasoned and conscientious explanation, however, the book as it unfolds does the work of convincing not that another nation or cinema could not have been included, but that the assumption that this would be a work about national cinemas is both persistent and, here, ill-placed. Limbrick's own persistent effort is to return to the trope of the encounter, both as it is fundamental to settlement – and, therefore, settler cinemas – and as a means of engaging with the filmic text. The lesson here, at the risk of sounding didactic, is actually a fairly simple one: that as the book asserts in its title, settler cinemas are not born (to grow up into national ones), but “made,” and indeed re-made in what Limbrick refers to as the “friction” of each new encounter (p.2).

The novelty and reward of this insight for me, as will be clear from the review which has preceded, is the work Limbrick does to effectively “provincialise” what has typically been the centre: his own centre of gravity seems to be here, in this place; the United States is not in its typical position as master cinematic narrative but itself settled, and settling.⁶ This may be clearest in the last section of the book, which deals explicitly with New Zealand-made material, and in which Limbrick's presence as film historian and author is much more explicitly invoked. Throughout the book, his efforts to move between different kinds of cinematic sites – industrial, technical, narrative, and affective – shift authority away from the film text as itself the habitual centre of film historical enquiry. In the book's final section – “Film History and Settler Cinema in Aotearoa New Zealand” – the labour of producing film history comes squarely into focus by virtue of his attention to the preservation and screening practices of The New Zealand Film Archive / Ngā Kaitiaki o Ngā Taonga Whitiāhua. In the final chapter, the work assumes increasingly intimate dimensions, as Limbrick travels with Archive staff to re-screen *The Seekers* in the locations where it was made (hence, his encounter with the scrapbook). This section realizes the promise of the “encounter” by placing the author's person and practice in the midst of the “unfinished histories... which make the film in the present” (p.174). It is a process of which he writes: “I felt myself to be a minor player in an ongoing encounter with past, present, and future” (p.181). Rather than text, then, or production or distribution practices, Limbrick's emphasis is what he describes as the “affective and corporeal labour” which both makes and localizes settler cinemas (203), and in which he, as film historian, and his book are equally implicated in kind.

The encounter, as it features here, thus becomes a way to consider the practice of film history. It's interesting that the final section, with “history” in its title, is the most focused on the present; this part of the book is also the most in debt to indigenous epistemologies – specifically, kaupapa Māori. Particularly in this section of the book, Limbrick goes beyond those works which he cites as examples of scholarship in the extra-textual matter of film history by virtue of his attention to the status of films and their ancillary texts as *culturally situated* sites of encounter; this too when the vision of ‘culture’ offered by the text is a problematic, even offensive one. His achievement, then, is not just that the book offers a consideration of the practice of film history, but by doing so, offers a way into an ethics of film history.

Notes

1. “Ephemeral” or “orphan” film includes industrial films, home movies, and other genres of film not destined to be screened in cinemas. Limbrick cites, as precedents for historians working extratextually, Amelie Hastie, Jon Lewis, and Eric Smoodin, all of whom are based in, and study the US (pp.22; 210 n. 43), and acknowledges “recent works on Australian cinema...[which] share my disinterest in constructing a national cinema,” such as those by Deb Verhoeven and Deane Williams (pp.14–15). However, his model for settler coloniality, and the trope of the settler, is heavily influenced by the work of writers and commentators based in New Zealand and informed by our cultural politics, such as Barry Barclay, Jo Smith, Paul Tapsell, and Stephen Turner.
2. See, for example, *New Zealand Film: An Illustrated History* (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2011) which surveys films made in New Zealand from a wide variety of authors and genres for a general readership; Alfio Leotta's *Touring the Screen: Tourism and New Zealand Film Geographies* (Chicago: Intellect, 2011), is a recent example of work destined, like Limbrick's book, primarily for an academic readership which includes a chapter discussing pre-1940s productions from a variety of genres and makers.
3. His example of this trend is Duncan Petrie and Duncan Stuart's work *A Coming of Age: 30 Years of New Zealand Film* (Auckland: Random House, 2008).
4. *New Zealand Cinema: Interpreting the Past* edited by Alistair Fox, Barry Keith Grant and Hilary Radner. Chicago: Intellect, 2011.
5. As Limbrick also notes, to settle speaks both to the urge to establish residence and to tame or quiet, “bringing [the land] into conformity with a settler colonial imaginary” (p.83). Efforts to delimit the good settler text, and to restrict settler coloniality accordingly, may be motivated by similar impulses.
6. My reference here is to Dipesh Chakrabarty's foundational text in postcolonial-theory, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). Limbrick's claim is that his own book distinguishes itself from the larger field of film history by taking “the development of postcolonial theory [in relation to the settler colony] as its explicit aim” (p.208 n.19).