

The Seekers: Unmasking Localised Identities in Media Representations

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Abstract: During the early twentieth century, common themes for films made in New Zealand were those of encounters between Māori and European during the pre-colonial and post-colonial periods. This mode of representation saw films such as *The Seekers* become vehicles for which imperial ideals and attitudes could be transported to intended audiences. Interpretation of these films often resulted in a replication of assumptions and misrepresentations of Māori culture and identity. In the case of *The Seekers*, contemporary interpretations have transformed the film. As a result, this film has become a signifier to a new generation, permitting reconnections with people, places and time to be made. In 1954 a British film crew arrived in the Bay of Plenty to shoot scenes for their production *The Seekers*. This paper explores the imperialistic attitudes of the film and the way it masks the reality of Māori identities, but also the way in which its semiotic relationships allow it to be interpreted differently.

Keywords: film; identities; representation; semiotic relationship

Introduction

During the early part of the twentieth century, the characteristics of cinema film in New Zealand, particularly those made by British production companies, were largely reflective of imperialistic beliefs and ideals (Blythe, 1994) These ideals determined how the film industry engaged in formulating and framing all areas of film production, and the extent to which cinema product was delivered to viewers.

Striving to meet the demands of mainstream viewer expectations also played a major role in the way films were crafted. Like *The Seekers* that was filmed at a similar time to movies such as *African Queen* (1951), *Outcast of the Islands* (1952) a major part of the emphasis was on the use of ‘authentic’ locations. Creating images of people and places according to mainstream notions and ideals supported viewer demands. Such activities cemented certain kinds of semiotic relations between film makers and viewers, through which exotic locations were always read as evidence of the authenticity and immediacy of indigenous cultures.

The communication inherent in these relationships can be partially explained “...by a theory of signs or semiotics (from the Greek semeion, sign)” (Gripsrud, 2002, p. 100). A theory of signs (in this context, film imagery) explains that communication can proceed differently at different times. These relationships can be understood if one acknowledges how, through the medium of film, film makers were able to reconstruct life and life’s experiences, transmit

these images via film and permit viewers to receive, interpret and share the message (or messages) as portrayed in film.

From the early 1900s through to the 1960s, formats of communication embraced notions of knowing and doing in such a way that allowed indigenous truths, or "...essential truths" (Mita, 2001, p.10) to be controlled and in this study it is argued that they were masked. For Māori, such constructed truths and their physical manifestations such as traditions, dress, language, cultural beliefs and values, did not conform or align with mainstream practices. For this reason the reality of those truths were distorted and masked with imperial cultural attitudes and preferences to win the approval of those working in and for the film industry along with viewers who supported these attitudes. As a result of this masking, identity and images of Māori have been romanticised, exoticised and often, caricaturised in film (Blythe, 1994).

Identity transformation in early film was not only confined to actors or specific locations. The use of taonga (cultural treasures) was also used for the purpose of creating an 'authentic' feel to the film, often with little regard given to the meaning and significance instilled within these taonga prior to being used as scene props. Outcomes of these portrayals have contributed to stereotyping and constructions of mock cultural identities (hooks, 1990). For Māori, these constructions minimised opportunities to validate their individual, cultural and tribal identities. That is, to tell their stories. So what does this mean for Māori whose stories were appropriated?

In 1954, the arrival of a British film crew to the Bay of Plenty region provided opportunities for local community members (particularly Māori) to partake in the production scenes for the film *The Seekers* (also known as 'Land of Fury'). Based upon John Guthrie's book of the same name, the film was set during the early colonial period of European settlement in New Zealand. This paper examines the experiences and impacts the production crew and film had on the lives of local Māori who were either directly or indirectly involved with the filming during that time, and examines what affects this had upon constructions of their identity.

The first two sections of this report begin with the early 1900s where imperialistic attitudes and semiotic relationships greatly influenced the way films such as *The Seekers* were masked and interpreted. Further sections provide insights into the construction of images and how the role of taonga as portrayed in *The Seekers* were prone to being objectified, misrepresented and appropriated during film shoots conducted in and around the Bay of Plenty. The last part of this report explores how *The Seekers* has contributed to the construction of localised Māori identity through representation of its people, taonga and culture with a concluding section summarising main ideas and findings.

Colonising the screen: an era of imperial ideas and notions

Many films made in New Zealand during the early 1900s attempted to reproduce fictional aspects of pre-colonial and early post-colonial histories of this country, and the relationships that emerged between Māori and European (Martin & Edwards, 1997). While the concept of history could be said to be an issue of interpretation itself, film makers of that period excelled

in producing pictures influenced by mainstream beliefs and ideals; indeed they were re-creating desired perceptions of early colonial history. Martin Blythe (1994) explains that between 1840 (the year New Zealand was annexed by Britain) and 1931 (when New Zealand attained full national status), "...the Empire was clearly the dominant state of mind" (Blythe, 1994, p.15). Blythe's emphasis is upon how having attained full national status and "...because it offered a very definite sense of cultural identity and racial hierarchy..." that "...New Zealanders were British and that was that" (ibid).

Co-founder of Pacific Films and renowned producer, John O'Shea articulates this point further:

We – and the nearby Māori people – were only ourselves. It hardly ever occurred to us that we, our families, friends and neighbours, were unique and worthy of a story, a song, a drama, or even a painting that would convey what we meant. We barely knew where we were – except as a part of 'the Empire'. (O'Shea, 1996, p.15)

The notion that New Zealanders were part of 'the Empire' provides an understanding of the dominance of an imperialistic nationalism as felt by the majority of people living in New Zealand during the early 1900s. The perceptions of those times centred on the relationship colonial New Zealand shared with those of their adoptive 'mother country' Great Britain. As an inter-dependant nation, the need to impress upon New Zealanders the pride and gratitude associated with being part of 'the Empire' was, for movie goers, continuously reinforced with renditions of 'God save the Queen' played prior to the screening of any cinema film in New Zealand theatres. This act reinforced continuing economic, political and social ties between the dominion of New Zealand and Great Britain, and maintained a sense of gratifying pride that was to be had from being part of such an international affiliation. While New Zealanders were sympathetic to the importance of this relationship and its connotations of a national identity, British film productions continued to reinforce imperial ideals which Blythe writes as being "...kind of a double play which oscillates between annexation (assertion of nationalism) on the one hand and exclusion (denial of biculturalism) on the other hand" (Blythe, 1994, p.8).

As Gabriele Joki (1999) has explained, the "...construction of a non-European society within imperialist frameworks has tended to denigrate the colonised as the Other in order to define the coloniser's identity and superiority" (Joki, 1999, p.28). Imperial notions were therefore created to service an emerging post-colonial society who wished to free themselves from their most recent memories, that being a fraught colonial history of subjugating the 'native'. Celebrations of nationhood and the reification of the colonisers identity upon New Zealand as an emerging nation needed to reference, yet also paradoxically, subsume the presence of the 'colonised'. Such a deliberate act was an inherent feature of British film production as it sought to proclaim dominion upon its dominions.

Another major influence which maintained such superior notions were artistic, commercial and societal perceptions that created the notion of 'Māoriland'. The term Māoriland was a reference that encouraged mainstream society to position Māori into an exotic Pacific location while it romanticised the occasion. This term was "popularised in the 1880s in the Sydney

magazine *The Bulletin*” (Blythe, 1994). From an historian’s point of view, this sentiment was a sentimental and romantic cliché of the British imperial age” (ibid, p. 16). As Blythe explains, “...it never had an agreed upon definition, it was mainly an exotic and utopian synonym for New Zealand” (ibid). Such a reference was extremely useful for promoting travel and tourism by featuring pictorial displays of romantic landscapes populated by exotic natives (ibid). A large collection of postcard images (of Māori and women of Polynesia) such as those described by Blythe can be seen in Mark Blackburn (2005). Although some of the pictures were taken in studios, these images exhibited how Māori women were used and portrayed as exotic subjects while being made to pose in certain alluring ways. Being made to wear certain garments, to pose with objects of cultural significance (such as carvings, Māori weaponry and neck ornaments) and be accompanied by lush scenery for the purpose of conveying ideals and perceptions associated with Māoriland. As well as appearing as themes for post cards, Māoriland provided writers with a point of reference books namely, James Cowan’s *Tales of the Māori bush* (1934) and Alfred Grace’s *Māoriland stories* (1895). There was a dual purpose with these techniques. Firstly, to assist in distinguishing Māori of pre-colonial times and post-colonial New Zealanders and which emphasise how “...Māori did not exist as such presumably because as New Zealanders their Māori identity became invisible.” (Blythe, 1994, p.67) As a consequence, Māori perceptions of identities were masked and reinforced by notions of Māoriland that encouraged Māori culture to be consigned to the past whereby “...the only history Māori were only to be entitled to was in romantic legends” (ibid) and of course as fantasy images from Māoriland.

Film depictions of Māori followed carefully constructed identities that were more aligned to imperial beliefs and values. Throughout the movies they made, film makers showcased these as paternal attitudes while also these attitudes were apparent in all other facets of film production; cast selection, recruitment, stage and prop construction. (see Mita, 2000, p.83)

A semiotic relationship

Within the discipline of film making, exploitation and masking of cultural identity are areas of contention. The concerns are with how impacts of film can emerge from the intentions, actions and interactions that occur between film makers and viewers. Exploitation and masking constructions and interpretations of film images influence how people, cultural practices/identities, and physical locations may be portrayed, represented and perceived. Such approaches are indicative of certain types of semiotic relationships. As Ellen Seiter explains, semiotics:

... is the study of everything that can be used for communication: words, images...and much more. Semiotics studies the way such ‘signs’ communicate and the rules that govern their use ... Semiotics first asks how meaning is created, rather than what the meaning is (Seiter, 2004. p.11)

Joki Gripsrud (2002) explores how interpretations of signs can be influenced by individual perception and the context in which signs are displayed. Such influence enables ‘unlimited semiosis’ to take place. Gripsrud introduced the notion of ‘unlimited semiosis’ to represent

the process of ongoing interpretations or reinterpretations. In accordance with this notion, film images represented on screen are able to be interpreted and re-interpreted depending upon those who are interpreting and how these perceptions are influenced by their knowledge. Thus, a semiotic relationship can be partly defined as a process consisting of three main parts promoting 'unlimited semiosis'. That is, a diagnostic; a formative and a summative process of creating, exhibiting and interpreting film. A diagnostic approach refers to the creation of a film, where producers employ actors, create props, reproduce scenes with the intention that the final product be screened to an audience. Secondly, the formative part relates to the exhibition of film where its images (characters, props) are made available for viewing. During this stage, the images become a vehicle of representation and used to convey to an audience the intentions of the producer(s). These images become 'signs' or 'signifiers' to be interpreted. Lastly there is the summative part of the process which provides opportunities for the viewer/s to engage in and become part of the interpretation process. The Viewer/s interpretation and understandings of the images in film are 'signified' "...which is the mental concept or meaning conveyed by the signifier" (Rayner et al., 2004, p.10). Because there are potentially an unquantifiable number of viewers that might watch a particular film, there must also be an infinite number of signified positions.

While those signified may also differ markedly, there is possibly one major factor that can help to determine common understandings or interpretations. That is through making an interpretation based on a viewers own life experiences. Such experiences can influence how film might be perceived and to some extent determine how film images are interpreted, compared and understood according to their ideals and values maintained by viewers. Thereby permitting characters, props and settings to become subjects for interrogation by viewers, whose understandings might be informed and based upon their own prejudices. Semiotic relationships therefore, provide a useful model for examining and interpreting images on film.

Constructing images and the role of taonga

The construction of early films particularly those involving Māori, have had ongoing and far reaching effects. Images and narratives from these films have maintained a presence to contemporary times, in the minds of those who may have seen, acted in or contributed in some way to the making of early 20th Century films (Mita, 1996). The images and narratives of *The Seekers* indicate the minimal effort made by the director and crew to familiarise themselves with Māori culture regardless of a technical advisor (Dr. Maharaiia Winiata) being on set. As a result, *The Seekers* appears as a construction based on cultural assumptions and inaccurate representations of Māori culture/taonga.

Williams (1971, p.381) defines taonga as being 'Property, anything highly prized'. Tapsell (1997) explains further that within the traditional Māori universe:

...are directly associated with both ancestors and customary tribal lands. ...A taonga can be any item which recognisably represents a kin group's genealogical identity, or whakapapa, in relation to their estates and tribal resources. ...They can be

tangible...or...intangible, like the knowledge to weave or to recite genealogy...The role of korero [oratory; to speak; narratives associated with ancestors] associated with taonga is to maintain the kin group's genealogical connection with their lands. Without korero, the item ceases to communicate, loses context, and fails to link a group's identity to specific ancestral landscapes. (Tapsell, 1997, p. 331)

Whether tangible or intangible, taonga is a representation of a people, a place and a culture. Taonga that are tangible i.e. created and used by people, are able to be conferred through narratives, while other taonga like natural landscape features like geysers that are not dependent on narratives or on people to interpret its value, can be appropriated and used to 'authenticate' a particular experience.

The use of taonga such as facial moko, pre-colonial dress, Māori language, and canoes in the *The Seekers* was one way of assigning a sense of realism to the film. As tangible/intangible culture they highlighted authentic aspects of Māori life, but did little to enlighten viewers of the importance taonga had and continues to have for Māori today. As Paul Tapsell has pointed out, "...taonga have neither been properly understood, nor credited with any major importance, by outside observers" (Tapsell, 1997, p.324). As outsiders who sought the use of taonga, the production unit of *The Seekers* failed to consider the connective relationship that existed between taonga and Māori. Their limited knowledge of this relationship meant that taonga could not be appreciated for its inherent value and appropriated outside of its value context and re-conceptualised into another foreign space.

Film representations that construct taonga presence and use as Māori material culture were used to complement and support other portrayals of images. In *The Seekers* tangible items like land marks, waka and wahapū (gate-way) were used to enhance the qualities of specific scenes. For 'Pohutu' the geyser, the capture of Jack Hawkins and Noel Purcell in an early scene highlights how this geyser was used to visually inform viewers of the nature of the land on which these two men found themselves. In this way, Pohutu was used as an accessory emphasising the achievement of these two characters who discovered a beautiful, uninhabited location (or so they thought), consigning the importance of taonga (as perceived in te ao Māori) as insignificant to the authenticity of the scene. Another example of how *The Seekers* failed to recognise the significance of taonga can be seen in Laya Raki's role as 'Moana' who, during one major scene, failed to demonstrate the mannerisms or actions which a Māori woman of that calibre would have maintained. Here, taonga can be distinguished as being the unique behaviour characteristics of a person. In this sense, taonga is acknowledged as being an indicator of identity– which in *The Seekers* was misrepresented by Raki's 'alien' portrayal of her character 'Moana'.

While taonga was perceived as a necessity capable of adding 'authenticity' to scenes, the important role of these items, as perceived by the film crew, were short lived. On completion of the Bay of Plenty film shoots, items such as wooden palisades and carvings were left on location where they eventually disintegrated (Anonymous, personal communication. December 20, 2007). The location of other taonga used in *The Seekers* remains unknown. For kaitiaki (guardians), the lack of knowledge has meant 'korero' for these taonga have been lost, resulting in taonga being displaced from the people and places whom they were created

or connected to. For this reason, the separation of taonga from its people can be said to be a major cause for intensifying the value placed upon these treasures.

Depictions of people and landscapes memorialised on film are, like 'still' pictures, also regarded as taonga (Mita, 1996). As Mita explained of a 'closed viewing' where Māori were able to privately engage with film images "...what the screen communicates is absorbed in a sitting and so carries on the oral tradition with a heightened visual aspect" (Mita, 1996, p.39). For those generations who have since passed or landmarks that no longer stand, film showings (such as those taken on a marae) are a way of retrieving the communications of these taonga enabling connections to be renewed and confirmed.

Unmasking localised identities

Like taonga, individuals who took part in the making of *The Seekers*, representation of their cultural identities and practices were determined and portrayed according to the needs and wants of the director in alignment with the idealised expectations of a mainstream audience. The 1935 production of *Hei Tiki* by American Alexander Markey featured an array of Māori talent depicting fictional aspects of cultural identity. Although not a British production, this film traced the trajectory of Eurocentric ideals which resulted in Māori identity being objectified and grossly misrepresented. Evidence of this kind of manipulation is explored by Peter Limbrick (2007) who notes how *Hei Tiki* "...appears as a kind of colonialist relic, the left over junk of an idiosyncratic entrepreneur [referring to Markey] whose ethnographic gaze created occasionally grotesque or exploitative scenes of Māori life and culture" (Limbrick, 2007, p.248). The specific scenes referred to "shots of wiggling bottoms of naked Māori boys" (ibid) and "the frequent close-up shots of the (female) character Mara's chest" (ibid). Similar scenes in *The Seekers* also objectified Māori life and culture as voyeuristical, such as the scene where Laya Raki executes a seductive dance routine with little inhibition before a large assembled crowd of Māori villagers and the Englishman Phillip Wayne. Inia Te Wiata's description of a portrayal "...so alien to how a young Māori maiden of noble blood would have behaved..." (Te Wiata, 1982, p.84) is another critical response to the insensitivity arising from a scant knowledge of traditional practices by the makers of the film.

For Māori involved in early film productions, it was not "...possible to tell whether Māori collaboration was able to influence the director to maintain a semblance of authenticity when dealing with Māori culture" (Mita, 1996, p.11). What *was* possible and fearlessly certain was the disempowerment felt by Māori like Te Wiata who tried to have the role altered. However, to do so would have meant forfeiting a typical formulaic 'hook' for the purpose of enticing an audience.

Of films like *Hei Tiki* and *The Seekers*, Leonie Pihama (1994) has suggested how, "...films that are constructed and controlled by the colonial gaze are dangerous for Māori people. Those films which continue to perpetuate negative belief systems about Māori and which contribute to the reproduction of stereotyped images of our people are dangerous" (Pihama, 1994, ¶.9). While this statement highlights the power that exists within the 'colonial gaze', images in film are a vital component from which this power is engineered. Created and

utilized by film makers to captivate the attention of those doing the looking or gazing, viewers engage in the 'watching' of these images unconsciously drawing themselves into an interpretation process where they are inclined to consider and reciprocate their own position and power as a viewer, and as an important participant within the agency of cultural representation. As Ian Angus and Sut Jhally put it, "...This is not simply a case of people being dominated by images, but of people seeking and obtaining pleasure through the experience of the consumption of these images" (cited in hooks. 1990, p.5). Thus viewers are able to identify and construct themselves as social beings through the mediation of images.

Examination of identity construction and representation on film, privileges those who are looking in. It is from a similar position that Māori participants and/or their whānau are able to reflect upon the impacts and meaning *The Seekers* has for each one of them. Although a great majority of the Māori cast of *The Seekers* have long since passed, recollections and vague memories remain in the hearts and minds of their whānau. While only a very small number of people whose whānau members had been involved with the making of *The Seekers* and other early films were available to share their views regarding the film, a common theme from these discussions became evident. The decision to participate in the film was based on a commitment to their whānau, in so far as, there were financial benefits. It also provided an opportunity to be a part of something rarely seen or experienced in small towns like those of the Bay of Plenty. For its residents the arrival of a film crew was a spectacle which attracted the attention and 'exotic gaze' of many. With the prospect of capital being invested in the area the production was also welcomed by locals and visitors to the various areas at that time.

The possible impacts of a production crew like that of *The Seekers* upon the people and places of that region could not have been realised or fully appreciated. This assertion is supported by Mita who states how during those early years it was "...impossible for any Māori at that time to comprehend the nature of feature film production or the subsequent impact the films would have once they were exhibited" (Mita, 1996, p. 11). Although for several people (Māori) who involved themselves with this production, there was always a certain awareness of how a fabricated display of cultural identity as it appeared in the film, might be perceived by others who had little or no knowledge about Māori culture.

Conclusion

Imperial ideals and notions of a national identity were adopted as part of a framework in which early 20th Century films in New Zealand were made. These ideals played a major role in reshaping how and why images of Māori culture were exhibited and in retrospect replicated assumptions and misrepresentations of this culture and its people. Notions premised on Eurocentric ideals heightened the dominant values and beliefs of mainstream societies. Often displayed in an exotic and humorous light, the nature of Māori identity, like the depiction within 'Māoriland', was objectified and manipulated to suit the intentions of film makers and to satisfy the curiosity of Pākehā society.

Interpretations of films like these have seen viewers engage in what has been termed as a 'semiotic relationship' where interpretations of screen images have challenged collective

perceptions permitting unique understandings to emerge. The writings of authors such as Mita (1990), Pihama (1994) and Blythe (1994) explore these understandings and promote an awareness of the potential impacts film and film making have on communities.

The production of *The Seekers* presented Bay of Plenty residents with an opportunity to take part in a film about pre-colonial and early post-colonial encounters between Māori and Pākehā. For local Māori who were employed as actors or supporting extras, *The Seekers* allowed them to engage with others on an international scale. Thus enabling new knowledge to be added to the experiences they undoubtedly gained during that time. In addition, support for the project from local iwi and hapū strengthened the connections. There was a distinction however, in the manner in which taonga was perceived. For the film crew, taonga were necessary for adding a sense of ‘authenticity’ to scenes, and as visual displays to attract the attention of viewers. For Māori, the use of taonga confirmed its place in traditional cultural life and acknowledged the inherent connections shared between the two.

Like taonga, the portrayal and significance of cultural identity as represented in *The Seekers* was not exempt to change or manipulation. Pre-conceived ideas of Māori cultural identity highlighted inaccurate and often exploitative scenes of Māori customary life, as was the case with Raki’s role as Moana. It is little wonder that Pihama (1994) has strongly suggested how films like these can be ‘dangerous’ for Māori particularly where stereotyping of these images continue to be perpetuated on film. While this view has negative connotations for Māori, it could prove to be a doubled-edged sword. That is, through internalisation of these images – by Māori, the naivety inherent of these portrayals and false beliefs can be confirmed. Furthermore, these notions can induce Māori to tell their stories, to validate and re-present them in way that is meaningful for Māori.

In these contemporary times, interpretations of *The Seekers* has led to this film undergoing a transformation. Where it was once a means of reinforcing imperial ideals, now is a means of reconnecting Māori to their past. As a film inherent of such imperialistic undertones and overtones, such a shift has enabled this production to be re-situated into a context that allows descendants to visually ‘see’ aspects of the past. This shift has been positive for Māori, especially for descendants of those who appeared in the film. Such a change continues to be supported by whānau (and others) who, through watching, are able to reconnect to ancestors; to the landscape as it use to be; and to people who have since passed but remain very much a part of their everyday conversations. For that reason, *The Seekers* film is now able to signify to a ‘new’ audience (or generation) different relations from that of its intended audience during those earlier days in which it was screened.

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