PhD report
for people who've helped me

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last eighteen months, on a PhD scholarship funded in memory of filmmaker Di Oliver-Zahl, I've been measuring New Zealand women's recent participation in feature filmmaking, excluding documentaries, and comparing it with men's participation. I've focused on scriptwriters but have paid some attention to directors because there are so many writer/directors. The results of this measurement will provide reference points for my thesis fieldwork, as I explore how autoethnography might generate information about women's experiences when they write scripts for feature films.

I've also talked informally with about ninety people in the industry in New Zealand, Europe, Australia and the United States and promised to keep them informed about my progress. This is the first instalment of the promised information. It's taken a long time to finish because while working on the statistics I've had to read a lot across several disciplines for my PhD proposal (my PhD will be in Management), and worked on some scripts. A big thank you to all of you who've talked with me. Some exchanges have been very brief, and only by email. Others have been complex and have continued intermittently over two years or so. But each one has been helpful and I've appreciated all of them.

I also acknowledge the strong and warm support of my supervisors at Victoria University of Wellington: Dr Deborah Jones of the Victoria Management School and Dr Lesley Hall of Gender & Women's Studies.

There's so much I don't know and don't understand. This report is just a beginning. I hope it will lead to more discussion with you. Please feel free to phone or email me any time. And a special thank you to those of you who've read an earlier version of this report and pointed out some gaps I hadn't noticed and some possibilities for future reference.

According to the theory I'm using (autoethnography's use and meaning is vigorously debated) autoethnography is based on the experience of a single research participant, the researcher herself, within a specific culture. In my case, the culture is the film industry in New Zealand. (Autoethnography may generate information that would be unavailable to a researcher whose experience in and commitment to the culture being studied is as a researcher only.)

I will present my thesis, due for completion in late September 2009, as a feature-length script about the creation and deferment of hope for a

woman engaged in script development processes.[1] It may end in realisation of her (mostly my) hopes for a script, or in her (my) disappointment. Either way, I hope interested people in the film industry will read the thesis script and find it useful.

In the next stage of the research, the fieldwork, I'll enter three different kinds of development pathways, each with one of my own feature scripts, one written in collaboration with Cushla Parekowhai, to discover how the experiences affect me and whether I feel or observe that my gender affects those experiences.

This informal report is in two parts. The first is an outline of possible ways to make a feature film in New Zealand, a summary of statistics about women writers' and directors' recent participation in feature filmmaking, and the questions I have about these figures. Full statistical details based on data up to June 30, 2008 will be available in my thesis.

The second part considers two larger frameworks that may affect the statistics: aspects of the contexts women scriptwriters work in, and of the content we produce within those contexts. I'll keep these frameworks — and the questions I have about them — in mind as I work on my scripts. The footnotes provide both references and some information about where I'm going as I complete this report, a kind of subtext.

This year's Writers Guild of America West statistical report examining trends in film and television employment and earnings is entitled *Whose stories are we telling?* It encapsulates my motivation better than I can. I am involved in this project because scriptwriting is:

> …a definitive phase of the production process… [T]he importance of [the stories scriptwriters tell] and of the people telling them cannot be overstated. These are the stories through which our society defines what it is, what it is not, and what it hopes to be. [The scriptwriters] are the people whose experiences shape the underlying reservoir of ideas. In other words, industry diversity is not only about equal access to employment opportunities; it is also about opening space for the telling of stories that might not otherwise be told.[2]

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[1] I loved reading David Mamet's: "…dramatic structure consists of the creation and deferment of hope…The reversals, the surprises, and the ultimate conclusion of the hero's quest… in direct proportion to the plausibility of the opponent forces", Mamet 2007, p. 111, because it can apply to women's hopes of participating in feature film writing and to my own voyage through the PhD process, as well as to a script. One reader responded to Mamet's statement with "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, desire fulfilled is a tree of life" Proverbs 13:12. And I agree that hope and desire have an interesting inter-relationship; one definition of hope is that it is desire combined with expectation.

[2] Hunt, 2007, p. 51.

I am more interested in industry diversity that opens space for "the telling of stories that might not otherwise be told" than in equal access to employment opportunities which may not open that space.

Of all New Zealand arts practitioners, writers have the lowest median income from their principal artistic occupation;[3] we arrange our lives accordingly though it isn't easy. An (ungendered) film artist who seems to be a writer told Creative New Zealand (CNZ) researchers a story that's very familiar to me:

> Money is one of the main problems writers have. Another problem is getting things published. Constant rejection takes up a large portion of your life and you don't earn a thing. You lose faith in yourself and you have to live virtually on no income. Support from my partner keeps me going financially.[4]

As well, for scriptwriters, "being 'in development' or to use its more technical definition 'being unemployed' is your natural state".[5] For me, the only reason to write scripts is that my desire to tell a story that might not otherwise be told is stronger than my desire for an 'employment opportunity' whether or not the opportunity is a storytelling one.

When I started this project, because state subsidies are central to the New Zealand feature industry, I wanted to establish the extent to which women writers, as storytellers and taxpayers, benefit from these. Where women are underrepresented, it is important to consider why this might be so, and how we might participate more fully in various programmes. Because self-funded feature filmmaking and alliances with commercial entities that are independent of the state are also options, I wanted to know what these might mean for women, too. Fortunately, since New Zealand is so small, it is easier here than in other countries to find information about the various possibilities. But I have gaps, of course.

PART 1: STATISTICS

Background

For many New Zealand filmmakers, the ideal is to make a feature that has global distribution. To do this, (except for Peter Jackson and those associated with him, or those based outside New Zealand) filmmakers usually engage with government-subsidised programmes, all somehow

[3] Creative New Zealand, 2003, p. 51.

[4] Creative New Zealand, 2003, p. 54.

[5] Arista, 2007, p. 2.

connected with the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC), as well as seeking investment from other sources.

The Film Commission's latest statement of intent was developed in the context of the Labour government's focus for the decade on economic transformation, families, and national identity. It is "to have a leadership role in developing New Zealand's national cinema within the wider screen production industry". It will realise this vision through producing "cultural and economic outcomes within commercially-disciplined processes and practices" [6]. Feature filmmaking is fundamental to the vision: "Quality audience-focused feature films which contribute to New Zealand's cultural capital are the culmination of all the NZFC's outputs"[7]. New Zealand film will reflect "a vibrant image of this country's diversity, talent and technical excellence"[8]. However the statement of intent does not define diversity and the only explicit commitment to promoting diversity is one to the development of Maori films "to ensure that tangata whenua cinema is a dynamic constituent voice within New Zealand film"[9]. Gender is not mentioned.

Although some producers self-fund feature film development, the NZFC tends to be seen as the 'one door' for development finance. And although many producers develop and use their own international networks, most also develop relationships with international producers and distributors through the NZFC, which takes equity in any project that it funds.

For beginning filmmakers the traditional pathway to making a first feature is to write and direct a short film as a kind of calling card, funded through the NZFC short film programme. Very often this film is written and directed by the same person. If it does well on the international 'A' list festival circuit (i.e. is selected for festivals like Cannes, or Venice or half a dozen others), development of an NZFC-supported feature script may follow.

In the next step to making a feature a writer or writer/director writes a feature script and finds a producer, or is invited by a producer to submit

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[6] New Zealand Film Commission 2007, p. 4.

[7] New Zealand Film Commission 2007, p. 6. The statement footnotes George Barker's definition of cultural capital (2000): "[It] creates a shared identity which helps connect individuals. It has aesthetic, cognitive and moral dimensions. It is collectively owned and forms part of the endowments which each generation receives from the past and builds on for future generations."

[8] New Zealand Film Commission 2007, p. 5.

[9] New Zealand Film Commission 2007, p. 11.

a script. The producer then applies to the NZFC for early development funding, then for advanced development funding. When the project is almost fully developed, probably with some cast, and distribution and international investment attached, the producer applies again — or for the first time if development has all been funded 'in-house' — to the NZFC for production funding.

Once made, these films often premiere in prestigious international film festivals and are released in local cinemas and internationally. In addition, there are a few relatively inexpensive features made within targeted NZFC programmes, the Signature and Headstrong films.

Over the last five years, the NZFC has also had an annual programme called the First Writers Initiative (FWI) that aims to identify a small group of new feature writers and support a project from each of them. Jonathan King's *Black sheep* (2006) was the first completed feature from this programme.

An increasingly common alternative is to participate in the 'lo-budget' or 'shadow' industry,[10] largely invisible to the public because most of these features are not distributed in cinemas or shown on television.

Options for financing a lo-budget or shadow feature include:

- Self-funding, probably with help from cast and crew, private investors and/or community organisations;
- Self-funding development and then applying to the Creative New Zealand (CNZ) managed and partially NZFC-funded Screen Innovation Production Fund (SIPF) for production costs (up to a maximum of $25,000);
- Applying to the NZFC for post-production funding only.

Some of these features appear in local and international film festivals; this year at least one had a limited, local, cinema release. Those who make this kind of feature may then enter the NZFC development processes for their next, instead of taking the successful short film route. I will refer to these features as shadow films because I like the idea that at any moment one of them might jump out of the shadows and bite us.

The material that follows refers to eight categories of activity that relate to feature filmmaking: features released into cinemas between January 2003 and December 2007; produced features in the same period; features NZFC-funded for development July 1, 2004-June 30 2007; short films over the last decade; First Writers Initiative; NZFC

[10] Arista, 2007a, p. 1.

Writers Award; the Screen Innovation Production Fund; and the 48 hour film competition.

I want to thank chief executive Ruth Harley and her staff at the NZFC, especially Jeremy Macey. When I first told Ruth what I wanted to do and asked her for access to unpublished data her immediate response was "We will help you". They've more than helped; they've been generous, offering warmth, challenge and ideas. I've appreciated their patience, too (I'm slow with numbers). I also thank Linda Halle at CNZ for her generosity as she engaged with the statistics and me.

Features released into cinemas

Twenty-four NZFC-funded features were released into cinemas between January 2003 and December 2007. Of these, women wrote and/or directed only two (8 per cent, or one in twelve): Niki Caro wrote and directed *Whale rider* and Gaylene Preston wrote and directed *Perfect strangers* . Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens co-wrote *King Kong* (2005); this takes the total for women writers on all New Zealand films released into cinemas to 12 per cent (one in eight). The lowest per centage of women in other professions measured by the Human Rights Commission is 7.13 per cent for directors of the top 100 New Zealand Stock Exchange companies.[11]

Women's recent participation as writers and directors of feature films is measured differently from study to study and country to country, sometimes by individual films (how many films had women writers or directors) sometimes by actual numbers participating (taking account of co-writers and people credited on more than one project).

One study found that in 62 British films released into cinemas in the United Kingdom in 2007, women directed only four, 6.5 per cent.[12] Women wrote only eight, 12.9 per cent, a lower figure than in findings from a study of a random sample of 40 films certified as British in 2004 and 2005 and theatrically released. In this study, of 63 screenwriters credited 12, or 19 per cent, were women, only one film, less than 2 per cent, was written by a woman and only 17.5 per cent of the films had women writers.[13]

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[11] Human Rights Commission & New Zealand Centre for Women & Leadership, 2006.

[12] Millward, 2008.

[13] Rogers, 2007, p. 33. See also Sinclair, Pollard & Wolfe 2006.

In the United States, in 2006, 7 percent of all directors and 10 per cent of all writers on the 250 top grossing feature films were women. In 2007 6 per cent of the directors were women (continuing a decline from 11 per cent in 2000). And, again, 10 per cent of the writers were women, with 82 per cent of the films having no women writers at all.[14] The figures vary between 12 and 33 per cent for four European countries — Austria, Finland, Germany and Portugal.[15] In Denmark, between 1992 and 2002, 20 per cent of directors and 17 per cent of screenwriters were women.[16]

In a snapshot prepared for WIFT NSW, the Australian Film Commission (AFC) tracked women writer and director participation in feature films released during the five years between January 1 2003 and December 31 2007. This comprehensive list of one hundred films includes government-funded, not government-funded, and low-budget (under $500,000) features if they screened at a festival or had a cinema release. It shows that women wrote 16 per cent of these features and directed 13 per cent. They co-wrote a further 10 per cent and co-directed another 1 per cent.[17]

I've heard, but been unable to confirm, that in France, because of a massive state investment in film to help preserve the language, women writer/directors are attached to about half the feature films produced. I've been unable to find statistics for other parts of the world, yet.

Produced features and low budget feature making

New Zealanders in New Zealand produced, but did not necessarily release, at least 53 feature films in the five calendar years ending December 2007. As far as I can establish, 25 were low budget films, made with no NZFC funding at all.[18] Of all 53, women wrote and directed

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[14] Silverstein, 2008; Lauzen, 2007.

[15] Cliché, 2005, p. 32.

[16] Knudsen & Rowley, 2004.

[17] http://www.wift.org. The AFC reports on the sex of applicants to film development, but unfortunately the statistics group together all core members of creative teams when recording gender: writer, director, producer; if a project has a writer and director of one gender but a producer of another, it is placed in the mixed gender column and this obscures writer/director gender proportions: Australian Film Commission, 2007, p. 91.

[18] This list is based on an NZFC list and information from other sources such as *Onfilm*'s production listings and *The big idea* website. One more low budget film was made with CNZ funding and four were made with NZFC funding for 'small' features through the devolved NZFC Signature and Headstrong programmes. Several of the 25 received

four (7.5 per cent).[19] Just one of these, Athina Tsoulis' *Jinx sister*, was a low budget feature, making 4 per cent of the low budget films. The other three were NZFC-funded: *Perfect strangers*; *Apron strings* written by Shuchi Kothari and Diane Taylor and directed by Sima Urale, a Signature film made for television and a small theatrical release and *The strength of water*, written by Briar Grace-Smith and directed by Armagan Ballantyne. *The strength of water* is the first feature written by a Maori woman since Riwia Brown wrote *Once were warriors* (1994), an adaptation. The last feature a Maori woman directed—and wrote an original script for—was Merata Mita's *Mauri* (1988). In the previous five years, before low budget films were common, women directed seven out of 37 features (18 per cent); I have yet to analyse the writer figures for this time.

Between 2003-2007 mixed gender teams co-wrote five films (9.4 per cent). These include *King Kong* from New Zealand's most successful writing team of all, Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens, currently with *Lovely bones* in production, and *Garage sale/Second hand wedding*, written by Nick Ward and Linda Niccol and directed by Paul Murphy. Women also co-directed three of these, all shadow films: *Gupta vs Gordon* (Jitendra and Promila Pal), *Invitation to a voyage* (Victoria Wynne-Jones and Daniel Strang, SIPF-funded), *Down by the riverside* (Marama Killen and Brad Davison).

Questions

Why is women's participation so low? Why has women directors' participation decreased over the last decade? Why are women not making low budget features? Are women resisting using the new technology to make features because of perceived distribution problems, as so few low budget films reach cinemas? Or are we uncomfortable with the new technology (I don't think so)? Do we fear 'having a go' and possible failure? These two possibilities could also be why women's participation is said to be very low in the *48hours* film competition, another 'short' way to develop a track record and gain a profile in the industry. Given these figures, will the NZFC's signalled reduction in debut films, in its latest Statement of Intent, discriminate against women directors and writers?[20]

NZFC post-production funding once selected for festivals or when they found a distributor.

[19] *Whale rider* was produced outside this period.

[20] New Zealand Film Commission, 2007, p. 15.

Features NZFC-funded for development

In NZFC feature development funding figures in the four years ending June 30 2007, women writers were attached to 27.5 per cent of project applications and 28 per cent of approvals. Not all projects had a director attached, but of project applications that did, women directors were attached to 31 per cent; and to 29 per cent of the approvals. Women producers were strongly represented, attached to about half of applications and approvals. I do not have figures for applications to the Signature and Headstrong initiatives, which were devolved projects, managed for the NZFC by external producers.

Questions

Why do comparatively few women apply — as writers and directors — for development funding? Would it help if the NZFC Statement of Intent referred to the importance of women's stories for creating cultural capital and a national identity and was explicit about women writers' and directors' potential contribution to 'culturally specific' films?[21]

Why is the women writers' and directors' share of development funding larger than their share in the films actually produced and released over the last five years? Are more women's projects than men's falling over between development and production as they come up against international preferences? Or given that "If you're writing feature scripts anywhere in the English-speaking world then statistically 90 per cent of your scripts will never get out of development"[22] are projects with women writers and directors attached in fact doing well, with a higher production/release rate than 2.8 per cent?

Do women producers prefer to work with male writers and directors? Why? (I haven't talked to many producers; I felt ambivalent about approaching them because I knew that I might later want to find a producer for one of my own scripts and couldn't work out how to manage the conflict of interest most effectively.)

Women writers and directors are well represented in projects the NZFC funded for production in mid-late-2007. *The strength of water* and *Apron strings* should be in cinemas in 2008, when the long-awaited *Vintner's luck* written by Niki Caro and Joan Sheckel and directed by Niki Caro goes into production. What has caused this little group of films to appear all at once, when other features also written by women have fallen over within

[21] New Zealand Film Commission, 2007, pp. 8-9.

[22] Arista, 2007, p. 2.

the NZFC development process? Is it possible that what is observed changes, i.e. has talking about the issue over the last year or so drawn attention to it and possible resolutions? Or is the higher successful participation just a 'blip'? [23]

Short films

As noted, making a successful (usually NZFC-funded) short film is an established pathway to feature making. Analysis of the director information in the NZFC's *Review of NZFC short film strategy*[24] shows that over the last decade fewer women (37 per cent of the total) than men directors make NZFC-funded short films. However the women directors make a proportionately higher share of films accepted for 'A' list film festivals (42 per cent of all accepted) than the men; and as individuals are significantly more likely to make an 'A' list film: 60 per cent of women-directed short films get accepted for an 'A' list festival, but only 48 per cent of those with male directors. I don't know whether women from other countries use short films as stepping-stones to features more or less successfully than New Zealanders.

Questions

If women do so well with short films, why are they under-represented in the features statistics? I have no idea what 'A' list festivals look for when selecting short films, other than presumably 'high quality', but one reader of a draft of this report suggested that perhaps women's short films suit the (perceived?) art house bias of festivals, but their features

[23] Of course, all these films had been in development for some time before I started work. However I'm also aware of particular difficulties for women's projects like these, at the stage of advanced development when decision makers choose whether to take a risk and invest in a project's production. All kinds of beliefs feed into that judgment call, about a script, a director, audience; the quality of advocacy on behalf of the project and who advocates strongly for it also affect a decision (see below p. 22-23 nn. 52-56; pp. 27-33, nn. 64-87; p. 30 n. 79 and accompanying texts). In my experience in other contexts, beliefs that inform advocacy and influence decision makers are often subliminal and unarticulated and when these beliefs are even subtly altered by new information, change can occur very quickly, at any stage in a long process. To give a very straightforward and *un*subtle example: when I learn that the box office returns for films women write are slightly higher than those for films men write (see below p. 28 n. 71 and accompanying text) I'm more likely to fund production of the next project with a woman writer attached. But I understand that this little cluster is indeed a 'blip' and that there will now be a gap similar to the one after *Whale rider* and *Perfect strangers.*

[24] New Zealand Film Commission, 2007a.

tend not to suit the commercial criteria applied when evaluating feature ideas. Or do motherhood or livelihood issues sometimes kick in at this stage in women's careers?

First Writers Initiative (FWI)

Women's experiences when they participate in this initiative over the last five years partially support the idea that there are institutional and attitudinal factors that hinder the advancement of women feature scriptwriters' projects.

The initiative has three stages. The submitted scripts are read 'blind', without the reader having any indication of who the writer is. From these, about twelve scripts are short-listed and, with the names now attached, about six writers are selected to participate in a workshop. From those who participate in the workshop a small number receive further funding and enter the NZFC development stream. There is a range of decision-makers along the way.

There were 104 applicants to the FWI the first year, and 64 in 2007, with a variety of numbers in between. Over the five years about 40 per cent of applicants were women (this figure excludes the half dozen or so people with ambiguous names and includes some people — men and women — who applied several times over the years). Women writers make up 34.5 per cent of the individuals short-listed; 29 per cent of workshop participants chosen from the short list; and 18 per cent of those who receive further funding.[25]

These figures are especially interesting because the FWI selection process is blind at the beginning and takes place within a very contained timeframe. Women moving to another industry or having children, and other variables that affect longer processes do not affect its outcomes.

Questions

What characteristics of some women's scripts (or readers' responses to them) mean that they are eliminated in the first cut?

I completed an M.A. in Creative Writing (Scriptwriting) at the International Institute of Modern Letters at Victoria University (IIML) in 2004[26] and took part in a Linda Voorhees master class group of twenty

[25] This data comes from NZFC files.

[26] See below p. 37.

(nine women) selected from past M.A. students, in 2007.[27] Some women who have completed the M.A. (ten participants each year, almost always about half men and women), and some who also took part in the master class, have applied to the FWI over the last five years. But, unlike the men from these groups who have applied, these women have all been unsuccessful in reaching the short list.

It is my belief that the work of women from my M.A. year, and from the Voorhees class, is as accomplished as that of men from these groups whose work I know and whose names are among those short-listed. Their scripts made me laugh, cry and think. Because of this knowledge, I feel confident in asking: What ongoing internalized cognitive biases about content inform the selectors — women and men — and result in under-representation of women's scripts in this programme? Is there now, or will there be, a 'feedback' effect operating so that fewer women apply?

What happens between short-listing, choice of workshop participants and further funding that doesn't work for women? What happens in the workshops that fails to advance women's work? What can be done to ensure that more women apply, every year, to prevent a negative feedback effect?

Writers Award

In 2007, the NZFC decided "to refresh and expand the development pool" through the Writers Award with applicants required to have "at least one screenplay credit on a New Zealand feature film". Seven men applied and two women (22 per cent). Four men and one woman (20 per cent) received awards.

Questions

Because the established paths to screenwriting credits are not working for women, they were largely excluded from application. In view of the FWI figures, the figures for produced and released features, for the applications and approvals for development funding and the short film figures, was the NZFC Writers Award discriminatory?

The outstanding local[28] and international success of our women scriptwriters[29] and of women who make short films justifies an argument

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[27] A stunning learning experience for me, enhanced by membership of the ten-person Bluebirds group.

[28] Of only three NZFC-funded films that have earned more than $6 million, two were written by women, *Once were warriors* (Riwia Brown) and *Whale rider* (Niki Caro), both adaptations of men's fiction. The third is *The world's fastest Indian.* The next nine most

that we may at the moment have a significant pool of unrealized female feature scriptwriting and directing talent. Could the NZFC refresh and expand the development pool by creating programmes designed to increase women's participation in feature scriptwriting? In Austria, the number of female screenwriters of feature films has more than doubled in the last decade following the establishment of programmes for women.[30] I have heard arguments that the development of this kind of programme would result in excluding women from applying to other programmes, or supporting scripts simply because they were written by women. But it should be possible to avoid these things through careful planning and allocation of resources.

Screen Innovation Production Fund (SIPF)

Women made three of eight applications for feature production funding in 2005 (37.5 per cent), five of 17 applications in 2006 (35.71 per cent) and none of nine applications in 2007. SIPF funded one feature film in 2005 (with a male writer and director and a woman producer). None has been funded since, perhaps because of the projects were not sufficiently developed.

Questions

Why have women stopped applying to SIPF for feature projects? Are they more likely to apply for short films and documentaries?

48hours film competition

I have only anecdotal information about this competition and I haven't yet asked for statistics. I'm told that few women seem to participate as writers and/or directors in this annual event where participants have a weekend to complete a (genre) film that's between two and seven minutes long. Lots of women are involved in other roles. I understand that women also find their participation problematic in a similar Australian event,

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highly earning films were all written by men: http://www.nzfilm.co.nz/Film catalogue/statistics.aspx: *Top 12 NZ movies released in New Zealand*.

[29] New Zealander Jane Campion is one of only three women who have won Oscars for an original script in the last eighty years and the only woman ever to have won the Palme d'or. Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens' scriptwriting Oscars for an adaptation were also rare for women, who have been members of winning teams only five times since 1955.

[30] ERICarts, 2005.

Tropfest, but the only statistics I've seen show that women directed only 129 of 611 entries in 2002.[31]

Questions

Is this a microcosm of feature participation? Why do few women writers and directors take part? Are there alternative ways to build women's skills, experience and confidence?

PART 2: DISCUSSION

These statistics show that women scriptwriters' — and directors' — participation in feature filmmaking is problematic. As in other industries, however, it is possible to present an optimistic or a pessimistic scenario. Each depends on anecdotal information so I'm pleased to have as many statistics as possible about state-funded and shadow features to complement this, and would welcome any further statistics from producers.

Only one general proposition seems uncontested: making a feature film is hard for anyone. Peter Jackson says this: "You have to be relentless, really. That's what my story is. You just have not to give up".[32] A group of women filmmakers in the United Kingdom use similar language: "Perseverance," "Determination," "Focus," "Obsession," "Persistence".[33] Do many women lack these traits? What are the variables at work that either open space for women to tell stories that might not otherwise be told or restrict their potential?

At the moment, I think of the variables in two main groups: context and content. In general, the context includes all the variables other than the content of a script: cultural background(s), skills, attributes and reputation; and access to resources. These include money to buy time to develop ideas and networks, allies and mentors to provide support, including access to audiences. Whether a woman chooses to be a writer or a writer who also directs and/or produces is also an important part of the context. As a writer, I focus on the processes that affect the development of a script; a writer with directing and/or producing responsibilities also has demanding commitments that continue through pre-production, production and post-production.

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[31] Chapman, 2002. Three women were finalists and Emma Freeman won the competition with *Lamb* (2001).

[32] Cardy, 2006, p. E2.

[33] Kellaway, 2007, p. 3. For a range of women director views see also Hankin, 2007.

Context and content crossover: women's life experiences and experiences within various industry contexts may affect the content of their scripts (choice of theme, genre, structure) and the content of their scripts may affect their experiences in industry contexts (as possibly, for example, in the FWI processes and when the scripts are being considered by potential investors).

Context

I've divided this section into five parts: background; the obstacles — internal or external; contextual mechanisms and belief systems; the effects of belief systems in the film industry; addressing the obstacles.

Background

Almost fifty years ago, a group of accomplished women who wrote fiction and poetry also wrote about problems specific to women writers. All also acknowledged and addressed issues of differences among women writers.[34] In *Silences*, as Virginia Woolf had done a generation earlier,[35] Tillie Olsen, one of these writers, discussed women's lack of time, money and space and how this limits our ability to write, and the difficulties caused by responsibilities for children, all compounded by such accidents of birth as class and race.

Of writers taken seriously enough for their books to be reviewed, used in university courses and included in reference books and anthologies, Tillie Olsen estimated that only one out of twelve was a woman. This is about the same ratio as for New Zealand films written and directed by women and released 2003-2007. Tillie Olsen also cited another researcher's figures showing that only one out of five British books published between 1800 and 1935 were written by women.[36] This ratio is similar to gender ratios for writers of feature films in some countries today, for scriptwriters with features in development with the NZFC and for successful projects in the First Writers Initiative and the recent Writers Award. It seems that women's contemporary public participation in storytelling, on film, is comparable to our historical participation in print. Does this (rough) correlation mean that in some respects the position of women storytellers is not much better than fifty or even two

[34] Those whose work I've found particularly useful are Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Joanna Russ and Tillie Olsen.

[35] Woolf, 1929.

[36] Olsen, 1978, p. 24.

hundred years ago? And if so, why? Do women still lack time, money and space to tell stories on film for the same reasons they once lacked time, money and space to write books?

When I started reading, I expected to find that contemporary practitioners and academics had closely analysed the changing contexts within which women scriptwriters and directors work. But since the early 1980s, little has been written about the private as well as the public material conditions that affect women artists and writers, including women filmmakers, although some Australian filmmakers explore the meaning of gender in their careers in one book. Other filmmakers do this in a fragmented way in books of interviews or based on interviews.[37]

One academic, also a filmmaker, Laura Mulvey, identifies political reasons, in Britain at least, for this "break or fissure…that makes any relation of continuity or conceptual dialogue across the decades…harder and harder to maintain," between feminist film theory and practice of the 1970s when "…the cinema doubled as a major means of women's oppression through image and as a means of liberation through transformation and reinvention of its forms and conventions" and the present. However, without any reference to statistics, she is optimistic because "in the worlds of art and film…women's presence as makers, curators, and critics has expanded enormously over the last two decades [and] new horizons have opened up with new technologies"[38]. Her article is not about the ideas explored by Tillie Olsen and others but supports the view that there has been a break in conceptual dialogue on issues that affect women filmmakers.

Another academic, Kelly Hankin, believes that feminist film scholars (she does not define this term) have not focused on conditions within the industry or outside it, particularly on the role of motherhood, including the desire for motherhood, because they are uneasy with essentialist ideas about women.[39] This fits with many women's understanding, as expressed to me, of gender as something fluid and their preference for being known as filmmakers rather than as women filmmakers.

Another academic writer, Rosalind Gill, focuses on new and old gender inequalities that she finds largely unarticulated and undertheorised in

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[37] Francke, 1994; French 2003; McCreadie, 2006; Seger, 1996; Weibrecht et al, 2004; Wexman, 1999.

[38] Mulvey, 2004, pp. 1286-1287.

[39] Hankin, 2007, p. [8].

discussions of new media and challenges the idea that new media work, in some ways very similar to film work, is egalitarian.[40]

Larissa Marno's New Zealand research into gender imbalance in the film industry was perhaps compromised by participants' self-censorship[41] and most New Zealand research into women and film has focused on other issues, for example Deborah Shepard's work to reframe women's contributions to the film industry.

When I realised that the fissure identified by Laura Mulvey exists and extends to dialogue about the conditions within which women filmmakers work, I decided to see if the ideas of the women writers from the seventies and early eighties would help me understand the context around women's participation in writing and directing feature films. And they have done this.

Some information indicates that women as storytellers are now very successful. In addition to the A-list festival successes of women short film makers, the high proportion of the most commercially successful New Zealand films written by women, and the prestigious international awards won by our women writers of feature films,[42] the top 'go-to' writers for television in New Zealand — producers' writers of first choice — are about half women and half men, according to one industry informant. Two out of three of the novels that appeared most frequently in the New Zealand best-seller lists in 2007 were by women.[43] On the other hand, CNZ research shows that for all women artists, including writers and filmmakers, our median income from our principal artistic occupation is less than a third of the income earned by men from their principal artistic occupation. From all arts work, our median income is just over a third.[44]

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[40] Gill, 2002.

[41] Marno, 1997, 1998.

[42] See above pp. 13-14 nn. 28-29 and accompanying text.

[43] New Zealand Booksellers Association, 2008. The two women's novels, Jenny Pattrick's *Denniston Rose* (2003) and Keri Hulme's *the bone people* (1983) have been around for some time; they appeared on the lists half as often as Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2006).

[44] Creative New Zealand, 2003, pp. 50-55. I haven't been able to find any policy response to these figures. I wondered if they show the greatest income differential by gender within any occupation. I also wondered about the current breakdown of applications and funding by gender at CNZ and if women's share of allocations are any better than in 1980, when artists Janet Paul and Barbara Strathdee found a ratio of three women visual artists to every seven men who applied for funding to the Queen

What happens for women who want to write and direct features, in the gap between some women's exceptional success — whether measured by a feature's earnings or by critical acclaim and awards — and the realities reflected in the NZFC's statistics and the CNZ research? Why is the proportion of women 'go-to' writers for television equal to that for men? Do women who write well and want to see their work produced on screen choose to write for television so that they have regular and regularly paid work, because making features is so hard and nine out of ten of features in development never get made? If so, does this commonsense decision-making extend to our reluctance to participate in the shadow feature industry, where a film usually has a tiny audience and may be less likely than a successful short film to lead to NZFC support for a feature?

Why do women producers participate in feature making more than women writers and directors do? Is it because, although a producer is an integral part of a creative team, the skills required are not storytelling skills and involve very different processes? Some people have suggested to me that women are successful as producers because they are highly skilled at nurturing and multi-tasking.

Do women who want to write or direct feature films have specific gender-related obstacles to overcome? Are these obstacles internal or external?

The obstacles: internal or external?

When I first started asking questions for this project, many women identified the obstacles as internal, referring to attributes that may restrict our potential as feature writers and directors. Some women told me that women lack confidence, or that men have a sense of entitlement and women don't.

Other women said that we need to be more courageous, more competitive, and as energetic in advocating for our work as men are. And I've noticed that I lack some of these attributes. When I accessed the NZFC's data I focused almost entirely on the research and tried to forget I was also a scriptwriter. But one day, at the end of a meeting, I asked one of the staff for some specialist information (not directly relevant to the NZFC's work) about a script I'm writing. When the staff member asked a question about the script itself, which I hadn't expected, I became hesitant. I stooped. I fiddled. The tone of my voice changed. I flushed. I

Elizabeth II Arts Council (CNZ in an earlier form); and that for almost eight men whose applications were successful only one woman succeeded: Paul and Strathdee, 1980.

wanted to run away. And this wasn't a situation where I needed courage, was competing, or had to advocate for my work.

Some women said we also need to be more willing to work as writers and directors-for-hire for television, theatre, and commercials;[45] and perhaps more willing to write adaptations, especially as New Zealand women writers have had critical and commercial success with adaptations.

One director outside New Zealand has attributed the small numbers of women directors (globally) as due to "women's reluctance to bullshit".[46] Other informants told me that if women really want to make features and work strategically, we can do it: that is, we have to take a problem-solving approach.[47]

Motherhood factors in their rich diversity may also create obstacles, particularly for writers and directors who want to delay having children until after their first features or do not have family and other domestic support.[48]

It seems that motherhood, the gendered hierarchy of care, and other domestic factors that both Virginia Woolf and Tillie Olsen identified may generate both internal and external obstacles, because women often want intimate relationships, children *and* satisfying work but resources

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[45] Some women feature producers, writers and directors do work in various roles in television. For example in the award-winning series *Being Eve*, credits in the first season (2001) included Vanessa Alexander (who wrote and directed the feature *Magik and Rose*) as producer, Niki Caro and Briar Grace-Smith as writers and Armagan Ballantyne as a director.

[46] McFadyean, 1998.

[47] One reader of an earlier version of this report wrote to me: "This is what some women have told you? That it's up to individual initiative? Sounds… very neo-con; does NOT sound feminist." In this context, I'm not sure what feminist means, but I do know that women develop strategies to solve problems all the time, especially as we manage the demands of paid and unpaid work. From the statistics, New Zealand women producers do this particularly well. We also do this when engaging in other activities, such as playing sport, or bridge or chess or computer games; and in caring for children and the elderly. As writers we also develop strategies to survive, from careful gardening to mutual support networks. Why not strategies for getting our stories to the world?

[48] My understanding is that there may also be an insurance problem for women filmmakers who are pregnant, if they are essential to the film. After I read that Gurinder Chadha's *Dallas* had been delayed because of her pregnancy a local insurance agent told me that an insurer may have some reticence to provide essential elements cover for a director because the cover goes right through to the end of post-production and with the length of time involved, pregnancy becomes a risk for the insurer.

available to support their choices are less readily available than for men.[49] Some people have told me that parenting issues continue to affect women artists more than men because we continue to have — and often want — primary responsibility for children. I've also heard that women are more likely than men to care for elderly parents and that it is easier for men who are artists to find partners who support them economically and emotionally than it is for women. Might having children and managing domestic responsibilities make it more difficult to write and direct features than to produce them? Is the kind of support necessary to sustain focus different for a woman feature writer or director than for a woman producer?

Niki Caro is one prominent example of those who believe that women are responsible for their own success, or lack of it. Niki Caro said at the beginning of her career: "I don't feel as a woman I have any less to offer. The time's long past where your gender makes a difference", seeming to imply that a woman has as good a chance of success as a man if she ignores gender difference (in context if not content), is competent and believes in her own abilities.[50] Niki Caro's own achievements appear to support this view.

And there is a belief that in time, any gender imbalance will work itself out. Riwia Brown, who wrote *Once were warriors*, says this in relation to Maori women filmmakers "The onus isn't on the [NZFC]. I sit on that board and they do everything within their power to promote Maori work… It's a very competitive industry to be in and it's just going to take time [for Maori women writers, directors, producers]".[51]

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[49] Looking for something else on the internet — as you do — I found details about *Who does she think she is?* (http://www.wcwonline.org/content/view/1476/54/ ; director Pamela Tanner Boll) a feature-length documentary in progress that "explores the lives of five women artists who are also mothers. In the film, each of the women sustains the competing claims on her heart despite financial hardship, institutional disinterest, and lack of support. Historically, women have not been able to mother and make art — neither pay. So how do these women do it? And why should it matter to us? *Who does she think she is?* tells the story of ordinary women who pursue their calling — at a price — but for whom art has the power to transform their lives, and perhaps ours, into a deeper experience of living. The film is being produced by Mystic Artists in collaboration with the Wellesley Centers for Women."

[50] Marbrook & Pradhan, 1990, timecode reference not available.

[51] Perkins, 2000, p. 155.

But Jane Campion expressed another view at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. As the only woman who has won the Palme d'or, she showed a fantasy short film about a ladybug — a woman dressed up in an insect costume, who gets stomped on in a movie theatre. She identifies the problems as external, describing her film as a metaphor for women in the film world: "I just think this is the way the world is, that men control the money, and they decide who they're going to give it to," she said, explaining why so few women get films made.[52] She is also reported as saying: "It's strange to be here with a big football tea[?m], like this. I'm making the best of it. It is sad. All of us would like to see more movies about how women see the world".[53] A Spanish filmmaker, Iciar Hollain, has expressed a related view: "In reality, the doubts appear when they see our tits".[54] That is, those who make decisions, who may be women, tend to have a fixed view of what gender means and what stories films may tell (a possible content problem), and deny women a chance to participate. I've heard women in New Zealand and Australia say similar things.

And I've heard them talk about concerns like some additional ones articulated by Spanish directors: "The works of women directors are less appreciated…our efforts at experimentation get cut less slack" (Josefina Molina); "I always skip on the question of whether it is more difficult for women to direct films… But today I will dare answer it… yes it is more difficult… I would dare say that twenty years ago it was easier. At that time there were so few women in my profession that they always considered you a curiosity, an oddity, you were someone who was tolerated — a demonstration of their liberal character. Now we've gone from being curiosities to being the competition. And that's as far as we have been able to get" (Patricia Perreira).[55]

The existence of external difficulties is confirmed in the regular Writers Guild of America West reports on equity issues. The 2005 report states:

> The industry… provides few points of access for writers traditionally denied the chance to demonstrate their skills and gain experience. Until this basic structural truth is addressed, and until a norm of inclusion is enacted by industry gatekeepers both large and small, it is unlikely that the familiar story told in this report will

[52] Anonymous, 2007.

[53] Thompson, 2007, p. [1].

[54] Perez Millan, 2003.

[55] Perez Millan, 2003.

> change in any dramatic way. Without meaningful interventions targeted at the industry status quo, the industry will fall further and further behind a changing America.[56]

This industry status quo extends to other countries where, like New Zealand, filmmakers rely on complementary funding from international (usually male) investors to augment investment by state agencies. However, it's my belief that gender imbalance in New Zealand features is partly because the NZFC has no policies to address gender imbalances and only a quarter of its board members are women (though women are not always our own best allies). I also think that belief systems and the mechanisms they generate cause the external obstacles women face. And that it helps to talk about these and how they may work.

Contextual mechanisms and belief systems

Joanna Russ, from the group of fiction writers and poets who addressed gender issues for writers in the 1970s and 1980s, identified common mechanisms used to underestimate women writers [and artists] and to undermine them in *How to suppress women's writing*. These mechanisms include ignoring women writers completely. They also include dismissing women's work because they write about the 'wrong' things, condemning them for writing in the wrong genre, blaming them for what others have deleted from their work, or simply joking about them. I have noticed the use of all these mechanisms as I talk with and about, and read about, women scriptwriters and directors. I've also noticed another one. People have often said to me "There is no problem, look at Niki Caro, or Jane Campion, Gaylene Preston, Merata Mita, Christine Jeffs, Philippa Boyens, Riwia Brown, Linda Niccol, Vanessa Alexander, Alison Maclean, Fran Walsh": they focus on the exceptions without acknowledging that they are exceptions, implying that because the exceptions exist there is no problem.[57]

The effects of mechanisms used to underestimate and undermine us may affect the content and quality of our work as well as our ability to access resources. Tillie Olsen again:

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[56] Hunt, 2005, p. 8.

[57] One reader wrote to me: "I am one of those women who have said 'Discrimination in NZ? But what about Jane Campion etc'… But I wasn't intending to name the exceptions… I thought the list of women film directors was long, equally as long as men's … The women have been in the forefront of my mind, because more of their films have been significant to me… I have thought it was women who lead the way in NZ."

> [P]ressures towards censorship, self-censorship; toward accepting, abiding by entrenched attitudes, thus falsifying one's own reality, range, vision, truth, voice, are extreme for women writers (indeed have much to do with the fear, the sense of powerlessness that pervades certain of our books, the 'above all, amuse' tone of others). Not to be able to come to one's truth or not to use it in one's writing, even in telling the truth having to 'tell it slant', robs one of drive, of conviction; limits potential stature; results in loss to literature and the comprehensions we seek in it.[58]

And Joanna Russ' mechanisms remind me of belief systems that justify a person or group's right to exert control and to impose on others their understandings of reality, motivations, responsibility and status. The belief systems may be explicit or covert, conscious or unconscious. They may be generated by fear of the unfamiliar or different and rely on fixed ideas about the meanings of gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, ability, resources, appearance, role or what a script or film is or should be. The diversity of belief systems that lead to abusive behaviour, "an act of omission or commission that is judged by a mixture of community values and professional expertise to be inappropriate or damaging"[59] is well represented in New Zealand statutes that recognise the potential for inappropriate acts of omission or commission, within public or private spheres, and provide remedies for those who have been abused.[60] Outside legislation a specific term, like racism, homophobia or sexism is used to describe some of these belief systems.

To complement the ideas of Tillie Olsen and Joanna Russ when reading a statement like Jane Campion's "I just think this is the way the world is, that men control the money, and they decide who they're going to give it to," I refer to the MANALIVE list of controlling behaviours familiar to me from my legal practice and study.[61] The list specifies the kinds of

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[58] Olsen, 1978, p. 44.

[59] McDowell, 1995, p. 88. McDowell argues that because the emotional/psychological harm from abuse is often the most difficult to heal, physical and sexual violence are a subset of emotional/psychological abuse.

[60] I've just read Dr Kim McGregor's (director of Rape Prevention Education) epilogue to *Louise Nicholas; My story* and learned that "since the 1980s the enormous problem of sexual violence [has] fallen off the public and political agenda" (Nicholas and Kitchin, 2007, 243). Perhaps because institutions like Women's Refuge seem thoroughly established and I recently worked on a sexual violence project I had thought there had been no rupture in dialogue about — and action to prevent — sexual violence against women. Now I understand that the contemporary silence about the suppression of women writers has its parallels in silences about and lack of action to address other kinds of violence against women.

[61] Evans, 1993, p. 33.

harmful things people do when they have the power to make decisions that adversely affect others. It refers to the control of time, space (including controlling intellectual or spiritual space by belittling ideas, beliefs or capacity); controlling material resources ("We can't risk resources on a film that doesn't stick to the rules"); controlling speech, body language and gesture ("You can't have a character/behaviour like that in a script"); controlling reality and motivations by making someone responsible when they are not ("It's your fault your film can't get funding"; "You're not competitive enough"; "You aren't successful because you're not prepared to be a writer-for-hire"); or by assigning status ("Most women can't write films that sell").

This kind of control tends to be subtly expressed in creative industries decision-making. It may also be strongly defended through reference to (possibly unfounded) artistic or commercial judgments. Those adversely affected by this kind of control tend not to articulate it as a problem or challenge the judgments behind it, sometimes because they fear the consequences if they do. Many women filmmakers I spoke with, or read about, insisted that although women's participation in the industry was low, they did not want to talk publicly about it, often because speaking out might jeopardize future opportunities. Most of all they did not want to be seen as victims.

However, "[the] unnamed should not be mistaken for the non-existent. Silence often speaks of pain and degradation so thorough that the situation cannot be conceived as other than it is".[62]

I thought of Joanna Russ and the MANALIVE mechanisms recently when I saw New Zealander Hamish Keith's book — accompanying a television series that I did not see — *The big picture; the story of New Zealand art since 1642.* The publicity about *The big picture* emphasises that it expresses a personal view. But because a series like this with an accompanying publication is rare and because the title claims to be *the* story it is likely to influence our national sense of identity, what children and students learn, and to affect artists' sales and opportunities.

The final two chapters are mostly about art by living practitioners. They include 74 images, from a period when the numbers of women art students and practitioners have at least equalled those of men. Only nine of these images — around 11 per cent — are of women's work (one of them not a New Zealander). The only images included *of* women are made by men, although over this time many women explored how women look at

[62] MacKinnon, 1979, p. xii.

and portray women differently from the way men do. (I saw the book on my way home from seeing some extraordinary, powerful, portraits of women by Fran Marno, and after a discussion of how and why she and fellow painter Linda James convey new things about women's experiences and how women look at and paint women.)

To some extent, because it has reached a wide (New Zealand) audience, the ideas expressed or implied in *The big picture* are likely to control what happens in the spaces where contemporary art is taught and shown and discussed and bought in New Zealand. This will adversely affect women artists. Although I doubt whether Hamish Keith intended to do this, by almost ignoring contemporary women artists, he has belittled us and assigned us a status that is 'less' than men's. He has probably contributed to a continuing differential between the incomes of women and men who are artists, thus indirectly controlling the money — and time to make art — available to us. He is implying to children of both genders, and to women students, that women artists and the way we see and portray women do not matter. This is 'just the way the world is' when men — and women who do not question their views — control resources including space, like a television series and book.[63]

And, I believe, very similar to what happens with film, although over a longer series of processes.

The effects of belief systems in the film industry

I don't know enough about how beliefs about economic efficiency, gender and audience affect decisions to invest in feature scripts, or about the relationships between actual and potential film audiences and commercial realities. However, they seem likely to affect decision-making and taking

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[63] *The big picture* is, I believe, also just one example of the effects of the 'fissure' between the women's art movement of the 1970s and the present, identified by Laura Mulvey (see above p. 17 n.38 and accompanying text). My impression is that far less work by women artists from the period covered in Hamish Keith's last two chapters reaches auction rooms; and when it does, it sells for much less than works by their male contemporaries. The silence and amnesia that the fissure has created has also disrupted women artists' historical continuity, as men's work becomes the 'normal' point of reference. In 2007 I helped moderate marking for film students at a tertiary institution and saw a film that reminded me strongly of experimental films by Joanna Margaret Paul (1945-2003), relatively easy to find through the New Zealand Film Archive: http://www.filmarchive.org.nz/. When I asked the student about the relationship of her ideas and imagery to Joanna Paul's she had not heard of her. Her teachers were familiar with Joanna Paul's work, had not thought of referring the student to it; nor to Georgia O'Keeffe's, which might also have been helpful as she developed her conceptual framework and aspects of her imagery.

risks with content, especially for agencies whose decisions — unlike the NZFC's decisions — do not have to take into account factors like our national identity. And I do know that in the United States at least, women participated most fully in filmmaking before it became commercially significant.[64]

Outside New Zealand, where scriptwriters are more often employed by studios to write — or rewrite — feature scripts, than initiators of their own projects, there is some evidence that beliefs about the economic viability of women's scripts and women's films work against their employment.

Martha Lauzen is reported as saying that "the unproved notion that men won't watch them" is chief among the complex web of factors that work against women's films.[65] This idea is based on a stereotype about women's stories and a misapprehension that (white, heterosexual) men are the primary audience for films. Martha Lauzen also believes that economic fear in the industry causes the situation for women to worsen because "When people are frightened they fall back on established patterns"[66], that is, on choosing (white) men to write and direct scripts.

Jane Cussons, Executive Director of Women in Film and Television (WIFT) U.K. has said: "Film financing is high-risk venture capital, and somehow women are considered more risky"[67]. This may be the case whether men or women are making decisions: Abramowitz noted that even with three female studio heads in Hollywood, studios were still unwilling to entrust a $50m movie into the hands of a woman as director.[68] In her view, the situation in the independent sector — particularly relevant in New Zealand — is not much different.

Liz Francke, in her celebratory book on women script writers, points out that women's scripts tend not to be associated with the kinds of films that generate high incomes from merchandising and are therefore not as attractive to large studios.[69] Today, merchandising opportunities may be even more important than when Francke was writing, just over a decade

[64] Mahar, 2001.

[65] Pepper, 2004, p. 62.

[66] Pepper, 2004, p. 62.

[67] Pepper, 2004, p. 62.

[68] Abramowitz, 2002.

[69] Francke, 1994.

ago. This connects context and content, as a way for women to write 'the wrong thing'.

Producer Christine Vachon of Killer Films, like the Spanish women filmmakers, identifies financing entities' gender — and image-oriented beliefs — as problematic:

> [They scrutinize] your project for marketable elements that will distinguish it from the morass of independent films…they want a director about whom good copy can be written… It helps if they're attractive. And it helps if they're male. I'm usually reluctant to spout stuff like: "If you're a female it's so much harder, if you're a male it's so much easier" — I hope it's a *little* more complicated than that. But I do think that the machine works better with boys. People are more familiar with the whole idea of a male director, especially when he's a maverick who's kicking the system. We did, however, get lots of ink for Rose and Guin from *Go Fish* because they are extremely presentable and very articulate.[70]

Script readers and producers, women and men, are part of this machine. They may have internalized some of these attitudes, the residue of many centuries of attraction to the wild, beautiful and sexy boy-genius-as-artist, and be influenced by them when reading women's scripts. They too may make exceptions for women who are 'extremely presentable and very articulate'.

The recent United Kingdom Women Screenwriter Study, however, found a good economic argument for including women's representation in the screenwriting role. In what appears to be a world first, the study found that United Kingdom films written by women were dollar for pound slightly more effective than those written by men. The box office return for films with a woman screenwriter was $1.25 per £1 budget, compared with $1.16 for films with all-male writers.[71]

The authors of the study found that people who commissioned — or presumably, were approached to fund — stories, perhaps unconsciously, believed that women did not write stories that would sell. They appeared to believe that the main audience for films was young men and that women could not write action and horror movies that appealed to this group. However, the data shows that overall cinema audiences were roughly equally balanced between men and women, women over 35 are the largest single part of United Kingdom cinema audiences and for many individual films female audiences are in the majority. Comedy, not action,

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[70] Vachon, 1998, pp. 129-130.

[71] Sinclair, Pollard and Wolfe, 2006, p. 19. The New Zealand experience may to some extent reflect this, see above p. 13 n. 28, especially in conjunction with the films Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens write with Peter Jackson.

is the most financially successful genre and women like men can and do write a broad range of genres including comedy.[72] The authors argue that increasing women's representation — and reflecting the diversity of the United Kingdom society — may increase the strength of the film industry: economic realities support the encouragement of women writers.

Financing entities' age-oriented beliefs may also be relevant. According to one analyst, in the United States the 50 plus age group is the fastest growing segment of the population with a net worth five times greater than that of other Americans. This group controls 48 per cent of all discretionary spending and includes more women than men.[73] As well, people over 50 control 80 per cent of the United Kingdom's wealth.[74] Yet financing entities still seem to see the 'youth' — and male — market is as the most important one. A recent Writers Guild of America West report noted that the employment rate of older writers had declined steadily over the study period and that this was "particularly troubling because it is out of sync with an America that is graying by the minute"[75]. I have been unable to find any research on feature marketing research and strategies for the 50 plus group, which may become more significant in the digital age.

Addressing the obstacles

Within the film industry I suspect that the (often subtle and sometimes hard to recognise or believe) use of the MANALIVE and Joanna Russ mechanisms influence an individual's capacities to be confident, and to advance her own work and interests. I think that it is important to talk about these mechanisms and develop a counter belief system that understands them as harmful. Exchanging stories about experiences can be part of this, providing an opportunity to form alliances for support that enhance individual resilience and the potential to resolve individual problems.

Addressing obstacles involves more than monitoring decisions about financial investment, whether the investor is a state agency or a purely

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[72] And Harris et al, 2004, found that men *do* go to 'women's movies' — musicals, romantic comedies — which may or may not be written by women.

[73] Sanders, 2002. I was reminded of this market when in an airport lounge filled with middle-aged couples watching DVDs on their laptops; I felt a little out of place with my book.

[74] Armstrong, 2008, p. 28.

[75] Hunt, 2005, p. 48.

commercial entity. The United Kingdom study of women feature scriptwriters advocated more research to clarify the nature and extent of the barriers women screenwriters face *and* beginning to take action to mitigate these by:

> … encouraging decision-makers to be more conscious of their decisions; equipping women with the skills to survive in the profession; realigning the profiles of women screenwriters; and highlighting the extent of the under-representation of women and the need (social and business cases) for improving representation.[76]

An ERICarts (European Institute for Comparative Cultural Research) study, while identifying some recent increase in the participation of women feature screenwriters in some European countries, reached similar conclusions.[77]

Skillset United Kingdom appears to believe that training and networking are the main solutions.[78] However, this may not be enough. According to the 2005 Writers Guild of America West report:

> In the past, the Guild has found value in the establishment of access programs and many such programs have been implemented by our employers. However… we must seriously consider whether access can be truly provided by programs or if it is people who provide access. Ours is a business based on personal relationships and social contacts. Work is distributed most fundamentally on the basis of a hiring party's personal knowledge of a writer's talent, commitment, character, work ethic, and overall appeal. This requires a social integration within the professional community and a personal access to company decision makers that is too often lacking for our colleagues who happen to be neither male nor white… It is abundantly clear to me that diversity in hiring requires a firm commitment on the part of decision makers…to actively seek out and read the work of writers who are women and people of color.[79]

I think that any commitment on the part of decision makers to seek out and read the work of writers who are women and people of colour may also require those readers to be aware of the effects on readers and writers of entrenched mechanisms that contribute to cognitive bias.

Very often transparency about the existence and consequences of unacceptable behaviour helps make change, simply by raising awareness of a problem that can be fixed, although this has not worked in the United States. This transparency may include the consistent provision of

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[76] Sinclair, Pollard, & Wolfe, 2006, p. 90.

[77] ERICarts, 2005.

[78] Skillset & United Kingdom Film Council, 2005.

[79] Hunt, 2005, p. 4.

statistical information as a basis from which to advocate and measure change.

Problem-solving strategies may include taking legal action. In the United States a group of 150 television scriptwriters has taken 23 class actions against networks, studios, talent agencies and production companies, for discriminating against them on the grounds of age. The writers contend that the entire industry and all the businesses within it have a common practice of age discrimination. Paul Sprenger, the lead attorney, has had considerable success in other age discrimination cases and says:

> This is far and away the best case on the merits that I've had. No-one in Hollywood would say publicly "I don't hire women" or "I don't hire blacks" but they will say "I don't hire older workers"[80].

Scriptwriter Nora Ephron expressed a similar view in conversation with Marsha McCreadie:

> Though I have experienced some blatant examples of ageism, there's never been a moment when I heard someone say, "Let's get a guy writer".[81]

Women's organisations can also help. Outside New Zealand women's non-profit-making organisations have provided and continue to provide opportunities to address issues that affect decision-making, audiences and resources as well as to provide networking and training. The Sydney Women's Film Group is a powerful historical example;[82] Studio D in Canada is an example of historical affirmative action resulting from activism.[83] Contemporary organisations include Women Make Movies (New York); some chapters of WIFT (I found one analysis of a WIFT chapter useful for evaluating the activities of others[84]); Guerilla Girls and Alice Locas; First Weekenders and POWER UP! (Los Angeles). And there are the festivals: long running festivals in Paris, Seoul, Ankara, Taipei and elsewhere and the more recent Birds Eye View festival and associated programme in London. In the United States, SWAN Day (Support Women Artists Now Day) is a new international holiday that celebrates women artists with all kinds of events including some that are film-related.[85]

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[80] Basler, 2005, p. [1].

[81] McCreadie 1994, p. 193.

[82] Chapman, 2002.

[83] Burgess, 2003.

[84] Nolan, 2004.

[85] The first will be Saturday, March 29, 2008: http://www.womenarts.org/swan/.

I've been told off for suggesting that lobbying would be a good idea in New Zealand, and for not acknowledging that women here have lobbied to advance women's interests in film for some time. However, the lobbying could only have been informed by anecdote, the policies that affect state agency decision making, and the number of released features directed and produced by women. I'm not convinced this could ever be adequate unless accompanied by a detailed analysis of where and how women writers and directors attempt to participate in the various feature making activities and programmes, and isolating specific problem areas (like the FWI). Anecdotes about women's difficulties in the film industry can easily be matched by anecdotes about men's difficulties and, in my opinion, are best used when they complement hard data. Lobbying may have been successful with New Zealand on Air (NZOA) which funds television programmes; these may include films but as I understand it only those already with NZFC investment and a commitment from a broadcaster.[86]

Unlike the NZFC and CNZ, NZOA has to consider the interests of women. Legislation requires NZOA "to reflect and develop New Zealand identity and culture by promoting programmes about New Zealand and New Zealand interests and by promoting Maori language and culture" and "to ensure that a range of broadcasts is provided that reflects the interests of women, youth, children, persons with disabilities and minorities (including ethnic minorities) and also the diverse ethical and spiritual beliefs of New Zealanders" [87]. The NZOA statements of intent and annual reports reflect the requirements of the legislation. Could this legislation be one reason why women are so strongly represented as scriptwriters for television? Would legislative change help advance women's interests, within CNZ and NZFC?

From conversations, from the New Zealand and international statistics, and my reading, I have concluded that there may be some internal obstacles for some women who write feature scripts (including me). Some of us do need to be more confident, to bullshit better, to be more competitive, more courageous, to feel entitled, and maybe be willing to work as writers and directors-for-hire. But there is also the

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[86] April 20 2008. After I completed this report, the *Sunday Star Times* reported that New Zealand on Air had just funded a feature film for television written and produced by two women, Donna Malane and Paula Boock: Anonymous. (2008, 6 April). Star-Times campaign to hit screen. *Sunday Star-Times,* p. A3. This may signal a new direction following the termination of the NZFC/ New Zealand on Air Signature programme.

[87] Broadcasting Act 1989, section 36 (a)(i), (ii) and (c).

internal/external problem of motherhood. And significant external, systemic, problems. Some women develop careful and individualised strategies to accommodate or bypass these problems. Sometimes these work and sometimes they don't. Many of these problems will continue to exist without institutional changes including, for writers, "a firm commitment on the part of decision makers… to actively seek out and read the work of writers who are women". But what if decision makers start to do this and the content does not appeal to them, because women's scripts are too different, and not marketable?

Content

I struggle for clarity about the content issue, even more than with the context, perhaps because women scriptwriters I know — and their scripts — are so diverse. Are women's scripts sometimes different from men's? How? And do these differences make a woman's script less attractive to readers? Are the differences, for instance, why few women's scripts make the short list in the First Writers Initiative? When people have talked with me, or emailed me, the variety of opinions about the content of women's scripts matched the variety of opinions about the contexts affecting women scriptwriters. I've divided this section about script content into process and product. Process and product overlap; and overlap with context. Like the contextual material, this information is fragmented, because I find it difficult to isolate the significant factors; and the information available to me seems to indicate that others find it difficult too.

Process

In many ways, the writing process is similar for everyone. According to the novelist Zadie Smith a writer has a single duty: "to express accurately their way of being in the world". She writes, "…this matter of understanding-that-which-is-outside-of-ourselves using only what we have inside ourselves amounts to some of the hardest intellectual and emotional work you'll ever do"[88].

Edmund White, another novelist, puts this idea a little differently: "To find the psychic energy to pursue a long career…a writer must juggle between a vigorous, recording curiosity about the world and the ongoing process of self-creation"[89]. The poet W.B. Yeats described the process in

[88] Z. Smith, 2007, [5]-[6].

[89] I have yet to relocate the source of this reference.

another way, referred to in a recent Arista development workshop: "…Now that my ladder's gone, I must lie down where all the ladders start, in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart"[90].

And we all have to come to terms with regular failure. Zadie Smith again:

> We like to think of fiction as the playground of language, independent of its originator… [F]iction writers know different. Though we rarely say it publicly, we know that our fictions are not as disconnected from our selves as you like to imagine and we like to pretend. It is this intimate side of literary failure that is so interesting; the ways in which writers fail on their own terms: private, difficult to express, easy to ridicule, completely unsuited for either the regulatory atmosphere of reviews or the objective interrogation of seminars, and yet, despite all this, true.[91]

In my experience this intimate side of failure has many facets. Here's just two examples I know about.

Sometimes it's related to a failure of craft and identifying my work too closely with myself. Recently, at a script group, all women that night, we read the first six pages of my new script — which I could see, hear and feel very vividly. The unanimous response of the group was more or less "Marian, *what* is it about?" And this was my beloved shadow script about a therapist with depression after two clients suicide, and paedophilia and murder in Oriental Bay. Somehow, I'd got it wrong, and the bits of me in the characters and my love of the place were hurt for a moment, until I started to think about how to resolve the problems.

Sometimes I've felt that I fail as a human being because I can locate unpleasant aspects of some characters within myself without too much difficulty: the charming paedophile; the apparently devoted mother who places batteries in her three-month-old daughter's vagina; the prison guard who insists that all prisoners use the same blade to shave with. A friend asked me "What does this do to your head?" My head can cope, but my heart struggles sometimes. It struggles even more when I write about the creation, deferment and loss of hope for a child and the creation, deferment and bittersweet realization of hope for a woman.

Although the process may often be similar for men and women it may also be different. And it's no surprise that ideas about women and their writing processes vary. I'm a little uncomfortable with an essentialist view of women, such as that articulated by Jane Campion in an interview at Cannes in 2007: "When I think of what's fantastic about women, it's

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[90] Arista, 2007, p. 1, slightly amended thanks to a poet reader.

[91] Z. Smith, 2007, [4].

their generosity, their intuitiveness, their capacity to trust emotions, to be emotional, to nurture, to promote peace, to care about the planet's environment so their children can inherit it. Those qualities aren't sexy for guys, but quite natural for women" [92]. I believe that women (and men) are diverse. How could I not, as Cushla and I work on our conflicting thoughts and feelings about the emotions and behaviours of the women characters in our script, some of whom have no natural inclination or capacity to nurture and to promote peace? And as we discuss the emotions and behaviours of the men, some of whom do have a natural inclination or capacity to nurture and to promote peace?

On the other hand we — and therefore the characters — are also shaped by incidents that are more common for girls and women than for boys and men, including experience of the conditions described by Tillie Olsen and the mechanisms described by Joanna Russ. And Joanna Margaret Paul's well-known statement about her working process has also influenced me:

> As a woman painting is not a job, not even a vocation. It is part of life, subject to the strains, and joys, of domestic life. I cannot paint unless the house is in order. Unless I paint I don't function well in my domestic roles. Each thing is important. The idea that one sacrifices other values for art is alien to me, and I think to all women whose calling it is to do and be many things... I don't wish to separate the significant and everyday actions but to bring them as close as possible together. It is natural for women to do this; their exercise and their training and their artistry is in daily living. Painting for me as a woman is an ordinary act — about the great meaning in ordinary things. Anonymity pattern utility quietness relatedness.[93]

Does feature filmmaking require a persistence that will undermine my efforts to reach this ideal, even though the writing process, for me, and perhaps for some other women, *is* about 'daily living', exploring 'the great meaning in ordinary things', and the layers of meaning in 'ordinary' things?

"Over and over again", script expert Linda Seger's interviewees told her that women did not need to and should not tell stories the same way as men do. They emphasized character, behaviour, emotions and relationships, alongside a deep interest in both the human experience and the transformation of women. Angelica Houston, director of *Bastard out of Carolina* put it this way: "I've got a great story. It's about people. I've never been interested in special effects, in explosions, except human explosions"[94].

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[92] Anonymous, 2007.

[93] [Paul] (Harris), 1976, p. 41.

[94] Seger, 1996, p. 119.

Any emphasis on emotions can present problems for a scriptwriter. Linda Seger quotes Robin Laing, then Gaylene Preston's producer:[95]

> When you don't tell an action story, you have to find the connections of events by digging deeper. Emotion is harder to write down than action. If we have to see emotion, we need to turn it into some kind of physical event for the film. But we have to value it and trust it.

This viewpoint echoes Zadie Smith's claim that "understanding-that-which-is-outside-of-ourselves using only what we have inside ourselves amounts to some of the hardest intellectual and emotional work you'll ever do".

One woman, a script professional, told me: "Women scriptwriters tend to start from an emotion rather than an idea and often cannot express the essence of their script in a single sentence"[96]. Another script professional, equally experienced and authoritative, said: "If anything, the women I know can be more analytical and more focused on exploring ideas than some of the male writers I know." Do these statements conflict? Is it possible that exploring more than one idea makes it more difficult to express the essence of a script in a single sentence? And how might starting from an emotion otherwise affect a script?

From my limited experience I think that some women may be more likely than many men to work with several ideas at once; and be reluctant to prioritise one of them. Is this part of a tendency to 'tell it slant', because our voices have been undervalued, or to bring the significant and everyday as close as possible together? Or is to some extent characteristic of an attribute identified by Philippa Boyens when speaking on a Wellington WIFT scriptwriter panel (2007): "Women don't instinctively try to own/shape/move forward an idea... at some point you have to confront the truth of moving forward for yourself" — because having multiple ideas means we don't have to commit ourselves fully to any of them, and experience the consequences of that commitment? Or is it that we tend to multi-task more than men do in daily life and may attempt to write scripts that multi-task?[97] Are we also more likely than men to work with more than one

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[95] Seger, 1996, p. 119.

[96] Others have also told me that women are not good at writing loglines for their own work.

[97] As I finished this I received a parcel of second hand shirts from the man —a painter and a gifted op-shopper— who long ago introduced me to John Berger's work (see below p. 42) along with an ancient copy of *Camera Obscura*, probably from an op-shop too, for my birthday. And there was an article about Sally Potter's *The gold diggers* (1983). It contained a list of the 25 films Sally Potter chose to present with *The gold diggers* and

protagonist and point of view and a long timeline, and is one reason some women prefer to write for television rather than film?

At the moment my own experience is the only one I can refer to and draw any tentative conclusions from.

I applied for the IIML M.A. course after I saw a play called *Cherish,* by the IIML scriptwriting director Ken Duncum. Ah, I thought, this is wonderful, I can learn from him. And I did. The year transformed me, and my writing. I didn't just learn on the M.A. course. I loved it, and the people on it. We were expected to be diverse, to find and strengthen our own voices. We learned how to read and respond to other people's work in a way that was useful for them, and I found learning how to read and respond to other people's writing very useful for my own writing. It was especially helpful to learn to read a script twice before writing a response; to pay equal attention to what worked for us as readers and to what did not; and how to ask questions about the script's intentions.

I'd never completed a script before that year, and had read only one, *Chinatown*. But I had a film, *Mothersongs/Chansons maternelles*, in my head, generated by my ongoing low-grade obsession with mothering and its dramas, how the mothering a woman receives affects the way she is a mother, and how social context — a war, feminism, or other kinds of civil unrest — affects mothering processes. As is probably obvious by now, I'd also participated in many debates about how to manage children alongside commitment to other work and a central intimate relationship. And concluded eventually that all three together were possible only if the 'other' work paid well or an intimate partner earned well and was prepared to subsidise the household. For a woman, being a writer, or another kind of artist, in the conditions already described adds a fourth element

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texts she wrote about the film, including: "I see this film as a musical describing a female quest. Making it has demanded asking the same questions during the working process as the film endeavours to ask: about the connections between gold, money and women; about the illusion of female powerlessness; about the actual search for gold and the inner search for gold; about imagery in the unconscious and its relationship to the power of the cinema; looking at childhood and memory and seeing the history of cinema itself as our collective memory of how we see ourselves and how we as women are seen": Rosenbaum, 1984, p. 128. This seems to me to describe a script and film that multitasks superbly but the only trace I've been able to find of *The gold diggers* is a short clip downloadable at http://www.7digital.com/stores/productDetail.aspx?shop=286&pid=78495. I long to see the entire work, and then to look at the films she chose to present with it, some familiar to me, some not. Maybe twenty-five years after *The gold diggers'* release is a good time to re-release it so we can think about its aesthetic, intentions and themes?

because a woman's income from a principal artistic occupation is usually so small, especially if she is a writer.[98]

My mother used to tell me that when I was born she "turned her face to the wall" because she didn't want me, didn't feel she could cope with another child. This story permeated our relationship and may be the source of my fixation on mothering. From my late teens I loved participating in every aspect of the magic of the biology of motherhood: conception, birth, breastfeeding. But because I also love lots of time alone *and* being out in the world, often doing things that do not generate an income, and had not been well mothered myself, I was intermittently a neglectful and ineffective mother. I wrote *Mothersongs* with multiple protagonists: "Mothers. One's physically absent because she's terrified. One's emotionally absent because she's ambitious. The other two think they have it sussed. Political struggles and their children's choices change everything, for each of them".

Towards the end of the year by chance I came across the concept of absent motherhood and realised that I had been an absent mother, in a different way than my own mother, and that *Mothersongs* was about absent motherhood. I'd written *Mothersongs* to explore a question that troubled me both intellectually and emotionally: "What does it mean to be an 'absent' mother?" Knowing that helped me to write a (sharper) third draft.

A script professional told me a little while ago that sometimes, when being given notes on a script, a writer struggles and cries, as s/he is forced to 'go deeper', beyond where the story appears to be, and write about what s/he really wants to write about, which is where the story actually is, (I was shown the tissues on hand). It happens with men as well as women and I imagine that it is part of the emotional hard work Zadie Smith refers to.[99] My experience with *Mothersongs* taught me a little bit about this. When I understood about the question underlying my desire to write *Mothersongs* it was very hard to talk about it in class. It was typical of the acceptance and support available in the group that (as I remember it) after I'd stumbled through my explanation, there was a

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[98] Over the summer I've read Sylvia Ashton-Warner's memoir *I passed this way*; it provides a fine, New Zealand, illustration of these difficulties to complement the work of Tillie Olsen and others.

[99] When I read Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *I passed this way* I decided that her key vocabulary concepts may help me to get to what I'm *really* trying to write about, see especially pp. 417-419 where she describes how a strong, unacknowledged, image can 'jam the mechanism'; and am now re-reading her *Teacher*.

short silence. Then one of the guys said "Plenty of absent fathers." And another added "Ain't that the truth."

The memory of this process helps me understand, to some extent, the "understanding-that-which-is-outside-of-ourselves using only what we have inside ourselves." But as I resist the idea that gender is fixed and know that many of the issues around motherhood are similar for men who parent, I'm no closer to understanding why and how some women's scripts may be very different from men's. How — if at all — do ideas about the role of the writers' emotions in their work relate to women 'telling it slant'? To women's starting from an emotion rather than an idea? To taking ownership of an idea and moving it forward? To being able to express the idea behind a script in a sentence or two? To working with multiple or conflicting ideas?

Linda Seger is concerned to find 'the woman's voice', and that it may be compromised by the conditions like those that concern Tillie Olsen and Joanna Russ. She writes, from within the United States:

> …the woman's voice has not yet clearly emerged in the art of screenwriting. Finding the woman's voice in storytelling can be just as difficult as finding her voice in management. The woman first has to create the story. It seems simple enough, yet often women have few other films as models about how to tell their stories and express themes that have not been shown before.[100]

Seger found that many women writers wanted to discuss the woman's voice. She supported this, because not talking about it: "…makes it harder to find, to acknowledge, to value. Women do have a point of view, just as men do. Dismissing it, pretending it doesn't exist, or devaluing it doesn't negate it, but it does mean that a large realm of experience is not up on the screen"[101].

However, finding a voice may bring contextual problems: "If she's found her voice, even if it's considered by most to be a great script, she knows that many of the executives will probably consider it not commercial because it's unlike other films on the market"[102].

According to Linda Seger, the writer's need to adapt her voice to meet investors' demands, whether the investor is a state funder (in New Zealand) or a purely commercial entity "often removes originality and authenticity… [The work] begins to look derivative, predictable, and all

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[100] Seger, 1996, p. 112.

[101] Seger, 1996, p. 121.

[102] Seger, 1996, p. 112.

the same. It also limits the kinds of films that are made — another voice never emerges". Linda Seger quotes Roseanne Barr as saying "Today you can't tell the difference between something produced by a woman and things produced by a man…and that disturbs me. When women's voices sound like men's, then women have effectively been censored"[103]. Do we censor as we write? And does that censorship compromise the quality of our work? If we don't self-censor, will our work ever be produced?

However, Seger concedes that discussing the woman's voice can be problematic: "Looking for the woman's voice can remove women from opportunities to do action-adventures, thrillers, science fiction. It can also stereotype men, leaving relationship stories as woman's domain"[104].

And it may be difficult to experiment with 'women's voices', even when resources are available. Seger introduces Sara Duvall as the producer of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, described as one of the one hundred most successful films of all time, among both female *and* male filmgoers (1996). At that time Duvall had obtained financing to do two to four films a year, written, directed, produced and in a large part crewed by women. She wanted to help 'the women's voice[s]' emerge, but knew it would not be easy. She said:

> I'm going to have to cultivate the writers of these scripts… I'm going to have to convince the women writers that I really mean it, about the women's point of view. Women have written so long for the male audience that for them to believe I really want a script with a woman's point of view is going to take a lot of work… These are the scripts that agents wouldn't even send to the studios because they don't think they're commercial. Or they are scripts that women have written just for their own satisfaction and put away five years ago, knowing that no studio would ever buy them.[105]

From information available on the imdb database, Duvall appears to have been involved with no film since *Fried Green Tomatoes*. What happened?

Whether or not there is a 'woman's voice', or are 'women's voices', every script is unique and the writing process may be affected by the source of the story. Because some New Zealand women write adaptations, and these have often been very successful in various ways, I wondered whether the

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[103] Seger, 1996, pp. 121, 114.

[104] Seger, 1996, p. 121. A reader's note here: "Lo these many years ago Molly Heskell noted that European films about relationship stories have not been denigrated in the way that Hollywood did in referring to them as weepies. In both places these films have been directed by men (probably often by the same men) but the attitude is different. So the problem may be with Anglo-Saxon approaches to the material".

[105] Seger, 1996, p. 123.

adaptation process was different from writing an original script and especially suited to the way women work. I tried a little experiment with a Texan detective story that captivated me when I read it.

When I finished the adaptation my sense was that for me an adaptation *might* not be "the hardest intellectual and emotional work you'll ever do" (at least for this kind of simple story). I tend to find it difficult to develop a logical and linear structure and having a structure already in place helped me. And because the characters were already developed within the story they did not surprise me and subvert my planned storyline, as happens when I write an original script. I could focus on replicating, for a different medium, the feelings I had when I read the book. Starting from an individual's already recorded life story may also in some ways be less demanding (for me) than starting from an emotion or an idea; one of the scripts I'm working on is based on a true story. As with the adaptation, it helps to have the story arc already in place, although getting the characters right is a challenge.

My own view about women's scriptwriting processes, in New Zealand and elsewhere, accords with ideas expressed by filmmakers Raida Haines and Barry Barclay. In response to a question about what a 'women's film' is, Raida Haines said: "Until women directors [and writers] can offer the public a much larger body of work, there is no answer to that question"[106]. Barry Barclay has said something similar about Maori films: "We shall get to know what a Maori film is when we get a chance to make more films"[107]. We may better understand women's writing processes once more women's scripts go through development, and we've heard more of the women's stories that wait to be told.

Product

Academics don't write much about differences between men's and women's writing processes. And in recent years, if addressing the products of the writing process, writers on gender in film have tended to focus on how films construct and perform gender. Kelly Hankin thinks this is because of "…certain theoretical tides, particularly structuralism, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis, which de-privileged the 'author'". This meant "it was considered theoretically unsophisticated to focus on the female filmmaker"[108].

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[106] Gregory, 2002, pp. 368-369.

[107] Barclay, 1990, p. 20.

[108] Hankin, 2007, p. [4].

Linda Seger doesn't have this problem. Nor does Debra Zimmerman, executive director of Women Make Movies in New York, which continues to operate as a training organisation, distributor and production umbrella for women, and to adapt to technological change. Zimmerman is unequivocal that:

> …[B]ecause of socialization and experiences, women see the world in a completely different way than men. And their films reflect that. Even in the most simplistic terms women see themselves as central in their own lives, and in their films they are the ones in control of the gaze.[109]

Another woman, from the National Film Board of Canada's Studio D, a woman's filmmaking group that no longer exists, describes a woman's film as one that:

> … puts a woman's story front-and-center of the frame… Whether the subject is racism, pornography, sexuality, or humor, our films look at it through women's eyes and experience, and we look for stories that we don't find in mainstream media. We've tried to challenge stereotypes and assumptions about our lives…[110]

There are many debates around the contrasting ways that women and men look at the world that I won't address here. I learned most, as a visual artist, from John Berger's *Ways of seeing.*[111] Others I know have been influenced by Laura Mulvey's writing about 'the gaze'.[112]

In her thesis on New Zealand women filmmakers, Larissa Marno reports Niki Caro's views, influenced by producer Bridget Ikin, who showed her that "Girls didn't have to be just girlfriends or lovers or mothers or daughters. They can move into the centre, and not have to look beautiful to occupy that space." Not surprisingly then, Caro also says "I've always been talking about intimate relationships, family relationships, a female perspective, always". And adds: "I'm convinced that the future of

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[109] Aufderheide and Zimmerman, 2004, p. 145.

[110] Seger, 1996, p. 115.

[111] Berger, 1972. On Sally Potter's website I found this reference to John Berger's most recent work Hold Everything Dear (http://www.versobooks.com/books/ab/b-titles/berger_j_hold_everything_dear.shtml) which "'meditates on the state of undefeated despair' that is shared by those violently excluded from power. In the first essay, 'Wanting Now,' he concludes: 'Not all desires lead to freedom, but freedom is the experience of a desire being acknowledged, chosen and pursued. Desire never concerns the mere possession of something, but the changing of something. Desire is a wanting. A wanting now. Freedom does not constitute the fulfilment of that wanting, but the acknowledgement of its supremacy'": http://www.sallypotter.com/node/125, retrieved 3 February 2008. A good place to stop footnoting and send this out.

[112] Mulvey, 1975.

narrative film making is in hard core female experience… Because it's simply more interesting than your traditional kind of genre milarky"[113].

In one of many crossovers between context and content Liz Francke notes that women's scripts — other than those written in partnership with men — are more likely to be made when films about relationships are in fashion because women tend to write films about relationships. There may be times when women write about the 'wrong' thing, in Joanna Russ' terms. And it's true, many women scriptwriters I know do write about primarily about relationships, and the genre is secondary, whether they're writing an action film, a romantic comedy, or horror.

Another academic, Marsha McCreadie, is more romantic about women's writing. Referring to the well-known work of Carol Gilligan[114] and to an excerpt from Robin Swicord's script for *The Perez family* McCreadie claims that it has:

> …a filigree of delicate description that perfectly fits the format of film: simultaneity perhaps being a natural mindset for females… women see the world differently from men, using a language of interconnectedness and interpersonal continuity… to think of others, to envision scenes occurring at the same moment, by cross-cutting, may be natural for women.[115]

Filigrees 'of delicate description' that perfectly fit the format of film may or may not be characteristic of women's writing; I feel uncomfortable with this description and with some strange errors in McCreadie's book.[116] But I think that McCreadie's ideas about the consequences of women seeing the world differently, as manifest in women's scripts, may relate to what I perceive as 'multi-tasking' in some of our scriptwriting processes.

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[113] Marno, 1997, pp. 76, 79.

[114] Especially Gilligan, 1982.

[115] McCreadie, 2006, p. 8.

[116] She states that "Even today, if you visit New Zealand, you will see proudly displayed in numerous bookstore and coffee-houses the series of photos of the three perfectly matched red-haired actresses who played [Janet] Frame at various intervals in her life" (p. 12); refers to Niki Caro as 'Nikki Karo' (p. 142); says that women's film festivals are "at very least an annual staple in… New Zealand" (p. 143); refers to "director Peter Walsh's *Lord of the Rings* "(p. 140); credits Jane Campion as director of *Angela's ashes* (p. 2). Most puzzlingly she claims that women write 38 per cent of New Zealand features; Sinclair, Pollard and Wolfe, 2006, used this statement as evidence that conditions for women scriptwriters are better in New Zealand than in the United Kingdom.

Linda Seger's take on structure also helped me understand this. She states that the (United States) standard, relatively direct and linear structure of a script may not suit women writers, several of whom have similar ideas about climaxes in film and relate these ideas to gendered orgasms. Men may write one conflict, one climax and one denouement. Women may write many conflicts, multiple climaxes and many endings, which may be why very often we are good at writing series for television. The process is as important the arrival.

According to Seger, it is possible to abandon a strict linear structure through use of a circle, a spiral, or a helix, a ripple, a mosaic, a quilt, or other kinds of layering, of both character and complexity. Some linear narrative must remain, to move the story forward, but action is de-emphasized, and the proportions of emotion and psychology becomes greater. This way of working carries risks:

> … [S]ome women…may not yet have the craft to make these different models work. Although these kinds of stories can be done for a much lower budget than the more action-oriented models, if they fail, women know they usually don't get another chance. If they compromise, they feel they aren't truly telling their stories.[117]

Seger does not claim that these models have never been used or that men do not or cannot use non-linear models. Nor does she advocate non-linear models for all women's films. She is not an essentialist. However, her discussion gave me a sense of permission to break 'the rules' and to feel entitled to experiment. It also offers something authoritative to refer to when the results of our experiments are challenged for their 'quality'.

Because they will be challenged. Long ago, when I read Keri Hulme's *the bone people* and couldn't understand why publishers had rejected it, I rang the publishers. "What's the problem?" I asked each of them, men and women. "She won't edit it," they said. And that was true. She'd spent twelve years writing it and the structure especially was complex, in Linda Seger's terms probably best described as a spiral structure. It didn't need editing.

When the late Irihapeti Ramsden read the manuscript, she identified the book's structure and rhythms as being closely aligned to her familiar, Maori, oral history tradition. And when I inquired more closely about the changes the publishers wanted made, they all wanted different changes because, I think, the structure was unfamiliar and they didn't understand its workings. (They were also uncomfortable with some of the 'difficult' subject matter.) I concluded that the publishers feared the unfamiliar in

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[117] Seger, 1996, p. 141.

the book, and that they used the Joanna Russ/ MANALIVE type mechanisms to justify their discomfort, refusing to publish unless Keri changed *the bone people* to suit what they (or their English principals) thought literature should be.

Editing would, I am sure, have damaged *the bone people*'s careful structure and reduced the book's overall impact. We (Irihapeti, Miriama Evans and I) published it with only one tiny change and although readers tend to love or hate it, it continues to be read and to sell well, twenty-five years after publication. The point of this little story? That I believe, because of this experience, that there may be women's scripts written in unfamiliar ways (and including 'difficult' content) that will make commercially successful films. If women script writers find ourselves wanting to use one of the structures described by Linda Seger, or another unusual one, it may be important to hold fast against experienced readers who are uncomfortable with this. And necessary to be extra obsessive about finding ways to turn the script into a film.

I have questions though, about how best to develop the craft to use alternative structures well, relating more to the process than the product. Where do the challenges of these structures fit within the more general issues about women's scripts? How do they relate to 'telling it slant'? Is 'telling it slant' an integral part of a layered structure? Might 'telling it slant' even be a useful way to create a subtext?[118] Does the use of an alternative structure make it more difficult to express the idea(s) behind a script in twenty-five words? And how can we find appropriate support for experimental work? How can we find informed readers to help with development; and producers, investors and eventually audiences?

Many women scriptwriters and filmmakers agree with Gillian Armstrong and don't wish to be 'ghettoized': "I'm proud to carry a woman's vision but I don't like that label at all. It's like putting women in the ghetto. It limits

[118] I've just found a reference to a suggestion by Doris Lessing in *The golden notebook* that the impulse to turn life into fiction is a form of evasion — and means that the writer wants to conceal something from herself. That makes me think again. I'll track down a copy of *The golden notebook* and see what else Doris Lessing says. Or there's yet another view that people use art to confront rather than to evade. Fred Vargas, a crime writer, says she has a theory of art that goes back to Neolithic times: "I think art emerged as a sort of medicine to deal with the fact that we are afraid, alone, small and weak in a dangerous world. But we are not like all the other animals and cannot live with just a pragmatic and realistic life. So we invent a second reality, similar but not identical to ours, into which we escape to confront these perils." Wroe, 2008, C4.

women because it says, 'Oh, you can make women's films, but you can't make other films'" [119]. A friend who read this comment wondered whether Gillian Armstrong would have made it if women's films were not subject to the kinds of mechanisms that Joanna Russ identified or included in the MANALIVE list.

Robin Swicord sometimes writes with her husband Nicholas Kazan and presents another view:

> In all honesty, I'm not sure if a woman *can* write a woman's part better than a man. I hate it when something arrives at the door with a note appended, "You write the girl's role and Nick can write the guy's part". We call it pink and blue thinking… Sexism is not as bad for writers in the business as corporate thinking.[120]

The potential for stereotyping might be overcome by writers who work at the kind of authenticity advocated by Zadie Smith. On the other hand, some men writers struggle with women characters. Riwia Brown says of her invitation to write *Once were warriors* that "the reason I was approached to write… was because I could write Maori women and that was a point of reference. No one believed I could write Maori men, or a whole screenplay, probably least of all me" [121].

And the desire to address stereotyping can be oppressive for writers. New Zealander Judy Callingham told Linda Seger:

> Political correctness is killing us. It's gagging us as storytellers. You can't write a story about a woman who isn't a feminist. You can't write a story about Maori women or about victims. You can't write stories about bad women, which are often the most fascinating because they open up those areas we've never been allowed to explore. You can't show violence of any kind, even though the violence may be absolutely essential in order to show a character transforming.[122]

Deidre Pribram, a filmmaker and academic, notes Mathia Diawara's distinction between 'oppression studies', which seek to identify and specify the exclusion of blacks, and 'performance studies', which focus on how blacks create and reinvent themselves within the context of American culture.[123] Pribram writes:[124]

> This shift is occurring in women's projects, too. There is less of a concern (although the concern is ongoing) to delineate patriarchal structures, and more emphasis on

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[119] Seger, 1996, p. 120.

[120] McCreadie, 2006, p. 4.

[121] Perkins, 2000, p. 55.

[122] Seger, 1996, p. 159.

[123] Diawara, 1992.

[124] Pribram, 1993, p. 5.

> depicting women's lives, relationships, perspectives, desires and truths. The dominant project is no longer to solely explain how groups are oppressed or forever argue against that oppression, but rather to portray and understand one's own experiences. Less energy is spent convincing a dominant other, and more attention is devoted to one's own community and its meanings. The question is how does this approach, centered on one's own concerns, coincide with an industry still representing its dominant members and their modes of thought.

Pribram's article aims to persuade the independent film industry to embody diversity, where the variety and complexity of communities and the variation and range of their experiences must be understood as "a concept with *implications*, including audiences who must be actively sought and reached, and films that are 'hard sells' in part because their meanings vary for different cultural groups"[125]. Her question about interactions between an industry representing its dominant members and their modes of thought and filmmakers who focus on telling the stories of their own communities is fundamental to what I'm attempting to do with my scripts and my thesis.

I've already tangled with the different meanings for members of different cultural groups, with *Mothersongs*. Women outside the M.A. class in general did not like it. One external examiner's report came from a woman producer whose report focused on the script's shortcomings, though, because of the way I've been influenced by Joanna Paul, I was entertained that she called the script a 'domestic epic'. I felt she hadn't read the script twice, as our class had been taught to do; nor thought about what worked as well as what did not, and why. So I gave the script to an academic who teaches film. Hmmm, the same imbalance: a focus almost entirely on — different — shortcomings. (One of these readers is not a mother; I don't know about the other one).

A writer friend who's a mother gave me a more balanced and useful response. The second external examiner, a scriptwriter and a man, a script writer whose work I admire, was almost entirely positive and awarded me the class prize (I'd have liked to know a little more about what didn't work for him and why). After all this, I paid a woman classmate to give me a detailed critique, which carefully addressed strengths *and* weaknesses and asked good questions, wonderful. But then I moved on because I stopped caring about *Mothersongs* (I'd learned what I needed to know); and wanted to try something new.

Now I've read and written more, I'd probably be less confused by diverse responses to a script from experienced readers, and better able to sort

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[125] Pribram, 1993, p. 5.

through them and move forward. But as with the six pages of my script that I read with the scriptwriting group, I may still be challenged when trying to work out whether responses from readers from outside my communities that I write about are because I've failed as a writer or because the meaning of what I write is different for them as 'outsiders'.

Recently, Rachel Millward, director of the United Kingdom Birds Eye View film festival since 2002, describes the sensibility of *Away from her* and *Stephanie Daley* in the 2007 festival as having 'startlingly frank ambivalence':

> [The films] wrestle with doubts and leave questions unanswered. There are no bad guys here, only human beings who try and fail. Conflict arises when two people are trying hard to reach each other. The gaze is scrupulous and penetrating, yet its judgment is light. Is this the woman's touch? ...It is my belief that as more women make films, the more impossible to categorise their films it will be. We have to hold lightly to any notion of a feminine type.[126]

She believes that women's films 'run the gamut of theme and mood, just as men's films do' but wants more diversity in women's films:

> The important thing is to explore diversity and to relish the creativity it brings. Many of the subjects approached by our filmmakers can be painful… I can't wait for the day when more women start making raucous comedy. But the triumph of these films [*Away from her* and *Stephanie Daley* are among those she discusses] is that they do not leave me in despair at the world we live in.[127]

Some of that diversity relates to themes. I've heard one script professional claim that a high proportion of women's scripts are about looking for a home. That idea might fit some local women's scripts I'm familiar with; they address family relationships a lot more than the men's, too. The script professional also identifies a high proportion of men's as being about looking for redemption. But I'm familiar with scripts (written by both genders) about women looking for redemption and men looking for a home.

Another theme, explored in the recent *Red road* (written and directed by Andrea Arnold), *Stephanie Daley* (written and directed by Hilary Brougher) and *Away from her* (written and directed by Sarah Polley) is how women approach pain. One scriptwriter recently suggested to me that some script assessors for the FWI — women and men — are uncomfortable with scripts that examine women's pain, perhaps because they remind assessors of the now less fashionable local *cinema of unease*.

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[126] Millward, 2007a, p. [2].

[127] Millward, 2007a, p. [2].

Other discussion about diversity relates to genre. I know I'd love to write a musical comedy and I have a mate whose big dream is to write historical drama. I know women whose comedy scripts I love and admire. But I've also witnessed two women script professionals arguing passionately about whether women can write genre movies, or want to. Does some of the diversity that interests Rachel Millward involve more participation in writing genre, and perhaps subverting it?

Somewhere, I read about a man — a producer — who has supported women filmmakers. And the writer or director who mentioned him repeated his advice. It went something like this: "A film can be about *anything*, so long as there's a hook that the marketing people can use." Genre can offer a useful shorthand when writing and as a hook. But perhaps it doesn't matter too much if there's another hook for the marketing people.

Academic Lucy Fischer explains genre as a fundamental organising principle that allows makers and audiences to classify films, although it cannot be rigidly defined. Fischer 's interest in the dynamics of gender and genre relates to the broad question of how narrative and cultural forms imply a specific sexual politics. Arguing that because too neat a classification "tends to calcify forms and to mask their potential interactions", she attempts to establish interrelationships between genres and argues for a more fluid classification of genre.[128]

Seger, Francke and McCreadie identify some gendered relationships to genre, while acknowledging, yet again, the diversity of women scriptwriters. Women are less likely to write action scripts or horror. But they do write them. And they may share the writing on action scripts with men, and enrich them. Some writers, like Robin Swicord who write with men emphasise that they are not necessarily going to be the ones 'writing the women'; others may ensure that the women's parts are improved.[129]

Philippa Boyens told McCreadie that she and Fran Walsh were conscious about trying to bring 'female energy' to the roles they created from Tolkien's characters in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. "We have a lot of differences between our female characters. They are very, very different from each other which is wonderful as well. And the female energy in the film[s] is very strong".[130] 'Female energy' is undefined.

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[128] Fischer, 1996, pp. 4-7.

[129] For instance see Seger, 1996, pp. 80-86.

[130] McCreadie, 2006, pp. xviii, 142.

Perhaps Philippa Boyens is referring to a strong, multifaceted, female presence.

Kirsten Smith, who wrote *Legally Blonde,* describes chick flicks as a developing genre:

> It seems like the chick flick got to be a larger genre. There's the female action movie and the romantic comedy and the weeper and the woman-in-jeopardy movie. The genre that we've been working in we've named the 'girl-power' genre. The female character starts without any acceptance. She spends the movie gaining that acceptance. But at the same time she's redefining the parameters of that acceptance. *Erin Brockovich* is a great example of that.[131]

Other examples are Niki Caro's *Whale rider* and *North country*. Caro has said of the parallels between Josey Aimes in *North country* and Pai in *Whale rider*: "Obviously they both faced tremendous opposition but they go about creating change in not a crusading heroine way but in quite a gentle way and they are both so unlikely"[132].

OK. That's as far as I can get on the longest day of 2007. I'm going to work on those scripts now. I'll be in touch again later on. And thanks again for your help.

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