Dear John,

Congratulations on being declared SPADA/Onfilm Industry Champion for 2002. In your celebratory interview in Onfilm with Onfilm editor, Nick Grant, (Onfilm, December 2002) you raise a number of significant policy matters, some relevant to Maori.

You say, for instance, that you are against those who maintain that “people can only tell stories about themselves”. Frankly, I feel you would have to search a long way to find anybody who thinks that way. The real bogey you are raising is that there are people about who believe “only Maori can tell Maori stories.” As if to preempt possible future objections to your new film on this score, you tell us that Whale Rider is “Absolutely … part of Ngati Porou” (so, a Maori story), and then add, “but I could think of fifty societies were the same issues were being debated and fought over” (so, an “absolutely international” story, a story which, because of that internationality, that universality, anybody, including South Pacific Pictures, may freely make use of.).

Many stories may be “absolutely international”, but, unless the rights are cleared, nobody can use them commercially. You’re at pains to tell how you obtained the commercial (copyright) rights, but, whatever you may have declared to Maori in Whangara, whether you honourably cleared with Ngati Porou rights relevant under Maori Custom Law may remain, for some Maori, at least, an open question.

You complain: “You know, I get really frustrated by this apartheid view of culture. It’s entirely wrong and will diminish our ability to move forward if we don’t accept that there are things we owe to each other and borrow from each other and move on”.

Like the “H” word (you will know the Prime Minister has forbidden Maori in high office from using the “H” word in public), the “A” word is an ugly word. “A” was something inflicted on people of colour, millions of them, by whites. So it strikes a queer note when I hear that word being used by whites against people of colour, especially when those people have been generous towards white folk, as the peoples of the Pacific - Polynesians in particular - have been generous in cinema towards Western producers.

And oh!, how those producers have “borrowed”. From this country, I think of How Chief Te Ponga Won His Bride (1913), shot in Rotorua, with an all-Maori cast; The Romance Of Hine-Moa (1927); The Te Kooti Trial (1927) and many others. What are we to make of such wonderful local cinema icons as Broken

Note: John Barnett is one of the Producers of Whale Rider. Whale Rider won the 2003 Sundance World Cinema Audience Award, the 2003 Rotterdam Festival Audience Award and the 2002 People’s Choice Award at Toronto International Film Festival. Whale Rider is taken from the novel of the same name, which was written by Maori author Witi Ihimaera. There have been rumblings from some Maori about the fact that Whale Rider has been adapted for screen, directed, and produced by an all-White team. It is a story unique to the descendants of the tribe, Ngati Porou whose lands are centered on the East Coast of the North Island of Aotearoa, (New Zealand). Much has been made of who is telling our stories, (Maori stories), and who therefore has control of the Maori voice. Barry’s letter is in response to John Barnett’s attempts to internationalize, or universalize Whale Rider in order to justify this particular instance of appropriation.
 Barrier and Utu? In more recent times, we’ve had the badboy Maori films, What Becomes of the Broken Hearted and Crooked Earth, and soon enough, we may be blessed with a “white woman goes native” feature (River Queen) and a “Geronimo feature - visionary native leader brought down by flaws in his own character” (I Shall Not Die)

I attended a conference in Honolulu in 1997 at which white academics made mention of Romance Features made in the Pacific, War Features in the Pacific, Missionary Features made in the Pacific, Musical features made in the Pacific, even the representation of Pacific Peoples (women especially) in feature film posters for features made in the Pacific.

Polynesians have “given” to Western cinema famously. The Western producers have “borrowed” with enthusiasm. We are attractive subjects. Our stories are “universal”; they are “absolutely international”. Ah, those cheekbones; ah, the suppressed savagery; and ah, last but not least, the allure. Brown her up; brown her down; see how beautifully she moves; what feelings she has.

Indigenous Peoples have been generous, as well, with their traditional designs, emblems, concepts, poetry, songs and art works. The koru is painted on our national carrier; the Rugby Union seeks to get a special act through parliament to protect the Silver Fern logo; even the sacred tiki, trembling with another power, has, in plastic imitation, found its way into the tourist memento box and earned a handsome dollar. So it is profoundly insulting, my friend, to have you use the phrase “cultural A” when talking about Indigenous Peoples and their generosity (alleged lack of) with respect to sharing their intellectual and cultural treasures.

You should be aware also that it may not be too easy for Indigenous dissenters to speak up against the cinema barons, against, for example, the outlook of the SPADA/Film Commission/Film Fund troika. Remember the patronizing reporting in some outlets of the stand taken by Rena Owen when she threatened to pull out of the Canadian pro-
duction, *Ogopogo*, which was set down for shooting in Queenstown and in which she was to play a starring role? The screenplay was said to be based on the ancestral lake-dwelling creature, *Ogopogo*; the First Nation chiefs of Canada’s British Columbia had refused to endorse or support the project as long as the creature of the film story was named *Ogopogo* and the film was titled after it. Rena stood her ground in solidarity, a lesson for us all, I think. (The title and script were changed and filming proceeded.)

Perhaps you know, too, that the issues have been debated for some time right up at UN level, under the somewhat clumsy yet epiphanic phrase, “Indigenous Intellectual Property Rights”. In 1993, near Whakatane, Maori hosted the first ever International Conference on this topic. Over 150 Indigenous delegates attended. Among them were representatives from the Japan, USA, Sirinam, Panama, India, Peru, Fiji, Phillipines, Cook Islands, Australia, as well as local delegates. At stake were “a range of significant issues, including the value of indigenous knowledge, biodiversity and biotechnology, customary environmental management, arts, music, language and other physical and spiritual cultural forms.” At the conclusion of the conference, the seminal Mataatua Declaration was promulgated.

The point I am making, I suppose, is that Maori are not dullards in this area. Also, there are no ready formula. Has it been a serious breach of Custom Law to have changed the name of the film’s young girl lead from the *Kahu* (short for Kahutia Te Rangi) of Witi Ihimaera’s novel to *Paikea*? What might be the consequences? Who can people of goodwill turn to and ask? It is unseemly to be badgering Maori about such issues, as if they are stupid should they have a contrary opinion, or, indeed, have no ready opinion at all, not one they are prepared to declare out loud to all and sundry. Meantime, the IP protections that South Pacifc Films will have placed on *Whale Rider* would fill a football stadium, I shouldn’t wonder, and will be vigorously asserted in every territory the film enters: this to the benefit of the owners.

There’s another, darker side to this business. I’m talking of the multi-million dollar heist, a generation of stolen dollars, with which even you, willy-nilly, may be associated.

You will know (perhaps you don’t) that Maori, with industry help, started a whole new branch of Cinema, namely, Indigenous Cinema (or, as I have from time to time dubbed it for my own satisfaction, “Fourth Cinema”). Fourth Cinema features are dramatic feature films made by Indigenous filmmakers themselves. To date, there have not been many of them, only eleven, and, of these, Maori have made five: (in order of release) *Ngati, Mauri, Te Rua, Once Were Warriors*, and *Te Tangata Whai Rawa O Weneti* (the Maori Merchant of Venice). The balance has been made by Inuit, Native American, Aborigine and Saami directors; the titles include *Atanarjuat* (*The Fast Runner*), *Smoke Signals*, Tracey Moffit’s *Bedevilled* and Ivan Sen’s *Beneath Clouds*. Internationally, there’s a growing appreciation of Indigenous product, authentic Indigenous product, that is, a developing niche market, quite singular. We helped begin this market, having been the first in it.

But (and this is where the heist bit comes in) there hasn’t been a Maori dramatic feature made through the Film Commission since *Once Were Warriors*, released 1994. (*The Maori Merchant of Venice* was funded by Te Mangai Paho.) Even if a Maori feature goes into production within the next few months (and Merata Mita’s *Cousins* is the only feature anywhere near close to that) it will almost
AN OPEN LETTER TO JOHN BARNETT

certainly be next year, 2004, before it can be released. So, no Maori feature through the Film Commission in a whole decade.

What happened? And where did the money that might have been expected, in the normal flow of things, to have gone into Maori production, disappear to? Millions of dollars. I am not suggesting you or anybody else simply pocketed the millions, but the troika, within which you have been such a major player over the period, a champion, was party to the decisions and may well have been the principle architect of cornerstone policies which have resulted in true Cultural A within our industry. What a shame, eh? A generation of Maori filmmakers has missed out. Why don’t you all simply put up a sign, “Whites Only Need Apply”?

And now, fresh from the South Sea zephyrs, another universal Polynesian story (“poetic, even mythic”) comes to the international screen from the cinema barons: Whale Rider. A young Polynesian, in a “performance as artless and affecting as you could wish to see”, “aches to shoulder the mantle of leadership”. (Quoted phrases are from Peter Calder’s Herald review). Well, we’re all in show business, Niki Caro is a talented young director, the film is being expertly promoted and sold, so good luck to everybody involved, I say.

But, John, don’t badger us that this is the glorious path which we must all go along, head to tail; don’t put us down when we raise our concerns about how non-Indigenous artists handle this type of material; and don’t go hyper-promoting, in any triumphalist way, “universal story” to the detriment of genuine Indigenous efforts. Above all, don’t tell us that we, as Maori, must like this film. It is every People’s right to make their minds up on that, particularly when it is their own world being shown up there on the screen.

There will be a Maori opinion come in on whether we have in Whale Rider true pou-namu or true plastic. That opinion may be decades in the coming. Whatever else you may be able to do, you cannot foretell exactly what that opinion may be, any more than I can.

Barry Barclay, Tinopai, January 2, 2003

NOTES

1 Note of explanation from Merata Mita to Peter Britos.
2 This unsolicited response will also be published by Online in the spring of 2003.
3 The name of the tribe that the story in Whale Rider comes from.
4 The name of John Barnett’s production company.
5 Whangara is the village where the film was shot.
6 Holocaust.
7 Apartheid.
8 A Pattern.
9 New Zealand Air.
10 Greenstone, a local jade, precious amongst Maori.