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*Andrew Melville
August 23, 2004.*

Acknowledgements:

For Jane, Charlie, Carwyn and Josephine for keeping the dream alive and providing plenty of advice, laughing at the wrong bits, and being moved by the right bits,

To Rod and Pamela for begetting me and allowing me the freedom to grow and explore,

To the people of Mt Tabor Trust for opening my eyes,

David Hughes for breathing life into the ideas and always talking about the characters as if they were real, even when I forgot,

Vivien Bridgwater for her generous support with ever-precious time,

Liz Riley , Philip Carter and Bob Harvey for creative and soulful partnership and believing.

Abstract:

The film script ***Mangrove*** is both an eco-warrior thriller with science fiction elements and a documentation of the quirky, multicultural milieu of 21st century Auckland. It deals with the issues surrounding experimentation with genetic engineering and human alienation and disability.

The script references the tradition of New Zealand film and its development as a “cinema of unease” through the character of Nat, who lives as a “man alone” on a moored yacht, and through its setting in a desolate mangrove estuary adjacent to a suburban industrial estate. It features characters who are recent immigrants from varying cultures and offers insights to world views that contrast with the pessimistic colonial outlook on life that pits man against the environment in a struggle for domination.

The title, ***Mangrove***, is a metaphor for the rich human environment that can be found in outposts of society that are often maligned and overlooked for their perceived lack of value.

Mangrove's main character, Talia, is a disabled woman whose desire is to be accepted for her difference, her insights and her humanity. She is confronted with her past and her origins that may be part of a late 20th century genetic experiment.

She meets Nat, a former journalist hiding out from society who is searching for a way to express his idealism. Likewise, Shiva, an indo-Fijian living in a nearby car wreckers yard has a love of music and the environment and shares Nat's idealism and desire to work for a better world. The three uncover a potentially world-altering genetic experiment with sugar. The antagonist multinational has Russian mafia allies that have to be dealt with, while the protagonists have the assistance of some Thai monks and Pacific Island street kids as they strive to expose the experimentation, and work out their relationships with one another.

Exegesis for the film script: **Mangrove**.

“The film image as an acute observation of life is linked to the Japanese haiku, which cultivates its images in such a way that they mean nothing beyond themselves, and at the same time express so much, it is not possible to catch their final meaning.”

Andrei Tarkovsky

Mangrove is a story about ‘the space between’ in both the geographical sense of the area between land and sea, and in human terms of that between mainstream society and the side-eddies where alienated individuals reside. The mangrove plant itself is a coloniser in biological terms and inhabits ‘the space between’. **Mangrove** provides a nutrient rich environment, as do the diverse cultures of new immigrants, the disabled, and those whose lives have taken them away from the mainstream of society. The film also looks at modern day immigration as another theme of colonisation and survival. The main character, Talia, personifies the frailties and the strengths of human beings as she shifts through conscious and sub-conscious realms. The film examines the issue of genetic engineering and the level of control humans have over manipulating human life. It explores the potential of genetic engineering to be marketed by multi-national corporations as the ultimate commodification; that of human beings and human body parts.

This exegesis explores the themes of alienation, colonisation, and dislocation through the context of New Zealand film making. It describes how the themes of the screenplay, **Mangrove**, build on the tradition of New Zealand film as a ‘cinema of unease’ and move on to a contemporary post colonial interpretation that is becoming a ‘cinema of ease’ as new world views of differing cultures become more dominant.

Mangrove is a contemporary New Zealand film set in the early 21st century. The title comes from the setting of the film – the estuarine environments of West Auckland adjacent to the North-Western motorway and Waitemata Harbour. **Mangrove** is also a metaphor for those who inhabit the fringes of society on the edges of the city. Its main characters are fringe dwellers. As islanders, New Zealand’s inhabitants are never far from the coast, which holds a special attraction as the undefined place between the ocean and the land; the tamed and the untameable. The coast is a constant in our consciousness.

The tidal areas inhabited by mangroves are often maligned, as wastelands of mudflats of little value. They have been spurned in favour of more attractive coastline, sandy beaches, ocean beaches and bays.

Throughout the world, mangrove habitats are fought over. Some wish to preserve them, others to reclaim them. In New Zealand, mangroves have colonised areas that were once open water. Silt from land development has caused mangroves to spread and colonise. The mangrove seed bobs in the tide until it can put down its roots. It carries its own nutrients, as an immigrant carries his/her own culture. This enables it to survive and adapt.

Mangroves are recognised as plants that provide a nutrient rich environment that is a powerful source of life where many aquatic species breed and thrive.

"One perceives a forest of jagged, gnarled trees protruding from the surface of the sea, roots anchored in deep, black, foul-smelling mud, verdant crowns arching toward a blazing sun. . . . here is where land and sea intertwine, where the line dividing ocean and continent blurs, in this setting the marine biologist and the forest ecologist both must work at the extreme reaches of their disciplines." (Rytzler and Feller p 94)

Mangrove is about revealing the beauty and wisdom in people and places seen as waste.

In the latter 20th century, New Zealand films such as *Desperate Remedies* (Peter Wells 1993), *Broken English* (Gregor Nicholas 1996), and *Memory and Desire* (Niki Caro 1998) started to canvas unexplored ethnic and gender issues reflecting New Zealand's increasingly multi-cultural and diverse society.

Desperate Remedies is a costume drama exploring 'strategic camp.' For the first time in New Zealand film, it brings out of the closet 'camp' themes that to mainstream audiences may occur as 'over the top' but are worlds and places of imagination that are key parts of the homosexual world. Director Peter Wells argues that by changing the normal and the natural into style and artifice, camp might be said to change the 'real hostile world into one that is safe'. He views the camp nature of *Desperate Remedies* as a strategy of survival...a reordering of priorities, and a celebration of continued existence- a way of talking in a difficult situation.

Wells sees New Zealand as a young country with a potential that is no longer constrained by its past in the way it expresses itself in film: "... part of being such a new manufactured society, in a process of dynamic change, is that the relativities change all the time, nothing is fixed, and we as homosexuals and lesbians are always jockeying for a better position." (Wells 1997 p 4)

Talia in **Mangrove**, as a disabled woman, is part of a minority that is often forced to conform to what is considered a 'normal' life as much as homosexuals must conform to a "regime of presumptive and compulsory heterosexuality." (Wells 1997 p 13)

Former Director of the Centre for Film, Television and Media Studies at the University of Auckland, Roger Horrocks, says these late 20th century films were increasingly starting to describe a collision of cultures in New Zealand. He says the challenge for New Zealand film makers has been, as New Zealand poet Bill Manhire says, to "catch the full strangeness of the local situation, its particular diversities, disjunctions, juxtapositions and incongruities."

Says Horrocks: "A culture can be conceived not as a permanent essence waiting to be bottled and marketed in films but as a changing field of forces involving many conflicts and local differences." (Verhoeven 1999 p 136)

Mangrove blurs boundaries of distinct ethnicity to find commonality and some positive experience and connections in a post-modern global human experience. In its depiction of the culture of a disabled woman and several ethnic cultures, it explores a search for identity in a globalised world that has disrupted their sense of place.

Trinh T Minh-Ha, Vietnamese/American film maker and professor says:

“Whether we choose to concentrate on another culture, or on our own culture, our work will always be cross-cultural...because of the heterogeneous reality we all live today, in post-modern times- a reality, therefore, that is not a mere crossing from one borderline to the other or that is not merely double, but a reality that involves the crossing of an indeterminate number of borderlines, one that remains multiple in its hyphenation.”

Minh-Ha says multiculturalism does not lead us very far if it remains a question of difference between one culture and another. Differences should also be understood within the same culture, just as multiculturalism as an explicit condition of our times exists within every self.

Since the 1980s, the New Zealand film industry has had an ongoing debate about the ‘New Zealandness’ of films made in New Zealand. (Reid 1986) In a note to the second edition of *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand* in 1996, editors Jonathon Dennis and Jan Bieringa noted that New Zealand funding agencies continue to pursue film making in New Zealand from an economic point of view that seeks international investors and opportunities, rather than promoting indigenous New Zealand stories.

“Conservatism and bureaucracy, now entrenched in the arts, has meant a loss of freedom in filmmaking perpetuating the industry’s perennial frailty more and more dominated by the market and driven by economic rather than creative imperatives” (Dennis and Bieringa 1996).

On Film magazine has canvassed views for and against foreign influences on New Zealand cinema.

Antony Ginnane, producer of *Race for the Yankee Zephyr*, *Dead Kids*, *Prisoners*, *Mesmerised* and *Second Time Lucky* argued that New Zealand filmmakers should join the ‘international mainstream’ by making commercial internationally orientated co-productions with foreign capital. He suggested this would be the best alternative to a non-commercial state subsidised cinema.

There was a sharp reaction to this from John Maynard, producer of *Skin Deep* (1979), *Strata* (1983), and *Vigil* (1984) and a committed supporter of cinema with a national identity.

Maynard said the real issue was ‘films from somewhere’ as opposed to films from ‘anywhere’.

Finance and foreigners are said to be the two issues that arouse the greatest heat and passion among local film makers (Reid p17).

Horrocks argues that New Zealand governments’ global interests are “not so much post colonial as comprador, engrossed in a search for overseas investors and wealthy immigrants. The idea of public support for the arts is

contested by politicians and at best results in only token assistance” (Verhoeven 1999 p135).

He says government film funding agencies in New Zealand don't understand talk about the potential loss of localness or the idea that there may be important films for small audiences. (p137)

Mangrove's story is deliberately global, so that in reality it could be set in a number of countries facing similar issues about globalisation and alienation. Yet it retains a distinct antipodean flavour, evidenced in the light, colour and atmospheres of the indigenous environment unique to Aotearoa.

Auckland is now not just a Polynesian and Pakeha city, but a place where Indian, Asian, South American, Eastern European, Middle Eastern and African people are becoming an entrenched part of the fabric. Auckland's Access Radio station, Planet FM has a show on hip-hop music hosted jointly by a Korean and a Papua New Guinean. Horrocks has identified our diversity has led to New Zealand being a floating signifier, with varying opinions on whether we should draw from our South Pacific influences, Maori indigenous frameworks, links to Asia, or to Australia. He considers the range of collaborations in New Zealand film in recent years reflects connections in all these directions.

There were several personal experiences that led to the development of this film script. One was an interaction with two panel beaters in Morningside on a rainy autumn morning. I had, in the usual kiwi DIY fashion, tried to repair the sliding door of the family van myself. I had been unable to put it back on. It was raining hard, I was late for work, and the kids were late for school. So I made an emergency drive to the Korean panel beaters around the corner. A Croatian man and an Indo-Fijian man came out of the workshop and agreed to fix the door for 'slab of Lion Red'. The interaction between the two men – the Croatian teasing the Indian guy about wanting to 'make it' with his sister, and their banter showing their desire to be 'more kiwi than kiwi' – struck me as a new flavour of contemporary Auckland.

The main character, Talia, is based on a number of people I have met while working as a community worker for people with disabilities. She has an innate wisdom that can come from alienation, like a shaman who can be an insightful member of society through exploration of self through being set aside by society. The 'space between' can also represent the unconscious, the unseen. Talia is confronted at times between the rational world and her intuition. At 16, she is exploring her own sexuality, but as with the other main characters, Nat, Shiva, Matthias, and Kohm and Goh, this is not overt. There is a sense that their exploration of themselves, and of love, is about a wider realm of unconditional love and spirituality.

There is a likeness between elements of this exploration by Talia and Toss (Lisa) in Vincent Ward's film *Vigil*. (1984)

In *Vigil*, Toss deals with the death of her sheep farmer father, Justin, and life with her widowed mother, Elizabeth, and their relationships with her grandfather 'Birdie' and farmhand Ethan.

Toss was 'tossed' among adults, and as a child was alone in the empty landscapes of Taranaki. Scenes of her in ballet tutu, gumboots and balaclava, epitomised her sexually indeterminate status.

"Without adult understanding, a child's mind is coming to terms with the mysteries of sexual distinction and death. Toss's world was one of animism; things live, machines have animate souls. It was not just sexual identity alone that had to be worked out. It was human identity itself, our distinctiveness from non-human things. The wind moaned, Toss blows down a cartridge case and makes a similar moan to that of the wind. The cartridge case whispers to her in her father's voice and clearly, it is alive" (Reid p111-112).

Vincent Ward says in *Vigil* that he wanted to recreate his childhood perception of the world he had inhabited. "I wanted to see a small intense child on a farm by himself, combating fierce nightmares and fantasising victories over imaginary foes. At the same time I wanted to convey how a child seems to see the real world in oblique glimpses, and like a detective gathering clues, has to work out what is going on about him." (Ward 1990 p 69)

Talia is engaged in making sense of a world that has made her separate. With her coat hanger wire straightened out and held ahead of her, she communes with the energies that are unseen, as a diviner does with a divining rod. She is putting a piece of wire, a symbol of New Zealanders' attempts to fence and control their natural environment, to a more metaphysical use. She is alone in the hostile landscapes of mangroves and mudflats, but attuned to nature. *Vigil* has "an acute ear for significant natural sounds – the bleat of sheep, rattle of stones, or suck and squelch of gumboots in the mud" (Reid110). Likewise, the soundscapes created and described in ***Mangrove*** by Shiva aim to create a strong sense of mood and environment.

The development of the ***Mangrove*** script over the past three years has explored many possible genres. It has an environmental/social issues element, but also some romance, some sense of action and it is for a young audience. It is now loosely a 'kidult' genre, largely as the main protagonist Talia is aged 16. The issue of genetic engineering and themes of alienation are also designed for a young audience.

Minh-Ha warns of the challenge of using too closely defined parameters in film making and other artistic expression.

"Intercultural, intersubjective, interdisciplinary. These are some of the keywords that keep on circulating in artistic and educational as well as political milieux. To cut across boundaries and borderlines is to live aloud the malaise of categories and labels; it is to resist simplistic attempts at classifying, to resist the comfort of belonging to a classification, and of producing classifiable works." (Minh-Ha p 108)

Mangrove's setting is a natural environment enclosed within an urban environment. The estuaries running from the Waitemata Harbour mix coastal estuarine and harbour areas and wilderness location in amongst suburbia.

A number of recent New Zealand films, *Vigil* and *The Navigator* by Vincent Ward as well as the subsequent *Rain* (2003), *Whale Rider* (2002), and *Lord of The Rings* (2001) rely on a quality of outsider suspicion, a feeling of being bound to a place and needing to protect it from change or invasion and at the same time being small and powerless against greater forces. All of these films take the perspective of a child, or in the case of Frodo, a child substitute. The subtext is always New Zealand facing the world, often in a state of apprehension or fear, but in most cases, things look better in the end. While drawing on this tradition, ***Mangrove*** seeks to portray a New Zealand that is not bleak, a New Zealand that is emerging as a multicultural nation, gaining strength in expressing its cultural diversity and origins. In Auckland, the Pasifika Festival, Matariki (Maori New Year), the Chinese Lantern Festival, and Indian Dwali festival are now increasingly more relevant to the population than New Zealand public holidays such as Labour Day and Queens Birthday weekend.

Auckland is the backdrop for this story. Anti-globalisation and anti-genetic engineering protests make headlines around the world. A moratorium on genetic engineering projects on crops in New Zealand is about to end and has captured the imagination of New Zealand's youth as a cause worth fighting. It became a major election issue and became a negotiating point as the Labour Party and the Greens formed a coalition government.

"In some ways the present day surge has parallels with the protest movement of the sixties, which can provide lessons for today. It was a time of mass protest and the intertwining of diverse currents" (NZ Workers Party Website).

The incident of 'corngate', the release of genetically modified corn in New Zealand became a major election issue in 2002.

Internationally, scientists are pushing boundaries of experimentation with genetic modification for not only plants but human beings.

Auckland is also experiencing rising numbers of immigrants settling in the city. In 2002, more than 36 ethnic communities began pre-school playgroups in New Zealand based on the model of the Maori kohanga reo movement to retain their languages and cultures. ***Mangrove's*** theme of alienation moves on from the tradition of New Zealand film as a 'cinema of unease', as defined by Sam Neil in his 1995 documentary of the same name.

Mangrove has twists and threads of the male history of NZ; the pioneering working ethic to break in a new land, of man pitting himself against nature, alone. There is still a strong connection with the land and sea, but a different take on how to interact with it. Shiva and Nat are male figures that no longer represent the NZ tradition of men communing more intimately with inanimate objects than other human beings; and Shiva, of Indo-Fijian background, and Kohm and Goh as Buddhist Thai men, bring a different flavour to the way men are portrayed in ***Mangrove***.

Philip Matthews finds the definition of New Zealand film as 'cinema of unease' a "too-neat title to sum up an increasingly diverse film practice- it locked the New Zealand tradition into a permanent early-80s of Bruno Lawrence road movies and male self-loathing, with the forces of law and order always closing in." The ultimate 'unease' film in this tradition is *Smash Palace*.

Film maker and writer, Peter Wells, says: "cinema offers a liberation, perhaps particularly potent to a Pakeha New Zealander, of a post war generation: for New Zealand culture in my youth defined itself in terms of certain rather drab values; self reliance, sense, strength-masculine values, defensive and aggressive in the same awkward posture. I grew up in this culture, which was tacitly, on occasion, expressly opposed to imagination, to the power of sensibility. Lyricism was like a missing heartbeat, a lost note. The very power of cinema comes from the fact that it provides the poetry that is essential to the human condition- the poetry of beauty, loss, of pain, transcendence. That it was borrowed from other cultures did not, immediately, strike me as a dislocation: perhaps all life at that time seemed a dislocation-for what else could it be to a Pakeha child growing up homosexual in a society which itself had such an insecure identity." (Martin and Edwards P174)

Online discussions of recent New Zealand short film offerings have criticised the constant 'kiwi dread' theme.

"The same tired themes of isolation and dread trotted out yet again and that trade mark cold, blue look was used, the look that Vincent Ward perfected in *Vigil* back in 1984."

"You'd think that after so many years of tackling the topic of the white man feeling displaced and alienated by a hostile, brooding landscape, it would have worn a little thin by now."

"It's tough in the colonies. There were the obligatory chook beheading, plaid shirts, car accidents, strange dark beings and ordinary, inanimate objects taking on super natural powers" (Posted July 8, 2001, Mediawhore.co.nz. about NZ Shorts at the 2001 NZ Film Festival).

Others have found a new lightness in contemporary New Zealand films such as *Magik and Rose* (1999). They blame the selectors for NZ Films Festivals for the dark themes of those chosen.

Dr Jenny Lawn of the School of Social and Cultural Studies at Massey University says Vincent Ward's *Vigil* and Jane Campion's *The Piano* shows "our Gothicism is rooted in the anxieties of colonial life, of bush, distance, and a sense of relative existence overshadowed by larger cultures."

Not all New Zealand films that might fit into a description of the cinema of unease are heroic or tragic. AS Roger Horrocks says, some are surreal, comic or down to earth. He considers fragility of culture, the legacy of colonialism, a triangle of influences between Britain, the USA and New Zealand, Maori-Pakeha relations, localism, and the impact of the political new right all contribute to New Zealand film being a cinema of unease, going beyond its original definition in Sam Neill's documentary of the same name.

“With an extraordinary pace of change, stolid never changing New Zealand has become a floating signifier, all levels of cultural and political debate a series of possible identities are in contention, with each way of thinking seeking its reflection in films and other forms of artistic production.”
(Verhoeven, p 132)

Mangrove stirs around in the murky mudflats of some of the ‘dark and brooding’ elements of New Zealand film. You feel fear as something unseen and frightening slashes you in the mud. But then moving on to the quirky multicultural milieu of present day Auckland, you find yourself laughing at life along with a defrocked Buddhist monk or celebrating life and the freedom offered here compared to the homelands of many New Zealand immigrants. **Mangrove** utilises these diverse backgrounds to discuss issues of human existence and the construction and disintegration of global boundaries. The unease now shifts from breaking in the land to navigating technologies, urban jungles, many mediated realities from many media and a jambalaya of cultures and values. The realisation of humankind’s ability to alter its very essence and genetic makeup depends the unease.

The film explores “nostalgia” in the sense conveyed in the Tarkovsky film of that name. In Russian “nostalgia” is deeper than the English “nostalgia”: it is a state of unquenchable longing for one’s homeland – nostalgia for the spirit of light, a global yearning for the whole of existence.

There are elements of a ‘child’s eye view’ of the world in **Mangrove**, with a a feeling of playfulness in the comparatively young main characters. New Zealand’s culture is young and still defining itself providing a lot of space to play with genre and post modern themes. There is a sense of optimism, and that is enhanced by the child-like playfulness and the world view of the Buddhist Thai monks, Kohm and Goh, and Shiva’s Hindu perspective. There are moments of natural humour, laughing at the idiosyncrasies of modern day life which brings lightness to a film that is also tackling the serious issues of genetic engineering, human cloning, test tube babies, and alienation. “Childhood is a common theme in New Zealand writing. Perhaps this is due to the relative newness of the national identity, and ‘rites of passage’ stories reflect this coming of age. Maybe we are attracted to the theme because New Zealand is so remote that when we venture into the world outside we do so as innocents” (Ward p70).

Mangrove is a film that references the New Zealand film tradition of unease and man pitting himself against nature in a young and raw land. It is sliding towards a ‘cinema of ease’ in a world where New Zealand’s history is constantly being reshaped. Youth today increasingly acknowledge their past respectfully as is evidenced in the rise of young people observing Anzac Day and attending dawn ceremonies. But the pioneer history is becoming distant, a reference point more than a powerful influence, that is now woven in ‘post-modern pastiche’ through today’s stories, and today’s populous, like a mangrove seed, putting down roots and claiming an environment wherever the tide takes it.

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CAST LIST

AFGHAN TRADER
ALEX
AUTISTIC BOY'S MOTHER
BUSKER
DR JIM BOKANOVKSY
EUROPEAN MONK
GOH
ICECREAM VAN MAN
JOURNALIST
KEOGH
KOHM
KRISPA KRUST MANAGER
LITTLE BOY
MATTHIAS BURDON
NAT MANAWA
NEWSREADER
NISSAN GUY ONE
NISSAN GUY TWO
PARTY CHILD ONE
PARTY CHILD TWO
PARTY MOTHER
POLICEMAN
PRIYA MANDRAKE
SASHA
SETU
SONNY
SHANE JOHNSON
SHIVA MANDRAKE
SHIVA'S GRANDFATHER
STUDENT JOURNO
TALIA TOULOUSE
TRUCKDRIVER
VERONICA TOULOUSE