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Post-colonial New Zealand
Cinema: Gothic aesthetics
and the repression of Pakeha
violence in *Fantail*



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CINEMA: GOTHIC AESTHETICS
AND THE REPRESSION OF PAKEHA
VIOLENCE IN *FANTAIL*

Abstract

Fantail (2013), written by Sophie Henderson and directed by Curtis Vowell, has not yet received scholarly attention for its relationship to several dominant trends in New Zealand cinema. This essay examines *Fantail's* protagonist Tania as a new articulation of the gothic Pākehā woman in identity crisis, a trope embodied in films such as *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993). Through Tania, *Fantail* acknowledges the harmful consequences of Pākehā repression of colonial violence, ignorance of Māori historical disenfranchisement and eroticisation and appropriation of Māori culture. This reading models how gothic aesthetics, adaptations of past tropes, and restricted narrative subjectivity can function within film as tools of critique, allowing *Fantail* to simultaneously perpetuate and criticise dominant representational trends in New Zealand's national cinema.

Film theorists Hilary Radner and Misha Kavka have noted a trope in New Zealand cinema involving female, Pākehā characters debilitated by identity crisis and a gothic sense of isolation. This is apparent in prominent New Zealand films *The Piano* (Campion, 1993), *Crush* (Maclean, 1992), and *Vigil* (Ward, 1975). Another tendency of New Zealand cinema is to represent modern Māori disenfranchisement without attributing this to colonial roots. Barry Barclay and Leonie Pihama have critiqued *Whale Rider* (Caro, 2002) and *Once Were Warriors* (Tamahori, 1994) for skirting around colonial history to remain palatable to Pākehā audiences. As a film that engages deeply and critically with both these trends, Sophie Henderson and Curtis Vowell's *Fantail* (2013), has not yet been given scholarly attention. A film about a "blonde-haired, blue-eyed women who identifies as Māori," *Fantail* engages with cinematic tropes of Pākehā women and the (mis)representation of Māori disenfranchisement with a post-colonial self-awareness (*NZ On Screen*, 2013). Through its gothic aesthetics and dark ending, *Fantail* warns of the dangerous consequences of Pākehā repression of past colonial violence.

The trope of the melancholic Pākehā woman is crucial to *Fantail*'s critique of Pākehā colonial repression. In her chapter 'Screening Women's Histories' in *New Zealand Cinema* (2011), Radner explains the trope as a product of the colonial settlement process. Male settlers' 'do-it-yourself' individualism and aggression-fuelled fraternity developed into a Pākehā culture that was "fundamentally masculine" (p. 120). Meanwhile settler women, excluded from male culture and geographically distant from other women due to their agricultural lifestyles, failed to successfully "transplant" a living, collective female culture from Britain to New Zealand (Bell, 2006, p. 225). In interviews in *The Pantograph Punch* (Tan, 2013, para. 96) and *The Lumière Reader* (Brooks, 2013, para. 20) respectively, Henderson has commented that as a Pākehā woman who doesn't "like sports ... [or] ... work on a farm," she has been left "longing to have a culture." Cultural theorists, such as Bell, explain the experience of early settler women as cultivating a sense of isolation, cultural deprivation and melancholia in Pākehā women, a sensibility that is echoed in their literary and cinematic representations. The writings of Katherine Mansfield and Janet Frame are full of lone female characters that illustrate such a theory. The melancholic woman transitioned to screen in Vincent Ward's short film adaptation of Frame's novel, *A State of Siege* (1978), which handles Malfred's self-imposed isolation in a gloomy, rural cottage. In addition, Ada in *The Piano*, Angela in *Crush*, Lizzie in *Vigil* and Penny in *In My Father's Den* (McGann, 2004) all appear deeply melancholic and traumatised by their isolation. In somewhat of an oxymoron, Pākehā women in film can be collectively identified by their exclusion from a collective social culture; in other words, their social identities rely on their lack of sense of social belonging.

Fantail's protagonist Tania (played by Henderson) exemplifies the trope of the isolated, culturally deprived, white woman. Tania exists only in the shadowy peripheries of society. She has no community or kin, except for her dying mother (who doesn't speak in the film), her boss Rodge, and her little brother Pi. When Pi leaves for Papamoa, Tania is distraught: "You can't leave me by myself!" Throughout the film Tania is mostly alone, or (bar a few minor shots) only interacts with one other



Figure 1 – Wide shot of Tania, isolated at the gas station, *Fantail*. Courtesy Curious Film, Auckland, New Zealand.

character at a time. This isolation is exacerbated by her graveyard shift at the local gas station, where her few interactions with customers are from behind a window. Only in one of the very last shots of the film, when Tania rides the bus and other patrons react to her crying, do we see any acknowledgement of her existence from a wider community. Although set in South Auckland, Tania's lack of interactions mirror the rural experiences of Ada, Malfred and Lizzie. *Fantail* is a twenty-first-century representation of the anxious, isolated, culturally deprived Pākehā woman, visible throughout New Zealand cinema and the literature that preceded it.

Gothic aesthetics are essential to the melancholic Pākehā women trope. The gothic stretches back to medieval Europe, based upon religious notions of debasement and exclusion from the heavenly sphere. The “female gothic” is a “coded expression” of women's simultaneous ostracism from the masculine sphere and “entrapment” by patriarchal culture (Radner, 2011, p. 269). In cinema, this is expressed not only in narrative, but also in *mise-en-scène* and other formal elements. Dim, shadowy lighting, lone figures, vertically elongated shapes, austere, puritanical costumes, slow pace and melancholic, eerie music are all symptomatic of the female gothic. Ian Conrich has theorised another gothic subset in New Zealand film, which he labels “Kiwi gothic” (2012, p. 393). Born from settler anxiety, Kiwi gothic particularly emphasises geographical isolation in its desolate, barren landscapes that “assail and entrap ... eccentric, disturbed, or disadvantaged” individuals (pp. 393, 397). Female and Kiwi gothics come together in the Pākehā woman trope, their aesthetics embodying the character's psychological and physical entrapment in the New Zealand cultural and geographical environment.

Fantail employs this hybrid of the female and Kiwi gothic. Tania, who demonstrates all the traits Conrich associates with gothic characters, is aesthetically entrapped via costume, set, performance and lighting. Her dark hoodies, long sleeves and hair-shrouded face may not qualify as the Victorian attire conventionally associated with gothic, but this contemporary equivalent maintains the demure, body-concealing features of traditional gothic costume. Tania's hood performs the same gothic function as Ada's bonnet. The gas station, where the majority of the film takes place, resembles a cage. Because Tania works the night shift, she locks herself inside and only serves people from behind the vertical, black metal bars on the window. The station is lit by cold, fluorescent tubes that cast harsh shadows on Tania's face. Frequent wide shots show Tania swamped by the darkness of the barren service station (Figure 1). Despite their completely different spatial-temporality, these shots in *Fantail* evoke the same sense of isolation created in *The Piano*'s extreme wide shots of Ada on the desolate, rugged beach. Though Tania fantasises about escaping to the Dream World theme park in Australia, *Fantail*'s portrayal of her daily existence as encaged makes this ambition seem hopeless. The reference to female gothic in Tania's costume and Kiwi gothic in her environment communicate the underlying sense of entrapment essential to Tania's character.

The gothic Pākehā woman trope sees such characters seek reprieve from their isolation and identity anxiety through erotic interactions with Māori characters. *Fantail* presents an interesting new articulation of this relationship. In *The Piano*, Ada's settler anxiety leads her to reject her colonial suitor Stewart and pursue Baines, a Pākehā man who, with his tā moko and atavistic lifestyle, masquerades as Māori. This eroticisation of an appropriated Māori-ness in order to "escape from repressive Victorian sexual norms" has been deeply criticised by Mark Reid as a "parody of Māori culture" and an avoidance of representing interracial intimacy (2006, p. 109). In *Crush* (made one year earlier than *The Piano* but set 140 years later), Angela's adolescent identity crisis fuels her erotic moment with Horse, a Māori man. In other words, the film represents interracial intimacy as transgressive rather than romantic: it is Angela's experiment with asserting an identity independent of Pākehā masculinity. In *Fantail*, Tania's identity crisis also leads to a desire for Māori-ness, but in herself, not a sexual partner. Tania has always thought Pi's Māori father, present in all her childhood memories, was her father too. Pale and blonde, Tania believes she is Ngāti Whātua, only her "brother got all the Māori genes." When Dean bluntly asks, "Why do you want to be a Māori?" Tania replies indignantly, "What's your culture?" insinuating that she has the same reasons for identifying as Māori as Dean does. For the lonely, isolated Tania, insisting on being Māori is an attempt to belong. Although Tania does have a sexual relationship with Dean, his Māori identity is not eroticised or posed as a transgressive alternative to Pākehā masculinity. Unlike the characters in *The Piano* and *Crush*, Tania channels her identity-anxiety into being Māori rather than being with a Māori (or masquerading as Māori) man.

In her desperation to be accepted as Māori, Tania judges other Māori characters' expressions of cultural identity. She is highly critical of Dean, who responds to Tania's "What's your culture?" question with "Free-running, maybe?" To Tania, Dean's



Figure 2 – Tania judges a Māori woman's clubbing attire, *Fantail*. Courtesy Curious Film, Auckland, New Zealand.

engagement with ‘Pākehā’ activities makes him less Māori. In a later scene, a Māori woman from Tania’s high school kapa haka group shows up at the gas station wearing a snapback cap and gold hoop earrings (Figure 2). When the woman asks directions to the Sapphire bar, Tania criticises how “girls [at the bar are] too dressed up, dancing like they’re in a hip-hop video.” This awkward ‘foot-in-mouth’ exchange highlights Tania’s insecurity in her own identity and inability to accept a Māori woman who does kapa haka *and* goes clubbing. Whilst Tania practises poi, wears a pounamu and uses colloquialisms associated with Māori culture (“bro”, “mean as”), she is not shown to have any connection to a wider whānau, marae or whakapapa, some of the key structures of Māori community. Having learned her version of Māoriness from a position of isolation, Tania’s conception of Māori identity is limited. Having learned her version of Māoriness from a position of isolation, Tania’s conception of Māori identity is warped and misconstrued. In the struggle to maintain her perception of herself as Māori, Tania ends up unintentionally policing other people’s orientations to their cultural identity.

Film scholars have critiqued recent New Zealand films for not attaching socio-historical causality to the struggles of its Māori characters, and it might initially appear that *Fantail* demonstrates that critique. Barry Barclay criticises *Whale Rider*’s exploitation of indigenous “intellectual and cultural treasures” and erasure of the specific geographical and historical context of the story in its efforts to market an “international story” (2003, p. 11). In a similar vein, Leonie Pihama expresses deep concern over the way *Once Were Warriors* portrays Māori poverty and violence without attributing it to “the impact of colonialism” (1998, p. 4). *Fantail*, too, in its portrayal of gang culture and absent fathers, represents Māori disenfranchisement

without acknowledging colonial oppression. When Pi gets involved with a bunch of teenagers and their drug use, violence and petty crimes, the source of their delinquency is never investigated. Tania writes them off as “losers,” bad kids. This judgment contrasts a film like *Mauri* (one of the few films considered Māori ‘Fourth Cinema’ – a term coined by Barry Barclay to describe indigenous cinema), which portrays its gang as a reaction to institutional, police racism. Similarly, the neglectful parenting by Pi’s father might seem ignorant of postcolonial discourse on the effect of colonialism on Māori whānau structures. The audience is told very little about Pi’s father, only that he used to read Pi and Tania the Maui myths and now lives on the Gold Coast. The fact that these kids have no connection to anyone in his whānau or iwi is not explored as a potential consequence of historical land alienation, the colonial rejection of whānau in favour of atomised nuclear families, or the systematic economic disenfranchisement that may motivate Māori to look to Australia for work. Much has been written about the effects of colonialism on Māori masculinity, but it is not a discourse *Fantail* appears to engage with.

Rather than conclude that *Fantail* misrepresents Māori identity, I propose that *Fantail* strategically stresses mistaken perceptions of Māori identity by Pākehā. In other words, I read Tania’s judgment of Māori cultural expression and *Fantail*’s lack of acknowledgment of the colonial roots of Māori disenfranchisement as a self-aware criticism of Pākehā ignorance. While Tania claims to represent Māori culture, *Fantail* as a film does not. Instead, *Fantail* is a representation of Pākehā conceptions of Māori, which are affected by repression and denial of New Zealand’s colonial past. Tania’s subjectivity dominates the film: for the most part, the audience only knows what she does. Once viewers acclimate to the intentionally restricted nature of the narration, they can begin to analyse what information is misrepresented and why. Tania’s criticism of other Māori, bound up in her desire to belong, reflects the contradiction of the Pākehā women trope, in which white prejudice clashes with a fetishisation of Māori culture and community. Tania’s inability to look at the deeper socio-historical roots of the issues the other Māori characters deal with represents Pākehā refusal to address the violent, racist truth of New Zealand’s colonisation, which has been repetitively mythologised in public dialogues as a peaceful, positive process. The brooding imagery and unsettled tone of the film simulates this repression. Therefore, the aesthetic features of the female/Kiwi gothic hybrid outlined earlier can be more precisely read as a “post-colonial gothic” that “articulates the traumas [that arise] from repressed colonial violence” (Kavka, 2014, p. 227). Misha Kavka reconfigures post-colonial gothic in her theory of a Māori gothic, haunted not by the presence of the dead (as there is “no notion of spiritual trespass in Mātauranga Māori”), but the presence of descendants of colonialism who “have been absolved of participation or concern” (pp. 23, 239). Ultimately, *Fantail*’s gothic aesthetics are a visual manifestation of Tania’s entrapment, isolation and repressed post-colonial guilt, and enable the film to draw attention to the negative repercussions of Pākehā cultural appropriation.

The ending scene is essential to reading *Fantail* as a critique, rather than as a propagation of post-colonial misrepresentations. The majority of the film balances

drama and comedy: the overall melancholic tone is peppered with moments of warmth and smile-inducing humour. The last fifteen minutes, however, are unexpectedly dark. When a person in a black balaclava and hoodie bursts into the gas station, a terrified Tania hits him over the head with a hammer. Only as he falls dead to the floor, with blood gushing out onto the white tiles, does Tania realise the person was Pi. After failing to reference white violence against Māori throughout the whole film, it is suddenly brought to the forefront. The visceral, drawn out scene is highly distressing to watch and opposes the palatability Pihama critiques in other films. Pi's blood is literally on Tania's hands (and face and hair), and she is forced to take responsibility for a violence that, while unintended, has serious consequences. This scene takes place just after Tania learns her father is not Pi's dad, but her white boss Rodge. The coinciding of Tania's realisation of her Pākehā ethnicity with the killing of her brother creates an allegory for addressing post-colonial trauma. After Tania kills Pi, she scrubs the tiles of any evidence and abandons his body at the airport. In the monologue which overlays the action, Tania claims, "I am no-one." No longer identifying as Māori, she is still unable to accept her Pākehā identity. The combination of Tania's identity dissociation and her concealing of her role in Pi's death solidifies *Fantail's* critique that Pākehā post-colonial refusal to acknowledge the violence of the past has harmful consequences.

Whether overt or subtle in its expression, "New Zealand cinema is informed by and continually negotiating its prevailing myths of colonisation" (Joyce, 2009, p. 241). *The Piano*, *Crush*, *Vigil*, *Whale Rider*, *Once Were Warriors* and *Mauri* have engaged in different ways with dominant concerns of identity and colonial history. *Fantail* is a contemporary engagement with critical discourses about New Zealand film, simultaneously perpetuating and criticising representations that erase colonial violence via the figure of the gothic Pākehā woman. This reading models how gothic aesthetics, adaptations of past tropes, and restricted narrative subjectivity can function within film as tools of self-critique. Whether or not there is acceptance of a reading of *Fantail* as depicting the negative potentials of repressing colonial violence, the film undoubtedly engages in the "conversation about being a New Zealander," which is a subject of major concern to scholars of national cinema (Brooks, 2013, para. 53).

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Caitlin Lynch has recently completed a Bachelor of Arts, which she began at the University of Auckland and finished at Victoria University of Wellington. She majored in film theory and, with a minor in history, held a particular focus on the New Zealand context. She is about to pursue post-graduate study at Victoria, aiming to continue her research on the representation of New Zealand history and national identity in cinema.

Course information

This paper was written in June 2017 for Victoria University's Film 302: Cinema and Representation, taken by Dr Missy Molloy. The course applied key feminist theories of representation and spectatorship, as well as post-colonial and queer analysis, to a wide range of female-made films.