



I.B. TAURIS

Impure Cinema

INTERMEDIAL AND
INTERCULTURAL
APPROACHES TO FILM

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Contents

	<i>Illustrations</i>	viii
	<i>Contributors</i>	xii
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii
	<i>Introduction</i>	xviii
	<i>Lúcia Nagib and Anne Jerslev</i>	
Part I:	The History and Politics of Impurity	1
Chapter One	From Impurity to Historicity <i>Philip Rosen</i>	3
Chapter Two	The Politics of Impurity <i>Lúcia Nagib</i>	21
Part II:	Intertextual and Intercultural Dialogues	41
Chapter Three	Contestations of Intercultural Collaboration: The Case of <i>Whale Rider</i> <i>Virginia Pitts</i>	43
Chapter Four	Adapting Frida Kahlo: The Film-Paintings <i>Armida de la Garza</i>	66
Chapter Five	Transatlantic Drift: Hobos, Slackers, <i>Flâneurs</i> , Idiots and Edukators <i>Paul Cooke and Rob Stone</i>	82
Chapter Six	<i>Captain Swing the Fearless: A Turkish Film</i> Adaptation of an Italian Western Comic Strip <i>Lee Broughton</i>	102

Part III:	Literary Impurities	119
Chapter Seven	Adaptation by Degree: A Study of Vittorio De Sica's <i>Bicycle Thieves</i> <i>Matthew Harper</i>	121
Chapter Eight	The Supernatural from Page to Screen: Ambrose Bierce's and Robert Enrico's <i>An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge</i> <i>Germán Gil-Curiel</i>	134
Part IV:	Border-Crossing Films	149
Chapter Nine	An Art in the Rough: The Cinema of João César Monteiro <i>Paulo Filipe Monteiro</i>	151
Chapter Ten	Relational Subjectivity, Impure Voice: The Video Essays of Agnès Varda, Bingöl Elmas and Kathy High <i>Brenda Hollweg</i>	165
Chapter Eleven	Jia Zhangke's Cinema and Chinese Garden Architecture <i>Cecília Mello</i>	183
Chapter Twelve	Amidst Landscapes of Mobility: The Embodied Turn in Contemporary Chinese Cinema <i>Haiping Yan</i>	203
Part V:	Post-Medium Films	225
Chapter Thirteen	Chantal Akerman: Moving Between Cinema and Installation <i>Griselda Pollock</i>	227
Chapter Fourteen	Projection as Performance: Intermediality in Japan's Expanded Cinema <i>Julian Ross</i>	249
Chapter Fifteen	Shooting for a Cause: Cyberactivism and Genre Hybridization in <i>The Cove</i> <i>Taticana Signorelli Heise and Andrew Tudor</i>	268

CONTENTS

vii

Chapter Sixteen	David Lynch Between Analogue and Digital: <i>Lost Highway, The Straight Story</i> and the <i>Interview Project</i> Anne Jerslev	282
	<i>Index</i>	300

Chapter 3

Contestations of Intercultural Collaboration: The Case of *Whale Rider*

Virginia Pitts

In traditional Māori culture, stories belonged collectively to the *whānau* (extended families), *hapū* (sub-tribes) or *iwi* (tribes) and, in any telling of the story, questions arising about authenticity and accountability were moderated by elders (Lee 2005: 10). Using *Whale Rider* (Niki Caro 2003) as a case study, this chapter explores how such issues of accountability and authenticity may be managed through the integration of Indigenous¹ tradition and modernity in the production process and the aesthetic construction of a film destined for global consumption. In response to the difficulty many critics exhibit both in acknowledging Māori participation in the making of *Whale Rider* and in formulating a reading position that functions beyond a Western positivist orientation, primary research has been undertaken that reveals a mode of intercultural creative collaboration in which dialogic negotiation by (and with) Indigenous people provides an alternative to processes of either cultural domination or utopian synthesis.

Myth, Novel, Film

Adapted from a novel by celebrated Māori author, Witi Ihimaera, Niki Caro's film tells the story of a young Māori girl's struggle to overturn patriarchal resistance towards her future role as a leader. Both novel and film draw from the ancient genealogical *pūrākau* (myth) associated with Ngati Konohi, a sub-tribe of Ngati Porou based in Whangara on the east coast of New Zealand's North Island. According to this *pūrākau*, the tribe's founding father, Kahutia Te Rangi,

foiled his brother's plan to kill him by sinking their *waka* (large, intricately carved canoe). Left adrift in the ocean near Hawaiki (the Māori ancient homeland), Kahutia Te Rangi was saved by a *paikea* (humpback whale), who transported him to Whangara in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Once there, he was renamed Paikea in honour of the creature that delivered him. The traditional function of *pūrākau*² in Māori culture is to convey a 'moral lesson or esoteric truth' (Roberts 2008). According to Ihimaera, although people already occupied Aotearoa, they lacked the *mauri* (life principle) needed to live in close communion with the world. For him, then, the value of the Paikea *pūrākau* to the people of Aotearoa was to generate a 'oneness' between humans and sea creatures (Ihimaera 1987: 27).

Ihimaera was motivated to adapt this *pūrākau* in the mid-1980s by two incidents that occurred in close succession: his daughters' complaints about action movies being dominated by male heroes who save helpless females and the unusual sight of a whale swimming up the Hudson River in New York, where he was working at the time. The Paikea myth immediately sprang to mind for Ihimaera, who is related to Ngati Konohi through his mother, and he set about writing a feminist revision of the myth that replaces the male hero with a female heroine. Says Ihimaera, 'Having a girl ride the whale, which is also a symbol of patriarchy, was my sneaky literary way of socking it to the guy thing' (*Making the Film* (nd)). His dual intention to honour the original *pūrākau* and adapt its message for a contemporary era is achieved by creating three intersecting storylines, two set in mythic time and one in a contemporary naturalistic setting. All three storylines are positioned within a broader structural framework (Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter) linking them to the cycles of nature. The book first introduces the two mythic plotlines: one follows Kahutia Te Rangi's journey to Aotearoa according to the original myth, while the other, more substantial plotline takes place in the depths of the ocean and in a deeper mythic time stretching back and forth into infinity. This storyline follows the journey of a herd of whales headed by the Ancient One and suggests broader themes about our species' relationship to the planet, such as in its moving depiction of the herd being forced to flee south into walls of crashing ice due to the poisoning of its habitat by nuclear bomb testing off the island of Moruroa.³ Expressing Ihimaera's belief in the symbiosis between humans and sea creatures, the besieged herd reflects the foundering human community above sea level and, in line with his feminist agenda, both leaders – Koro above sea level and the Ancient One below – require educating by their female partners in order to be released from patriarchal assumptions about gender and leadership.

In the novel, the mythic strands weave in and out of a contemporary naturalistic plotline narrated by a young man, Rawiri, who recounts the fortunes of his niece (Kahu). She is the granddaughter of Koro Apirana, who longs for a

grandson to lead his people. After a difficult birth, baby Kahu's mother (Rehua) insists Kahu's umbilical cord be buried on the *marae* (courtyard in front of the meeting house) of her father's people rather than Koro's.⁴ This is concealed from Koro, who is already horrified by Rehua's decision to name the baby girl after his family's godly *male* ancestor, and angry at his wife (Nanny Flowers) for giving permission for this behind his back. Three months after giving birth, Rehua dies and Kahu is taken away to be brought up by her mother's family. Each summer, however, Kahu returns to Whangara, where her love for Koro blossoms despite his constant rejection of her for being a girl. He does not recognize her early and intense interest in *Māoritanga* (Māori culture, practices and beliefs) as anything but a nuisance, and constantly shoos her away from the *wānanga* (place of learning) he runs to teach the skills of ancient Māori tradition to the local boys – the only legitimate recipients of such knowledge in his view. As Kahu grows from toddler to pre-schooler, it becomes clear to all but Koro that she has inherited the ancient gift of communication with sea creatures, and this is confirmed when, assisted by dolphins, she retrieves from the ocean floor a carved stone Koro had thrown in the (unfulfilled) expectation of identifying the next leader among the boys he is preparing for the role.

Māori philosophy perceives the past as embedded in the present, giving rise to a spirituality in which ancestors lead the way into the future. In Ihimaera's novel, this is expressed structurally when the mythic storyline surfaces in the naturalistic (present) storyline as 200 whales become stranded following their doomed attempt to escape the effects of nuclear test explosions. A massive rescue effort involving both Māori and Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent), old and young, the navy, wildlife groups and the media, fails spectacularly and all 200 whales die. The following day, the Ancient One strands himself at Whangara and lashes out at the locals' attempts to save him. Koro understands and proclaims that if the whale is saved, so is their future, but if the whale dies so do they. Demonstrating her courage, young Kahu is prepared to sacrifice her life to safeguard the future of her people and it is only when she communicates with the Ancient One that his death-wish subsides (Figure 1). With her astride him, the whale returns to the ocean before delivering the girl back to land to lead her *iwi*.

While the events of this denouement also occur in the climax of Caro's filmic adaptation, she makes a number of changes to the plot and structure in order to tell the story in 100 minutes and connect with a modern cinema audience. Rather than an episodic narrative that depicts Kahu's childhood during annual summer holidays, Caro chose to plot the entire screen story in her eleventh year. Sacrificed for the screen adaptation are Ihimaera's substantial mythic plotlines and thus also some of the broader themes and political commentary they carry in the novel. However, Caro's underwater sequences with whales do suggest the mythic time and space more manifestly rendered by Ihimaera,



Figure 1: *Pai* (Keisha Castle-Hughes) joins with mythical ancient whale to save the herd and her community (Whale Rider).

and this is crystallized in the film when the young protagonist rides the stranded whale back into the ocean. Caro cleverly scripts Koro's *wānanga* scenes to educate the audience about Māori cultural traditions and introduces a new element to the story in the form of Porourangi's emblematically unfinished *waka* (canoe), which languishes on its building frame in the dunes. This addition provides an arresting image in the final scene when tradition and modernity symbolically meet as the completed *waka* is 'flown' through the air by crane and into the sea.

Although the feminist interpretation of the *Paikea pūrākau* was first rendered by Ihimaera, Caro further centralizes a female perspective by shifting the narrator role from Rawiri to Kahu, who is renamed Pai (short for *Paikea*) in the film. Hence, the relationship between ten-year-old Pai and her stubborn grandfather is foregrounded in a story more focused on the unconditional love she gives Koro in her quest to gain his recognition. The catalyst for Koro's rejection of Pai is given more impact by opening the naturalistic plotline *in medias res* via a dramatic scene in which Pai's mother and a twin brother (not present in the novel) both die during childbirth. Updating the contemporary plotline of Ihimaera's novel, a more pressing need for local leadership is constructed by Caro in her depiction of a small community fraying at the edges: some of the local boys have fathers who have either dropped out or are in prison, and Rawiri remains good-natured but is transformed from the industrious manual worker who travels abroad in Ihimaera's novel to an overweight stay-at-home stoner lacking in direction. Another character shift occurs with Nanny Flowers, who remains strong-willed in Caro's film, but is not as stropic as the character painted by Ihimaera. In Caro's adaptation, Pai's father, Porourangi (Koro's first-born), is transformed into an artist whose work Koro rejects. He also becomes

the character who lives overseas and is more keenly subjected to Koro's ever-deepening disappointment in him for not fulfilling a leadership role in the community. Koro's quest for a leader is thus sharpened in Caro's adaptation because, in the novel, Porourangi is actually accepted as the leader from his generation, and it is only from the next generation that Koro seeks someone worthy of assuming the chiefly mantle.

Although neither book nor film question the legitimacy of hereditary leadership claims in traditional Māori culture, Caro looked beyond this model for a style of leadership worth celebrating in the character of Pai:

It sounds sort of kooky, but for Pai I was looking to somebody like the Dalai Lama for that leadership style, which I believe is the very best kind. A really effective leader is not the guy at the front shouting and being the boss, it's the person who leads by compassion and empowers, inspires everybody else to be the best that they can be. (Shepherd 2003: 86)

Unusually for a feature film, there are no subplots in Caro's script, and this places further emphasis on the emotional centre of the story – the relationship between Pai and Koro.

Cultural Politics: Exclusions and Difference

Despite concerted efforts to secure financing from the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC), Māori filmmakers have, per capita, directed far fewer fiction feature films than Pākehā. By the time *Whale Rider* was released in 2003, only four of the 92 dramatic feature films financed by the NZFC were directed by Māori.⁵ This constitutes 4.3 per cent of the NZFC's dramatic feature film output at a time when, according to the 2001 census, Māori constituted 14.28 per cent of the population. Furthermore, a persistent obsession with Māori by Pākehā and foreign filmmakers has resulted in some culturally unacceptable production experiences⁶ and a cluster of films characterized by either negative othering or naïve romanticization of Māori.⁷ Consequently, the fact that a Pākehā was commissioned to adapt Ihimaera's novel and direct the film sparked fears that the authorial exclusions and presumptuous cultural projections of the past would be perpetuated.

Heated debate on the topic via a series of open letters in New Zealand's screen industry trade magazine, *Onfilm*, exemplifies how these skewed bicultural power relations infect the politics of New Zealand filmmaking. The debate was triggered by an interview with John Barnett, the producer of *Whale Rider*, who accuses Pākehā academics of proscribing the telling of stories outside of one's own culture. He argues instead that cultural forms 'evolved by one group of people'

are 'built on by others' and that 'at each iteration the definitive form is a reflection of things that have gone before'. Furthermore, Barnett asserts that to deny this is tantamount to an 'apartheid' view of culture (Barnett 2002: 2). While his appreciation of how hybrid cultural forms evolve is valid, Barnett's view does not acknowledge the profound effect unequal power relations can have on the gate-keeping and evolution of this work in an industrial context. A more extreme disavowal of the unequal postcolonial playing field is evident in letters by writer/producer Alan Brash. He refuses any distinction between a Pākehā directing a Māori story (*Whale Rider*) and a Māori directing a James Bond film (*Die Another Day*, Lee Tamahori 2002) or the making of *The Māori Merchant of Venice* (*Te Tangata Whai Rawa O Wenei*, Don Selwyn 2002) by a Māori director (Brash 2003: 11). Brash states that Māori ought to be "grateful" for being allowed to "borrow" the technology of film-making' and opines that non-Māori taxpayers helped fund several Māori-themed feature films. However, he fails to note the corresponding fact that Māori and other non-Pākehā taxpayers helped fund the 88 NZFC-funded dramatic features directed by Pākehā prior to 2003.

Māori filmmakers Barry Barclay and Carey Carter contest Barnett and Brash's views in their responses, also published as open letters in *Onfilm*. Barclay first objects to Barnett's reversal of the term apartheid to describe 'Indigenous attempts to protect their cultures from appropriation and financial exploitation by Western producers' (Barclay 2003: 11). He also critiques Barnett's emphasis on the 'universal' nature of a story to 'the detriment of genuine Indigenous efforts' (14), while questioning the applicability of European concepts of intellectual property rights to the acquisition of Indigenous stories.⁸ Carey Carter adds to the debate by critiquing Brash's ignorance of the struggles Māori filmmakers have faced in seeking the same access to finance as Pākehā for the telling of their stories on film (Carter 2003a: 11). Acknowledging Barclay's lifelong efforts to achieve that same access, Carter argues that '... before we debate who should and who shouldn't have the right to tell a Māori story, let's get the playing field on equal terms' by giving 'Māori a shot at telling their own stories' (Carter 2003b: 9).⁹ Evident here is the apparent threat intercultural cinema poses to Indigenous filmmaking in New Zealand, particularly when the intercultural creative team is comprised of Māori and Pākehā. Due to the lodging of a Treaty of Waitangi Claim against the NZFC in 1998,¹⁰ Barclay has argued that any film with Māori content is seen by the NZFC as counting towards an 'unspoken quota' (Pitts 2001).¹¹ While distinctions between Indigenous and intercultural filmmaking are often muddied due to these cultural politics, and Carter expresses his concern at the historical tendency of non-Māori to overlook or misunderstand the crucial 'spiritual essence' of Māori stories, he also sees a place for intercultural cinema, with the proviso that cultural guidelines are issued and met by filmmakers as a criteria for funding (Carter 2003b: 9).

The binary conception of cultural difference inflecting much of the *Onfilm* debate about *Whale Rider* also appears in academic and critical commentary.

For example, it has been argued that Māori culture is 'largely incomprehensible to the western viewer' (Hokowhitu 2007: 23), and that Pākehā appreciation of *Whale Rider* is based on 'familiar western narrative and filmic tropes' that make the film no different from *The Lion King*, *Billy Elliot*, *Harry Potter* or *Bend it Like Beckham* (Murdoch 2003: 100). Another commentator argues, therefore, that the film 'is no longer a Māori story' despite 'masquerading as such' (Bennett 2006: 21). The Māori mythic framework of the story has thus been treated with scepticism and conflated with a western 'mode of magic realism that ... has become stock standard and quirkless formulaic' (Murdoch 2003: 104). Despite Ihimaera's previous iteration of the myth, some critics have accused Caro of orchestrating a feminist appropriation of an Indigenous *pūrākau* (Hokowhitu 2007; *Metro Magazine* 2004: 173) and thus of reproducing her own culture only to 'portray it as another's' (Hokowhitu 2007: 29). The filmmakers have also been accused of taking 'what they consider to be basic elements of Māori culture' and piecing 'them together to create a representation of Māori as an outside majority audience might want to see it' (Bennett 2006: 21).

Public airing of the spiritual/philosophical orientation shared by the filmmakers and their Māori collaborators has also been dismissed as a cynical public-relations exercise designed to vindicate and authenticate the cross-cultural re-imagining of an Indigenous *pūrākau*. Claire Murdoch, for example, is suspicious of such discourse for turning the making of the *Whale Rider* into 'an echo-chamber in which events of significance in the film find authenticating spiritual reverberations in the events of its production' (2003: 100). Accordingly, because 'one culture's spiritual link to the natural world is another's New Age mysticism' (Morris 2003: 18–19), non-Māori should be 'constructively cynical' about the film's 'indigenous-yet-accessible' quality and their own 'readiness/neediness to embrace it ...' (Murdoch 2003: 105).¹²

Such responses to the film and its production context contain little reference to the actual processes of intercultural collaboration involved in its making. Even where mention is made (for example by Murdoch 2003), the degree to which Indigenous collaborators actually influenced decisions about the production process and shaped the representation of Māori culture in the film is not discernible. The research on which this article is based was thus designed to investigate these areas. To this end, separate interviews took place with the two key collaborators – the film's writer-director, Niki Caro, and the Māori cultural advisor, Hone Taumaunu, who is also the senior elder of Ngati Konohi in Whangara. These interviews were followed up by email exchanges, including communication with Witi Ihimaera. A methodology was thus adopted that results in an interpretive process identified by Paisley Livingston as involving a reciprocal relationship between 'internal and external evidence, whereby "internal" refers to the meaningful features of the audio-visual display, and "external" refers to evidence pertaining to the context in which the film was made ...' (Livingston 2009: 108). In this case, the external evidence is focused

on the collaborative processes involved in the development of the script and the production of the film.

Creative Collaboration: Development, Pre-Production, Production

Apart from Caro and Taumaunu, other members of the intercultural collaborative team included Witi Ihimaera's sister, Carol Haapu, who worked on specific tasks such as teaching the actors how to perform the *karakia* (incantations or ritual chants)¹³ and Ihimaera himself, who was the film's Associate Producer. He describes this role as one through which he could ensure that the guiding philosophy and production processes of the film would 'continue to come from a Māori direction and a Māori perspective' (Matthews 2003: 23). By collaborating with a team so closely attached to the Whale Rider *pūrākau* and so dedicated to protecting its cinematic iteration, Caro felt released into the work at hand because, as she explains, 'I knew that if I put a foot wrong, or if it looked like I was off course, they would bring me back' (Pitts 2006a). Nevertheless, she went to great lengths to arrive at this confidence and to pave the way for a successful collaboration. Apart from researching relevant Māori history and customs, Caro's biggest preparatory undertaking was to learn the Māori language. She considered this an absolute prerequisite for a respectful entrance into Whangara and, according to Taumaunu, Caro's efforts to educate herself in this way were crucial to the success of the collaboration. He also highly valued Caro's decision to shoot the film in Whangara. He explains: 'The cast and crew knew that they had come to the real place, and Niki was very aware that it was our history she was making, and that it was taking something out of our gut' (Pitts 2006b).

In accordance with the tradition of telling *pūrākau*, the screenplay development process for *Whale Rider* involved extensive consultation. Ihimaera was sent every draft of the script, and the last two drafts were also sent to the elders of Whangara for approval. The few comments or queries made by Ihimaera tended to focus on issues of cultural appropriateness. For example, during a scene in which Pai enters her home and smells cigarette smoke in the house, she tells the older ladies 'Māori women have got to stop smoking, we've got to protect our child-bearing properties', to which the ladies joke (after Pai has left the room), 'You'd have to be smoking in a pretty funny place to wreck your child-bearing properties'. According to Caro, Ihimaera was concerned about the joke linking 'a smoking or death image with a vaginal or life image' (Pitts 2006a). The way he dealt with this was to allow Caro to shoot the scene as she had scripted it on the understanding that she seek his approval to include the scene in the film before locking off the edit. This was done and both he and

Taumaunu subsequently granted their approval. Ihimaera was also briefly concerned about the final sequence in which the *waka* is seen to soar through the air, as it was an entirely new and powerful image that removes the *waka* from its traditional function at a crucial moment in the story (Figure 2). Following a discussion with Caro, he was satisfied with her explanation that it expresses 'the way the community are changing, the way they are opening up and revealing the beauty that had always been inherent' (in Pitts 2006a).

On another occasion Taumaunu received a call from Ihimaera about the scene in which a boy blows raspberries while crossing the stage with a cut-out of the *hapū*'s emblematic whale. Ihimaera was concerned that the action might be seen to denigrate the whale rider *pūrākau* in the sacred meeting house, but Taumaunu considered it an instance of perfectly harmless humour and Ihimaera accepted that. However, Taumaunu was not so soft on expletives. Having distributed copies of the penultimate draft among Whangara's elders and canvassed their views, he presented Caro with their unanimous request to remove the 'four-letter words starting with "P" that were in the script, insisting that, even if Whangara's young people swear elsewhere, they do not in and around the village' (Pitts 2006b). As requested, Caro removed the expletives.

Following this consultative work during script development, the pre-production stage also witnessed the integration of filmmaking processes with traditional Māori ritual. For example, Taumaunu decided that no filming would take place in Whangara until it had gone through a ceremonial blessing involving cast and crew. He considered this necessary because the arrival of the film crew and the making of the film had the potential to 'de-stabilize the spirituality that is upon Whangara and our history and our traditions' (in Pitts 2006b). The blessing took form in a number of ways. Prior to the land above Whangara



Figure 2: Completed *waka* soars through the air to the sea for inaugural row (Whale Rider).

being reshaped for the East Coast Highway, the hills and rocks making up the sweep of the bay resembled a whale with its tail submerged. Taumaunu devised a ceremony 'to lock in and link' the cast and crew to the land between the head and the tail of the formerly whale-shaped coastline. From a sacred fresh-water spring on the headland that represents the whale's tail, Taumaunu collected pebbles, which he later made into pendants. Back in Whangara, he conducted an intercultural ceremony that included a *karakia* to thank the Māori gods and a Christian prayer to acknowledge the presence of the Anglican Church in the village. During this ceremony, everybody was asked to join hands to 'unify the environment' and, after blessing every cast and crew member individually, Taumaunu gave each of them one of the pendants he had made, which they wore for the duration of the production (Pitts 2006b).¹⁴ There was also a ceremony to launch the film's *waka*, accompanied by *karakia* and a ceremonial row around the bay before the official welcome on the *marae*, which included temporarily lifting the *tapu* (sacredness) of the *marae* for the visitors.¹⁵

As cultural advisor during the production process, Taumaunu's primary concern was that his people were neither 'trivialized' nor his heritage 'denigrated for the benefit of a spectacle' (Pitts 2006b). Under this broad guiding principle, his advice was multifaceted. As well as the script comments discussed above, he wrote *karakia* for the Māori rituals in the film, for example to farewell the spirit of the mother who died in the opening and those *karakia* associated with the *waka* and the whale. Taumaunu contributed to the characterization of Koro and the creation of a key emotional turning-point in the film through discussions with Caro about how his decline into a depressed state might materialize. His suggestion that Koro keen at the base of a carving of his ancestors is, he says, a typically 'Māori way of breaking down' (Pitts 2006b), the effect of which is accessible to non-Māori through the emotional resonance of Rawiri Paratene's performance. Taumaunu also worked with the actors to ensure the east-coast dialect was authentic in the Māori dialogue and to 'convince the audience that the Māori characters were fluent speakers', a job he describes as a challenge given that 'half the Māori actors couldn't actually speak Māori' (Pitts 2006b). His input here also ensured that the actors' involvement in the project had a cultural value beyond the development or consolidation of acting careers.

Crucially, Taumaunu was given his own video monitor during the production process in order to comment on anything that arose and, effectively, approve every shot in the film. Examples of his input include direction to the art department regarding the setting of props; vetoing the cutting of *karakia* part-way through when Caro felt a scene was too long; ensuring the use of the *marae* was appropriate in terms of who sits where, how people are called on to the *marae*, where the chief is positioned and so forth. Consequently, some of his input involved the staging of shots. Another example of this occurred during

the filming of the final scene in which Pai is formally acknowledged as the new chief: Caro had positioned Pai and Koro at the back of the *waka* to be emblematically framed by the sky, but this had to be changed and the original shot plans discarded when Taumaunu informed her it was the wrong place for a chief to sit (Pitts 2006a).¹⁶ This scene also required flexibility from the filmmakers in response to the unplanned, namely that the 60 members of the outrigger group contracted to row the *waka* included female rowers, which is not traditional. Though concerned about this initially, following discussions with Taumaunu, Caro considered the presence of the women to be fortuitous in the context of 'a people moving forward' (Pitts 2006a). For Taumaunu, the only 'slightly odd note' in the film occurs during this scene, as he believes contemporary daywear would have been more appropriate for the ceremony than traditional Māori costume (Pitts 2006b). However, he knew that Carol Haapu and the local community wanted the scene to be conveyed in the form of a traditional ritual, which they believed would present Ngati Konohi to the world in a good light. Both Taumaunu and Caro agreed that the wishes of the community participants were of paramount importance in this instance.

The intimate knowledge of the script gained by Taumaunu in the development stage of the project assisted him in reconciling issues that arose during production and enabled him to very quickly judge the degree to which protocols were negotiable. For example, the use of the *marae* is not always strictly traditional, such as when Koro uses it to teach Māori culture to the local boys. Because Koro was training rather than giving a formal speech, Taumaunu felt that behaviours did not need to adhere so rigidly to traditional form. Hence, Pai enters the *marae* and sneaks around the sacred house to spy on the training, which would not be appropriate in other settings, and Koro shouts 'get out now!' which, Taumaunu explains, 'he would never have done on a *marae* if he was giving a speech rather than conducting a training session' (Pitts 2006b). Taumaunu insists he was never pressured to compromise the non-negotiable protocols that were inconvenient to either the crafting of the film or the production process, and summarizes the process as follows: 'Everything was done according to my wishes' (Pitts 2006b).

Production Culture

One of the distinctive aspects of this filmmaking experience was the evolution of a production culture that was far more intimate and flexible than that of the industry standard. For example, throughout the filming period, an expanding group of *kuia* (female elders) was present. Supplied with chairs, blankets and cups of tea, the *kuia* positioned themselves near the monitors in order to watch what was being filmed and became something of a test audience for Caro,

especially when she had written something she hoped was funny. When shooting those scenes she would check to see if the *kuia* were laughing and, if they were, she felt confident the scene was working. In addition to the *kuia*, more and more people from the region turned up to the shoot each day. Says Caro, 'People's mates and dogs and kids and everybody came, and most of them ended up in the film' (Pitts 2006a) (Figure 3). Such blurring of the subject-object relation was embraced by Caro, who notes, 'We were making the film, but they were watching us make the film, as well as contributing to its production both behind and in front of the camera' (Pitts 2006a). Although the film was post-produced in Germany, a preview screening for Ngati Konohi acted as a more formal invitation to return (and comment on) the filmmakers' gaze. In Taumaunu's view, the fact that there were no requests for changes at this stage is a reflection of how the filming period was a time in which everybody 'established a tremendous empathy and rapport and became one' (Pitts 2006b). He elaborates:

It was a very intimate family. We really got to understand and to love people. On the final morning ... we had a big breakfast together before everyone returned to Auckland, and I've never seen so many Pākehā having a real *tangi* (cry), a real weepy session before they got in their cars. It was quite an emotional experience – a Māori experience. (Pitts 2006b)

Both Caro and Taumaunu are convinced that the success of the production as a process and a creative product was based on the genuinely collaborative nature



Figure 3: Locals join the cast of *Whale Rider* as extras.

of the experience. Distinct from collective decision-making, Caro describes 'collaboration' in this context as meaning that everything about her vision for *Whale Rider* was in accord with what her collaborators told her (Pitts 2006a). The production company, South Pacific Pictures, was party to this process in the first instance by agreeing to shoot the film in Whangara when it would have been much cheaper to make the film in Auckland, where most of the cast and crew lived.¹⁷ Caro was also gratified to learn that the production of the film in Whangara had helped to heal some historical wounds in the region, had encouraged members of Ngati Konohi to return to Whangara after long absences, and that many of the *kuia* who turned up on set each day had not, in fact, been out of their houses for years and that the making of the film had triggered their coming together (Pitts 2006a). Taumaunu argues that there is no coincidence in the fact that the 'love and friendship' evident in the production culture was utterly in sync with the message in the story about the need to 'develop good relationships' (Pitts 2006b). Caro agrees, asserting that 'what lands on the screen is absolutely informed by the culture you create in the filmmaking process – it's very symbiotic' (Pitts 2006a). For Caro, the production culture and processes involved in the making of *Whale Rider* set a new benchmark, and showed her a 'practical way of working' which she took to northern Minnesota for the making of her first Hollywood film, *North Country* (2005) (Pitts 2006a).¹⁸

Contestations: Spirituality and Representation

The filmmakers' embrace of Māori customs and spirituality did not stop at a consideration of production protocols. Also evident is respect for the Māori belief that the land and the environment are interlinked with 'the deceased, the living and the unborn', and that all these elements form part of a whole containing their own *mauri* (Roberts 2008).¹⁹ Hence, good omens are understood by Māori to manifest in non-human phenomena, often involving other beings and the forces of nature. For example, very early on in the process, when Caro was reticent about tackling a Māori story, a whale was beached close to where she lived at Karekare – an extremely rare event on that particular coastline. Anxious at first about it being a bad sign, Caro was assured by Māori *moko* (tattoo) artist, Tim Worrall, that it was in fact a very good omen because, historically, if a whale died on the beach it was fortuitous for the local community as it ensured a supply of oil and meat as well as bone and teeth for weapons (Pitts 2006a). Indeed, for Ihimaera the *mauri* of the *Whale Rider* *pūrākau* was delivered to him the day a whale swam up the Hudson River. He explains that the *pūrākau* 'lodged itself' in his 'heart and brain' as a child when he would cycle the long distance from Gisborne to Whangara to gaze at the carving of

Paikeha on the meeting house, but that 'the *maui* of the *pūrākau* had been waiting for me to grow up' (Ihimaera 2010). He then wrote *The Whale Rider* in six weeks and, on the night it was launched in Whangara, the people there 'saw for the first time in ages a whale spouting on the horizon' (Ihimaera 2010).

Taumaunu also believes 'absolutely that there are signs that ensure success' and 'signs that say pack up and get out'. He recalls, for example, that the production almost always got precisely what it needed from the weather, be that a 'dull grey day', a 'boisterous and wild' sea, 'a calm day with a gentler breeze ruffling the hair' or a 'strong light' (Pitts 2006b), which is most unusual in filmmaking. Even on the penultimate day of the shoot, when it seemed that the production's good fortune had run out due to torrential rain halting the proceedings, the storm suddenly evaporated and a rainbow appeared perfectly arched over the *waka*. Caro recalls that 'the next morning we had ideal conditions – way off the met service radar – and that was our very last opportunity to shoot the final scene in the film' (Pitts 2006a). Neither Caro nor Taumaunu view this consistent good fortune as merely a series of coincidences. Taumaunu interpreted the appearance of the rainbow over the *waka* as an omen indicating that 'there would be a journey and the film would be richly received' (Pitts 2006b). He also believes that the good fortune the production experienced was made possible by the blessing he performed prior to production, which allowed the spirit of the Paikea legend to 'be let loose to travel the world' (Pitts 2006b).²⁰

That the synchronicities Ihimaera, Taumaunu and Caro draw meaning from have been branded by some commentators as little more than questionable new age mysticism or 'media-tasty instances of coincidence, mysticism and ... poetic rightness' (Murdoch 2003: 100) demonstrates a naturalized positivist perspective. An unfortunate correlation of this perspective is the (likely unwitting) dismissal of a Māori worldview or, at best, a racializing operation whereby a spiritual belief held by an Indigenous person can be regarded as authentic, yet that very same belief held by a non-Indigenous collaborator is dismissed as phoney.²¹

Claims that 'the specific cultural edge of the particular *iwi* has been taken away' (Bennett 2006: 21) are also contestable. The *iwi* referred to, Ngati Porou, is a very large tribal confederation, yet the presentation of Māori in *Whale Rider* operates at a *hapū* level, thereby favouring highly specific community representation over broader generalization. Regarding the *marae* setting, for example, which has been the object of criticism for not being conveyed in purely traditional form, Taumaunu says it is depicted to reflect how the *marae* is very much part of the community's daily reality in Whangara (Pitts 2006b). In light of the research presented here, arguments that the filmmakers created an outsider's view of Māori are revealed to be erroneous. While the close

intercultural collaboration and attendant approval processes involved in the making of *Whale Rider* cannot forestall criticism or claim to represent the views of all Māori, the scope of Māori influence on the development and production of the film, as well as on the production culture that set the context for creative activity, functions beyond the surface-level minutiae of cultural 'accuracy' to an extent that can be described as a higher degree of dispersed authorship than is the norm in mainstream cinema. That the Māori influence on the construction of the film remains unacknowledged in most commentary points to a need for the kind of contextual research undertaken here and a structural imbalance present in much criticism founded in representational theories. As Lúcia Nagib explains, some of this criticism has led to

the establishment of a hierarchy that ascribes a superior position to those who purportedly hold the knowledge of the real (the critic) as opposed to those who re-present it in an artwork ... [By these means the critic is led] to become judgmental rather than appreciative, normative rather than inquisitive, a moralizing preacher rather than a passionate learner, thus reenacting the very power relations Cultural Studies aspires to debunk. (Nagib 2011: 3)

Conceptions of Cultural Difference: Binary and Relational

The notion that *Whale Rider* masquerades as a Māori story due to the ethnicity of its director and producer is contested by the Māori participants in the project. Faced with these criticisms, Taumaunu argues that they overlook 'the collaborative interaction that generated the spirituality of the work' and insists that Caro's approach to developing the script and making the film 'was all so sound that it was unimaginable to cut her off in mid sentence and dismiss her as "Pākehā"' (Pitts 2006b). He also considers the universal aspects of the story to be as valuable as the cultural specificity his role was designed to protect (Taumaunu 2007). For Ihimaera, *Whale Rider* remains unequivocally a Māori story precisely because 'it comes from a specific, regional myth', it 'deals with a specific people who are in a specific location, in such a way that it can only be a Whangara film' and, just because 'the director happens to be blue-eyed', this affects nothing because 'so are a lot of Māori' (Matthews 2003: 23).

Proceeding inductively, it can be argued that, while the critics of *Whale Rider* discussed here tend to exhibit binary conceptions of cultural difference, key members of the film's intercultural collaborative team demonstrate a relational approach that engages a democratic process described by Jacques Rancière as 'the action of subjects who, by working the interval between identities, reconfigure the distributions of ... the universal and the particular' (Rancière

2006: 61–2). The intercultural processes involved in the making of *Whale Rider* may thus be understood as rooted in a rejection of dialectical reasoning in the sphere of cultural difference in favour of the idea of a 'third space' distinguished by cultural multiplicity and exchange. Rather than a 'synthesis' in the Hegelian sense, this 'third space' is occupied by the juxtaposition and intersection of different cultures, as well as the cultural products that arise from that relation. Homi Bhabha describes this space as one in which 'the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences' (Bhabha 1994: 218). The potential for such 'tension' to be productive and address certain inadequacies of dialectical reasoning can be found in the processes and conceptual orientation of 'dialogism'.

Initially elaborated by Bakhtin as a metalinguistic term to challenge the ahistorical nature of structural linguistics, 'dialogism' can be described as the characteristic epistemological mode in a world in which 'there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others' (Holquist 1981: 426). Central to the concept of dialogism and how it might be applied to conceptions of cultural difference is Bakhtin's recognition that 'opposition pure and simple necessarily leads to chaos and cannot serve as the basis of a system' and that 'true differentiation presupposes a simultaneous resemblance and difference ...' (Holquist 2002: 26). The argument that Māori culture is necessarily incomprehensible to non-Māori is thus contestable. As Hermans and Dimaggio state in their study of how the processes of globalization and localization demand a dialogical conceptualization of self and identity, never before have there been so many people from different cultural backgrounds 'so interconnected with each other as in the present era' (2007: 31). Different cultures can therefore be seen to come together 'within the self of one and the same individual', and this has resulted in the development of hybrid identities (35). Paul Willemen's description of intercultural comprehension achieved in a dialogic mode accurately describes the process between the key collaborators in the making of *Whale Rider*, that is by asking questions and receiving responses without relinquishing either culture's 'unity and open totality' (Willemen 1994: 214).²² Caro's description of working with Ngati Konohi as an experience that was so 'rich' it was 'just like waking up' (Pitts 2006a) suggests how this process can be mutually enriching and relativizing.

From Creative Process to Creative Outcome

That the very vision for the film was shaped by a dialogic mode of intercultural collaboration is also evident in its aesthetic construction, which interweaves the respective naturalistic and symbolic registers of New Zealand mainstream cinema and Māori storytelling paradigms. Where caution has been advised about the

accessible indigeneity of the film, and claims made about the impossibility of Māori *pūrākau* being received appropriately by non-Māori, I assert the productive potential of artists and audiences being inspired by Indigenous mythology and, as a result, developing better intercultural working processes and expanded viewing practices. While it has been suggested that *Whale Rider* asks a lot of audiences 'for whom talk of destiny, tragedy, and legend is usually restricted to fantasy' genres 'set in other times, worlds, or galaxies' (Morris 2003: 19), the popularity of the film around the world suggests that audiences have not been flummoxed by this. Furthermore, such a position at once denies Māori familiarity with Western storytelling and any capacity for Westerners to comprehend non-Western storytelling paradigms. Granted, the changes made to Ihimaera's novel in the process of screen adaptation involve the simplification of novelistic narrative complexities in order to compress the action to feature-film length, and the centralization of the protagonist-antagonist relationship can be seen to reflect mainstream screen storytelling conventions. However, the Indigenous symbolic register framing the naturalistic hero-journey points to a style of hybrid storytelling that utilizes the power of Indigenous mythology to provide analogies for contemporary fears, conflicts and ideals. Such mixing of narrative modalities is not antithetical to the function of *pūrākau*. As Jenny Lee explains, 'the telling of *pūrākau* includes storytelling in contemporary contexts' (Lee 2005: 2). In fact the word *pūrākau* is made up of the Māori words for base (*pū*) and tree (*rākau*), thus demonstrating 'a Māori understanding of stories' in which there is an original source, yet 'there may be many branches, versions or interpretations' (Lee 2005: 8).

While New Zealand's cinematic history proves that intercultural collaboration may replicate processes of colonial assimilation, research presented here reveals that the key collaborators in the making of *Whale Rider* exhibit a sophisticated awareness of how peoples from different cultures are at once distinguishable and connected. This materializes in the democratization of traditional screen production culture in accordance with Māori spirituality and protocols, which, in turn, triggers a higher degree of dispersed authorship than is the norm in mainstream cinema production. That the ascription of agency to both human and non-human entities appears not only in the original *Whale Rider pūrākau*, but also in the novel, the film and the Indigenous philosophy guiding the film's production, provides further evidence that the subordination of one cultural perspective to a monolithic and positivist Western other has not in fact occurred. Both the film and the process of its making may, therefore, be understood as expressing something at the heart of what Sean Cubitt terms a 'posthuman politics' in which 'the value of public good is no longer de facto concerned with humans alone' (Cubitt 2009: 15).²³ Despite the conquest of animism by monotheism in Western thought during the enlightenment, the fact that 'indigenous peoples have maintained and developed animism' is for Cubitt, 'a lesson for us' (18).

Consequently, in a genuinely dialogic intercultural encounter, the 'ethics' of drawing from an Indigenous symbolic register in a film destined for global consumption need not necessarily be cast in terms of the exploitative appropriation of an oppressed culture by the powerful. Rather, in the case of *Whale Rider*, it may be understood as an operation that challenges the scientific positivism built into strictly conventional realist narratives by bringing into the public eye the value of metaphorical storytelling modes formulated by Indigenous cultures to cement a relationship between humans and the other beings and forces with which we share a planet. This is not to deny the legitimacy of Indigenous Cinemas, support for which is essential to redress historical exclusions and maintain cultural self-expression in contemporary form. Rather, it is to argue for the validity of intercultural filmmaking wrought by non-exploitative dialogic exchange as an additional cultural space and posit the intercultural creative processes involved in the making of *Whale Rider* as an exemplar for such activity.

Glossary of Māori Terms

<i>Aotearoa</i>	New Zealand
<i>atua</i>	an ancestor with continuing influence, or a god, demon or supernatural being
<i>hapū</i>	sub-tribe(s), section of a large kinship group
<i>iwi</i>	tribe(s), extended kinship group
<i>karakia</i>	incantation(s), ritual chant(s), prayer(s), blessing(s)
<i>kuia</i>	female elder(s)
<i>kumara</i>	sweet potato
<i>Māori</i>	indigenous New Zealander, indigenous person of Aotearoa/New Zealand
<i>Māoritanga</i>	Māori culture, practices and beliefs
<i>marae</i>	courtyard in front of meeting house, often also used to include the complex of buildings around the <i>marae</i>
<i>mauri</i>	life principle, material symbol of a life principle or its special nature, source of emotions
<i>moko</i>	1. lizard, skink and gecko; 2. Māori tattooing designs on the face or body
<i>noa</i>	ordinary, free from restrictions
<i>paikea</i>	humpback whale(s)
<i>Pākehā</i>	New Zealander(s) of European descent
<i>pūrākau</i>	ancient legend(s), myth(s), story/stories
<i>taonga</i>	prized possessions, treasure
<i>tapu</i>	sacred, prohibited, restricted, set apart, forbidden, under the protection of an ancestor with continuing influence

<i>waka</i>	large intricately carved canoe(s)
<i>wānanga</i>	place of learning; tribal knowledge, lore, learning; instructor, wise person, sage, authority, expert, guru, philosopher, savant
<i>whakanoa</i>	to remove <i>tapu</i> – to free things that have the extensions of <i>tapu</i> without affecting the intrinsic <i>tapu whānau</i> extended family/families

Notes

- 1 Following Barclay, I use the capital 'I' for Indigenous to distinguish the politicized position of First Nations peoples (and First Nations Cinemas) from a more generalized use of the term differentiating the national from the global.
- 2 In the Māori language, the plural is indicated by context rather than a change in the word.
- 3 Moruroa was the site of nuclear testing by France for 30 years from 1966. In 1974, the testing was moved from the atmosphere to the ocean floor.
- 4 Following the birth of a child, it is Māori custom to bury the placenta and umbilical cord in a culturally significant piece of land.
- 5 Prior to the making of *Whale Rider*, the four feature-length fiction films directed by Māori were *Ngati* (Barry Barclay, 1987), *Mauri* (Merata Mita, 1988), *Tē Rua* (Barry Barclay, 1991) and *Once Were Warriors* (Lee Tamahori, 1994).
- 6 The exploitation of Māori by non-Māori filmmakers began as early as 1928 when Hollywood director, Alexander Markey, was commissioned by Universal Studios to make a romantic drama about Māori, *Under the Southern Cross* (1929). Among other insults, Markey stole the *taonga* (prized possessions, treasure) that Māori had loaned to the production as props.
- 7 For commentary on such processes and representations, see Barclay 1990, 1996; Blythe 1994; Mita 1996; Pihama 1996; Pitts 2008.
- 8 Barclay went on to explore the complex relationship between Māori *taonga* and the commercial world of Western intellectual property rights in his book *Mana Tūturu* (2005).
- 9 At the Hawaii International Film Festival in 2001, Barry Barclay was presented with the inaugural Legacy Appreciation Award for 'his ground-breaking work as a filmmaker and writer, and his tireless advocacy of the rights of Indigenous people, in particular the rights of Māori' (*Onfilm* 2001: 20). During his keynote address at this festival, Barclay introduced the term 'Fourth Cinema' to describe cinema created by Indigenous Peoples and to separate these films from the categories of First, Second and Third Cinema.
- 10 This Treaty of Waitangi claim against the New Zealand Film Commission was lodged by a group of Māori filmmakers including Barry Barclay. Their claim argues that the NZFC and its Act of Parliament are inconsistent with the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi (New Zealand's founding document, signed between Māori chiefs and the Crown in 1840) in that they have failed to actively promote and protect Māori culture and language. Because cinema is a

- 'paramount' contemporary mode of expression for Māori language and culture, the claimants assert the 'fundamental right' of Māori to access Film Commission resources 'to tell their own stories in ways which Māori deem consistent with their own culture' (clause 15). At the time *Whale Rider* received NZFC financing, the claim was languishing at the Waitangi Tribunal.
- 11 By 'unspoken quota', Barclay means a tacit agreement between the NZFC and Māori that the number of Māori films produced should roughly reflect the percentage of the nation's Māori population.
 - 12 It should be noted that Paula Morris is, in fact, largely positive about the film and does discuss the apparent integrity of the cross-cultural collaborative process.
 - 13 In traditional Māori culture there were *karakia* for all aspects of life, the purpose of which was to enable people to carry out their daily activities in union with ancestors and spiritual powers. See <http://www.maoridictionary.co.nz/index.cfm?dictionaryKeywords=karakia&search.x=0&search.y=0&search=search&n=1&idiom=&phrase=&proverb=&loan=>, last accessed 25 August 2012.
 - 14 Obviously, cast members removed the pendants when necessary for filming.
 - 15 All formal greetings and discussion take place on the *marae*, and the *tapu* is always lifted for visitors, be they from another tribe or another culture altogether. When *tapu* is removed, things become *noa* (ordinary, free from restrictions), the process being called *whakanoa*. See <http://www.maoridictionary.co.nz/index.cfm?dictionaryKeywords=tapu&search.x=0&search.y=0&search=search&n=1&idiom=&phrase=&proverb=&loan=>, last accessed 25 August 2012.
 - 16 The only people who sit in the front or the back of the *waka* are the experts monitoring the wind and direction of the *waka* – training that a chief and his granddaughter would not have. Taumaunu advised Caro to position Koro and Pai in the middle of the *waka*, which is where such people are placed so that, in the event of it overturning, the rowers can make a raft of themselves for them (Pitts 2006a).
 - 17 By filming in such a remote location, the expense of housing and feeding the cast and crew and paying them per diem was a considerable addition to the normal fees payable.
 - 18 Prior to their acceptance of an alternative production culture, Caro recounts the initial surprise of cast and crew on that 'enormous Hollywood film' in response to her employment of what she calls the 'Whale Rider model' of filmmaking (Pitts 2006a).
 - 19 On a Māori 'world view', see also Awatere 1984; Walker 1985; Durie 2005.
 - 20 In light of the key collaborators' belief that the universe provides guiding signs, it is interesting to compare the good fortune attached to *Whale Rider* with the extraordinary run of ill fortune experienced during the production of *River Queen* (Vincent Ward 2005), which followed a more traditional Western production model. An intercultural love story set during the Māori land wars of the 1860s, Ward's film was beset with problems from the start, including atrociously bad weather, widespread respiratory infections among the crew, the departure of five production office staff in the first few weeks of production, the (temporary) resignation of the cinematographer due to an injury, the postponement of the entire production half way through the shoot due to the hospitalization of the lead

actress (Samantha Morton) following severe influenza and secondary bacterial infection, deteriorating relations between Morton and Ward when shooting resumed, another on-set injury due to an accident with a horse, a serious driving accident for principal cast member, Cliff Curtis, and finally, the firing of Ward several weeks after shooting resumed (*Onfilm* 2004b: 3). Ward is candid about the minimal consultation with Māori during the early stages of his project and states that 'in the end you just want to tell your story' (Ward 2005: 17).

- 21 I describe these dismissals as unwitting because the academic commentary on *Whale Rider* discussed here appears rooted in solidarity with the project of Indigenous filmmaking.
- 22 It should be noted that Willemsen applied the term to describe a mode of cross-cultural *interpretation* of films, not a mode of collaboration in the field of intercultural filmmaking.
- 23 Cubitt elaborates, saying the polis 'is not exclusively made of its population. It is rocks and earth, water and air, plants and animals, buildings, services, communications' (Cubitt 2009: 15).

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