

Intercultural short
filmmaking in
Aotearoa
New
Zealand

BY VIRGINIA PITTS

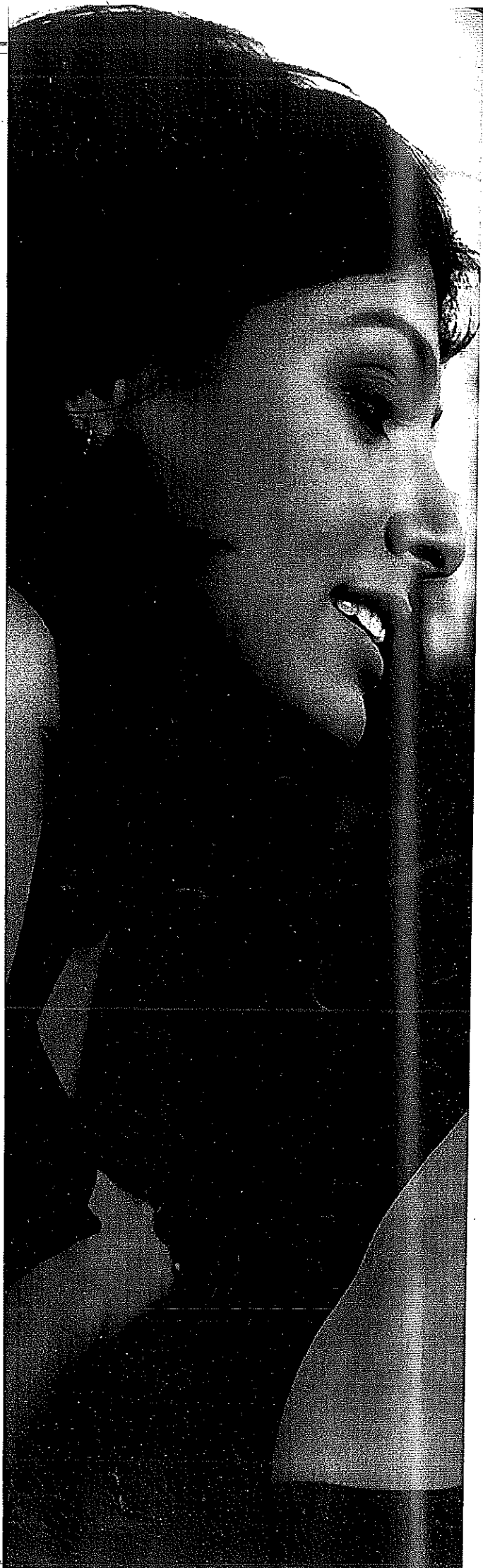
In this article, I examine two short films from 2004, *Fleeting Beauty* (directed by me) and *Eating Sausage* (Zia Mandviwalla), as examples of intercultural filmmaking practice based on productive dialogic encounters between distinct cultural communities in Aotearoa New Zealand.¹

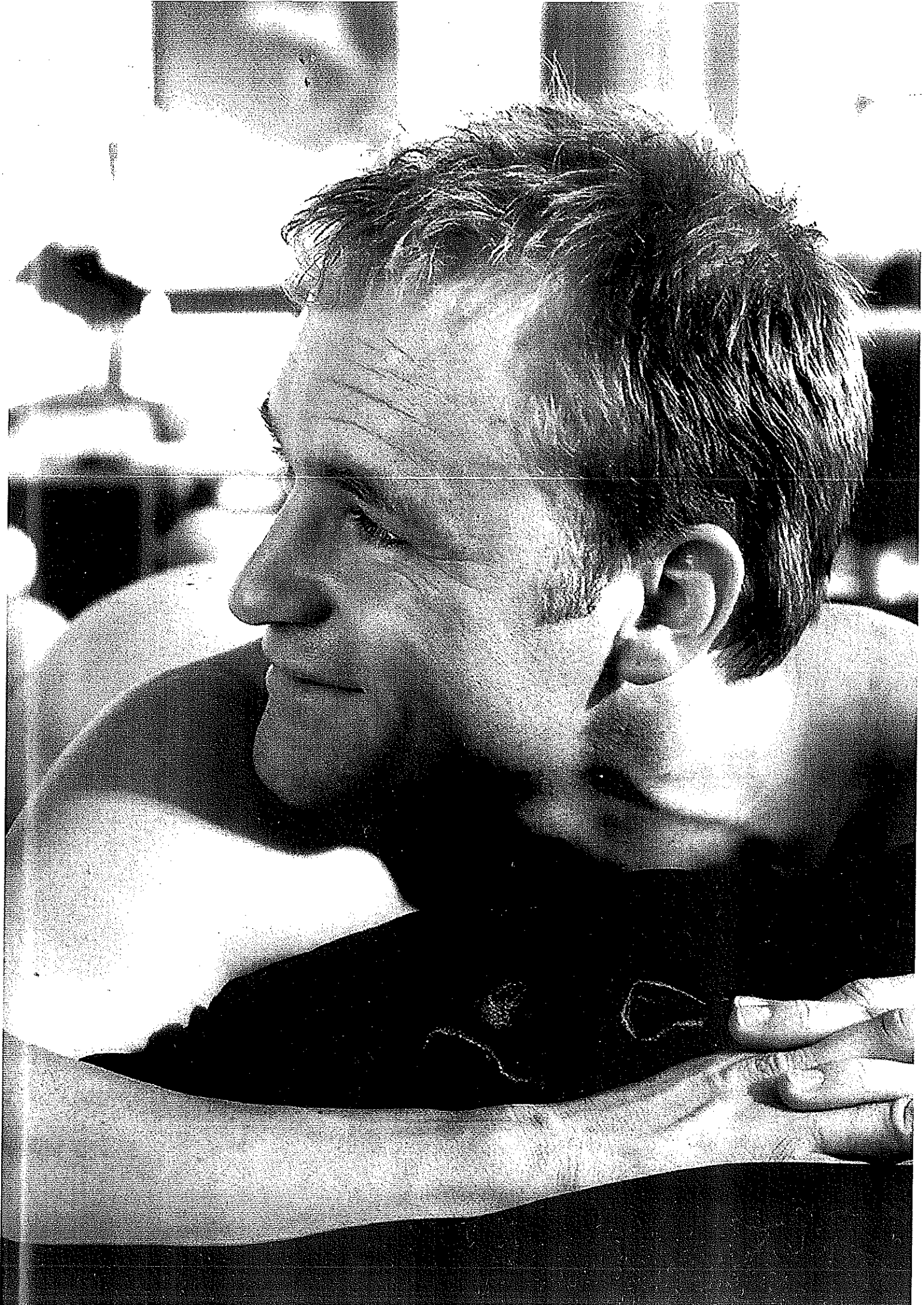
BECAUSE these films received post-production funding from the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) and have screened widely on the international festival circuit, they are also playing a role in the process of re-defining New Zealand cinema to national and international audiences.²

Fleeting Beauty, written and co-produced by Shuchi Kothari, features an Indian immigrant, Seema (Nandita Das), who creates maps with spices on her Pakeha lover's flesh while recounting stories of the ancient spice trade. As her tale unfolds, the spice-art on her lover's skin evolves from a delicate line map to a vibrant desert terrain, which then transforms into a recognizable map of the New World. Seema speaks of places penetrated and plundered by Europeans in search of pepper, and her story climaxes in a re-telling of the colonization of India as the result of a five-shilling dispute over the price of pepper between the Dutch and the British. Her lover, Chris (William Wallace), is repaid for dismissing her version of events when he accidentally gets chilli on his genitals.

Eating Sausage, written and directed by Zia Mandviwalla, is

2006







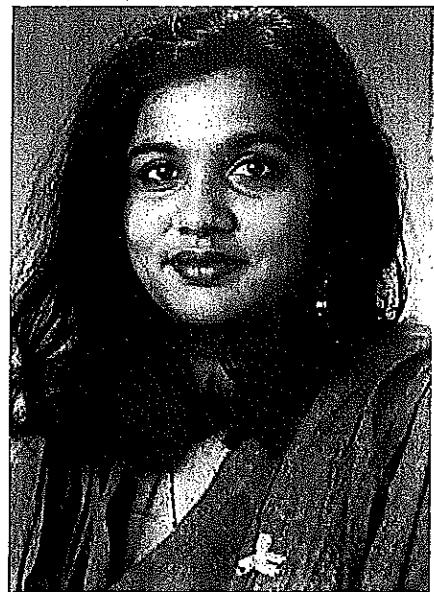
ABOVE AND INTRO PAGE: FEELING BEAUTY; RIGHT CLOCKWISE TOP LEFT: EATING SAUSAGE; SHECHIKI KOIHA: EATING SAUSAGE

about a Korean immigrant, Su Jung (Soo Ae Park), who finds relief from suburban isolation by joining in swimming lessons with her Kiwi neighbour.³ Su Jung's husband, Kim (Chul Young Chung), feels threatened by her newfound independence and willingness to connect with New Zealand culture. When she pointedly serves up sausage alongside their traditional Korean fare, he equally pointedly refuses to eat it. Powerless to control his wife's culinary adventurousness and passion for swimming, Kim resorts to locking Su Jung in the house and blocking all means of escape. When he returns from work to the prospect of Su Jung having drowned in the bath, Kim is left pitifully alone in a home now reduced to a site of impotent male oppression and cultural petrification.

Nomadic citizenry & cultural difference

Just as the distinctions between cultural and craft collaboration are difficult to discern among the vicissitudes of fiction filmmaking, the nature of cultural difference itself is in a continual state of flux in an increasingly interdependent world order. However, I am proceeding with the view that, in this global context, the hybridization of cultural identity on some levels is partnered with the re-inscription of cultural difference on others.⁴

Manifestations of cultural difference most significant here are those evident when the film is about characters from different cultures, when the filmmaker is from a different culture than the characters in the film, and when the filmmaker is cross-cultural, either through genealogy, experience, or both.⁵ It is worth noting, then, that those of us with authorial control of *Eating Sausage* and *Fleeting Beauty* experience simultaneous 'inside-outside' associations with many countries, including India, New Zealand, the US, Dubai, and England. Yet we are all New Zealand citizens who, to some degree, occupy those fissures between the categorisations of identity politics that relate to national and cultural affiliation, an experience reflected in the films we



Park and Chung both of whom were new to acting simply refused to play the sex scene as it would spell social suicide for them in their cultural milieu ... the loss was made easier by the realization that there were more subtle and clever ways to depict the lovelessness of the characters' marriage

make and our respective approaches to creative cultural collatoration

From working method to creative outcome: intercultural filmmaking as dialogic encounter

Because the term 'multicultural' is rife with restrictive and tokenistic connotations, I have chosen to adopt Laura Marks' term 'intercultural' cinema, which she describes as operating 'at the intersections of two or more cultural regimes of knowledge' to create 'new conditions of knowledge'.⁶ Such intercultural dynamics are not only evident in the diegeses of *Fleeting Beauty* and *Eating Sausage*, they were also integral to the creative process. To conceptualize this process, I have adapted Paul Willemen's application of the term 'dialogic' in his analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin's three modes of interpreting 'other' cultural practices.⁷

The first of these interpretative processes Willemen names 'projective appropriation', whereby viewers project their own belief system, cultural framework, and comprehension of

signifying practices onto foreign films. The second process, 'ventriloquist identification', occurs when the viewer 'presents him or herself as the mouthpiece for others', which Willemen describes as a fantasy of the privileged, whose guilty conscience compels them to 'masquerade as the oppressed'.⁸ The third process, the dialogic mode, brings about creative understanding by neither renouncing nor imposing the viewer's own cultural framework. Rather, questions are asked, and understanding sought in a mutually enriching and relativising encounter.⁹ These interpretive processes can be usefully adapted to describe modes of collaboration in the field of intercultural film praxis.

While writing the script for *Eating Sausage*, Mandviwalla was teaching English to Korean students and working alongside several Korean women, with whom she had many frank discussions about male-female relationships in Korea. She learned that while Korean society is very patriarchal, women are often the capable ones because men are extremely mollycoddled by

their mothers.¹⁰ She was also taught how to prepare and cook Kim Chi, the Korean national dish made by Su Jung in *Eating Sausage*.¹¹ Much of this initial research could simply be described as cultural familiarization, complete with the potential to replicate processes of projective appropriation mentioned above. In such a transaction, the culturally specific information provided by representative advisors can be either discarded by the filmmakers, or adopted in such a way that does not significantly affect the pre-determined (and culturally constituted) vision for the film. However, the fact that Mandviwalla subsequently asked one of these colleagues to read and comment on her script suggests a rather more respectful and inclusive approach.

Her encounter with Korean culture deepened when the actors came on board. They worked together for four months on translations, rehearsals and related activities, resulting in script changes that could only emerge from an energetic and genuine dialogic encounter.¹² The first scripted event to be jettisoned was the sex scene. Park and Chung, both of whom were new to acting, simply refused to play the sex scene as it would spell social suicide for them in their cultural milieu. Mandviwalla readily accepted this, and the loss was made easier by the realization that there were more subtle and clever ways to depict the lovelessness of the characters' marriage.¹³ Hence, a decision that was initially culturally determined became a craft issue for Mandviwalla. The replacement scene, in which Kim tentatively places his hand on his wife's sleeping body and almost immediately withdraws it, is extremely potent for being so beautifully understated.

Shifts in characterization also evolved during rehearsal, a process where distinctions between cultural and craft collaboration are even harder to draw. Mandviwalla and Young Chung wanted to develop Kim's character so that he would not be a simplistic, stereotypical patriarch. Their wish for the audience to feel sympathy for him was aided by Park's interpretation of her own character as somewhat selfish. Su Jung was initially Mandviwalla's heroine in the story, but once she and Park looked

more closely at her character, they didn't feel she was entirely blameless. This, Mandviwalla says, 'coloured Park's performance in a way that wasn't necessarily evident in the script. The character evolved into someone who just decides to pursue her own exploration of her identity'.¹⁴

Through this collaborative, intercultural process of fleshing out the characters over an extended period of time, the film successfully scratches the surface of imperious Western perceptions of Asian cultures as ruthlessly oppressive towards women. While the oppression exists, and is represented in *Eating Sausage*, the male character is rendered with complexity and humanity. Ultimately it is Kim who remains passively trapped in a dysfunctional and repressive framework, albeit one designed to privilege his own gender. And it is the female character that actively liberates herself from this gendered and culturally constructed straitjacket, demonstrating the failure of anachronistic patriarchy to contain female will.

At a craft level, the sheer amount of time the director and actors spent together is also responsible for loading the silences between the on-screen characters with a sharp sense of loss.¹⁵ Underscored by the absence of music or sound-scape, and the lack of eye contact between husband and wife, a quietism of image emerges that is characteristic of many intercultural films.¹⁶ It is also generic to art-house films, with their emphasis on reaction over action.¹⁷ In this narratively passive space, the viewer is invited to contemplate the relativising effect of placing a very conservative manifestation of Korean culture in (relatively) liberal New Zealand. Conversely, the subtle emotions and restrained expression of the Korean couple throw into relief what Mandviwalla calls the 'fruity-patootiness' of Auckland suburbia.¹⁸

Where the dialogic process centred on the actor-writer/director collaboration in the making of *Eating Sausage*, much of this process played out between Shuchi Kothari as writer and myself as director in the case of *Fleeting Beauty*. Two crucial differences are relevant to this particular creative union. First, because the script was written by an

Indian woman, I did not need to check for cultural-accuracy in the way that was required of Mandviwalla.¹⁹ Secondly, the fact that Kothari is Indian and I am partly of British descent recalls a history of unequal power relations that was not present in Mandviwalla's cross-cultural collaboration. While such historical baggage had not previously figured in our creative and professional relationship, culturally determined priorities did emerge in lively debates over several aspects of our proposed discursive and aesthetic strategies for the film.

One strategy deployed in *Fleeting Beauty* to create new conditions of knowledge is to initially mimic two hegemonic colonial discourses: the exoticization of Eastern women as a projection of European sexual fantasy, and the positioning of European traders as admirable adventurers whose travels represent 'civilizing' quests into new horizons. The former is conjured up by the film being set in a bedroom where a very beautiful Indian woman, surrounded by soft, sensual material, creates 'exotic' art on the skin of her naked white lover. The latter is invoked by Seema's apparent admiration of the European traders' ability to survive, and even create profits, in the face of extreme adversity.

However, as Seema explains to Chris, 'There are other ways of seeing', a notion explored in the film through self-conscious reversals of the colonial gaze and conventional race and gender power relations. In this way, Seema controls what is seen by and uttered to her inert lover and to the audience. Significantly then, it is a prone white male body that Seema (fully clothed) treats as a metaphorical landscape and the camera voyeuristically caresses while she recounts alternative versions of historical events.

While the original script conveyed a sensuality that toyed quite knowingly with orientaling discourses, my idea to surround Seema's bed with a curtain of translucent material and shoot through it in the long opening tracking shot pushed this discursive play further than Kothari was initially comfortable with. While she appreciated the aesthetic qualities of the proposed material,

Kothari feared it would also produce a 'harem effect' that did not chime with her own intentions.²⁰ The second issue for Kothari here was a difficulty in rationalizing the 'veiling of the East' she thought would result from shooting through the material in the opening shot.²¹

During the ensuing debate, I was acutely aware there was more at stake for Kothari than there was for me as a member of a race and culture with no history of being detrimentally 'othered'. I did not wish to proceed with my plans if she had felt compromised by them, yet neither was I prepared to automatically quash my directorial impulse in the kind of paroxysm of inherited guilt so common to well-intentioned white liberals. Such an act would replicate, in the sphere of film praxis, that process of 'ventriloquist identification' described so sardonically by Paul Willemen. At stake for me was the relinquishment of an idea I was convinced would draw people into the world of our film more successfully than the alternatives discussed. Crucial to my own *raison d'être* as an audiovisual storyteller is a desire to communicate beyond the demographic of the 'already-converted' and, while there would be a risk of perpetuating orientalist discourse by invoking it before reversing it, that was a risk I was prepared to take in order to build a connection with an audience.²²

Over many conversations and email exchanges, Kothari and I discussed, among other things, differences between laying out the power dynamics of the piece right away and first summoning that which is to be reversed, the function of the proposed curtain material (it became mosquito netting) and ways to reduce the harem effect, ways to challenge the conventional male/colonial gaze and the dangers of literal filmic translations of such theoretical notions, and plans to ensure Seema is revealed with clarity on screen only after the skin of her naked lover's back has been introduced. As Willemen points out, a genuinely dialogic process is necessarily demanding and works to simultaneously increase understanding of another culture and re-perceive one's own.²³ Through such a dialogic process, Kothari and I were able to reach a consensus on crucial issues rather

than settle for mutually disagreeable compromises.²⁴

The rest of our work together was more typical of any collaboration between director and writer in the creation of a final shooting script. However, one alteration I pushed for had cultural and pragmatic implications. Prior to my involvement in the film, two Executive Producer groups had turned down the project on the basis that it was not a 'New Zealand film'.²⁵ I heartily disagreed with this. The tale of colonial conquest has obvious parallels with the New Zealand experience, and the presence of a prone male is becoming typical of how gender politics are played out in New Zealand film.²⁶ I wanted to shift the story into an identifiably New Zealand setting not only to underline these thematic and intertextual connections, but also to normalize the presence of new immigrant communities in this setting, and to ensure we would not be excluded from NZFC post-production funding further down the track.²⁷ Consequently, the film became set in an apartment with a view of Auckland's iconic Sky Tower, and the characterization of Chris shifted so that his dismissal of Seema's story would stem from ignorance rather than inherent contempt.

Typically of intercultural cinema, in *Fleeting Beauty* the ideological character of memory and history plays out in a productive tension between fiction and documentary. Although it is a fiction film, the bulk of Seema's dialogue is factual, and stems from the historical excavations undertaken by Kothari who, in presenting the tales she unearthed, actively intercedes in hegemonic historical processes.²⁸ In this way, the film neatly exemplifies Laura Marks' assertion that intercultural cinema is constituted around 'the directly political discrepancy between official history and "private" memory'.²⁹ The pain Seema experiences in recalling repressed cultural memories, and the anger she finally expresses when they are dismissed by Chris, illustrates the intensity with which colonial and post-colonial discourses can collide during such intercultural encounters. The culturally constituted nature of Chris' resistance to Seema's version of events is underlined by his similar inability to comprehend the rationale

behind her ephemeral art form.³⁰ In contrast, Seema's cultural dexterity and greater capacity for compassion are inscribed when she acts to ease Chris' self-inflicted pain. With the aid of cool, soothing milk – a product associated with New Zealand culture in the opening exchange between them – Seema washes the remaining spices from his back, which spiral and disappear down the plughole in a melancholic reminder of the losses erased by official histories.

Eating Sausage and *Fleeting Beauty* both favour a naturalistic aesthetic, yet both also cross the line into magic realism to realize the expressive potential of their central ideas. In *Fleeting Beauty*, Seema's transformation of the spice maps defies temporal and physical logic, but emphasizes the idea of historical storytelling as a metaphorical palimpsest. In *Eating Sausage*, the audience is treated to a single shot of Su Jung, rising phoenix-like through an implausibly and fully flooded bathroom. When that image cuts to black and a sharp intake of breath is heard, we are left with the idea that Su Jung is very much alive, despite the depiction of this in a non-naturalistic register.³¹

Notwithstanding the reluctance of both films to slide neatly into classic realist narrative, neither *Eating Sausage* nor *Fleeting Beauty* displays the overt suspicion of representation itself emphasized by Marks.³² Her selection of films to be categorized as 'intercultural' favours work that manifests the disjunction between different orders of knowledge through a disjunctive relationship between the sound and image tracks.³³ While this is theoretically tidy, I would argue that it is unnecessarily prescriptive. Films like *Fleeting Beauty* and *Eating Sausage* do, to varying degrees, productively juxtapose conflicting cultural regimes of knowledge without replicating the disjunctive conventions of avant-garde cinema. In fact, *Fleeting Beauty* very deliberately creates cohesion between an evocative sound-scape and a sensual, fluid visual style as a way to maximise the potential of cinematic language to seduce an audience into its world before revealing the discursive layering and reversals that constitute its rationale. In this way, the style and

aesthetic of the film is intended to mirror the central character's technique for capturing and sustaining the attention of her lover: it makes an appeal to the intellect by stimulating the senses.

In conclusion, we can see how, through genuinely dialogic encounters in the creative processes of film practice, productive cultural relativisation occurs that is reflected in the evolving scripts and final films. This dialogic working method, whether intuitive or self-conscious, results in work that expands Marks' definition of intercultural cinema by creating new connections between art house, avant-garde, and the mainstream, whilst also expanding the definition of a New Zealand Film.³⁴ That these short films from the cultural and industrial fringes have received any funding at all from 'mainstream' New Zealand production finance bodes well for this expanding definition, as well as for the future inclusiveness of New Zealand cinema.³⁵

This article was refereed.

Virginia Pitts works as a lecturer at the University of Waikato and is completing her PhD on the effects of cross-cultural film production on the notion and products of a national cinema. She has written and directed short film, documentary, television drama and dance video, and is currently developing a feature film based on the life of New Zealand dancer Freda Stark.

Endnotes

- 1 Aotearoa New Zealand is an unwieldy name for a country. My interchangeable use of the words 'Aotearoa' and 'New Zealand' reflect that, as well as the complexities and inadequacies of available designations.
- 2 I wouldn't want to overstate the impact of these films. Due to the dearth of local exhibition opportunities for short films, they cannot achieve critical mass in New Zealand.
- 3 *Eating Sausage* is New Zealand's first Korean-language film.
- 4 For analyses of how this dynamic plays out in terms of the national and the international, see Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995; and Tom Nairn, *Faces of Nationalism – Janus Revisted* Verso, London & New York, 1997.
- 5 See Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, *Cross-*

cultural filmmaking: a handbook for making documentary and ethnographic films and videos, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997, pp.5-7. While this book is about documentary filmmaking, the significance of cultural difference is equally applicable to fiction filmmaking. I have, however, rephrased Barbash and Taylor's points to correspond with the language of fiction.

- 6 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2000, p.24.
- 7 Paul Willemen, 'The National', *Looks and Frictions, Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, bfi Publishing, London, 1994. Willemen examines these processes in a preamble to his call for a discipline of comparative film studies to be conducted as a genuinely dialogic process.
- 8 *ibid.*, p.215.
- 9 *ibid.* p.214.
- 10 Mandviwalla described this as very similar to the Indian experience.
- 11 Zia Mandviwalla interviewed by Virginia Pitts, 1 September 2005.
- 12 Mandviwalla credits the actors for ensuring that the minutiae of Korean culture was depicted accurately, ranging from such details of décor as the obligatory presence of a cuckoo clock in the homes of Koreans, to the practice of cutting meat with scissors rather than a knife.
- 13 Zia Mandviwalla email interview by Virginia Pitts, 8 September 2005.
- 14 *op cit.* Mandviwalla, 1 September 2005.
- 15 When actors spend real time together, real (recallable) memories are created, albeit for fictional characters. This forms a guiding principal for many rehearsal techniques, including improvisation.
- 16 The characters' gazes only meet once in the film, despite sharing the same space for much of the story.
- 17 See David Bordwell 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Practice' (1979), in *Film Theory and Criticism. Introductory Readings* 5th edition, Oxford University Press, New York & Oxford, 1999, pp.716-724.
- 18 Zia Mandviwalla interviewed by Virginia Pitts, 1 September 2005.
- 19 Of course, I conducted rudimentary research into such things as the art of rangoli, geographical features of the ancient spice routes, map-making from medieval to modern times, Indian historiography in the colonial and post-colonial eras, and classical Indian music. However this was a process of self-education and cultural attunement that any director would undertake in similar

circumstances:

- 20 Email exchange between Shuchi Kothari and Virginia Pitts, 1 Feb 2003.
- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 That Kothari came to filmmaking through academia and I came to academia through filmmaking can be detected in our respective approaches to resolving certain tensions between cinematic and academic concerns.
- 23 Willemen, *op. cit.*, p.214.
- 24 Clearly, as producer as well as writer, Kothari was well positioned to protect her script. Normally, screenwriters are 'disappeared' from the process once a director is attached to the project.
- 25 Each year, three Executive Producer groups are appointed to make decisions on how to spend the NZFC Short Film Fund allocation.
- 26 For example, this prone figure features in a very literal sense in *Kitchen Sink* (Alison McLean, 1989) and *Sure to Rise* (Niki Caro, 1994).
- 27 Fortunately, the NZFC did not question the 'New Zealand-ness' of the film at all. Once *Fleeting Beauty* was selected for an A-list film festival, we became eligible for post-production funding in the usual way.
- 28 The artist as intercessor is another common feature of intercultural cinema. See Marks, *op.cit.* p.68.
- 29 In this context, I take the term 'private memory' to include all memories buried by official versions of history.
- 30 Seema's technique for creating maps with spices derives from the Indian art of rangoli, whereby a mixture of powdered marble and pigment is used to create designs which last as long as climatic conditions allow, as they are drawn (for particular occasions) on the ground in exterior spaces such as domestic courtyards.
- 31 Cf. the underwater scenes in *Whale Rider* (Niki Caro, 2002) and *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993). Both films are elements of Mandviwalla's own cultural memory.
- 32 Marks, *op. cit.* My references to Marks in this article relate to the chapter 'The Memory of Images', pp.25-76.
- 33 Marks, *op. cit.*, pp.30-31.
- 34 Where the dialogic process was intuitive for Mandviwalla, it was more self-conscious for Kothari and I.
- 35 While NZFC finance can be considered mainstream in the New Zealand context, this clearly is not so in the context of the global film industry.