

GENRE STUDIES: DOCUMENTARY IN NEW ZEALAND: PART ONE 1900–1959

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ACTUALITIES & TRAVELOGUES

Documentary is an incredibly broad category of cinematic expression, traditionally. The only common characteristic to all documentary films is that they are meant to be non-fiction films.

The actuality film is a non-fiction film genre that like documentary film uses footage of real events, places, and things, yet unlike the documentary is not structured into a larger argument or coherent whole. In practice, actuality films preceded the emergence of the documentary. During the era of early cinema, travelogues, newsreels, reenactments, and other short films depicting current events were just as popular and prominent as their fictional counterparts. In fact, the line between "fact" and "fiction" was not so sharply drawn as it would become after the documentary came to serve as the predominant non-fiction filmmaking form. Despite the demise of the actuality as a film genre, one still refers to "actuality footage" as a building block of documentary filmmaking. In such usage, actuality refers to the raw footage that the documentarist edits and manipulates to create the film.

NEW ZEALAND'S OLDEST SURVIVING FILM:

RESTORATION

Restoration (extracts)

New Zealand Film Archive 1993. Duration 1:03

In 1993 a small piece of nitrate film was deposited with the Film Archive. The film was in poor condition and needed extensive repair and after 160 hours of work New Zealand's oldest surviving film was saved.

THE DEPARTURE OF THE SECOND CONTINGENT FOR THE BOER WAR

The Departure of the Second Contingent for the Boer War (extract)

[A.H.Whitehouse] 1900 Duration 0:54

New Zealand's oldest surviving film captures an important moment in our national identity – the point where a young nation first sent soldiers off to fight in a foreign war. The film is of the Second New Zealand Contingent filmed on January 13 or 14 1900 at Newtown Park, Wellington. It shows the Contingent members in fatigues undergoing riding tests or training. All the

soldiers were volunteers, and they even provided their own horses and equipment.

The film is credited to A. H. Whitehouse who, in 1896, brought the first moving image camera to New Zealand. Whitehouse shot actualities in order to attract audiences to his vaudeville shows. Films were just part of the entertainment and not enough in themselves. Even the Lumiere brother's, who were the first in the world to shoot and project film in 1895, did not see a future for the medium.

In the film the camera is close to the horses as they ride by on a diagonal from the right to left of frame. This angle gives the illusion of depth and makes the shot more interesting accentuating the movement towards the audience – not unlike Lumieres earlier actuality of a train arriving at a station.

SIGHTS IN NEW ZEALAND

Sights in New Zealand (extracts)

[1906]. Duration 2:40

After the initial excitement of the new medium had died down international audiences were no longer enthralled by actualities of the everyday. Slapstick comedy and drama provided new material. Actuality makers had to look further abroad in search of exotic subjects to attract audiences. New Zealand was one such place where exotic Maori (natives) and scenic attractions were used to entertain and promote New Zealand as a tourist destination and a place to emigrate to.

At the time, Rotorua was firmly established as a tourist town, and Maori culture was an important draw-card. Maori were encouraged to live in 'traditional' villages and practice 'traditional' activities in order to appeal to tourists. As such, this compilation of actualities was not an ethnographic film, but rather, presented a view of how Maori should be portrayed for its European audience.

The subjects are very much aware of the camera, often glancing, smiling and playing up to it demonstrating an important point; the presence of a camera does modify behaviour.

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COASTS OF NEW ZEALAND

Coasts of New Zealand (extract)

Pathe Freres [1910]. Duration 2:05

Pathe Freres crews travelled the globe seeking subjects for its films and aimed to be the best in the market. Content was important, but so too was technology and technique. Most significant in this extract is the use of Pathecolor, which was the best of early colour processes. It was a very costly technique as it required a multitude of women workers cutting stencils for each colour in each frame of film.

Well composed shots of different scenes are edited together and combined with intertitles as pre-sound narration to give the film structure. However, what is still missing is editing within a scene to get other shots and coverage of the action. The music soundtrack is an example of the live music that would have accompanied a screening of the film. The shot of the dolphin swimming next to the bow of the ship is especially well done and would have required some elaborate rigging – not to mention the presence of the camera operator to hand crank the camera.

SCENES AT THE EAST END PICNIC, NEW PLYMOUTH

Scenes at the East End Picnic, New Plymouth (extracts)

Empire Theatre 1912. Duration 1:55

Local film of local events and people gives local audiences a taste of their own images on screen, personalising the excitement of going to the pictures. Family fun activities at a seaside picnic. This is typical of many early New Zealand films, shot locally and quickly processed, the films screened in local cinemas within days, always attracting a large crowd eager to see themselves on screen – in effect a community home movie. The Picnic took place 25 January 1912 and the film of it first screened 31 January. The Taranaki Herald reported on Thursday 1 February that:

“One has grown so accustomed to the apathy and lack of enterprise amongst our local businessmen that Mr Saunders’ latest development of his business, in the excellent series of local pictures, produced from his own plant last night, is all the more commendable. Moving pictures of the seaside Picnic At the East End... drew an immense crowd to the New Theatre. Long before 8 o'clock the pit and the unreserved part of the rest of the house was crowded. (I was going to say to suffocation, but the electric fans provided against that.) It was quite

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evident that the local element in the programme was providing a big draw. The building is meant to accommodate 630 people with seats. The number present last night when the 1st picture was thrown upon the screen must have been nearer 800 and the only disappointed ones in the huge crowd were those who could not gain admittance... As scene after scene was unfolded before the audience, parents joyfully recognising their own particular 'Jimmys' and 'Nellies' and some groups of merry makers, gave vent to their feelings in little suppressed exclamations of satisfaction... Mr Saunders is to be heartily congratulated on his having obtained the services of such an expert operator as Mr Haughton, who took the Picture”.

Notice that language of the report used the still photography terminology, ‘took the picture’ which also explains filmmaking process at the time – a series of photos with moving images. The novelty of being filmed and expectation of ending up on the screen meant that subjects were very much aware of the camera and it is not until they are engrossed in their activities that they no longer look at the camera and ‘perform naturalistically’.

SCENES OF MAORI LIFE ON THE EAST COAST

Scenes of Maori Life on the East Coast (extracts)

Dominion Museum / James McDonald 1923. Duration 1:55

James McDonald was a New Zealand Government cameraman who in the 1920s made ethnographic films of Maori in remote areas of the North Island. In 1923, at the behest of Apirana Ngata, he went with a team that included Peter Buck to the East Coast to obtain film records of Ngati Porou and document a Maori way of life before it disappeared. (continued overleaf...)

At about the same time, in North America, Robert Flaherty was making his own (salvage) ethnographic film on the Inuit in Canada in what is known as the first documentary feature, *Nanook of the North* (1922). What made *Nanook of the North* so successful was Flaherty’s use of the language of fiction film making to shoot and edit ‘reality’ in a dramatic way. Controversially, Flaherty ‘cast’ the Inuit family and used recreations in order to get his footage. The extent to which McDonald did this is unknown, however, given that the film was to be a record for the Dominion Museum, and not entertainment, authenticity would have been important. The fact that Maori in McDonald’s films wore contemporary European dress, differentiates McDonald from Flaherty and indeed some of the other tourist films in this selection.

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While much of the footage is actuality and occurs in real time, McDonald now edits in order to show other aspects of the subject through different shots. The footage of men building a net on a river is a good example of McDonald compressing time through editing.

VALLEY OF ENCHANTMENTS

Valley of Enchantments (extract)

NZ Government Publicity Office 1930. Duration 2:02

The age of the 'talkies' had arrived and this would have been one of the last silent tourist films. It shows the technical and narrative developments in filmmaking since Sights in New Zealand. The extract uses dissolves, fades, intertitles and interestingly, slow motion for the diving sequences. The intertitles punctuate the film with open ended sentences "Every coin thrown from the bridge is recovered –" establishing shot of bridge "–by dusky native children." shots of children jumping from bridge. The subjects response to the camera have certainly changed to the point where they look like they're jaded by its presence as just another by-product of being part of the tourist gaze. Needless to say, intertitles now clearly set the tone and meaning of the extract. Basic, silent actualities may, in a sense, be more real and neutral because they were less mediated, but as non fiction filmmaking became more sophisticated its veracity certainly comes into question.

HOLIDAY HAUNTS

Holiday Haunts (extract)

NZ Publicity and Tourist Office 1935. Duration 4:40

The addition of sound and a more creative fiction film approach makes Holiday Haunts an interesting milestone in New Zealand non-fiction films. Non-diegetic music and voice-over introduces an approach that will dominate until location sound recording becomes more practical for a smaller crew in the late 1950s.

The type of voice-over will also remain unchanged for decades to come; male and with an affected British accent. The opening sequence has more coverage and therefore more cuts than what we have seen before. A high angle shot of the guide meeting the man certainly demonstrates power relationships. The next shot crosses-the-line to a low angle MCU of the guide looking affectionately at her tourist. Orchestral versions of Maori songs play in the background and there is a clever use of piano to simulate the CU of boiling mud.

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INDUSTRIAL & BEYOND

THE MAGIC COLLAR BOX

The Magic Collar Box (extracts)

N.Z Radio Films 1927. Duration 4:41

In 1926 Edwin Coubray formed New Zealand Radio Films Ltd, specialising in producing sponsored industrial films and newsreels. He was also assistant cameraman on the feature film *The Birth of New Zealand*. *The Magic Collar Box* is exactly that, and through filmmaking trickery, books on the history of collars are magically superimposed on a collar box. After this history we are taken to the present day, 1927, and visit New Zealand's only collar factory where intertitles tell us what we need to know: 'over eighty skilled operatives are employed where congenial surroundings and conditions help to produce the finest work'. Screening in cinemas before feature films, industrial films informed the public about everything from coal mining to milk production and were in effect long form advertisements.

AUCKLAND'S MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA

Auckland's Man with a Movie Camera (extracts)

Coubray Films Compilation [192-]. Duration 13:25

This extract can be viewed as a comparison to the classic documentary *Man with a Movie Camera*.

Coubray shot mainly in Auckland, and as the footage attests, he certainly captured many facets of life there. He also experimented with camera techniques and this combined with footage of place, people and industry certainly are reminiscent of some of the work of the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov. While Coubray's fragments don't make a masterpiece, they beg the question – what if? Perhaps if Coubray was given the financial, intellectual and ideological stimulus that Vertov received, he may have made a New Zealand *Man With a Movie Camera*?

In 1929 Dziga Vertov released his avant garde 'city film' *Man With a Movie Camera*. The film celebrates the Soviet Worker and the power of film making to show a new cinematic truth (*kino pravda*). Shot in Moscow, it uses every cinematic device in the book to reveal the 'truth'. That truth, of course, was swathed in the idealism and ideology of the recently founded Soviet Union. Vertov believed in Communism, and used his camera to show this world view. He also received state

support for his radical filmmaking as Lenin believed that cinema was the best form of propaganda.

TECHNOLOGY

Filmmaking is heavily reliant on technology, and as this technology changed, it altered the form and content of films themselves.

WELSH SOUND SYSTEM TEST

Welsh Sound System Test

1930. Duration 2:08

The “talkies” began in 1928, but like any new technology, was cost prohibitive and took several years to catch on. Also, compared to the portability and simplicity of cameras, sound recording equipment was anything but and made it impractical for location sound recording. Furthermore, like all technology, there were many versions, of which Jack Welsh’s was one.

THE MAKING OF THE WEEKLY REVIEW

The Making of the Weekly Review (extract)

National Film Unit [194–] Duration 3:00

The extract shows the serious process of creating the Weekly Review. “Directors are allotted stories and information is gathered from every possible source when preparing the script the completed script is then submitted for the producers approval”. The opening studio sound stage shoot shows where diegetic sound was recorded. The huge sound proofed (blimped) camera reveals more about the troubled relationship between sound and camera. Out on location, filming the ships propellor, there is of course no sound. The expository mode is imbued in the whole institution and becomes amusingly self-conscious when the narrator has to “...at this stage I have to introduce myself...”,when he is filmed doing a voice-over.

AMATEUR

It could be argued that all early filmmakers were amateurs, making up the rules as they went along. However, pretty soon conventions and rules were established and actualities evolved into documentaries, and amateurs were separated from professionals. However, don't home movies document reality? Initially, film making was expensive and therefore only the well-off could afford to make films. That changed with the advent of 8mm, super 8, and video which brought the cost down and allowed many more people to document events in their lives. On the whole, these events tended to be positive and consisted of celebrations and holidays. They provide a snapshot of that time and in the right hands show something more than professionals could ever capture.

PARATAI DRIVE

Paratai Drive

E. Garden 1933. Duration 2:40

Amateur filmmaking allows for different expression, and this film certainly is that. When most non-fiction films concerned big events and typical subjects, Paratai Drive is an unexpected poetic gem. The story of a house and a little girl who lived in it. We go from room to room seeing the everyday in a new way. Seen as a snapshot of the past it is almost ghostly as a shot of a room dissolves into a shot of a girl on a rocking horse.

MARAETAI 1950 REGATTA

Maraetai 1950 Regatta (extracts)

A.H. Pilliner 1950. Duration 5:35

The kiwi summer holiday is explored here with an affection and eye for detail that a professional could not match. Saturated colour, great composition and archetypal holiday imagery perfectly evoke the time. The montage of beach races is particularly good, and what's more, Pilliner uses the convention of the cut away to break up the main action, show who is watching, and no doubt, help his editing. No voice over or music to distract the viewer, just their own memory as a soundtrack to summers gone.

ONE HUNDRED CROWDED YEARS

ONE HUNDRED CROWDED YEARS

One Hundred Crowded Years (extract)

Government Film Studios 1940. Duration 12:52

A propaganda film made for New Zealand's Centennial in 1940. It contains dramatised re-enactments of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, the New Zealand Wars and the discovery of gold in Central Otago. The film changes to documentary style midway and gives an overview of development in agriculture, industry, education, health and social welfare. The first half of the film is drama-documentary and is based on the above historic events, but tends to forgo details for dramatic purposes and resorts to a cowboys and Indians Western as an explanation of the land wars.

NATIONAL FILM UNIT

The term 'documentary' was first used by British film maker John Grierson who founded the British documentary movement. He defined documentary as the creative treatment of actuality and believed that documentary could achieve social change through education. He mainly used the expository style of documentary which is still in use today and presents information as objective through the use of 'voice of God' narration.

In 1940 John Grierson was asked by the New Zealand Government to critique the work of the Government Film Studio. On his arrival in New Zealand officials revealed the mindset that prevailed and had created an industry of travelogues – they wanted to show him the scenery – To which he famously replied, "... if we must go sightseeing don't show me any scenery. Show me your housing estates, your schools, your Research Stations, your farming methods. Show me, in fact, something about the people." Although the detail of his report was not implemented, the spirit of his recommendations were put into effect by Stanhope Andrews, when in 1941 the National Film Unit was established. Its first few years focused on the war effort, but after the war the style changed and returned more to what Grierson was advocating. It often concentrated on a single topic in documentary style.

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However, it needs to be remembered that the NFU was an information arm of the government attached to the Prime Minister's Department, and its role was 'keeping people informed on national affairs'. This entailed an absence of critical commentary and an emphasis on the positive achievements of the government in office and led to accusations of propaganda.

WAR

COUNTRY LADS

Country Lads

National Film Unit 1941. Duration 8:27

Hitler called our soldiers 'poor deluded country lads' and the NFU's first newsreel used the latter part of that statement for its title. Country lads was a term of endearment for the down to earth nature of the New Zealander.

"Week after week thousands of us have been in training – ever since we in New Zealand undertook to pull our weight in this war." A moving commentary accompanies scenes of troop departures and marching. "They are soldiers and fighters because they know that as things are, only soldiers and fighters can make the world safe for civilians to live in – safe for women and children and decent, ordinary people."

Troops march through Wellington city, in and around Parliament grounds and along Waterloo Quay. The whole process of embarkation is shown including farewells to the Maori Battalion by Ngata and Te Puea, and the loading of cargo onto ships. The narration is a departure from the standard expository style of the expert and is a passionate appeal to the audience from someone who is one of them also, through frequent use of 'us'.

THE WAR YEARS

The War Years (extract)

National Film Unit 1983. Duration 1:33

This compilation of NFU wartime extracts contrasts with County Lads and returns to a bombastic piece of expository propaganda. Reminding the audience of how bad the enemy is, and at the same time, reassuring them that we were up to the task of defeating them. Like all propaganda, facts did not get in the way and the tank footage in particular was certainly sourced from outside New Zealand as we didn't have any tanks remotely like those in the film.

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DIRECTOR STUDY: CECIL HOLMES

Cecil Holmes worked for the NFU for over three years, from 1945 till his dismissal in 1948 for Communist leanings. He graduated quickly from editing and commentary writing to directing some of the best newsreel and short documentary films of the era.

MAIL RUN

Weekly Review 310

National Film Unit 1947. Duration 10:34

RNZAF ... MAIL RUN: Follows the RNZAF mail run on a flight from Whenuapai to New Zealand soldiers in Japan. The film is narrated by a National Film Unit cameraman and includes extracts from his diary.

The plane flies over Australia, landing at Cloncurry for a drink at the pub with local cattle rustlers. Onto Indonesia, the slums of Singapore and Saigon where shots of French soldiers at the Club Sportif are juxtaposed with street beggars. Then Hong Kong and finally Okinawa in Japan. Mail is unloaded and the plane heads back to New Zealand via Manilla.

Mail Run breaks with the tone of official anonymity and introduced a personal voice. The conventional narrator soon gives way to someone with a New Zealand accent reading “extracts from a diary used on the trip”. It is a device which allows Holmes to impart something of a left-wing, anti-colonialist perspective to the film’s description of places the plane visits. Although the personal perspective and international context may allow for the inclusion of Holmes’ political sentiments, such comments rest uneasily with a NFU that was an information arm of the government. Officials of the government had private previews of the unit’s film, and in this case, the producer had to make sure he distracted the minister by talking to him when some of the more controversial material came up.

POWER FROM THE RIVER

Power from the River (extracts)

National Film Unit 1947. Duration 12:56

Power from the River was a major undertaking at twice the length of most one reel Weekly Review. Critical comment stated that “it is not easy to think of many factual films produced overseas which are markedly superior to this

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New Zealand effort”. It was certainly no coincidence that the release of the film coincided with national power cuts and the film was made to show what the Government was trying to do to overcome the shortages. Because of this, some called the film propaganda. Balanced coverage, that included opposing points of view were not on the agenda, and the film remained ‘on message’. Nonetheless, the film is still fascinating today for its glimpses of life at the time and will provide many discussion points around bias and balance in the media.

THE CHANGE-OVER

Weekly Review 344 (extracts)

National Film Unit 1948. Duration 6:59

The Change-over documents the process by which Air Force Dakotas were converted to civilian airliners for the National Airways Corporation, and the former military pilots retrained. Hailed at the time as a fine example of the progress made by the NFU, the film is imaginatively scripted and edited. Through the recollections of airmen, flashbacks are used to show wartime action of supply drops to provide “..everything from beer to bacon” – at Bougainville and Guadalcanal. Music is used sparingly and there is an unusual amount of synchronous sound for the time. The Change-over marked “ a step forward in sound technique for the National Film Unit, as for the first time music, commentary, natural sound, and dialogue are recorded simultaneously”.

THE COASTER

Weekly Review 374 (extracts)

National Film Unit 1948. Duration 6:00

The Coaster follows the MV Breeze from Wellington to Lyttleton and back up the coast to Wanganui. It’s use of a Denis Glover’s poem as commentary is clearly indebted to the Grierson 1936 documentary, Night Mail. Night Mail used a poem by W.H. Auden as commentary and Holmes considered the film one of the all-time high points in documentary making. Both Night Mail and The Coaster take an everyday job, the night train mail delivery and coastal shipping, and makes them dramatic, even heroic, through deftly applied codes and conventions of film.

FIGHTING BACK

Fighting Back (extracts)

Cecil Holmes 1949. Duration 10:44

While awaiting his appeal against his dismissal from the NFU (which was eventually successful) Holmes made the historic documentary Fighting Back. The film was the story of the carpenters dispute of 1949 in which the communist led Carpenters Union was deregistered by Peter Fraser's Government, in cahoots with the Federation of Labour. Holmes said the film was the first time he had complete freedom to express his attitudes on own terms. He experimented with dramatic reconstructions, talking heads, and created "the first on-the-spot film of an industrial dispute ever recorded in the Southern Hemisphere".

AFTER THE SHAKE UP

By the late 1940's the NFU had become a political football. The scandal around Holmes' dismissal, after his satchel was snatched from his NFU car, added to the onslaught. Following the change of Government in 1949, production of the Weekly Review was stopped for alleged political bias. Information films continued to be produced for government departments and in 1952 a monthly magazine, Pictorial Parade, appeared for the first time and continued to run until the early 1970's.

THE CALL UP

Weekly Review 448 (extract)

National Film Unit 1948. Duration 2:35

This is one of the last Weekly Reviews. The cold war had begun and a new compulsory military training scheme was introduced. Shots of smiling and happy young men indicated they were looking forward to training. A quick shot of a young man carrying a guitar indicates the youth culture he is leaving behind.

WAIOURU CAMP - SALUTE TO THE S.A.S.

Pictorial Parade 41 (extract)

National Film Unit 1955. Duration 3:27

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The Cold War has heated up with the Korean War and now the Malaya Emergency. Pictorial Parades regularly presented military perspectives and New Zealand's place in security alliances. This salute to the S.A.S. is more like a cross between a war movie and a training film with commentary. The narrator is quick to point out the conflict in genre when he states that the soldiers were “..too closely bunched, but they thin out more normally, this is just to show how” – it's how they do it in the movies, not in real life.

HUTT VALLEY YOUTH CLUB

Pictorial Parade 79 (extract)

National Film Unit 1958. Duration 2:47

Concern for the morality of youth peaked in 1954 with the Mazengarb report on teenage delinquency. This newsreel is a depiction of ideal youth behaviour. At the Hutt Valley Youth Club young people engage in wholesome activities.

PACIFIC FILMS

Independent production company, Pacific Films, was founded in 1948 and was responsible for the only three locally produced dramatic feature films in New Zealand between 1940 and 1970. They also produced documentary, sport, training, sponsored, commercial, tourist, travel and road safety films.

BROKEN BARRIER

Broken Barrier (extract)

Pacific Films 1952. Duration 2:55

John O'Shea and Roger Mirams produced and directed Broken Barrier which was advertised as not a documentary – a featurette – or a tourist travelogue, in an attempt to woo an audience saturated by such content. O'Shea says in regard to documentary that "... there is no doubt that recording the sight and sound of reality with a feeling for it – the hallmark of documentary – has been a primary force in New Zealand film making itself and in many feature films [such as] Broken Barrier, a disguised documentary based on real people". Broken Barrier explores race relations in New Zealand through the relationship between a European boy and Maori girl and is told through voice-over, mainly as a cost cutting measure. This extract is the opening of the film and uses standard documentary commentary to give an overview of the Maori people. "Whenever two races live side by side there are problems. Here is the story of some Maoris and European and what they think about it all".

PACIFIC MAGAZINE 21: REPORT ON NELSON

Pacific Magazine 21 (extracts)

Pacific Films 1955. Duration 5:41

Unlike the state controlled National Film Unit, Pacific Films' independence allowed for a rare example of coverage of a negative issue; the failure to deliver on the promised rail link to Nelson. The documentary film shows many of the codes and conventions that will become standard in the forthcoming age of television. Footage of civil disobedience, women picnicking on railway tracks to stop their demolition, is also a taste of things to come.

DANCES OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Dances of the South Pacific (extract)

Pacific Films 1955. Duration 1:44

Maori migration to the cities heralded their joining the “civilised world” and while the documentary still focused on the traditional, it was at pains to point out that today Maori fitted into European life. Unlike the early travelogues and actualities that portrayed Maori as a tourist attraction, this extract shows them practicing cultural activities for their own benefit. However, the Eurocentric world view of the narrator is revealed by his comment that “today, Maori culture is a concert item for ceremonial display” implying that there is little place for it in the modern world. Maori will have to wait until the 1970s to take control of their own image by making their own documentaries. Compare with the same film company’s ground breaking Tangata Whenua series made less than 20 years later.