

## Māori documentary film: Interiority and exteriority

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**Abstract:** How do we create essence in film? Where does it come from? How can it be achieved? This research investigates how the exterior filming process can affect the inner essence or interiority of a Māori film. The aim is to link Māori philosophies such as whakapapa (genealogy) to the outer processes of creating a film and the inner essence (wairua) that results from these surface processes. The application of kaupapa Māori philosophies to a documentary filming process will also be discussed in relation to personal experiences of filming within Māori communities and with Māori people. This paper argues that by following tīkanga processes when filming kaumātua and whānau, it creates a space that allows the essence of a film to be developed.

**Keywords:** documentary; exteriority; film; interiority; Māori

### Introduction

In the article titled *Celebrating Fourth Cinema* (2003) Barry Barclay proposes the existence of a category beyond the framework of First-Second and Third Cinema (American, Art House and Third World Cinema), which he has aptly named the Fourth Cinema. Fourth Cinema as described by Barclay is Indigenous Cinema. Barclay alludes to the meaning of Fourth Cinema by explaining elements of this framework in relation to the conceptual theory of “interiority” and “exteriority”, highlighted by Arts Academic, Dr Rangihira Panoho (Barclay, 2003). Barclay describes the exteriority as “the surface features: the rituals, the language, the posturing, the décor, the use of elders, the presence of children, attitudes to the land, the rituals of spirit.” (2003, p.7). The interiority is described as the philosophical elements, the essence of Indigenous film and is a complex ingredient to convey. As Barclay (2003) highlights “for very good reason” (p.7), it is an element that is not enthusiastically talked about and is difficult to define.

This report aims to relate mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) to the external processes of creating a film and the inner essence or wairua (spirit) that results from these surface processes. The research is discussed using fundamental philosophical components from within a Māori world such as wairua (spirit) and whakapapa (genealogy). A more general aim is to encourage further discussion among Indigenous film-makers by adding to the conceptual framework of Indigenous cinema.

The relationship between interiority and exteriority is investigated by studying the application of kaupapa Māori processes to documentary film. This is done by applying aspects of tīkanga (customs/protocols) to filming techniques (this being the exteriority), and seeing how this affects the interiority of indigenous documentary or how it creates a space beyond the physical filming processes. The application of kaupapa Māori philosophies to a documentary filming process will also be discussed in relation to my own experiences of filming within Māori communities and with Māori people. Having grown up within Māori communities and within the Māori language, I am privileged to be an ‘insider’ and will also interpret the relationship of interiority and exteriority from this personal view.

Historically for Māori, research has been implicated with the perpetuation of Western knowledge both through academic work and the construction of theories (Smith, 1999, p.183). As Smith (1999) highlights, these notions have “dehumanized Māori and in practices which have continued to privilege Western ways of knowing, while denying the validity for Māori of Māori knowledge, language and culture.” (p.183). To combat this, the concept of kaupapa Māori approaches of research were initiated as a strategy to create a culturally considerate and safe environment. Kaupapa Māori research exists to benefit Māori by considering the Māori-world-view. Kaupapa Māori research has also been described as research by Māori, for Māori and with Māori (Powick, 2002). One area that much of the literature on kaupapa Māori research highlights is the fundamental element of whānau as a structure to form research methods. Graham Smith has created a summary that states kaupapa Māori research:

1. is related to ‘being Māori’
  2. is connected to Māori philosophy and principles;
  3. takes for granted the validity and legitimacy of Māori, the importance of Māori language and culture; and
  4. is concerned with ‘the struggle for autonomy over our own cultural wellbeing’.
- (cited in Smith, 1999, p.185)

I had been filming long before meeting this concept of kaupapa Māori research, yet in reviewing the literature for research purposes, it was apparent that the guidelines and the philosophies that were fundamental parts of kaupapa Māori research were occurring in my work. I just did not know that what I was doing was called kaupapa Māori research. This shows an element within kaupapa Māori research that goes deep beyond the exterior needs of creating a methodology because of Western implications. In Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s *Decolonising Methodologies* (1999) Tuakana Nepe speaks about how kaupapa Māori is distinctive from Western philosophies because it has derived from a different epistemological and metaphysical foundation. This would explain the intuitive nature of my own filming as it stemmed from my being nurtured from birth in Te Ao Māori.

## **Te Ao Māori and documentary film**

Documentary films have the ability to inform and educate through an entertaining medium. This fusion of learning whilst being entertained is a concept well used within Te Ao Māori. Stories of our tīpuna (ancestors), stories of our lands, seas and gods are all predominant in the Māori world view. Translating these stories into film is difficult; however, as described by Nichols “Situations and events, actions and issues may be represented in a variety of ways” (1991, p.32). Documentary is one such filming style that is associated with the telling of true events and circumstances. There has been much written and theorised pertaining to the development of documentary from a Western prospective. Theorists such as Renov, Nichols and Rothman have all investigated the complexities and ethical issues that encompass documentary. Filming people; their lives, their opinions, their interactions, their culture and their emotions are all reasons to tread carefully with in this filming space. The outcomes of documentary can be rewarding. It can give people the ability to experience other cultures and other events that they might not normally have experienced otherwise. Documentary allows people to encounter these events from a safe distance while still gaining a knowledge and understanding.

Māori have not always been allowed to have a voice within documentary or the context of the wider media. This is reflected in the history of Māori in television. We have a short history and on many levels television and Māori have a youthful relationship. Māori film-maker

Merata Mita was at the forefront of these difficulties and reflects upon the deprivation of Māori people from television both in front of the camera and behind it. Television media was to remain untouched by a Māori hand or devoid of Māori images for over 20 years (Mita, 1996). "From the Māori grass roots to the university intellectuals it was a graphic illustration of what came to be termed institutionalized racism. We were offered no choices, given no alternatives; television made us invisible." (Mita, 1996, p.45). Historically, it has been non-Māori with the power, funds and knowledge to film Māori. Their positioning has developed from the West and therefore, these perspectives and values are portrayed in the films they make. These perspectives are evident in films such as *The Romance of Hine-Moa* and *Hei Tiki*. This can be dangerous as the powerful nature of images through film has been used to perpetuate the existence of stereotyping. As Fleras and Spoonley (1999) highlight "Stereotyped images of Māori have distorted the cultural basis of Māori identities. The evolving nature of these stereotypes has reflected prevailing views of New Zealand's emergent national identity." (p.65). Stereotyping in past films, supports the emergence of kaupapa Māori processes in film.

As we have said documentary history lies in the West and indigenous people have not, in the past, had the power behind the camera to contribute to the development of these conventions. However, what is fundamental here is that indigenous people, like Māori, do have a profound history of storytelling. This history can be seen through the existence of Māori myths and legends. These mythologies connect the past with the present and perpetuate values and beliefs through providing examples of behaviors and outcomes of those behaviors as Walker (1992) explains:

Properly understood, Māori mythology and traditions provide myth-messages to which the people can and will respond today... One way of looking at mythology is to read it as the mirror image of a culture. Myths reflect the philosophy, ideas and norms of the people who adhere to them as legitimating charters. Sometimes a myth is the outward projection of an ideal against which human performance can be measured and perfected. (pp.170-171).

Storytelling has always been an important element to the continuation of the cultural values. Walker (1992) writes about the origins of Māori myths and legends dating back some than six and a half centuries (p.180). The fact that these stories still exist illustrates how effective oral storytelling has been for Māori. This perpetuation of our storytelling history validates the development of creating our own storytelling processes.

While there has been much written about documentary from the western stand point there has been little conversation on the relationship between documentary and indigenous people. Documentary codes and conventions have developed from a western world and therefore it is inevitable that some elements within these two domains do not agree and on some levels conflict. In some aspects the natural role and responsibility of a storyteller with in Te Ao Māori would seem to correspond with that of a documentary film-maker. One reason Māori told and tell stories is to help preserve values and beliefs as well as continue histories and teachings. The language was of utmost importance and is still very much an important part of Māori history and identity as highlighted by Whaititiri (2006):

Māori literature included; whaikōrero, whakapapa, carving, weaving, kōwhaiwhai, kanikani, waiata, oriori, haka and karakia. Like all cultures, Māori held a deep love and respect for language. Language had mana, with the power to harm, to heal and to change reality. Those with the ability to use it well, persuasively, poetically and

wisely were held in high esteem and wielded significant power in society, just as they do today. (p.82)

As Whaititiri has alluded to, oratory skills have always been highly valued in Te Ao Māori. The orators were highly skilled in the domain of persuasion as well as being creative in their assembly of metaphor to help express view points. These are also skills highly valued within the process of documentary film-making. It seems that the ingredients to be a good orator are similar to that of a good documentary film-maker; persuasive, poetic and wise.

### **Applying Kaupapa Māori**

In reflecting upon my previous filming experiences with kaumātua, it was apparent that rather than focusing on technical aspects of filming, the focus was more on tīkanga. These filming processes needed to firstly derive from the values of Te Ao Māori so that the procedure of filming was appropriate for those being filmed. The role of whakapapa and the connections to ancestors, for example are fundamental. As Patterson (1992) points out, “knowing one’s ancestors is not simply knowing a genealogical table. One must also know what the ancestor did, as these actions constitute the precedent for ones behaviour” (p.81). Their stories are priceless echoes of the past that help us to draw pictures of who we once were and who we might become. The primary goal of my filming was to capture the past stories and histories locked away (at their discretion) in the minds, souls, hearts and spirits of our kaumātua. The purpose was not to seek detailed codes that would unlock great treasures. These treasures of insight are unravelled on what might seem modest circumstances of conversation, laughter and remembrance. Another fundamental aspect is that if kaumātua are filmed the descending generations get to watch, hear and experience their own ancestors that they may not have known through the footage. A connection not only to the past is solidified through these narratives but as Anne Salmond (1983) highlights, it is the past that illuminates the future and provides identity for the present which can contradict some Pākehā views of the past.

This previous filming experience highlighted some differences from conventional documentary filming technique. An obvious difference was the use of family members as a film crew. In most productions the film-maker would enlist a specialised film crew to achieve a professional-looking documentary. The film crew would have considered the best angles to shoot the kaumātua. This would have resulted in changing the position of the camera so that the viewers would not get bored with one frame. Moving cameras around while kaumātua were talking would have been highly distractive to the participants as well as being disrespectful to those speaking. Also bringing a film crew into a family’s natural setting would have raised questions of intrusion and trust such as; Who are these people? What are they going to record? What are they going to use it for? How will they use it? This would have polluted their natural flow of conversation and interaction, which would defeat the point of recording them.

Whānau members were used to operate the camera as well as do the sound work; they also helped with the interviewing process by engaging in the conversation. Of great importance in these interviews with kaumātua was to understand the role of power in the interviewing process. The camera is a powerful tool and as Mita (1996) has previously articulated those doing the looking are empowering themselves to define. Therefore, this power negotiation was carefully considered before filming. The person interviewing is usually in a position of power as they are able to direct the conversation. In the interviews done with our kaumātua, however, relatives were invited to listen and partake in the storytelling process with our kaumātua. In order to help distribute this presence of power the questions were to be directed

from the whole family and not just from the interviewer. The role of the interviewer as the sole director of the conversation was therefore diffused. Their questions were just as valid as mine. What they wanted to know was just as important as what I wanted to know. Not only was having other family members there important in distributing questions but it also redirected the focus away from the camera, which helped to encourage the natural progression of the conversation. This element was indeed effective as the dialogue soon developed and was comfortable and relaxed, where we were at ease with each other.

Conversing in groups is a natural and comfortable way to communicate within Māoridom. Māori people are often more comfortable and will be more willing to engage in conversation when they are allowed to converse in groups with people they know. These interactions are unique and can express values otherwise not seen. Non-Māori film-makers can find this difficult to understand. Barclay (1990) highlights in a past incident: “I was astonished when the producer flatly refused to allow the friends of Ngoi Pewhairangi to sit with her while she was being interviewed” (p.12). Ngoi Pewhairangi is of Ngāti Porou descent and considered to be one of Māoridom’s great songwriters. Her knowledge was considered priceless and recording her should have been considered a privilege for a film-maker. Collecting this information in whatever way she was comfortable with should have been the priority, as this would have enhanced the quality of the information by making her more comfortable to speak. When filming my kaumātua it was important to create a space that they were comfortable in. For example, most of my interviews were with kaumātua together. It was more comfortable for them and enabled us to capture their interactions with each other.. They were also able to assist one another by prompting shared memories. Although using more than one person in the shot is quite difficult to film, it was worth sacrificing the aesthetics for the comfort of those being interviewed and for the extra and often unique interactions.

Sound is extremely important when filming. If the aesthetic composition of the footage is not at the forefront of filming then the sound and voices need to be recorded as clearly as possible. Alanis Obomsawin an indigenous Canadian film-maker from the Abenaki tribe, refers to her vital need to capture sound, like Māori, a need that stems from her oral culture:

Telling stories was the centre piece of the Abenaki education that she received from her relatives, and she never abandoned the storyteller’s art, always relying on the power of the spoken word in her creative expression as a performer, a creator of education kits, and rare film-maker who listens before she looks. (cited in Lewis, 2006, p.64).

Māori oral tradition celebrates the use of using the sensory elements of traditional storytelling. Sound is essential in this traditional art of storytelling and is just as important in contemporary modes of storytelling such as documentary. Sound and voice have always been important in the continuation of Māori tīkanga, values and beliefs and is therefore, a kaupapa Māori process that needs to be considered when filming in a Māori context. Another key consideration when interviewing was the use of the Māori language. Being able to speak Māori meant that it allowed us, as interviewers, to adjust to what the participants felt comfortable with by being able to converse in both languages. The Māori language holds Te Ao Māori philosophies and if participants feel like they are better expressed through the Māori language, then speaking in it helps develop the narratives and therefore the content. Interviewees often switched between Māori and English and were able to do so knowing that those interviewing could understand what they were saying and could also reply in Māori.

Using techniques that are simple yet consider the space, positioning and point of view of those being interviewed allow the filming to develop more organically. Using a film crew that was familiar and had direct interest and connections to the events or people being filmed enabled a collective focus to develop which in turn resulted in a determination and understanding of our actions as a whānau film crew. This collective focus contributed to the quality of the interviews by being able to relate to the people filmed as well as the benefit from them knowing our background and intentions. Essentially, what applying these filming strategies does is create a space that enables a more organic conversation to take place that considers what it means to be part of indigenous Māori storytelling. Therefore, applying these kaupapa Māori processes helped to create a space that allowed people to share their experiences more easily which gave their stories an essence that otherwise would not be captured.

### **The Interiority of film**

As Barclay indicated, it is challenging to discuss aspects of spirituality and essence. While these concepts are often difficult to discuss within an academic framework, *Te Ao Māori* incorporates them naturally along with genealogy. This feature is highlighted by John Rangihau, a revered elder of the Tuhoe tribe who stated:

I have been talking about such things as life force, aura, mystique, ethos, life style. All this is bound up with the spirituality of the Māori world and the force this exerts on Māori things. It seems to me that people who want to enter this world need to enter it with a lot of respect and always be aware of these different life forces which are going on and which the Māori believe are part of this being. (King, 1975, p.13)

Barclay suggested that there is scepticism involved in talking about essences and interiorities and that perhaps this uncertainty has evolved out of a Eurocentric way of looking at the world. An example of this is highlighted by Patterson who refers to the Pākehā need to justify aspects of Māori culture such as creation narratives:

As far as Māori values are concerned, the point is not whether the creation narratives give an accurate factual account of how the earth and its populations come into being. Even if they do not do this, even if they are scientifically inadequate, they do still express important spiritual and ethical messages. For example, the Māori place great importance upon close spiritual relationships with their lands, and no amount of scientific explanation of origins could possibly impinge on that. (Patterson, 1992, p.157)

Barclay uses the word 'essence' when referring to interiority. From a Māori perspective, the view encompasses identity and whakapapa which are maintained through the passing down of narratives and experiences. Whakapapa is the all-encompassing connection between past and present and it is paramount to the understanding of one's identity as Māori. Ka'ai and Higgins (2004) explain the interconnections of Māori concepts as follows:

The Māori World view is holistic and cyclic, one in which every person is linked to every living thing and to the atua. Māori customary concepts are interconnected through a whakapapa (genealogical structure) that links te taha wairua (spiritual aspects) and te taha kikokiko (physical aspects). (p.13)

If the filming processes of documentary is the whakapapa of the film and it is about Māori, then to be a Māori documentary it has to have Māori whakapapa. Although technologies to film did not develop from Te Ao Māori; incorporating Māori tūkanga and values to the filming process works towards expressing these values. These values can be seen as an aspect of essence and are better expressed through a process that incorporates them into pre-production, production and post-production.

The storytelling space is achieved when what is being created or portrayed rings true to those depicted in the story. For example, the short film *Two Cars One Night* by Taika Waititi achieves this essence because the depiction was true to his own socio-cultural experiences and environment. The fact that this film is celebrated within our iwi shows that the audience could identify with and embrace the portrayal of the story. In contrast, although the film *The Whale Rider* directed by Niki Caro, was critically acclaimed, it had a number of aspects that did not fit with iwi views. This variability of response to a film also raises further questions. Such as: do people experience essence differently? Can people that are not familiar with the story, setting, characters and culture understand the essence of a film? These questions appear valid and illustrate the challenge in further understanding the concept of 'essence'.

This research has highlighted the importance of applying kaupapa Māori processes to documentary film and how these methods conceive the essence or indigenous interiority of documentary film. It is argued that it is the interiority that separates indigenous cinema from others, yet defining such a concept is difficult. Māori films can achieve an essence but it is the type of essence that is diverse difficult to 'see'. Perhaps one way of viewing interiority is to consider it as the inner wairua (spirit) that is conceived when the exteriority finds balance with the interiority. This balance is judged by those who understand the segment of life that is being portrayed in the film and they understand it because they have lived that story before or are connected to it somehow. Interiority can be gauged by this judgement and people may ask themselves questions such as: was this a real account of my people, area and culture? *Two Cars One Night* achieved this essence because Waititi deeply and personally knew the story and was therefore, able to articulate his experiences through film. Waititi was concerned with what his own people might think about the film; and their embracing it confirmed that it had captured the essence of the people, how they spoke, laughed and interacted.

## Faking it

Within the construction of documentary there can be very blurred lines between fiction and non-fiction. What we see are events unfolding or an argument developing toward a solution or outcome, we do not see the processes and the manipulations that take place on the film-maker's behalf to build the argument in the direction they wish. These adjustments can be made during the process of making the film and/or in the post-production stage within editing, as seen in a classical documentary, *Nanook of the North*. This was Robert Flaherty's story of an Inuit family and their struggle for survival in the unforgiving climate of the Arctic. *Nanook of the North* "is generally regarded as the work from which all subsequent efforts to bring real life to the screen have stemmed." (Rothman, 1997, p. 1). This classic documentary is a prime example of what Nichols calls 'wish-fulfillment' by the film-makers. Flaherty filmed the Inuit family going about their day to day lives; lighting camp fires, paddling kayaks, trapping foxes and making igloos, or so it seemed to be. In reality, Flaherty arranged a lot of the events that transpired during what seemed to be the impression of lived time as described by Rothman:

Flaherty did not ... simply directly film Nanook and his family going about their lives. Many actions on view in the film were performed for the camera and not

simply 'documented' by it. The filmmaker actively involved his subjects in the filming, telling them what he wanted them to do, responding to their suggestions, and directing their performance with the camera. (1997, p.1)

This is not a technique that is restricted to classic film-making and is still used today in many respects, this emphasises the distorted realm of fiction and non-fiction. Flaherty had preconceived ideas about what he wanted a 'noble savage' to look and act like. He lived these desires through Nanook and his family, thus portraying them with a romanticised Western view of how he wished to view the 'other' and where he thought the 'other' belonged.

This blurring of the boundaries between what we see and what is constructed also highlights an important ethical issue pertaining to Māori. There are past films that have portrayed Māori in the same subjective light as Nanook and his family were. Flaherty shows his audacity and his lack of respect for a culture he could not understand by insulting their integrity as human beings by imposing his romanticised ideology of what a noble savage like Nanook should look and act like. Māori film history provides similar examples of similar romanticism.

So how does the fictional portrayal of a documentary affect the essence of a film? Can one develop the essence of a film while constructing the movements and speech of people? A consideration of films such as *Two Cars One Night* and *Tama Tu*, there is a strong sense of truth which manifests an essence. However, the difference with documentary is that people think what they are being shown is really happening. With regard to other feature or short films they know that they are being told a story through actors and this is the main difference. Telling kaumātua what to say and how to act would be considered inappropriate in a kaupapa Māori setting. The whakapapa of these processes have derived from a place of respect and embedded values that can be seen and felt when expressed as they were in *Two Cars One Night* and *Tama Tu* both Taika Waititi films. Filming kaumātua and asking them what to say may create a discomfort that would encourage unease in their conversations and therefore, inhibit their stories and the creation of essence.

## Conclusion

This research has been interesting and challenging. The concept of essence is broad and encompasses many different metaphysical elements that can be challenging to articulate. The use of kaupapa Māori processes has been offered as a way to carry Māori values into the filming process and by doing so help express the essence of a story. Using kaupapa Māori processes allowed the kaumātua I filmed to open up more because they understood and were comfortable with these processes. Traditionally the film-maker has had the position of power, however, through kaupapa Māori we were able to deconstruct this traditional relationship and empower those being interviewed.

It is clear that interiority and exteriority are inter-twined and that they are often a reflection of one another. For example, by using Māori values in the exteriority they are then manifested in the interiority of the film. It has also been argued that deeply knowing and understanding the story one is trying to convey is fundamental to the development of the essence. The fact that documentary can be constructed to appear real was also discussed; and it was recognised that these constructions can at times be sensed by the audience. Such constructions generally do not develop the kind of essence represented in this paper; however, they can succeed as lighter entertainment.



Both interiority and exteriority are needed to articulate film. The exteriority is a basis from which the interiority is developed. A successful balance between the two requires adherence to a range of values. Ultimately, people judge the essence of film, and it is from people's visions and values that this essence stems.

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