

ISCCI Summer Research Report

Adapting Wendt-Examining the transition of “Sons for the Return Home” from novel to film.

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Outline

My thesis project was to be a critical analysis of the films *Sons for the Return Home* and *Flying Fox in A Freedom Tree*. I needed to find an area of study that would bridge both disciplines of my joint Honours program; a dual inquiry into novel-to-film adaptation and the surrounding contextual issues presented a seemingly ideal opportunity to combine both my Communication and Cultural Studies and English disciplines in one project.

Over the summer break, my aim was to formulate a solid critical reading of both films, and their source texts, written by Samoan writer, teacher and academic, Albert Wendt.

However, it soon became clear as I continued my research that the field of study I had demarcated was going to prove too large for the parameters of an Honours thesis. My focus over the summer became a mission of identification and refinement—pin-pointing those areas of research crucial to an in-depth understanding and a thorough exploration of the discursive frameworks that shape the films' and their source texts. The post-colonial phenomenon of writing back against empire and Albert Wendt's influence on the Pacific literary landscape, neo-colonialism, the reclamation of cultural heritage, mythology and orality, issues regarding the formation of selfhood/the individual within the communal, familial hierarchy of fa'a Samoa, representations of Pacific identity, film adaptation theory are central theoretical concepts that I wish to examine further in relation to the two films, with a view to forming chapters out of my findings. For this report, I have prepared my research findings on the negotiation of identity in a post-colonial society and given an introduction of my film adaptation theory.

There is very little secondary material or critical analysis available on either film; being quite local texts of limited international distribution, there has not been a great deal of academic attention paid to them. So I have included below a number of Wendt's other texts that could be of help.

Research Findings

The first problem I encountered with adaptation from novel to film was how to read each text in relation to the other. As Christopher Orr notes ‘...the fidelity of the adapted film in letter and spirit to its literary source has unquestionably dominated the discourse on adaptation.’¹ In this way, it would be a simple enough exercise to merely explore concerns thrown up by what Brian McFarlane terms ‘the fidelity issue’, and conduct an investigation into how faithfully and accurately an auteur can capture and translate a novel’s ‘meaning’ into the film medium. But the stress on fidelity to the original undervalues other aspects of the films’ intertextuality, which are of greater academic value in the case of the films *Sons for the Return Home* and *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree*. By that, I mean it is a far more enriching and dynamic exercise to examine how the above-mentioned issues—i.e. identity, neo-colonialism—translate into film, and what consequences/problems arise out of the subsequent representations.

‘Within this critical context [i.e. of intertextuality], the issue is not whether the adapted film is faithful to its source, but rather how the choice of a specific source and how the approach to that source serve the film’s ideology.’² It is perhaps not too gross an oversimplification to say that both films attempt to adapt the discursive frameworks/ideological constructs and critical apparatus of their source texts in order to question and critique the discourses underpinning the formation of identity in the film medium. In Albert Wendt’s texts *Sons for the Return Home*³ and *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree and other stories*⁴, ‘...paradox and contradiction become the laws of postcolonial modernity’⁵ as his characters attempt to negotiate some form of identity out of a series of binary oppositions—tradition/ modernity, alienation/ integration, exploitation/ preservation, individual/ perceived community, independence/ neo-colonialism. The films’ confront—with varying degrees of success—the ‘hybrid perplexity’ characteristic of most colonised societies as they navigate post-colonial existence. Both films attempt to represent, explore and challenge the discourses of colonialism that continue to marginalise, oppress, industrialise, stereotype, and that result in the exploitation and

erosion of traditional systems of meaning, culture and language. They strive to capture the confusion of characters forced to seek out an identity in a cultural terrain defined by contradicting ideologies and worldviews, and reinforce Wendt's belief that Samoans need to reclaim the fragments of a collective tradition no longer generally available as a way of 'rediscover[ing] and reaffirm[ing] our faith in the vitality of our past, our cultures, our dead, so that we may develop our own unique eyes, voices, muscles, and imagination" ⁶

However, the issue of intertextuality and adaptation extends beyond the source texts in this field of inquiry. The broader contextual framework surrounding the production and release of *Sons* and *Flying Fox* is central to both films, and opens up an important avenue of cultural consideration key to the analysis of what each text is saying about the post-colonial condition. Therefore, in examining issues of film adaptation, I want to pose the query; how does wider intertextuality contribute to an adaptation?

Having watched both films over the summer, *Sons For the Return Home* seemed the logical place to begin my line of inquiry. The source text is Wendt's first novel, written over two years and published in 1973. It is the product of Wendt's personal experience and a fictionalised exploration of the concepts that underpin his essays and critical works, in particular the ideas expressed in his pivotal essay 'Towards a New Oceania' and his very personal 'Letter from Paradise'.

The main character in *Sons*, an unnamed young man who acquires the name of Sione in the film adaptation, is most often read as a fictional rendering of Wendt and his experiences as a Samoan youth growing up in New Zealand. Wendt believes writing *Sons* was his way of cleansing his system of his 'New Zealand experience.'⁷ Sione is the vehicle through which the complexities of identity formation in Samoan, and indeed wider Oceania, are accentuated. His attempts to negotiate the 'hybrid perplexity' and his search for a way to create and express his sense of Self are positioned as indicative of the Pacific experience of post-colonialism. Sione encapsulates the desire to find some sense of belonging to the world inhabited by his ancestors which eludes him because of his

awareness of his colonialisised past, and his post-colonial present. Sione is the embodiment of Wendt's perceived experiences of post-colonial existence; 'For me, the post in postcolonial does not just mean after; it means around, through, out of, alongside, and against.'⁸ In this, Wendt is very deliberate in his characterisations. He does not construct characters that evoke pity or induce pathos constantly struggling against their cultural status as the 'colonised Native'. Rather, his characters engage assertively with the imposed losses of colonialist history and dialogically interact with continuing discourses of racism. Wendt was criticised for his often quite negative dealings with character by the Samoan establishment, who were not happy with his "bare all" portrayals of his Samoan characters.

Both the novel and the film tell a relatively straightforward tale in a realistic style about a Samoan family who migrate to New Zealand in the hopes of accumulating material wealth and giving their two sons a highly esteemed Western education. Whilst at university, the youngest, called Sione in the film, falls in love with a white middle-class girl, called Sarah in the film, and the resulting cross-cultural relationship is the axis for the conflict in the story. Their relationship is highly controversial, issuing a pointed challenge to established notions of cultural acceptability and the state-promoted integrationist ethos that pervades the official discourses rhetoric of race relations in New Zealand. As the relationship grows, more racist assumptions, stereotypes and fallacies are highlighted and critiqued for the viewer-ranging from the assumptions that 'all Islanders can dance' and are inherently violent, to the sweeping aside of history—sacrificing any significant historical recognition of Maori resistance to colonial invasion upon the altar of "national unity".

The often violent consequences of the interaction of sexuality and race in Sione and Sarah's relationship assumes another, deeper significance when viewed alongside the issue of identity in the film. Ravell sees the sexual-racial nexus in terms of colonialism sapping indigenous culture and self-respect;-

For Islander males, in particular, loss of validated access to the warrior ethos of the past is felt as emasculation and produces a compensatory reaction of *macho* excess, which in turn is used by colonialist power to trap them

in images of 'stud' or 'savage'...white and missionised Island societies, having allowed sexuality to be confined in a narrow moral and private space, become either heartlessly repressive or perverse in realising desires.'⁹

This is yet another facet of the same problems encountered attempting to negotiate identity in a post-colonial context. The same symptoms are present; dislocation from heritage and loss of culture—in this case traditional forms masculinity; replacement of heritage, ritual, and traditional systems of meaning—here replacing the 'warrior ethos' with denigrating stereotypes, perpetuating what Ravell terms a 'hypermasculine' discourse that continues to project the coloniser's fears, desires and biological/anthropological judgements onto representations of the native body. Hence, the continued dissemination of myths of innate native virility, violence and primitiveness that permeate the film.

The function of a Western education in both Wendt's texts highlights the way it is highly valued—having great currency in Samoan society—and privileged over more traditional forms of instruction. Yet it inherently carries with it a tragic irony that Wendt takes great care to expose in his texts; an education that is supposed to give one greater status within the Samoan cultural framework eventually works to isolate and alienate its protégés from their roots, disallowing them a sense of 'authentic' connection with or belonging to their community. Wendt carefully creates this double bind in the novel through Sione, who struggles against the deep insight into his own culture, heritage and family a Western education and his New Zealand adolescence have given him. In this, Sione encapsulates Wendt's understanding of the way Western education practices affected his identity; -

'I became a westerner, yet an outsider in the society which had unintentionally given me the eyes to see with. And for this I owe New Zealand so much. For without such a gift I would not now be seeing my own country as it really was, as it is now, and as it is inevitably going to be.'¹⁰

Sione, like Wendt, remains an outsider in both Samoa and New Zealand, respectively because of and in spite of his Western education. Sione's experiences within the New Zealand education system of the 1960s indicate the hypocritical double standards that underpinned the national rhetoric of harmonious and egalitarian race relations of the time. Sione's passage to awareness and painful

realisation of this cultural duplicity begins in high school, after he received his school certificate. The film scene in which the Head master of the school condescendingly bestows his blessing on Sione as the first Samoan (read 'native') to achieve their certificate and congratulates his parents for their fine work is horrendous. As Sione translates his father's pathetically humble, very formal expressions of gratitude, the irony of the scene is not lost on him. Sione perceives in his father's ceremonious gratitude what no-one else in the room can; the need to be seen as equal, as civilised. However, the over-zealous platitudes of Sione's father reveal the dynamic of mimicry that operates in this exchange between the colonised native and the white authority figure, exposing the way the double standards of black/white relations are internalised and work to maintain the racial status quo.

Likewise, when Sione's older brother Malie is caned for fighting in the schoolyard after enduring a spate of racial taunts, he is told to control the 'natural' tendency toward violence his 'race' inherently harbour. Again the mechanics of duplicity—the taken-for-granted binaries of white/black, civilised/savage, inherently superior/inherently inferior, Christian/heathen that underpin discourses of racial inequity—are emphatically exposed by the unfair administering of Malie's punishment.

The film of *Sons for the Return Home* falters in its attempt to convey Wendt's layered ironies as directly as the novel does. Adaptation from novel to film presents a unique set of difficulties; loss of subjectivity; distancing from the individual's imaginative impressions; issues of access to culturally specific systems of meaning; less direct questioning of the impact dominant discourses have on the formation of identity. As a result, the film has to work harder at constructing the 'first-hand' immediacy Wendt's text achieves, despite the prose being composed in past tense. The audiences' response to the themes being presented in the film becomes less narrowly focused as '...one now sees everything the camera 'sees', not just what impresses itself on the hero-narrator's imaginative responsiveness'¹¹. Without the internal monologue of the protagonist, the viewer is far more detached from the allegorical main character in a way that never happens in the novel. However, the intensity with which lead actor Uelese Petaia plays Sione does help counteract this distance, and

draw the audience closer to his multi-faceted character. From the first time, standing outside from his own homecoming celebration, the viewer is drawn to the pride and complexity Petaia injects into his character. With each new indignation and invasion of his character's cultivated, westernised sense of individuality and personal space, Petaia conveys without speaking the nuances of alienation he experiences from his perceived 'home'. The placement of 'home' for Sione has always been a troubled one. Handed down to him by homesick parents in a haze of idealised glory, it existed on the periphery of daily life as the paradisiacal haven of both his childhood and his future. The reality of Samoan life for Sione gives the weaker of the two adaptations' a poignant humour—Sione's frequent trips to the out-house surrounded by his squawking 'peanut-gallery' of village children are wonderfully telling moments—and it is this humour that exposes the bewildering isolation his New Zealand upbringing has fostered in him. Sione struggles with the hardships of communal living, the burden of his family's expectations, his mother's insistence that as 'good' Samoans they must be regular church-goers though Sione is himself an atheist (a word his mother can barely bring herself to speak). Even consuming traditional meals is a hazard, symbolic of his outsider's status.

Sione does forge some kind of link with his heritage, but one infused with Wendt's deep sense of irony. Through a quasi-supernatural encounter with his great grandmother—which confusingly breaks with the otherwise realistic tone of the film—Sione learns about his socially recalcitrant grandfather. His search for the true identity of his elusive grandfather leads him to the site of his burial. On an isolated sand spit, surrounded by overtly symbolic strangler figs with their connotative references to nature gone wild, repression, suffocation and powers of binding, he encounters a mysterious old woman who tells Sione that his grandfather had the same 'curse'-the eyes with which to see the erosion of traditional systems of meaning by the culture of the coloniser. The account of his grandfather's pagan existence, his eventual surrender to foreign, imposed set of cultural conventions and belief systems and his death, is fragmented at best. The manner the tale of his grandfather's sad life unfolds highlights the way any recollection or real connection to an 'authentic' static, timeless and traditional Samoan culture is no longer possible, if indeed it ever was.

Recognition of the fragmentation of traditional culture and the subjectivity of history blows aside the smokescreen that it is possible to recapture a pre-invasion idyllic in a modern context.. Wendt expresses the deep need to reclaim these fragments in order to counteract stereotypical, commodified representations of Pacific culture, and to foster pride in a sense of identity independent of the colonisers; to once again restore pride and visibility to marginalised and stereotyped Samoans.

Often production constraints add confusing ambiguity to scenes which otherwise would have been effective scenes of critique. The scene in which the character of Sione encounters Sarah in the library is a very pointed attack on the inherent racism and assumptions of colonialist superiority Sione is constantly struggling against. The first, rather lifeless, sexual overtures between the two is prefaced by Sione's answer to Sarah's questioning what he does at the university. His reply, which captures and exposes the subjectivity and cultural relativity of Western historical knowledge- 'At the moment, I know all about Oliver Cromwell'—loses its impact in their attempts to capture the first tentative sexual overtures.

After her first, rather lifeless, tentative overtures to Sione, Sarah stops to talk to acquaintances as she exits the library. Her exchange with them is muffled, almost indecipherable. Apparently, one of the boys says to her 'Taking anthro now, are you?' to which Sarah laughs and continues on her way. Obviously this comment is meant to be only half-heard by Sione as his reaction suggests, but it carries implications of 'slumming it' or inspecting the native other as curiosity. Although it was obviously intended that Sione should only 'catch' the gist of the comment, the audience is in danger of missing it altogether, as the audio reproduction is nothing but a murmur.

In a similar vein, language and the verbal content of the film begins to present a barrier to an audience trying to understanding the narrative devices used in the source text as a way of deconstructing and challenging the reader's perceptions of issues of the post-colonial experience. Whereas Wendt allowed for all the speech in his novella to be written in English, large slabs of the film's Samoan dialogue remain un-translated. Although the intention is clear, there are times

attempts at conveying meaning are frustrated by these limitations. A non-too-subtle play at reversing the linguistic coloniser/colonised barrier appears as though the film's translator simply could not finish the job properly.

As a result of my research, I have formulated a chapter outline for my final thesis that encapsulates most of the concerns I started out wishing to cover. The first chapter will be comprised of my work on film adaptation, with a bent to posing the questions; does 'faithful' make a better film and how does wider intertextuality contribute to an adaptation? The next chapter is to be an outline of Wendt and his work; his themes, motifs, cultural, socio political concerns with a focus on his early essays.

The following two chapters will be a study of *Sons for the Return Home* and *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree* respectively, in which I hope to continue my research in the same vein as this report.

My final chapter will my conclusions regarding my project. Thank you for the opportunity to kickstart my thesis in this way. A special thank you to Paul Sharrad, my mentor for the first half of the year, for his insight and knowledge.

List Of Further Readings Works by Wendt in Chronological order;

'A Descendent of the Mountain' [story] (1963) in *Pacific Voices: An Anthology of Maori and Pacific Writing*, edited by Bernard Gadd, Auckland : Macmillan New Zealand; pg 46-48.

'Put on your Mask of Manhood' [poem]; (1963) 'Tagata, the Man Who Search for the Freedom Tree' [story]. Both in *New Zealand Universities Arts Festival Yearbook*, 7, 24-29. Wellington: NZU publications

'Colonialism, Independence (1965) [poem] rp in *Pacific Voices*.

'Rebel' (1967) [poem] *New Zealand Listener* 3 Nov, 6.

'Lava Field and Road, Savaii; Flying Fox; My Uncle, the Consumptive, or How to Cultivate the Worms and Live a Long Happy Life.' (1969) *Landfall* 23 (2): in *Ten Modern Poets* (1974), ed. Harvey McQueen, and Lois Cox, 172-187. Auckland: Longman Paul.

'Nazis? What is Nazis' (1971) [story]

'No Islands in the Sun, Just Misters (1974) [poem]

'Pebbles and Pauses'. *Pacific Perspective* 6(2)

¹ Orr, Christopher (1996) 'The Discourse on Adaptation', *Wide Angle*, 6/2 (1984), p 72, cited in McFarlane, B. *Novel to Film; An introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, (1996) Oxford: Clarendon Press. p 10

² *Ibid*.

³ *Sons for the Return Home* dir. Paul Maunder, produced by Don Blakney; New Zealand Film Commission.

⁴ *Flying Fox in A Freedom Tree*, dir. Martyn Sanderson, produced by Grahame Maclean; New Zealand Film Commission.

⁵ Sharrad, Paul, (2003) *Albert Wendt and Pacific Literature; Circling the Void*; New York; Manchester United Press; p 50.

⁶ Wendt, Albert "Towards a New Oceania." *Mana Review* 1.1: 49-60. Reprinted in Sharrad, Paul, ed. *Readings in Pacific Literature*. Wollongong, Australia: U of Wollongong and New Literatures Research Centre, 1993. p9-19.

Wendt, Albert *Sons for the Return Home*. 1973. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1996.

⁷ Cited in Sharrad 2003 p 39

⁸ Wendt, Albert (1994) cited in Wilson, Rob 'Introduction'; *Inside out; Literature, cultural politics and identity in the new Pacific* (ed) Hereniko, V and Wilson, R; Lanham Md : Rowman and Littlefield (1999); p 3

⁹ Ravell (1997)thesis; cited Sharrad, (2003) p 47.

¹⁰ Wendt, Albert (1993) 'A letter from Paradise' in Sharrad (ed) *Readings* ; p 11.

¹¹ McFarlane, Brian (1996) *Novel to Film*, p 16