

Film Families and Friends: Creative Networks in a Precarious Industry

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Three years ago the LHP awarded me a one-off scholarship towards an MA project about an aspect of post-World War II labour history. This generous act of faith boosted my confidence to begin the project. The astute mentorship and goodwill of many other people, especially my supervisor/dungeon master Annabel Cooper, helped me to finish it. And so did the expectations of our grandchildren – “Nana! You can’t drop out. You’re our role model!” And so – I offer my grateful thanks to you all.

My thesis is titled “Film Families and Friends: Creative Networks in a Precarious Industry.” Films have been made in Aotearoa for more than a hundred years but the early 1970s saw significant growth in independent filmmaking. I investigated the period of New Zealand film’s evolution from informal cottage industry to professional global industry, focusing on the changes and continuities

TOP LEFT: On the set of *Uenuku and the Mist Maiden*, Waimarama 1973. From left: Helen Bollinger pregnant with Solomon (sound), Liz Sanderson (costume), Geoff Murphy (director) holding Linus, Alun Bollinger (DoP)

TOP RIGHT: Mothers and Children on *Cousins*, Wellington 2019. From left: Ainsley Gardiner, director, Mary Davis Gardiner, production assistant, Bindy Crayford, gaffer, Jimmy Bollinger, 2nd assistant camera, Miriama Grace Smith, art director, Briar Grace Smith, writer/director. Photo: Georgina Condor

BOTTOM LEFT: Geoffrey Murphy with son Heperi Mita on his shoulders, talking with First AD Chris Graves on the set of *Never Say Die*, 1987. Photo: Ngā Taonga archives.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Three generations of Harré family filmworkers. In front from left: Rewa Harré (director of photography), Te Aorangi Harré (costume standby assist), Miro Harré (production designer). In back from left: Dave Harré (writer/director/producer), Manu Harré (costume assistant), Solomon Harré (locations assist), Emma Harré (costume standby), Elsie Harré (actor). Photo: Oscar Harré, 2019.

in filmmaking culture between 1970 and 2020.

My investigation focused on three distinctive characteristics of the New Zealand industry: project-based work, freelance networks, and the enculturation of second and third generations into filmwork. The place of families and friendships is central to the processes of enculturation and to all these networks. These three characteristics also shaped (and shape) the inclusion and exclusion of marginalised groups, particularly women, LGBTQ, and Māori and Pasifika filmworkers.

I drew on the literature about filmmaking and creative industries for comparative data. The theories of Actor-Network and habitus and capital developed by Pierre Bourdieu provided a framework. My primary sources were drawn from semi-structured interviews I undertook with twenty participants – all members of Kiwi three-generational, freelance, filmworker families. I analysed the interviews according to themes in light of the secondary literature and wove these into the story.

My research indicated strong connections between self-image and creative work, between habitus (the socialising norms and tendencies that are internalised by children to become their guiding dispositions) and family legacy occupation, and between networks of the counterculture and the development of film in New Zealand. It also revealed changes in the industry as it becomes more open and diverse; the gendered participation of families has altered through successive generations.

My second chapter, “Freedom, Flexibility and Precarity in a Project-based Industry,” probably has the most relevance for readers of labour history. During the 1970s when secure employment was as a rule both desired and attainable, a small number of would-be filmmakers opted out of regular work in favour of project-based filmwork in which they hoped to combine lifestyle, creative ventures and money-earning. Over time, for them and their families, economic insecurity became part of ordinary life. Along with shearers and other seasonal workers they became unconscious pioneers of today’s “Gig Economy,” the new normal where job security exists for fewer people and increasingly workers are part of the precariat. This balance between freedom and insecurity – a new phenomenon in many other fields – is an enduring element in the lives of the participants in my study.

Freelance filmmaking is a lifestyle as much as a job. Economic insecurity has always been a normal part of life

for screen workers. However, freelance work is now part of a larger trend where contractors in other fields do not necessarily gain the once-experienced freedoms. My interviewees indicated that the negative aspects of project-based film work included the pressure of working to maintain a presence in the industry as well as the competition for work, degrees of financial insecurity, the unpredictability of contracts, the long hours, and the pressure to find carers for children. One study found that the nature of employment arrangements was still constructed around notions of standard employment (Blair, Grey and Randle, 1999). This theme was confirmed by a number of interviewees who saw it as problematic because government agencies and banks were not wholly oriented to supporting those on irregular incomes. Consequently, the steady and marked productivity of the industry suggests that in light of the idiosyncratic nature of freelance filmwork, a review for government departments’ policies is overdue.

The combined evidence of the literature and the interviews indicated that for the people in my study, the positive aspects of working as a freelancer in the creative industries outweighed the negative aspects. The identified benefits included all kinds of capital, with cultural cachet being the most important for some. Intellectual and creative stimulation, self-identity, the bonding with workmates, the pay packet, the travel, the freedom to choose to work or not and the finite nature of the contracts, were all seen as advantages which mitigated the structured insecurities of contract-based work.

I was 70 when I began this study as a part-time distance student at Otago University Sociology, Gender Studies & Criminology Department. Now that I’ve finished and the agony is over, I can reflect on this experience and recommend that anyone like me who has a few Ks on the clock and with an interest in contributing to the canon of our cultural history – should get cracking immediately. One’s life can become a primary source and one’s own flavour of lived history can offer unique perspectives. I found that the research and scholarship extended insights into my own experience. I learned a lot about my life from this project and met many lovely people along the way. (And I got an A+).