It's All Over Down Under—
The Quiet Earth now
By Matthew Bannister

In this age of impending environmental catastrophe, aided and abetted by the unthinking consequences of human technological progress, Geoff Murphy's (1985) film The Quiet Earth, seems more relevant than ever. And it's set (at least partly) in Hamilton!

Any film with a line like “I'm at Mansel Street and Hillcrest. That's nothing here,” has to be worth another view. Incidentally, it's Mansel Ave. in Bronte.
The film is based on New Zealand writer Craig Harrison's 1982 sci-fi fiction novel of the same name, itself examples of the post-apocalyptic sci-fi subgenre of “the final man,” the rest of humanity having been exterminated for unknown reasons. The genre began with The Purple Cloud (1901) by British writer M. P. Shiel, which inspired the early science fiction of H.G. Wells.

The NZ film industry was relatively flush with Government money in the early 80s, and was even having some commercial success. For material they often drew on NZ literature, and especially the “man alone” (originally a 1939 novel by John Mulgan), but also a feature of Roger Donaldson's Sleeping Dogs (1977), based on C. K. Stead's novel Smith's Dream, and continuing through Beyond Reasonable Doubt, Bad Blood and some of the films mentioned above.
The man alone is a leitmotif of Poikeha literature — isolated, anti-establishment male anti-heroes, their deaths usually recounted in a laconic, “realistic” mode: Kiwi blokes in embryo. Lawrence, a copable and charismatic actor, although (or because?) he was not born in NZ, played such parts with aplomb. The man alone relates not only to a local ideal of pioneering manhood in the bush, but also to an international tradition of modernist alienation — the outsider, the stranger, the alien. So The Quiet Earth unites two unlikely bedfellows — the Kiwi bloke, and the last survivor of a post-apocalyptic sci-fi nightmare. Another ingredient is countercultural rebellion — as children of the 60s, the NZ film community, many of whom were also part of NZ travelling Hippie commune Etara, were deeply influenced by New Hollywood — Easy Rider (1969), Vanishing Point (1971), Two-Lane Blacktop (1971) etc. Hence the “good” — escape from responsibility, away from society and into the landscape, but usually ending in a ball of flame on a lonely highway. Boys and their toys they love their technology, but it usually ends in tears. Smash Palace is the obvious precedent — Bruno plays Al Shaw, an ex-recking driver, who's never "at home"; unless he's behind the wheel — movement is life, death is death (an idea literally expressed in the repeated action of his stopping his car on the railway in the path of an oncoming train). Shaw is like a machine or automaton himself, who doesn't react unless he's "switched on" by outside events, like his wife sleeping with someone else. He kidnaps his daughter, goes on the rampage, and presumably ends up in jail.

Finally, these films also share something with the western — unlike the western, however, they are pessimistic or tragic — the main character usually dies or is removed from society (as in the road movie). There is no sense that the “man alone” can be a hero; he can't even save himself. We sense that Zac is in trouble when he puts on a woman's dress, styles himself president and addresses an audience of cardboard cut-outs. He goes on the rampage and shoots at an icon of Jesus in a church. One supposes that he is also racked by guilt for his part in Project Flashlight, which seems to have brought about the end of humanity, present company excepted. But humanity is generally defined by the presence of other humans, it can't operate in a vacuum.

Luckily, that chirpy Joanne turns up. When they in turn discover Apo, the situation is set up for a classic denouement — who will get the girl, Zac or Apo?

What we also have is a colonial settler myth — the last man is also the first man. He finds his five, but it turns out that they have to deal with the natives. Joanne's choice of mate sets the agenda for the new world. But Zac is doomed, tortured by white man's guilt for helping engineer a technological apocalypse, his best option is heroic self-sacrifice, which occurs when Zac drives a truck full of explosives into the test facility, immolating himself and his old workplace. Thus saving the world for Apo and Joanne to repopulate with coffee-coloured people by the score. A satisfactory ending, that is also impeccably PC, suggesting that the white man's days are numbered. But Zac only survived the initial shock because he was attempting to commit suicide, so he's no great loss. Plus he gets the glory — in the end he does save the world, even if it's only from himself.

Artists/Work:
Julia Reynolds, Earthing (2015)
wood and image cut from Sheppard film (6:10)
Erica van Zon, Clocks radials and other pages (2015)
air dry clay, hardboard, acrylic and graphite
Joseph Scott, Ecolocations 6:15 (2016)
acrylic and pencil

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The Quiet Earth: A Hamilton Success Story?

By Richard Swainson

The Quiet Earth is not the only feature film shot wholly or partially in Hamilton. It is however the only one that also grossed over US$3 million at the American box office, garnering a measure of critical respect along the way.

Rather improbably, The Los Angeles Daily News labelled it "the best science fiction film of the 1980s". In Germany it attracted a genuine cult following, earning at the time more in foreign sales than any other New Zealand film and it won awards at several European festivals.

Domestic response to the film was also noteworthy. Seen by over 100,000 people, reviews were mostly positive. At the notoriously drunken CQTFAs ceremony of 1987 - New Zealand's equivalent of the Oscars - The Quiet Earth won eight awards, including Best Picture, Best Director (Geoff Murphy), Best Actor (Bruno Lawrence) and Best Editor (Michael Horton).

In the 30 years since its release the film's international reputation has grown. Depending on whether you accept The Films and the Lord of the Rings saga as genuinely New Zealand productions, it is one of three (or seven) films from this country to make the "1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die" book, the bible of list-keeping buffs the world over.

Critics closer to home have not always been so kind. Failing to make a mention of The Quiet Earth in the main body of his A Decade of New Zealand Film, Nicholas Reid confines his comments to the sarcastic appendices, noting "the engaging whimsy and mutual pretentious chatter" and concluding with a devastating one sentence put-down: "Masochistic, ritual nads to Max Marina and solemn theorising on the role of the scientist don't exactly jell".

The film's principal creative personal were fully aware of the material's flaws. In some ways, given the unique circumstances of the production, The Quiet Earth is our Casablanca - a classic fated out of if not anarchy then often fractious relationships, creative battles and outright disaster. Made extraordinarily quickly, with a grinding at and time fingered crew, it was far from the film originally envisaged by producer/writer Sam Pillbury when he set out to adapt Craig Harrison's novel of the same name. Its merits were only apparent at the very last and even then better appreciated by those on the outside. As Geoff Murphy makes clear in his recently published autobiography, Pillbury's and Bill Boes' original screenplay was scrapped as one of many conditions under which, he, Murphy, would take the project on. After 8 months on the film, Pillbury had admitted defeat, realising the shortcomings of his script but having at the same time secured funding under New Zealand's then controversial tax-shelter sort. Because the investors had already spent their profits, not making the movie had ceased to be an option. More to the point, there was a $1 million budget to pay for. The only limitation - a significant one - was time. Murphy and co had only 24 weeks to re-write, shoot and complete most of the post-production work.

A new screenplay was the first and most important priority. Murphy elected to employ a "think-tank" approach. He, Pillbury, actor Bruno Lawrence and Murphy's partner Merato Mita - a significant filmmaker in her own right - would together spend seven a days a week for four weeks straight writing a new script. Murphy took the lead, making the crucial decision to reduce the cast to three characters only, one that would give The Quiet Earth its corresponding three act structure of first Zoz, then Zoc and Joanne and finally the love triangle of Zoc/Joanne/Mita.

Murphy notes that this approach to script writing resulted in "many vigorous arguments" and says Pillbury's input was limited. Murphy's instinct was to "to make sure we got the Moari bits right". Because of the deadlines, pre-production had to begin before the screenplay was complete. Murphy argues that this was further complicated by a "deterioration of the new crew culture", by untenable agitation, petty pilfering and drug use. Murphy fired the original editor, clashed with sound track designer Finnoo Dyer and had to pull rank during the sound mixing after a minor revolt against him in his recording studio.

Bruno Lawrence was also a double-edged sword. Too much booting after hours led to a level of divisiveness not always in keeping with his character and Lawrence was often tired and unfocused. On the other hand, he was also capable of improvisation, Zoc's cross-dressing wasn't in the script, it was a result of Lawrence's actorly instincts.

The first cut screening of The Quiet Earth was an unintentional disaster. Lindsay Shelton of the Film Commission - a man who later proudly stage managed the film's overseas sales - took offense at Bruno Lawrence's penis, feeling the full frontal male nudity was "in bad taste". Sam Pillbury told Murphy that he'd ruined his film and washed his hands of it. As Murphy notes, Pillbury "didn't appear again until the film was released and garnered favourable reviews".

For all that we in the Warkato would like to claim the film as one of our own, Pillbury reflects that they "didn't need to go to Hamilton as it's pretty much indistinguishable from Auckland", at least in the way the movie was shot. Murphy is himself entirely silent on our city.

This having been said, a Hamilton audience is likely to appreciate the historical ship shot that the film affords. Hillcrest Road, Alexandra Street, the Winter wall and maybe even the old Rugby Park are sighted. Most impressive is the sequence shot in Garden Place, a crane shot revealing a certain lack of grass and fountain from an earlier era.

Matthew Bannister's contribution to this exhibition begins by noting The Quiet Earth's Hamilton connection, albeit ironically, given Zoc's inability to distinguish between Monsel Ave and Monsel St even with a Hamilton map open before him. Dr Bannister's essay places the film squarely within the 'man alone' tradition of New Zealand film and literature, even as it tops into another science fiction sub-genre.

Julia Reynolds' response is appropriately audio-visual and grounded more in a reflection on the film's science fiction premise, the "Operation Flashlight" effect itself, and what it says about humanity's relationship with the environment. Using extracts from Shephard's, her own science fiction feature, Reynolds explores the idea that "by fragmenting Earth into parts for the purpose of production we lose the essence of Earth". Waikato University's Dr Gareth Schott provides the accompany-

ing sound track.

Erica von Zon's work is three-dimensional. By re-creating some of the props from The Quiet Earth, von Zon revisits the practice of her 2002 Master's project, creating what she sees as "a confusing, layered way of interpretation". Clocks and radia seen in the film are rede and flattened, as they are presented on screen. The thomatic importance of these images/objects is secondary to their "sense of nostalgia in terms of design and technology".

Joseph Scott's response to the film takes inspiration from both the Craig Harrison sound novel and a renowned painting by Paul Gaugain. Like others before him, Scott is interested in the notion of "a country emptied out and stripped of context" and of a single survivor negotiating this new environment, challenged by a sense of loss and solitude. In Scott's "the more by his large scale wall drawing. While the artists in this exhibition touch on the environmental and technological themes embodied in Earth, it is interesting that neither they nor Murphy in his autobiography comment on what seems to me to be his political subject, Operation Flashlight - a project of international defence based on the Western world by the United States - has obvious parallels of ideas of nuclear deterrence and Ronald Reagan's much derided Strategic Defence Initiative, the so-called "Star Wars" missile defence system. Amongst other things, The Quiet Earth is a political statement of its 10 Cold War times, one very much in keeping with the then Lange government's decision to make New Zealand a missile-free zone, a decision that caused a rift with our ANZUS partners. However little else of Sam Pillbury's original agenda can be seen in the final product, this theme survives. The Quiet Earth is a protest film, one that continues to resonate 30 years on.