

# 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. There's nothing here," has to be worth another view. Incidentally, it's Mansel Ave., Bruno.

The film is based on New Zealand writer Craig Harrison's 1982 sci-fi fiction novel of the same name, both 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 spawned such mutant offspring as *I Am Legend* (1954) by US writer Richard Matheson and films such *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971), and *I Am Legend* (2007).

Bruno Lawrence stars as Zac Hobson, a scientist working for Delenco, an international energy consortium, whose project, Operation Flashlight, seems to have gone horribly wrong. Zac drives around various locations that look like Auckland and Hamilton, looking in vain for signs of life (sound familiar?). Eventually he meets two more characters who have been miraculously spared, Joanne (Alison Routledge) and later Api (Pete Smith), a Maori. Concerned that the "Flashlight Effect" will recur unless they act, they devise a plan to destroy the Delenco facility where Zac worked.

Lawrence was arguably NZ's best known film actor at this time, appearing in *Goodbye Pork Pie* (1980), *Smash Palace* (1981) and *Utu* (1983). 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 Pakeha literature – isolated, anti-establishment male anti-heroes, their deeds usually recounted in a laconic, "realistic" mode; Kiwi blokes in embryo. Lawrence, a capable 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 Blerta, were deeply influenced by New Hollywood – *Easy Rider* (1969), *Vanishing Point* (1971), *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) etc. Hence the "road" – 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-racing driver, who's never "at home" unless he's behind the wheel – movement is life, stasis 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. Lucky, then, that chirpy Joanne turns up. When they in turn discover Api, the situation is set up for a classic denouement – who will get the girl, Zac or Api?

What we also have is a colonial settlement myth – the last man is also the first man. He finds his Eve, 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 Api 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)  
moving image out-takes from  
*Shepherd* film (6:50)

Erica van Zon, *Clocks radios  
and other props* (2015)  
air dry clay, hardboard, acrylic  
and gauche

Joseph Scott, *Ecclesiastes 6:12* (2015)  
acrylic and pencil

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#### Writers:

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Dr Richard Swainson

#### Editor:

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#### Design:

Area Design

Essays to accompany the exhibition *The Quiet Earth* commissioned by RAMP Gallery, School of Media Arts, Wintec. *The Quiet Earth* was curated by Wendy Richdale and Kim Paton and featured works by Erica van Zon, Julia Reynolds and Joseph Scott.



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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 GOFTAs 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 if anything grown. Depending on whether you accept *The Piano* 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-ticking 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 its "engaging anarchy and much pretentious chatter" and concluding with a devastating one sentence put-down: "Macho posturing, ritual nods to Maoritanga and solemn theorising on the role of the scientist don't exactly jell".

The film's principal creative personnel 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 fashioned out of if not anarchy then often fractious relationships, creative battles and outright dissent. Made extraordinarily quickly, with a grumbling and at times light fingered crew, it was far from the film originally envisaged by producer/writer Sam Pillsbury 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, Pillsbury's and Bill Baer's original screenplay was scrapped as one of many conditions under which he, Murphy, would take the project on. After 18 months on the film, Pillsbury 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 rort. 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 play with. The only limitation – a significant one – was time. Murphy and co only had 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, Pillsbury, actor Bruno Lawrence and Murphy's partner Merata Mita – a significant filmmaker in her own right – would work together seven 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 Zac, then Zac and Joanne and finally the love triangle of Zac/Joanne/Api.

Murphy notes that this approach to script writing resulted in "many and vigorous arguments" and says Pillsbury's input was limited to writing down the ideas of the others, a claim in some ways substantiated by the producer himself on the DVD commentary track. Lawrence's input was, as you might expect, confined to the character of Zac, whereas Merata Mita was touted as being there "to make sure we got the Maori 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 film-crew culture", by unionised agitation, petty pilfering and drug use. Murphy fired the original editor, clashed with sound track designer Finola Dwyer and had to pull rank during the sound mixing after a minor revolt against him in the recording studio.

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

The rough cut screening of *The Quiet Earth* was an unmitigated 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 Pillsbury told Murphy that he'd ruined his film and washed his hands of it. As Murphy wryly notes, Pillsbury "didn't appear again until the film was released and garnering favourable reviews".

For all that we in the Waikato would like to claim the film as one of our own, Pillsbury reflects that they "didn't need to go to Hamilton as it is 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 snap shot that the film affords. Hillcrest Road, Alexandra Street, the Wintec 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 fountains from an earlier era.

Matthew Bannister's contribution to this exhibition begins by noting *The Quiet Earth's* Hamilton connection, albeit ironically, given Zac's inability to distinguish between Mansel Ave and Mansel St even with a Hamilton

map open before him! Dr Bannister's essay places the film squarely within the 'man alone' traditions of New Zealand film and literature, even as it taps 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 outtakes from *Shepherd*, 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 accompanying sound track.

Erica van Zon's work is three-dimensional. By re-creating some of the props from *The Quiet Earth*, van Zon revisits the practice of her 2007 Master's project, creating what she sees as "a confusing, layered way of interpretation". Clocks and radios seen in the film are remade but flattened, as they are presented on screen. The thematic 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 source novel and a renowned painting by Paul Gauguin. 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 suicidal impulses. Made all the more potent by his large scale wall drawing.

Whilst the artists in this exhibition touch on the environmental and technological themes of *The Quiet Earth*, it is interesting that neither they nor Murphy in his autobiography comment on what seems to me to be its political subtext. Operation Flashlight – a project of international defence foisted on the Western world by the United States – has obvious parallels with 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 late Cold War times, one very much in keeping with the then Lange government's decision to make New Zealand a nuclear free zone, a decision that caused a rift with our ANZUS partners. However little else of Sam Pillsbury'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.

15 Oct–13 Nov 2015

# THE QUIET EARTH

Artists: Erica van Zon /  
Julia Reynolds / Joseph Scott

Writers: Dr Matthew Bannister /  
Dr Richard Swainson