A quarter of a century ago, the English critic and writer John Berger said, “The true stories of our time have to be able to reconcile a pile of clothes in a drawer with world historical upheavals.”¹ This seems like an ideal prescription for documentary but, given our times of intensified globalization and the reorganization of “world historical upheavals” around a particular global narrative, the practical challenge behind Berger’s word “reconcile” seems even more daunting than it did in 1985. In particular, the “pile of clothes in a drawer,” the lived spaces of the everyday, the intimate, the personal, the forgotten, the material things tinged with memory, seem even more at risk of consignment to the category of the inconsequential. Certain durable public exceptions, like the piled and tangled frames and cracked lenses of the Auschwitz-Berkenau spectacles, have achieved an iconic status as personal markers of world historical trauma (thus celebrities being invited to donate pairs of old spectacles to a 2008 exhibit in Liverpool, England, marking National Holocaust Day²) but, if anything, this has raised the bar on just whose “pile of clothes in a drawer” might connect with the “true stories of our time” that Berger envisaged. The recent opening of so many old drawers to the burgeoning “family history” genre (e.g. television’s
Who Do You Think You Are?) tends not to facilitate this connection so much as to shift the “pile of clothes in a drawer” into another, tidier space; one equally privatized and disconnected from larger contexts and frames of meaning, except where those get represented as a kind of generalized dramatic backdrop.3

So when New Zealand film-maker Vincent Ward opened an old drawer of his own in 2006, with the intention of making a documentary film, and went back to a ramshackle, abandoned house in the Māori heartland of the remote Urewera mountains in New Zealand (Aotearoa to Māori), his prospect of rising to the challenge of Berger’s prescription might have been considered low. While the resulting film is not without its unresolved internal tensions, it succeeds in connecting three spaces: a community in the Ureweras in the late colonial period (centered around an event there in 1916), the house of an old Māori woman who took in a young Vincent Ward when he was an exile from film school in the late 1970s, and the space of the “global war on terror.” This article will focus on two things in particular: (a) an example of how a concretely staged documentary filmic space is mapped across those three larger spaces; and (b) the question of what the medium of connection is that enables that mapping to be more than just a stated or hypothesized claim to connectedness. To signpost where this article is going with these questions, it will be suggested that highly specific matters of audio-visual organization are central and that a staging of affect occurs as a result. The intersection of spaces, places and affects is key to the particular claim being made for the example presented below.

Rain of the Children (released cinematically in New Zealand in 2008 and then on DVD) is a drama-documentary feature by Vincent Ward that returns to a place and a subject he first made a film about when still a student over a quarter of a century earlier. As a young student somewhat disillusioned with film school (at the School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, New Zealand, which had the country’s first film school program), he had taken himself off into New Zealand’s forested Urewera mountains, homeland of the Tūhoe (pronounced roughly “two-hoy”), the Māori tribal grouping that resisted European penetration longer than any others, refused to sign the principal treaty and remains determinedly hostile to white dominance. There the young film-maker, who lived in a dilapidated shack in the hills, was taken into the confidence of an old woman, perhaps because she too had become something of a self-imposed outcast; and this despite his being pākehā (the Māori word for white).
The early student film was called *In Spring One Plants Alone* (1981). Made over eighteen months with the help of friends, it documented the daily life of the old Tūhoe woman in her 80s called Puhi and (according to the outside world’s labeling) her “schizophrenic” adult son Niki. Over the intervening years, Ward had learned more about Puhi’s involvement in some significant historical events, and *Rain of the Children*, made after his decade of flirting with big-budget Hollywood movie-making, embeds extracts from the earlier student documentary in an exploration of that history, which is viewed as much as possible from Puhi’s point of view.  

*Rain of the Children* goes back to the period of the land wars, New Zealand’s civil war in effect, after which Puhi was born. Then in several layers, with actors of various ages playing Puhi to supplement Ward’s old footage of her, the film reconstructs her life. One of these layers is Ward’s own first visit to Puhi’s long-abandoned house since he had filmed there years before.

The old student documentary material establishes the ordinariness of Puhi and Niki’s impoverished daily lives in that house. We watch Puhi cook for them both, we watch her hands, we watch the simple actions of putting food on a plate, we listen to the everyday sounds. There is an element of
telegraphing about this of course, of constructing generically familiar shortcuts to empathy, but it is deftly handled and convincing in its observational sensitivity. Ward’s later film constructs several layers around this earlier material; the visit to the present-day location, the old film, historical re-enactments, and new documentary material (including interviews in the community) begin to construct Puhi as a multi-faceted person in history, not just an old stooped mumbling figure in the clips from the original student film.

The affective “charge” that the film begins to store for eventual release comes initially from observational acuity without emotionality. Although we watch Ward trying unsuccessfully to find Puhi’s grave in the long grass years after her death, and he is clearly moved by his return to the old house (both Who Do You Think You Are? style moments but with the emotion held back), it is the slow accumulation of details and the growing web of interconnections that draw us in, rather than any overt appeal to sentiment. The historical “layer” culminates in an attack by white police on Puhi’s community in 1916. Puhi, at the age of fifteen or sixteen, has married the son of Māori “prophet” and land rights activist Rua Kenana, and is living in a community he founded at the foot of Tūhoe’s sacred mountain Maungapohatu. A police raid on the village, ostensibly to root out illegal alcohol sales there, replicates any number of colonial raids on indigenous communities in different times and places to root out difference on whatever local pretense was convenient (with representations in film dating all the way back to D.W. Griffith’s The Massacre in 1912). Puhi (played here by Mikaira Tawhara) is caught in the middle of the raid.
Figure 2. Rain of the Children (2008). A young Puhi (Mikaira Tawhara) experiences a police raid at Maungapohatu in April 1916.

Rain of the Children stages the police raid on the Tūhoe village as a dramatic reconstruction. When gunfire breaks out, in which her young husband will be killed, Puhi along with many of the other women and children is caught in the middle of the confusion. Ward’s operator Adam Clark deploys his camera hand-held and with a long lens, so he can stand well back from Puhi but pull in on her face. The camera first moves right to left around her as she turns slowly in the opposite direction, crouching instinctively as if to duck the bullets. One cutaway shows the police firing, ejecting their shells, firing...

Then Clark is moving the camera on the same arc but in the other direction, as the young Puhi counter-rotates. The visual effect is to capture the girl’s disorientation almost physically. The background spins much faster than she does because of the relative movement of camera and girl. In the blur, because of the shallow depth of field, we catch glimpses of the police and of other Tūhoe, but they become her impressions rather than clear objects in the field of view.
The vertiginous staging of the 1916 police raid opens a space for a contemporary image to be sensed. 2007 photograph of police “anti-terrorist” raid courtesy of the Whakatane Beacon.

In effect the scene’s power derives from an unexpected quality of abstraction at this point. Puhi as a girl and the specific event in which she is caught up, while physically captured with a quality of dynamic naturalism, are also simultaneously lifted out of the specifics by these techniques, not least because classical narrative staging and cutting are largely eschewed. What we might think of as an “elsewhen” is evoked—or rather a series of “elsewhens” in which this kind of event has happened to other people. And most powerfully of all, there is the “elsewhen” of a police raid in 2007 on Tūhoe communities in the same area, carried out under the authority of a Terrorism Suppression Act (TSA) brought into law with the encouragement of the US authorities via the UN Security Council in the post 9/11 global climate.6 The staging of the 1916 scene seems (in one sense quite literally) to spin out dizzyingly to connect with the 2007 anti-terror raids by the New Zealand police, forming a suddenly accessible web of historical interconnection. At the same time, canisters of compressed air were used to puff Mikaira Tawhara’s strands of hair in synchronization with the sounds of passing bullets. So these moments have a precise particularity in those small details but, simultaneously, a larger vibration triggered, one can argue, by the release of an affective charge that the drama-documentary has been building up to this point. The 2007 raid, with New Zealand police wearing full US-style
anti-terrorist protective clothing when, for example, they boarded a school bus to carry out a search, remains itself an affectively charged site in the political landscape of a country largely unaccustomed to such images and untouched by terrorism; not least because the country’s Solicitor General (chief law officer) subsequently denied the police permission to proceed with any “terrorism” cases under the invoked legislation, due to the flimsy nature of the evidence presented.

It is necessary to step back at this point in order to ask what it actually means to “sense” another image from outside the documentary in question, as 2007’s so-called anti-terror raid is never explicitly mentioned or depicted in the film. One framework for thinking about this is in terms of Pitirim Sorokin’s discrimination between the “logico-meaningful” and the “causal-functional.”7 Sorokin is, as Milan Zafirovski puts it, the now “virtually forgotten” rival of Talcott Parsons in terms of breadth of achievement in sociological theory.8 This distinction was usefully revived by Clifford Geertz in order to argue that phenomena differently framed by the terms “cultural” and “social” are “not mere reflexes of one another but independent, yet interdependent.”9 Sorokin on this matter has tended to be forgotten because his “logico-meaningful” plane has been taken to mean the “subjective” in some loose sense.10 However, the precise words that Sorokin actually used to define the logico-meaningful are (most often) “felt” and (more occasionally) “sensed.”11 So, some 75 years after Sorokin used these words, we might find ourselves a good deal more sympathetic to an interest in the “felt” and the “sensed” on the logico-meaningful plane of the cultural than were his critics in the pages of the various Sociological Reviews; not least because the question of affect is now taken seriously.

More specifically, though, we might think of Brian Massumi’s influential thesis on the autonomy of affect, according to which we could surmise that affect ebbs and flows “autonomously” across both the logico-meaningful (here the documentary film) and the causal-functional (here the 2007 anti-terror determinants understood as an event embedded in the causal-functional determinants of the precise political and historical moment).12 As Geertz realized, however, the power of Sorokin’s formulation was in its invitation to see the interactions that occur between the logico-meaningful and the causal-functional not just as dynamic but as dynamically “heavy with feeling” in the words of Fred Inglis commenting on Geertz.13 In adopting this perspective we are beginning to address Emily Apter’s criticism that the affective turn licenses an interest in “feelings washing about in a depoliticized space” and
in “particularisms that have lost their hard edges.” Affect may indeed be “autonomous,” in Massumi’s sense, in relation to the logico-meaningful and the causal-functional if considered separately but may become very specifically anchored at the points where these two planes are articulated, the points where being “heavy with feeling” is linked to a sensing of particularisms with hard edges.

But there is still a problem that will emerge more clearly after we look back at the documentary scene in question. What Ward does with this scene in Rain of the Children is to sidestep the kind of conventional emotional “release” that is a repeated formal device of the TV show Who Do You Think You Are?, where the carefully and familiarly constructed quest for an ancestor reaches some point of personal revelation around which easily recognizable and empathy-inducing emotions can be packaged. Instead, affect here is much more a matter of the physical staging, what French filmmakers have long termed découpage (the synergistic combination of staging and cutting), in which we look so intently at Puhi that we see—or perhaps more accurately feel—vertiginously through her to sense the forces that placed her at this point in time and space.

If evidence were needed that this “sensing” has happened in the relationship between spectator and documentary space, it comes from the way in which the film then transfers this accomplishment to her troubled son Niki, especially after Puhi’s death in old age when he is left on his own. Niki at the outset is not an obvious sympathy-eliciting figure: a sullen, sometimes violent, overweight, "schizophrenic," whose rheumy eyes peer suspiciously at everything and whose talk, when he does talk, seems by turns paranoid and ominous. But by the closing stages of Rain of the Children, and not through any sentimentalized discovery that Niki is other than he is, we are heartrendingly interested in this person. When Niki (played in a reconstruction by Waihoroi Shortland) is found drunk and naked in the middle of a street, the image in the tableaux-like staging evokes Gustave Doré’s Last Judgment (the kind of depiction that prophet Rua Kenana had invoked to inspire awe in his followers) though the moment is not a transcendent one. The white light is not heavenly but from the streetlights in a little town on the edge of Empire. It is not the Archangel Michael who comes to the fallen one but a neighbor’s white horse to which he has been attached and which seems to understand him. And Niki is both a “particularism” and at the same time carries the hard-edged weight of a
history that has made him who he is. Our anguished interest in him is in part a felt recognition of the sheer magnitude of those crippling forces.

Figure 4. Niki in *Rain of the Children* (2008) and Doré’s *Last Judgment* (1897).

In 1905, influenced by exposure to Biblical symbolism, Rua Kenana set himself up as a Māori prophet at Maungapohatu, until the police raid on the community in 1916.

Now the key point to be made about the “spaces” of Puhi and Niki discussed here is that the film itself does not juxtapose them with photojournalistic images of the 2007 police raids. A didactic juxtaposition of such images, as offered above, might well have been possible, accompanied by a disembodied voiceover or a historian’s talking head making the connections explicit. We are, of course, entirely familiar with such documentary methods. The alternative connective medium deployed here is instead an affective one. The images we have been considering poise themselves for more conventional emotional pay-offs and then veer off instead to connect with what we have termed “elsewhens,” reflecting perhaps something of the Māori view (counterintuitive to a Western sensibility) that the past is always in front of us. In Māori the past is *ngaa raa o mua*, literally "the days in front," and thus Māori people are "facing" the past as they move into the future. Immersion in Māori thinking as a young filmmaker may have shaped Ward’s feeling for time-space relations; certainly on the evidence of this film it is possible for documentary form to reflect something of *ngaa raa o mua* and its connective potential.

Having spent a decade as an increasingly unhappy Hollywood-based filmmaker, Vincent Ward is all too aware of the way that a heavy-handed
narrativization of affect can quickly close down such connective potential. Hired to direct a big-budget feature scripted by Hollywood stalwart of soupy sentimentality Ron Bass, Ward found himself making What Dreams May Come (1998) a film of extraordinary visual potential that got tied down (through the given of an inviolable screenplay) to the most appallingly mawkish of narratives. His earlier feature, Map of the Human Heart (1993), with its Inuk central character and Canadian locations (with the fire-bombing of Dresden in 1945 as its “elsewhen”), is an immeasurably better indication of the freedom he might like his images to have. But Rain of the Children, with its comparatively small budget and return to more personal subject matter, succeeds in demonstrating what can be done with that freedom in a documentary context.

How, in the depicted scene, the young Puhi’s ‘recreated’ or fabricated body functions as a reminder of other spaces, is then the key question. The proposition here is that such a reminder is not primarily a cognitive one, but rather an affective staging. To be successful, such a staging on this evidence requires at least the following:

1. A culturally adjacent context that does not have to be folded explicitly or didactically into the form of the documentary. In this example it is the contemporaneous first use of New Zealand’s 2002 Terrorism Suppression Act which, on October 15th 2007, allowed the police incursion into Tūhoe land in search of weapons and evidence of indigenous insurgency, as well as raids on some 60 other locations throughout the country to arrest indigenous activists. Rain of the Children is not “about” this; it is about Puhi, her son, and a police raid in the same place 90 years earlier, and yet by virtue of inescapable adjacency, it not only makes the link but gives the 2007 raids a connection that goes deep into one of John Berger’s piles of clothes in a drawer.

2. A découpage to underpin the staging of affect that sufficiently loosens the hold of conventional narrativization. In this example it is the illustrated “vortex” effect in the camera movement and blocking of actors, which refuses anything like a master shot, conventional shot/reverse-shot cutting or the other dominant devices for coverage and editing of a dramatically reconstructed scene, so that the moment centered on the young Puhi stays inside her instant so claustrophobically and determinedly that it then opens out to other
possible connections, rather than merely connecting itself conventionally to a stable recreation of a specific represented space; in short it projects “elsewhens” rather than merely projecting a surrounding space of neatly organized diegetic props.

3. An oscillation between projected “elsewhens” as, on the one hand, specific spaces and times, and on the other, instances of a larger field. In this example, the larger field is the one that holds self-declared indigeneity and the power of historically dominant others in a perpetual state of tension. That tension permitted the global discourse of a “war on terror” to infiltrate (via the specific mechanism of the post 9/11 TSA) a remote part of New Zealand, and to categorize self-declared activist indigeneity as part of a larger threat (that really does put the “global” into “global war on terror”). It informed the police raid in 1916 when an armed unit tracked and killed a perceived “insurgent,” profoundly affecting Puhi’s life and the prospects for her son. And it is a tension that permeates the very fabric of the images reproduced here. The specific and important differences that pertain across those sites do not prevent the larger field from becoming affectively apprehensible in these particular instances.

What we have described in the previous 3 points is in effect a specific instance of what John Thompson termed “space-time interpolation,” that is the “process of splicing together” three sets of space-time coordinates: those of production (the documentary-making foregrounded in this example), those of the represented places in space-time (here the community in the Ureweras), and those of reception. The problem of course arises with respect to the latter and is graspable via Thompson’s important related point, that “back regions” are crucial to any such interactive framework of communication. It is a simple enough observation to note that there is a local back region for a New Zealand audience where the “culturally adjacent” of point 1 resides, and that the consequent recognitions or affective “sensing” are specifically enabled by that. It is not much more complex a point to note, additionally, that different back regions of reception are likely to be missing those particularisms—the articulation with the causal-functional in such specific terms—so affect begins to “wash about” in the way Apter suggests and the particularisms begin to lose their “hard edges.” This is not to say that some more general “sensing” does not occur, capable of connecting to similar things (i.e., that it instantly becomes “depolticized space” in Apter’s sense). But it does entail this final point:
4. Affective staging depends for its greatest efficacy on the availability of, and access to, a local back region where any material not directly staged but important for the potential anchoring or de-autonomizing of affect can be accessed.

To shift vocabulary in one final move here, the concentrated gaze at young Puhi becomes so focused that something doubles back—we become aware of Puhi’s awareness of being gazed at—and the “something” either remains an abstractly sensed presence within the causal-functional determinants of her larger historical situation or takes on the particular appearance of a historically informative connection, the latter giving real weight to Berger’s term “reconcile.”

Notes

2 “Spectacles throw new light on atrocities,” Liverpool Daily Post (January 22, 2008), reporting the city’s RESPECTacles project.
3 Who Do You Think You Are? (a Wall to Wall production), premiered on NBC in the United States on May 3, 2010, based on a BBC original that has been screening on British television since 2004.
4 After three Cannes Film Festival official selections, the last of which was Map of the Human Heart (1993), Ward moved from Australasia to Hollywood where he helped develop and was briefly slated to direct Alien3 (1992) and The Last Samurai (2003), retaining a story credit on the former and an executive producer credit on the latter. His one directing role in Hollywood was the feature What Dreams May Come (1998). He took elements of his own original concept for the film that became The Last Samurai back to New Zealand and made River Queen (2005) there, set in the 19th century ‘land wars’ period.


11 Robert Bierstedt, “The Logico-Meaningful Method of P. A. Sorokin,” *American Sociological Review* 2, no. 6 (1937): 816. It is important to point out one absolutely key factor in the marginalization of Sorokin’s ideas over the years, when compared with Parsons’ influence. Gibbs above puts it succinctly as well as dismissively: “the difficulty with Sorokin’s logico-meaningful explanation of social phenomena is that it is inherently subjective.” However, the lazily dismissive word “subjective” here summarizes an earlier and more suggestive dismissal of Sorokin. Bierstedt above (cited by Gibbs via a different quotation) says, “the logico-meaningful method is more akin to mysticism than to logic” and, when Bierstedt quotes Sorokin to demonstrate this, the terms “subjective” and “mysticism” turn out to be these critics’ alternates for Sorokin’s important deployment of the words “felt” and “sensed.”


18"Indigeneity" with its essentialist and primordialist overtones and problematic definition remains a difficult term, but I am using the concept of *self-declared* indigeneity here as a marker of self-definitional autonomy, not as an objective description of identity.


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