

## Media Reviews

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*O Tamaiti* (The children), 15 minutes, 35 mm, black and white, 1996. Writer and director, Sima Urale; producer, Kara Paewai; distributor, New Zealand Film Commission, PO Box 11546, Wellington, New Zealand. Fax: (644) 384-9719.

*Velvet Dreams*, 46 minutes, VHS (NTSC and PAL), color, 1997. Director, Sima Urale; producers, Vincent Burke, Clifton May; distributor, Top Shelf Productions, PO Box 9101, Wellington, New Zealand. Fax (644) 801-6920, email: topshelf@clear.net.nz. PAL, NZ\$39.95, and NTSC, NZ\$65.

Exciting new writer and director Sima Urale's debut film *O Tamaiti* (The children), winner of the Best Short Film award at both the Venice Film Festival and the New Zealand Film Awards in 1996, is a visually and aurally packed 15-minute slice-of-life film about a migrant Samoan family living in New Zealand from the perspective of its children. The film focuses on the burden of responsibility shouldered by the eldest of the five children, eleven-year-old Tino, who becomes a surrogate parent in the absence of his working parents. The arrival of yet another new baby brings Tino's childish bearing of adult responsibilities into sharper focus.

From the opening shot it becomes clear that Urale's skills lie in conveying each scene of the story experientially, a skill often demanded by the condensed genre of the short film. Dialogue is kept to a minimum. Only the adults are heard briefly speaking,

reinforcing (and in the process critiquing) the axiom that children should be seen and not heard. Ironically, the film's overall silence gives voice to an often-silent majority in society—children. It is their story that Urale is most interested in exploring. The dominance of the lowered camera positions and angles, the extreme close-ups (rendering common objects as interesting and alienating as they must be for a child or a migrant family newly encountering the seductions of the west), and the visual decapitation of speaking adults prioritize the worldview of the children and serve to reinforce viewer identification with them. At the same time such filming techniques create an atmosphere of disorientation and claustrophobia. Additionally, extreme high-angled shots used when children confront adults reinforce the children's powerlessness and their subservience in a Samoan world that is characteristically authoritarian. This is an example of how Urale's filmic technique reinforces certain givens in the Samoan culture. As in many Pacific Island cultures, eye-to-eye contact with one's elders can often be construed as a sign of rebellion. But there is no rebellion here. Tino is, as his name implies, a "good" child, unquestioning and obedient to his parents and a model Samoan child. Indeed, Urale leaves little doubt that this is a Samoan world, for Samoan is the only language spoken (accompanied by English subtitles) and *Palagi* (Europeans) only exist in the camera's peripheral vision. However, this is by no means a culture-

specific situation. When it premiered at a Hawaiian Film Festival in 1996, the issue of acceptable child-rearing practices was an emotive and controversial topic, even without the additional question of cultural practices. Conversations I had with audience members revealed that Samoans were just one of many cultures identifying with *O Tamaiti*. This film is a must-see, not only for its excellent ability to tell a dramatic and inevitably tragic story (interspersed with child humor) in a snapshot, or for its social worth, but for its creative, often surreal, filmic execution.

Much as Urale's decision to film *O Tamaiti* in black and white served to challenge stereotypes of colorful and humorous Pacific Islanders, her direction in another film, *Velvet Dreams*, does the opposite. In contrast to the carefully controlled color, image, and dialogue in *O Tamaiti*, *Velvet Dreams* is unabashed in its splashes of eclectic color and sound. Having premiered at the 1998 Auckland International Film Festival, *Velvet Dreams* is a cleverly ironic docudrama. Its faceless narrator (reminiscent of a Bogart-like detective) is obsessed with finding the "real" woman behind a velvet painting, one of the kitsch icons of the 1970s. As the mystery unwinds, the audience is treated to a smorgasbord of interviews from practitioners of velvet painting, to its concubines, collectors, and critics. Amid the interviews, the phallic, location-establishing shots of city towers (also establishing that this whole fantasy basically centers around male, industrialized, that is, "civilized" dreams) are frequent interjections to a montage of melodramatic Pacific Island women in traditional dress seductively posing topless,

staring at the viewer from behind the deliberately hazy and sentimental lens of the camera. One of the real mysteries in this quirky film is discovering exactly who is watching whom? And whose dream is the audience partaking in?

Urale, playing coy, offers no clear-cut answers. Instead she prefers to explore a medley of views through a narrator who is at times conscious of his untenable position in the politically correct nineties, but most times extremely proud of his obsession with the stereotype of this South Seas dusky maiden. He expresses distaste at the unwitting attempt of Charlie McPhee (artist of his fantasy woman) to deconstruct his dream girl by revealing how he traces enlarged photos onto paper from which he paints stock body poses underneath varying beautiful heads. Urale further complicates things for the more politically correct of us by rendering the narrator (who is both naive and world-weary) likeable. The film is replete with such ironies.

The narrator's circuitous journey mirrors the subtextual journey of finding that the velvet dream is indeed in the eye of the beholder. By the end there is little doubt as to what the "real" velvet dream is—that of the life lived by the artist of the painting, and by enamored, fantasizing onlookers such as the narrator. McPhee candidly admits moving to Samoa in order to escape civilization, a desire he continues to seek to this present day. He is a man described by one newspaper article written at the height of his popularity as "an artist as exotic as his pictures." The film uncovers more about the dreamer than the dreamed of. Little is learned about the woman in the painting,

while increasingly more is discovered about McPhee and the narrator. Urale brings to the screen what Pacific Island author Albert Wendt brought to the world of literature when he wrote in 1976 that much canonical writing about Pacific Islanders from outsiders merely provided a forum for "papalagi fantasies and hang-ups, dreams and nightmares, prejudices and ways of viewing our crippled cosmos, than of our actual islands" (15).

By the film's end the narrator candidly reaches his own self-realization by admitting that he is chasing a fantasy, largely the creation of others. But, like the average "Joe Bloggs" in his charmingly un-politically correct manner, by the end of the film he cares little for the deconstruction of his fantasy that has taken place on both theoretical and practical levels. His joy remains in the visual pleasure received from viewing a beautiful and seductive island maiden. This titillation is encouraged by Urale's filmic technique as the camera's eye seems to stroke each tactile image, caressing from top to toe brown, curvaceous bodies, gliding in tune to mellifluous island harmonies. To return to the question of who is watching whom and plunge into the ironic, here is a brown woman watching, filming, and ultimately deconstructing the voyeuristic creations of a white male who paints brown women.

Audiences tire quickly when being preached at. This film is both witty and playful, moving beyond the obvious and into the ironic. It both celebrates and critiques attractive, paradisiacal images of the Pacific Islands and their women and proceeds to playfully investigate fantasies surrounding the stereotype of the South

Seas dusky maiden. Urale does so, not with the righteous anger of a politicized Pacific Island woman, but in the spirit of Cook Island artist Ani O'Neil (who reappears throughout the film), which laughs at itself, playing upon itself with a complicit audience.

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*Kava: The Drink of the Gods*, 90 minutes, VHS-PAL, color, 1998. Research, photography, and editing, Thorolf Lipp; producers, Asesela Ravuvu, William C Clarke, and Bob Maclay; produced by the Institute of Pacific Studies and the Media Centre, University of the South Pacific, Suva; distributor, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, PO Box 1168, Suva, Fiji; US\$20 plus postage.

The video cover is not wrong. This film provides a wonderful "journey through Oceania with its stunning cultural and natural beauty and richness," consistently taking advantage of the compelling visual attractiveness of the region. A few quibbles might arise: some "live" shots are a little stilted, having been acted for the camera, and the pronunciation of some Pacific words in the narration is a little anglo, but these are minor distractions. The images, color, and sound quality cannot be faulted, and overall the video is a superb technical production.

The subject matter also holds enormous intrinsic interest for students of the Pacific. This interest has been fueled by definitive publications like *Kava: The Pacific Elixir* (Lebot, Mer-