

Ghost Town, a response to *The Oshima Gang* at RM Gallery

by Oscar Mardell

I am an Aucklander, and while I have never felt entirely at home in this city, I have lived here for some twenty five years. Theo Macdonald's moving image artwork *The Oshima Gang* focuses on five locations in Tāmaki Makaurau: Auckland Railway Station, the Auckland Council Chambers, Mt Eden Prison, the Wintergardens in Pukekawa / The Domain, and King's College in Ōtāhuhu. (It also alludes to a sixth, absent site: Mansion House on Kawau Island.) With the exception of the Council Chambers, these places are all familiar to me. Some, such as the Railway Station and the Wintergarden, I have visited dozens and dozens of times.

So why does *The Oshima Gang* unsettle me?

The first thing that creeps me out about Auckland Railway Station is the location. It is an edifice designed to have thousands pass through each day situated in a part of town where hardly anyone ever sets foot. Why the fifteen minute hike from the bottom of Queen Street? The location was chosen while there were plans to construct a line to Morningside, which would have connected at Beach Road to the existing line running east across Hobson Bay, but the plans were abandoned the year the station was completed, and we have been landed with a ghost train station ever since. Auckland Light Rail will follow the proposed route almost exactly — which suggests Auckland's urban planning past has real claims on the city's future.

I also find it disturbing that the station now serves principally as accommodation. What does it mean to have private dwellings in a public transport building and residents, where there should be passengers in repose at the point of departure? The station is now the end of the line without any line: an absolute terminus.

I used to go to the Wintergardens on Tinder dates — I am now in a long term relationship with somebody who works up the hill at the nearby Auckland War Memorial Museum. I have a soft spot for this era of iron-and-glass, which harks back to Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, and forward to Buckminster Fuller's Geodesic Domes.

Those Tinder dates never worked out, making the Wintergardens feel haunted by too many ghosts of too many lost futures.

My only relationship to King's College is that I have an aunt who is tremendously wealthy because she married a man who owns an oil drilling company, and they sent their children here. I had to collect one of them once. I got lost in the grounds and a door locked behind me. The door was glass, so I was clearly visible to the passers-by on the other side. I gestured to them to open the door, but they all kept walking past — now it was I who had become the ghost. This continued for about half an hour. Eventually a security guard came and escorted me out.

These stories may be specific, however many Auckland residents will have similarly uneasy memories of some or all of these institutions. But perhaps *The Ōshima Gang* is unsettling because the particular combination of these sites is strangely familiar — having been lifted from Nagisa Ōshima's 1983 film *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* (whose audio outtakes have supplied the sound of *The Ōshima Gang*).

Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence takes place, for the most part, during WWII in a Japanese-run POW camp in Japanese-occupied Java, Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). At the time of shooting, Java was — as Ōshima phrased it in his notes on the film — a 'dictatorship' — and of the three alternatives — the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand — the latter was chosen because 'it seemed...like New Zealand's money was better'.¹

And so Java's built environment was represented through Tāmaki Makaurau. Auckland Railway Station stands in for the military court where Major Jack Celliers (David Bowie), the film's secondary protagonist, stands trial (and where he subsequently faces a firing squad); the Council Chambers for the courtroom in

¹ As Trisha Dunleavy and Hester Joyce explain:

Between 1978 and 1982 a favourable investment climate and provision for tax shelter combined to allow the film industry to become one of the few growth areas in New Zealand's economy. Under the tax shelter, investors in New Zealand-produced feature films were able to reduce their tax liability as well as to share in any potential income. NZFC funds were used to provide non-recourse loans to investors, which allowed the investor to write-off not only the amount of the cash investment but also a share of the NZFC's loans. Accordingly, the investment could be 'geared upward' to provide tax concessions in excess of the initial cash amount, sometimes at ratios as high as three to one.

which he is found guilty; Mt Eden Prison for his jail cell; the Wintergarden, for the courtyard where he is assaulted by guards; and King's College, for his former boarding school in South Africa.

For local audiences at least, each of these locations is immediately recognisable — a de facto landmark, appearing to possess a genuine 'sense of place'. But what is disquieting here, I think, is the fact that these very landmarks are also nondescript enough to have been chosen to stand in for other places altogether.

Important, in this respect, is that this nondescription was planned from the start. Architects Gummer and Ford directly modelled their plans for Auckland Railway Station on those of Union Station in Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania Station in New York City; their Wintergardens, on the Arts-and-Craft-era collaborations between their tutor Edward Lutyens and the horticulturalist Gertrude Jekyll. Richard Atkinson Abbot styled King's College in the Collegiate Gothic so as to evoke the halls of Oxford and Cambridge, while Pierre Finch Martineau Burrows based Mt Eden Prison on Dartmoor in Devon, Corradino in Malta — which was based, in turn, on Pentonville in London — and the colonial gaol structures described in the 'Blue Books' wherein the British Empire made its annual reports on its colonies.

If I have struggled to find a home in Tāmaki Makaurau, it is not entirely my fault. The city's landmarks are virtually indistinguishable from those of any other former European colony. I don't quite know where I am.

Nagisa Ōshima was born in 1932, in Tamano, Okayama. His father, a government official of Samurai lineage, died when he was six, leaving behind an extensive library of Socialist and Communist texts which Ōshima read through over the course of his youth. In the early 'fifties, he attended Kyoto University where he took a degree in Law and Political History, dabbled in theatre, and became deeply involved in political activism, eventually becoming an officer in the left-wing student association and leading its members in the 1959–1960 Anpo protests opposing the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty. Ōshima became a film critic before landing an apprenticeship at Shochiku studios where, in 1960, his first feature, *Seishun zankoku monogatari* (Cruel Story of Youth), garnered enough attention to land him and his young colleagues with the name *Shochiku Nuberu bagu* (Shochiku New Wave).

It was around this time that Ōshima became involved in the debates around fūkeiron or 'landscape theory' — a dynamic but short-lived discourse whose varied texts shared a common discontent with the mode of documentary filmmaking-making which was then favoured by the the traditional left, and which had predominantly restricted itself to portraying the personal struggles of

individual radicals. For fūkeiron's advocates, by contrast, the landscape itself — the built, modified and protected environment — was a subtler and more ubiquitous expression of political reality.

Ōshima's most direct contribution to fūkeiron is his 1970 film *Tokyo senso senyo hiwa* (The Man Who Left His Will on Film). But in its attentive focus on the landscapes of Tāmaki Makaurau that featured in *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence*, *The Oshima Gang* posits a question: could *Merry Christmas* be considered a “landscape theory” film,’ as Theo Macdonald puts it, ‘if only for New Zealand viewers?’²

And if so, what political reality finds expression in the train station, the council chambers, the prison, the hothouse, and the campus? For Macdonald, ‘the irrelevance of Auckland [to *Merry Christmas*] makes the film a compelling portrait of this city’. Ōshima made it so that viewers would not see Tāmaki Makaurau per se and would read its environs as elsewhere, but in doing so he inadvertently documented a crucial feature of those environs — their eerie ability to go unseen and to be read as elsewhere.

It is this ability which *The Oshima Gang* succeeds in bringing to the fore, and it is this, moreover, which places *The Oshima Gang* within a certain strain of the New Zealand Gothic. Here, the very idea of a ‘homeland’ — the very possibility of a place whose physical characteristics are unique enough to shape the psychological characteristics of its inhabitants — appears to have been precluded. This is what makes it so eerie when, in the soundtrack, James Malcolm (who played Celliers’ brother in *Merry Christmas*) repeats in take after take, “It won’t be the same as home, will it?”.

But it is also this reality which *The Oshima Gang* succeeds in negating. Before Macdonald’s camera, Tāmaki Makaurau is completely undressed — though ‘nudity...’, as John Berger once reminded us, is itself ‘a form of dress’. In these images, the city is no longer impersonating another place but itself. Nowheresville is no longer roleplaying as elsewhere but as the city that I, along with a third of Aotearoa’s population, happen to live in.

What’s more, *The Oshima Gang* makes the city feel — as every inhabitable place must feel — haunted: when footage of Tāmaki Makaurau is accompanied by outtakes from the audio of *Merry Christmas*, the city acquires a certain ghostliness, as if some trace of the shooting has been imprinted on them, a trace which *The Oshima Gang* has simply tuned into. The fantasy that *The Oshima Gang* allows us to indulge in, then, is that this ‘irrelevant’ place might actually constitute a home.

² Macdonald, Theo. ‘The Oshima Gang’. Retrieved from <https://tetuhi.art/exhibition/theo-macdonald-the-oshima-gang/>