

FANTASTICAL WORLDS AND FUTURES AT THE WORLD'S EDGE: A HISTORY OF NEW ZEALAND SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

by
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CHAPTER 3: SF CINEMA AND TELEVISION BEFORE THE RING ARRIVED

What do Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Show* have to do with New Zealand science fiction for the screen? A great deal, as it turns out.

In 1902 France had led the way into space when Georges Melies's delightful eighteen minute feature *Le Voyage dans la Lune* brought science fiction into the cinema for the first time, then New Zealand's followed with Franklyn Barrett's seventeen minute feature, *A Message From Mars* in 1903. It was not until 1910 that America's Edison Studios produced a fourteen minute version of *Frankenstein*, and finally Britain followed in 1913 with a 68 minute adaption of *A Message From Mars* from United Kingdom Photoplays.

A Message From Mars (1903): New Zealand's *A Message From Mars* (1903) ran for seventeen minutes and was based on the British author Richard Ganthony's 1899 stage play - which was in turn based on Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. It was the second film produced by Franklyn Barrett, who had recently moved to New Zealand from England, and would later become a pioneering director and cinematographer in Australia. *A Message From Mars* is almost certainly the world's second science fiction film, and the first science fiction film shot in an English-speaking country.



Barrett wrote, produced, directed and filmed this adaption of *A Message from Mars* and probably used scenery, costumes and actors from the February 1902 staging of Ganthony's play in Wellington - which may have been the first science fiction play to be staged in the country. Unfortunately the film stock has been lost, and only part of a poster survives. We know from a later British version that the science fiction content was fairly minimal: a Martian travels to Earth to warn a human that his parsimonious lifestyle is leading to some truly dire consequences.

The play's popularity probably owed something to H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* being published recently. The British film adaption of 1913 is believed to be the first full-length work of British science fiction for the cinema. Thus New Zealand was, briefly, a world leader in science fiction film, but this turned out to be an anomaly. It was nearly seventy years before the next work of science fiction for the screen was shot in New Zealand.

The modern age of SF film in New Zealand was brought to life with the aid of government subsidies. Television had been introduced to the country in 1960, first in Auckland and then to other cities by regional television stations. Unified national television broadcasting did

not occur until the early 1970s. As in Australia, most early shows with science fiction content were for television and intended for children and teenage viewers.

The Great Fish of Maui was a seven minute animation of a Maori creation legend. Directed and produced by Fred O'Neill, there is a strong case for its being New Zealand's first work of fantasy for the screen. The young demigod Maui goes fishing with his brothers and he uses magical strength to catch an enormous fish which becomes the country's North Island. Its date is variously given as 1960, 1967 and 1973, but the 1967 date seems most credible. It does seem fitting that the first of New Zealand's modern works for the screen comes from the extensive Maori mythology, and as was mentioned in Chapter 1, this mythology has striking parallels with the European Arthurian and Viking epics.

Modern science fiction followed five years later with the television miniseries, *An Awful Silence* (1972), but before we consider this and other works for the small screen, we must explore the issue of which show with New Zealand origins qualifies as its first science fiction film. Does *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* have a place in this history of New Zealand's science fiction? The writer of the 1973 London stage production, *The Rocky Horror Show*, was Richard O'Brien, who was British born but raised in New Zealand. A childhood of watching science fiction films in Hamilton's Embassy Cinema tells us where he developed a fondness for the creature feature films of the 1950s and 60s. It also demonstrates that there was widespread access to overseas cinematic science fiction available in even the smaller regional cities of New Zealand in those decades.



After thirteen years in New Zealand, O'Brien returned to Britain in 1964, where his script for what became *The Rocky Horror Show* was written, then picked up and staged in June 1973. Was the London stage version of *The Rocky Horror Show* New Zealand's first science fiction musical? A case could certainly be argued that it was. The film version of the musical, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), was released two years before *Sleeping Dogs* (1977), which was the first locally written SF film actually shot in New Zealand.

Over in Australia, the post-nuclear apocalypse novel *On the Beach* (1957) had been written by the English immigrant Neville Shute, then picked up and filmed by America's Stanley Kramer, in Melbourne, with Hollywood money and stars. Nevertheless, this 1959 film is generally thought of as Australia's first science fiction film. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was conceived and co-written in Britain by a British writer, who had been raised in New Zealand. It was shot in England with Hollywood money ... and with O'Brien playing Riff Raff. The Hamilton cinema where the author watched those science fiction double features has been demolished, but a bronze statue of O'Brien as Riff Raff now stands at the site. In a 2019 interview O'Brien declared that he still regarded himself as a New Zealander.

Does *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* qualify as New Zealand's first modern science fiction film? When compared to *On the Beach*, it might not be very intellectual science fiction, but science fiction it most certainly is. At the very least, it showed that science fiction with its roots in New Zealand could make the world sit up and pay attention - and make money. It

grossed nearly a hundred times the cost of production at the box office, and this figure does not include DVD and broadcast revenue. Ten years later *The Quiet Earth* (1985) would seize the world's attention again, this time as an unambiguous product of New Zealand - proving that one could work from home and still be a success. Where does that leave *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*? Love them or loath them, one is stuck with one's ancestors, and there is no denying that the film has at least some New Zealand DNA.

EARLY TELEVISION

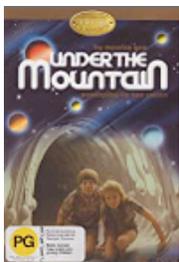
Twelve years after the introduction of television to New Zealand, and 99 years after *A Message From Mars* was released, the first locally written and produced science fiction television show reached New Zealand screens. The country's producers would average one show or series every two years over the next two decades. A selection of those shows follows:



An Awful Silence (1972): *An Awful Silence* featured sentient alien plants snatching human bodies and invading Wellington, and was one of the first New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation's features to be shot in colour. The show was also the first of the country's works for the screen to win an award, the Feltex Award for Best Drama (1973) - making it New Zealand's first science fiction work to win an award! Vincent Ley wrote the script, which won a Ngaio Marsh teleplay contest. The director, David Stevens, moved to Australia and later wrote the feature length mainstream works *Breaker Morant* and *The Sum of Us*. *An Awful Silence* featured actor Davina Whitehouse, and gave early screen credits to Grant Tilly and Susan Wilson.



The Games Affair (1974): New Zealand television's first children's serial was something of a science fiction/fantasy crossover. The setting for the six episodes is the 1974 Commonwealth Games, and follows the adventures of three teenagers pitting themselves against an evil professor who is conducting performance-enhancing experiments on athletes. The 'enhancer' is so potent that when a little old lady is accidentally shot by it she wins the 100 metres sprint, and a high diver jumps so high that he passes a passenger jet and lands in a distant river. *The Games Affair* was notable for its special effects, and for giving John Bach his first screen credits in a long career that included *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* movies.



Under the Mountain (1981): This eight-part children's series is Ken Catran's adaptation of Maurice Gee's highly successful award-winning novel *Under the Mountain* (1979). The twins Rachel and Theo have psychic powers, and they put them to good use in the fight against giant alien slugs that have a base beneath a volcano near Auckland. The show was notable for maintaining the tension and sense of danger, but the aliens (Wilberforces) are driven off by the end. Their lair was convincingly designed, and the music was performed by the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. Those who have rated the show for IMDB

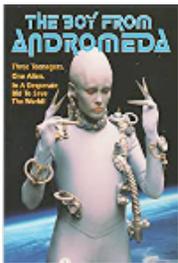
gave it the very high score of 8.4.



Children of the Dog Star (1984): Having adapted Maurice Gee's *Under the Mountain* for television, Ken Catran wrote this six-part story of teenagers meeting an alien. While it has similarities to the film *ET* in concept, the plot is original and specific to the New Zealand landscape. Teenager Gretchen and local boy Ronny are on a farm belonging to Gretchen's aunt and uncle when they discover a weather vane that appears to be alive, intelligent and telekinetic - it can control cars and electric appliances. They find an artifact in a swamp that is the sacred

site of a local Maori tribe, and which is under threat by developers, and soon mysterious creatures start emerging from the swamp. *Children of the Dog Star* rated a respectable 7.0 on IMDB, and won a Golden Gate Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival.

The Dominant Species (1985): Although made for television, *The Dominant Species* is more of an experimental short docu-movie. An alien observes the interactions between humans and their cars in 1975 New Zealand, and concludes that cars are the dominant species on Planet Earth. The special effects were innovative and relatively advanced for their time, and several New Zealand beginners got early screen credits in this production. It was directed by Derek Morton and was eleven years in production.



The Boy from Andromeda (1991): This six-part series is Ken Catran's reworking of his own *Children of the Dog Star*. Jenny, a teenage girl on holidays finds a mysterious metal artifact, then meets Drom, who owns it. He is the survivor of an alien mission to turn off a planet-buster gun, but the gun's android guardian attacks them. Jenny and Drom join forces with the young locals Tessa and Lloyd to defeat the mechanoid. Like many Australian series of the period, the clean and wholesome adventure was well suited to the international television market and made a profit.

SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

As in Australia, New Zealand's science fiction film production lagged behind that of science fiction for television by a few years. While television enjoyed State funding, films initially had to rely on private money. As we have already seen, there is a case for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) to be considered New Zealand's first modern science fiction film, but if we narrow the definition to films written and shot in New Zealand, *Sleeping Dogs* (1977) was definitely first into the cinemas. New Zealand producers would average one SF film per year for the next fifteen years. Some highlights follow.



Sleeping Dogs (1977): *Sleeping Dogs* was more of a political thriller set in a near-future totalitarian state, but the setting makes it science fiction. It starred Sam Neil in his sixth appearance on screen as Smith, a New Zealand man caught up in a revolution and framed as a terrorist. The \$450,000 budget produced 107 minutes of screen time, and was considered remarkably low, even for the 1970s. It was directed by Roger

Donaldson, was an award nominee at the Taormina Film Festival, and rates 6.4 on IMDB. It was based on local author C. K. Stead's 1971 novel, *Smith's Dream*, and as a first attempt to produce adult science fiction for the cinema, *Sleeping Dogs* was a very credible effort.

Nutcase (1980): A lot is packed into the 49 minutes of this short children's movie. Evil Eva wants five million dollars in return for not dropping a nuclear bomb into Rangitoto, a volcano near Auckland. The idea is that the bomb will cause it to erupt, destroying the city. The son of DI Cobblestone and his two friends save the day with a home-built anti-gravity machine. Roger Donaldson was again the director. While nothing intellectual, the show was nevertheless pacy, fun and entertaining for the target audience.

Dead Kids (1981): The setting for this New Zealand and Australian collaboration is actually a small town in Illinois, although it was shot in Auckland. The film is marginal science fiction but more horror and - in spite of the title - is a 99 minute feature length production for an adult audience. Before his death, Scientist Dr Claude Le Sange conducted experiments that induced homicidal behaviour in teenagers. Chief of Police John Brady was widowed when his wife died in suspicious circumstances while working for Le Sange. After three teenage youths and an eyewitness are brutally slashed to death, Brady suspects that his son Pete may be on the killer's list. It turns out that Pete works for Gwen Parkinson, who is continuing Le Sange's experiments in mind control. Also known as *Strange Behaviour*, it is credited as being New Zealand's first horror film, and in spite of the IMDB rating of 5.7, it has a reputation as a cult classic.

Battletruck (1982): The phenomenal return on investment and general popularity of Australia's *Mad Max* (1979) and *Mad Max 2* (1981) caught the attention of producers internationally. Like *Mad Max 2*, *Battletruck* (1982) is set in a lawless near future following World War 3, in which mobile gangs roam the roads searching for oil. Known as *Warlords of the Twenty-First Century* in New Zealand, it was known as *Battletruck* - or translated variants - elsewhere.

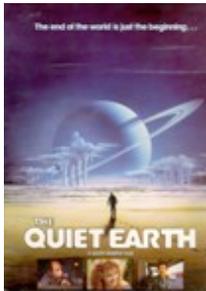


Straker leads a band of former soldiers who travel in a heavily armoured truck armed with machine guns and a howitzer. His daughter deserts him after refusing to execute the owners of a large store of diesel fuel, and joins with Hunter, who rides a weaponised motorcycle. They are betrayed after Hunter is wounded, and she returns to her father. Some of Straker's victims attack his headquarters in an armoured car, blowing up his precious fuel supply. Straker pursues the car, swearing revenge, but is lured into an ambush. After being hit by rockets, the battletruck runs out of control, plunges over a cliff and explodes. In the finale Hunter rides off on a horse, rather than settling down in a survivor community.

Battletruck benefitted from the government's tax breaks for locally made movies, which ran from the mid-Seventies to mid-Eighties. It had the US director Harley Cokliss heading a cast and crew of locals, in collaboration with Battletruck Films. It earned \$3,000,000 in the US and Canada alone, against its \$1,000,000 cost of production, and remained New

Zealand's highest-grossing science fiction or fantasy film for two decades. Annie McEnroe won an award for Best Actress at the Catalonian International Film Festival,

While these early local films were intriguing experiments with science fiction's tropes and were successful with the critics on a modest scale, none of them could be described as breakthroughs or high profile. All that changed in 1985, starting with the spectacularly successful *The Quiet Earth*.



The Quiet Earth (1985): This 91 minute film was adapted from the 1981 novel by Craig Harrison, and was a breakthrough both in terms of critical acclaim and box office takings. It was shot in 1985, just before the tax breaks for New Zealand films were withdrawn, and released in 1986. The basic premise has some similarities to that of the 1956 US film *Forbidden Planet*, in which a race of aliens is wiped out when a planet-wide, telekinetic energy source is activated. In *The Quiet Earth*, a global energy grid for the Earth has a particularly alarming side effect.

Early one winter morning near Hamilton, the sun darkens for a moment, and there is a red light surrounded by darkness. Zac is a scientist with Delenco, a subsidiary of a worldwide consortium building a global energy grid, Project Flashlight. When Zac awakes and switches on his radio, the airwaves are silent. As he drives through the deserted city he discovers the remains of a crashed airliner, yet it contains no bodies. When he reaches his underground laboratory, a monitor is showing the words Project Flashlight Complete. He soon concludes that the vanishing of all people and animals and the start of Project Flashlight are connected. What he calls The Effect has apparently left him as the only human on Earth.

Zac takes refuge in bizarre games, such as assembling cardboard cutouts of Hitler, the Queen and the Pope and addressing them from a balcony as the president of the Quiet Earth. Eventually he pulls himself together, then meets Joanne, another survivor from Project Flashlight. They promptly move into a sexual relationship, more through sheer relief than attraction, then decide to search for other survivors. They discover Api, a Maori, and by comparing what they were doing when Project Flashlight started, they realise what may have saved them. Api was about to be killed in a fight, Joanne was being electrocuted, and Zac had overdosed on sleeping pills in a suicide attempt - he had been racked by guilt about not blowing the whistle on certain dangers involving Project Flashlight.

Although a love triangle inevitably develops, Zac is more concerned with the fact that universal constants of physics are shifting due to Flashlight's influence, and even the sun's energy output is changing. The Effect will happen again unless Flashlight can be disabled. They secure a truckload of explosives and plan to remotely guide it to the Flashlight plant, but Zac realises that the ionising radiation from the plant will prevent the remote control electronics from working,

While Joanne and Api are having sex, Zac drives the truck onto the roof of an underground part of the Delenco plant, and as the truck crashes through the roof he sets off the explosives. Following the explosion, Zac is rather surprised to find himself still alive. He is even more surprised to be lying on a beach. Out to sea, impossibly shaped waterspouts are rising into the air. Zac shambles toward the water's edge, watching an enormous ringed planet coming up over the horizon. The imagery of this final scene has become a classic ikon of science fiction worldwide.

The Quiet Earth was shown at the Toronto Film Festival in October 1985. It won Best Actor and Best Director at Italy's Fantafestival, and won eight awards at New Zealand's Film and Television awards, including Best Film. While box office takings for *The Quiet Earth* more than doubled its \$1,000,000 production cost in the USA and Canada, it earned only about 70% of *Battletruck's* takings, presumably due to having a more specialised audience appeal. It was reviewed in the *Los Angeles Daily News* as “the best science-fiction film of the 80s”, and when one remembers that *Blade Runner* and *The Terminator* had been released by that time, this was quite a compliment. *Variety* magazine reported that “Geoff Murphy has taken a man-alone theme and turned it imaginatively to strong and refreshing effect in *The Quiet Earth*.”

Six months after the release of *The Quiet Earth*, Reactor 4 blew up and burned at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, turning a large area of the Soviet Union into a real-life Quiet Earth.

In 1986, six weeks before shooting began for *The Navigator*, the tax breaks for investors in New Zealand films were withdrawn by the government. This delayed production of the film for a year, until funding was secured from the Australian Film Commission. This was the the first Australia/New Zealand co-production in science fiction.

The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey (1988): In Fourteenth Century Cumbria a psychic youth, Griffin, has apocalyptic visions and the Black Death remorselessly edges north, and rather like Joan of Arc he believes he is being divinely inspired. In order to save his village, he convinces other villagers, led by the dynamic adventurer Connor, to enter a cavern and dig deeper into the Earth.



The tunnel appears to be some sort of spacetime wormhole because they come out into Auckland in 1987. Not surprisingly they find most aspects of modern city life bewildering and terrifying, especially the traffic, but they persist with a quest to attach a cross to the top of the spire of what they think is the biggest church in all of Christendom. The ending is particularly bleak, because despite all this faith, effort and bravery the Black Death does reach Griffin's village. He has predicted that there will be only one death, however, and the final scene suggests that Griffin himself is the only fatality.

The Navigator was undeniably downbeat, even when compared to *The Quiet Earth*. Nevertheless, the film was a critical success, winning more than twice as many awards as

The Quiet Earth. It was described in the New York Times as “a dark and thrilling fantasy,” was nominated for a Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1988, and scored 80% on Rotten Tomatoes. Of its 21 national and international awards, six were for best film.

It is worth remembering that at the time of *The Navigator's* release, the AIDS epidemic was spreading its own type of terror in the real world and, as was the case with the Black Death in Fourteenth Century Europe, there was no cure. Journeys to seek divine clemency were common in the Middle Ages, and groups of flagellants wandered from village to village, lashing themselves with whips - and spreading the fleas that infected humans with the disease pathogens in the first place.

Planet Man (1996): In this 15 minute film, actor Tim Balme narrates as Ant, who describes how he is trapped in a world from which all women have disappeared. However, he then encounters a beautiful woman, E.T., but her attitude is anything but traditional and Ant finds his rational mind subverted by his hormones. The dark techno-gothic style is appropriate to the plot, and the film won Best Short Film in Critics Week at the Cannes Film Festival.

Letters About the Weather (1999): Peter Salmon's short is set in a future where virtual reality has become so realistic and refined that it has become part of reality itself. A lot is packed into the runtime of sixteen minutes as Grace seeks out the dangers and unpredictability that the real world imposes, in preference to the perfection fantasy of the computer-generated world. Although superficially similar to *The Matrix*, it was released in the same year so the features that it has in common are probably a result of parallel evolution rather than plagiarism. It won Sara Wiseman a New Zealand Film and TV Award for her performance as Grace.

Infection (2000): At eight minutes, James Cunningham's award-winning short film quite possibly holds the record for the shortest science fiction / horror film to come out of New Zealand. A computer virus in the form of a disembodied hand with just three fingers attempts to break into a database to delete a student loan for its creator, but it must run the gauntlet of warrior eyeballs and boobey trap syringes. The CGI was low budget but highly innovative for its time. It won five awards, including Best Short Film at the New Zealand Film and Awards.

PETER JACKSON BEFORE THE LORD OF THE RINGS



When in 1986 the government withdrew tax breaks to investors in New Zealand films, a talented young director named Peter Jackson managed to cope by making his science fiction/horror film *Bad Taste* in his spare time and acting in it.

Bad Taste (1987): Humans as a source of alien food was nothing new by 1987. H. G. Wells had his Martians consuming human blood in his 1898 classic, *The War of the Worlds*, and the television anthology series *The Twilight Zone* had run the episode "To Serve Man" in 1962 (based

on the Damon Knight short story). Humans as the raw material for an intergalactic fast food chain did tend to add indignity to horror, however. A town's population vanishes, replaced with monsters that resemble animate potatoes. This is the first stage in a plot to harvest the whole of humanity for alien humanburgers, and Jackson himself stars as Derek, who goes up against the aliens with a chainsaw.

Reviewers on IMDB varied markedly in their reactions to *Bad Taste*, rating it from 10 to 2 stars. The overall ranking came to a respectable 6.7, and the general feeling was that as comedy horror it was a very fine piece of work. It won the Audience Award at Italy's 1989 Fantafestival, and was nominated for Best Film in Fantasporto in 1990. It was made on the astoundingly low budget of \$200,000, but box office returns are not available.

Meet the Feebles (1989): Jackson's second film suggests what might have happened if the Muppets had discovered sex and drugs. One reviewer declared *Meet the Feebles* to be: "Dark and vulgar, is a backstage comedy featuring puppets that offers proof of Peter Jackson's taste for sheer outrageousness, even if it often lapses into pure juvenilia". The black comedy was released internationally at a fantasy film festival in Hamburg, Germany in April 1990, and had the distinction of being banned in Ireland. *Meet the Feebles* was a poor performer commercially, grossing only \$80,000 in New Zealand against production costs of \$750,000. However, it was also Jackson's first film co-written with his future wife, Fran Walsh, and they would go on to quite spectacular successes as a scriptwriting team over the following decade.



Braindead (1992): Originally 104 minutes in length, this was a big budget film for its time at three million dollars in production costs. Box office figures are not available, but it won five New Zealand Film and TV Awards, two international awards for Jackson, and six other awards and several nominations. It rates an impressive 7.5 on IMDB.



After being bitten by a Sumatran monkey during a visit to a zoo, Lionel's mother dies, then comes back to life as a homicidal, cannibalistic zombie, whose bite spreads a mysterious virus and creates yet more zombies. The rebirth scene in the climax is Freudian in the extreme, but love triumphs, mother is destroyed, and a fire conveniently wipes out the copious contagious blood splatters. *Braindead* and *Bad Taste* indicated that Jackson was about to have a successful career in comic horror, but in his next film he veered away into time travel.

Jack Brown Genius (1994): This time travel romantic comedy does have some basis in fact. Around the year 1010 the English Benedictine monk Eilmer of Malmesbury, inspired by the legend of Daedalus, strapped on a pair of home-made wings and leapt from a tower of Malmesbury Abbey. He managed to glide an impressive 220 yards in his 15 second flight, but landed rather heavily and broke both legs. He tried to explain to the bishop that a strap-on tail would have provided what we now call aerodynamic stability, and that he was sure

that the next flight would go rather better. The bishop said that he was quite lucky to have survived, and ordered him to hang up his wings. Eilmer is known to have lived to at least eighty, and became an authority on astrology.



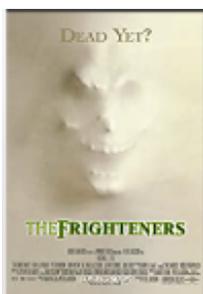
The 85 minute film tells a somewhat different story. Eilmer dies in his attempt to fly, and his soul is cast into hell for committing suicide - a little unfairly, because his intention had been to fly, not kill himself. In late Twentieth Century New Zealand his spirit enters the brain of the New Zealand inventor Jack Brown, and forces him to rebuild Eilmer's original device and prove that men can fly, thus saving his soul. Jack accomplishes the feat with the aid of his girlfriend. Some sort of heavenly appeals court for lost souls reviews Eilmer's case and exonerates him.

Jack Brown Genius was written by Tony Hiles, Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh, directed by Tony Hiles, and produced by Peter Jackson and Jim Booth. The film starred Timothy Balme as Jack Brown, with Stuart Devenie as Eilmer. In spite of its critical reception being less than enthusiastic, it won Best Director, Best Actor and Best Film Score at the New Zealand Film and TV Awards in 1996, and was nominated at Fantasporto for Best Film. Production costs and box office figures are not available.



Heavenly Creatures (1994): *Heavenly Creatures* was a dramatisation of the events leading up to the Parker–Hulme murder case. With the exception of the depiction of the girls' romance diary scenes, this was not a genre film, yet is worth mentioning here because it earned Jackson and Walsh an Oscar nomination for best writing, and nine New Zealand Film and TV Awards among its seventeen awards and fourteen nominations. Directed by Jackson, it won him five awards, with star Kate Winslet winning another four. It cost \$5 million to produce, and it is estimated that box office sales covered costs.

Forgotten Silver (1995): This TV movie was an alternate history mockumentary about the life of Colin McKenzie, a fictional, forgotten pioneer of the film industry. The budget was just \$650,000, but it did a lot to raise Jackson's profile as a director. It got a Gold Hugo nomination at the Chicago International Film Festival for - ironically - Best Documentary, won the Audience Jury Award at Portugal's Fantaspro festival, and at the New Zealand Film and TV Awards it won Best Director Comedy/Drama for Jackson and Costa Botes.



The Frighteners (1996): Frank (Michael J Fox) loses his wife in a car smash, but gains the ability to communicate with the dead. At first, he uses this ability to befriend ghosts and run a sort of ghostbusting real estate scam, then a demonic spirit in the form of a Grim Reaper appears and sets about killing both the living and the ghosts. The theme is comic fantasy and horror, rather than science fiction. Directed and co-written by Peter Jackson, it did a lot to establish his credentials in the production of large-scale films. It was a very big budget film for

its time in New Zealand, costing \$30 million to produce, but box office takings did cover the cost of production. It also scored ten award nominations and one win internationally.

By the mid-1990s New Zealand science fiction, horror and fantasy films had established a definite presence internationally. *Battletruck* showed that impressive money could be made, while *The Quiet Earth* and *The Navigator* demonstrated that the local product could win awards and critical acclaim.

Having directed or produced four films from 1994 to 1996, Peter Jackson had proved that he could handle enormous workloads and big budgets. The results of all this effort had gone on to win twenty-six national and international awards and earned him an Oscar nomination. *Forgotten Silver* also showcased him as a bona fide director, his work either broke even at the box office or did not make substantial losses, and perhaps most important of all, he had proved that he could direct and write science fiction, horror and fantasy.

Clearly the technical expertise was being established that would lead to Jackson directing and co-writing *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy of movies, which would bring three Oscars home to New Zealand, along with the country's first three Hugo Awards - among its 272 awards and nominations. However, there was another side to the development of New Zealand's ability to produce highly successful blockbuster fantasy, and it had its origins in television series of the 1990s. The *Hercules* and *Xena* series were financed and written by Americans, but they laid the foundations upon which Middle Earth was to be built in New Zealand.