

2. *Erewhon*: Filming nowhere

Abstract: Photographer Gavin Hipkins' first feature film draws upon Samuel Butler's anonymously published utopian satire *Erewhon: Or, Over the Range* (1872). It pairs a stream of evocative images with a voiceover narration from Butler's text. In particular, it is in his exploration of Butler's critique of the coming dominance of the machine in a post-industrial society that Hipkins' film speaks to postcolonial New Zealand. Paradoxically, however, Hipkins employs the words of Butler's text to free himself from the tyranny of narration and produce a film of continual interruptions, juxtapositions and breaks in perspective and mood. One moment we are asked to respond to the sublime grandeur of the New Zealand bush or mountainscape, the next to the banality of a rusted dripping pipe or a collection of car carcasses. Hipkins' images acquire their power not because of their inherent qualities, but because they prove themselves to be transformable, that is, because they can enter into relations of composition with other images. Through its montage, Hipkins' 'cinema of thinking' successfully combines the documentary nature of film—its recording—with its symbolic, evocative, ruminative capabilities, thus exemplifying Jean-Luc Godard's dictum that all good fictions are documentaries and all good documentaries are fictions.

Keywords: colonial New Zealand, *Erewhon*, documentary, experimental essay film, Gavin Hipkins, montage, realism, Samuel Butler

Tous les grands films de fiction tendent au documentaire, comme tous les grands documentaires tendent à la fiction. (All great fiction films tend towards documentary, just as all great documentaries tend toward fiction.)

—Jean-Luc Godard (1985, p.144)

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FOR his first feature-length film, *Erewhon* (2014), a pictorial essay on Samuel Butler's utopian satire *Erewhon: Or, Over the Range* (1872), photographer Gavin Hipkins has found resonance for Butler's words in the New Zealand landscape. *Erewhon* is an experimental essay film but one where that genre implodes since it is also a visual adaptation of a novel that charts its narrator's journey from a Canterbury high country sheep farm to a fictional society, where vegetarianism is the law and machines are banished for fear of their becoming conscious. Cinematic realism is never straightforward and always involves a struggle with other realisms and with meaning (see Williams, 1980; Roberts, 1998). Inevitably, realisms must come face to face with language and narrative. On the other hand, a purely self-referential art inevitably has

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to confront realities and the everyday. The dilemma, which Hipkins faces, reminds one of Godard's truism that all good fictions are documentaries and all good documentaries are fictions. It is this conscious bringing together of fictional and documentary elements (whereby the real world is made to assume a quality of the magical and strange), a citational density (a voiceover from a literary source), an interest in found images and found objects (wilting flowers, model ships, gas mask goggles, rusting machinery, dripping water) and strategies of filming and editing (open to chance and improvisation) that are essentially associative (without a predetermined order) rather than dramatic or linear (where everything is in place) that is exemplary. Hipkins' recollections and associations can be as thematic as the mechanical bulldozer which sets the entire film in motion, or simply a colour (red, yellow, blue), or a sound, or a line (horizontality), or a movement (water dancing), something, often infinitesimal, that turns the smallest detail (the texture of dampness, the focussing of a landscape through mist) into something beautiful and even sublime, so that nothing, literally nothing, is insignificant; or, rather, that the most ignored, neglected, discarded, demeaned and insignificant becomes precious and wondrous, and precisely for those reasons of being out of step. In *Erewhon* this transformation of the passing and the insignificant, even of the invisible, eternalises the present and for an instant immobilises it, celebrates it.

In Hipkins' *Erewhon* the personified yet unascribed perspective, the sense we get of seeing through the eyes of someone unseen, is matched by the narrated voiceover from Butler's text, *Erewhon, or, Over the Range* (1872), admirably vocalised by Mia Blake. It lures us in but, because of its (deliberate) gender mismatch, uncannily displaces us too. Wherever there is a discrepancy between the words of the narrator and the image we view, there is always irony. Visually, Hipkins is an exacting craftsman. He uses the words from Butler's *Erewhon* to liberate himself from the tyranny of a plot. The voiceover embroiders his images with reflection and allows them to fill narrative gaps. But it also releases images from a narrative subordination so that they can flourish in splendid autonomy. Few images are allowed to unfold for long or to reach any dramatic resolution; there is no panning, zooming or tracking. Instead we get bits of scenes arranged into a mosaic of shifting impressions. That bulldozer grunting back and forth across a fallow field at the outset seems a premonition of the later discourse from Butler on man and machine.

How many men at this hour are living in a state of bondage to the machines? How many spend their whole lives, from the cradle to the grave, in tending them by night and day? Is it not plain that the machines are gaining ground upon us when we reflect on the increasing number of those who are bound down to them as slaves, and of those who devote their whole souls to the advancement of the mechanical kingdom. (Butler, 1970, p. 223)

Is the prefatory bulldozer destined to uncover something? (Or is it digging its own grave?). But almost immediately after the title frame that follows is an exquisite image of a misty coastline with crashing waves, then a snow-covered mountain range, examples of what Hipkins elsewhere has labelled 'postwar pictorialism' (Hipkins, 2010). This is a film of continual interruptions, juxtapositions and breaks in perspective and mood. One moment we are asked to respond to the sublime grandeur of the New Zealand bush or mountainscape, the next to the banality of a rusted dripping pipe or a collection of car carcasses; often a circumstantial detail will cut a scene short so it amounts to no more than a glimpse. While we hear one of them on the voiceover, and hear about them, what strikes us most is the absence of people. There is little if any human contact made, no dialogue exchanged, and when we stumble upon inconsonant figures in an elemental landscape that stands apart from history, beyond human understanding, the filmed sequence of them is filtered through a grey screen or they are deliberately blurred or even masked.

The fact that both cinema and still photography can be placed together like this is because of their apparently similar views of duration and because both can be thought of as 'documentary': Both 'record' what is set before. Then it also has to do with a mournful quality of all photographs because they have a strong referent (Barthes, 1981). The photograph only attests to the referent having once been, but is now no longer. It is the presence of absence. The photographic referent is other than it is simply because the subject, so strongly declared, is effaced by time. The photograph is always of a moment that has passed, as is film, despite seeming to be 'in the present tense'. Hipkins appears to photograph everything, like a collector, and what he seeks is valuable for its uniqueness: that is, objects and images that have no particular conventional place, are no longer worthy of being classified are precious to him for being out of order, for lacking authority, not being part of tradition, for being that which has been rejected, something therefore truly authentic. (New Zealand viewers of *Erewhon* were surprised to learn that some of Hipkins' images, though they seemed to 'belong' to New Zealand, were actually shot in Queensland and Northern India.) The flotsam and jetsam that come his way, that he seeks and that he is open to, is put into play. Play, for Hipkins, with all it implies of chance, improvisation, a lack of constraint, is thereby what is joyous for the possibilities that are offered by the random in reality. They are the very substance of Hipkins' art, its precondition. The object, immobilised in time in the photograph is, more so than the photograph itself, subject to time. Immobility is a means of taking possession of movement, seizing hold of it, arresting time in a pregnant moment. The cinema then reinscribes movement in the object and thus an order of time that destabilises the object by returning it to a flow, thereby combining presence with disappearance, certainty with instability. More importantly, this movement, or the implication of it, implies thought as Sergei Eisenstein insisted:

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... no one should forget that cinema is the only concrete art which is dynamic at the same time, which can unleash the operations of thought. The march of thought cannot be excited in the same way by the other arts, which are static and which can only give a cue to thought without truly developing it. I think that this task of intellectual excitation can be accomplished by film. (from a speech delivered at the Sorbonne in 1930 quoted in Michalcyzk, 1977, p. 224)

For Hipkins, images acquire their power not because of their inherent qualities, but because they prove themselves to be transformable, that is, because they can enter into relations of composition with other images. This claim must be surprising to anyone who has admired a particular shot in a movie for its pictorial qualities; it is hard to resist the idea that a great film would be one where every shot could stand on its own. Is *Erewhon* great because of this? (Hipkins is a photographer and the photographic ideal dies hard.) It is tempting (and the temptation is usually not resisted by critics) to see in the filmmaker Hipkins, the shadow of the photographer Hipkins (see, for example, Sleight, 2014). The evidence is in the testimonial, evidential, documentary aspects of his films, the long takes, the immobile camera, the use of stills, the frontality and the centrality of composition, a certain stillness, as if his films, among other things, belong to photography. There exists an aching beauty in Hipkins' shots of New Zealand bush and mountain scenery. Yet any image that presents itself as self-sufficient—one that offers up its own meaning, that tells you everything you need to know, that can be taken at face value—will be useless for the purposes of montage, that is to say, for cinema and for Eisenstein's 'march of thought'. French film director Robert Bresson explains, in his wonderful and insightful *Notes on the cinematographer*: 'An image must be transformed by contact with other images as is a colour by contact with other colours. A blue is not the same blue beside a green, a yellow, a red. No art without transformation'. Bresson also proposes a 'Cinematographer's film where the images, like the words in a dictionary, have no power and value except through their position and relation' (Bresson, 1997, pp. 20-1). *Erewhon* is just that: 'a cinematographer's film'. It might seem obvious that film directors compose their images in order to assemble them into 'strong' montage sequences. That is what the vast majority of films offer us: there is not one image out of place. To the degree that every image aligns with the next one along a well-marked path—guided by the overarching unities of narrative, genre, design, etc.—such films will present themselves with built-in interpretations, which the spectators will be more or less able to recognise every step of the way. Hollywood tries to make images that never fall off the rails. But Hipkins' *Erewhon* is not like that. It proceeds as if it is possible to practise montage without the advance guarantees of formulaic composition. In that sense, montage can be a radical experimentation, in which we discover which images are strong enough to overcome aesthetic and semiotic inertia by seeking only the strongest combinations. Each image, no matter how definite, will acquire its force only when it is seen in the midst of other,

equally provisional, images. Every image anticipates the next, although the next does not always arrive, just as every image remembers the last, even when it was never there. There is no centre in Hipkins' film. In the stream of associations—the link of one thing resembling another following another—there is neither original nor copy. Links are not explanations. The associations are neither linear nor directional but plural and reversible. This structure of inversions and reversals mirrors that of the narrative strategies of Butler's *Erewhon*.

Hipkins knows that colonialism and photography were connected intimately. Photography provided the evidence for colonial expansion, documents of the now and the to-be (Maxwell, 1999). Colonial photography was modernist, expansive, aggressive. Bring the modern to the colonies it argued, shift to a new place, tame nature, clear forests, build dams, create lakes. Its images are both strange ('What will I find?') and familiar ('a home of my own'). Butler believed in the benefits of colonialism, or at least the benefits promised. He was granted rights to an isolated block, unknown to Pakeha and unused in any consistent way by Māori. He named his run-hold Mesopotamia, built himself a hut to live in, increased his sheep flock, and held it for five years, before selling out, doubling his money and returning to London. But Butler's colonialism was less practical and more theoretical. He was not interested in the capitalist enterprise but in the implications of what he encountered in New Zealand for the structures of his thought. What the Canterbury experience and his ultimate success as a colonist meant for Butler was a liberation from conventions and forms, from what he elsewhere described as the 'science-ridden, culture-ridden, afternoon-tea-ridden cliffs of Old England' (Butler, 1914, p. 304). Butler's interest in New Zealand was in its theoretical status as a primitive form of more advanced state. *Erewhon* tells the story of a settler colonist, Higgs, who, accompanied by a pusillanimous Maori guide, Chowbok, broaches a previously unreconnoitred pass through a mountain range (the Southern Alps) in search of a sheep pasture. But instead of discovering unoccupied farming land, Higgs finds himself among a people whose society, named Erewhon (an anagram of nowhere) is ordered by unique values, practices and institutions. It is also clear that certain understandings of Māori custom were absorbed into Butler's work which thus stands as an interfusion of *matauranga Māori* (Māori ways of thinking) into settler colonial, and hence into metropolitan flows. This means that Butler's work, in its pragmatic subversiveness, and despite its ambivalent Englishness, can offer Hipkins a foundation for the (postcolonial) undoing of identity and negation of the conceptual struts of colonialism. This is not to say that Butler was not tarnished through his association with colonialism—his colonial life was based on the occupation of lands to which he had no just claims, and his written work predicts the end of traditional Māoritanga. But importantly, colonialism did not preserve traditional ways of life; it abolished them and imposed others. It shattered an evolutionary framework by bringing together, at once and unmediated, extreme poles of societies still in nature and societies that dominated nature with science and technology. It is this clash of civilisations that Butler, shaped by

his colonial experience, explored as an intellectual project.

It is undoubtedly the movement between and juxtaposition of images, and their juxtaposition with a compelling voiceover text, not simply their content that gives *Erewhon* so much of its power. However, this misses out on a fundamental aspect of Hipkins' cutting: the frame itself. In the many shots of tropical flowers in *Erewhon*, for example, Hipkins' camera neither centres on nor straightens the objects it presents. The heads of both flowers and humans are cut off and we are too close to see them in their entirety. This messy intimacy with the object of the gaze has two particular effects. The first is centrifugal. The edge of Hipkins' frame is less a boundary or a limit, but something that feels more like a horizon. We cannot see it, but perceive nonetheless that the world extends out from this image or event, that there is an elsewhere (an 'over the range') we could move into. The images are fragments of a larger whole. The several shots of rapidly flowing horizontal torrents of water are just this. (Hipkins has consistently hung the installations of his photographs in connected series on gallery walls, asking himself the question: 'How does a single image exist in the context of a series?') (Hipkins, 2010). This is a filmmaker's question. At the same time, the randomness and ambiguity of the frame's edges deny it a sense of authority, that this and only this is what we must see, what we must remember. This is a photographer's response. The effect is centripetal. Instead of searching for significance beyond the frame in the wider world, our focus is concentrated inwards towards the centre of the image (we are drawn into the stamens of a wilting flower petal; in extreme close-up we flick through the blue pages of a mechanical manual). This creates a sense of these objects as things that are touched rather than simply seen. It is the combination of proximity and distance, close-up detail and vague openness, that we recognise as being like our experience of memory.

Hipkins has declared an interest in the artistic experiments of the avant-garde of the 1920s, exemplified perhaps best in the collage-montage works of Surrealism, and, radically of Dada, in film and photography. Like another contemporary enthusiast of Surrealism, David Lynch, Hipkins is drawn to 'the space of surreality in the everyday' (Hipkins, 2010). This manner of presentation was a way of thinking whereby linearity, causation, consequence and transparency were displaced by the vagaries of the multi-directional and by mechanisms of memory, dream, association, the unconscious, serialisation, repetition, simultaneity, lack of finish and conclusiveness and a confounding of the logical by the poetic. The cinema, best of all perhaps, was suited to this way of thought; film as an assemblage-montage, the pictorial surface of its images cut into and fragmented, dimensions of objects contrasted, shots overlaid with others, a play between the transparent and the opaque, the illuminated and the shaded, the veiled and the exposed, contrasting and contradictory points of view. In short, film in its images and by their conjunction, was, and is, a perfect instrument of montage in the most general sense. Philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin admired the montage compositions of Dada and their unlikely and often devastating combinations. Benjamin's own unfinished *Arcades*

Project (1999) was similar in its uncustomary associations of heterogeneous elements, references and times, a modernism of method (montage, collage) and of scope (the compression of past and present). Both Benjamin and Hipkins seek out a pre-history of the modern as association and juxtaposition, rather than as chronology. Hipkins quotes a significant passage from Butler:

The Erewhonians say that we are drawn through life backwards; or again, that we go onwards into the future as into a dark corridor. Time walks beside us and flings back shutters as we advance; but the light thus given often dazzles us, and deepens the darkness which is in front. We can see but little at a time, and heed that little far less than our apprehension of what we shall see next; ever peering curiously through the glare of the present into the gloom of the future, we presage the leading lines of that which is before us, by faintly reflected lights from dull mirrors that are behind, and stumble on as we may till the trap-door opens beneath us and we are gone. (Butler, 1970, p. 169)

The passage is significant because the intertwining of past and present, the experience, as Butler describes it, of ‘being drawn through life backwards’ is inherent in the Maori concepts of *mua* and *muri*. (Indeed, as suggested above, with hindsight we might ask whether Butler derived this notion and others from his encounters with Māori in New Zealand?). The word for the past in Māori is *mua*, which may be understood as ‘the way we face’. The past always moves ahead of us for guidance, while *muri* the word for ‘the future’, translates as ‘the left behind’ or the unknowable. The past is always there to be remade in the contemporary world. Indeed, the well-known Māori *whakatauki* urges that ‘We walk backwards into the future, our eyes fixed on the past’. For Benjamin, too, the sudden encounters of past and present, the irruption of the past, created a spark that ignited and formed a constellation (a montage) (Benjamin, 2003). Hipkins’ history, like Benjamin’s history, is precious, tenuous, fragile and subject to seemingly infinite reconfigurations and displacements. The effect is of seeing a memory staged, indelible in the realism of its details but edited and compressed over time ... the world as processed by the mind, with finally only the bright bits magnetised by emotion remaining to flash against darkness. Nevertheless, Hipkins’ personified camera movement imitates the human gaze moving through space; his jump cuts imitate the mind’s eye looking back in time. How do we remember things, how do they come back to us? Not as dramatic scenes but as retrieved moments, not in coherent narrative sequence but in bits and pieces. We remember places, the context but not so much the story; we remember faces, the expression but not so much the event. We remember parts more than wholes, and try as we might to fit the parts together, discontinuities remain. Moments and details keep coming back to us as images in their own right, a little different each time as they shift in the mind. If the whole film is a montage of memory fragments—a kind of unframed flashback—whose memories are we seeing? Butler’s; Hipkins’; perhaps our own?

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In the literature the most frequent metaphor for the film camera is the machine. In the first moments of the history of cinema it is the technology—the experience of the (film) machine—that provides the immediate interest (Christie, 1994). With its capacity to transport a viewer to the past or future through a convincing *mise-en-scène*, to accumulate discontinuous moments through elliptical editing, and to compress or expand the flow of time through optical effects, the cinema is a time machine that works by way of mediation. If we construe *Erewhon*'s image metaphorically as a meditation on the organic and the mechanical, the soundtrack—the voice of a woman trying to reach someone and talking to a machine instead—offers a parallel. If, on the other hand, we see the image as an acknowledgment of the inanimateness of film even as it registers animation, then the sound of the anxious voice, mechanically recorded, reminds us that the machines in our lives are not themselves alive, and that even those designed to connect us are apt to come between us. According to this reading, Hipkins' film is concerned with the extent to which the way we live is governed by machines—and cinema is one of them—that dehumanise our human transactions. This is the major resonance with Butler's *Erewhon*; this is what for Hipkins is 'pertinent and prophetic' and resounds as 'so timely in terms of technological dependency' (New Zealand International Film Festival, 2014). All the while Hipkins, through his avatar Butler, playfully reproves a technological future already here, and anxiously contemplates our rush into a future that is forever getting away from us. That is just how I felt as *Erewhon*'s spectator: there was the film, maybe beyond my grasp yet holding me in its grip, unfolding before my eyes with remarkable conviction, the diverse strands pulled together in a miracle of montage.

An earlier short film by Hipkins, *The Port* (2014), contains an audio montage taken from H.G. Wells 1985 sci-fi novella *The Time Machine* and Hipkins has declared his interest in science fiction:

I love science fiction films, so I come from that perspective of understanding films like *Terminator* and even back further, *War of the Worlds*, ... what I found most prophetic in Butler's writing was around the notion of machine dependency, and I think that in the last two decades in particular with the advent of the PC, and in the last decade with the advent of smart phones, there is an absolute dependency that's emerged at an experiential level. (Berrington, 2014)

Stalker (1979) was the last film director Andrei Tarkovsky made in Russia. It is an obscure parable about a forbidden zone, left over from some disaster, uninhabited and overgrown, into which the stalker, who is presented as a sort of priest, guides a writer and a scientist towards a mysterious room, in which your innermost wish will be granted—not what you ask for but what you really desire, which the room knows even if you do not. The writer and the scientist dare not enter the room when they finally reach it, but the camera does enter and distantly watches them from its perspective. It is possible the

stalker made up the whole story about the miraculous room. But he appears to believe in it, or at least believes in belief, in finding room for faith amid the ruins. Cultural theorist and film buff Slavoj Žižek offers a materialist reading of *Stalker* that echoes Butler's *Erewhon*: he construes Tarkovsky's *Zone* as a 'postindustrial wasteland' where the stuff of modern civilisation is reclaimed by nature and the 'abstract universality' governing our social existence gives way to the concrete reassertion of material life expressed through the 'direct physical impact' of Tarkovsky's film (Žižek, 2008, p. 64). Tarkovsky preferred long takes, in which rhythm and duration were intrinsic, not imposed in the cutting room. 'I reject the principles of "montage cinema" because they do not allow the film to continue beyond the edges of the screen', he declared (Tarkovsky, 2003, p. 118). But he was actually renewing rather than renouncing montage. With its emphasis on landscape, texture and atmosphere, *Stalker's* brooding, dystopian science fiction is as much environment as movie. *Erewhon* shares with *Stalker* a landscape of rusted machinery and the liquid metronome of the sound of dripping water and trickling streams. And in both we ache for what corrodes and evaporates.

As Robert Leonard has noted, 'an underlying uneasiness is always there in Hipkins' work' (Leonard, 1999, p. 42). Hipkins' art is an art of the interval and the gap, to be filled, or at least met, not by the artist but by the spectator, in short, an art of openness, infinitude, lack of finish, contradiction, difficulty where images function as facts and as documents and all, however analogous or associated, are made independent and distinct by being fragments placed in opposition and contrast, that is, as differences. Nothing in *Erewhon* is fixed. Singular elements, by their capacity to join with others become multiple, as does time and space: hence the expansive, seemingly limitless aspect of the film. For example, the same image or sequence is often repeated and each repetition, because of its altered position transformed, the same becoming different. For instance, the shots of verdant New Zealand bush; or the repeated and enigmatic aluminium casing of a plane's fuselage. There is no set narrative, nothing merely consecutive or causatively contiguous, but instead a constant rethinking, ever-new constellations and configurations. In fact, rethinking is the basic thought of *Erewhon*. Hipkins has a gift for embodying thought, grounding the conceptual in the material and investing the material with the conceptual, a filmmaker's gift for what Hegel termed the concrete universal. He successfully combines the documentary nature of film, its recording, with its symbolic, evocative, ruminative capabilities. And characteristic of his approach, too, is the way he calls on us his viewers to complete the film. He has said that *Erewhon* 'is a meditative film ... and it asks the audience to think and to consider what is unfolding in front of them and, I guess, like all films, how it is affecting them' (Hipkins, 2014). *Erewhon* accumulates fragments of a passing and invites us to journey not by its consistencies, but by its lack of them. These gaps are its opportunities. It is not documentarism that interests Hipkins, in the sense of limiting the image to a referent, but rather of allowing all manner of references to invade the image. To free the image from the constraints of narrative is not to free it from narrative, but to reveal these constraints,

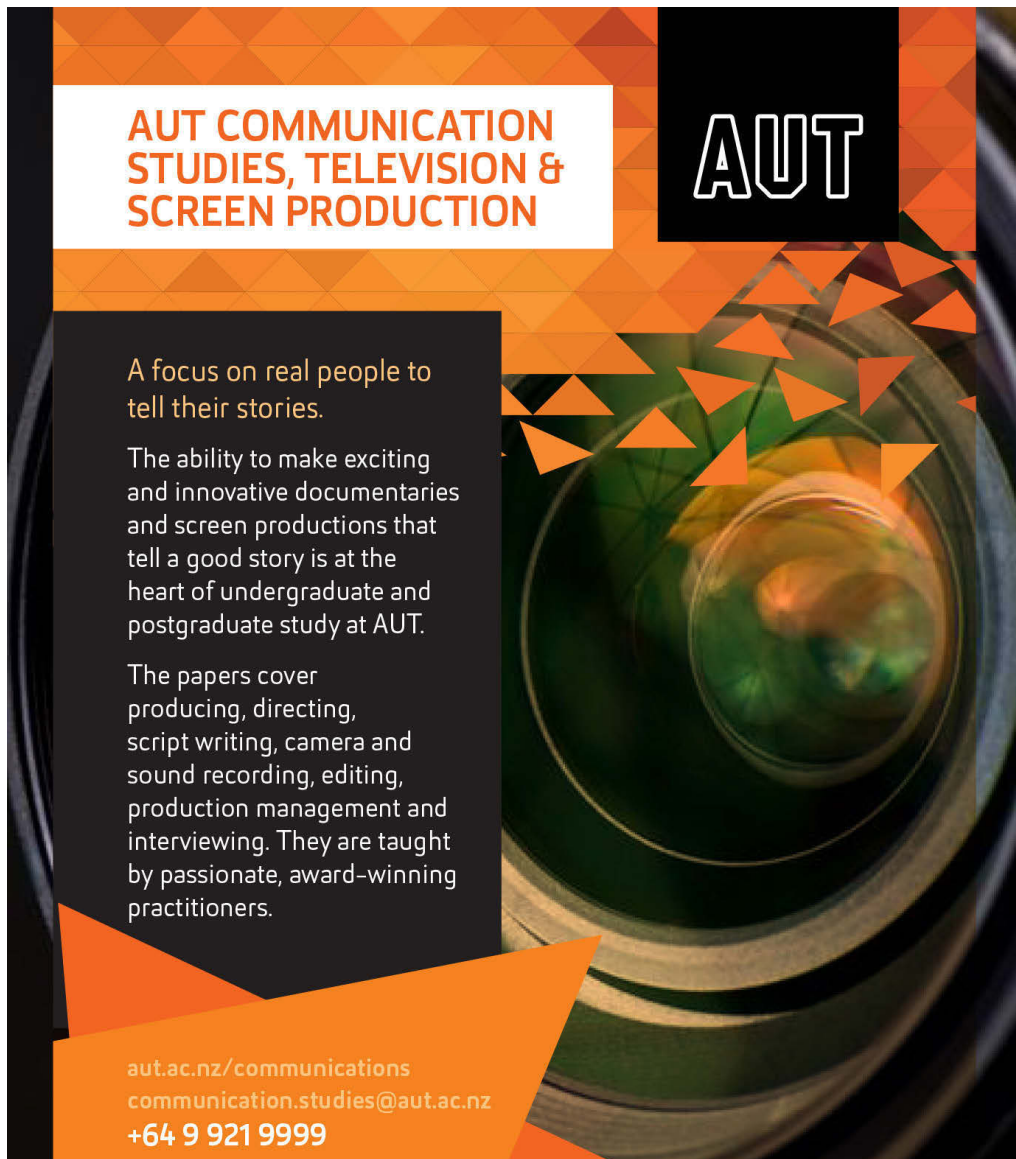
and thereby open the image up to the narrative. It is as if Hipkins' film is explicitly titled and organised to become another film, an other than the original *Erewhon*. It contains its otherness within it as part of itself. No matter where you look what you see is elsewhere than where it was or would be, or nowhere passing to an elsewhere of its own denial.

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