

# Ian Conrich

## Driving Force from the Land of Tolkien

### Abstract

This interview presents Professor Ian Conrich's opinions on various topics related to the movie industry in different countries. He describes what he thinks about the driving force behind the New Zealand studies in UK, he brings his thoughts about the global marketing of cinemas also in the interview can be found answers about his favourite films and his opinions about public influence from certain movies.

### Keywords

Movies, Movie industry, New Zealand cinematography, Tolkien, Online world

### We heard that people called you: „the driving force behind New Zealand studies in UK“, why is that?

That was said quite some time ago, I have been evolved with New Zealand Pacific Polynesian studies for some 20 and so years now. My main background is film and visual culture, but I launched out or moved into New Zealand Pacific studies, but I keep the two working together. And I sort of incorporated or utilized that in my presentation today, which engaged with issues of New Zealand culture, identity, marketing and also still included issues of New Zealand film albeit through New Zealand's

in-flight safety videos, which have taken on another life beyond airplanes or the in-flight journey where many millions for times have been watched on YouTube as a sort of almost short film, so they have a multiple function or dual function beyond that which was the original presentation.

### As you said, that your interest is in movie area, do you think that big movies or blockbusters can affect global marketing?

Yes, but blockbusters can be defined in different ways. I think most common assumptions are that most blockbusters tend to be American, unfortunately a lot of American blockbusters are short on ideas, they are sequels, remakes and they are poorly scripted. They are taking the view that the target audience is less smart than it actually is. But different countries make different films, that in their own country wouldn't be called blockbusters, but which can be translated that way or received overseas. In New Zealand that was a film called Once were warriors, which could be argued was a blockbuster and then that got shown overseas and became an arthouse film. So it depends on the actual original context or the audience that is watching a film as to whether it's defined as a blockbuster or not.



### So now it's time to ask you, what's your favourite film?

I get asked this question quite a bit and I give an answer, that doesn't make people happy. I will use that answer. I don't believe in the creation of pantheons, I don't believe in elevating one cultural product in a hierarchy above others. So if you have some top 5, top 10 about which the internet is obsessed - with lists. What happens over the time is that whatever is not on those lists becomes neglected, becomes forgotten and lost. So I tell my students, when I teach them, anything is available for them to include in their work, as long as it's legal and they should also include films, if we're talking about films, even if they are bad, even if they're poorly made, even if they're trash. They are still available to be included, because they are part of the cultural products of the time. But if you create a hierarchy, you will lose elements over time. It would be equivalent to having an art gallery and saying we will only keep the 50

best paintings and the rest should disappear in to the basement and never be seen again. And therefore you have different view of our history. And it doesn't answer your question.

### But it was interesting point of view. Do you think, that films which are produced or made in specific countries like Slovakia, or Poland, can influence public opinions only in their countries or also abroad?

No, also I don't have as much awareness of Slovakian film as I would like, I have a good awareness of Czechoslovakian film from an older period. I have more awareness of Polish film. There are two issues here, that I think should be adhered to in terms of film being made for an international audience. First, you should on one level make films, that you believe the local audience wants to see. You shouldn't just forget that audience in the desire to make films for an international audience. And if a film is good



enough for a local audience, there is a reasonable chance that it could be good enough for an international audience. Secondly, what translates well internationally from a local culture are often stories that are true, stories based on history, stories based on real lives in social situations. So if a Slovakian film maker was asking, what sort of subject should be used to be given the best opportunity to be translated overseas, I would suggest a film, in my opinion, that speaks to the local audience, but which is based on an actual historical moment or life, or lives. These can have a value, that will be appreciated by an overseas audience as well. A lot of Polish films of recent years, that have been excellent are based on actual historical events.

**So little bit of a different topic. We know Tolkien's novels weren't that popular before the films were made. After that New Zealand adopted them into their national identity. Why do you think is that? Is it because New Zealanders have found similarities between themselves and the main characters?**

I think not so much there. The key factor is obviously Peter Jackson having a desire to film Lord of the Rings. Other people tried it before, but they said, the technology wasn't there. The technology became available with the personal money of Peter Jackson that he was putting into digital technology available in New Zealand. One of the questions we had earlier today was from someone who's talking about an „ecosystem“ that's necessary within a country to make international films or to attract finance. And what happened with the LOTR was that a number of his large technical crew, that was needed, was bought from Australia, where the Matrix films have been

made before. So what you do need as well is this „ecosystem“. And I think Slovakia could have been used for making some of the LOTR, obviously it wasn't. It has some similar landscape, it has this sort of this pastoral almost primordial untouched landscape in places, it has this sort of medieval past in some of its buildings, which could then be translated into a mythical past. But there are many other factors, that are not present in Slovakian filmmaking or culture, that I think would have never allowed the LOTR films as they are to be made. And why have New Zealanders embraced them? I don't think they were particularly looking to embrace LOTR as such, but New Zealanders love to take on the world, they love this feeling, that they are world leaders at whatever. Because they feel that they are this small country on the edge of the world. I don't quite feel that but that is seems to be a sort of latent issue. And anything that gives the opportunity to take on to world, to beat the world, sort of embraces or engages the wider New Zealand community, so whether it is rugby, whether it is sailing, whether it is the LOTR. When something emerges to puts New Zealand into this global pole position, the New Zealand cultural community comes heavily behind it.

**Last question is about the online world. Where do you find yourself more, in the online world or the offline world?**

That's an interesting question. I'm going to answer it two ways. One, I'm not like a lot of other people who whose lives are dominated by the internet. I have a Facebook page, but there's nothing on it. I only have it so I can look at other Facebook pages that I need to. I don't have Instagram. I have only recently got WhatsApp and this is the way to

reduce the level of communication that I have because there's already enough to keep myself occupied. I don't play computer games, the last computer games I played well before the internet really took over, so that's fine. But then, if we looked at what most of my day is divided up into I would be spending a lot of time on the internet. I would say on a normal day the Internet is taking up half my day, whether that is browsing BBC or news sites, whether it's for research, emails whatever. So I am heavily dependent on the internet, but then my usage of it is a narrow usage compared to maybe what younger people are using nowadays.

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Ian Conrich is a Professorial Fellow at the University of Vienna, leading masters classes in visual and material culture. Previously, he was Professor of Film and Visual Culture at the University of Derby and Associate Professor and Associate Head of School: Research, at the University of South Australia. Chair of the New Zealand Studies Association since 1997, he was the founder and Director of the Centre for New Zealand Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, and in 2008 he was named Air New Zealand New Zealander of the Year in the UK. He is a writer, theorist, and historian with work in film, media, visual and popular culture. The author or editor of eighteen books, Ian also has extensive experience of working with corporate sponsors, local and national governments, film commissions and schools; curating film festivals, cultural programmes, museum exhibitions, and international conferences.

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Marek Šimončíč is engaged in audiovisual and multimedia domains, photography and production activities. He worked for the

Trnava Municipal Television and Piešťany Television. He organized many multimedia events and he participated in well-known festivals like Pohoda or Grape. He graduated in mass media communication at FMK UCM, where he worked as a teaching assistant during his studies, and since 2008 as a professional assistant. He was guest lecturer at the University of Malaya and the University of Dubrovnik. He teaches subjects focused on audiovisual production and leads the faculty television FMK TV.