

## Creative Narratives in *Boy*

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*"I like to think it is a human story closer to reality in that we see how children cope with these situations, how they make life more bearable."* Taika Waititi on *Boy* (Macron, 2010)

Continuing the themes established in his earlier films *Two Cars, One Night* (2003) and *Tama Tū* (2004), Taika Waititi's feature film *Boy* (2010) examines themes of abandonment and imaginative play. *Tama Tū* deals with Māori men waiting in an abandoned building in the midst of a World War II battle. While they wait for the cover of night, they silently amuse themselves with a tin soldier and silent pranks while guns go off in the distance. *Two Cars, One Night* deals with children left in cars outside a drinking establishment. While they wait for their parents the children create an imagined world between themselves as a way of passing time. *Boy* also draws on the importance of imagination and play when dealing with difficult issues. This article focuses on the range of creative and imaginative narratives produced by the characters in *Boy* to argue that the film ultimately underscores the importance of imagination in creating viable social worlds.

Brought up in the small rural town of Waihou Bay in the Bay of Plenty, New Zealand, Boy lives with five of his cousins, his younger brother Rocky and his Nan who is the primary care-giver. As the film unfolds we find that Boy's mother died giving birth to Rocky and that their father is in prison. Nan is absent for a week, attending a tangi in Wellington, leaving Boy in charge of the house. In the absence of his father, Boy has concocted a range of heroic fantasies about him. His father, Alamein, and his two man gang, the Crazy Horses, unexpectedly arrive at the rural home while Nan is away. However, Alamein's return does not signal any kind of sentimental homecoming, as much as Boy might wish it. Instead, he has returned to retrieve money buried in a nearby field. The sharp contrast between Boy's self-created fantasy about his father, and Alamein's own fantasies about himself, underpins some crucial themes in *Boy*, as do the creative visions of the youngest family member, Rocky.

The film starts with Boy's direct address to camera and leads the audience through a montage of moments from Boy's "interesting world" which includes his favourite person (Michael Jackson), his impressively talented father, and his Nan, brother and cousins. As soon as Boy makes mention of his father, editing and cinematography signal a sequence of fantasies with Boy's voice-over saying:

I'm named after my dad. He can dance as good as Michael Jackson. He's a master carver, deep sea treasure diver, soldier, captain of the rugby team and he holds the record for punching out the most number of people with one hand.

Boy's enthusiastic portrayal of his father sets up the audience's expectations, expectations which are then continually undermined by the actual presence of Alamein. From the start then, Boy's ability to craft a fantastical image of his father helps manage more troublesome and complex social relations.

Boy's wishful perspective of his father is underscored through filmic language, including lighting, close ups and photo montage sequences. Boy creatively understands and manipulates his own narrative by using various materials from popular culture. Two sequences in particular demonstrate how the film underscores the power of popular culture and imagination to act as a buffer against more unsavoury realities. When Alamein gets drunk and obnoxious at a party, Boy turns this moment into a scene from Jackson's *Billie Jean* video (1983). The camera moves in close up on Boy's face, and lighting signals a dream-like sequence is about to take place. Alamein's gang patch and leather jacket costume is transformed into a short-legged leather pants, white shirt and jacket ensemble, complete with white socks and leather loafers. The shed which hosts the party is transformed into the neon brick pathway from Jackson's video and Alamein subsequently acts out iconic Jackson moves in slow motion as Boy looks on in admiration before the scene fades to black. The second overt reference to Jackson music videos comes in the hotel sequence when members of a local gang attack Alamein and his gang for stealing their marijuana. Boy watches the encounter at a distance and from the safety of a car. Again, lighting and music signal a shift into a fantasy realm as the gang conflict turns into a scene from Jackson's *Beat It* video (1983). However, where the earlier sequence faded to black, this fantasy sequence is interrupted by the harsh reality of Alamein being doused in beer and beaten up by the

rival gang members. This is the last time that Boy makes reference to Jackson in relation to his father. This scene ends with Alamein running over Boy's pet goat, Leaf, and Alamein's promise to take Boy to see Jackson live.

Boy filters material from already-made narratives in order to make sense of the world around him; not because he is incapable of understanding his experiences, but as a means of empowering himself in a situation of vulnerability. As an audience, we see shots of Boy recognising the significance of his situation. However, we also recognise him accessing his imagination during traumatic scenarios to create a familiar narrative that reframes a positive outcome. Where filmic strategies overtly signal Boy's fantasy sequences, Alamein's imaginary world is less obviously signposted.

If Boy's introduction to his father sets up audience expectations that we might enjoy meeting a hero, the actual onscreen presence of Alamein presents a very different picture. Fresh from prison, with a 'gang' of two others, Alamein has particular fantasies about himself that are at odds with actual social encounters. At moments he frames himself in relation to Boy as a renegade Shōgun samurai warrior, and at other moments he begs his mother for money. He claims to have a way with the girls but his advice to Boy in relation to Boy's crush on Chardonnay goes horribly wrong. In many ways the character of Alamein conforms to what Vivien Silvey has described as "permachild" characters which are, "adults who continue to behave like adolescents" (2008). Alamein is frozen as a permachild throughout most of the film. We see this clearly illustrated through the relationship he develops with Boy, taking on the role of a friend rather than a role model father figure, even to the extent of saying to Boy, "Can you stop calling me Dad? It sounds weird".

There are no animated drawings or montage sequences to signal Alamein's permachild mentality. Instead, Alamein's fantasies are embedded within the diegesis of the film, and are not often directly addressed to the audience but instead towards other filmic characters. The only time we do see Alamein obviously digress out of reality into the fantasy realm is when he performs for the boys with a sparkler. Fantasy is signalled to the audience by the traces left behind by the sparkler pictures. However, most of Alamein's fantasy sequences translate as being more embedded as a character trait than a process to be read in the fantasy realm of the film; thus making his childish and often belittling treatment of

other characters harder for the audience to forgive. While his absence from Boy and Rocky's lives may have cemented this fantasy world for Alamein, his face-to-face encounters with his children ultimately wake him up to the reality of his actions, even while any sustained sense of character transformation remains questionable.

Alamein's childish behaviour often makes direct connections to popular culture. At one moment in the film Alamein acts out one of his own fantasies, drawn from the popular 1980s US television series *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979-85). On leaving Boy at the shop with his friends, Alamein decides to jump into the driver seat window of his car instead of simply opening the door. As he does he says under his breath, "Dukes of Hazzard". His attempt to re-enact a popular scene from a TV series is awkward and unimpressive because he takes too long, grazing the car horn on his way in. This action of jumping into the car, while providing comedic relief, also shows how Alamein still views himself as a child – small enough to fit through a car window, trying to impress other children and demanding embarrassing attention. The materials that create Alamein's fantasy sequence mirror some of the qualities of Boy's fantasy constructs. The use of popular culture references suggests that Alamein may have resorted to a similar method as Boy, to escape trauma in his own past.

Where Boy's fantasy sequences include re-enactments of music videos or photo-montage sequences (of Boy and Alamein riding dolphins, drinking cocktails, in tuxedos) and Alamein's fantasies are part of his characterisation, Rocky's creative sequences are most often depicted by animated colour pencil drawings. Our first example of this is in the opening sequence when Boy introduces his brother Rocky, who wanders along a road while a school bus passes by. As the children onboard shout out to him and throw things, Rocky reaches out his hand and an animated colour pencil drawing depicts the bus exploding and careening off the road. Another animation sequence includes a drawing in menacing black, of car headlights turning into three sets of staring eyes, which cues the arrival of Alamein and his gang of two in a car late at night. Rocky's drawings signal a child-like perspective on the world where a dead mouse can turn into a bird that flies away and where a crying house turns into a rampaging father-figure.

Rocky imagines he has super powers because he feels responsible for the death of his mother, who passed away while giving birth to him. The use of coloured pencil drawings suggests that Rocky's fantasy world is still very much uncharted. He is still of an age where influences of media and popular culture are not as prominent and where, perhaps, insights from the world around him help shape his reading of situations. That is to say, Rocky's fantasies often reflect the danger of situations as opposed to the hopeful optimism we see in Boy's fantasies. Directed towards the absent mother-figure (and his guilt over her death), Rocky's fantasy life ultimately offers a space for reconciling the differences between Alamein and Boy.

As we have seen, all three characters have a creative fantasy life that helps the family negotiate relations with one another. Yet these forms of negotiation come to a head when Alamein's gang abandons him and Boy's image of Alamein as Jackson is disturbed by Alamein's defeat at the hotel and the subsequent death of Leaf. After these events, Boy gets intoxicated on beer and marijuana and recollects scenes from his childhood with his mother, without any presence of Alamein. Boy returns to the shed to confront Alamein with the goat-eaten money and Alamein's absence as a parent.

Interestingly, this climax in narrative tension between Boy and Alamein comes after Rocky has dressed up as a superhero/E.T.-figure and has attempted to bestow healing powers upon Alamein using a sparkler and his magic powers. As Rocky apologises to Alamein for, "what I did to mum", Alamein reaches out to him – to comfort him or to admonish him, it is not clear. Boy walks into the garage while Rocky is being held by Alamein. Boy protects his little brother, putting himself physically in the line of fire by pushing Rocky out of the way and telling Alamein to, "leave him alone". Boy then shows his father the remains of the buried money. As Alamein begins to react, Boy slaps him and continues to physically throw himself upon him aggressively saying, "You weren't there". This is the first time we see Alamein pay attention to Boy as his own child without getting caught up in his own fantasies about himself.

Each character's ability to fashion creative narratives about themselves and each other, signals another theme of *Boy*; the dual-edged nature of the notion of potential. An early scene explicitly addresses the theme of potential. An incident in the classroom

following Boy's class presentation leads to an after-school detention where a teacher, Mr Langston, tells Boy, "Looks like we might have an orator on our hands". Boy doesn't understand what Mr Langston means until the teacher explains the term "kaiwhaikōrero". The reference to whaikōrero signals the power of narrative constructs. Furthermore, Mr Langston draws a connection between Alamein and Boy by describing Alamein as, "full of potential", when he was at school, just like Boy. This scene prefigures the subsequent narrative development when Boy mimics his father and thus signals the risk that he will turn out to be as self-deluded as Alamein when he grows up. This scene between Langston and Boy has an ironic dimension. Langston gives Boy some positive feedback by saying that Boy has the potential to become a great storyteller. However, when Boy asks the teacher what "potential" means, Langston refuses to tell him because the school day has finished and he says, "It's 3:30 mate, I'm off duty". This is where we see the injustices of Boy's situation and his need to find some kind of control in a world where things are often out of his hands.

The link between whaikōrero, storytelling and potential are ideas Waititi embraces himself.<sup>1</sup> In one particular interview Waititi makes reference to Cliff Curtis's investment in encouraging Māori creative talents. As Waititi notes:

[Curtis is] trying to put something back into the community and foster creativity among Māori, because Māori are pretty amazing storytellers – culturally we have a strong oral and storytelling tradition and we've lost that a bit over the years. (2005, 75)

Considering this extra-textual material, we can see the theme of creativity in *Boy* as linking to more traditional skills of oratory and storytelling and thus the positive potential of Boy's imaginative life. Where we see this idea of creative oratory and potential illustrated most explicitly in the film, is through the sparkler motif that continues throughout and which functions as a healing motif between various parties.

The introduction to the sparkler occurs on Alamein's arrival with the Crazy Horses, when he gives the children what appear to be stolen gifts, as they are all largely inappropriate for children. He gifts a box of sparklers to Boy after presenting a fantasy of his

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Lister argues that "Waititi himself is an expert storyteller. Much of his work taps into and celebrates the power of film as a medium for contemporary storytelling". See Pivac (307).

own. This is where we see Alamein engage in his own fantasy and is one of the only times in the film where the fantasy world of Alamein is addressed to the audience. Alamein uses the sparkler to draw a space alien, then a circle and then the words, "FUCK THE WORLD". As the two boys watch the display the audience views their varying reactions. Boy watches with a romantic glow about him, in awe of his long imagined father-fantasies coming to life. Rocky, on the other hand, is less convinced about Alamein's performance and turns to his brother for confirmation of his own reading of the situation. He soon learns that Boy does not feel the same.

Where the initial sparkler sequence demonstrated Alamein's futile efforts as an adult and father-figure, sparklers return in other sequences as a healing motif. For example, Boy offers his friend Dynasty a sparkler as a way of apologising for telling his father about the marijuana plantation; Chardonnay approaches Boy instead of ignoring him when he is playing with sparklers; Alamein puts on a sparkler show upon meeting Boy and Rocky, almost as an appeasement to make up for his absence; and finally the confrontation between Boy, Rocky and Alamein when Rocky approaches Alamein on roller skates with a sparkler in his hand. So the fantasy spaces provided by the sparklers echo the double-edged nature of potential introduced by Mr Langston. The sparkler is then a tool embodying choice; it can be used to write "FUCK THE WORLD" or as a mechanism of reconciliation. Thus, the dual-edged nature of fantasy and potential is also revealed in *Boy*.

The significance of the sparkler is revealed when we consider Waititi's thoughts on creativity; the sparkler as an object itself and Alamein's sparkler presentation.

I think one of the most important things to encourage is creative writing. At some point in our lives we are told to stop writing stories and start writing essays. I think that's crap and definitely screws with someone's creativity. (Macron, 2010)

The wonderment and creative potential of a sparkler as an object not only lies in the artistic flair of the person in control of its drawings, but also in having its audience participate in the show. Believing in the potential it carries to create a picture is key. A child's eyes are the only eyes then that celebrate its potential without questioning why they can't see the picture. Instead, a child will often search for a picture in spite of not being able to see any

trace left behind. In this sequence then, Waititi is asking the audience to indulge in fantasy, play make believe with him, and create what they will out of what they are seeing.

This idea of sharing and participating in creative narrative is most convincingly illustrated towards the end of the film, after Alamein has destroyed parts of the house in an aggressive tantrum and Boy has confronted Alamein with the goat-eaten money. After the children clean up the house and Alamein has disappeared, Boy and Rocky walk along the sea shore on their way to visit their mother's grave. As they walk, Boy tells Rocky that Alamein has now gone to Japan to train as a samurai. The audience then sees a shot of Alamein dressed as a samurai and with a sword. The film then concludes with the two boys finding Alamein sitting at their mothers' grave, full of emotion. As they sit opposite one another, it is almost as if words are not enough to convey the complex tumble of feelings surrounding them all. Rocky has the last words. He looks at Alamein and asks, "How was Japan?" The two young boys then look at each other, Boy with a questioning glance at Rocky. Editing shows a close-up shot of Boy, smilingly uncertainly at his father. The film then ends. In this moment the shared fantasy spaces of Rocky, Boy and Alamein come together and express a mutual understanding that fantasy has played a great role in negotiating their relationships to date, and that perhaps this shared fantasy space might bring them more closely together.

Through creative or fantasy narratives constructed in *Boy* we see how people are able to empower themselves by recreating a positive storyline out of negative situations. We see this reflected in the humorous elements of the film. When advertised, the hilarity of the film was highlighted. Upon reflection after viewing the film, we are able to see how the creative comedy of the film was used as a device to signal the reconstruction of narrative with which the protagonists are empowered. Waititi's 2010 film *Boy* then reminds us of the importance of the meaning of 'create' in the word 'creativity', and furthermore encourages us to see that potential has a double edge. Waititi has been reported as saying "even a stupid story with a message is still doing something" (White, 2005), showing his belief in the personal empowerment possible by telling stories. The three characters discussed in this article access their imagination in varying ways, with a common purpose of escaping traumatic circumstances. While hopeful, the final sequence still leaves the future of their relationship in question, and this noncommittal ending invites the audience to participate in imagining a future for them.



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