

Boy and the Postcolonial Taniwha

Misha Kavka and Stephen Turner

In his book *Our Own Image* (1990), Barry Barclay was cautious about defining what kinds of films Māori might make in the future. Wary of the “what is a Māori film?” question, he imagined the possibility – only slightly tongue-in-cheek – of an unlikely Māori kung fu flick, *The Taiaha Kid*. Expanding the notion of what kinds of films Māori might make is a challenge Barclay posed throughout his career to the New Zealand film and television industry, which he repeatedly criticised for making funding dependent on Māori being ‘Māori’ in the industry’s conception of that category (on a good day, Barry Barclay would throw anything associated with categories on a bonfire). For Barclay, there was always a pistol lying on the table when it came to making Māori film, and the pistol was never his (2006).

No longer with us, given his untimely death in 2008, Barclay is not able to voice his opinion of *Boy*, but we wonder if he would have recognised *Boy* as *The Taiaha Kid*. He would certainly have taken a great interest in the way that this film negotiates its audience, so successfully in fact that it is now the highest-grossing New Zealand film of all time (*Voxy News* 2010). To comprehend its wide appeal, we focus here on a filmic device without which a national celebration of *Boy* may not have been possible. We are not attempting to say anything about the achievement of Taika Waititi and his cast, as the film’s merits do not need pointing out by us. Rather, we wish to address the industrial – or, better, the infrastructural – conditions of the film’s production as manifested in figurative form by what we call the ‘postcolonial taniwha’. This opaque figure recalls the characteristics of a Māori taniwha but is a creature of postcolonial history that works to occlude the attention an audience might otherwise give to the socio-historical conditions of the situation in which the characters in *Boy* find themselves. To say that these conditions are erased from *Boy* indicates not so much a failure on the film’s part as a failure on the country’s part. This, we argue, is a constitutive occlusion or forgetting with which everyone, Māori and Pākehā, must contend.

The postcolonial taniwha is not authentically Māori, but is rather a filmic trope demanded by the conditions of possibility of making a successful Māori film in Aotearoa New Zealand. It works to simultaneously communicate and elide the historical bases of social deprivation amongst Māori that a non-Māori audience is usually not disposed to contemplate, and even refuses to acknowledge if directly addressed. In *Boy*, of course, deprivation is signalled everywhere, but it appears as a 'natural' part of the landscape, encompassing impoverished homes ('a shithole', says Alamein about the family home), derelict houses, ruined cars, collective unemployment, missing mothers, deadbeat fathers, and numerous references to the fantasised wealth of the 'rich', as opposed to local people's lack of money. The roads, for instance, are so evidently poor that Boy finds it hard to ride the bike (presumably stolen) that Alamein has brought, while Rocky's new skates are seemingly redundant given the 'natural' lack of infrastructure in the countryside. These signs themselves, and indeed what they say about issues of rural Māori communities, are less our concern here than the incommunicability of the larger conditions of this poverty, and especially the impossibility of relating such conditions to colonial history. It is no secret in the film that the local situation is blighted; this is noted metaphorically near the very beginning, when Boy's self-introduction in the classroom is followed by the teacher's efforts to engage his class in a discussion of 'the plague' by way of an image of a blighted sheep. What the plague might be is not answered for the class – the lesson is interrupted by Boy's fist-fight with his classroom nemesis¹ – but the sense of a plagued people persists throughout the film. That the blight is lifted by the reunion of Alamein, Boy and Rocky, hallowed by the sardonically upbeat ending to the film, is due in no small way to the postcolonial taniwha, which is integral, indeed structurally necessary, to the happy outcome. This, then, is the figure we will follow.

The postcolonial taniwha helps to articulate a legacy of colonisation without non-Māori appearing to be in any way responsible for the social and natural degradation it caused. In *Boy*, the taniwha appears in the form of Weirido, a character unlike any other in the film, who is neither named nor narrativised. He appears repeatedly—and hence

¹ This moment of editing is not without interest for our argument, since it subtly indicates that Māori in-fighting takes the place of any sustained attention to the historical conditions of the deprivation that plagues Māori communities or, put another way, that (Māori) boys will just be boys, taking out their frustration on each other rather than attempting to understand the sources of that frustration.

tropically—in close proximity to the river, engaged in an endless and unexplained pursuit of poking amongst the driftwood looking for ‘anything’. At first chased away by Boy and a reluctant Rocky, Weirdo reappears in a second encounter with Rocky urging him to whisper because, he says, the water is ‘dangerous’. Taniwha, according to Māori Marsden, are

... dragon-like creatures [who] dwelt in certain localities and could be independent and unattached from the local tribe. As such, they were devourers of men. But where they were attached to the local tribe, they acted as guardians and manifested themselves as animals, fish, birds or reptiles. Strictly speaking, these were not spirits but occult powers created by the psychic force of ancient tribal *tohungas* [sic] and by the *mana* of their creative word, given form and delegated as guardians for the tribe. (19)

Weirdo is evidently handicapped, a condition or disposition that may be associated with having special psychic powers, or seeing differently. In any case, it is clear that Weirdo is unusually attentive to the local land and waters, which he appears to oversee and tend as he pokes about on the shore. Like a taniwha conceived as guardian, the watchful Weirdo will later save Boy from drowning, after he falls, stoned and drunk, into the river from the bridge separating his house from the *urupā* where his mother lies buried. In the subjectively filmed sequence preceding his fall, Boy sits on the railing of the bridge and sees the fantasy world he has hitherto shared with his father literally turned upside-down, as memories of his dying mother *without* his father in the frame² give way to an upside-down shot of the sky, land and water around him. Eliding any rescue scene, the next shot of Boy (after a brief cut to Alamein literally digging a hole for himself in the paddock where he had buried his ‘treasure’) shows him lying on the ground, wet but covered tenderly with a blanket. As he attempts to focus his eyes on a figure sitting by the riverside, a fantasy image of his mum is replaced by a second take: his rescuer is Weirdo, spirit of his dead mother, river guardian and taniwha in one.

² Again, the editing here is important, as an initial sentimental memory of smiling mother and child (Boy) sitting in a *pohutukawa* tree by the river gives way first to an image of the weeping and pregnant mother next to the child, and then to the death scene, with only the bloody feet of the mother visible as the grandmother rocks the newly born Rocky in grief. This last image, framed by the young Boy peeking around the doorway, is a literal replay of Boy’s memory from earlier in the film, except that in its first appearance Boy (mis)remembers a broken and grieving Alamein curled at the foot of the bed. The awareness – brought about by a combination of weed, beer and the taniwha – that his father was not in fact at the birth/death, leads to Boy’s epiphany.

Rocky, the ethereal child who believes his 'special powers' killed his mother, has immediate rapport with Weirido, who confirms the wisdom of seeing differently by telling Rocky that he must use his powers for good, "just like in the comic books". This Rocky later does. Dressed in a homespun superhero costume; with belted red jacket, pillow-slip cape and roller skates, Rocky glides up to Alamein waving a sparkler like a vernacular angel on wheels, offering to absolve Alamein of his guilt for his absence at Rocky's fatal birth. However, absolution is somewhat more complex than this, since Rocky apologises to Alamein for his own role in his mother's death ("sorry for what I did to mum"), thereby modelling acceptance of the tragedy and making Alamein responsive to his own grief at the loss of his partner. This touching scene itself turns on the physical gesture of touch, for Rocky reaches out and lays a childish hand on Alamein's forehead in a gesture reminiscent of the fantasy figure *E.T. (Extra-Terrestrial)*, the alien-child from Spielberg's eponymous film (1982) whose omnipotent touch is earlier mentioned, if not obsessed over, by Alamein ("I seen it four times"). This remains, however, a world turned upside down: alien replaces angel, the child apologises for his birth to his father, and absolution is followed rather than preceded by blame, when Boy suddenly returns from his fall into the water and accuses Alamein of not having been there at his mother's death. Boy's own touch, as he slaps and beats his father, is far less forgiving than Rocky's, although Ocean Ripeka Mercier points out that "both forms of touch bring each relationship to a head" (7).

It might also be said that Weirido is touched. In fact, it is his touch, and his being touched, that sets in motion the endgame of transformation and resolution. He is a *deus ex machina*, an opaque figure whose transformative, albeit peripheral, presence ultimately saves the vexed relationships between Alamein, Boy and Rocky. His transformative powers, however, only work because he is opaque. If we knew his story – indeed, if he were properly embedded in a network of social and narrative relations, as the other characters are – he could not operate outside the actions of the others in order to save Alamein-Boy-Rocky. Unlike an authentic taniwha, however, which is named and known, this one is merely filmic, an essentially structural device given embodiment in order to resolve the core conflict in such a way that the historical, social and material conditions of their situation are not directly addressed.

This is the basis, we would argue, for the appeal that *Boy* undoubtedly has for a national audience. Despite the brilliance of Waititi's filmmaking, we say this with a sense of misgiving. If some Māori felt concerned that an audience might be laughing at Māori in this film, as was indicated at the *Boy* symposium (2011), our Pākehā misgiving – which might be the flipside of the Māori misgiving – is that we are somehow let off the hook of responsibility for the social deprivation that this film confronts us with. It is as though what this film gives misses Pākehā altogether. This is in part to do with the hermetically sealed world of *Boy*, his mates and his whānau. We receive only a glimpse of the outer world in the surreal image of a group of cyclists whizzing by the stoned *Boy* before he falls off the bridge. Like an anamorphic stain on the inner world, to use Lacan's terminology (88-89), the cyclists move so fast across the surface of the image that they are literally out of focus, ungraspable to the naked eye.³ The contrast between the cyclists and the local world is strange and glaring, as if the two worlds were incommensurate, able to occupy the same frame only on different planes, with one laid anamorphically across the other.

In a similarly doubled layering, the focus of the film may be a profound story of healing, but the blind spot of this vision means that non-Māori need not play any role in righting the blighted social setting. They simply whizz over the bridge, unconscious of the river tended by the taniwha below. The filmic taniwha warns all concerned of the danger to be avoided here, which, like *Whale Rider* or *Once Were Warriors*, demands that for the sake of the film's national success Pākehā must not bear any relation to the material and social poverty of the Māori world as depicted. That everything is put right in *Boy* allows us all to be happily 'post'-colonial, but this depends on a structural mechanism which is economic in its function rather than spiritual. If colonisation is a knotted circumstance of violence, this knot cannot but appear in a film where the negative effects of the political economy of settlement are quite evident (see Turner). The hinge-like figure of the postcolonial taniwha crucially connects the interior and exterior stories of what Barclay has called Fourth Cinema, that is, an inner Māori story and an outer story that is more easily grasped by Pākehā.

³ As Margaret Iversen explains, the concept of anamorphosis was introduced by Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, 'where he used the perspectively distorted death's head floating in the foreground of Hans Holbein's famous painting, *The Ambassadors* (1533), to figure the blind spot in conscious perception. Several references to anamorphosis appear in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, where it is used to describe what the geometral (conscious) model of vision necessarily elides' (7).

Amidst his numerous talks and writings, Barclay notes the difficulty of fielding Māori stories when the audience is not wholly or even primarily Māori (2003). The difficulty begins with the appeal or pitch to funders, who sit within an industry that has every interest in Māori film for non-Māori but very little interest in Māori film for Māori. The solution, according to Barclay, involves a double telling; an interior story that Māori will understand more or less well at the heart of an exterior story generically recognisable to non-Māori. Barclay's own first feature film, *Ngāti* (1987), concerns an intra-iwi conflict enfolded in an outer story about the return of the native son who discovers his own 'Māori-ness'. Needless to say, the romantic prodigal-son story is more readily graspable by a non-Māori audience – and more readily fundable by the film industry – than the internecine politics of East Coast Māori at the time of the film's making. Whereas Barclay's more explicitly politicised films obviate the structural need for a postcolonial taniwha, we are interested in how interior and exterior stories come to be threaded together in popular Māori film, and what form they might take when threaded together.

Mercier's reading of *Boy* within a kaupapa Māori framework greatly helps us here (2010). While ownership of mātauranga Māori must lie beyond our ken as Pākehā researchers, we are heavily indebted to Mercier for opening up the wealth of insight that this framework makes possible. Her reading points out the existence of an inner story, or interiority, which remains relatively inaccessible to non-Māori, but allows us to see the film work of the outer story and the function of the figure of the postcolonial taniwha. Mercier sees the film as unfolding a five-step process that follows the pōwhiri on the marae ātea. The film first offers the karanga, in which Boy's introduction of himself welcomes us to his world. The second phase is the whaikōrero, which lays out the kaupapa or issues of the film by way of the delegated orators, or central characters. Indeed his teacher, Mr Langston, thinks Boy is an orator like his father, and that he has 'potential'. The third phase is the koha, an exchange or sacrifice, which reciprocates the manaakitanga of the hau kainga, where Boy (representing the hau kainga) loses his beloved goat, Leaf, after Alamein (the manuhiri) runs him over on a drunken drive home. The next element is the hariru, where the important sense of touch brings manuhiri and hau kainga together as Rocky 'triggers' Alamein's real hurt by ritualistically touching his forehead. The final element is kai, a coming together in which the tapū is lifted and the danger of encounter dissipated. In the *Thriller/Poi E* 'hybrid

haka' that accompanies the closing credits, the kai and waiata are interwoven, says Mercier (7). The haka is thus not just comic genius, but perfectly fulfills the trajectory of a pōwhiri-themed Māori film. This is what Barclay called the 'interiority' of Māori film, which is to be distinguished from the 'surface features' or 'accidents' that merely constitute its exteriority, such as 'rituals, the language, the posturing, the décor, the use of elders, the presence of children, attitudes to land, the rituals of a spirit world' (2003, 7).

As opposed to the kaupapa Māori story, the outer story in *Boy* is fleshed out by references to popular culture (such as Michael Jackson, the novel *Shōgun* (1975), the film *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* and the 1979-85 television series *The Dukes of Hazzard*) and by the all too familiar imagery of rural and gang-patched Māori, here given a comic twist. Waititi's cartooning of 80s culture and Māori stereotyping works to good effect, while also delivering a healing story according to a more traditional Māori pattern. Mercier's careful attention to the elements of this Māori pattern alerts us to the hinge between the inner and outer dimensions that allows a properly Māori story to be fielded also by a non-Māori audience. This requires a figure that plays no role in the pōwhiri, resembling instead a creature, the taniwha, that is both not of this world and visible to outsiders. In keeping with his commitment to the Māori story, Waititi no doubt wanted to make his taniwha real, rather than the disembodied, often-scorned mystical entity of middle-New Zealand outrage that blocks the building of roads and prisons, and otherwise halts national progress (consider, for instance, the 2002 protests at Ngawha).

We have already noted the hinge-like capacity of Weirido as taniwha. Otherworldly in Māori terms, we think he is structurally useful for Pākehā audiences in the sense of turning social deprivation into a 'natural' landscape. Within a political economy perspective, this gnarled figure articulates, or rather disarticulates, the knotted circumstances of violently colonising settlement. The problems that the central characters in *Boy* face are ultimately seen to lie within themselves, chalked up to boys being boys and Māori being Māori, rather than in the historical and material conditions of settlement. While these may not be the focus of the film, the unifying force of the final element of the pōwhiri, where Jackson meets Pātea Māori Club, is somewhat forestalled by the audience's forgetting. Local people are no doubt aware of what has happened, which has so reduced their 'potential', but a larger audience may well be distracted by the entertainment of locals, not to mention

distracted by local people *as* entertainment (playing stereotypical conceptions of oneself for laughs is a local problem that is at least as old as the comedy of Billy T James, itself briefly referenced in *Boy* as the children laugh at James on TV while doing the washing up). The postcolonial taniwha, we suggest, is the pistol on the table, the *sine qua non* of a national popular story without which Māori content cannot be articulated.

We see the same taniwha figure at work elsewhere, such as in *The Strength of Water* (2009), another moving story of healing that relates and simultaneously occludes the conditions of loss and conflict, this time through a taniwha figured as a mongrel dog that drives the prodigal son to bear the blame for the death of the Māori community's favourite daughter. Films made by Pākehā which touch on the historical and material reality of colonisation are differently opaque. Lacking an inner sense of broken Māori history, they throw up, according to Allen Meek (43-61), giant-like figures that are congealed images of primitivism and savagery, evidenced for instance in the symbolically martyred figure of Niki Takao lying naked on a deserted street in Vincent Ward's *Rain of the Children* (2008).⁴ While it may be that no New Zealand filmmaker has so significantly misapprehended colonial history as Vincent Ward, who recasts the past-in-the-present of Tūhoe as the curse of an old woman and thereby puts that past to bed and makes himself at peace, this does raise the question of whether the colonial past is similarly misapprehended in *Boy*.

Waititi's comedy has an entirely different tone to Ward's self-alienated and lachrymose paint-overs, but the more important difference is that the colonial realities which underlie the social landscape of *Boy* are not so much misapprehended as obliquely referenced. For instance, having realised that he went too far in angrily stripping Boy of the 'Crazy Horses' gang jacket that his son had borrowed in order to be more like his father, Alamein comically pops up at the window of the boys' bedroom to apologise. In a sense, the apology is the closest anyone in the film comes to a reflection on the frustrations caused by colonial history:

I'm under a lot of stress at the moment, got a lot goin' on, y'know. People trying to bring me down and shit, the government mainly – and others. And I'm getting frustrated, y'know, can't find my shit.

⁴ Olivia Macassey makes insightful use of Meek's notional giant in her sharp-eyed exposure of Ward's tactical avoidance of colonialism (3-7).

Alamein's plea for forgiveness resonates with Meek's giant figure, in part because he is literally perched on the shoulders of one of his gang members but also because he can only understand himself in terms of *The Incredible Hulk* (1978-82) of 80s popular culture:

Sorry I am like I am sometimes. Get angry, a bit like *the Hulk*. He gets angry. He is usually helping people, but sometimes he loses control. He's not a bad guy. Mainly he's a good guy. Think you can handle having the *Incredible Hulk* for a dad?

This knotted talk suggests at once a necessary obliquity where a non-Māori audience is concerned, and the wish for a Golem-like figure that might secure Māori community and flourishing.

That community proves key to the reunion of Alamein, Boy and Rocky in the urupā in the film's final shot. In his own earlier moment of realisation, Rocky sees a picture of the local marae – the only such image we see of it in the film – and recognises that Alamein *was* once there, although later absent during his mother's death. The grainy photos of the marae bespeak a historical and social reality of community that remains interior to the film, whereas Waititi, Billy T James-like, otherwise plays the local landscape for laughs. We are not so sure, however, whether Pākehā can truly share the sense of community that all are given to feel in the closing credits, since the role they have played in what has happened here is so occluded. It is unclear whether the promise of the film's epigraph, taken from Spielberg's *E.T.* – “You could be happy here . . . We could grow up together” – offers to absolve Pākehā from the historical responsibility of having forced a situation of “grow[ing] up together” or promises a collective maturity to come. In effect, it is impossible to be earnest where *Boy* is concerned, since the humour is so infectious and irrepressible, but our misgivings beg the question of the authenticity of everyone being “happy here”. New Zealand film, little helped by the poverty of criticism and a national drive to self-celebration, may itself be an extended form of misgiving about such happiness, at least until a political economy of the ‘we’ who could grow up together no longer requires a pistol on the table, or a fabricated taniwha, to mediate real encounter and exchange.

Misha Kavka teaches film, television, and media studies at the University of Auckland. She is the author of two books on reality television (Palgrave 2008 and Edinburgh University Press

2012), and the co-editor, with Jennifer Lawn and Mary Paul, of *Gothic New Zealand (Otago 2006)* and, with Elisabeth Bronfen, of *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century (Columbia 2001)*. She has published extensively on New Zealand film, television studies and gender studies.

Stephen Turner teaches in the English Department at the University of Auckland. He has published numerous articles on the settlement and history of Aotearoa New Zealand, and is currently working on a manuscript concerned with First (Indigenous law) and settler society. With Sean Sturm, also at Auckland, he has also co-written articles about issues of pedagogy, writing and the university.

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