Shaking the Frame:
Taika Waititi's Anti-Anthropological Edge

Jo Smith

Peter Debruge's *Variety* review for *Boy*, which bemoaned the film's lack of an "arthouse-ready anthropological edge" (2010), reveals the ongoing expectations placed upon Māori creatives to represent a particular notion of Indigeneity. According to Debruge, Waititi's investment in 1980s global culture (pop icon Michael Jackson and American television series such as *Dallas* (1978-1991)) empties out a more desirable (read authentically traditional) form of Indigenous cultural expression. Tammy Davis, a notable Māori actor (who played Munter in NZ TV series *Outrageous Fortune*), posted an online response to Debruge's review, asking the reviewer:

> What culturally specific aspects were you missing? Were young Māori in the early 80s too busy learning to keen and chant and wail to be concerned with schoolyard crushes and the phenomenon that was Jackson? Then I'm afraid to say I am a let down of a Māori, because in the 80s this was all there was for me. (Hulme 2010)

A film with an "arthouse-ready anthropological edge" is one that tells non-Māori something about Indigeneity in an aesthetically pleasing and easily consumable way (think Niki Caro's 2002 *Whale Rider*). Debruge's remarks assume a highly prescriptive notion of what an Indigenous filmmaker must provide, revealing a set of expectations indebted to the Western tradition of anthropology—dedicated to teaching the West about "the rest" —and a global market hungry for exotic forms of cultural difference.

Alternately, Tammy Davis's comment about the role played by a global pop icon in his East Coast childhood experience gestures to the ways in which global popular cultural imaginings can fuel those Indigenous cultural contexts and Indigenous modes of being, knowing and doing; disrupted and irrevocably transformed by processes of colonisation. As such, it is a perverse thing that Debruge desires in relation to *Boy* in that his wish for anthropological elements wilfully forgets the devastating effects of colonisation on a people's life worlds.

Debruges' desired authenticity restricts Waititi's creative expressions to severely circumscribed areas of practice; it imposes unrealistic expectations on a filmmaker with whakapapa, and demonstrates a tacit refusal to examine the reviewer's own relationship to things Indigenous. Why box in Waititi's creative expressions using a tired dichotomy between authentic cultural "tradition" and the allegedly tainting effects of global popular culture? Why can Debruge not see Waititi's refusal to deliver more domesticated ideas of Indigenous culture as an expression of the endlessly transformative dimensions of Indigenous articulations?[1] Could there not be aspects of an anti-anthropological 'edge' to *Boy* that simultaneously draw on vernacular culture *and* global popular cultural references to underscore the role that the imagination plays in the lives of adults and children alike? As I will argue, *Boy*'s dual investment in global popular culture and aspects of te ao Māori shakes orthodox interpretative frameworks surrounding Indigenous cultural producers and invites its audience to learn to listen anew to expressions of (and from) te ao Māori.

RECURRING THEMES IN WAITITI'S FILMS

To date, Taika Waititi has consistently disrupted expectations of what it might mean to be an Indigenous filmmaker. Waititi, born in 1975, is not only a filmmaker he is a painter and photographer, and an established actor and comedian, working under the name of Taika Cohen.[2] Waititi's engagement with popular press consistently undoes orthodox expectations by emphasising his multi-talented, high energy and offbeat character. His irreverent public persona (demonstrated by his pretending to be asleep at the Academy Awards when being announced as a nominee) provides a refreshing change from those nationalist discourses that often accompany New Zealand film production.[3] Waititi also displays what Aaron Lister calls "a canny awareness and negotiation of" the presuppositions underpinning the category of "Māori artist" (47). The tendency to read works produced by Māori artists solely in terms of an

[1] Aspects of this discussion appear in "Framing *Parade*", a chapter in Marco Songovini's *Covering Parade*, forthcoming from Waiteata Press.

[2] For a more detailed discussion of *Two Cars, One Night,* see my essay 'Bicultural Temporalities: time and place in *Two Cars, One Night*' (2008: 44-59).

[3] I have in mind here the celebratory nationalistic discourses surrounding film projects such as Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy where New Zealand landscapes and labour became the hidden grounds for a Middle Earth global spectacle.

Indigenous dimension is a tendency that Waititi seeks to gain distance from, even as his short film *Two Cars, One Night* (2003) appeared in the 'Native Forum' section of the Sundance Film Festival and his own childhood experiences on the East Coast of the North Island are drawn upon in this film and then extended in *Boy*. One could say that Waititi's negotiation of the popular press carves out a space within and *against* prevailing norms that define Māori creatives. A key strategy Waititi uses to push against the frames that define him as Māori is to assert the universal themes of his films. For example, Waititi emphasises the universal application of the themes in *Two Cars, One Night*. Describing the empty car park outside a pub and the three children who wait for their parents to finish drinking, Waititi says of this setting:

> That situation is universal […] no matter what race you are, or your socio-economic origins. Everyone has been left somewhere by an adult. The film is trying to deal with that sort of thing – the feeling of being left, coupled with being a kid trying to create your own world. (Campbell)

This attention to the human experience of abandonment chimes with the universal themes of other New Zealand-made films such as Niki Caro's *Whale Rider*. A dual investment in the local *and* the global is also evident in *Whale Rider* in its use of local histories and cultural practices (taiaha, whakapapa and Witi Ihimaera's novel) in combination with a three-act structure and coming-of-age themes typical of many Hollywood films. However, where *Whale Rider* deploys a very didactic mode of address to explain local elements to a global audience (the subtitling functions in this way in particular), *Boy* makes a more implicit appeal to the local that asks its audience to lean in a little more to pick up on these nuances. This sense of having to lean in, or sit quietly to watch what unfolds, is particularly evident in Waititi's second short film *Tama Tū* (2004).

In *Tama Tū,* six young soldiers wait in a bombed building for night to fall so they can escape under cover of darkness. Promotional material for the film describes the themes of *Tama Tū* in the following manner:

> Six Māori Battalion soldiers wait for night to fall in the ruins of a ruined Italian home. Forced into silence they keep themselves amused like any boys would, with jokes and laughter. As they try and ignore the reminders of war around them, a tohu (sign) brings them back to the world of

> the dying. They gather to say a karakia (prayer) to unite their spirits before they head back into the dark of war. Even at war…boys will be boys.[4]

Firmly situated within the international genre of war films, *Tama Tū* is perhaps the film where Waititi draws most explicitly on things Māori even as it oscillates between the specificities of local and global themes. For example, as a film that depicts youthful members of the Māori Battalion, *Tama Tū* reminds its local audience of the sacrifices made by these young men, the trauma they experienced and the subsequent role played by the Māori Battalion in narratives of New Zealand nationhood. But it is also a short film that depicts the universal dimensions of war, trauma and masculinity *in general* and it is easily translatable to a global audience. Evidence of this global appeal can be found in the three festival awards received by the filmmaker.[5] The film also underscores the coping strategies and modes of humour available to young men in general, but also specifically to te ao Māori. That is to say, many of the gags invoke humour based upon the body that can be recognisable to a general audience. However, the exaggerated eyebrow-raising sequence (a typical Māori greeting that involves eyebrow movements with a raised chin) references a more local knowingness that might only be recognisable to a New Zealand audience. Without doubt, the tohu and the final karakia the soldiers invoke before leaving their shelter, are signs of cultural practices specific to te ao Māori, whose meaning and significance is not easily readable to the non-Māori audience. This persistent oscillation between the particularities of local culture and an engagement with more global popular cultural forms is also evident in Waititi's first feature film *Eagle vs Shark* (2007).

Vivien Silvey situates *Eagle vs Shark* as part of a recent trend in American independent cinema for main protagonists who are ostensibly adults but who behave like adolescents (2008, 142). These 'permachildren' films often include nostalgic reference to 1980s and early 1990s popular culture and feature characters that appear as children trapped in adult bodies. Silvey includes *Eagle vs Shark* among such films as *Napoleon Dynamite* (Jared Hess, 2004),

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[4] See Aio Film Ltd. *Tama Tū*. 2005. <http://www.tamatu.co.nz/film.html>.

[5] These awards include Second Place Audience Award – *National Geographic All Roads Festival* 2004; Honorable Mention in Short Filmmaking – *Sundance Film Festival* 2005 and The Special Jury Prize - *Berlin Film Festival* 2005.

Thumbsucker (Mike Mills, 2005) and *Superbad* (Greg Mottola, 2007) and she outlines the politically regressive implications (in the case of *Eagle vs Shark*, the gendered dimensions) of drawing on the motif of the permachild as an anti-hero figure. Yet, even as *Eagle vs. Shark* seemingly makes a global appeal to an independent cinematic trend, Waititi's attention to the specificities of characterisation, place and time makes this film a very local New Zealand film. Perhaps not a Māori film as such (as Barry Barclay has argued, such a question [what is a Māori film?] is an adolescent one), *Eagle vs Shark* still portrays a particular type of humour, and pays attention to vernacular culture in ways that express a sense of the local. Waititi describes the film in the following way:

> It's definitely the humour that makes this film. It's what I call smart New Zealand humour, more subtle than obvious yet even people overseas who have seen only a little totally get it. They may laugh at different moments but for me it reaffirmed that our stories can be enjoyed by everyone. And I really want to make films that New Zealanders can be proud of. I'm not limiting myself to making films just in New Zealand but I like that my country can have a film that's actually about them, a film they can relate to and enjoy. (New Zealand Film Commission, 2010)

Silvey's 'permachild' theme is also present in the characterisation of Alamein in *Boy* and these universal elements do not stop there. *Boy* also features a certain kind of trafficking between the particularities of growing up in Waihau Bay in the 1980s and a more global love of a pop icon such as Jackson and American popular culture. This continuous trafficking between the local and the global in Waititi's work suggests a form of cinematic practice that uses universal themes and global cultural references to revisit orthodox representations of Indigenous experience with a renewed sense of energy and engagement.[6]

Take, for example, the final sequence of *Boy*, which some audiences have described as Waititi's koha to his audience.[7] After experiencing a mix of drama, comedy and pathos in the

[6] Aaron Lister has argued that Waititi's feature films "simultaneously exalt in and mock the way we weave stories around ourselves and others and are closely attuned to the role popular culture plays in shaping those fantasies". See 'Taika Waititi' in Pivac et al (2011, 307).

[7] Some participants of the 2010 VUW *Boy* Symposium made this observation. The author acknowledges that the talk at this Symposium underpins much of this current discussion. Mention should be made too, of Ocean Ripeka Mercier's reference to this scene as part of a modern day hariru ritual where the end

actual feature, the final sequence of *Boy* involves inter-textual references to Jackson's *Thriller* music video (1982) mixed with a loving re-enactment of the video of the 1984 hit song *Poi E* made famous (in New Zealand at least, but with some international impact) by the Pātea Māori Club. While this sequence can be seen as part of a current trend for self-reflexive end credit sequences (the most obvious comparison being Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (2009), I would like to suggest that Waititi's *Poi E* sequence provides clues as to how to read all that has gone on before it, and helps us to think through, in more general terms, Indigenous creative practices.

POI E, MICHAEL JACKSON AND *BOY*

The final sequence of *Boy* involves a loving homage to two significant popular cultural moments from both local and global contexts. The music and lyrics to the dance sequence reference the creative work of Māori language pioneer Ngoi Pēwhairangi, musician Dalvanius Prime, and Taranaki-based kapa haka group, the Pātea Māori Club. The video's choreography and mise-en-scene draw on Jackson's ground-breaking music videos from the *Thriller* album (1982). It could be said that each of these music events inaugurated new articulations of cultural and racial identity. Jackson's 1983 *Billie Jean* video (referenced in the main feature film of *Boy* and part of the *Thriller* album cover art) raised the profile of a nascent MTV video channel and was the first video by an African American musician to gain regular airing. In 1984, *Poi E* stayed in the New Zealand music charts for 22 weeks and captured the imagination of the nation. The lyrics to *Poi E* derived from a Māori action song but were delivered over a synthesised, drum-heavy beat drawing heavily on popular American music of the time. This contemporaneous feel was augmented by the accompanying video which featured the Pātea Māori Club performing Māori kapa haka alongside Māori and Pacific Island youth performing elements of American street dances such as 'breaking,' 'popping' and 'locking.'[8] Music academic, Tony Mitchell, argues that *Poi E* was the first Māori hip-hop/rap-inspired music event

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sequence functions as a form of kai which returns participants of the ritual of encounter to a state of noa. See her essay 'Welcome to My Interesting World: Pōwhiri Styled Encounter in *Boy*'. *Illusions* 42 (2010): 3-7. Web.

[8] My grateful thanks to April Henderson for her useful comments on the popular music aspect of this article.

to gain national commercial success (30). Waititi's strategic re-articulation of these popular cultural events in *Boy* provides a heuristic device through which we might understand the main body of *Boy* and contemporary Indigenous creative practices differently.

After the final poignant grave-side exchange between Rocky, Boy and Alamein (as described in Bianca Daniell's article in this issue), the end credits bring up the three names of the characters involved in the film. Then the soundtrack to *Poi E* begins and an onscreen close up of Taika Waititi as Alamein/Michael Jackson flashes on to the screen. Alamein/Taika directly addresses the camera and wears an approximation of Jackson's iconic red *Beat It* (1983) jacket. He advances towards the camera and leads a team of cast members as kapa haka performers who mix iconic Jackson moves with elements of haka and poi, all set to the original 1984 recording. All three characters (Rocky, Boy and Alamein/Waititi) are central to this end sequence, but it is Waititi who dominates. While other cast members directly address the camera and thus signal a break between the diegesis of the feature film and this self-reflexive end sequence, Waititi maintains a connection to the character of Alamein. The tension between the self-reflexive knowingness of the other performers, and Waititi/Alamein's fusion, forms the backbone of *Boy*'s political potential.

If I have claimed that Waititi's re-enactment of *Poi E* and Jackson iconography provides a frame through which we might understand Indigenous creative practices anew, what new understandings might emerge? If Peter Debruge's *Variety* review yearns for the expression of traditional cultural practices, perhaps he expected to witness an authentic kapa haka performance, or to hear a constant stream of te reo Māori. The final sequence does indeed offer a form of haka, but it is one mixed with the signature moves of Jackson and intertextual references to *Thriller*, and performed to the soundtrack of *Poi E*. This strategic mixing of local and global cultural references includes a combination of traditional and contemporary practices that brings the past into the present and breaks with the diegesis of the film to highlight the difference between actors and characters. As Ocean Ripeka Mercier argues, "Waititi's hybrid haka reminds us of the pretend nature of the film" (2010).

This overt self-reflexivity at the end of the film offers a useful framework for thinking about *Boy* in its entirety, as well as the emergence of global Indigenous cinema more generally.[9] If the end sequence reminds us that this is just a performance, this self-reflexive gesture lays bare those orthodox framings that hope for an expression of authentic Indigenous traditional experience (Debruge's anthropological 'edge'). If Debruge's wish for an 'edge' refers to an Indigenous film somehow having something *new* to say to world-weary international arthouse cinema-goers; *Boy*'s 'edge' comes from its self-reflexive end sequence which gestures to the frameworks surrounding notions of Indigenous performance, even as it simultaneously draws on cultural tradition to underscore the affective and productive dimensions of media culture in general. That is to say, while playful, knowing and self-reflexive, the end sequence also expresses an intense set of affects that cannot be denied. After the melodrama of the main feature film, this end sequence offers a joyful and ferocious expression of Indigeneity that draws on existing Indigenous frameworks in a renewed fashion.

Boy's tactic of drawing on local vernacular culture and tradition can be seen most clearly in Waititi's end credit haka performance. The intensity and commitment he demonstrates in his performance can be related to performance ideals and aesthetic judgement from te ao Māori. According to Nathan Matthews, the haka is linked to three concepts: ihi, wehi and wana (2004). Broadly stated, ihi refers to the power and potency of the performance; wehi is the response inaugurated by this performance; and wana is the condition created by the combination of these encounters. In *Boy*'s hybrid haka the call, response and subsequent commingling of forces depends on a productive slippage between the visual and aural dimensions of a haka performance and the citing of iconic moves from global pop celebrity Jackson. This slippage between local and global culture (a slippage also coded into Jackson's performance of ethnicity and gender) renews the aesthetic criteria surrounding the haka by making appeals to a more global form of charismatic performance (the Jackson iconography).

[9] I have in mind here the similarly self-reflexive gestures of Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn's Inuit film *The Journals of Knud Rassmusen* (2006). In this film, hand-held cinematography, direct-to-camera dialogue and the foregrounding of recording technologies all function to remind the audience that this film is an historical re-enactment of events and a carefully staged performance of an Inuit past and its response to the spiritual violence of Euro-Christian contact.

There is a politic to this end sequence and the slippage between tradition and global pop culture that chimes with the intent and purpose of *Poi E*. In the mid 1980s, language activist Pēwhairangi asked Dalvanius Prime how he might teach the younger generation to be proud to be Māori. Prime believed that one could capture the imagination of the younger generation by drawing on both rural roots and urban influences and he came up with a musical score to Pēwhairangi's lyrics that did just that. The music video accompanying the song also featured break-dancers, New Romantics and, most notably, a main dancer wearing two white gloves in direct homage to Jackson. As Mitchell writes:

> [*Poi E's*] absorption of elements of rap and hip-hop culture into a tradition of Māori popular-music provides an example of both the syncretism of Indigenous musical cultures and the Indigenisation of rap in seemingly remote ethnic contexts. (281)

This syncretic practice has a long history in relation to te ao Māori and, importantly, Waititi invokes this tradition in his end sequence to *Boy* as well as his remake of the *Poi E* music video. In many ways, Waititi's homage to *Poi E,* the haka and Jackson invokes a form of media whakapapa that stays true to the experiences of growing up Māori in the 1980s on the East Coast of New Zealand as well as to the longer history of Māori media as invoked by the *Poi E* phenomenon. If Debruge's lament for an "arthouse-ready anthropological edge" to *Boy* threatens to contain the possibilities of what an Indigenous creative might be able to do and say, Waititi's end sequence to *Boy* wilfully refuses to be contained by such orthodoxies. The power of the imagination and the creative and productive potential of popular culture are affirmed in this final sequence; and echo Simon Frith's observations about the ways in which popular culture (in his case, music) can be a mechanism for fuelling individual and social identities. As Mitchell writes:

> Simon Frith has pointed out the fallacies involved in looking for direct reflection of identity or place in music; rather, musical practices need to be interpreted as processes through which identity is actively imagined, created and constructed. (302)

Some audiences and reviewers assume that Indigenous creatives will always provide a direct representation of orthodox understandings of Indigeneity (honed and shaped by non-

Indigenous modes of knowing). The *Thriller/Poi E* homage demonstrates how Indigenous identity is always "actively imagined, created and constructed", and it gestures to the longer histories of syncretic cultural practices. The political significance of this kind of popular cultural mixing derives from the affective "push and pull" dimensions of such performances. Simultaneously drawn into the local through iconography of a more global kind, there is a challenge in Waititi's end sequence, as much as there is a koha for the audience. In activating this link between a film and its audience (its ihi, wehi and wana), the *Thriller/Poi E* homage calls its audience into an aesthetically based relationship that holds the potential to provoke new kinds of questions from its audiences: questions not wedded to a search for authenticity, but rather, questions that are directed at the curious contradictions invoked by such Indigenous screen practices. While Indigenous practitioners strive to articulate their visions of the world, audiences, film critics and academics must equally strive to shake the frameworks of orthodox interpretations surrounding things Indigenous.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Sally Milner for her invaluable advice and feedback on earlier drafts of this article as well as her assistance with aspects of this special issue.

Jo Smith (Kāi Tahu) is a senior lecturer in the Media Studies programme at Victoria University of Wellington. She researches in the area of postcolonial media theory, Indigenous media and new media studies. She has published work on DVD technologies, postcolonial cultural politics, and the Indigenous broadcaster, Maori Television. She is currently working on a project (with Sue Abel) about the emergence and significance of Māori Television (funded by a Marsden grant 2012-2014).

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