A Short Commentary on *Boy*

Leonie Pihama

When I was asked to write a commentary for this special issue I reflected on the fact that for some time I have not engaged in media or film analysis. After writing analyses of *Once Were Warriors* (1994) and *The Piano* (1993) I came to the view that only certain films would be considered fundable within this country. They would be films that echoed either a deficit/deprivation approach; or affirmed the dominant colonial gaze of Māori as 'savage'; or again maintained a filmic process of decontextualisation of our experiences as Māori; or all of these things. Sadly, there are few films that include stories about Māori that move beyond these types of approaches to Māori representation.

Having read the articles in this issue I find analysis provided that engages these concerns, the same concerns I have expressed over the past 20 years. However, there are also terms and analyses that I find problematic. The use of the term 'postcolonial taniwha' is one that disturbed me immediately, as the term 'postcolonial' will always be problematic within a context of the ongoing occupation of Indigenous lands by our colonisers. It makes no sense to me to juxtapose the term 'postcolonial' as an illusionary concept in Aotearoa, with the reality that are 'taniwha'. The existence of taniwha as spiritual guardians in multiple realms for whānau, hapū and iwi are predominantly dismissed by Pākehā as 'imaginary', 'make believe' or 'fictitious', whilst the notion of 'postcolonialism' is articulated as a legitimate understanding and valid description of relationships within this country. The twist in such use of the terms appears to reflect the dysfunctional relationships of power that continue to exist both in Aotearoa generally and within the academy specifically.

There also exists some angst in this issue in regards to how the film *Boy* may be defined. Reference is made to Barry Barclay and how he might have seen the production in regards to notions of Fourth Cinema and definitions of what constitutes a Māori film. For me, there is no doubt that *Boy* is a Māori movie by anyone's definition: it is written, directed and produced by Māori. It is a story of a Māori whanau and is located within what is an identifiable Māori community. What *Boy* is *not* is a Kaupapa Māori movie, as in essence it maintains and reproduces some of the basic stereotypical views of what it means to be

Māori, and in particular, what it means to be a Māori man. As such, any Kaupapa Māori analysis of the film cannot assume that any shape or supposed reflection of Māori structure or protocol within the film is done consciously or deliberately as there is no indication of that from any of those involved in the creation and production of the film. What *Boy* does is remind us that for Māori films to be supported within this country there remains an expectation that the film must not only be palatable to a non-Māori audience, but that it will, as with past films, continue to absolve any Pākehā contribution to the ongoing marginalisation and impoverishment of our people within contemporary New Zealand society. In contributing to this issue I have chosen to provide here a reflection that I wrote days after my viewing of the film in 2010. This writing has sat on my computer untouched for two years. This is its entry into the world of light. Ngā mihi.

2010 REFLECTIONS

For the past weeks I heard many positive comments and reviews of the new Taika Waititi movie *Boy*. In my usual manner I waited for the movie audiences to thin out before venturing to see this new film. My daughter accompanied me to an early afternoon viewing. This was the fifth time she had seen the film and she knew nearly every comic line by heart. I was excited by the prospect of seeing a movie that has been developed by Māori for the world. As the opening sequence flashed up on to the screen I could feel myself waiting eagerly for what was described in a TVNZ review as:

> Poignant, hilarious and heartfelt - and unmissable, *Boy* is a beaut piece of New Zealand rural nostalgia, crammed full of funny moments and heartbreak as the reality of Boy's life starts to take sharp focus in this coming of age vignette from Waititi. (Bevan, 2010)

And which TV 3 Reviewer Kate Rodger noted:

> It feels like a while since I smiled this wide and felt this good watching any film, kiwi or otherwise. It was a great feeling. Go see *Boy*. It's choice. (2010)

Being from Taranaki the opening sequence accompanied by the Pātea Māori Club hit *Poi E* was familiar and fun. The *E.T.* (*The Extra-Terrestrial* 1982) quote provided the quirkiness that one has come to expect from any Waititi film. My own children had told me about the

opening and how funny it was to see a Kuia in the car saying goodbye to her mokopuna and to then see them all pushing the car for it to jump-start.

Pushing cars in that manner was something I remembered as a common occurrence of that time. But the fun of this scene disappeared as the Kuia drove away and left all the mokopuna to fend for themselves for a week. At that point the familiarity merged with all the negative stereotypes of our people that have been the basis for so many films in this country. And sadly that feeling never changed for the remainder of the film. Rather, I sat wondering why such a film even needed to be made. Earlier reflections of *Once Were Warriors* came flooding back. I had entered into the world of lame stereotypes yet again and felt an instant disappointment. That is not to say that there was not some great acting, particularly on the part of the Māori children and clearly Waititi is a good performer in his own right. However, by the end of the movie I felt like I had sat through a rural based *Once Were Warriors*.

Yes, there were fewer gangs, less leather, less urban angst but everything else rang true to the negativity that '*Warriors*' presented to the world 16 years ago. Clearly Waititi himself does not see the comparisons to Lee Tamahori's 1994 film. As one commentator noted:

> Waititi, who in person displays a stand-up performer's sensibility, fires in "Boy" a spear of social comment that he tips with comedy. Asked at the post-screening Q&A about how he wanted to depict the Māoris [sic] in his film, he responded, "We get portrayed two ways, like the [goons] in [the 1994 New Zealand family epic] 'Once Were Warriors.' Or we get shown as the blue people in 'Avatar.' I wanted to show that we are normal, awkward people -- Indigenous geeks. (Zeitchik, 2010)

Interesting comments from the director; however, it is difficult to see how Waititi's representation of Māori as "normal, awkward, Indigenous geeks" differs significantly from the *Once Were Warriors* "goons". The only significant difference is the rural, seaside setting. Apart from that we still get the major stereotypes:

- Māori children left to fend for themselves;
- Māori children who are neglected, live in poverty and have to struggle against parties and alcohol for dinner;

- Māori men who are clearly shown as useless, who lie, bludge, steal, party and smoke dope;
- Māori fathers who desert their whānau and return only to get what they can take;
- Māori women who are mean spirited and bossy; and
- Māori boys who supposedly adore their father but at the first opportunity steal from them.

So, how exactly does this differ from *Once Were Warriors*? Another reviewer, Andrew Hedley, suggests that*, "Boy* moves from comedic into more serious territory but, for once, we are not seeing onscreen Māori as hampered by domestic violence or mired in spiritual guff" (2010). Such review comments indicate a clear lack of knowledge in regards to the multi-levelled way in which domestic violence is perpetuated. The reviewer assumes that domestic violence is solely about physical violence. This could not be farther from the reality of domestic violence, which includes everyday emotional and psychological abuse faced, primarily, by women and children. The second comment that Māori are not being represented as "mired in spiritual guff" is equally uninformed. What exactly are the scenes around the urupā, if not spiritual or at least an attempt at placing some reflection and spiritual essence into the space of that whānau? This review also brings to the fore the assumption that films about Māori should only be about what is palatable to non-Māori, and that the spiritual essence of our being is 'too much'. Yet, the power of such an essence is clearly shown in Māori films such as Barry Barclay's *Ngāti* (1987) and Merata Mita's *Mauri* (1988).

The question needs to be posed then, as to how exactly *Boy* has become the movie that is promoted as "a beaut piece of New Zealand rural nostalgia" when the film continues to perpetuate earlier representation of Māori as 'deprived natives' who are alcohol and drug-driven, as well as neglectful, criminal and generally deficient in every way? If that is what makes the "best comedy film" in this country then the future of Māori film is going to be a very depressing one.

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