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## **Maori Arts as Film Art: An Analysis of Ritual and Myth in *Whale Rider*, *Once Were Warriors* and *Te Rua***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyses three key films of the Maori Renaissance, which, in addition to being art forms in themselves, depict ritual song, traditional dance, martial arts, tattoos, carvings, and mythical storytelling. Moreover each film has both drawn from and generated debate about the roles of religion, ritual and cultural performance in the negotiation of resources and identity for indigenous peoples against a background of post-colonial late capitalism. In *Once Were Warriors*, the central problem is conceived in terms of a loss of the traditional means of disciplining male aggression and attempts to re-vitalize them, including the teaching of *haka* (war dance) and the martial arts of *taiaha* (spear) to young offenders and the adoption of tattoos resembling traditional *moko* by local gangs. *Whale Rider* in contrast, has a peaceful rural setting but also emphasizes the teaching of *haka* to young males as an initiatory rite for potential leaders. Both films have been criticized for their emphasis on gender and their silence regarding economic and political forces, although *Whale Rider's* enactment of mythical connections between human and animal communities suggests subtlety in the transmission of animist religion. *Te Rua*, exploring Maori efforts to repatriate ancestral carvings from European museums, suggests the power of the carvings themselves and highlights the virtues of consulting with one's community more than martial arts. Taken together, these films suggest that while traditional myth, art, and ritual are central to the shaping of Maori post-colonial identities, their precise role is a subject of intense scrutiny and debate.

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## Introduction: The New Animism and the Study of Indigenous films

This paper analyses three key films of the Maori Renaissance, *Whale Rider* (2002), *Once Were Warriors* (1994) and *Te Rua* (1991). These films, in addition to being art forms in themselves, also depict ritual song, traditional dance, martial arts, tattoos, carvings and mythical storytelling. Moreover each film has both drawn from and generated debate about the roles of religion, ritual and cultural performance in the negotiation of resources and identity for indigenous peoples against a background of post-colonial late capitalism.

Film and indigenous studies scholars have asked important questions about the degree to which the popularity of *Once Were Warriors* and *Whale Rider* with European and American audiences may have been achieved because both films simplify the complexity of the challenges facing modern Maori people, making them more palatable for western audiences and in the process losing important details or misrepresenting Maori lives and rituals (Joyce, 2009, p. 240, 246; Hardy, 2012, p. 16, citing Hokowhitu, 2007, and Barclay, 2003). These critiques emphasize three main problems with the films. The first is their tendency to focus on modern conflicts between men and women in Maori society and thereby underplay the historical conflicts that have afforded wealth and privileges to colonial settlers and their descendants. Secondly the films are thought to reflect colonial strategies of creating imagined indigenous utopias and dystopias. For example De Souza (2010, p. 15) suggests that *Whale Rider* and *Once Were Warriors* 'mirror one another in so far as the former features a Maori chief struggling to prevent the loss of Maori culture within his rural tribal group while the latter follows a nuclear family struggling to reconcile its urban identity with its rural Maori roots.' Thirdly, the films are unfavourably compared to the books on which they were based, the books being regarded as a much better medium for adequate exploration of the complexity and detail of contemporary Maori life. Dodd (2012, p. 20) concludes with regard to the film *Whale Rider* that:

[W]hile there is much to appreciate in this story of female empowerment, it suffers significant losses from the book in the sense of divine and ancestral providence over Maori history, in insight on the unique mission of this people, and in the power of the sacred to break through the mundane in a recapitulation of the people's founding event, restoring to them their special calling to the world. A wedge is placed between the theme of restoration of a people to its originating call and that of the (universal) empowerment of women, allowing the distinctiveness of Maori lived experience to become a simple variable plugged into the general story of any adolescent girl's groundbreaking liberation from patriarchal strictures. So the extension of the myth to women certainly works, but only at the expense of the myth's original function.

This statement raises a range of interesting questions from the perspective of a theorist of religion, but my focus here is firstly on the complex notion of 'tradition' that underpins it. While the importance of faithfulness to lived Maori practices and voices is key both to sensitive scholarship and film, I would also

argue that even in the absence of a post-colonial context, there can be debate about which elements of a tradition are absolutely inviolable and which are potentially more fluid and responsive to circumstances. To give one example, Morphy's (1991) study of art with the Yolungu of aboriginal Australia, suggests that while actual artworks may circulate between secret and open status, this fluidity may work to keep more fundamental principles of their traditions intact. An alternative analysis of the film *Whale Rider*, could legitimately emphasize its analysis of differing leadership techniques. The young woman Paikea is able to listen, both to other humans and to whales, and inspires both to action while her grandfather is for the majority of the film focusing on other details of traditions in an attempt to preserve what he believes to be of value. In this reading gender does not triumph over other issues, it is transcended by other, more fundamental, community values.

Therefore, while I explore the critiques outlined above, I also bring to bear additional techniques of analysis and questions informed by studies of culture and religion. Hardy (2012, p. 12) notes that this approach is unusual in relation to New Zealand film because 'religion was treated as a spent force by academic commentators...with other factors considered more worthy of social analysis' and cites interest in political surrealism, landscape, unease, and rites of passage as being more recognised themes by scholars such as Horrocks (2011, p. 20). Nonetheless, I argue here that these themes are actually closely interwoven with debates about the sacred in art and ritual practice both in Maori film and in debates about the problems facing Maori communities and their solutions.

Placing these debates in a broader context, I draw from a range of studies of indigenous religions that have been developing methodologies that aim to take fuller account of practitioners' engagements with ancestors, deities, and spirits rather than explain away these perspectives. Keller's (2002) conception of instrumental agency in possession trance and studies that re-explore 'animism' (Viviros de Castro, 1998; Bird-David, 1999; Ingold, 1998; Harvey, 2005; 2013) are of particular interest. Many modern studies of animism eschew Tylor's (2010 [1871]) assertion that animism is an ontological mistake and instead focus on the fluidity and dynamism of forms of personhood in many societies, suggesting that a focus on the relational interactions with persons, including animals and spirit beings is a much more fruitful line of inquiry. These approaches inspire interesting avenues for the study of films made by or representing indigenous peoples, including a consideration of what techniques film-makers might use to represent the inhabitants of indigenous religious worlds such as animals, deities, ancestors, and spirits and sacred art such as carvings that are thought to embody these persons. In some cases modern Maori art may stem from earlier forms but may also be the creative product of multiple influences, such as the individualistic expression valued by European art traditions and cross cultural communication promoted by the 'cultural performance', and the films I examine in this paper explore these tensions in different ways. Moreover, Maori ideas about personhood influence debates about leadership, decision making and how one might go about challenging colonial power structures and these debates are depicted in and raised by *Whale Rider*, *Te Rua* and

*Once Were Warriors*. Therefore, in paying attention to advances in the scholarly study of personhood I am able to explore issues about economic and gender inequality in New Zealand together with an in depth analysis of the arts in film and the art of film in New Zealand productions about indigenous peoples.

For example, many scholars interested in the New Animism refer to the work of Hallowell (2002 [1960]) who lived with and wrote about the Ojibwa (an indigenous group located around the Great Lakes of America and Canada). Hallowell explores the relationship between certain linguistic designations in the Ojibwa language and Ojibwa understandings of the world. He notes that the term grandfathers refers to certain human beings but also to certain spiritual beings and 'if we adopt a world view perspective no dichotomization appears...both sets of grandfathers can be said to be functionally as well as terminologically equivalent in certain respects' (Hallowell, 2002, p. 21). Hallowell is also interested in the linguistic designation of 'animate' to both Thunder and stones and goes on to explain that an informant suggested that not all stones are alive 'but *some* are' (Hallowell, 2002, pp. 23-24; see also Harvey, 2005, pp. 33-40). One owned by his friend Chief Berens 'had contours that suggested eyes and mouth. When Yellow Legs, Chief Berens' great-grandfather, was a leader of the Midewiwin he used to tap this stone with a new knife. It would then open its mouth, Yellow Legs would insert his fingers and take out a small leather sack with medicine in it. Mixing some of this medicine with water, he would pass the decoction around. A small sip was taken by those present' (Hallowell, 2002, p. 25). Given that this experience has a particular ritual and social context, the exact nature of what was seen and how it was seen cannot be conveyed in its entirety by the account. Certain things are left to the imagination and raise the question of how might a film-maker depict this episode?

Hallowell goes on to suggest that 'at the level of individual behaviour, the interaction of the Ojibwa with certain kinds of plants and animals in everyday life is so structured culturally that individuals act as if they were dealing with 'persons' who both understand what is being said to them and have volitional capabilities as well' (Hallowell, 2002, p. 35). A further ability of a number of animate persons, according to the Ojibwa, is metamorphosis. The conceptualization of Thunderbirds as 'animate beings who, while maintaining their identity, may change their outward appearance, and exhibit either an avian or a human form exemplifies an attribute of "persons" which, although unarticulated abstractly, is basic to the cognitive orientation of the Ojibwa..."persons" of this class are capable of metamorphosis by their very nature. Outward appearance is only an incidental attribute of being' (Hallowell, 2002, p. 34). Metamorphosis is a theme for Ojibwa artists such as Norval Morrisseau whose work, according to Robertson (2012, p. 53), is 'infused with an intense spiritual force, but his imagery related to thunderbirds and notions of transformation most clearly express his engagement with art and religion. The power of his Anishinaabe name, Miskwaabik Animiiki – Copper thunderbird – resonates in his Thunderbird imagery.' Morrisseau depicts *Man Changing into Thunderbird* (1977) using six large panels that are a little like freeze frames of an animated sequence. For this reason the work

points to one way in which film might be a useful format for illustrating transformations of animate persons as, in a sense, all films are animated mediums. However, Morrisseau's work, while influenced by his Objibwa roots, is also the individual expression of a modern artist who was interested in Picasso and Matisse (Penny, 2013, p. 15) and his work therefore negotiates tensions between this modern role and traditional social frameworks that produced indigenous art rooted in community conventions and purposes, tensions that are portrayed in the films I discuss and that are arguably inherent in the medium of film itself.

### **Film as a medium for animism and magical realism in New Zealand**

How can film in particular as a medium can portray and express relationships with ancestors, mythical beings and spirits? Merata Mita (1996 [1992], p. 36), in an article entitled 'The Soul and the Image' suggests an ambivalent 'wonder and enthrallment tinged with fear' in Maori responses to photography and film. She argues that the 'mystical' quality of the camera made the ritual of being photographed in the late 1800s something treated with either reverence or outright refusal and disgust based on a suspicion that the soul might be tampered with or the image used to their detriment. Nevertheless, she suggests that 'the reproduced likeness had mana, and [that]...portraits added a new dimension to our remembrances and provided what was thought to be a window to the soul. Therefore a sacred aspect was accorded those images, which has endured up to the present. Photographs of lost loved ones adorn the walls of meeting houses and surround funeral biers' (Mita, 1996, p. 36). Further to this, Mita suggests that moving pictures inspired both wonder and hostility. While crusading church groups and some Maori who saw themselves as 'guardians of our souls and our morals' (Mita, 1996, p. 40) argued that film shows were 'harbingers of evil and dens of iniquity' others regard archival films as *taonga* (treasures) (Mita, 1996, p. 39), particularly when their screening takes place in Maori meeting houses (*marae*) and audiences therefore feel more free to take an interactive approach to film and shout out when they see Maori and especially their own ancestors on screen.

The reference to *marae* is key here, as the meeting house is simultaneously a building with ancestral carvings, the site of ritual performances, and a focus of collaborative activity and decision-making practices. Ancestral carvings and the meeting house play a role in all three of the films that I examine in this paper, namely, *Once Were Warriors*, *Whale Rider* and *Te Rua*. In *Once Were Warriors*, Beth, a Maori woman who has been living in the city with her abusive husband, decides to return to the *marae* of her home to bury her teenage daughter, Grace, who commits suicide after being raped by a family friend. This decision is accompanied by a filmic technique in which her face dissolves into a carved figure in her village. Traditional and contemporary artistic expression are juxtaposed in *Whale Rider*, through the character of Paikea's father, who leaves his family after his wife's death to become a modern artist in Berlin, and whose return and completion of an ancestral canoe are key to the climax of the film. *Te Rua* most strongly portrays the carvings as not simply representations of ancestors but as their embodiment.

Berlin is also featured here, in part because the West Berlin State Film Fund offered some support for the project. In the words of its director Barry Barclay, '*Te Rua* tells a tale that explicitly has to do with cultural sovereignty. In the fiction, a group of rural Maori set off for Berlin to recover three carvings which last century were stolen from their ancestral home by a German and one of their own relations. The carvings are now stored – or so the story has it – in the basement of a Berlin museum' (Barclay, 1996 [1992], pp. 127-128). The film gives a clear sense that this theft is also, in one sense, a kidnapping. Shots of the carvings are brought to life with subtle moving interplays of light and shadow and sound effects, and a central character, Rewi, awakes from a dream after one of these shots, implying that the carvings were communicating with him. The matriarch of the Maori community intuitively immediately the moment that they are freed, and in a tricky moment in the campaign, Maori protestors abscond with three busts (of Caesar, his wife and Nero) as leverage for the return of their own carvings, referring to the busts as 'hostages'.

This narrative strongly challenges the idea that the arts are purely secular, even in a European context, and this attitude is informed by Maori perspectives on the relationships between art forms and deities. In addition to the personification of particular ancestors by particular carvings, the arts more broadly are thought of as gifts that spring from them. Brown relates that 'in the creation story of the separation of Ranginui and Papatuanuku, as light poured into the world, the first colours experienced were black, white and red – and these have become 'traditional' pigments used in carving, fibre work, and other arts. The conflict between the departmental gods after creation, and their interactions with the world around them, led to the arts of wood carving, plaiting, weapon-making and body adornment' (Brown, 2008 [2005], p. 5). Examples include, Ratukatauri, a goddess associated with flute music, and Nikwareka the female deity who gave mortals skills in fibre arts including clothing and mats (Brown, 2008, p. 84, 78). In some myths Nikwareka flees her mortal husband Mataora, because he had abused her, and returns to the underworld. Mataora follows her in remorse for his behaviour and begs her family for forgiveness, learning the art of moko (the Maori tattoo) from his in-laws in the underworld in the process (Te Awekotuku, 2007, pp. 12-14).

Moko can symbolise personal deeds of courage and membership of tribal and extended family groups (iwi and whanau), and the process of receiving one is subject to tapu restrictions (Brown, 2008, pp. 72-73; Robley, 2003 [1896], pp. 62-63). Another occasion for moko that Robley mentions is its relationship to female mourners who were known to gash themselves during funerals and the resulting marks were sometimes immortalized by moko-dye being applied to the wounds (Robley, 2003, p. 45). Whether the film-makers had this in mind when they used the dissolve of Beth's face just prior to the funeral scene is a moot point, as this tradition was dying out when Robley was writing in the late 1800s, but it does provide an additional layer of meaning to consider. At the very least, this scene is a reminder that *moko* designs do not only adorn human persons but are also carved into wooden ancestor persons (Robley, 2003, p. 87). In both cases spirals and curves evocative of growth and potency are found in almost symmetrical designs on either side of the face or

body connecting these designs with cosmic order and dualisms such as that between earth and sky (Harvey, 2005, p. 60). Moreover, the forest deity, Tane is 'invoked, consulted and thanked in karakia (incantations) before trees are felled, the timber regarded as having mauri (life force) and wairua (everlasting spirit) of Tane even after it is cut and fashioned into other taonga (treasures)' (Brown, 2008, p. 14).

These treasures include the meeting house (wharenuui) which is regarded as the body of an ancestor, and a representation of whakapapa (genealogy) (Brown, 2008, p. 14). As Harvey (2005, p. 62) explains, neither of these are static things, but rather involve complex shaping of facilitating of interactions between persons in the present, including ceremonies that give guests the opportunity for visitors to become guests or enemies. This opportunity is preceded by a *haka* 'a posture song integral to conflict resolution and guest-making more than it is a provocation of war'. The meeting house is also a place where people come together to eat and discuss matters of importance to the community and a sense of traditional relationships and values guides these practices also, exemplifying the complex relationship between Maori arts, deities and structured social interactions.

Emma Webber-Dreadon (2002) outlines Maori ideas and practices about community and collective decision making that is centred around well-being, an important strand being less emphasis on bureaucratic hierarchies and more on concentric circles of participants in discussions wherein each member may speak openly. This kind of approach has influenced the Maori film director Barry Barclay, who is noted for the community centred focus of the content of his films and his shooting and editorial techniques. Joyce (2009, pp. 244-245) notes in relation to his film *Ngati* (1987) that he trained a predominately Maori crew and that:

[T]he production was revisionist in that it resisted prevailing policy practices within the New Zealand Film Commission and the film production industry. The film is radical in that the story is told and solved from a Maori perspective; the community is the protagonist... Barclay used devices such as wideshots, long lenses and end-slating to promote a collective respect. The *mise-en-scène* reflects what could be termed a 'Maori aesthetic' – group shots, framing that emphasises the community over the individual, personal interaction taking place amongst groups, and panning and tracking shots that connect people rather than isolating individuals.

Barclay is eloquent on the question of Maori decision making, asserting that 'On a marae, there is an opportunity for all to speak, be it on the paepae, through song in the dining room, or late at night in the whare nui. Mana is recognized, of course, but over the days of a hui, the little person, the 'nobody', is given room too. Those who are over-bold are pulled down a touch, and those who are timid are supported. It matters little whether you happen to be a city lawyer or a breaker of horses. All have a voice' (Barclay, 1996 [1992], p. 119). Moreover, he suggests ways in which these principles can be applied to film-making, referring to the process involved in the

documentary *Tangata Whenua*, in which people were given ample opportunity to talk about their own lives in their own language.

### **Gender and initiation: Maori martial arts and tattoos**

While Barclay in particular emphasizes the challenges of implementing traditional decision making processes in a post-colonial context, both *Once Were Warriors* and *Whale Rider* have been criticized for the ways in which they appear to side step economic and political disadvantages experienced by Maori people and instead focus attention on tensions between men and women within Maori communities. Critics of *Once Were Warriors* such as Smith (1999, p. 387), go so far as to argue that the domestic violence perpetrated by Jake Heke on his wife Beth and her subsequent assumption of the role of melodramatic heroine who re-establishes the domestic unit by re-immersing herself and the children in the *marae* 'indicates a shift in the film's politics. Prior to this, the film seemed to be arguing that the difficulties facing the Heke family – unemployment, depression, imprisonment, alcoholism and interfamily violence – arose from past and present discrimination, but now *Once Were Warriors* tempts viewers to read the Hekes' troubles as springing from the incontestable differences between bad men and good women. Surreptitiously, a symptom of colonialist oppression becomes the origin of modern-day Maori misery. Smith does not deny the importance of gender as an issue for both Maori and descendants of white settlers, but she locates the problem in colonial history, wherein women as wives provided essential labour for the settler project, and argues that questions of race and class are elided by a sleight of hand because, 'images of violent gender conflict in New Zealand cinema have a complex, ultimately reactionary function. New Zealand's cinematic gender violence both uncovers and re-covers hidden histories of race and class conflict' (Smith, 1999, p. 382).

*Whale Rider* has also been the subject of mixed critical attention in part because of its emphasis on gender issues. In a number of ways it could be argued that *Once Were Warriors* and *Whale Rider* are mirror images of one another. *Once Were Warriors* depicts male violence and urban deprivation, stemming from a loss of Maori social structures and values. *Whale Rider's* community problems, in contrast, are given a comparatively peaceful idyllic rural setting but the film also depicts quests for solutions in traditional ritual, authority and practice. By juxtaposing the approaches of Paikea and her grandfather, it also debates about the extent to which a reclamation of tradition must retain strict divisions between male and female roles and thereby suggests a valuing of some elements of the past while questioning others. Based on a book by Witi Ihimaera (1986), *Whale Rider* tells the story of a girl named Paikea, whose early life is cast in the shadow of her twin brother's still birth and her grandfather's resulting disappointment at the loss of a potential leader for his people. He searches for and tries to train that leader by teaching the boys and young men various skills, including chanting and the wielding of a sacred weapon, a *taiaha*, and excludes Paikea on the grounds of her gender. Paikea persists, however, and is taught by her uncle, who is galvanised into a more active life, and the film therefore depicts her as a

catalyst for others. Meanwhile, her grandfather tries to discover which of the young men he is teaching might stand out as a future leader. Taking the boys out on a boat he throws a sacred object (a whale's tooth called a *reiputa*) into the water, challenging the boys to retrieve it, but none are able to accomplish the task and it appears that the *reiputa* is lost. On a later trip, Paikea dives into the water and finds the whale's tooth, demonstrating her abilities and connection to the ancestors. The climax of the film revolves around a group of beached whales, an event that is understood by the community not only as an environmental disaster but as a spiritual one. The whales are thought to be connected to the community both through its origin myth and as a living connection and both are played out through Paikea as she imitates her ancestral name-sake, the 'whale-rider', and persuades the primary whale to turn around and head for the ocean by climbing on his back and riding him. Dodd examines a number of criticisms of the film, suggesting that the emphasis on gender both obscures a number of other important factors (such as the fact that the original myth refers to a specific tribal group, the Ngati Porou, based in Whangara on the North Island) and ignores that this *iwi* has a particularly strong reputation for positive gender behaviour, falsely depicting inflexible rules about leadership based on primogeniture (Dodd, 2012, pp. 7-8).

These critiques are important and challenging. Nonetheless, I find it intriguing that ritual places and behaviours such as the *marae*, the *haka*, and the *taiaha* play such a central role in modern films about the problems facing contemporary Maori people and their implied proposed solutions. Far from simply valorising women at the expense of indigenous men, I suggest that these films are pointing to the idea that re-claiming and practising ritual disciplines is not only a key element of a positive Maori future, but an important tool for the management of gendered identity and consequently the reduction of gendered violence. I am curious, in the light of heated and often unresolved anthropological enquiries and debates by scholars in the anthropology of religion, about the extent to which ritual and martial arts can serve this function (Child, 2012). To give one example, Donald Tuzin, in a 1982 article on 'Ritual violence among the Ilahita Arapech', asks important questions about the ethical problem for Papua New Guinean men who feel guilty about committing violence against women and children in a ritual context. Clearly the 'bracketing' of such violence as prescribed ritual behaviour breaks down in some instances (Tuzin, 1982, p. 323). However, in his 1997 book *The Cassowary's Revenge* Tuzin documents the destruction of masculine ritual secrets (partly as a consequence of a mythic reading of the anthropologist's return) and expresses concern about the subsequent structural vacuum (Tuzin, 1997, p. 183), suggesting parallels with problems in American society including 'racism, joblessness, gangs, incivility, spousal abuse, divorce...underlying or running through them all is the spectre of lost, damaged, or eroded masculinity' (Tuzin, 1997, p. 193).

Clearly there are key differences between social change in Papua New Guinea and the situation in New Zealand, but the idea that ritual performance can play a role in the solution is an attractive one. This attraction is itself brought into question by an alternative anthropological study, one that looks at

a *marae* as the locus for computer and job related skills training, but where it is insisted that the unemployed youth that attend their courses also learn rudimentary Maori language and ritual performance skills. Toon van Meijl's (2006) interviews with young people involved in the programme demonstrated that, far from benefiting from the stipulations many dropped out, experiencing a fracturing rather than a restoring of self. This was partly because as many as two thirds of the Maori population spend little time in the *marae* and many of the students enrolled on the course had never been on one before despite its close geographical location. Van Meijl locates this problem within the Maori renaissance, in that he asserts that its emphasis on cultural reclamation may be too reductive and thereby pay insufficient attention to other political, social, and economic factors of inequality (van Meijl, 2006, p. 918). Drawing from Maori scholar Poata-Smith (1996), he argues that 'the rhetoric of cultural nationalism has been counterproductive by fostering internal controversy over the authenticity of culture. Furthermore, Poata-Smith argues against the promotion of changes in individual lifestyle when they are advocated instead of radical political changes that may improve socio-economic circumstances of lower-class Maori people' (van Meijl, 2006, p. 920).

It is interesting to reflect on this argument in relation to *Once Were Warriors*. Based on a novel by Alan Duff (1990) it is part of a body of his work that advocates the active pursuit of educational and economic opportunities by modern Maori (Duff, 1993). However, both the book and the film also contain numerous references to the perversion of Maori traditions in the late capitalist context. Wilson (2003, p. 208) suggests that the film draws attention to problems that Maori have experienced as part of colonisation, including economic dependence on the state, alcoholism and domestic violence in Jake, and the gang membership of his son, 'in contrast to Pakeha emotional repression, Puritan guilt, and fragmented consciousness, the Maori pathology is one of loss of autonomy through amnesia, by blocking out the unpleasant reality of the present, by forgetting what they had been. Jake...exemplifies in *Once Were Warriors* the decline and degeneration of the ideal of warriorhood: the loss of tribal cohesiveness and *mana* (spiritual power)'. Although Wilson (2003, p. 209) draws attention to the film's references to structural inequalities (a caste system) within traditional villages, and the caution with which the idea of a 'cultural revival associated with Maoritanga' is treated she nonetheless points to Jake's son's use of the *taiaha* 'a traditional weapon of war, under the training of the social welfare officer' contrasting this with Nig's gang tattoos, and arguing that Beth seems to hold the middle ground by insisting on her daughter having a traditional funeral (*tangi*) in her home village, she returns to Auckland to make a new life and promote, if not the permanent 'return home' to the *marae* implied by the cultural survival associated with the Maoritanga, at least a turning to indigenous ceremony, belief and ritualistic practice integrated into an invigorated urban renewal' (Wilson, 2003, pp. 209-210).

The art of tattooing is another practice in modern New Zealand that combines elements of traditional and protest art in different ways, depending on the individual who gets tattooed and their identifications with different social groups. Beeler (2006) explores stories about tattoos and the ways in which tattoos can act as narratives in themselves, linking persons with individual and

social identities. She suggests that in a number of aboriginal cultures tattoos have been a way of preserving traditional links with genealogy or myth and explores colonial desire and disapproval when confronting indigenous tattoos (Beeler, 2006, p. 147). She explores how these ambivalent reactions appear to have been internalised by many male characters in *Once Were Warriors* suggesting that Duff's book points to the way that tattoos used to be chiselled in, while the violence of many modern Maoris is 'a distortion of a noble warrior culture which has degenerated' (Beeler, 2006, p. 154). This degeneration theory promoted by the film tends to ignore the wealth of creative possibilities explored by numerous modern Maori who are interested in both their traditional roots and their contemporary situation (Te Awekotuku, 2007). Allen (2012, p. 142) illustrates this well, both in a creative engagement with literary, pictographic, woven, and carved arts of Indigenous peoples, including Native American and Maori peoples, and in the reporting of complex issues around the literary and critical receptions of his work in a range of talks that included different audience combinations of, for example, scholars whose focus was hard to shift from typical western literary scholarly techniques and scholars who emphasised Maori studies. That one of the talks was on a marae and that talks with predominately Maori audiences included a ritual greeting of him as a guest, in addition to the more familiar academic formalities is of particular interest (Allen, 2012, pp. 139-142).

Waller's essay on 'embodying the urban Maori warrior' (1998, p. 338) asks 'what possibilities exist for agency – in mastering, gendering, performing, constructing the body – in this contemporary city beneath the billboard? If once *were* warriors, can and should there again *be* warriors? And how would modern warrioriness be embodied?' She starts with the example of abusive husband and father, Jake Heke, (an irony, in light of a number of myths related to the origins of Maori tattooing, in which an abusive husband is abandoned by his wife who returns to her family in the underworld and is only taught the sacred arts of permanent body ink when he has begged forgiveness of her and her family, Te Awekotuku, 2007, pp. 12-14). Jake, on the other hand, 'has no need or desire to train or redecorate his body, which is already bulked up and adorned with tattoos: a scorpion on his neck, links of barbed wire on his upper arm, a snake-skin design on his forearm. These pointedly non-traditional tattoos, like his black sleeveless t-shirt and black leather pants, Jake shares with what his wife calls his "mongrel mates". The Mongrel Mob, one of the major Maori gangs to emerge in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was another manifestation of resurgent tribalism, in the guise of aggressive defiance and outlaw ethnicity' (Waller, 1998, p. 342).

This is contrasted with the attitudes of his two sons. The elder, Nig, is initiated (by allowing himself to be subjected to group violence) during the film into a gang called the Toa Aotearoa. The facial tattoos more closely resemble traditional moko 'that are so prominent in 19<sup>th</sup> Century representations of Maori warriors and in the carved figures on the doorways, gateways, side-posts, and interior panels of traditional Maori *whareniui* (meeting houses)' (Waller, 1998, p. 346). Nonetheless, the fact that they cover only half his face signifies the gap between his initiation and more traditional honours signified by traditional tattooing. Boogie, the younger son, is given the opportunity to

undergo a different kind of initiation in borstal. He is taught the *haka*, 'a highly formalised, physically enacted, chanted exhortation in which the male participants invoke and literally reach for ancestral inspiration. The *haka* aggressively challenges the spectator, who takes the position of the enemy or opponent, in part because its gestures – protruding tongues, chest slapping, stamping feet – so completely emphasize the collective and individual body of the Maori warrior' (Waller, 1998, p. 345). Boogie is also taught how to use the traditional spear, both in the sense of physical skills and in the mental discipline of anger. Mr Bennett says 'when I have taught you... you'll carry your taiaha inside you' (Waller, 1998, p. 344). The lesson appears to have been learned as when Nig asks Boogie if he would like a tattoo he replies that he wears his on the inside.

The *haka* also features in *Te Rua*, both in the opening scene and narration of the original theft of the carvings and in a couple of scenes where the activists use it to protest this theft. Interestingly, these scenes appear to be less about masculine individuality (in the protest the women are asked to lead the charge) and more related to a collective show of strength. Moreover, respect for collective decision making is suggested to be an important leadership quality in this film and when the leader who is negotiating the return of the carvings forgets this and acts alone he is challenged by his compatriots and asked to re-think his behaviour. *Te Rua* is the best example of this, but *Whale Rider* can also be read in this way. It could be argued that although played out to some extent through gender, it is actually styles of leadership that are at stake in this film. Paikea's gentle enthusiasm for learning galvanises the community, particularly her uncle, whose likeability and talent for persuasion come to be recognized by her grandfather, as evidenced by his asking his son to ask the tribe to continue to work to help the whales despite their fatigue because 'they'll do it for you'. Similarly the grandfather's mistake can be seen as only incidentally related to gender; it is his refusal to listen to his family, his community, and to signs suggesting Paikea's connection to the ancestors that is the root of the fault he acknowledges at the end of the film.

## Conclusion

Although views about the potential role of Maori traditional religion in the future of New Zealand vary a good deal, myth and ritual are vital themes, both within Maori focused films and in academic and critical debates about them. On one level, this critique is about the ways in which colonial mythologies depict Maori in utopian or dystopian terms. Heffelfinger and Wright (2011), for example, explore early filmic romanticized portraits of heroic Maori warriors and erotic women placed in a vacuum without historical context or settlers to disturb or contextualize this comfortable idealised view. *Once were Warriors* and *Whale Rider* also (Heffelfinger and Wright, 2011, p. 73):

...depict Maori experience as cut off from Pakeha culture, but the absence of white characters in both films serves to underscore the marginalization of the Maori as a result of colonial domination. And while both films, like their predecessors, are shaped by Maori legend,

both rewrite traditional mythology in a way that, instead of sexualizing Maori women, positions them as saviours who will be responsible for the invention of contemporary Maori culture.

It is interesting to note that Barclay's films employ a very different strategy. *Te Rua* is set both in New Zealand and Berlin and depicts complex relationships between European and Maori, including sexual relationships and one of his central characters is a performance artist who re-tells Maori myths and stories for a culturally mixed audience in Berlin at the beginning of the film. However, *Whale Rider* also refers to Berlin, in this case as the place where the father in the story initially flowers as an artist and meets his new romantic partner. Moreover, it could be argued that white New Zealanders and colonial history both form 'absent presences' subtly shaping the disadvantages that the central characters are presented with.

New Zealand film is also known for challenging myths about benign colonisation. Analysts of New Zealand cinema often explore ways in which the nation's films explore undercurrents of tension and explosions of violence disturbing the apparent tranquillity of New Zealand as a 'pastoral paradise' (Conrich and Woods, 2000) and while there have been notable criticisms of Sam Neill's documentary *Cinema of Unease* (Horrocks, 2011, p. 21), the phrase continues to have explanatory force, particularly with reference to films that explore the situation of Maori people in post 1970s New Zealand (Joyce, 2009, p. 242). Moreover, novels, plays and films continue to resist portraits of the world that conform to a bland secular disregard of the range of persons that may inhabit it. In a strategy not dissimilar to Allen's (2012, p. 133) assertion that 'art objects oral narratives enable the viewer or listener to participate in the power of transgenerational address, the power of speaking across generations' Hardy (2012, p. 18) points to techniques such as magic realism. Referring to Maufort (2007) she argues that these kinds of techniques, including the portrayal of *taniwa* in film and television are exciting and challenging. These developments continue with the recent television production of *Tatau*, a collaboration of the BBC and the New Zealand Film Commission that includes depictions of visions, ancestors and mythical personages in a story line that moves comfortably between secular and mythic realities.

Therefore, although scholars and film-makers have pointed to problems in the translation of the novels *Once Were Warriors* and *Whale Rider* into the film medium, there are, nonetheless, assertions that film and television do have something to offer Maori and other indigenous cultures. Mita, for example, explores the challenges for Maori film-makers and audiences of operating in a film industry dominated by values and methodologies that do not originate in or fit well with Maori approaches to projects, but still suggests that, 'old films are highly prized because they retain the images of the ancestors. They not only retain them, they are able, under the right conditions, to bring those images to life in front of us on the screen, and this can be repeated over and over again with each screening. Nothing else has this power, not books or tape recordings or statues, or written historical records' (Mita, 1996, p. 50). Her appreciation of this is inspired by an initiative of the New Zealand Film

Archive in 1983 to reintroduce travelling picture shows (originally brought to Aotearoa in 1896). This move is somewhat reminiscent of the debates explored in *Te Rua*, except that rather than the ancestors being re-claimed in the form of carvings, they are being returned to their descendants through archival screenings in meeting houses (*marae*), screenings that were 'complemented by an appreciative living sound track of laughter, exclamations of recognition, crying, calling out and greetings...what the audience sees are resurrections taking place, a past life lives again, wisdom is shared and something from the heart and spirit responds' (Mita, 1996, p. 51). This kind of writing about the interaction of ancestors and film is important because it demonstrates that film can participate in what have traditionally been considered to be sacred realms and that, moreover, film studies needs to include perspectives derived from traditional religions, in addition to its more staple critical tools of gender and psycho-analytic critiques. In the case of New Zealand cinema, film is not only documenting transformations in culture through debates about art and performance, it is an art form that animates the ancestors and by extension is one process that will help to determine the ways in which tradition both looks to the past and remains a living thing in the future.

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