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Lee Tamahori's *Once were warriors*

Abstract

As a Pakeha reviewer I find it necessary to hedge this review in opposition to a couple of statements about this film which regularly crop up in reviews and commentaries. Since the film is such a brutal and explicit interrogation of violence within a Maori community, Pakeha reviewers tend to applaud the 'honesty' or 'realism' of the film, which in a way assumes this kind of violence is quite the norm for Maoris. The 'real' Maori is then homogenised as the urban Maori disenfranchised from his or her 'traditional' culture. I don't see myself in a position to declare what I consider 'real' Maori life is like, and critics who, upon viewing a single film, think they have the knowledge to articulate the Maori reality are in a very dubious position. The other common statement is that the film succeeds because it deals with, in the words of a reviewer in *The Australian Financial Review*, 'the taboo subjects of indigenous representation and domestic violence' (Colbert 1994: 16). Just as the term 'honesty' naturalises Maori society as violent, the term 'taboo' naturalises representation as Pakeha. Indigenous representation in this case is assumed to be of Pakehas representing Maoris, and that is why it is considered such a touchy subject. But Maoris do represent themselves every day, only it is the Pakehas who generally have the luxury to debate the politics of representation. I think part of this film's success is, rather, the ways in which it supersedes this debate by assuming that authority to speak and the control of production of texts do not rely on Pakeha humanist generosity. The film steers away from examining Pakeha representation, which, I think, exposes Pakehas as being not nearly as important in Maori cultural issues as Pakehas would like to think they are.

LEE TAMAHORI'S ONCE WERE WARRIORS

Michael Hayes

As a Pakeha reviewer I find it necessary to hedge this review in opposition to a couple of statements about this film which regularly crop up in reviews and commentaries. Since the film is such a brutal and explicit interrogation of violence within a Maori community, Pakeha reviewers tend to applaud the 'honesty' or 'realism' of the film, which in a way assumes this kind of violence is quite the norm for Maoris. The 'real' Maori is then homogenised as the urban Maori disenfranchised from his or her 'traditional' culture. I don't see myself in a position to declare what I consider 'real' Maori life is like, and critics who, upon viewing a single film, think they have the knowledge to articulate *the* Maori reality are in a very dubious position. The other common statement is that the film succeeds because it deals with, in the words of a reviewer in *The Australian Financial Review*, 'the taboo subjects of indigenous representation and domestic violence' (Colbert 1994: 16). Just as the term 'honesty' naturalises Maori society as violent, the term 'taboo' naturalises representation as Pakeha. Indigenous representation in this case is assumed to be of Pakehas representing Maoris, and that is why it is considered such a touchy subject. But Maoris do represent themselves every day, only it is the Pakehas who generally have the luxury to debate the politics of representation. I think part of this film's success is, rather, the ways in which it supersedes this debate by assuming that authority to speak and the control of production of texts do not rely on Pakeha humanist generosity. The film steers away from examining Pakeha representation, which, I think, exposes Pakehas as being not nearly as important in Maori cultural issues as Pakehas would like to think they are.

Once Were Warriors has gained widespread acclaim from film critics and audiences which is largely deserved. It is the story of a Maori family's life of violence and poverty in the suburbs of South Auckland. The father, Jake 'The Muss' Heke, is a heavy drinker and fighter who has spurned his Maori culture for his family at the pub. He brings home this violence and alcoholism to his wife and five children. While the outlook for the family is

despairing, the children face trouble with the police or for the women a bleak future in a misogynistic society, the way these problems are handled are the focus of the film.

Alan Duff, whose novel the film is based on, was originally employed to write the film script. Though he wrote the early drafts, he was sacked from the project and the script was finished by Riwia Brown, a Maori woman. It appears these events caused much animosity, for Duff has recently spoken of his sacking in a recent interview with *Meanjin*, claiming not many improvements were made on the script ('Alan Duff': 13). The focus given to the women in the film, which has been attributed to Brown - 'she instilled warmth and ... hope into the story' one critic wrote ('Maori Story') - may also have been in Duff's script. Duff's role as the right-wing critic of the Maori community - he considers social inequalities stem from Maoris not trying hard enough and he is critical of the authority of the *Kaumatuas* (Maori Elders) - has probably influenced how many commentators see his role in the film. Part of Duff's controversial image is due to the very vocal and critical climate in Maori affairs. This says much about the strength of Maori politics and the contested terrain of Maori representation. Far from this area being taboo, it is highly productive and dynamic. Pakehas now must become noticeably more aware of using racial stereotypes and generalisation because of this critical scene. There have been numerous, well-publicised arguments. There was much debate over Allan Hanson's quasi post-structuralist reading of Maori culture (Hanson 1989) leading to an open debate at Auckland University, and previously Witi Ihimaera, probably the most well-known Maori writer, was attacked by Pakehas for plagiarising a historians work, and by Maori women for 'speaking for' Maori women in the novel *The Matriarch*.

Once Were Warriors is not concerned with the debate in this arena but concentrates on the still-prevalent Maori underclass. The film exposes Maoris as locked out of positions of control. The film's opening of an idyllic pastoral scene, which is shown to be a billboard in a working-class suburb, quite obviously critiques the Pakeha utopian myth associated with the literature of Aotearoa by traditional critics and writers. The shot moves out to show Beth, the mother, walking next to a freeway. The freeway is always in the background in the film: the Heke's house backs onto it, the children in the yard play next to it. As the billboard is to the utopian myth, the freeway is to the urban Maori. The Maoris live next to it, or as does one character, underneath it in a wrecked car, but never in the film do they travel on it. The film does gesture that there is another society that is affluent and who can think about utopia, but mainly through their absence or by showing an infrastructure which is part of a society built for Pakeha, not Maori use.

The praise *Once Were Warriors* has received for being 'sickeningly

realistic' (LePetit 1994: 178), or as Robert Redford is quoted as saying, its 'emotional honesty' (Crompton 1995: 1), can simplistically credit all the violence to Maori culture, ignoring that violence is also determined by economic and patriarchal practices which are as prevalent in Pakeha society as in Maori society. This is my only reservation I have with the film, that it leaves the possibility of reading violence as both culturally specific and valorised. Lee Tamahori, the director, has commented that the film may celebrate Jake's lifestyle rather than criticising it (Wane 1995: 115). The ubiquity of violence assumes that authority is only available through this masculine form. Undoubtedly violence is a part of the Maori community; however, violence is prevalent in lower socio-economic groups (of which Maoris make a significant proportion) regardless of their culture. Views that threaten to collapse violence into simple cultural determinism leave Pakeha violence largely uninterrogated. I was surprised to hear that the pub scenes, where most of the violence takes place, were shot in a Pakeha pub in relatively affluent Invercargill. Invercargill being noted more for its economically prosperous farms and alpine scenery than its bar-room brawls demonstrates the power of Pakeha control of their own representation. Pakeha pubs are generalised as safe, Maori pubs as violent; quite clearly this is not the case. Just like the often quoted statistic that *Once Were Warriors* is the highest grossing movie in Aotearoa, being seen by more people than *Jurassic Park*, is supposedly surprising because *Once Were Warriors* is such a 'violent film'. While it is facetious to attempt to measure levels of violence, *Jurassic Park* certainly has its share of blood. There is an insidious evaluation occurring through the association of realism and violence, a kind of hierarchy that assumes law, order, and peace are 'naturally' found in 'normal' Pakeha society and domestic violence is in the Maori community.

These criticisms are, to a certain extent, answered by the film itself. While *Once Were Warriors* shows Maoris facing hardships because of their limited access to wealth and ability to practice their culture, quite equally it emphasises major political successes and strengths of the Maori community. Maori music, both traditional and western, is played through the film. A Maori radio station is often heard in the background. Maori language is a prominent feature which, most importantly, is not subtitled and relegated to a marginal language. The audience is assumed to have a knowledge of Maori language and culture because no subtitles or explanations are given, reversing the sort of assumptions which many Hollywood or Australian movies make of their predominantly white audience. Almost like a parody of the stereotyped indigenous extras, who were reduced to background scenery in many Pakeha films, Pakeha's have very little influence in the story. Their roles are brief and restricted to their 'cultural' uniforms such as judges, lawyers, or police officers. The film, instead, situates Maori society as the

complex and heterogeneous group. Far from homogenising a Maori identity, *Once Were Warriors* produces a complexity which is so often missing in Pakeha representations of indigenous communities. We only need to think how *The Piano* relegated Maoris to roles of mimicry or workers in the background, while the tensions of their community were appropriated by Harvey Keitel's character of the Pakeha Maori, a kind of white-hybrid identity which features in the Pakeha literary tradition.

Exposing internal divisions in the Maori community in 'traditional' class, gendered, and cultural forms quite thoughtfully draws up the dynamics and tensions between groups but does not resort to evaluating any one as 'authentic'. The Heke's eldest son becomes a member of a Maori gang which mixes aspects of Maori culture such as language and tattooing with practices more associated with a bikie gang. Beth's family live on a whanau and are 'traditional'. Jake and his friends have turned their back on their Maori heritage but still talk of being a family. Even within 'traditional' culture conflicts are shown. Jake and Beth's marriage was not allowed because Jake was from a slave class, and this designation seems to fuel his violence and hatred of 'traditional' Maori politics. Part of the film's reinscription of Maori authority has to do with its representation of the law and welfare. At all points the legal institutions is undercut, in some way, by the Maori community. In one scene a police car is overtaken, at high speed, by a car full of gang members taking Nig to his initiation. The police disappear from the scene, as if they wouldn't even think of stopping them for speeding. In another scene outside the District Court, where Mark the second son is waiting for his court hearing, the District Court is almost unrecognisable for the large groups of Maoris — bikies, rap singers, musicians — who are standing outside making the area look more like a market than a courthouse. Rather than representing the strength of the legal institution, the court appears to have little jurisdiction over the people outside. When Mark is advised to be put in a boys' home, it is not the white authorities who recommend this, but the Maori welfare officer. And inside the boys' home Mark learns Maori culture — not Pakeha justice and values. These are some of the optimistic points where Maori culture is disseminated in urban institutions and there is a sense that racism and colonialism are losing their once powerful grip. Like many people seeing this movie, I had heard about the violence and brutality beforehand and was expecting to be shocked and depressed, but it is these articulations of change which make the film fascinating and stunning.

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