

Taika Waititi – Happy Sad Cinema

After watching the clip about Taika Waititi and the three NZ focused feature films he has made (*Eagle v. Shark*, *Boy* and *The Hunt for the Wilderpeople* as well as the short film *Two Cars One Night*), write a one to two paragraph response for *each* of the following questions:

- 1) **What themes/issues consistently make an appearance in Waititi's NZ focused work? Describe these themes/issues and support your explanation with a minimum of three separate pieces of evidence from the films viewed so far (evidence = quotes, description of scenes, characterisation etc).**

A consistent theme that makes an appearance in Taika Waititi's films are that of child neglect due to a plethora of reasons including alcohol and drug abuse. Waititi, in particular, focuses on the issues faced by the Maori community, a community he aligns himself to. Waititi presents the negative and serious social issues such as alcoholism, drink driving and neglect of children that are common in New Zealand, which runs parallel with the comedy he implements. This can be seen in the film Two cars one night. Throughout all of the scenes, the children are left outside the pub in cars while the parents are busy drinking. This in itself shows the fact that alcoholism leads to lack of care for our children. In the case of Two cars one night, anything could have happened to the children as they sat in the motel carpark in an unlocked car. They could have easily fallen victim to a degenerate or wandered off and gotten themselves into trouble. The other serious issue raised is how 'normal' this behaviour is for the children. Eddie comes prepared with a book to read, indicating to the viewers that this is not the first time this has happened. The other issue as the children highlight is that after their drinks their parents still drive them home putting all their safety at risk. Although these are serious issue, Waititi enhances this with comedy which is shown through the children interacting with each other. This same theme is also seen in Boy. Although the serious fact that the father is not with their children, showing no care for them, Waititi again implements comedy through the characteristics of the characters. Therefore, both of these films clearly show Waititi's theme of accommodating serious events with comedy.

- 2) **Discuss the term 'Happy Sad Cinema' and explain how such a seeming contradiction-in-terms might make sense as a description when seeking to define and understand Waititi's style.**

Happy sad cinema is the term used when a film involves both comedy and tragedy. Waititi's style usually implements styles of work based on the happy-sad cinema concept. In Waititi's films, we usually see both comedy and tragedy presented in a parallel form to enhance our understanding of the ideas being presented. In Boy, the tragedy that occurs is that the children's mother has passed away, creating grief for these children, making it saddening for

the viewer. They are also left pretty much to their own devices as there is an absentee father. However, once the father re-enters the children's lives, comedy is presented, and the story continues to go on. This correctly displays the happy-sad cinema effect. In 2 cars one night, we see the comedy occur once the children start interacting with each other. Pradoxically as the children leave with their respective parents tragedy is created. This film again has the happy-sad cinema effect implemented. The happy-sad cinema effect is a hallmark of Waititi's style of film creation. It is in a comedic manner that he is able to deliver strong messages in both text.

3) Given the often serious nature of the themes/issues being addressed, are there dangers/risks in telling stories the way that Waititi does? Is it possible that his comic approach diminishes or makes light of the tragedy of real-world themes/issues? Or is the opposite true: does comedy actually reveal more vividly the absurd and impossible tensions that individuals experience?

Waititi's approach is effective in putting light on the tragedies of the world. I believe the use of the absurdist approach only deepens our understanding of the issues he is highlighting. While some believe there should be a sense of gritty realism in films to deliver messages of child neglect or alcoholism as seen in the short film, Two cars one night, there is already an abundance of such films in the mainstream. Waititi's films take a more kiwi approach and it is his kiwi humour that makes the message even more poignant. Films in the mainstream that give realism to issues become unpalatable for viewing if watched more than once. It has the capacity to destroy our souls as we watch humanity at their lowest. While Waititi still broaches serious issues, he does it also through comedy. The comedy only enhancing the message as we laugh with these characters who we grow to love and hence their tragic experiences have a more profound impact on the viewers as we identify with them. Furthermore with films that present realism only. the message might still be effective, but it would reach less of the general public as people don't usually want to watch films that are mainly focused on tragedies and nothing else. Through Waititi implementing comedy, he attracts viewers to the film while still bringing the main message out to the public. Hence, I believe the approach of comedy is good.