

## Maori Reflected on Screen

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### Abstract

This paper examines and analyses Maori filmmaking in particular, dramatic feature films with reference to an indigenous global context from Linda Tuhiwai Smith's book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, provides a convenient template for viewing the impact Western-minded research, historically, has had upon effecting voice and identity in Indigenous communities. Her treatment of how its methods, in a number of ways, have undermined the integrity of countless Indigenous communities, has provided her with insight about the kind of epistemological shift that will be necessary for researchers to provide meaning, balance, and sensitivity to voice within Indigenous communities. This paper is grounded in Kaupapa Maori theory, a theory that is founded in Maori epistemological and metaphysical traditions. The study focuses on visual interpretive analysis as methods to expose the layered messages and examine the Maori community in film *Ngati* (1987).

**Keywords:** Maori; indigenous people; commodification; visual analysis; representation; decolonizing methodology.

### Introduction

This paper examines and analyses Maori filmmaking with reference to an indigenous global context from Linda Tuhiwai Smith's book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Her book provides a convenient template for viewing the impact of Western-minded research, has had upon in affecting voice and identity of Indigenous communities. Her treatment of how its methods, in a number of ways, have undermined the integrity of countless Indigenous communities, has provided her with insight about the kind of epistemological shift that will be necessary for researchers to provide meaning, balance, and sensitivity to voice within Indigenous communities.

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## Representation of Maori

Creative cinematic expression through storytelling in film is identified by Tuhiwai Smith as possibly the greatest potential of Kaupapa Maori theory. This is because film offers a unique site that Maori voices can inhabit and give expression to their diverse realities and experiences. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's emphasis on the importance of representation:

Representation of indigenous peoples by indigenous people is about countering the dominant society's image of indigenous peoples, their lifestyles and belief systems. It is also about proposing solutions to the real-life dilemmas that indigenous communities confront and trying to capture the complexities of being indigenous. Many of the dilemmas are internalized stress factors in community life which are never named or voiced because they are either taken for granted or hidden by a community. (151)

Linda Tuhiwai Smith proposes that for understanding indigenous community representation becomes significant. In that sense films play a major role in reflecting Maori community. Film is an important part of identity formation and contributes to how we see ourselves. It shapes others' perceptions of us locally and globally. In this sense there is a struggling but growing movement in the making of Maori dramatic and documentary films, which began in the late 1970s and 1980s. However, very few Maori directed dramatic feature films have been made. Therefore, Maori pioneer filmmaker Barry Barclay is a significant contributor to the Maori cinematic history.

Barry Barclay's film *Ngati* (1987) offers a unique and transformative cinematic representation of Maori in the form of dramatic feature film. Key findings highlight how Maori identities and culture are validated through cinematic narrative and visual representations. The study focuses on visual interpretive analysis as methods to expose the layered messages and examine the Maori community in film.

## Kaupapa Maori Approach

The development of *Kaupapa Maori Framework* is the prime method of study that is adopted to elucidate the representation of Maori on screen. Marsden explains that *kau* means "to

appear for the first time, to come into view, to disclose” and that *papa* is “ground or foundation.”

Therefore, *Kaupapa* can be interpreted as ground rules, first principles, general principles and platform. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith defines in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*:

What is now referred to as Kaupapa Maori approaches to research, or simply as Kaupapa Maori research, is an attempt to retrieve that space and to achieve those general aims. This naming of research has provided a focus through which Maori people, as communities of the researched and as new communities of the researchers, have been able to engage in a dialogue about setting new directions for the priorities, policies, and practices of research for, by and with Maori. (183)

*Kaupapa Maori framework* can incorporate multiple expressions and applications from a distinctly Maori base. Examining key features of Kaupapa Maori following six key thematic categories for *Kaupapa Maori Framework*: (1) Maori voices; (2) Maori worldviews and concepts; (3) collectivity and relationships; (4) challenge and resistance and; (5) transformation.

### **Background – Barry Barclay and *Ngati***

Filmmaker, writer, theorist and thinker, Barry Barclay, described himself as having Ngati Apa (Iwi of Maori) and Pakeha (people of European origin) heritage. Barclay (1944 - 2008) grew up in the rural countryside of the Wairarapa near Martinborough, New Zealand. Barclay attended secondary school run by the Marist Brothers and left New Zealand in the early 1960s to join the monastic order, eventually studying for the Roman Catholic priesthood. He left the priesthood, returning to New Zealand when he was 21 and worked in radio prior to becoming a filmmaker.

*Ngati* is chosen for particular consideration because it is the first dramatic feature film to be directed, written and predominantly made by Maori. “*Ngati* is also described as the first feature film to be made by an indigenous filmmaker” (Cairns and Martin 102). As a result, *Ngati* was groundbreaking, transforming ideas of cinema in New Zealand. “It is one of a small handful of dramatic feature films that position Maori at its centre, enabling a Maori voice to be heard that is

driven and creatively controlled by Maori.”(Barclay 2003). In addition, *Ngati* is a film of both national and international standing, winning a number of local and international awards including the Best Film Award at the Taormina Film Festival in Italy (1987). It was the first film from New Zealand to be screened at the International Critics Week at the Cannes Film Festival. (Cairns and Martin 237)

## Synopsis

*Ngati* is set in 1948 in the fictional rural, coastal town of Kapua (cloud). At this time, New Zealand was experiencing major social changes, including the return of service men and women from World War II, the migration of Maori to the cities, the introduction of new technologies and the restructuring of industry (James 473). A factor impacting on community life for Maori occurred after World War II with the return of the Maori Battalion who had suffered severe loss of life.

The term “*Ngati*” translates to the prefix of a tribal grouping, but it is important to note that the concept has deeper connotations in Maori language. In Gosden’s (1987) review of the film, the film is described as follows:

The narrative structure of *Ngati* allows three interlocking stories of equal importance to unfold; (1) how the community, including Tione, come to terms with young Ropata’s serious illness and eventual death; (2) the threat of the closure of the local freezing works and the community’s reaction and (3) Greg Shaw’s personal journey as he discovers his whakapapa.

The first act sets time and place, introducing characters and the three plot lines. Greg, a young doctor from Australia arrives in Kapua. He is both arrogant and racist believing he is non-Maori. Greg stays with the Bennetts, a Pakeha family, who have lived in Kapua for years and are accepted as a part of the community by local Maori. Sally, a young Maori woman, returns home from the city only to clash with her father, Iwi, who is a leading member of the community. She finds it difficult to accept traditional Maori healing methods. Her twelve-year-old brother, Ropata, is dying from leukaemia and is supported by his loyal friend Tione. Lured by increased financial returns farmers are sending stock to outside freezing works rather than the local works,

jeopardising its economic viability. Scenes revolving around the closure of the freezing works, the main employer in the area, highlight the serious effect this would have on the economic base of the community.

In the middle section Tione begins to come to terms with Ropata's impending death. Ropata is emotionally supported by tohunga, Uncle Eru. Greg begins to find his place amongst the community, but it is not until later in the film that he discovers his Maori whakapapa. Sally settles into the community although the relationship with her father remains strained. The owner of Crosby's sheep station offers Iwi the job of managing the station, but not one of total control. At this point the characters are in a state of change and issues of identity, racism, and self-determination are raised.

In the final act resolution and reconciliation occur. After Ropata's death, Tione begins a healing process with the support of Iwi, Greg, and in particular Uncle Eru. A hui on the marae finds a community solution to their economic problems led by Sally and supported by Iwi. Iwi is offered and accepts the management job at the station with total control. Greg, who finds out that his mother is Maori, becomes committed to learning more about his whakapapa and heritage, promising to return to Kapua. In contrast to dominant forms of storytelling where there are often one or two leading roles, there are a number of characters in *Ngati* who are of equal importance. These characters are all critical to the telling of the three stories.

The three narrative strands are also of equal weight, indicative of Barclay's commitment to Maori notions of collectivity that emphasis the importance of the collective without diminishing the role of the individual. The key themes can also be viewed in terms of individual and collective journeys within a Maori community setting. Greg's journey is related to the discovery of his Maori identity that he was previously unaware of. Sally journeys back to her iwi and whanau where her relationship with her father matures and she finds her place in the community.

The community experiences collective economic problems and work together to resolve them. Ropata journeys into death supported by his whanau and friends and is then grieved for by

them. Tione particularly goes through a very personal journey as he comes to terms with his friend's illness and death.

### **Maori Voices**

The topic of Maori voices incorporates numerous articulations, including telling, legitimating and focusing the stories and dialect, and the assorted variety of Maori character. Ngati deliberately utilizes dialect in emblematically and politically thunderous ways while still accommodating the 'needs' of local and international distribution. The film strategically promotes Maori language, challenging the privileging of the colonisers' language in cinema. The same importance of Maori voice to be heard is also stressed by Linda Smith quoting Leonie Pihama's review in *The Piano*:

Maori people struggle to gain a voice, struggle to be heard from the margins, to have our stories heard, to have our descriptions of ourselves validated, to have access to the domain within which we can control and define those images which are held up as reflections of our realities. (241)

Situating the film within a Maori world, rejecting the colonial gaze, *Ngati* does not always explain itself for the benefit of a non- Maori audience. This echoes Barclay's stance on the political aspects of *Ngati* saying: "this is the Maori world, take it or leave it" (Lomas 2-5). The collective pronoun 'us' and 'we' are reiterated by Maori characters and refer to both the Maori community and iwi in *Ngati* that by extension embraces a Maori audience collectively. For example, one of the drovers wants Iwi to manage the Pakeha station to "help us", the Maori community. Another is expressed by the bus driver who upon discovering Greg's Maori whakapapa remarks that Greg is "one of us then." This situates Pakeha as Other, inverting colonising discourses and offering a film that 'talks in' by speaking directly to a Maori audience from a Maori perspective.

### **Maori Worldviews and Concepts**

Maori worldviews and concepts are basic in Kaupapa Maori hypothesis and fuse various components including Maori conventions and otherworldly quintessence. Maori worldviews are

central in *Ngati* through the use of aesthetic devices and narrative that illustrate the importance of the connections between people and tupuna; people and land; the universe and beyond. Early scenes place people within the landscape, as a part of it as opposed to dominating the environment.

The opening shot is an example of the dramatic photography that captures the landscape in which the community resides. Barclay suggests connections between people and the environment that encompass spiritual elements. Similar idea of connection between Maori people and land is also imposed as she says in her book, “Land, for example, was viewed as something to be tamed and brought under control the landscape, the arrangement of nature, could be altered by Man” (51). Linda Smith states that for coloniser the land could be an object of victory or control whereas for the people of Maori land denotes a sense of ‘being’.

References are made in the film to a contagious epidemic in the community that resulted in a high Maori mortality rate, including Greg’s mother. Iwi’s challenge to the authority of western medicine resonates with the struggle to legitimate Maori methods of healing. Similarly, Linda Smith says in her book that Western research has dehumanised and rejected Maori knowledge and glorified the Western knowledge. But she nowhere in the book suggests to dismiss the Western Knowledge rather expects of collaborated research that recognises the Maori community:

Research is implicated in the production of Western knowledge, in the nature of academic work, in the production of theories which have dehumanized Maori and in practices which have continued to privilege Western ways of knowing, while denying the validity for Maori of Maori knowledge, language and culture. (183)

*Ngati* does not attempt to reconcile the conflict between Maori and western medicine but respects and validates both disciplines, offering possibilities of a harmonious coexistence.

### **Collectivity and Relationships**

Collectivity and relationships emphasize the importance of the collective without diminishing the role of the individual. The film reinforces notions of collectivity and relationships

by generations that are represented as living together, not always in harmony but with an underlying commitment to an empowering collective and collaborative model. This is illustrated by the relationship between Iwi and his daughter Sally. Despite their differences Iwi supports Sally when she provides a solution to the economic crisis. Additionally, Tione is supported during Ropata's illness by the community and in particular, Uncle Eru. This reflects in Linda Smith's importance of a community, "reconnect relationships and to recreate our humanness" (105) we can relate this view of her to the idea conveyed in the movie about the priority given to living together as community and value of relationships.

### **Transformation**

Kaupapa Maori film theory interfaces resistance from the potential outcomes of change, established on emancipatory standards. *Ngati* changed thoughts of film in New Zealand and how it identifies with Maori and additionally having indigenous worldwide implications. Barclay benefits and focuses indigeneity as a key plan in making a sound and motivational Maori experience true to life. *Ngati* provides an audience with counter hegemonic images of Maori that are complex yet overwhelmingly positive and optimistic. Linda Smith emphasis on her belief on change that is expected to arise and gives Maori oriented research will help in that enhancement and creation of Maori identity, she gives optimistic research methods to research on indigenous peoples. As she says, "transformation which signaled the Enlightenment spirit" (Smith 58) she strongly believes that the transformation in the research methods would provide enlightenment in the lives of the Maori.

### **Conclusion**

This paper explored Maori filmmaking and in particular Maori filmmaking pioneer, Barry Barclay and his film *Ngati*. Barclay cleared the path and shaped the future of filmmaking in New Zealand. Despite nuances and differences in interpretations of the film, the application of *Kaupapa Maori Framework*, developed as part of this study, enabled strong themes to emerge. The film challenges and creates alternative and transformative images that nourish the spirit and mind of the researcher in the understanding of the Maori community. Multiple expressions of Maori realities convey shared histories of colonisation, collective aspirations. This offers us glimpses of



Maori realities.

The filmmaker progresses the politics of these representations; Barclay has articulated a Maori cinematic vision establishing a place globally. *Kaupapa Maori Framework* also offered a number of more detailed discoveries when applied to the movie. The film engages in diverse and unique ways with all the categories: (1) Maori voices; (2) Maori worldviews and concepts; (3) collectivity and relationships; (4) transformation.

Barclay succeeds in creating a healthy and inspirational Maori cinematic site that expresses Maori experiences, offering hope and solutions. *Ngati* provides an audience with counter hegemonic images of Maori that are complex yet overwhelmingly positive and optimistic. Which according to Linda's proposed idea of representation is successfully carried out on-screen: "Representation is also a project of indigenous artists, writers, poets, film makers and others who attempt to express an indigenous spirit, experience or world view" (151).

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