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(Un)Pacific Visions: Alan Duff’s Writings and Their Film Adaptations

INTRODUCTION

Dissatisfaction from an author who sees his/her work adapted for the cinema is nothing new. The complaint that an author’s vision has been “compromised” or “mistranslated” when it has been brought to the screen is chronic. There should, however, be little question that an exact, one-to-one correspondence of film to novel is impossible. The work of Alan Duff is a case in point. His novel, *Once Were Warriors*, earned great critical acclaim, and its subsequent film adaptation was an international hit. The film, however, was not based upon Duff’s original screenplay and features many departures from the novel itself. These departures significantly alter the message conveyed by the film from the one in the novel. These differences make for fruitful areas of study as to how both films and texts are “read” by students and instructors.

Both the novel and film detail the lives of the Maori in New Zealand, encapsulated in the Heke Family: Jake, his wife Beth, and their children. Among the children are the oldest son, “Nig,” daughter Grace, and son Mark (“Boogie”). Jake seems an adequate (albeit distant) father, and the family seems to have no great problems except those faced by all working class families in an unstable job market. This picture is only the surface, however. Deeper rumblings are found underneath. While Jake may only be a somewhat gruff man when sober, his anger when drunk is frightening to behold. The scene in which Jake beats Beth is one of the most realistic and brutal depictions of domestic violence ever shown on film. To say that it is difficult to watch would be an understatement.
The results of the beating leave Beth too badly injured to leave the house the next day. It is that day that one of the parents was supposed to attend a court hearing on the welfare of their son Mark, who has been arrested for acts of delinquency. Accompanied only by his 13-year-old sister Grace, Boogie is declared a ward of the state and is sent to a juvenile center. Meanwhile, Nig is in the process of joining a street gang. Jake and Beth reconcile and Jake rents a car so the family can visit Boogie and have a picnic. The day ends in disappointment when Jake stops at the pub for “just one” and never comes back. Jake insults Beth when she tries to get the car keys to complete the visit. In the aftermath of one of the many drunken parties held in the Heke home, Grace is raped in her bed. Grace does not tell anyone about her rape, falling into a depression that eventually leads to her suicide by hanging. The family is shattered after that, and Beth separates from Jake in an attempt to raise her children in a world outside of the circle of violence.

DEPARTURES FROM TEXT TO FILM

While the general stories are similar, there are several differences between the film and novel, which push different understandings and conclusions upon the viewer and reader. In Duff’s novel, Jake Heke is the nearly full blooded Maori, while his wife Beth is half “Pakeha.” The film, however, gives to Beth chiefly blood, while Jake is of common stock. (Lower than simply common stock, even. In both the film and novel, Jake confesses that his lineage can be traced back to Maori slaves.) This confession seems to mean fairly little in the novel, as there is very little cultural pride exhibited by either Jake or Beth. However, Beth’s “royal” status forms one of the underlying tensions within the film.

While in the novel both Jake and Beth are mostly ignorant and derisive of Maori culture and traditions, Beth’s “Maori-ness” ends up becoming her primary source of strength in the film. Grace’s rape, which triggers the changes in and explosive breakup of the Heke family, occurs only once in the film, and Grace knows who her rapist is. In the novel, however, the molestation is a frequent occurrence, and the identity of the perpetrator is a mystery. In the novel, Grace’s diary implicates her father, and Jake himself cannot pierce through the drunken stupors that he experiences to even convince himself that he is innocent of such an act. Finally, while the film ends with Beth finally leaving Jake and re-
turning to her homeland with the rest of her family, the novel ends with a second funeral for the Heke family, as Nig is killed in a gang fight.

QUESTIONS OF CULTURE

Representations of Maori culture and pride pervade the film. The first specific instance occurs in the boy’s home, where Boogie is smashing windows with a tataha (a Maori war club). Bennett, the social worker, takes the club and shows that the weapon can be used with grace and beauty. The scene is shot at an upward angle, from Boogie’s point of view. While Bennett is intimidating, we are more deeply struck by the power and charisma Bennett exhibits in this moment. Nig’s sign of full entry into the gang is the full-face tattoos of traditional Maori warriors. On the other hand, Grace’s funeral is perhaps the first powerful expression of Maori culture in the novel. During the ceremony, a chief gets up to speak:

[H]e speaks first of his genealogy, as the chief rapid fired in a half-whisper a complex and endless mouthful of names, words . . . His ancestry—your ancestry, therefore, Beth, and mine—he recalls all those tupuna long gone yet still alive in the heart of every true Maori. He is saying, Beth, that we are what we are only because of our past . . . and that we should never forget our past or our future is lost . . . Beth wondering if perhaps that was what ailed her people; their lack of knowledge of the past. A history.4

The power of the chief’s words, even in a language Beth does not understand, moves her and those around her. “Had applause been permissible he’d’ve brought the house down.”5 The issue of communication here is a striking one. The power is not only in what is being said (or understanding it), but the sincerity with which it is spoken. Earlier, Beth comes to the realization that her home may lack a history:

And it occurred to Beth that her own house—no, not just her own house but every house she’d ever been in—was bookless. The thought struck her like one of Jake’s punches, dunno why . . . We’re a bookless society . . .

She took her mind over dwelling after dwelling she’d been to, relations’ homes, her own childhood home, friends. But no. It was bookless. She thought why? Almost in anguish. Why are Maoris not interested in books? Well, they didn’t have a written language before the white man arrived. Maybe that was it. But still it bothered her. And she began to think that it was because a bookless society didn’t stand a show in this modern world, not a damn show. And I live in it, don’t I? and my kids.”6
The irony in the difference between the presentation of culture in the film and novel is that while the visual medium of film allows the viewer to see these images of Maori culture, it is given to the viewer in a vacuum. Excepting the police officers and judge who remands Boogie to the care of the state, there are no whites in the film. This does not mean that there is no white presence in the film, however. The film is in fact full of passing references to Maori culture in juxtaposition with images from popular culture. The tension between Maori and Pakeha worlds are clearly put in greater focus in the novel. An entire subplot of the novel deals with the uneasy relation between Maoris and Pakehas as Grace is fascinated by the Tramberts, a Pakeha family that live near the Heke home. This subplot is excised completely from the film. In the novel, there is an underlying criticism not of “Maoriness,” per se, but how cultural concepts and traditions have been corrupted (by both indigenous peoples and their colonizers) in this modern world. There is the implicit criticism, for example, of the use of traditional full-face tattoos by the street gangs in the novel. The tragedy of colonization is recognized, to be sure, but Duff's commentary is a deeper one than simply recognizing that Maoris in New Zealand have got it tough because of the Pakeha. Duff's novel is a challenge to indigenous populations to do something today. In the scene with the warclub, Bennett challenges Boogie at the home to develop his strength within, which is where in the end Boogie will “carry his tiaha.” During one of Beth's internal dialogues, she suggests the corruption of the “warrior” culture, especially in the Maori male. It is a commentary on the frustration that grows within an indigenous population that sees itself as a conquered people in its own land. These are “defeated warriors,” and this builds within them a frustration that explodes in gang or domestic violence, a violence either stunted or exacerbated by heavy alcohol use:

Smiling—and to hell with the pain—at the sight of foamy white head atop her beer. Smokes. Must have a smoke to go with it, not the same having a beer without a smoke. Horse and carriage, love and marriage, smoke and beer. Beer and fists. Beer and personality change. Beer and . . .) . . . (Beer and happiness—?? happiness? For me it is. Beer and culture. Culture? Beer and Maori culture. It's our lifeblood. We live for our beer. My parents did, and as for Jake's, the stories he's told me about how they drank. Any wonder he's half mad.)

The controversy surrounding Duff's work is about more than Once Were Warriors. While the novel received great critical acclaim, it was viewed by many in New Zealand to be an “elitist” book, one that would receive little interest outside the intelligen-
tsia. It was anticipated the film would be received in much the same way, as director Lee Tamahori says:

I honestly thought when we made this film it was only going to appeal to people who had bought the book: a narrow, small, almost insular, white, middle class audience. A film festival crowd . . . . I didn’t think Maori would go either. I thought they’d stay away in droves because of the controversy surrounding the book and because they didn’t want to see such a tough picture of their own lives. The film defied all our predictions and it’s traveled through every generation and every culture in this country and its [sic] done that overseas too . . . . It’s quite phenomenal.9

The film did not escape criticism from some of the Maori community (or other reviewers) for what could be argued is its simplistic “solution” to the plight of the Maori. Leonie Pihama says:

So what is being shared about Maori people in an international arena? Well, for those that know little or nothing of our people, what is being portrayed is alcoholism, violence, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, alongside superficial notions that all we need to do to “solve our problem” is to go home, to go back to the marae. Yet even returning home is presented as “our problem” in that Jake and Beth’s “problems” are traced back to his rejection by her whanau [loosely, family] and then on to his statement that he was not considered good enough for her because [his] people were “slaves.” So the audience, both nationally and internationally, is told that we are the problem. There is absolutely no entertaining of any historical notion of colonisation. There is no thought given to the oppressive effects of colonisation on our people.10

What seems most ironic about this criticism is that Duff’s original novel does not offer such simple answers, but drew even greater hostility from much of the Maori community for its hard (Duff would argue honest) portrayal of Maori life. Duff’s novel, however, does contain issues of colonization and Maori-Pakeha relations that are absolutely absent from the film.11

“THE TWO JAKES”

There are two distinct Jakes portrayed between the novel and film. The Jake of the novel is impotent, both in his ability to influence the society around him and almost literally, in the fact that he rarely has sex with his wife. The novel-Jake’s only refuge, his only source of power, is his physical strength and prowess. In the bar, he is Jake “The Muss” (for muscles), and he exerts that strength in bar fights, as well as the beatings he inflicts on his wife. The film-Jake is strong, but also potent. Tamahori clearly indicates that the physical beating Jake inflicts ends with
his rape of Beth. This rape (which is only intimated at, unlike the rape of Grace) can be read on many levels. We can interpret this as an extension of Jake’s strength, his control over Beth. Rape is never really about sex, but rather about power. It can also be read as another expression of Jake’s helplessness and frustration, as he lashes out on one of the few things in his life that he feels he can control. But without the surrounding context of colonization and oppression that the novel gives us, the scene is naturalized, personalized. There is no presentation of outside issues and factors. This is not to justify domestic violence within an indigenous community—far from it. But rather, this is to understand that domestic violence is not an individual or even a family problem, but a social problem that needs to be brought into the open. Fleury argues that this is in fact what the film accomplishes, the illumination of domestic violence as a social problem. I would simply argue that the novel does this better, with more difficult, but more realistic, avenues for action and reform.

The end of the film leaves Jake with little recognition that he needs to change, to break from the circle of violence. As Beth leaves him, Jake rages at her that she will return, that she and the family cannot live without him. Beth’s leaving does not form the end of the novel, however. The end of the novel is Nig’s death and his funeral. Jake is seen hiding in the background, tears falling from his eyes, as he mourns the death of another child. This Jake may slowly see that changes must be made in his life, that he may eventually be redeemed. The Jake of Duff’s novels may follow with a greater internal consistency than the Jake of the films.12

There is certainly much for Duff to criticize in what he perceives to be the “leftist liberal” commentary on his work. These liberals may find “answers” in the film which placate their guilt but arguably do little else:

Sarah Sandley contends that the film provides an “unflinching view of the desperation faced by some urban Maoris [sic], but avoids the challenge of proposing ways out of it.” David Denby asks, “How are tribal rites supposed to heal the ruptures of modern industrial society, with its structural unemployment, its imported mass culture, its programmed hedonism?” 13

The conflict between Duff’s novel and Tamahori’s cinematic vision provide both the dilemma and opportunity for the instructor. The first challenge is to understand the difficulties (and unrealistic expectations) of translating text to film. The second, and perhaps even more difficult problem is to challenge the idea that
films simply “present” images and that our gaze is not manipulated.

PEDAGOGICAL QUESTIONS: TRANSLATION AND COMMUNICATION

The use of the term “translation” carries with it some intellectual baggage, but is a fair term in describing the move from novel to screenplay and finally to film. There shouldn’t be too much debate over the idea that the written word and the silver screen are in fact different mediums. I would argue that they are in fact two different languages.

Film is an advanced representational system, but what film actually represents is debatable. Our gaze is controlled, directed, and indeed manipulated to view what the director wishes us to see. Houston Wood argues that

Films produce multilayered representations that seem to most members of the metropole to mirror reality with an immediacy and verisimilitude that written texts lack. The great power of this advanced representational system derives in part from its ability to include viewers within its frame, to offer an engaged position to its spectators.  

While conceding the obvious point that the visual medium of film has an immediacy that written texts have a difficulty matching, I do not want to be taken to mean that the written word cannot offer an “engaged position to its spectators.” Indeed, this may be the great pedagogical challenge—to engage the student as reader. This can be done in many ways, but a first step will have to be deconstructing the students’ gaze when they watch the film.

“REALITY” VERSUS IMAGINATION

The visual medium of film has great advantages in conveying images and information over the written word. For example, Lee Tamahori says about the domestic violence scene:

In the book you only hear Beth getting beaten up. She’s downstairs and you’re never actually in there. I decided to go the other way, confront this right through: take people into their worst damn nightmare; take them in there and show them how vicious and how nasty this thing is.

There is no question that the scene is powerful, highly disturbing to watch, and a veritable motherlode of images for discus-
sion and debate. What is arguable, however, is whether the film’s presentation is actually more “real” than the novel’s. Or more to the point, whether or not the techniques used by Duff in the novel and Tamahori in the film simply take better advantage of the media being implemented. Film is the visual medium, and so therefore to _show_ domestic violence is arguably the best use of film._17_ The written word, however, creates pictures in the mind’s eye. This is mirrored in the fact that Grace and the other children only _hear_ the violence between their parents. That terror is certainly best shown in the written word as one that requires the reader to imagine the violence, just as the children must while huddled upstairs. Would a written description of the beating have been more powerful, or would it have diminished its own effect, falling into some “action-adventure” scene?

Films are _representation_ al systems, and the vision presented to the viewer is a _directed_ one. Students may have been conditioned to accept too easily the “reality” presented by the film over what is given in the written word, even when they see the “tricks” that the camera can play (such as the opening billboard scene in _Once Were Warriors_)._18_ Films can present powerful images, but these images must be streamlined for their power to come to the fore. A stark example of such streamlining in _Once Were Warriors_ is that the brown skin of the actors was made more uniform in color by a filtering process in post-production._19_ The implications of this practice are staggering, and far too numerous to do more than touch upon a few questions here. Was Tamahori concerned that the viewer would be troubled by “shades” of pigmentation? What does such a _constructed_ uniformity of imagery that we are presented with say about the verisimilitude of film as a representational system? In what other films has this practice been implemented, and what does this practice imply about presentations of race and ethnicity in film?

**PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES**

The comparison of film to novel offers incredible opportunities for in-depth discussion. The novel, the written word, allows us to see some things more deeply than any visual media can. The written word challenges us to create the vision, to paint the canvas with our mind’s eye. This makes the effect greater on the personal level, since it is the individual who must draw his or her own image. But a stronger personal image may be more difficult to share, more difficult to transfer mutual understandings, even from a “common” text. (Indeed, this difference in “trans-
lation” and expression is again the heart of the complaint between novelist and filmmaker.) The more visual medium can bring images to viewers that are more easily shared, a “baseline” that can initiate discussion. This may be “easier” for students, but certainly this would not be the first time that “easier” did not mean “better.” While the film takes (one could argue) the clichéd “return to one’s roots to find peace” ending, Duff’s novel actually attempts a more challenging proposal of developing a new community based on real attempts at trust and reciprocity. Gregory Gipson points out:

[In the novel] Beth has embraced a communal ideal, a Maori communal ideal. By contrast, in the film, after Grace’s funeral, we see not the local community, but the family one: Beth with her children, even Nig and Toot [a homeless kid and friend of Grace’s], together and happy, bidding a fond farewell to her aunt, who suggests a visit to the ancestral home. The film’s Beth is a woman who finds her community in her own bloodstream, with none of the wider consequences hinted at by the novel. In some ways, perhaps her reaction is (arguably) more realistic, but on the other, the loss of the scenes of neighborhood revitalization newfound community [sic] by the time of Nig’s funeral, removes a look at a very real social situation and a very real possibility of solution. Such is, I think it safe to say, Duff’s point—a pointing, that is, of direction, a passionate plea for action.20

There is no nostalgic, utopian, “good old days” rhetoric in the novel. Duff’s challenge is one for today’s Maoris, today’s New Zealanders, and essentially for all of today’s people. On the other hand, Lee Tamahori, director of Once Were Warriors, argues, “we fundamentally changed the structure of the novel so that there’s a lot more hope, heart and positive things in there, without destroying the infrastructure or very violent core of it. We retained all that and yet we gave a lot more positive pointers.”21 Whether it is the film or novel that offers the more positive (or more realistic) message is certainly a question to challenge the student.

Duff does not offer easy answers, but in my opinion he may in the end offer more realistic ones. The end of the film may comfort us about the power of the human spirit and the power of the community of Native peoples, but that message has too often degenerated into cliche and soundbite. The film is powerful, yes, but is actually much less subversive, much less challenging, than the novel. The film falls to familiar images that assuage liberal guilt. The novel is a much more powerful indictment of both indigenous and mainstream cultures.

Students, especially students today, are probably more likely to feel that “reading” the film is an easier task. This is only a superficial understanding of what it means to read the film, how-
ever. Passive watching is easier than passive reading, but active viewing of a film may in many ways be even more difficult than active reading of a text. Even films as emotionally powerful as *Once Were Warriors* can lull a viewer to “simply” watch and not think about how one’s gaze is being directed. In fact, films of emotional intensity such as *Warriors* may even make it easier to sit back and ride the emotional roller coaster that Tamahori intends *Warriors* to be. Such intensity will make it difficult to simultaneously experience the film and allow the viewer to critically examine what is being shown. What this implies is that single showings may not be profitable learning devices. Multiple viewings, like multiple readings, will strengthen the learning process.

While students may be initially suspicious of the idea that one’s gaze is manipulated by the director in a film, this device can be shown by the use of examples from the film itself. These scenes are not simply comic relief, little “tricks” to amuse before we “get down to business.” Rather, they can be seen as the implication of a director, a storyteller, one who is showing us what he/she wants us to see. We challenge this gaze by raising the counterfactuals—how else could this scene have been shot? What other ways are there of viewing what we are shown?

Films are too often used by instructors and seen by students as “filler.” Films can offer real avenues for education, but the challenge may even be greater than the assigning of written works. It is difficult to challenge the power of the visual media, to undermine its directed gaze, but it is out of that challenge that fruitful interpretations and understandings emerge.

**Notes**

1. The film actually eliminates one of the children. A third son, Abe, appears in the novel, and plays a more central role in the Duff’s sequel, *What Becomes of the Broken Hearted*?
2. The term more closely translates as “foreigner,” but has become the generally accepted term for “white” in New Zealand.
3. Indeed, when Jake beats Beth, it is after she has refused to cook eggs during a party at the Heke residence. Beth screams at him, “I’m not the slave here, Jake!” which clearly inflames his anger even further.
5. Duff, p. 4.
6. The walls of the children’s room in the Heke home are covered with posters of African American boxers and movies, most notably *Lethal Weapon* and *White Men Can’t Jump*.
7. In the novel, Grace actually hangs herself from the tree on the Tramberts’ property, rather than in her own backyard.
8. Duff, p. 35.

10. Quoted in Fleury, pp. 7–8, emphasis in original.

11. Much of the anti-Duff sentiment from the Maori community may be more accurately directed not at *Once Were Warriors*, but in Duff's nonfiction work, *Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge*. For a criticism of that work, see Andrew Eruera Vercoe (1998), *Educating Jake: Pathways to Empowerment*, Auckland: Harper Collins. Note that Vercoe’s critique still uses the image of Jake Heke in its title, however.

12. The author was in Australia when the film sequel to *Once Were Warriors* was released. *What Becomes of the Broken Hearted?*, adapted from Duff's novel of the same title, was panned in some circles. Many saw it as a "betrayal" of the first film; the sequel had unmade the message of the first film. Of course, it could also be said that the first film had unmade (or remade) the message of Duff’s novel.

13. Quoted in Fleury, p. 8, notes omitted.


15. One can also point out that there can be obstacles with engaging the student as watcher, as anyone who has observed students falling asleep during a film shown in class can attest.

16. Quoted in Fleury, p. 102.

17. This leaves aside judgments of how the domestic violence scene is filmed. Certainly, the violence shown when Jake beats Beth is much more "real" than the stylized violence of action-adventure films or even the earlier scene when Jake beats someone in the bar.

18. As the film opens, we are presented with a pristine image of New Zealand scenery. The colors are spectacular, almost too perfect. Then the camera pans back to reveal that we have been looking at a billboard in the middle of the city of Auckland.


