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“Souls of Warriors”: *Once Were Warriors* in France

Once were Warriors (1994), billed as the first fully Maori feature-length fiction film¹, though a huge success with popular audiences throughout Aotearoa, came in for some harsh criticism from academics, Maori and Pakeha alike. At the forefront of Maori academic critiques of this film and others (Jane Campion’s *The Piano*, most notably) that represented Maori, Leone Pihama feared the consequences of projecting what were seen as debilitatingly negative, decontextualized stereotypes of Maori, not just onto our national screens, but beyond, onto the global stage.² This paper seeks to (begin to) engage with such critiques³ by examining box office figures and press reception of Tamahori’s first feature in France.

Lee Tamahori and Rewia Brown’s screen adaptation of Alan Duff’s *Once Were Warriors* (1994) was released in France on 05 July 1995, as *L’âme des guerriers*, or *Souls of Warriors*. The film screened for nine weeks, attracting a total of 201 354 spectators according to French industry sources.⁴ Although a modest result in absolute Box Office terms: *Warriors* was 106th out of 453 films screened in France in 1995,⁵ this is a surprisingly solid outcome for a low-budget (\$US 1.3M), low distribution (50 copies), Antipodean first feature.⁶ The film came in just behind medium budget Hollywood action features *Star Trek Generations* (101/220 935; \$US 35M x 133 copies) and *Drop Zone*, (103/212 240; \$US45M x 103 copies), in front of star studded, high-brow British heritage drama *The*

Madness of King George (113/168 437) and far ahead of Spike Lee’s \$25 million *Clockers* (141/93 176 x 10 copies).

Warriors enjoyed quite extensive, generally very favourable press coverage in France, with an overwhelming majority of reviewers praising the film for the powerful performances of its lead actors, particularly that of Rena Owen, and for its poignant, hard-hitting social realism.⁷ The film was the subject of just under two dozen articles, interviews and reviews, including pieces by some of the country’s leading critics. My comprehensive sample consists of twenty three articles⁸ published in a total of 17 newspapers, weeklies, film and entertainment magazines across the political and intellectual spectrum, from the highbrow left-wing film monthly, *Positif*, to the popular and highly influential entertainment weeklies *Pariscope*⁹ and *Télérama*; from leading centre-left daily *Le Monde* to the centre-right *Figaro*. I will assume here, given the generally accepted status of film critics as culturally endorsed expert viewers and audience-opinion-shapers, and in the absence of wider audience surveys, that a careful analysis of these press articles will provide *some* insights into how broader French audiences might have viewed the film.

I will pose the following, interrelated research questions regarding how French audiences’ perception of Aotearoa generally, and more specifically Maori, might have been shaped or impacted by the film. To what extent, I ask, does an analysis of press reception suggest that the film resulted in the dissemination of a) inaccurate information and b) negative, decontextualised stereotypes of Maori? Specifically, did French critics read the film’s violence as the mark of a brutal ethnic group or do they connect it to historical and/or socio-economic factors ie. colonialism and capitalism? Thirdly, how did French critics read the film’s evocations of Maori tradition (moko, haka, tangi)? Finally, are there key cultural aspects of the film which appear to escape French critics’ notice, as one might expect? In addressing these questions, I will examine ways in which reception is inflected by paratextual and

contextual factors such as critics' pre-existing knowledge, cultural expectations and values, and distribution/marketing factors such as the quality of French translation(s) and interviews by director and cast.

Pre-Existing Knowledge of Aotearoa & Maori: Curiosity, Ignorance, Misreading

To French critics, *Once Were Warriors* is a film from a country that at the time was little known, apart from sheep (competing with French product), rugby (The All Blacks as formidable adversaries despite the recent World Cup final loss to South Africa), and anti-nuclear protests (The Rainbow Warrior Affair). Similarly, apart from Jane Campion's summary, and in some ways problematic sketch in *The Piano*, Maori are also an unknown quantity to the French at the time of the film's release, as the following quotes demonstrate:

New Zealand equals sheep cheaply smuggled in via England that end up on our butchers' racks. Or rugby: their team beaten by South Africa in 1995 but famous all the same. And then there are the vigorous protests against nuclear testing. That's about all that comes to mind when we think about this country on the other side of the world. The list would stop there if it were not for Lee Tamahori suddenly reminding us of the existence of Maori.¹⁰

We sure had better watch out for these films that make their way to us from the other side of the world. This one is a pure New Zealand product: punchy and clever. One might have expected as much from a country with a talent for rugby and counter-espionage.¹¹

If you hear the words 'film' and 'New Zealand', who do you think of? Jane Campion, of course.¹²

Geographical ignorance and cultural misreading surface in a number of reviews: Aotearoa is described by one critic as "an island state of Oceania and Australia"¹³, with the All Blacks as Oceanian players who, at the beginning of a rugby match,

start doing “a bizarre dance called the *aka*: different countries have their own version but the one from New Zealand is the most impressive”.¹⁴

Both ignorance and curiosity about Maori culture are evidenced in a number of articles, in which critics expressed a desire to learn more about a people “too rarely seen in movies”.¹⁵ The film was praised for beginning this process of the discovery of a largely unknown culture.¹⁶ Unfortunately however, the same process of discovery resulted in the dissemination of information which was often only partially correct. For example, some critics who noted that Maori are indeed descendents of a people originating from Polynesia,¹⁷ erroneously claimed that the date of our tipuna’s arrival was in either the fourteenth¹⁸ or sixteenth¹⁹ century²⁰. The former also described Maori as peaceful cattle farmers; clearly ignorant of the fact that livestock were introduced by Pakeha, centuries later.

Jake as Descendent of Black Slaves

The most disturbing cultural misconception regarding the film itself, one that resurfaces in almost a third of reviews (7/23), concerns Jake’s ethnicity. Many French critics misread the film as being about “a family of mixed ethnicity: Maori and African”.²¹ Thus one reads that the film “outlines the problem of ethnic confrontation between Black descendents of African slaves and the Maori, the first inhabitants of the island. Beth is Maori, Jake is Black.”²² For one critic, descendents of African slaves were “regarded with contempt by Maori”²³, who are described in more noble terms. In fact this frequent misreading was due, not simply to ignorance²⁴, but to a translation/interpretation error, in the subtitled French version, which occurs in the picnic scene, when Jake tells his children about his roots:

Original English Version: *Your mother was beautiful...pride of the fucking tribe. And this ol’ black ass comes along and*

steals her away: And you know where I come from kids? A long line of slaves.

French Subtitled Version: *Votre mère était si belle...la perle de la tribu. Et arrive un pauvre con de noir qui l'embarque. Vous savez d'où je viens? De générations d'esclaves.*²⁵

In the sub-titled version, which critics have clearly seen, the translation of ‘black’ as *noir* is literal and, being uttered in the context of slavery, is interpreted literally by many reviewers, who concluded that Jake was descended from Black African slaves. Lack of cultural knowledge (Maori kept prisoners captured in battle as slaves) and differing historically based assumptions (Black equals African; slaves come from Africa), almost certainly fed into this translation-induced cultural misreading on the part of French critics.²⁶ Such a misreading would have been reinforced by other elements in the film, notably Jake’s animosity towards tikanga evidenced in later scenes, his refusal to accept that Grace be returned to Beth’s whenua tuturu for her tangi and the fact that he refers to Maori, in the third person plural, as other.

Without background knowledge about the history of slavery within pre-European Maori society, the translation has inadvertently led French critics, including some of the most experienced and most distinguished²⁷ (and their readers) to conclude that Jake is a descendant of Black (African) slaves, while Beth is of noble Maori descent.²⁸

Previous Knowledge Reversed: Cliché Images of Aotearoa

Despite numerous instances of false assumptions due to cultural and geographical ignorance, critics also showed themselves more than willing to learn from the film. In this respect, two reviewers note the film’s explosive deconstruction of the stereotypical, Garden-of-Eden-like, tourist image of Aotearoa²⁹ announced in Tamahori’s opening ‘shot’, both critics praising the sudden camera movement from the idyllic pastoral billboard scene to the less than idyllic realities of

suburban life. In no sense negative, these comments promote the film as an opportunity to discover a different side to New Zealand beyond familiar tourist images and the naive or noble savage depictions of Maori presented in *The Piano*.

Contextualisation of Violence?

The number of cultural errors (re-) produced by many critics in the sample might suggest that the film’s violence could have been equally open to misinterpretation, out of a failure to take into account its specific socio-economic and historical contexts, reading the film as showing “graphic violence at the expense of wider social analysis, particularly recognition of the impact of colonisation and systematic degradation on the Maori race.”³⁰

In fact, this is not at all how French critics read the film. If almost all reviewers (21/23) mention domestic and other violence, it is seen as emerging from a broader a climate of cultural alienation that is explicitly or implicitly linked to either colonisation or capitalism or both. There is frequent mention of Maori being culturally uprooted, relegated to the status of foreigners in their own country. In no case are Maori described in monolithically negative terms as a brutal race.

The impact of colonialism is addressed most explicitly through translated interviews with Rena Owen describing how Maori land was stolen away³¹ by the English colonisers, resulting in a loss of identity and cultural pride, transforming Maori into “a community of people who have lost their roots in their own country.”³² Owen also explicitly promotes *Warriors* as evidencing a cultural revival.³³ A four page spread on the film including interviews with both Tamahori and Owen in the magazine *Impact* appeared before the film was released and might well have provided valuable cultural information for other critics. Unfortunately however, these interviews appear not to have been read by all, at least not by those critics (7/23)

who thought Jake was a descendent of black slaves, since Owen refers specifically to Jake's ethnic status as Maori.

Another key factor in critical reception of the film was undoubtedly the French cinematic context. *Warriors* was released just two months after the defining French film of the year, Mathieu Kassovitz' bombshell evocation of urban alienation among marginalised multi-ethnic French youth *La Haine / Hate* (1995).³⁴ Parallels were drawn by a number of reviewers, in statements that emphasised the socio-economic roots of violence ("domestic violence, delinquency, sexual abuse and suicide are modern-day realities in every industrialised society...*Once Were Warriors* is to New Zealand what *La Haine* is to France."³⁵) and the transnational character of cycles of alienation and violence within post-industrial capitalist societies (Tamahori's "guided tour of antipodean urban disenfranchisement reminds us that 'Hate' is not confined within national boundaries"³⁶). Parallels with *La Haine* thus reinforce numerous references to the universality of the film's story. "All the conflicts of the modern world are more or less symbolised by the drama between Beth and Jake"³⁷, making *Warriors* a film that "every spectator in the world...can identify with."³⁸

Maori as Noble Savage?

When confronting the unknown, human beings cognitively seek to draw parallels with the known³⁹, as we have noted with critical comparisons of the film with *La Haine*. Thus Maori are sometimes compared to other disenfranchised indigenous or colonised cultures attempting to reconnect with ancestral roots, such as North American Indians⁴⁰ or African Americans⁴¹, though not without the occasional instance of confusion, as we have seen. In another example, one journalist describes Beth as a descendent of "Maori Indians."⁴² Again this appears to be the result of a mistranslation, not from the

film this time, but from an earlier interview with Owen, in which she is misquoted as using this term.⁴³

For a number of French reviewers, the main points of interest in *Warriors* were the “fantastic rites”⁴⁴ of Maori culture and characters’ search for cultural identity⁴⁵ by “rediscovering their links with Maori tradition”⁴⁶, as when Nig joins the gang, Boogie learns haka and taiaha in the remand home and Beth finally decides to return to her people. More problematically, the gang are very often the focal point for French critics’ reading of the film as advocating a desirable return to noble traditions⁴⁷, being described as “trying to find their identity by returning to the tribal rites of the ancient Maori warriors.”⁴⁸ In several French reviews, Nig’s gang membership is viewed favourably as a means of reconnecting with Maori culture, while younger brother Boogie, without the support of the powerful surrogate family provided by the gang, is described as sliding into delinquency.⁴⁹ Indeed, some French critics readily expressed open admiration for the gang, and were impressed by the “spectacular” cultural tradition of facial and body tattooing⁵⁰ (even though gang members’ tattoos do not always follow traditional moko design) and by the open displays of physical strength. So much so, in fact, that one critic mistakenly attributed the film’s haka, performed by Boogie and others of Bennett’s young protégés from the remand home, to the gang.⁵¹ The over-romanticisation of the gang by some French critics, in this author’s opinion a misreading, borders dangerously on a re-enactment of Rousseau’s noble savage myth. Nonetheless, one article describes the gang as simply hyper violent⁵² and another sees them as a brutal, semi-fascist band of thugs, a perverted version of a more spiritual, more authentic Maori warrior culture, represented by Bennett, described as a Master of martial arts and spiritual reflection.⁵³ It is worth noting that this one critic had more contextual knowledge of New Zealand gangs, having seen Peter Cathro’s documentary, *Black Power-Fast Forward* (1990).

A number of French critics, who had not read Duff's novel and possessed little or no knowledge of the complex, social issue of gang-related violence in Aotearoa, visibly enchanted by what they saw as exotic ancestral rites, honourable connection to tradition and intriguing / impressive body art, erroneously attributed the film's more spiritual evocations of tikanga to the gang and perceived it as having a wholly positive function. Several others, who did not fall prey to this confusion, nonetheless misunderstood the role of tikanga in Maori cultural and economic revival, suggesting that a desire for a wholesale return to the past represented a nostalgic fantasy rather than a realisable social project.⁵⁴

Concluding Remarks

This close analysis of French press reviews has revealed that a combination of French reviewers' lack of cultural knowledge and translation error did indeed lead to their misreading key aspects of the film. We can conclude that these misreadings were very likely disseminated to sections of the wider viewing public. On the other hand, French critics did NOT read the film's violence as the mark of a brutal ethnic group, rather, violence was clearly connected to historical and/or socio-economic factors, specifically colonialism and international industrial capitalism. Moreover, in line with the film's translated title, *L'âme des guerriers / Souls of Warriors*, French critics overwhelmingly read the film as advocating a positive return to tradition equated with spirituality. However, this resulted in the gang being over-romanticised by many and only one critic distinguished between the controlled, ritualised violence (haka) advocated by Bennett as tohunga and the more brutal, culturally inauthentic violence of the gang.

We have noted how the context in which the film was released undoubtedly contributed to positive readings, inviting comparisons between the difficulties faced by indigenous peoples and other marginalised groups within post-industrial

capitalist societies. Interviews by Rena Owen and Lee Tamahori also appear to have given some French reviewers access to insider information about Maori but these were not read by all.

Finally, I am unable to say with certainty, just how representative my corpus of reviews may be of wider audience reception or to what extent French audiences read and adopted the stance of the critics in my sample. In order to do so, one would need wide ranging audience surveys. This will be my next project.

APPENDIX 1**French Box Office 1995**

French Box Office 1995				
Title	Position / 453	Total Box Office (seats)	Budget \$US	No. of Copies on first day
<i>Pocahontas</i>	3	5 656 757	55M	616
<i>Die Hard III</i>	7	3 458 382	90M	494
<i>Waterworld</i>	12	2 211 654	175M	371
<i>Star Trek Generations</i>	101	220 935	35M	133
<i>Drop Zone</i>	105	212 240	45M	103
<i>Once Were Warriors</i>	106	201 354	1.3M	50
<i>The Madness of King George</i>	113	168 437		80
<i>Clockers</i>	141	93 176	25M	10

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- _____. "L'âme des guerriers." Studio Magazine, July/Aug. 1995: 92-93.
- S.CH. "Les Maoris plus forts que Jurassic Park." La Tribune Desfossés, 5 July 1995.
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Notes

- 1 The pioneering work of Merata Mita and Barry Barclay predates *Warriors*.
- 2 Leonie Pihama, "Repositioning Maori Representation: Contextualizing *Once Were Warriors*." Film in Aotearoa New Zealand. Eds. Jonathan Dennis and Jan Bieringa. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1996: 191-94.
- 3 Ruth Brown notes the concern of New Zealand diplomats over negative images of Maori and New Zealand that might be conveyed by the film to international audiences. "Closing the Gaps: *Once Were Warriors* From Book to Film and Beyond." Journal of New Zealand Literature (JNZL) 17 (1999): 141-55.
- 4 CBO Box Office: <http://www.cbo-boxoffice.com/> 29.04.2011.
- 5 See Appendix I for a table summary contextualising French Box Office figures for *Warriors*, including these and other films of note.
- 6 *Warriors* could not hope to match the phenomenal success of Jane Campion's 11M Euro NZ-French coproduction, *The Piano*, released in France in 1993 as *La leçon de piano* (Box Office 2664 718; 8/363 x84 copies).
- 7 Negative remarks concerned Tamahori's style, which was predictably felt by some members of the more highbrow press to be overblown.
- 8 I would like to acknowledge here, the excellent primary research gathering done by Anna Bassett, in the context of a Masters'

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- Thesis into the French and German reception of *An Angel at my Table* and *Once were Warriors*: “With French and German Eyes: Descriptive Analyses of the Reception of Two New Zealand Films” (University of Auckland, 2007). Many of my review quotes are also referenced in this thesis, which includes full-text copies of the original articles in French.
- 9 *Pariscope*, the most widely read weekly entertainment guide in France at the time of *Warriors*’ release, included an article on the film in its favourites section (« Coup de Coeur »). See Yveline Chabot, “L’âme des guerriers.” *Pariscope* 5-11 July 1995: 69.
 - 10 S.CH., “Les Maoris plus forts que *Jurassic Park*.” *La Tribune Desfossés*, 5 July 1995. This and subsequent translations from the French are my own.
 - 11 Claude Baignères, “Malin.” *Le Figaro* 6 July 1995.
 - 12 V.P., “Rena Owen: l’âme d’une guerrière” *Elle* 3 July 1995. (This article went so far as to mistakenly credit *Warriors* as having been directed by Jane Campion.)
 - 13 Michel Rebichon, “L’âme des guerriers.” *Studio Magazine*, July/Aug. 1995: 92-93.
 - 14 Diasteme, “L’âme des guerriers.” *Première* July 1995: 43.
 - 15 F.B., “L’âme des guerriers.” *Fiches du cinéma: Tous les films de 1995*, 1996: 27.
 - 16 Annette Veizin, “Quand Beth s’en va-t-en guerre.” *InfoMatin*, 5 July 1995: 20.
 - 17 S.CH., “Les Maoris plus forts que *Jurassic Park*”, *op. cit.*
 - 18 Heike Hurst, “L’âme des guerriers.” *Jeune Cinéma*, Sept. 1995: 47-48.
 - 19 Even the carefully conservative estimate of esteemed Pakeha historian, the late Michael King, dates the arrival of Maori back to the thirteenth century. See Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, Penguin, Auckland, 2003.
 - 20 Annette Veizin, “Quand Beth s’en va-t-en guerre”, *op. cit.*
 - 21 Claude Baignères, “Malin”, *op. cit.*
 - 22 Annette Veizin, “Quand Beth s’en va-t-en guerre.” *op. cit.*
 - 23 Although the error indicates that these critics had clearly not read interviews with Owen and Tamahori that appeared prior to the film’s release: *Impact*, June 1995, 24-27.
 - 24 The French dubbed version avoids the translation error and reads as follows: *Votre mère était magnifique...la fierté de la putain de tribu de Maori. La dessus, pointe ce métèque qui leur enlève leur fille...parce que vous ne connaissez pas mes ancêtres. Je descends d’une vieille ligne d’esclaves.* This translates as “Your mother was gorgeous...pride of the goddam tribe. And this ol’ mongrel turns up and steals her away... Because you don’t know my ancestors. I’m descended from a long line of slaves.”
 - 25 German critics did not make this error.

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- 27 The most distinguished of the seven critics who made this error is Jean-Loup Bourget, member of the editorial board of leading intellectual film magazine, *Positif*, also an English speaker and leading French Academic, elected to the Chair in Film Studies at the prestigious *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in 2002.
- 28 Most worryingly, the mistranslation is repeated in the subtitles and back cover information on subsequent VHS and DVD releases, and in on-line plot summaries advertising the film. See for example, <http://www.amazon.fr/LAme-guerriers-Rena-Owen/dp/B00005JJAU> 28.04.2011.
- 29 Annette Vezin, "Quand Beth s'en va-t-en guerre", *op. cit.* ; F.B., "L'âme des guerriers", *op. cit.*
- 30 Davinia Thornley, "White, Brown or "Coffee"? Revisioning Race in Tamahori's *Once Were Warriors*", *Film Criticism* 25 (2001: 22-36), p. 26.
- 31 Géraldine Sartin, "Les Maoris enfin dédommagées ?", *InfoMatin* 5 July 1995.
- 32 Saltiel, "L'âme des guerriers." *Cinéma* 72, 1 July 1995: 9.
- 33 Brigitte Baudin, "Rena Owen dans le drame maori." *Le Figaro*, 5 July 1995.
- 34 Released on 31.05.1995, with only 118 copies, this small budget (2.59 M€) film by young, virtually unknown filmmaker Mathieu Kassovitz, was a phenomenal critical and box office success, with 2 042 070 (14/453) entries, picking up the Award for Best Direction at Cannes and three Césars (French Oscars). The film became something of a social phenomenon, helping to bring the problem of the French banlieues / projects to the attention of politicians and the broader public.
- 35 Saltiel, "L'âme des guerriers", *op. cit.*
- 36 Diasteme, "L'âme des guerriers", *op. cit.*
- 37 Claude Baignères, "Malin" *op. cit.*
- 38 Michel Rebichon, "Attention les yeux!" *Studio Magazine*, July/Aug. 1995: 51.
- 39 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980.
- 40 Lorenzo Codelli, "Once Were Warriors." *Positif* Nov. 1994: 68; Nadjar and Maccarone, "Le Mifed '94", *op. cit.*
- 41 Jean-Loup Bourget, "L'âme des guerriers." *Positif*, July/Aug. 1995: 130-31.
- 42 Monique Pantel, "Semaine cinéma," *France-Soir* 5 July 1995.
- 43 Marc Toullec and Didier Allouch "S.O.S. femme battue : Interview Rena Owen", *Impact* June 1995 : 27.
- 44 Nadjar and Maccarone, "Le Mifed '94", *op. cit.*
- 45 "L'Âme des guerriers," *Écran Fantastique* Mar. 1996.
- 46 Marc Toullec, "L'âme des guerriers", *Impact*, June 1995: 24-26.
- 47 Diasteme, "L'âme des guerriers", *op. cit.*
- 48 Génin, "L'âme des guerriers de Lee Tamahori".
- 49 Pantel, "Semaine cinéma", *op. cit.*

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- ⁵⁰ Jean-Michel Frodon, "L'âme des guerriers", Monde (Le) 6 July 1995. F.B., "L'âme des guerriers." ; S.CH., "Les Maoris plus forts que Jurassic Park", *op. cit.*
- ⁵¹ Diasteme, "L'âme des guerriers", *op. cit.* It is unclear whether this critic is referring to the haka practice scenes led by Bennett, or to Grace's tangi, or perhaps even both.
- ⁵² F.B., "L'âme des guerriers", *op. cit.*
- ⁵³ Heike Hurst, "L'âme des guerriers", *op. cit.*
- ⁵⁴ Annette Vezin, "Quand Beth s'en va-t-en guerre", *op. cit.* ; Jean-Loup Bourget, "L'âme des guerriers", *op. cit.*