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The Convert

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The Convert

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Convert* (2023), directed by Lee Tamahori.

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Author Notes

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***The Convert* (2023), dir. Lee Tamahori**

Lee Tamahori's *The Convert* tells the story of Thomas Munro (Guy Pearce), a British "lay minister" who arrives in New Zealand in 1836 to tend to the spiritual needs of a settler village on Māori land. He quickly becomes entangled in this historical moment's violent conflicts.

Who is the movie's eponymous convert? To answer this question—and thus get to what Tamahori's film is doing with religion—we immediately get into (warning!) spoiler territory. You might expect Munro to convert a Māori character to Christianity. You would be wrong. The eponymous convert is Munro. By the end of the film he has "gone native," joining the local Māori clan in its resistance to British rule. The TIFF publicity photo above foreshadows this plotline. It depicts the introspective struggles of a pensive white man who stands in front of a soft-focused Māori setting that is literally backgrounded. But look again: Guy Pearce's craggy face, staring into the distance, echoes the statue behind him. Background is becoming foreground. Munro is becoming Māori.

Tamahori is a New Zealander of Māori and British descent. His early work, like *Once Were Warriors* (1994), depicted contemporary urban Māori life. He then embarked upon a successful career in Hollywood, directing such features as the Morgan Freeman vehicle *Along Came a Spider* (2001) and the James Bond film *Die Another Day* (2002). More recently, in *Mahana* (2016), Tamahori has returned to Māori stories.

The Convert combines the various threads of Tamahori's career, using conventional Hollywood plot beats to narrate settler colonialism. The film was inspired, a credit indicates, by Hamish Clayton's novel *Wulf* (2011). Its production team also, the credits suggest, consulted extensively with Māori communities to create an accurate and authentic depiction of Māori life. Its cast is substantially Māori. Why then, one might ask, center the film on a white/Pakeha (Māori for a European settler) character? From the opening shots at sea until the end of the film, the viewer is sutured into Munro's perspective. We are on his journey, living his story. Presumably this narrative choice was strategic: white-centered stories still get more financial backing and are more easily launched onto the international film circuit. Guy Pearce, the lead in Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) and other films, rhymes with *The Convert*'s Hollywood plot structure. He gives the movie star power and commercial gloss.

One could describe *The Convert* as a variation on the plotline of *Dances with Wolves*—the 1990 film in which a romance with an Indigenous woman awakens Kevin Costner to the horrors of settler civilization (and which has been much critiqued for its romanticized depiction of Native life and re-centering of white subjectivity). What *The Convert* does is more interesting, however, largely because the film is so clearly addressed to contemporary political struggles around Indigenous sovereignty: its closing shot is of a Māori flag flying above the British Union Jack. At the beginning of the film, Munro does meet a Māori woman, Rangimai (played by the charismatic

Tioreore Ngatai-Melbourne); he trades a horse to save her from certain doom at the hands of a local warlord, Akatarewa (Lawrence Makoare). The relationship between Munro and Rangimai subsequently propels the film. It never becomes romantic, however, thus steering clear of *Dances with Wolves* territory.

The Western genre is built into *The Convert*'s visual DNA, especially in the shots of Epworth. The settler village is complete with church, general store, and besuited-but-muddy gentlemen—reminding us that settler colonialism was the half-repressed political unconscious of the Hollywood Western too, its ramshackle temporary buildings an instrument of an occupation that would eventually become permanent. Here, the engagement with colonialism is quite direct. Perched precariously on a beach near swirling tides, Epworth's land is leased from a Māori chieftain, Miainui (Antonio Te Maioha), and the village is at risk of being wiped out if Akatarewa—who is moving down the island, eliminating political rivals—attacks its landlord. Many of Epworth's denizens are rabidly racist, as Munro learns when he tries to incorporate Rangimai into village life. Epworth's citizens have hired him and paid for his voyage, and they inform him in no uncertain terms that they do not want him wasting his time on the natives.

These goodly citizens are literally murderous. They are also, in their murderous way, committedly Christian. An opening title informs us that, in 1836, the Māori had begun to give up their traditional weapons for “muskets and Christianity.” Is Christianity a weapon? The opening stretches of the film certainly depict it this way. During singing at an Epworth church service, one character notes that “there is a fierceness to these hymns, the weight of a whole civilization.” The civilizing mission suffuses Epworth's fierce Christianity, especially in its dismissal of other forms of religious life. As one denizen of Epworth says of the Māori: “We worship an Almighty God. They worship leaves and twigs.”

Alongside these villainous settlers, *The Convert* is also at pains to depict two Pakeha characters who ally with the local Māori community, thus directing the identification of the white viewer toward allyship. The first of these two characters is Munro. The other is Charlotte (Jacqueline McKenzie), a midwife and traditional healer who lives on the margins of Epworth and was once, we learn, married to a Māori man. Bilingual and bicultural, she becomes Munro's translator and intermediary in his dealings with Miainui, and she emerges as a key secondary character, her storyline unfolding alongside Munro's.

Munro's turn away from Epworth has everything to do with his Christianity, which he understands as a religion of nonviolence. Christianity makes him a man of peace—and thus a man apart from his violent world. Munro will not abide the racist violence of white settlers. He also opposes Māori violence, trying to avert an impending bloodbath by brokering a peace between Miainui and Akatarewa. The film seems persistently undecided about whether Munro is right to do this. On the one hand, Munro gives a persuasive speech about how Māori should not fight with each other but instead band together against the Pakeha. On the other hand, the film presents Māori practices of warfare as integral to Māori cultural tradition, and thus a thing to be affirmed and celebrated.

The film nominally resolves this implicit tension through a version of the “trauma plot.” (Warning: spoilers galore follow.) Towards the end of the film, we learn that Munro's hatred of warfare was born from a terrible experience. While stationed in some unnamed British colony, his army brigade was ordered to mercilessly attack an enemy obscured by smoke. Munro stabbed and thrashed and killed, and when the smoke cleared he realized he was standing in the middle of a school surrounded by dead women and children. This trauma led him to quit the army. He wandered for years before finding a new vocation as a lay Christian minister. Christian conversion

was, it seems, a secondary effect of trauma. Munro relives this tale in telling it to Miainui and his court, who then play the role of therapist. Munro was wrong to avoid war. The only cure for blood is more blood. Munro listens. In the film's final battle, he goes hard—and the violence does indeed seem to cure him.

This plotting resolves the movie's central narrative conflicts, and effects Munro's final conversion to Māori culture (he becomes part of the *hapu* or clan), but it not does resolve the fundamental questions the movie raises about the outcomes of historical violence. In fact, by seeming to resolve political violence at the level of the personal, the movie arguably deflects from these questions. Munro's closing dialogue echoes an explanation of Māori face tattoos given early in the film: they tell the story of the person's life, so far. We are thus, in the closing shots, given to think that the whole point of the film was to tell Munro's story—which is true, of course, insofar as this is a conventional Hollywood-style film centered on a white protagonist. A plot of settler reconciliation becomes the means by which the settler resolves his individual trauma.

By this time, however, Rangimai—and thus Ngatai-Melbourne— had (for me, at least) already stolen the show. Her charisma suffuses every shot she is in, far surpassing Pearce's blander performance. Rangimai is a political subject who sits in council with her father Miainui and other clan leaders. Far from being an icon of wilting femininity, she is perfectly capable of using a rifle to save the hapless Munro.

Rangimai drives what I took to be the film's linchpin moment. After our protagonists win the final battle against Akatarewa, the warlord and his son flee to the beach before Miainui and his men overtake them. The defeated duo kneel in the sand, the waves lapping against their knees. Miainui looms over them, brandishing his club, with Rangimai standing at a slight distance. Miainui strikes Akatarewa dead. Just as he raises his hand to kill the son, however, Rangimai

catches his eye. She looks pointedly at the son, an idea (and a trace of desire?) in her eye. It is a wordless suggestion, but her father understands it. As she walks over, Miainui declares he will create a lasting peace by uniting their two families. The son allows his hand to be pressed against Rangimai's on Miainui's weapon. The clans are finally united, as Munro had once suggested—but this union, it is clear, has happened through Rangimai's doing.

A short epilogue shows us the new political order brought into being by her decision, one where the clan is reasserting its sovereignty over Epworth. It's a hopeful note to end on. Munro, although talky, is playing what amounts politically to a supporting role. Rangimai is in charge.