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## Waru

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# Waru

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Waru* (2017), directed by Briar Grace-Smith, Ainsley Gardiner, Renae Maihi, Casey Kaa, Awanui Simich-Pene, Chelsea Cohen, Katie Wolfe, and Paula Jones.

## **Author Notes**

Ken Derry is Associate Professor, Teaching Stream, in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). Since 2011 he has been a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, and since 2012 he has been the Co-chair of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion. Aside from religion and film his teaching and research interests include considerations of religion in relation to literature, violence, popular culture, pedagogy, and Indigenous traditions. He is the recipient of the 2013 UTM Teaching Excellence Award.



***Waru* (2017), dir. Briar Grace-Smith, Ainsley Gardiner, Renae Maihi, Casey Kaa, Awanui Simich-Pene, Chelsea Cohen, Katie Wolfe, Paula Jones**

New Zealand

86 minutes

TIFF International Premier

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9L6Oq7tWwsY>

*Waru* is remarkable in many ways. Most notably, it is the first feature film made by Māori women in almost thirty years, since Mereta Mita's landmark *Mauri* (1988). In terms of form it echoes Hitchcock's murder mystery *Rope* (1948), which famously spliced together eight ten-minute continuous takes. In this case we similarly have eight ten-minute pieces of film occurring in real time; in *Waru*, however, these takes were shot by eight different directors and form separate vignettes that occur at the same time in different places and with different characters. Each vignette was shot in one day, with the full shooting schedule therefore being just eight days in total. (*Waru* in Māori in fact means "eight.") Also like *Rope*, *Waru* attempts to unpack the mystery of an unjust death, that of a young Māori boy. The main point here, however, is that the killer is not so much

a single person as it is a social condition, an oppressive history. The killer is colonialism, patriarchy, poverty, alcoholism; it is a struggle with self-worth, a loss of tradition and meaning.

The narratives of *Waru* all center on the tangi (funeral) of the title character, who also narrates parts of the film from his post-death vantage point. The camera follows several women—Waru’s teacher, great-grandmother, neighbors, and relatives, along with a newscaster and the mother of two schoolmates. Some are at the funeral, or preparing to go to it; others are hearing about it on the news or talking about it while they get ready for work, take care of their children, or (in the final vignette) steel themselves for a potentially dangerous confrontation.

One of the most powerful and impressive aspects of *Waru* is its ability to interweave scathing critiques of colonialism’s role in generating many of the struggles of contemporary Māori people, with carefully tendered suggestions that Māori themselves bear some responsibility for their current situation, and for turning things around. Non-Indigenous characters range from the apparently well-intentioned but thoughtless and ignorant girlfriend of Charm’s son, to the openly racist news anchor that Kiritapu works with and publicly rebukes. When Waru’s great grandmothers argue over where the boy should be buried they affirm that the European settlers stripped them of their ancestral ways, but they also admit their own role in the loss of tradition: “we foolishly followed.” Many Māori in the film hurt one another and themselves, but—galvanized by the young boy’s unnecessary, tragic, and too-common death—many decide that it’s time to do things differently, no matter the difficulty.

Repeatedly the film shows us Māori women working to improve their own circumstances, and those of their community. Em, a young mother who comes home drunk to find her baby unattended, smashes a bottle and says “no more.” Another mother, Mihi, learns to let go of her anger, listen to her children, and accept help from her neighbor. Kiritapu confronts her colleague’s racism on the air, presumably sacrificing her career in the process. Waru’s great-grandmother Ranui succeeds in removing his body from the funeral service in order to return him to his true ancestral land. Outside the tangi the teenaged Mere confronts the man who sexually assaulted her, and in her rage—expressed in Māori—she draws to her side a small group of other young women who likewise refuse to be victimized any further. Their confrontation prefigures the final vignette about Bash and Titty, sisters who prepare to risk their safety in order to rescue other children from dangerous men.

In each of these stories *Waru* tells us that religion is central to the revitalization of Māori people and traditions. One of the interesting ways in which it makes this point is through alcohol. In the first story, Charm prepares food for the tangi, and children mention that alcohol is not permitted on traditional/sacred land. When Charm’s son shows up, his non-Indigenous girlfriend makes a joke about him going out for a beer, a joke that lands very poorly with Charm. The other person to joke about alcohol is the racist anchor, who berates the Māori for their conditions of poverty and violence—conditions he conveniently neglects to mention resulted from colonization—and declares his personal philosophy that, when life hands you lemons, you should use them to make a gin and tonic. The pointed rejection of alcohol by people like Charm’s son, Em, and Bash, is also therefore a rejection of colonialism itself, and a return to Māori traditions.

Interestingly, an arguably “religious” colonial trope that’s embraced and transformed by several of the narratives is that of the superhero. Mihi’s children claim superpowers and ask their mum what hers is; she says “invincibility” but her daughter understands this as “invisibility.” Mihi is in fact far from invincible, unable to get her car to start or pay for her daughter’s school field trip. Because of this she does in fact attempt invisibility, hiding from her well-meaning neighbour’s gaze before finally letting her help. When Bash heads out to save the children from their violent home, her sister tells her not to be a superhero before agreeing to go along on the mission. Mere’s story includes taking care of a young boy in a red cape, who strikes a superhero pose with Mere and the other women against the physically aggressive and intimidating men. In each case the women stand up for themselves and for those they care about, but they do it peacefully and with others, abandoning the violent imperialism of the superheroic lone savior. They recall Beth facing her abusive husband Jake as she leaves him at the end of Lee Tamahori’s 1994 film, explaining to him that “our people once were warriors”—but *not* like Jake. They were warriors like Beth herself, fighting for her family with “mana, pride . . . with spirit.” In a similar way the Indigenized heroes of *Waru* indicate a fierce return to Māori traditions and perspectives. The little boy dressed as Superman pretends to fly, just like “the great albatross who brought us here” that Ranui sings of during the funeral. Just like Waru himself: “When I died, I was flying.”

Through its multiple endings *Waru* offers hope for tomorrow: a future in which people begin to take responsibility for the violence they have done to others; in which they stand up to oppressive individuals, systems, and substances; in which they are both strong and vulnerable, better able to take care of themselves and one another. The film

insists that despite colonialism and intense suffering and loss, Māori people and traditions remain, and are being renewed. As Waru says in the final words of the film: “I’m still here.”