

Viewing Notes for *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016)
written and directed by Taika Waititi -- New Zealand

Look for the director Taika Waititi's cameo role as the minister in the church, fairly early in the film.

Comedy can just wash over us and entertain, but understanding what makes humor work can be a rewarding way to watch a film with a critic's eye. With all Waititi's films, it helps to think about what defines the film's sense of humor and comedic timing, such as lingering on a slapstick situation just long enough for it to become truly absurd, the use of hyperbole, a character defying expectation (like Ricky's habit of making up haiku), and the ways in which the nonsensical behaviors of the adults and the children are paralleled. Consider, too, how humorous elements contrast the more serious moments and play up emotional tensions.

Popular culture plays a role in this story, as it does in all of Waititi's films. Popular culture might function as both an annoying substitute for a deeper sense of self, but also as an important tool for a character's self-discovery. (If you watched *Boy with us* last year, you might remember the central role that fan worship of Michael Jackson plays in the story.) Consider here how Ricky Baker's relationship with pop culture defines him, plays a role in his relationship with Hec, and evolves over the course of the story. Pop culture also enhances the tone of the film, as the violence and chase scenes are depicted as cartoonish.

Part of the director's insistence on including pop culture comes from his awareness of a critical trend regarding Maori film that seeks affirmation of positive stereotypes about indigenous characters, that they're "spiritual" and "connected to nature." Watch for the ways in which Ricky Baker's character (and other Maori characters) parodies those assumptions.

This film plays with the common tropes of the "buddy" movie and the "road" narrative. How does it adopt classic elements, and how does it vary on our expectations of such movies?

Sound: The somewhat ominous choral piece that opens the film's soundtrack is called "Makutehaku," named after the lake high in the mountains. The lyrics mix Latin and Maori. Apart from the songs that play through montage scenes, the rest of the simple electronic soundtrack is by the New Zealand band Moniker.

Scenes and tones: many of the interiors are fascinatingly dim while the exteriors are bright. The director of photography (Lachlan Milne) takes advantage of New Zealand's amazing natural landscapes and films them at sometimes unexpected angles. (Milne is currently DP for the next season of *Stranger Things*.) These contrasting interiors/exteriors provide texture to the narrative. Note how the light tends to be angled toward late-day/sunset in all the scenes toward the end of the film.

On the family-making theme of the story: in Maori culture, extended family all have parental roles. (Ricky, Bella, and the Child Protective Services officer are all of Maori heritage.) In the indigenous language, the terms for mother and father (*whaea* and *matua*) also can mean "aunt" and "uncle," so when Ricky calls Hector "uncle Hec," we should understand that term as more meaningful than it might be understood in Euro-American culture. Note, too, that their adventure in the bush lasts about nine months, a gestational period.