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05 Aug 2012

Week 7 Screening Response

Whale Rider is a profoundly beautiful and spiritually moving film. The nature and beauty of New Zealand drips off the screen while the endearing performance of a gifted young actor warms your heart. The movie is about the connections people make. The connections to the past, the connections to the Earth, and the connections to each other. The film has no prologue, no exposition, and no warning. You plunge straight into the emotional ocean with a stark, brutal, and somewhat confusing opening death scene in a hospital. The second time watching I caught many subtle clues to the characters and their past. The quickness of the story and its ambiguous beginning create a sense of wonder. Even the second time I found myself asking, "What is this movie about?". I asked the question in a very literal sense, not a philosophical sense. The sequence that answers that question and sets the plot in motion is the scene where Pieka is driving away with her Dad to live in Europe with him and his recently pregnant wife. The techno music that plays and the looks exchanged between daughter and estranged Father are reminiscent of many road trip movies. The answer seems at first to be that this movie will be about a Moari child getting to know the world outside of New Zealand and her father. This fish out of water/daddy-daughter movie might have been good. The ocean begins to make itself known. At first, it is just beautiful backdrop to a dramatic scene of people setting off on a long journey. Slowly, the ocean fills more of the frame and shot by shot we notice the attention of Pieka shifting from her father to the vast, expanding blue ocean. We share her growing sense of longing. We don't want to leave this beautiful place. She tells her dad to stop the car and she goes home. The first interaction she has is with her Grandfather. He ignores her longing for love and dismisses the importance of her return. The true answer is revealed. This movie will be about the relationship a granddaughter has with her grandfather. The connection to the Earth, especially the ocean, will play an important role in a movie that also includes the relationship between native cultures and their ancient pasts/religions. The use of nature is special in *Whale Rider*. The lush countryside, mystical cliff faces, and ever expanding/engulfing deep blue ocean are not mere backdrops or aesthetic pleasure devices. Nature plays a role in the movie. It has lines, actions, and makes changes to itself and the characters around it. The role of nature in this movie is different than many movies just like the role of nature is different to the Moari people than other peoples. The symbolism of this is also reflected in the practically total lack of soundtrack. The songs we hear are ethereal, natural, and animalistic. They go along perfectly with the native chants and prayers of the Moari. This film is about the Moari but the stylistic choices make it a *Moari Film* because it is felt more than it is experienced.