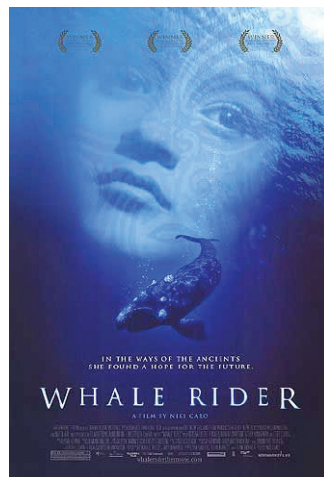


# GLOBAL FILM STUDIES GUIDE 2: WHALE RIDER

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## INTRODUCTION TO GLOBAL FILM STUDIES GUIDES

This series of *Global Film Studies Guides* aims at providing information, guidelines and ideas on how to teach films with a global dimension to children. Each of the guides will concentrate on a particular film that is concerned with themes and issues important to our increasingly globalised world.

The guides will follow a similar structure: in addition to the provision of necessary background information about the film and its story, some assistance on how to 'read' films is offered by introducing different film techniques. Each guide will also explore ideas of how to teach film to children and provide guidelines for discussions.

## CONTENTS

- I Why Film? Why Global?
- II The Film
- III Session Outline
- IV Background Information and Materials

# 1. WHY FILM? WHY GLOBAL?

## Why Film?

It is a common complaint amongst teachers and parents that children don't read anymore. While we should maintain our efforts to encourage young learners to discover the world of storybooks the fact that most children now grow up in what is often referred to as the 'audiovisual age' does not mean that they grow up without stories. Films tell stories too and they do it in their own language, a language most children have learned by the time they enter school. Like books, 'moving pictures' can enable us to explore the world we live in. They offer opportunities to investigate the imagination of others and provide spaces for critical enquiry.

And this is what these guides are about: presenting ideas on how to teach the language of films in an attempt to build on what children already know and treasure. There are, however, other arguments for including the study of films in schools and for the development of what film scholars call 'cineliteracy'. If we want to educate critical citizens, the reality of an extensive experience of and exposure to audiovisual media from an early age necessitates an education that facilitates and ensures a critical faculty towards media representation. This critical faculty should empower children in their 'ability to see behind an image or text. To appreciate its constructiveness; it is vital to understand and engage with the worlds of the imagination and poetry, and of politics and ideology.'

*(Look Again. A Teaching Guide to Using Film and Television with Three to Eleven-year-olds, published by British Film Institute Education Working Group 'BFI Education', pg. 6). (For the PDF file of this excellent resource for teachers click [here](#))*

## Why Global?

Much of our knowledge and understanding of our increasingly globalised world today is heavily dependent on representations of this world in and through the media. Becoming or being a global citizen, therefore, demands the development of a critical faculty towards these representations. By unwrapping some of the codes and conventions of moving images these film guides aim at developing skills necessary to critically examine moving images on television, in films and other audiovisual media. The *Global Film Studies Guides* will concentrate on films (short films and feature length films) that negotiate global issues because we believe that the art of filmmaking provides a very accessible route to teaching those topics in a manner that is both, educational and entertaining. The film guides are designed for sixth classes. With a focus on developing critical citizenship and media awareness these film guides generally fit into the SPHE curriculum (1999) strand *Myself and the Wider World* (strand units *Developing Citizenship* and *Media Education*). Some of the film guides will also fit into other curriculum areas. Such connections as well as the age group are always indicated.

## II. THE FILM: WHALE RIDER

### Synopsis

In a small New Zealand coastal village, the Maori claim descent from Paikea, the Whale Rider. In every generation for more than one thousand years, a male heir born to the Chief succeeds to the title.

The time is now. The Chief's eldest son, Porourangi, fathers twins - a boy and a girl, but the boy and his mother die in childbirth. The surviving girl is called Pai. Grief-stricken, Porourangi leaves Pai to be raised by her grandparents. Koro, her grandfather who is the Chief, refuses to acknowledge Pai as the inheritor of the tradition and claims she is of no use to him.

Over the years, Koro learns to love Pai and when Porourangi, now a celebrated international artist, returns home after twelve years, Koro hopes everything will be resolved and that Porourangi will accept destiny and become his successor. However, Porourangi has no intention of becoming Chief as he has moved away from his people, both physically and emotionally. After a bitter argument with Koro, Porourangi decides to leave suggesting to Pai that she go with him. She begins the journey but quickly returns claiming her grandfather Koro needs her.

Koro is blinded by prejudice and even his wife cannot convince him that Pai is the natural heir. The old Chief is convinced that the tribe's misfortunes began at Pai's birth and calls for his people to bring their twelve-year-old boys to him for training. He forms a cultural school for the village boys, hoping to find a new leader. Pai, aided by her uncle and one of the students, Hemi, secretly follows the lessons and learns to use a Taiaha (fighting stick), something traditionally reserved only for males. Her grandfather is enraged when he finds out. His relationship with Pai erodes further when none of the boys prove worthy of the title of leader.

Pai, in an attempt to bridge the rift that has formed, invites Koro to a concert of Maori chants that her school is putting on, as her guest of honour. However, as he is preparing to leave, he notices that numerous whales are beached near Pai's home. The entire village attempts to coax and drag them back into the water, but all efforts prove unsuccessful. Koro sees it as a sign of failure and despairs further. He admonishes Pai against touching the creatures, but when he walks away, she climbs onto the back of the largest whale and coaxes it to re-enter the ocean. Riding on the back of the whale, she leads the entire pod back into the sea, nearly drowning in the process. It is only when she vanishes into the ocean that Koro realises that Pai is destined to be the next leader. When Pai is found and brought to the hospital, Koro begs her forgiveness. The film ends

with the village, including Pai’s father, uncle and grandparents, celebrating her status as leader.

### **Credits**

Directed by: Niki Caro  
Written by: Witi Ihimaera (novel), Niki Caro (script)  
Cast: Keisha Castle-Hughes                      Paikea Apirana  
          Vicky Haughton                              Nani Flowers  
          Rawiri Paratene                             Koro Apirana  
          Cliff Curtis                                    Porourangi

## **III. SESSION OUTLINE**

### **1. Preparation for Screening (general)**

#### ***Introductory Activity:***

*Before watching the film we suggest at least one session to introduce some general aspects about feature films and the film that is up for screening. This section deals with film in general; explanations of some of the terms used can be found in the glossary (see Section IV).*

To start the session, ask your students to share their most precious ‘film moment’ with the class. Everybody has memories of certain film scenes that are so special that they stay with us for ever. Be clear that you don’t ask about the favourite film, a single scene or shot is enough. Most likely, students will respond with a description of a scene that is central to the film it is taken from. This allows you to point out certain things that are specific to the medium of film (visual language, sound etc.). You shouldn’t go into details here, because we will come back to these issues later by applying them to the film in question.

#### ***Possible follow-up questions for the class are:***

- *Could the scene described also be taken from a book?*  
This question points towards explaining substantial differences between the two media, i.e. the difference between a narrated scene in a book that leaves room for the reader’s own imagination and the more ‘guided’ representation in films.
- *For those who haven’t seen the film, what information is missing in order for you to be able to picture this scene in your mind?*

Here the different dimensions of the medium film can be introduced: i.e., visual language, importance of cinematography (composition of image in terms of colours and framing), sound effects and the arrangement of the scene (mise-en-scène).

- *Why do you think this scene is special?*

Here a brief explanation could be given that most films have key scenes, where many motifs and the main themes of the film come together.

## **2. Preparation for screening of *Whale Rider* (10–15 mins)**

### ***Introduction:***

As a class, create a list of movies that you have seen recently. Then create a separate list of the strong female characters that featured in these movies. Were any of these female characters on the list what we would call a 'heroine'? What defines a 'heroine/hero'?

To explore this aspect further you may ask questions such as: Do you know other films with female heroes? Why are there so few? Why are heroines/heroes in films often male?

### ***Enquiry (optional):***

*Apart from the gender aspect, leadership in general is a main topic in the film. This is often coupled with the theme of 'expectations and disappointments'. Depending on your class you may want to extend this preparation session and talk about expectations of parents or teachers and the difficulties attached to this.*

If appropriate you may investigate a second theme of the film before showing it; that of 'expectations and disappointments'. You may prompt students to discuss this by asking about their parents' or teachers' expectations. Are those expectations realistic? Are there good and bad expectations? What defines bad expectation?

## **3. Screening of *Whale Rider* (30/60 mins)**

*The screening should be broken down into two parts. The film's structure allows you to stop the screening after ca. 30 Minutes (Ch 07, 00:31:08) for a short intervention (see below for details). Before you start the film you should distribute Handout 1 and Handout 2 and explain to the students that they have to look out for certain things:*

### **Questions on the way (Handout 1)**

- *Why is the film called 'Whale Rider'? Why are whales so important to the people in the film?*
- *Describe the main character, Pai, in five adjectives.*
- *Note the scene which has angered you most. Also note the most powerful scene.*
- *Write down two words (nouns) to describe what the film is about.*

### **4. Brief Intervention: What's next? (25–30 mins)**

Stop the film after the scene in which Pai comes into the door of the community hall to tell her grandfather 'I am back' (after she has decided not to go away with her dad) Ch 07, 00:31:08 and ask the class to write down their assumptions about how they think the film will continue. This exercise presents a good opportunity to investigate the art of storytelling in a feature film. You may guide the discussion by asking questions like:

- *Why has Pai decided to go back? Why is her Dad leaving?*

These questions give you the opportunity to check whether important aspects of the film have been understood by the students (like the expectations Koro has in both his son and Pai, and how they, in his view, have 'failed' him). If not, a brief explanation is enough since we will come back to this topic later.

- *How will Koro react? Will he be happy that Pai is back?*

Here you may show a shot of Koro and how he looks out of the window in the scene where Pai is leaving to go with her Dad Ch 6, 0:27:30. The scene hints at the fact that Koro thinks both Pai and her Dad, have failed him.

- *Will the whales appear again in the film? Why do you think they will/will not?*

Here the use of the whales as a motif in the film should be introduced. The whales are used throughout the film as a powerful motif that keeps the film's cohesion (not just images of the whales also their sounds contribute to this). They are introduced briefly at the very beginning. Ch 1, 0:01:10 (credits) The scene where Pai looks out of the window of the car and looks out on the sea is the first indication of her strong bond with those creatures. You may show this scene and discuss how this scene conveys the strong bond between Pai and the whales Ch 7, 0:28:54 to 0:30:40.

## AFTER SCREENING

### 5. Guided discussion of the Film (using the questions from B) (45 mins):

- *Why is the film called 'Whale Rider'? Why are whales so important to the people in the film?*

You have already analysed the scene where the whales call Pai the moment she is about to leave with her dad. Now show the scene where the whales are stranded and ask why the people are so concerned about it. Here it should become clear that whales play an important role in the culture of the Maori people portrayed in the film. The stranding of the whales Ch 15; 1:13:00 could be interpreted as a symbol for the stagnation in their personal lives and the pitfalls of their modern lifestyle. It could also signify that they have lost their connection to their culture and traditions (and are themselves 'stranded') and are therefore disconnected from their cultural roots. The whales are a symbol of these cultural roots. That's why the stranding is so threatening for them.

- *Describe the main character, Pai, in five adjectives.*

Record the words the students have used to describe Pai on the blackboard. Then show two scenes (Possible scenes here: Ch 8, 0:34:16 Ch 13, 1:01:39)) of the film and discuss with the class how the film manages to convey certain traits of Pai's character.

- *Note the scene which has angered you most. Also note the most powerful scene.*

Here you may decide spontaneously to show one of the scenes the students have chosen. Make sure, however, that the scene you are analysing has some significance in relation to the gender topic you will further explore at a later stage. The suggestion is to show one of the scenes that portray Koro's reluctance to accept Pai's capabilities for leadership of the community, for instance, the scene where Koro tells Pai 'leave it, you have done enough'. Ch 15; 1:18:00 In this scene Koro seems to have found the answer to who is to blame. In his view it is Pai who doesn't respect the Maori tradition.

- *Write down two words (nouns) to describe what the film is about.*

Divide the blackboard into two columns. Collect the words the students have written down in the left hand column. Then ask students to assign a certain scene to each of the words in the left hand column. You may choose to show one scene and discuss it in more detail. Besides the gender theme other key

themes of the film are: 'expectations and disappointments', 'working together', 'tradition', etc.

- *Watch out for particular things listed in Handout 2!*

This exercise should get the students to look out for certain motifs or elements during the screening of the film: the whale, the rope, Koro's staff, the waka (boat), the bicycle. Discuss what they signify, what moods are related to them. You may pick one and explore it in more detail.

## **6. Session Outline: Leadership, Traditions and Gender**

### ***Introductory Activity:***

Divide the class into groups of four (two girls and two boys, if possible). Explain that they will have to produce a profile of somebody who they think would be ideal to represent their class in the school, who will organise events and who will make sure that everything runs according to plan in the class. Allow 10 to 15 minutes for discussion in the groups.

Then tell them that they have one minute to elect a speaker who will present the outcomes of the group in front of the class. Comment on the process and discuss aspects of gender equality and democratic procedures (this module can be extended as part of citizenship education).

Things to look out for/Questions to ask: Have students elected more girls or more boys to present the findings of the group? Why is that so? What were the reasons they have elected X to represent the group? How did they elect the person? Did they vote?

### ***Discussion:***

Divide the blackboard into two sections and note the leadership qualities the students came up with in the left hand column. Ask if some of these qualities are specific to boys or girls? Students should begin to understand here how gender is a role given to us by society and not by nature.

In a second step ask students to name a scene of the film where Pai shows leadership qualities. Pick one and analyse the scene. Most likely the students will remember the scene in which Pai does her speech in school so we would suggest picking this one for closer scrutiny (Ch 14; 1:08:14).

## ***Talk about/Investigate the scene***

### ***Step One: Investigate***

Investigate the scene by asking questions such as:

- What kind of qualities is Pai showing in this scene?
- What does she say about her idea of leadership?
- Is it a typically female version of leadership she is promoting in this scene (inclusive (female) 'We all can be leader' in comparison to exclusive (male) 'The one male heir')?
- Does she see herself as a leader of the community?
- Why has the director decided to interrupt the speech by a shot of Koro at the beach with the stranded whales? In this scene Koro asks: 'Who is to blame?' Who does he blame? And why?

### ***Step Two: Freeze Frame***

Pause the film to freeze the frame after Koro has asked 'Who is to blame?'

Ask students to describe Koro.

- What kind of person is he?
- Are there similarities between Pai and Koro?
- Why does he so desperately want a male leader?
- Why can't he accept the sign of Pai's capabilities as leader?

### ***Step Three: Activity***

Brief the students to work in pairs to prepare a short interview with Koro. This interview takes place 10 years after the events shown in the film. At this time Pai is already a celebrated leader of the Maori community we have seen in the film. What would you ask him?

### ***Step Four: Wrapping Up***

To conclude this session show the last scene of the film from the moment we see the waka (boat) (Ch 19; 1:30:44). Ask students if they think Pai has made a difference to the community she lives in? How would you describe this difference? What has changed?

# IV. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

## GLOSSARY FILM TECHNIQUES

**angle of framing, camera angle:** The position of the frame in relation to the subject it shows: above it, looking down (a high angle); horizontal, on the same level (a straight-on angle); looking up (a low angle). Also called camera angle.

**camera movement and position:** The way in which the camera is moved (panning, tracking, zooming) and positioned in relation to the filmed object (longshot, medium shot, close-up, angle).

**cinematography:** A general term for all the manipulations of the film strip by the camera in the shooting phase (like camera angle, lighting, framing, etc.) and by the laboratory in the developing phase.

**close-up:** A framing in which the scale of the object shown is relatively large; most commonly a person's head seen from the neck up, or an object of a comparable size that fills most of the screen.

**closure:** The degree to which the ending of a narrative film reveals the effects of all the causal events and resolves (or 'closes off') all lines of action.

**cut:** 1. In filmmaking, the joining of two strips of film together with a splice. 2. In the finished film, an instantaneous change from one framing to another.

**dialogue overlap:** In editing a scene, arranging the cut so that a bit of dialogue coming from shot A is heard in shot B that shows another character or another element in the scene.

**diegesis:** In a narrative film, the world of the film's story. The diegesis includes events that are presumed to have occurred and actions and spaces not shown onscreen. See also diegetic sound.

**diegetic sound:** Any voice, musical passage, or sound effect presented as originating from a source within the film's world. See also nondiegetic sound.

**direct sound:** Music, noise, and speech recorded from the event at the moment of filming; opposite of postsynchronisation.

**dissolve:** A transition between two shots during which the first image gradually disappears while the second image gradually appears; for a moment the two images blend in superimposition.

**editing:** 1. In filmmaking, the task of selecting and joining camera takes.  
2. In the finished film, the set of techniques that governs the relations among shots.

**establishing shot:** A shot, usually involving a distant framing, that shows the spatial relations among the important figures, objects, and setting in a scene.

**eyeline match:** A cut obeying the axis of action principle, in which the first shot shows a person looking off in one direction and the second shows a nearby space containing what he or she sees. If the person looks left, the following shot should imply that the looker is offscreen right.

**fade:** 1. Fade-in: A dark screen that gradually brightens as a shot appears. 2. Fade-out: A shot gradually disappears as the screen darkens. Occasionally, fade-outs brighten to pure white or to a colour.

**flashback:** An alteration of story order in which the plot moves back to show events that have taken place earlier than ones already shown.

**flashforward:** An alteration of story order in which the plot presentation moves forward to future events and then returns to the present.

**frame:** A single image on the strip of film. When a series of frames is projected onto a screen in quick succession, an illusion of movement is created.

**framing:** The use of the edges of the film frame to select and to compose what will be visible onscreen.

**frequency:** In a narrative film, the aspect of temporal manipulation that involves the number of times any story event is shown in the plot.

**genres:** Various types of films that audiences and filmmakers recognise by their familiar narrative conventions. Common genres are musical, gangster, and Western films.

**linearity:** In a narrative, the clear motivation of a series of causes and effects that progress without significant digressions, delays, or irrelevant actions.

**long shot:** A framing in which the scale of the object shown is small; a standing human figure would appear nearly the height of the screen.

**long take:** A shot that continues for an unusually lengthy time before the transition to the next shot.

**medium close-up:** A framing in which the scale of the object shown is fairly large; a human figure seen from the chest up would fill most of the screen.

**medium long shot:** A framing at a distance that makes an object about four or five feet high appear to fill most of the screen vertically.

**medium shot:** A framing in which the scale of the object shown is of moderate size; a human figure seen from the waist up would fill most of the screen.

**mise-en-scene:** All of the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed: the settings and props, lighting, costumes and makeup, and figure behaviour.

**plot:** In a narrative film, all the events that are directly presented to us, including their causal relations, chronological order, duration, frequency, and spatial locations. Opposed to story, which is the viewer's imaginary construction of all the events in the narrative.

**point-of-view shot (POV shot):** A shot taken with the camera placed approximately where the character's eyes would be, showing what the character would see; usually cut in before or after a shot of the character looking.

**production:** One of the three branches of the film industry; the process of creating the film.

**rhythm:** The perceived rate and regularity of sounds, series of shots, and movements within the shots. Rhythmic factors include beat (or pulse), accent (or stress), and tempo (or pace).

**scene:** A segment in a narrative film that takes place in one time and space or that uses crosscutting to show two or more simultaneous actions.

**sequence:** Term commonly used for a moderately large segment of film, involving one complete stretch of action. In a narrative film, often equivalent to a scene.

**shot:** 1. In shooting, one uninterrupted run of the camera to expose a series of frames. Also called a take. 2. In the finished film, one uninterrupted image with a single static or mobile framing.

**shot/reverse shot:** Two or more shots edited together that alternate characters, typically in a conversation situation. In continuity editing, characters in one framing usually look left, in the other framing, right. Over-the-shoulder framings are common in shot/reverse-shot editing.

**sound bridge:** 1. At the beginning of one scene, the sound from the previous scene carries over briefly before the sound from the new scene begins. 2. At the end of one scene, the sound from the next scene is heard, leading into that scene.

## HANDOUT 1: QUESTIONS ON THE WAY!

Why is the film called 'Whale Rider'? Why are whales so important to the people in the film?

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Describe the main character, Pai, in five adjectives.

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Note the scene which has angered you most. Also note the most powerful scene.

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Write down two words (nouns) to describe what the film is about?

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## HANDOUT 2: THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR!

There are certain things (like a rope, a staff belonging to the grandfather, a boat (called *waka*), a bicycle) in the film that are important for the story. Look out for them and note the scene in which they appear. Also note anything you find special about these scenes (music, scenery, colour, ....)

Before you start watching the film your teacher will assign you to a group. Each group has to look out for a different element of the film.

Group A: Look out for the rope!

Group B: Look out for the staff belonging to the grandfather!

Group C: Look out for the boat (called *waka*)!

Group D: Look out for the bicycle!

### Note the following:

Scenes in which they appear?

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Anything special about the scene?

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Any idea why these things are in the film?

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