

# ***Te Whakawhitinga***

Jeremy Leatinu'u

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## **A response by Garrick Cooper**

*Te Whakawhitinga* by Jeremy Leatinu'u is a melancholic and evocative moving image work, a largely abstract narrative following the journey of a young man from rural Māori Northland to the South Island for military training post for WWII. The film moves across different backdrops in Aotearoa. Taking the audience on a journey through rural landscapes and oceanscapes, the transitions between these convey the sense of a long journey; similarly, in the early part of the 20th century this would have been quite a trip. *Te Whakawhitinga* plays with temporality, though as I engaged with the images and story further, I came to the view that it doesn't play with temporality *as such*, rather it disrupts our normative conceptions of temporality. How Jeremy plays with images is where I would like to begin this discussion.

Modernity values and indeed prescribes clarity and sharpness. Being clear in our use of words, making a sharp argument, the crispness of a sound and the sharpness of an image often give us the sense that the work or event is completed and finished. Put another way, something that is formally highly-resolved is presented as *ready for our consumption*, to the point of infantilization, like food that has not only been prepared, but has also been chewed or pre-cut for us: all we need is to take that final step and chomp. An inexorable rush to a final conclusion. Such is the rush to consume that we no longer desire nor have the time for antiquated things like foreplay, which requires our engagement, effort, creativity, and above all, our attention. In the context of moving and still images, let's call this a form of ocular or *sensory finalism*. This is when images are presented to us as complete, and to be presented with a completed image is proper. It is as if such images don't actually require our engagement at all.

Sensory finalism almost renders an audience obsolete. However Jeremy's *Te Whakawhitinga* demands an audience, it requires our attention.<sup>1</sup>

Jeremy plays with image sharpness, and doesn't present us with centred, completed images. Where there are images of two people whose conversation pivots around old photographs we only really see hands flicking through and selecting photos. We do not see faces. Some of the images and moving images are as if they are slightly out of focus. It is here that Jeremy plays with light and darkness, in particular the transitional and liminal periods of light. Or is it darkness? In Māori/Polynesian traditions, life itself is premised upon the enduringness of *te pō me te ao, te ao me te pō* (the night and the day, the day and the night). However, contrary to prevailing European thinking (where light is deemed as being of particular inherent value, even signifying *goodness*, and darkness is to be extinguished, wherever possible, by light),<sup>2</sup> in Māori tradition we treat light and darkness quite differently. Both happen. Neither good nor bad. They just are and always will be. If anything, light is associated more with stasis and less vitality, whereas night is associated with disequilibrium and vibrant activity. The liminal periods in Māori traditions are the most sacred as we transition from the day to the night: it's the moment when we are forced to engage a different set of senses to move from seeing the world to 'feeling' the world. The slightly out of focus image that Jeremy presents us with initially draws our attention to it, in a fraught attempt to see the image more clearly. In our failure, we are forced to engage with our *ate* or stomach, and with how it responds. In Māori thought, given our feelings are located in our *ate*, the stomach becomes our new neural epicentre for engaging with, and navigating darkness. Now we are no longer, if we ever were, a passive audience. Jeremy, it seems to me, is calling upon us to be much more than an audience.

*Te Whakawhitinga* is both complete by itself and also completed with an audience. Tracing a journey from rural Northland to Te Waipounamu, in an era where regular travel outside of one's rohe was less common, it evokes a sense of both excitement and trepidation. The story has whakapapa within a long tradition of ancestors venturing out into new lands, opportunities and experiences

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1 See Lewis Gordon, 'What Does It Mean to Be a Problem?' in *Existentialism Africana* (London: Routledge, 2000), 63-95, for a discussion of "epistemic closure" vis-à-vis "epistemic openness" which influenced the argument that I am making here.

2 This is a theme of my PhD thesis (in progress), which is a Māori philosophical critique of, riffing off Nietzsche, *the will to know*. I argue that Europe's (now the Global North's) desire to extinguish the night with light/in European intellectual traditions—light being a metaphor for reason and the will to know—exemplifies the hubris of humans.

stretching back to ancestors like Maui, Kupe and Hoturoa, to the more recent Pasifika migrations of the mid 20th century. Jeremy himself embodies both, or we could simply use the singular and say this tradition, being of Māori and Samoan whakapapa. This is, as Moana Jackson says, "...a whakapapa with never-ending beginnings where the nature and effect of relationships crossed from the past into the future..."<sup>3</sup> Stories or pūrākau animate or bring to life whakapapa. Importantly for Jackson, whakapapa and stories are incomplete with layers to be added. And added. Moana Jackson is pointing to life beyond life, and stories beyond stories, almost underlining in bold the enduring incompleteness of life. Just as the generation of Jeremy's koroua did, it is each generation's responsibility to add to that story. Here the storyteller is also the audience and the audience storytellers. *Te Whakawhitinga* is an invitation to a story which draws on those of an elder generation within Jeremy's whānau, and it is an invitation to bring our own stories of journeys into a dialogue. It is perhaps in this way Jeremy leans on the multiple meanings of the word *whakawhiti* which also means to exchange.

A bilingual narrative compliments the work. The narrative moves along with the images through place and time. To me what is striking about this narrative is that it is not an attempt to be a meta-narrative about the images presented, nor crossings and journeys generally. The narrative is a reflection on place and experiences of home. Again, the narrative leaves open space for other narratives, for audiences to become storytellers.

Neverending-beginnings are a little messy and for viewers a lack of finality can make it difficult to know when to proverbially, look away. I say look away with intentional ambiguity. One might look away from something when we are afraid to see what happens next, or one might look away when we are certain the story has ended. The finality and clarity that modernity wills itself towards is not a feature of *Te Whakawhitinga*. Jeremy doesn't present us with a tidy ending, rather, I would suggest he is demonstrating to us a way of telling a story that isn't bound by linear temporality, nor is it encumbered by the need to be tidily completed, because life isn't like that.

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3 Jackson, Moana, 'Where to Next? Decolonisation and the Stories of the Land' in *Imagining Decolonisation* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2020), 139.

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**Garrick Cooper** is a Senior Lecturer at Aotahi School of Māori and Indigenous Studies, at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, Aotearoa. His research addresses decoloniality, though not always in a direct way. Sometimes it is just as powerful to engage in quotidian decolonial acts where we cease arguing the legitimacy of what we bring to the table but assume its legitimacy. Cooper's work is inspired by Polynesian oral tradition/philosophy and black decolonial philosophy, particularly the work of Frantz Fanon. He is a member of the Māori Association of Social Science and the Caribbean Philosophical Association, both since 2011.

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