



Film Study Guide
RAIN OF THE CHILDREN

NZ
FILM
COMMISSION
TE TUMU WHAKAATA TAONGA

Rain of the Children

The following are activities based on the achievement objectives presented in the Ministry of Education document, 'English in the New Zealand Curriculum'. They may provide a starting point for teachers wishing to design a unit based on the film.



ENGLISH

(Achievement Standards) Level 1.5: Show understanding of a visual text. **Level 2.5:** View, study, analyse visual text. **Level 3.4:** Respond critically to visual text.

MEDIA STUDIES

Level 2.2: Closely read an unfamiliar media text. **Level 2.3:** Demonstrate understanding of messages, values and representations within media text. **Level 2.4:** Undertake a media genre study. **Level 2.5:** Explain the use of narrative conventions in media text. **Level 3.2:** Explain how meaning is created in media texts.

GENRE

Making a **documentary** is a more complex activity than many viewers realise. *Rain of the Children* is a highly ambitious example because it is feature-length, it combines a big historical story with complex personal stories, it uses **reconstruction** (dramatised events), and it moves between a number of different time levels. Its director, Vincent Ward, is among New Zealand's most important and original film makers. For all these reasons, it is a rich documentary to study.

The documentary genre reflects our desire to get as close as possible to the truth. *Rain of the Children* grew out of Ward's sense that there was still much he did not understand about Te Pahi Tatu, the subject of his 1980 documentary *In Spring One Plants Alone*. In fact, "What I didn't know at the time is that she'd been part of some of the most dramatic events in



the country's history." Ward's new film took the form of a quest — to find out what had made Puhi the kind of person she was in old age.

Research is the basis of good documentary-making, and historical research can be particularly difficult (this film took several years to make). Ward's sources included: his original film, interviews with members of Puhi's family and community, interviews with historians, old photographs, old newspapers, and archival film footage. He also decided to dramatise some scenes — using no fewer than six actors to reconstruct Puhi's life at different times. There are also visionary scenes (e.g. imagining Niki with the spirit children). Ward, an experienced drama director, was able to use all the resources of dramatic (fictional) film-making in his attempt to reconstruct Puhi's earlier life.

Questions:

1. How does 'documentary' differ from 'drama'? Is this film best described as a documentary?
2. How and why does this film use drama elements in its search for the truth of Puhi's life? How are the drama and documentary elements woven together?
3. How does a feature-length documentary, made primarily for the cinema, differ from the types of documentary made for television in New Zealand?

STRUCTURE AND THEMES

What did Ward's research reveal as the main story-lines? As the title of the film suggests, he came to see the tragic loss of thirteen of her children — dying of illness or taken away from her — as central to her life story. Additional stories were the life of her last son, Niki; the extraordinary history of her Tuhoë community (led by its prophet Rua Kenana); and Ward's own quest for the truth (which functions as a **frame story**). These stories were linked by the presence of Puhi, and by certain **themes** such as conceptions of the spiritual world and the belief that someone can suffer from a "curse."

Because all the main stories were complex, the director's first challenge was to tell them in a clear way — starting with the opening sequence (the **introduction** or **set-up**). To help move the stories along, Ward used various **narrative conventions** — his own **narration** (a mix of **voice-over** and **direct-to-camera** commentary), some scripted narration spoken by an actor (Rena Owen), and a range of interviews. As a creative director with a keen eye and ear, Ward also wanted to tell the stories dramatically, so he broke each story down into

a series of individual scenes, then sought to give each scene some vivid images and actions, and appropriate music and sound effects — to create a sense of mood for each scene as well as to convey new information.

Questions:

1. How have the main stories been woven together to make up the complete text of the film? Could any of the stories have been dropped?
2. Are there any other important stories or themes in the film (besides those mentioned above)?
3. How — and how effectively — does each of the main stories end? (In assessing the “effectiveness”, consider: meaning, emotion, and any vivid or dramatic aspects of those scenes.)
4. How — and how effectively — does Ward introduce the film, set up the main stories, and engage the interest of viewers?

HOW MEANING IS CREATED IN A FILM

Rain of the Children makes strong use of these elements:

Colour

Question: When and why does the film move from one type of colour to another (full colour, black-and-white, sepia, muted or selective colour)?

Interviews

Question: Discuss the filming of interviews — the use of **close-ups**, the selection of backgrounds, the use of **two-shots**

or **three-shots**, the addition of **titles** (also known as **baseline supers**), the inclusion of the interviewer, etc.

Still photographs

Question: Discuss the ways in which the film uses and presents old photographs (with panning, zooming, and other camera movements; selection of details; emphasis on the grainy texture; etc.).

Special effects

Question: Discuss the use of special effects (e.g. rain, snow, dynamite, the first sight of Rua’s “city of God” — can you find any others?).

Montage

Question: Can you find examples of montage (a quick succession of related images)?

Landscapes

Question: Discuss some striking examples of the way Ward has filmed the remarkable landscapes of this region.

Sound effects

Question: Analyse the evocative use of sound effects (e.g. the heightened sound of guns).

Music

Discuss the complex combination of music in the film (Maori and European, vocal and instrumental).



Other questions:

1. Examine the credits at the end of the film, and explain any dozen roles that people with specialised skills have played in creating this film (e.g. producer, cinematographer, editor, second unit director, key grip, gaffer, animal wrangler, casting, art department, digital imaging, etc.)
2. Discuss six images (camera shots) that you regard as among the most vivid and dramatic in this film. What meanings and emotions do they convey?
3. Find six other examples of unusual camera shots in the film (e.g. unexpected angles or striking camera movements), and discuss why they may have been used.
4. What issues of community and individual cooperation may occur in making a documentary of this kind? Do any ethical issues also need to be considered?
5. A documentary is one person's best attempt to interpret a complex subject. Can you develop an interpretation of what motivated Puhi and created her sadness that is different from the one suggested by the film?
6. If you have access to another film directed by Ward, discuss any connections with *Rain of the Children*. (To give one small example: Ward uses Old Testament engravings by Gustave Doré also in *Vigil* and *What Dreams May Come*). Alternatively, compare the portrayal of New Zealand history in *River Queen* with the present film.
7. A striking feature of this subject matter is that two films have now been made that make use of documentary material concerning the same woman, yet they are quite different types of documentary. Investigate how these two films (*In Spring One Plants Alone* and *Rain of the Children*) are different types of documentary, from different traditions, and how their aims are in some ways also different in what they are attempting to capture.

Consider such phrases as 'fly on the wall' or 'here and now' documentary, and 'cinema verite' for Ward's first film '*In Spring One Plants Alone*.'

Also consider why *Rain of the Children* has quite different stylistic elements in order to tell its story, why this might have been necessary.
8. Do you think the two films aim to appeal to the same size or scope of audience or does one aim for a wider audience and if so investigate how this might affect the way it is made and what is included in it to make Puhi's story more accessible to communicate more widely.

This guide was written for NZ Film by Roger Horrocks, who is an Emeritus Professor and former Head of the Department of Film, Television and Media Studies at the University of Auckland.

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