

Liberating Bicycles in Niki Caro's Whale Rider and in Haifaa Al Mansour's Wadjda

Les vélos libérateurs dans Whale Rider de Niki Caro et dans Wadjda de Haifaa Al Mansour

Doris Hambuch

Volume 10, numéro 2, 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068519ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.OI.10.2.9>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

York University

ISSN

1918-8439 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Hambuch, D. (2019). Liberating Bicycles in Niki Caro's Whale Rider and in Haifaa Al Mansour's Wadjda. *Imaginations*, 10(2), 195–219.
<https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.OI.10.2.9>

Résumé de l'article

Susan B. Anthony a déclaré en 1896 que la bicyclette « a fait plus pour émanciper les femmes que toute autre chose dans le monde ». L'étude comparative de *Whale Rider* (2002) and *Wadjda* (2012) démontre que cet effet libérateur de l'outil de base des transports se renforce au cours du nouveau millénaire. De plus, l'analyse situe deux cinéastes contemporaines, Niki Caro de Nouvelle-Zélande et Haifaa Al Mansour d'Arabie Saoudite, au sein du réseau mondial en croissance que Patricia White identifie, dans *Women's Cinema, World Cinema* (2015), comme crucial pour l'amélioration des conditions des réalisatrices dans une industrie cinématographique mondiale.

All Rights Reserved © Doris Hambuch, 2019



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>



IMAGINATIONS:
JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE
L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imagination.sglendon.yorku.ca>

Open Issue

December 30, 2019

To cite this article:

Hambuch, Doris. "Liberating Bicycles in Niki Caro's *Whale Rider* and in Haifaa Al Mansour's *Wadjda*." *Imaginations*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2019, pp. 195–219, doi:10.17742/IMAGE.OI.10.2.9.

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.OI.10.2.9>



The copyright for each article belongs to the author and has been published in this journal under a **Creative Commons 4.0 International Attribution NonCommercial NoDerivatives** license that allows others to share for non-commercial purposes the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal. The content of this article represents the author's original work and any third-party content, either image or text, has been included under the Fair Dealing exception in the Canadian Copyright Act, or the author has provided the required publication permissions. Certain works referenced herein may be separately licensed, or the author has exercised their right to fair dealing under the Canadian Copyright Act.

LIBERATING BICYCLES IN NIKI CARO'S WHALE RIDER AND IN HAIFAA AL MANSOUR'S WADJDA

DORIS HAMBUCH

Abstract: Susan B. Anthony declared in 1896 that the bicycle “has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world.” The comparative study of *Whale Rider* (2002) and *Wadjda* (2012) demonstrates that this liberating effect of the basic tool of transportation is being reinforced in the new millennium. The analysis further situates two contemporary women filmmakers, Niki Caro from New Zealand and Haifaa Al Mansour from Saudi Arabia, within the growing global network Patricia White identifies, in *Women's Cinema, World Cinema* (2015), as crucial for the improvement of female directors' conditions in a global film industry.

Résumé: Susan B. Anthony a déclaré en 1896 que la bicyclette « a fait plus pour émanciper les femmes que toute autre chose dans le monde ». La recherche comparative de *Whale Rider* (2002) and *Wadjda* (2012) démontre que cet effet libérateur de l'outil de base des transports se renforce au cours du nouveau millénaire. De plus, l'analyse situe deux cinéastes contemporaines, Niki Caro de Nouvelle-Zélande et Haifaa Al Mansour d'Arabie Saoudite, au sein du réseau mondial en croissance que Patricia White identifie, dans *Women's Cinema, World Cinema* (2015), comme crucial pour l'amélioration des conditions des réalisatrices dans une industrie cinématographique mondiale.

Susan B. Anthony declared in 1896 that the bicycle “has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world” (Raab 24). The present comparative study argues that Niki Caro and Haifaa Al Mansour pay tribute to Anthony's feminist spirit when they create girl protagonists whose bicycles play crucial roles in their debut features, *Whale Rider* (2002) and *Wadjda* (2012) respectively. Patricia White states, in *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (2015), that even though “still dras-

tically underrepresented, women directors are increasingly coming into view within the current circulation of world cinema” (White 4). White establishes the “history of ‘cinefeminism’” (6) as point of departure for her critical framework “where women’s works are encountered in relation to each other [...] and to their various, expansive constituencies” (19). The current analysis of a film from New Zealand alongside one from Saudi Arabia situates their directors within such a history of cinefeminism. Indeed, both Caro and Al Mansour progressed to very diverse projects outside their respective national contexts after the international success with stories that were close to home. This article argues that the liberating rides they grant their protagonists therefore compare to the subsequent mobility of the directors themselves.

Inaugurating a cinematic focus on the muscle-powered transportation device, Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) enforced the symbolic significance of bicycles in global cinema. Ecologically friendly and not requiring a special license, this basic tool of transportation has featured as prominent prop in movies such as *Breaking Away* (1979), *The Flying Scotsman* (2006), or *The Kid with a Bike* (2011). It has further served as a metaphor for filmmakers to describe their own creative process (White, 2013). Both *Whale Rider* and *Wadjda* present the bicycle as an effective symbol of a girl’s growing assertiveness in conservative, tribal communities. Attributing the respective heroines to the industrial contexts of the two directors further claims the liberating effect of bicycles on a meta-level. Godard’s comparison of his work to a bicycle ride may apply to both Caro and Al Mansour as well. To acknowledge the centrality of bicycles in *Whale Rider* and *Wadjda* allows for a feminist angle on the neorealist legacy, and it reveals this angle’s relevance for the work of the women who directed the respective films.¹

The bicycle’s cultural representations go beyond the purely cinematic. A considerable amount of research has dealt with the universal significance of bicycles in fiction. *Culture on Two Wheels: The Bicycle in Literature and Film* (2016), edited by Jeremy Withers and Daniel P. Shea, is a comprehensive source that covers literature and film across the world and through the ages, since the invention of the bicycle, allegedly in the early 19th century (Raab 23). Alon Raab lists a

great number of writers who reveal themselves as passionate riders in “Wheels of Fire: Writers on Bicycles.” Withers and Shea open their introduction with the claim that “we are living during a bicycle revolution” (Withers/Shea 2) and go on to point out that cycling commonly associates with liberation. Their collection includes a chapter that discusses Al Mansour’s *Wadjda* as influenced by Italian neorealism and Iranian cinema. Anne Ciecko’s “Bicycle Borrowers after Neorealism: Global Nou-velo Cinema,” however, also establishes a context of national cinema in which to situate the neorealist legacy. In the absence of a national Saudi cinema, I argue that a comparative study of *Wadjda* and *Whale Rider* serves better to highlight the bicycle’s “extraordinary utility for critiques of social inequality” (Ciecko 242) in a feminist context. While *Wadjda*, as Ciecko points out, transforms De Sica’s father-son focus into a mother-daughter story, *Whale Rider* adds one more generation in its focus on a grandfather-granddaughter conflict. In both films, bicycle rides serve to reinforce a girl’s potential, against severe resistance. In film industries, in particular the well-established ones, women frequently face severe resistance as well when they attempt to work behind cameras. Such resistance mainly rests within the production and distribution apparatus, but it may also hail from film critics.

Both Al Mansour and Caro have been accused of cultural commodification in their attempts to reach larger audiences. It may not be accidental that in both cases the harshest, and also most polemical, critiques come from male critics. As women filmmakers, Caro and Al Mansour thus share a similar kind of oppression that their heroines battle in their respective films. One attempt to create more transparency and achieve gender parity in film industries is the so-called 50:50-by-2020 festival pledge. Unfortunately, not all powers that be agree with this measure’s necessity (Erbland).³ Providing a comparative analysis of *Whale Rider* by Caro and *Wadjda* by Al Mansour as part of De Sica’s legacy encourages critics to grant these directors the kind of liberating rides that they created for their respective heroines. The following analysis begins with a discussion of the older film, *Whale Rider*, which is based on a novel without bicycles. The second section sheds light on a bicycle as central prop in *Wadjda*, whose success led to a children’s book called *The Green Bicycle* (2015). “The

Liberating Effect of Bicycles,” finally, compares the symbolic significance of bicycles in the stories as well as for the work of their directors.

WHALE RIDER'S SHARED BICYCLE

The story we liked best was the one telling how Mihi had stood on a sacred ground at Rotorua. “Sit down,” a chief had yelled, enraged. “Sit down,” because women weren’t supposed to stand up and speak on sacred ground.” (Ihimaera 81)

Whale Rider premiered at the 2002 Toronto International Film Festival, where it received the AGF Peoples Choice Award. The release of a revised international edition of Witi Ihimaera’s novel (1987; 2003), on which the film is based, accompanied the latter’s worldwide success. Among the following numerous recognitions are nine New Zealand Film Awards, including Best Film, Best Director, and Best Screenplay. Melissa Kennedy points out that Caro’s screenplay resulted in “little change to the principal story-line,” but shifted the narrative voice mainly due to the difference in media (Kennedy 116). Māori scholars, in contrast, disapprove of Caro’s adaptation, and Alistair Fox, in *Coming-of-Age Cinema in New Zealand: Genre, Gender, and Adaptation* (2017), argues that the film imposes a Western feminist perspective. He further accuses it of “transubstantiating [the original story]’s meaning in the course of converting the source into a conventional coming-of-age genre film” (Fox 149).

Although Fox, in reference to studies by Brendan Hokowhitu (Fox 148) and Tania Kai’ai (Fox 149), is right to point to specific distortions of Māori culture, he exaggerates when describing the contrast between Ihimaera’s and Caro’s work on the story. Book and film use poetic devices, such as symbolism, intertextual references, and rhythm to interweave the tribal myth of the whale rider (Figure 3) with the story of this ancient hero’s real-life female descendent. Once Paikea, the film’s narrator, realizes her specific purpose within her post-colonial Indigenous community, she realizes she must oppose her stubborn grandfather Koro, the community’s current leader. Lars Eckstein, in his thoughtful placement of the tale on a continuum be-

tween magical and marvellous realism, provides important insight on the Māori writer's own variations of the material rooted in his tribal mythology. Ihimaera's rendering of *The Whale Rider* starts with the 1987 edition published in New Zealand, mainly in English, but includes Māori terminology and entire passages that indicate an untranslatable "alternative cosmology" (Eckstein 101). Eckstein is keen to emphasize that the date of this original publication, "about belief as much as about fantasy," coincides with the introduction of Māori as second official language in New Zealand (105). Ihimaera supports this development and pays tribute to the recognition of his tribal language with *Te Kaieke Tohara*, a 1995 Māori version of *The Whale Rider* (101).

Ihimaera's subsequent work on an international edition of the novel coincides with his participation in the film as associate producer (Kennedy 116). Both activities are concessions to a broader audience and thus mediations between cultures. Chris Prentice is right to remind readers, in "Riding the Whale? Postcolonialism and Globalization in *Whale Rider*," that the twenty-first century renderings of the story are also mediations between generations (Prentice 256). Māori terminology in the international edition appears only with translations, sometimes even accompanied by a glossary. In the film, the tribal language occurs only when the meaning is evident from the scene, or with subtitles. Eckstein situates these newer versions further away from the marvellous on his spectrum, due to a loss of the untranslatable alternative cosmology. They do not, however, replace Ihimaera's earlier text. Ideally, as in Eckstein's classroom, they may invite comparative studies that are bound to acknowledge Indigenous criticism. As with the edited version of the novel, the international reception of the film testifies to the success of the tale's twenty-first century receptions. These newer versions have met a global audience, for better or worse. They have introduced a tale from a specific community in New Zealand to viewers worldwide who may not have been familiar with Māori culture at all. Some of these viewers may have misinterpreted elements of the setting, or perceived of it as an exotic *other*.

Sarah Projansky discusses American reactions to Caro's film in "Gender, Race, Feminism, and the International Hero: The Unremarkable

U. S. Popular Press Reception of *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Whale Rider*.” Projansky traces the film’s transition from art house to multiplex cinemas across the United States (Projansky 190), and provides a thorough discussion of numerous reviewer reports. Her use of the word “unremarkable” in the title of her essay signals “predictable,” and refers to a certain complacency encouraged by stories from distant locations. At the same time, Projansky identifies important discrepancies between individual reviews, in particular regarding the relevance of feminist content (Projansky 199). The diverse reactions Projansky identifies in this context illustrate that feminism, even in the so-called “West,” is not the monolithic sort of movement Fox makes it seem in his assessment of Caro’s adaptation. The following analysis of specific scenes identifies further flaws in Fox’s argument.

Ihimaera’s book includes no bicycles at all. Instead, his narrator Rawiri, the heroine’s uncle, uses a motorcycle. In Caro’s film, Paikea herself provides the narrative perspective, and during the first half, she shares her grandfather Koro’s bike when he picks her up from school (Figure 1). The bicycle, in this case, serves to highlight the reciprocal affinity of the two family members, and it also draws attention to the wealth of the community’s natural environment. The first cycling scene occurs immediately after the opening hospital sequence that summarizes the tragic circumstances of Paikea’s birth. A jump cut transitions to the narrative present about seven years later. Following this cut, close-up shots of pedalling feet, the faces of the cycling pair, and the grandfather’s whale tooth necklace (Figure 2) alternate with long shots of the impressive landscape. These scenes mark a certain ambiguity in Koro’s character regarding his relationship with Paikea. When her mother and twin brother die during Paikea’s birth, Koro rejects his first grandchild forcefully. He is in need of a male descendent to take on his leadership role. As Paikea grows up in his house, in the absence of her father, their affinity becomes mutual, as long as she is unaware of her fate as the next leader. This fate becomes obvious for the first time when Paikea asks Koro about the community’s creation myth while he is repairing his boat’s outboard motor.



Fig. 1: During the first half of the film, the grandfather picks Paikea up from school on his bicycle.



Fig. 2: This close-up shows Paikea holding on to Koro's whale-tooth necklace.

Neither the motor nor the boat, as Fox suggests (Fox 155), symbolizes the tribe in this scene. Rather, it is the broken rope, as Koro makes clear when answering Pai's questions about the ancient whale rider's significance for Whangara (Figure 3). When the individual strings of the rope are tight together, the grandfather explains, the community is strong. While Koro disappears to find a new rope—a potential statement on modernization's battle against tradition—Paieka fixes the old, broken rope, which allows her to start the motor. Koro's angry reaction expresses his hostility towards his granddaughter's trespassing into his own field of responsibility. This hostility has its origin in the old leader's rejection of change, a rejection that ironically contrasts with his search for a new rope when Paieka proves that the old one is mendable. Koro does not overcome his aversion to impending change until his granddaughter's life is at stake, after she rides a whale and succeeds in rescuing a beached pod that way. When Koro finally admits to being a “fledgling new to flight,” this metaphor relates to said change, rather than to a disrespect of hierarchy, as Fox would have it (158). When Koro speaks thus in the hospital room, Paieka is still in a coma, and nobody can hear him. In a way, he comforts himself, showing that he can accept the unavoidable transition and welcome his successor even if she happens to be female.



Fig. 3: This wooden sculpture depicts the mythological ancestor Paieka, the Whale Rider.



Fig. 4: The grandfather wears the whale-tooth necklace during his practice with the boys.

During the scenes in which Paikea shares Koro's bicycle, she often holds on to his whale tooth necklace (Figures 2 and 4). This gesture expresses her affinity as much as it foreshadows their proximity in lineage. Although the grandfather refuses to teach the girl traditional skills, such as how to use a taiaha in Māori martial art, his legacy as leader seems to transfer to his granddaughter via the whale tooth, at least metaphorically. When Paikea's visiting father invites her to join him abroad, Paikea delays the departure by requesting an extra round on Koro's bicycle. This scene marks the last time Koro grants her the privilege of sharing his bicycle. When Pai, finding her bond with the whales during the airport ride, decides not to leave with her father after all, Koro no longer picks her up from school. A bicycle next appears in the film when Paikea rides on her own. Behind Koro's back, she has pursued her physical education, which shows when she passes the school bus by herself, pedalling at record speed (Figure 6). It also shows when she dives for the whale tooth necklace Koro threw

into the sea during a final test for the boys, among whom he hopes to find the next leader. Pai recovers this necklace in Koro's absence (Figure 5). Her independence at riding the bicycle foreshadows her own final test, the riding of a whale. While not a major change to Ihimaera's storyline, the use of the bicycle symbol in the film grants Caro the nod to De Sica, as well as to Susan B. Anthony. While the importance of the bicycle as symbol is implicit in *Whale Rider*, the following section discusses an example of a film in which the basic transportation tool takes centre stage.



Fig. 5: In order to find his successor among the boys he has trained, Koro asks them to dive for his whale-tooth necklace. Paikea is the one to retrieve it in Koro's absence.



Fig. 6: On her own, Paieka rides the bicycle fast enough to pass the school bus.

BICYCLE OBSESSION IN WADJDA

Still the bicycle floated in place on the other side of the fence, not moving, not rising or falling, just hovering. It seemed to be poised at the point where wooden boards met sky, waiting, ready for a ride. For what felt like forever, Wadjda continued to stare. Without looking down, she dropped her arm and slid her black stone into her pocket. And still her eyes followed the bicycle. It was like a vision, a dream. The most beautiful dream she'd ever had. (Al Mansour 59-60)

Haifaa Al Mansour's *Wadjda* premiered in 2012, a decade after *Whale Rider*, at the Venice Film Festival. It revolves around the bicycle with which the protagonist Wadjda becomes obsessed early on in the story. Al Mansour has revealed her indebtedness to De Sica (Garcia 37).³ Like *Whale Rider*, *Wadjda* has been attacked on the grounds of its international success. Although Al Mansour did grow up in the culture portrayed in her film (unlike Caro), she collaborated with an in-

ternational crew and worked in particular with German producers (like Caro). Tariq Al Haydar claims that “the political statement the film makes is specious” (Al Haydar). His polemic condemns the fact that Wajda’s bicycle has the national colour of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In a *Cineaste* interview, Al Mansour explains the specific role green plays in her country by stating that for Saudis, “heaven is green, not blue” (Garcia). Yet, other colors play important roles throughout the movie, such as those of different local football clubs. Wajda uses string in those colors to produce bracelets to sell in her attempt to raise money for the bicycle purchase. In the same *Cineaste* interview Maria Garcia discusses blue nail polish as a symbol of individuality. The same applies to Wajda’s purple shoelace, with purple, at the latest since Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, often seen in association with women’s rights movements. The socio-economic conditions in De Sica’s post-World-War-II Italian film stand in stark contrast with those in Al Mansour’s contemporary Saudi Arabia. Although Wajda’s family is not wealthy, they suffer neither from unemployment nor poverty. In this context, Caro’s Whangara parallels De Sica’s Rome, though the former is a very small community compared to the latter large city. Like Rome, Riyadh is a large city, but most of Al Mansour’s film takes place in Wajda’s immediate neighbourhood, which compares well in size with the small community in Caro’s film. Both films do, however, have much to do with parental affinities and youthful decisions, which provides the main connection to *Bicycle Thieves*.

Whereas the symbolic meaning of the bicycle Koro shares with Paikea is implicit in *Whale Rider*, Wajda’s desire to own one specific bicycle accounts for most of the plot development in Al Mansour’s film. Roy Armes’s discussion of *Wajda* has the character of a post scriptum at the end of *New Voices in Arab Cinema* (2015), but he does not fail to emphasize the “magical sight” (Armes 303) that instigates Wajda’s obsession when she first encounters this bicycle. As it is transported on top of a car, it seems to be flying along the wall that conceals the moving vehicle (Figure 7). Wajda’s immediate chase establishes the encounter as love at first sight (Figure 8). She follows the car all the way to the small shop (Figure 9) whose vendor gives in to her begging to hold on to this bicycle until she saves enough money

to buy it (Figure 10). This scene introduces the one special, incidentally green, bicycle whose possession Wadjda pursues with the same determination that guides Paikea's struggle to assert herself against her grandfather. The initial wish to own a bicycle, however, originates in Wadjda's friendship with her neighbour Abdullah (Figures 11 and 12).



Fig. 7: On her way home from school, Wadjda spots the green bicycle attached to the roof of a moving vehicle.



Fig. 8: The low angle emphasizes Wadjda's fascination with this particular bicycle.

After a pre-credits prologue inside her school establishes that Wadjda stands out among her peers, two subsequent scenes introduce her home and the conflict she faces there between her parents. In the first scene, she helps her mother to get ready for work and defends her against the driver, who complains about the regular delay. As Wadjda leaves the house to walk to school in the second scene, her father arrives wearing a car mechanic outfit. There are no further details about the father’s occupation throughout the film, as he is not present very often. The home, however, suggests that both parents have modest incomes. Happy to see her father, Wadjda indicates that he had not visited their house for an entire week. Later, viewers find out that Wadjda’s father is looking for a second wife, since her mother can no longer bear children. As she parts with her father, Wadjda encounters her friend Abdullah, who rides his bike to school with a group of other boys. Abdullah’s teasing results in Wadjda’s idea that she should challenge him in a race, and this idea prompts her desire to possess a bicycle.



Fig. 9: A toy shop in Wadjda’s neighborhood offers the bicycle she discovered on her way from school.



Fig. 10: Wadjda succeeds in striking a deal with the vendor.

Wadjda's bicycle fixation meets hostility from two adult women, her mother and her school principal. Although Abdullah at first also observes that girls don't ride bicycles, he then lends Wadjda his own bicycle to practice on the roof of her building (Figure 11). Seeing how her skills improve and that she grows fond of the activity, he gives her a helmet (Figure 12). This thoughtful gift implies the boy's belief in a future for his friend's ambition. It also asserts the traditional role of the male as protector, since Abdullah himself rides without helmet. When Wadjda, in the end, wins the Quran recitation competition, but loses the money meant to buy her the desired bicycle, Abdullah offers to let her have his instead. Wadjda rejects the offer, saying that they both need bicycles for the projected race. This idea returns to this article's introductory reference to Godard, without the competitive angle. Godard uses the metaphor of two separate bicycles to emphasise the nature of his collaboration with Anne-Marie Miéville, insinuating that they work together independently. Wadjda wants her own bicycle to participate in an activity with her friend

that also grants each their independence. Until the end of the film, Abdullah and, in a way, the vendor, are the only characters supportive of Wajda's plan.



Fig. 11: Abdullah lends Wajda his bicycle to practice on the roof.



Fig. 12: Abdullah's gift of the helmet expresses his belief in her goal to own a bicycle, but also confirms the stereotype of the male protector.

Ms. Hessa, the rigid and potentially hypocritical school principal, favours Wajda upon her progress with competition preparations.

She withholds, however, the prize money once Wadjda explains her anticipated use for it. “Bikes are not for girls,” Ms. Hessa echoes the mother’s judgment. Wadjda brings up her plan to buy a bicycle several times with her mother, mainly as she helps her in the kitchen. Once, during preparations for the Morning Prayer, the mother refers to a ruse women encountered in Europe and North America during the time Susan B. Anthony made the declaration quoted in the opening sentence of the present study. This ruse predicted a bicycle’s threat to women’s reproductive organs (Withers/Shea 43).

Once the father follows through with his plan to marry a second wife, Wadjda’s mother changes her mind and uses the money intended for a fancy dress to woo her husband on Wadjda’s dream. The closing scene shows Wadjda’s race with Abdullah. The final shot, as Ciecko suggests, shows “the girl looking out toward an off-screen horizon, suggesting potential openness” (Ciecko 241; Figure 13). An extreme long shot leading up to this future outlook emphasizes the distance Wadjda is able to achieve because of the newly gained mobility (Figure 14). The openness of this scene contrasts with women’s confinement in their private spheres, for example inside the home or the school. Wadjda’s mother refuses to work, like her friend, at a nearby hospital because the job would place her in what she considers an off-limit public sphere. The school principal asks her students to move indoors when they are in danger to be seen by workers on a neighbouring roof. Al Mansour herself had to work from within a van during the filming on location (Ciecko 240). The on-location settings, along with nonprofessional leads, underline both films’ debt to *Bicycle Thieves*.



Fig. 13: The film ends with Wadjda looking off-screen to welcome discoveries her new mobility affords.



Fig. 14: This extreme long shot underlines Wadjda's final achievement to own a bicycle and to challenge her friend to the anticipated race.

On-location filming depends on filming permits in the Gulf countries. It thus stipulates an acceptance of given production codes. The decision to film on location, then, emphasizes Al Mansour's aim to touch viewers "on a very basic level" (Garcia). The film never pretended to function as "revolutionary art," which Al Haydar mistak-

enly presupposes. Studied carefully, however, *Wadjda* does, as Dale Hudson and Patricia Zimmermann put it, “negotiate the complexities of indirect dissent” (Hudson/Zimmermann 157). It also contributes to the slowly growing category of accessible movies made by women. In “The Confidence Game,” Ruby Rich writes that “the mysterious absence of women in the directorial ranks continues to this day” (Rich 160). Directors such as Caro and Al Mansour may inspire more women filmmakers to change this situation, much like their protagonists assert their positions in the respective films.

THE LIBERATING EFFECT OF BICYCLES

Das Leben ist wie ein Fahrrad. Man muss sich vorwärts bewegen, um das Gleichgewicht nicht zu verlieren. (Einstein)⁴

De Sica’s main character in *Bicycle Thieves* depends on a bicycle to maintain his job. His wife makes an enormous sacrifice that allows him to purchase the essential tool of transportation in the post-World-War-II Italian recession. Her sacrifice during the prevailing and dire economic conditions of the moment redoubles the pain of the tragic theft of the bicycle during his first day on the job. *Bicycle Thieves* thus presents an extreme example of an on-screen bicycle whose possession literally liberates a family from their poverty, even if that liberation lasts for less than a day. In contrast, Caro’s *Whale Rider* pays no attention to the possession of a bicycle. Grandfather Koro’s bicycle is not even a central prop, yet its use makes a crucial statement about Paikea’s acceptance of her own potential. While the shared bicycle rides signal the bond between Koro and his granddaughter (Figure 1) and draw the viewer’s attention to the landscape the pair traverses, Paikea’s independent ride finally reveals her ambition. Not only does she ride on her own the last time the bicycle appears in *Whale Rider*, Paikea peddles fast enough in this scene to pass the school bus (Figure 6).

Unlike *Whale Rider*, Al Mansour’s *Wadjda* hearkens back at the question of possession pursued in *Bicycle Thieves*, but instead of the pattern of gain and loss created by De Sica, *Wadjda* builds up to the long-desired purchase that seals the semi-happy end of the story.

While the bicycle provokes the son to witness the father's humiliation in *Bicycle Thieves*, it strengthens the ties between daughter and mother in *Wadjda*. Both *Whale Rider* and *Wadjda* share the neorealist characteristics of on-location filming and reliance on nonprofessional actors. Additionally, *Whale Rider* includes elements of magic realism as a result of its source in Ihimaera's novel. Both Caro and Al Mansour employ the bicycle as a symbol for liberation. It symbolizes Paikea's as well as Wadjda's struggle to assert themselves in their tribal communities, Māori and Saudi respectively. It may further symbolize the assertion of two women filmmakers in a global industry. The two films discussed here mark beginnings of Caro's as well as Al Mansour's careers. Both films are, to use Ciecko's words, "culturally specific and globally appealing" (Ciecko 241) cinematic artefacts. They introduced their directors into a canon of world cinema, even if subsequent films did not consistently measure up to this early achievement.

The work of both Caro and Al Mansour could provide material for future books such as White's *Women's Cinema, World Cinema*. White underlines the importance of a global network for women filmmakers (White 4). Examining Kathryn Bigelow's success alongside directorial work by women in independent industries across the globe, White outlines a hopeful development during the current century. "Women filmmakers from all over," she states, "are navigating institutional politics and making films that have a chance to travel and be seen" (4-5). Such exposure is crucial for films such as *Whale Rider* and *Wadjda* to participate in the transcultural support network in question. Positive role models may help emerging women filmmakers out of the "confidence game" trap referred to by Rich. Much like the mother's move to solidarity in the closure of *Wadjda* allows for her daughter's success, a large number of female predecessors have contributed to conditions that are more favourable for younger women filmmakers today. White lists important examples, such as Tunisian Moufida Tlatli and Algerian Yamina Benguigui, who took on roles in public politics in addition to their creative endeavours (5).

Al Mansour, likewise, joined Saudi Arabia's new board of the General Authority for Culture, and she returned to a Saudi setting in her new film *The Perfect Candidate*. Since *Wadjda*, Al Mansour directed the

historical fiction film *Mary Shelley*, “with confidence if little recognizable presence” (White, “Gender Matters”), and the Netflix adaptation of Trisha R. Thomas’ *Nappily Ever After* (2018). With her premiere of *The Perfect Candidate*, the story of a young female Saudi physician, she was one of only two competing women filmmakers in the 2019 Venice Festival, a sign that the so-called celluloid ceiling is still a serious obstacle, and that the 50:50 by 2020 festival pledge is not equally successful everywhere. This pledge is not limited to the position of film director, but concerns many other activities pertaining to the production and distribution of movies.

The absence of female directors in the Venice competition does not relate to a lack of production, as Kate Erbland emphasizes in “Venice Film Festival’s Women Director Problem: Gender Parity Shouldn’t Be That Hard.” The Toronto Festival, which takes place shortly after the event in Venice, provides the strongest contrast. A few years ago, White already commended the Canadian platform (“Gender Matters”). During the year White published the respective essay, Al Mansour participated at TIFF with *Mary Shelley*. Earlier that year, Caro’s adaptation of Diane Ackerman’s *Zookeeper’s Wife* won a Heartland film award. For both Caro and Al Mansour, the projects following the two films studied here never achieved a comparable success. They have, nevertheless, provided each of the two women filmmakers with unique opportunities to discover material, experiment with diverse filming conditions, explore new collaborations, and continue to be part of what has come to be called a “cinefeminist” movement.

The release of *Whale Rider* and *Wadjda* occurred in two very different cultural contexts, Māori and Saudi respectively. The present comparative study has shown that viewing the two films alongside each other makes clear the symbolic use of bicycles as vehicles for liberation. The aim here has been to contribute to the kind of transcultural network that Patricia White identifies as vital to the improvement of conditions for women filmmakers worldwide. Jeremy Withers and Daniel P. Shea point out that a bicycle’s “association with freedom, mobility, and the liberating promise of modernity was secured during its rise to mass popularity following the appearance of the safety bicycle” (Withers/Shea 2). This basic tool of transportation is, however, not equally accessible to everyone across the globe, as cy-

clinging women, for example in Pakistan (Imtiaz), testify. A comparative study of the two 21st-century features by women filmmakers gives *Whale Rider* and *Wadjda* a feminist perspective on the neorealist tradition established by De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, even if the socio-economic circumstances in the specific settings are very different.

Mother and daughter are close yet divided over individual goals in Haifaa Al Mansour's film. In the end, the mother gives Wadjda the desired bicycle despite her initial opposition to the plan. Niki Caro's portrait of the conflict between grandfather and granddaughter adds a generation layer to the theme of parental choices. Both movies master on-location filming, Caro's in Whangara, Al Mansour's in Riyadh, though the latter's focus on a suburban neighbourhood resembles the former's spatial confinement. Both films work with non-professionals to tell stories of strong girl characters who assert themselves in their respective tribal communities, the pressures of which are more pronounced in the Māori setting. The fact that bicycles symbolize this process of a girl's coming of age in each of the two films leads to a reading of this liberating symbol on a meta-level in a global filmmaking community. The more and the more diverse role models there are in various industries across the world, the easier it will become for women to opt for a career as filmmaker.

WORKS CITED

Al Haydar, Tariq. "Haifaa Al Mansour's Wadjda: Revolutionary Art or Pro-State Propaganda?" *Jadaliyya*, 13 January, 2014, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30078/Haifaa-Al-Mansour%60s-Wadjda-Revolutionary-Art-or-Pro-State-Propaganda>. Accessed on 17 May 2019.

Al-Mansour, Haifaa, director. *Wadjda*. Razor Film Produktion, 2012.

———. *The Green Bicycle*. Dial Books, 2015.

———, director. *Mary Shelley*. HanWay Films/BFI, 2017.

———, director. *Nappily Ever After*. Netflix, 2018.

———, director. *The Perfect Candidate*. Razor Film Produktion, 2019.

Arms, Roy. *New Voices in Arab Cinema*. Indiana UP, 2015.

Caro, Niki, director. *Whale Rider*. South Pacific Pictures, 2002.

- , director. *North Country*. Participant Productions, 2005.
- , director. *The Zookeeper's Wife*. Scion Films, 2017.
- Ciecko, Anne. "Bicycle Borrowers after Neorealism: Global Nou-velo Cinema." *Culture on Two Wheels: The Bicycle in Literature and Film*, edited by Jeremy Withers and Daniel P. Shea, U of Nebraska P, 2016, pp. 228-245.
- Dardenne, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, directors. *The Kid with a Bike*. Les Films du Fleuve, 2011.
- De Sica, Vittorio, director. *Bicycle Thieves*. Produzioni De Sica, 1948.
- Eckstein, Lars. "Think Local Sell Global: Magic Realism, *The Whale Rider*, and the Market." *Commodifying (Post)Colonialism: Othering, Reification, Commodification and the New Literatures and Cultures in English*, edited by Rainer Emig and Oliver Lindner, Brill, 2010, pp. 93-107.
- Emig, Rainer and Oliver Lindner, editors. *Commodifying (Post)Colonialism: Othering, Reification, Commodification and the New Literatures and Cultures in English*. Brill, 2010.
- Erbland, Kate. "Venice Film Festival's Women Director Problem: Gender Parity Shouldn't Be This Hard." *Indiewire*, 25 July, 2019, https://www.indiewire.com/2019/07/venice-film-festival-2019-female-directors-1202160990/?fbclid=IwARofzXCtIUofbrITBSpe-sEB_kgPe6l5HwyUvhYoXkWffd-LLK2xuLzBOx1k. Accessed on 30 August 2019.
- Fox, Alistair. *Coming-Of-Age Cinema in New Zealand: Genre, Gender, and Adaptation*. Edinburgh UP, 2019 [2017].
- Garcia, Maria. "A Woman's Voice Is Her Nakedness: An Interview with Haifaa Al Mansour." *Cineaste*, Fall 2013, pp. 34-37.
- Hudson, Dale, and Patricia R. Zimmermann. *Thinking through Digital Media: Transnational Environments and Locative Places*. Palgrave, 2015.
- Ihimaera, Witi. *Whale Rider*. Harcourt, 2003 [1987].
- Imtiaz, Saba, "'People think we're from another planet': Meet Karachi's Female Cyclists." *The Guardian*, 26 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jun/26/people-think-were-from-another-planet-meet-karachis-female-cyclists>. Accessed on 3 November 2019.
- Joseph, Clara A. B. and Janet Wilson, editors. *Global Fissures: Postcolonial Fusions*. Rodopi, 2006.
- Kennedy, Melissa. *Striding Both Worlds: Witi Ihimaera and New Zealand's Literary Traditions*. Rodopi, 2011.
- Mackinnon, Douglas, director. *The Flying Scotsman*. Verve Pictures, 2006.

- Prentice, Chris. "Riding the Whale? Postcolonialism and Globalization in *Whale Rider*." *Global Fissures: Postcolonial Fusions*, edited by Clara A. B. Joseph and Janet Wilson, Rodopi, 2006, pp. 247-267.
- Projansky, Sarah. "Gender, Race, Feminism, and the International Girl Hero." *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*, edited by Timothy Shary and Alexandra Seibel, U of Texas P, 2007, pp. 189-206.
- Raab, Alon. "Wheels of Fire: Writers on Bicycles." *World Literature Today*, vol. 86, no. 5, 2012, pp. 22-31.
- Rich, B. Ruby. "The Confidence Game." *Camera Obscura*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2013, pp. 157-165.
- Schenkel, Elmar. *Vom Rausch der Reise*. Futurum, 2012.
- Shary, Timothy and Alexandra Seibel, editors. *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*. U of Texas P, 2007.
- White, Jerry. *Two Bicycles: The Work of Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2013.
- White, Patricia. *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms*. Duke UP, 2015.
- . "Gender Matters at the Toronto International Film Festival." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 12 October, 2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/gender-matters-at-the-toronto-international-film-festival/>. Accessed on 30 August 2019.
- Withers, Jeremy and Daniel P. Shea, editors. *Culture on Two Wheels: The Bicycle in Literature and Film*. U of Nebraska P, 2016.
- Yates, Peter, director. *Breaking Away*. Twentieth Century Fox, 1979. DVD.

IMAGE CREDITS

Figures 1-6: screenshots from *Whale Rider*

Figures 7-14: screenshots from *Wadjda*

NOTES

1. Both Caro and Al Mansour were scheduled to participate in the recent *Power of Inclusion Summit* in New Zealand, according to the blog *Women and Hollywood* (<https://womenandhollywood.com/niki-carohaifaa-al-mansour-and-more-to-attend-new-zealands-power-of-inclu>

sion-summit/), though only Caro seems to have been present in the end.↵

2. Womenandhollywood.com provides shocking statistics of women's participation in the Hollywood industry. The controversy over Natalie Portman's cape at the 2020 Academy Awards ceremony gives additional insight into current positions regarding this matter.↵
3. See for instance, Anne Ciecko's study of the film's reliance on Italian neorealism in "Bicycle Borrowers after Neorealism: Global Nou-velo Cinema."↵
4. See Elmar Schenkel's *Vom Rausch der Reise* (On the ecstasy of travel; 41): "Life is like a bicycle. One needs to move forward to not lose one's balance."↵