

PIKE RIVER EDUCATION RESOURCE

DIRECTOR COMMENTARY FOCUS

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES | YEARS 10–13

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“YOU CAN FEEL A RESONANCE OF TRUTH, AND THAT’S WHAT I WAS TRYING TO DO WITH THIS FILM — ANCHOR IT. ANCHOR IT IN THE SENSE THAT THIS IS REAL — THESE ARE REAL PEOPLE, THESE ARE REAL SOUNDS. I WANTED THE AUDIENCE TO FEEL THAT TRUTH, EVEN IF THEY CAN’T EXPLAIN WHY IT FEELS REAL.”

ROBERT SARKIES | DIRECTOR

INTRODUCTION

This Director Commentary offers a first-hand and exclusive look at director Robert Sarkies’ approach to storytelling, cinematic craft, and creative choices.

The film provides a way for students to explore how fiction can reflect lived experience, encourage empathy, and contribute to discussions about justice, representation, and collective memory.

The commentary guide highlights **four key waypoints** in the film, each discussed in detail by Robert in his video series, providing a framework for examining narrative, film techniques, and decision-making with students.

You can use the commentary videos to —

- **Model close-viewing** of scenes, highlighting narrative choices and technical craft.
- **Explain the structure of the story**, showing how dramatic pacing, character focus, and thematic layering create meaning.
- **Reveal the extent of conscious intent** in filmmaking.
- **Spark discussion** about the portrayal of reality, empathy, and ethical responsibility in dramatised storytelling.

KEY SEQUENCES AT A GLANCE

SEQUENCE	FOCUS	CLASSROOM USE
Opening	Landscape, tone, curiosity	Discuss how setting establishes mood, stakes, and emotional resonance.
USB of Security Photos	Sound design, narrative anchoring	Explore how visuals and soundtrack create realism and drive narrative questions.
Midpoint	Acting, pacing, empathy	Analyse how emotional beats and performance choices build empathy.
Closing	Composition, closure, hope	Examine how final sequence balances realism with cinematic style and convey hope.

FLEXIBLE FRAMING

OPEN DISCUSSION, TEACHER-LED EXPLORATION, NO FIXED TIMINGS.

OBJECTIVE

This approach is ideal for teachers who may want to shape their own classroom resources, using the Director Commentary as inspiration rather than a step-by-step guide.

This version is about exploration and discovery, letting your students follow curiosity while engaging thoughtfully with the film and its real-world context.

KEY USAGE

Discussion & Reflection — Invite students to share observations, ethical considerations, and emotional responses.

Creative Exploration — Encourage students storyboard, rewrite, or perform short scenes.

Analytical Tasks — Compare film scenes to documentary footage or news articles.

HOW IT WORKS

- Watch the sequences in any order — pause to explore story, performance, visuals, or sound.
- Use discussion prompts to spark reflection and dialogue.
- Let students lead which aspects to analyse, reimagine, or respond to creatively.

STARTPOINT PROMPTS

What makes this scene feel real? Which cinematic choices contribute to that?

Whose perspective is the film privileging, and why?

How could you creatively reimagine this moment while respecting real events?

SUGGESTED OUTPUTS

- Reflective journals
- Storyboards
- Creative writing or performance
- Media analysis essays or portfolios

STRUCTURED PATHWAY

STEP-BY-STEP LESSONS WITH SCENE TIMINGS, PROMPTS, AND FOLLOW-UP TASKS.

OBJECTIVE

This approach can guide teachers who might prefer a structured pathway, linking scenes directly to discussion prompts, reflective tasks, and creative exercises.

This supported version offers a clear path for teachers to confidently guide students through complex narrative, ethical reflection, and cinematic craft, while still allowing room for creativity and curiosity.

SEQUENCE	FOCUS	DISCUSSION PROMPTS	SUGGESTED ACTIVITY
Opening	Landscape, tone, curiosity	How does the landscape guide audience understanding? What emotions are conveyed?	Storyboard three key shots, annotate narrative and emotional impact.
USB of Security Photos	Sound design, narrative anchoring	How do visuals and sound together anchor reality? What questions does the scene pose?	Write a 200–300 word reflection linking visuals, sound, and narrative
Midpoint	Acting, pacing, empathy	How do performance choices evoke empathy? Which techniques highlight emotional truth?	Reimagine a short segment ethically, noting how performance communicates feeling.
Closing	Composition, closure, hope	How does the ending balance realism and narrative resolution? What visual cues suggest hope?	Design an alternative closing storyboard, focusing on tone and authenticity.

CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

English / Media Studies

AS90857 (L1), AS91107 (L2), AS91480 (L3)

Drama / Performance Studies

AS91214/AS91514, AS91215/AS91515

History / Social Studies

AS91230 (L2), AS91434 (L3)

SCENE WAYPOINT #1

OPENING SEQUENCE

OVERVIEW

Robert discusses the opening scene, highlighting the weight of the landscape and the way it immediately engages the audience. You can invite students to notice how composition, light, and camera movement suggest both curiosity and the rippling impact of events that follow.

KEY IDEAS

- Anchoring the film in reality through careful location and framing.
- Using landscape and visual tone to evoke emotional resonance.
- Prompting curiosity and engagement from the first moments.

SUGGESTED PROMPTS

- How does the setting communicate mood and theme?
- What narrative questions are posed to the audience in the opening moments?



SCENE WAYPOINT #2

USB SEQUENCE

OVERVIEW

Robert explores the narrative importance and sound design of this pivotal scene. Students can be invited to notice how the combination of images, pacing, and music answers key questions while anchoring the story in reality.

KEY IDEAS

- Narrative function — asking and answering key questions to guide audience understanding.
- Soundscape by sound designer Nick Buckton and composer Karl Sölve Steven — music and silence heighten realism and tension.
- Balancing factual events with dramatisation for ethical storytelling.

SUGGESTED PROMPTS

- How do the visuals and sound work together to create a sense of reality?
- In what ways does pacing shape audience understanding and empathy?
- How does this scene clarify important narrative information while remaining respectful of real events?



SCENE WAYPOINT #3

MIDPOINT SEQUENCE

OVERVIEW

Here, the focus is on acting, pacing, and eliciting empathy. Rob demonstrates how slowing down critical moments allows audiences to feel the emotional weight and consider what it must have been like for those involved.

KEY IDEAS

- Evoking empathy through performance and pacing.
- The ethical responsibilities of dramatising real people and events.
- Using cinematic techniques to convey complex emotions without sensationalising.

SUGGESTED PROMPTS

- How does the combination of sound and visuals create a sense of reality?
- What role does pacing play in building audience understanding and empathy?



SCENE WAYPOINT #4

CLOSING SEQUENCE

OVERVIEW

Robert's commentary on the closing sequence reveals the composition and narrative choices that balance authenticity, hope, and reflective resolution.

You can encourage students to explore how visual framing, pacing, and subtle cues contribute to emotional closure while respecting the reality of the disaster.

KEY IDEAS

- Composing shots to convey hope and closure.
- Blending realism with elements of subtle magical realism.
- Maintaining emotional and ethical integrity in the final moments.

SUGGESTED PROMPTS

- How does the ending visually and emotionally guide the audience?
- What narrative or symbolic choices contribute to a sense of reflection or hope?

