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## 2 The Last Patriarch

There is a scene two-thirds of the way through *The Piano* in which the film's heroine, Ada, lies stretched out on a bed gazing at herself in a small hand-mirror. Just a few hours earlier she had ripped off her clothes and foresworn her marriage vows with the next-door neighbor; now, as is more usual, she is self-contained and inscrutable. From the intensity of her gaze into the mirror, it seems as if she is involved in some kind of confrontation with her own idea of herself, but the nature of that struggle remains undefined. Having chosen to be mute, she has no chance of expressing her feelings in spoken language.

If one is an involved spectator of this film, one is most likely trying to divine what Ada is feeling. Is she satisfied? frightened? desirous? shocked? Does she feel her life has begun again? or does she fear that her actions will soon bring it to an end? Is she in love? Is she able to love?

There are many different answers to these questions and whichever satisfies you, whichever you add to the developing text of *The Piano's* narration, will likely be the one or several that fit your own life experience and structures of fantasy. For, in *The Piano*, Jane Campion and her production team have created a compelling and distinctive film that is also unusually open in terms of the opportunities it supplies for the construction of meaning. It is like a huge, silvered mirror into which you, as a spectator, are invited to look and in which you can arrange your

own story world out of the traces of imagery, the sounds, and the silence that swirl within it.

It probably seems fanciful to talk about such a visually definite, almost black-and-white film, driven by a surging, romantic soundtrack through a plot line of ever-increasing intensity, as being "open." However, it is useful, in this case, to distinguish between the form of the film, which results from a series of distinctive choices about technique and style, and the issues that the film makes available for discussion. Of course the two levels of presentation I am positing here are linked, and of course the audiovisual material that the production team has developed can be, to a large extent, nothing other than the embodiment of the ideas they have had about the story with which they are working. However, for the purposes of this essay, I shall treat the film as a text "authored" by the filmmaker Jane Campion and "read" by another white female New Zealander working in an academic context. On this basis I wish to suggest that it can be understood as an entertainment that, while functioning to support and perpetuate certain cultural forms, also undermines others by questioning fundamental sources of authority.

A cluster of typical concerns can be discerned across the range of Campion's work. These include plot lines relating to male-female and family relationships; issues of responsibility, power, and freedom; explorations of (mainly female) eroticism; and attempts to decide whether the characteristics of these relationships are historically determined and/or open to influence in the present day. As Campion's subsequent film – *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), again about an unhappy marriage in a repressive context – also demonstrates, an understanding of the nature and limits of freedom is crucial to happiness. Although Campion's stated relationship to feminism is often ambivalent,<sup>1</sup> it can be argued that she doggedly pursues a (semiotic) project of questioning, delegitimizing, reassessing, and revaluing assigned gender roles within society. In her films, male power must be taken into account, but it is not the guarantor of meaning. Neither is there an analogous source outside the system that can be called on to

legitimize meaning. Instead, her earth-bound female protagonists struggle to understand what it would be for them either to be, or to have access to, their own source of meaning.

That struggle is made manifest in extremely distinctive images, yet the underlying issues are by no means as resolved as the visual and auditory strategies the film employs. Like Isabel frozen at the border between security and the unknown at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady* or Ada floating under the sea, the filmmaker's mind is still in the midst of thought, and that open process is there for the viewer to participate in as well. When the emotional economy of most contemporary films has been calculated down to the last reaction shot, it is both pleasurable and challenging to be encouraged to feel strongly yet to be allowed to decide what one's own emotional or intellectual responses will be.

Indeed, the central object and metaphor in the film itself, the piano, is placed to reflect that "one entity-many meanings" strategy. An object with a very specific, iconic density and shape, it nonetheless produces one of the most evanescent forms of human expression. As a symbolic entity, the piano is polysemic, a producer of different meanings for everyone in the film who sees or uses it. "I wanted to tell a story around an object, that object being a piano, which would bring all the characters together and which would become the central mechanism from which the story evolves. I wanted the piano to be important enough to carry a lot of meaning for the characters."<sup>2</sup>

The instability of those central symbols – a piano that is nothing until it is played and a woman who cannot explain herself except through music – is obvious. Yet the ambiguity of the various forms of expression in the film is also embedded at the level of dialogue. For instance, a brief question such as Stewart's cry to Ada, "Why can't I touch you?" is capable of several interpretations, but no definite answers.

However, a truly formless entertainment would of course be both incomprehensible and an impossibility: All works of communication function within their time and are built out of patternings and motifs that employ, or stand in reaction to, culturally rel-

evant meanings. *The Piano* is no exception, and its effectiveness in communicating with international audiences has been demonstrated by its candidacy for both the *Palme d'or* at Cannes and the mainstream American Academy Awards. But what is unusual about it, for such a popular film, is the manner in which it holds in tension patternings from different sources, two centuries, and several societies, producing an eerie sense of dislocation out of familiar materials and narrative structures.

*The Piano* dips in and out of, and borrows from, myth, fairy tale, romantic and historical fiction from the past and present, regressive melodramatic nostalgia, colonial and postcolonial discourses, and an idiosyncratic but committed brand of feminism not completely contradicted by a deep ambivalence about the possibility of women's really being able to have it all. No one of these frameworks contains the film, yet all contribute to a complexity and vitality that suggest that it will be of interest to audiences and scholars for a long time to come.

From a cynical point of view, *The Piano* is a glamorous post-modern pastiche, a wicked Trojan horse in the reassuring semblance of a "classic" romance, carrying inside a cargo of old symbols looking for fresh currency, a clutch of oedipal warriors still needing to fight, fragments of ego hoping for a secure incarnation, some very good jokes, and several innovative insights seeking expression. What makes it work so well, what melds together all its incongruities, is its success at involving the audience, at dragging them into the film visually and viscerally.

### SHARING THE PASSION

Until now Campion's films have not been very concerned with seducing their viewers into the text. *Sweetie* (1989) and *An Angel at My Table* (1990) were both also about women who found their designated worlds impossible to accept. The writer Janet Frame secluded herself in a replica of madness, whereas the sisters in *Sweetie* took refuge in drug-supported hysteria and neurotic withdrawal, respectively. In both cases, but more especially in

*Sweetie*, which was not as constrained by the need to consider television audiences, the visual styles of the films kept the viewer at arm's length whilst at the same time being expressive of the characters' unorthodox perceptions of their surroundings.

*Sweetie* was an exhilarating yet prickly riot of color-coded, off-center, self-consciously graphic compositions, amongst which it was just as likely that the carpet or a shrub was out to "get" the characters as it was that other members of their family would do them harm. As a story, it snapped along in front of the eyes, although its energy came from the juxtaposition of intriguing images rather than from the skillful employment of camera movement. Replying to a comment that its visual complexity had alienated some viewers, Campion stated: "I think that the subliminal effect of *Sweetie's* shooting style is that you are unable to create strong, simple emotional relationships with the characters. It continually insists that you feel and think – you're not allowed to rest on one of those positions. Some people find this irritating and other people find it gives them a different experience."<sup>3</sup>

Yet, from *The Piano's* very first shot, we are actually *inside* someone else's experience, signaled by a point-of-view shot through Ada's fingers. Although Ada is silent during the body of the film, her "mind's voice" speaks to us now and at the end of the film, taking the viewer into her very thoughts and making us equal to whatever understanding she has of her own situation. If the perceptual intimacy of those first moments is not enough to induce mental complicity, physical coercion comes soon after. As Ada's tight, black figure is lifted out of the landing boat, the camera ducks beneath her and catches the full force of her dizzy disorientation as she sways God knows where, above the waves. It is an inspired means of helping us feel the risk that she is taking in coming to a new land, and also of knocking the viewer off balance into the visual flow of the film.

This initial shock is followed by more tracking shots as the passengers and crew stagger along the shore. From that point on, the camerawork in *The Piano* is scarcely ever still. Even in interior scenes or close-ups of conversation the camera's point of view is

usually moving in some kind of barely perceptible tracking or crabbing movement. The effect is to provide the opportunity for us to feel that we are part of the scene and have the power to see more, without the necessity of taking up a traditional over-the-shoulder position in relation to particular characters.

There are still extreme and off-center placings of human figures, reminiscent of the style of *Campion's* earlier films, but these placings are not unduly unsettling because the slow, very human pace of camera movements ensures that the characters are kept comfortably in shot. The camera usually tracks with the figures at the same speed as they walk and often in the same direction. In moments of expansion, moments of discovery and potential, such as the early scenes coming out of the bush onto the beach, the tracks usually go from left to right, a pattern of film grammar often said to signify positive progress. In contrast, in situations of defeat, confusion, or depression – for instance, when the characters are going back toward Stewart's house or further into the bush – the camera movement is often reversed. Situations of conflict gain extra energy from a rapid alternation of points of view.

Each shot is still strongly composed, with the shapes of human beings frequently used as cutouts, as interruptions in the flow of the vast natural forces around them. But because *Campion's* color palette is more subdued than previously, with black and white standing out against the murky greens, blues, and browns of the bush and sea, and because the complicated patternings previously found in carpets and wallpapers are now transferred into more plausibly "natural" forms, such as entangled vines or the shapes of clothing, the sense of directorial and cinematographic control over the images is less obtrusive. Direction becomes a more subtle yet effective means of guiding the viewer's attention through the film.

That is not to say, however, that the spectator of this film does not have any opportunity for thinking about what he or she is seeing. A significant subtheme of the film is a series of incidents musing about the reliability of appearances and their dependence on individual or cultural interpretation.

An early example is a scene of the British colonist Alastair Stew-



Stewart (Sam Neill) looks at Ada's photo before tilting it to reflect his own appearance. (Courtesy of CiBy Sales Ltd.)

art coming out of the bush accompanied by a group of Maori. He stops to look at the small, framed photograph of the wife he has ordered, has been married to, but has never yet seen in the flesh. Her formally posed photograph must impress him, because his nervousness at the thought of her is displayed in his face and gestures, which show tentativeness and irritability. But, in a movement that discloses both the self-interest of his desires and the hand of the filmmaker, he tilts the photograph so it reflects first the bush behind him and then his own face as he uses it for a mirror to comb his hair. Ada, as an image and a person, is blanked out by the land and subsumed in Stewart's perception of her.

A few minutes later in terms of screen time, another sequence explores similar ideas, with Ada forced to demonstrate her new status as Stewart's wife by donning a wedding dress and posing with him in front of a painted backdrop of a European scene. She is infuriated at the compromise to her identity that this image implies and violently rips the gown off as soon as she can, scandalizing the other women who have been acting as her attendants.

One of the functions of the perplexing, excessive Bluebeard shadowplay at the film's temporal and symbolic heart is also to bring to a level of explicitness the ideas of illusion, performance, and interpretation. A group of colonists play out this old folk tale behind a screen, naively raising the spirit of violence without having to take the responsibility for committing it. In this case, however, their bluff is called by some elements of an even more naive audience, demonstrating, in part, that in the cinema it is the reception of the image that matters, not the various parts of its making.

### A PIANO UP RIVER

This principle has held true in the case of the film itself. So successful has *The Piano* been at involving critics and audiences that a local controversy about the legitimacy of its own origins as a film project has been obscured.

At the time that *The Piano* went into production, a similar project, still at script stage, had been under development with the financial backing of the New Zealand Film Commission<sup>4</sup> for some two years previously. The script for that project was based on Jane Mander's 1920 novel *The Story of a New Zealand River*,<sup>5</sup> which is also a fictionalization of a woman's experience in colonial times and has several plot elements in common with *The Piano*. Campton maintains that noticing any similarities beyond a few genre similarities between the book, the other script, and her own script is a "beat-up." However, after reading the book and watching the movie, it is difficult not to be struck by the range of similarities, both general and specific.

In *The Story of a New Zealand River* the heroine, Alice Roland, is a "real" lady, "armour-plated," with "grey, day-of-judgment eyes" and a Scots temperament, who is traveling up-river in order to join her husband, Tom.<sup>6</sup> She and Tom have been married only four years,<sup>7</sup> and he has gone ahead to carve out a property in the bush. In this story, Alice is not mute, but we are frequently told that she is intensely private and has difficulty expressing her real



Ada (Holly Hunter) and Stewart (Sam Neill) sitting for a wedding photograph. (Courtesy of CiBy Sales Ltd.)

feelings. Alice hates the brutality of her new surroundings and longs for the comforts of England. Neither is her relationship with her husband satisfying to either of them. He has married her for a package of dispassionate reasons yet expects her gratitude and affection, and “the thing that annoyed him most was that he could not make her love him.”<sup>8</sup> She is, however, more compliant in her conjugal duties than is Ada: “Back to her he came for the logical conclusion that she never refused, because she had contracted to give it.”<sup>9</sup>

Although she has three small children, Alice’s primary relationship is with her eight-year-old daughter, Asia, a spirited and inquiring child with whom, as with Ada and Flora in the film, she has a companionship so close that rebellion lies just under the surface.

Asia had been one of her eternal verities. She had never allowed herself to think of a day when the child might combat her opinions or question her beliefs or dispute her commands. Much of her suppressed emotionalism had found vent in the affection

between them. To her the bond had been more than human. She had been sure of her right and power to dominate her own child.<sup>10</sup>

At one stage in the novel Alice almost dies, and the ambivalence of feeling that this exposes in Asia is reminiscent of Flora's tortured feelings about her mother's infidelity. "Would you be glad to know your mother is dead?" he asked gravely. She drew away from him, stiffening, while every drop of colour faded from her face. 'My mother dead, my mother!' she choked, her hate suddenly gone, her lips quivering."<sup>11</sup>

One of Alice's few comforts is her relationship with an elderly, cultured Englishwoman, Mrs. Brayton, who lives nearby. Her other major comfort is the enjoyment of playing the piano:

Alice played to a world of her own, to something in herself that had no other means of expression. She played with delicacy and passion, with unerring feeling for balance, for light and for shade. Mrs Brayton felt that her music was the result of more than natural gifts.

When she had finished Alice sat looking helplessly at the keys. She knew she had revealed capacity for feeling, and she wondered why she hated having people know how she felt.<sup>12</sup>

Like Ada, Alice finds refuge with another man, in this case, the violin-playing Scot, David Bruce, who is gentler and more nurturing than her husband; but, unlike Baines and Ada, they do not consummate their passion until Tom Roland dies. There are, however, several close calls along the way, and during one of them, the solicitous, emotionally perceptive Bruce utters words that, more clumsily, retrospectively, echo the elegant scripting of Baines's admonitions to Ada.

BRUCE: You are not to allow what you know to be my desires unduly to influence you. There are times when a man's desires would make a prostitute of any woman.<sup>13</sup>

BAINES: This is making you a whore and me wretched.<sup>14</sup>

There have been suggestions that Campion has plagiarized *The Story of a New Zealand River*, but these suggestions do not, ulti-

mately, seem all that plausible. The two works do draw on similar material, not just in contextual matters, such as the colonial setting and the importance of music to the central characters, but also in the particular emotional tone of each of the relationships. However, Mander's book is, by comparison, rambling and unfocused. Champion's work is pared down, taut and mysterious, layered with powerful cultural mythemes and centered on a discourse about passion that is only hinted at in *The Story of a New Zealand River*. It seems likely that Champion was influenced by the book, but it would be one among about twenty books that she has said she could name that influenced her while working on the script. It is also likely, though, that what would appeal to her about it is not so much the concrete details of Alice's story as the emotional geography of her life, for the tempestuous, four-cornered relationship between Alice, her husband, daughter, and David Bruce resembles the kind of oedipal material that Champion has previously explored in *Sweetie* and in some of her short films, such as *Peel* (1982).

### THE HAPPINESS OF TWO

It is perhaps just as fruitful to view *The Piano* as a popular romance transferred to film, a wish-fulfilment daydream of great sex and true love, close cousin to the sultry fantasies that women read to balance out the pragmatism of their working lives. One debt that Champion has acknowledged on several occasions is to the work of one of the progenitors of that genre, Emily Brontë, especially to Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*: "I felt very excited about the kind of passion and romantic sensibility writers like Emily Brontë were talking about. I thought it would transpose effortlessly to the situation where I was setting my story, in 1850s New Zealand."<sup>15</sup> In some overseas contexts where the specificities of New Zealand culture and politics are not available to viewers, the film has, indeed, been received primarily in terms of its literary resonances: "*The Piano* feels steeped in literary tradition, entirely original but rich in reverberations. It is *Wuthering Heights*, a romance of the soul with the wild New Zealand beaches and bush

standing in for the stark moors. It's Emily Dickinson, a romance of the soul . . . with its wavering between ecstasy and terror, eroticism and renunciation."<sup>16</sup>

The film certainly has several of the elements that Janice Radway identifies as being typical of the successful women's romance novel of the late twentieth century. As with all the best romance heroines, Ada is a woman who, although spirited and innately passionate, is not understood by those around her, and whose social identity is under threat as she comes to a strange, new situation. But happily, despite a period spent with the Wrong Man, and after many delays and misunderstandings, she comes to be understood and appreciated by a fully masculine, yet sensitive, male. This Sensitive Male sees her potential for relationship and leads her to an uninhibited expression of her own sensuality and, eventually, a happy, prosperous marriage.

On the other hand, *The Piano* also has some of the characteristics that Radway has identified as belonging to the failed romance, one that does not bring enough pleasure to its consumers. Romance readers do not like their female surrogates to be overly degraded nor excessively punished, as Ada is when Stewart beats, attacks, and tries to rape her. Nor is suicide because of despair a favored last-minute tactic in a romantic narrative. Romance fans are said to prefer their heroines to be more thoroughly affirmed:

If the events of the heroine's story provoke too intense feelings, such as anger at men, fear of rape and violence, worry about female sexuality, or worry about the need to live with an unexciting man, that romance will be discarded as a failure or judged to be very poor. . . . When a writer can supply a story that will permit the reader several hours of vicarious experience living as a woman who flourishes because she receives the attention, devotion and approval of an extraordinary man that writer will have written an ideal romance.<sup>17</sup>

So, if *The Piano* succeeds as a romantic experience for a female audience, it does so through an audacious genre patch-up in the last couple of scenes. Until then, for at least the last twenty min-

utes, the story has been on a severe and punishing downward trajectory. Ada's union with Baines has not supplied her with a chance to flourish through his protection. Rather, it has caused her to become isolated and abused, made her deceitful and frantic. She comes to see both herself and the piano as irredeemably maimed and, although eventually released by Stewart into Baines's charge, she decides to throw herself into the sea. Then, inexplicably, she reverses her direction, rising from the depths to settle down with her man in a pretty white house in Nelson.

### THE FAMILY GAME

Another interpretive framework that can embrace both the romance genre and more of *The Piano's* contradictions is that of the melodrama. Achieving its effects with music, spectacle, action, and easily read gestures rather than subtlety of language or character, melodrama has developed from the theater through silent cinema into what some critics describe as the predominant contemporary dramatic form, suitable for a godless age in which neither author nor audience can reach the certainty of belief in outside causes necessary for tragedy.

Melodrama looks at social patternings, at the operation of rules of behavior in society, and at individuals' attempts (usually unsuccessful) to live out their desires either within the rules or despite them. Melodrama is concerned with identity, particularly gender identity, as it affects one's place in the family and community, and, even more specifically, with gender identity as established in relation to the mutually reinforcing combination of patriarchy and the Law.

To settle on the contemporary term, then, the melodrama represents a struggle against, or within, the patriarchy, and what seeks release and definition is a repressed identity. . . . There, in the family, apart from the world of action, production and rational order, the melodrama of passion explores a familial world of subjectivity, of emotion and feeling, of problems of identity and desire.<sup>18</sup>

In this context Ada, Alastair Stewart, and Flora are members of a family of archetypal proportions from before the film even starts, and Flora's passionate declaration regarding Stewart – "I'm not going to call him Papa, I'm not going to call HIM anything. I'm not even going to look at HIM"<sup>19</sup> – reiterates an ancient female battle cry balancing defiance of the authority of the Father with desire for his approval. There is even an argument for suggesting that Flora and Ada are two stages of one person, part of a circular process of the development of a wounded femaleness. That argument is strengthened by remembering the first scenes of the film, in which Ada watches a young girl riding a pony struggle against the pull of an adult male. Presumably the child is Flora and the man is Ada's father, the one who arranges for her to be married to Alastair, but at this stage of the film the characters' identities are still unclear and the image could also function as part of Ada's own memory.

As a single mother, as a woman, Ada is shown to be vulnerable to being treated as a sexual and emotional commodity. Although her reasons for letting herself be married to a man she has never met are not spelled out, there is enough buying and selling in the film (the piano for land, the land for buttons, the piano for Ada's sexual compliance) to make it plain that neither she, the land, nor the Maori are expected to have self-sovereignty. Nevertheless, self-sovereignty is just what she tries to claim for herself; by writing her resistance into her body she attempts to become a human island, a product that does not function for anyone who thinks he can buy her, least of all her legal husband. Her refusal to speak, her muteness, is the most flamboyant sign of her resistance, but the clothing in which she is typically dressed – dark, severe, symmetrical – functions as an outer shield behind which she hides.

The force of Ada's protective negativity is doubled by the graphic patterns made by pairing her with her young daughter, who is similarly dressed in the first half of the film. Flora is, initially, close to her mother in all things; she is the only one who knows her mind and with whom Ada can relax. That relaxation is established in one of the early scenes in which, forced to camp on

the beach, they take shelter in the most formidable piece of Ada's attire, the stiff crinoline that holds out her skirt and keeps other people at a distance as well. Inside, it is warm and white, the first of many episodes in which the two females wrap themselves in a charmed private world, their mutual love and creativity provoking Baines to admiration and Stewart to jealousy. In these luminescent scenes of sensuality, Campion and her crew make visible magic out of one of the underlying referents of the family game.

As Steve Neale observes, "One of the major narrative strategies of melodrama is to provoke the spectator's wish for a union of the couple . . . the root of this wish lies in a nostalgic fantasy of childhood characterised by union with the mother: a state of total love, satisfaction and dyadic fusion."<sup>20</sup> The force that disrupts this ideal state is either desire for an adult relationship, the satisfaction of that "provocation" of which Neale writes, or a sadistic form of economic compulsion, depending upon how you choose to interpret the controversial relationship between the characters played by Holly Hunter and Harvey Keitel. So, by means of an erotic barter, a slow strip of a piece of her clothing – and thus her resistance – for each piano key, Ada is gradually made naked and vulnerable. At the same time her daughter, gradually figuring out what the rules of civilized life really are (what it takes to be an angel like the other girls), wants to put some distance between herself and her mother by acknowledging Stewart as her father. Although the flavor of the sexual encounters between Ada and Baines changes over time from abuse to pleasure, as a result of them Ada loses her social position, her freedom, her daughter's loyalty, her piano, and eventually a piece of her perfect, self-created body. In the most vivid castration scene since a tail-docking sequence in *Vigil* (Vincent Ward, 1984), Ada learns the lesson that all sensible women should learn from melodrama, especially if they neglect their family duties for erotic fulfilment: "Break the rules and pay the price!" Or, as another writer on melodrama put it, these stories "enact[. . .] again and again the enforced end of that imaginary plenitude [between mother and child] in a lachrymose and masochistic fantasy of betrayal and loss."<sup>21</sup>

Anyone who watches film or television is familiar with the patterns of melodrama and the increasing rhythms of action and reaction that it requires from its participants. Moral complexity and ideological contradiction have always been part of the content of melodramatic plots as characters try to shape their circumstances to their particular needs. Yet there is an energy about the drive of such narratives, which can often end happily after all – as long as one submits to the duties of love – that rushes over subtlety or excess to the safety of a firm conclusion.

Some of the excesses *The Piano* accommodates are story points made dense by long-standing associations culturally derived from myths and fairy tales. Ada, for example, is not just a colonial woman drawn to adultery: She is Rapunzel in her tower, Venus coming out of the sea, Sleeping Beauty waiting for the right man, Bluebeard's youngest wife waiting in fear for her husband's footsteps. To refer to the Victorian metaphors of femininity that also seem to be part of Campion's network of influences, Ada, in refusing to be the Angel in the House, demonstrates the imperiousness of a Queen combined with the vulnerability of a Fallen Woman. Meanwhile, to catch sight of her in her "real" nature, as Stewart and Flora do when they spy on her while she is making love with Baines, is to risk, as with the woman-serpent in the bath, undergoing some monstrous transformation of one's own self.<sup>22</sup>

## COLONIALISM AND POSTCOLONIALISM

Setting the action in colonial New Zealand and drawing upon the metaphors and tone of nineteenth-century British literature place this production as a historical or "costume" drama. Such a move can either isolate the story as arising only out of the time to which it refers or, more typically, set the viewer searching for relationships between past and present contexts. *The Piano* is only one of a number of recent literary, dramatic, and cinematic works that has undertaken a return to the colonial past. The British novelist A. S. Byatt, for instance, identified a market in 1990 with her Booker Prize-winning romance, *Possession*, about

pairs of adulterous lovers in the past and present. A second novel by Byatt, *Angels and Insects*, which reexamines the Victorian and Darwinian obsessions with genetics, has recently been made into a film. In New Zealand/Aotearoa, *The Piano* stands in the company of works such as Maurice Shadbolt's novels, Michelanne Forster's history plays, some of Chris Orsman's poetry, and Peter Wells and Stewart Main's gay rewriting of colonial myths in their film *Desperate Remedies* (1993).

These authors have all looked back, often with a postmodern consciousness, in order to reexamine the moments in which British-derived systems began to assert and then entrench their dominance over indigenous forms of culture within New Zealand/Aotearoa. To a greater or lesser degree these works are characterized by ambivalence. On the one hand, as has been noted of *The Piano*, they revel in the European literary forms that are their heritage, while on the other, they maintain a present-day awareness of the consequences of colonization for the land and its oldest inhabitants, the Maori. It is questionable whether *The Piano* is deconstructing old myths about the "birth" of New Zealand or whether, as that very noun suggests, by privileging a period some thousands of years into the time that the country has been inhabited, it is helping to create a new myth that is palatable to white New Zealanders while also paying lip service to the place of Maori.<sup>23</sup>

*The Piano* is set in the 1850s, a period during which an intensive land-grab occurred because thousands of British settlers flooded into the country. As the colonists acquired land from the Maori, often for very small sums of money, and despite the fact that Maori land was usually held communally, with no form of legal title that the British legal system could respect, the land was cleared and the bush laid waste. This process is beginning to take place in *The Piano*, and there are some signs that indicate the growing Maori disillusionment with their new neighbors. However, because the Pakeha (or European New Zealander's) imagination is central here, the land on which the film itself has been shot (including real locations at Karekare, Matakana, and

Awakino) has been reinterpreted, redesigned, and joined together in ways that are more expressive of the mental states of the key protagonists than naturalistic.

In the early part of the film, the landscape has a similar visual charge to some of the awesome set pieces in Ridley Scott's quincennial film, *1492* (1992), about Christopher Columbus and his discovery of the New World. However, as Ada's situation becomes more complicated, the setting also becomes more restricted, symbolizing the narrowness and danger of her choices by tiny wooden pathways laid over mud, or by the dark vines that thwart her as she tries to escape her husband.

This exotic, expressive landscape is decorated with interesting, exotic people. In the notes to the published screenplay of *The Piano*, Campion talks of her trepidation about the cultural collaboration with Maori, which she thought was necessary to portray properly the truth of the period, but then she speaks of working with Maori actors and advisers as one of the "deeply moving" aspects of the production process.<sup>24</sup> She and her chief Maori adviser, Waihoroi Shortland, clearly had sincere intentions of going beyond stereotypical depictions of Maori characters, as Shortland declared in a local trade magazine: "My only rationale for being involved was to ensure the Maori characters became more than glorified porters. We are past being your glorified porters and funny men."<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, that is actually the predominant way of interpreting how the Maori characters come across on the screen. Because the scenes involving the Maori characters are so brief and the film's focus remains firmly fixed on the concerns of the European protagonists, Hira, Mana, Muturu, Te Kori, and the rest of the Maori characters take up the very traditional position of being a colorful background and foil to the dilemmas of the Pakeha. They come in handy as ironic counterparts to the settlers' pomposity and prudishness in sexual matters, but otherwise the Maori characters seem to have little to do but hang around cracking jokes and helping to move objects and people. Some of them are portrayed as naive people who mistake a play for a real-life inci-

dent and rush the stage to defend one of the performers. Some moments do suggest that they may have points of view of their own, as when Heni and Mary start singing "God Save Our Gracious Queen," or a group of men dispute Stewart's price for some land, or Hira is the only one to perceive the depth of Flora's distress. Yet the sporadic nature and brevity of the scenes in which the Maori characters appear trivialize them and leave an impression of a bunch of jovial *patupaiarehe* (fairies) who resemble the fairy folk in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

As Ada is to the rest of the small, colonial community – an outsider who doesn't play by the rules and must be kept under surveillance – so are the Maori to the European system of values. Both outsider positions may be intended as critiquing the rigidity and hypocrisy of the colonizing culture, yet the terms in which they are described also replicate familiar forms of colonial discourse. The community's grotesque matriarch, Auntie Morag, suspects Ada of kinship with the irrational and uncivilized: "She does not play the piano as we do, Nessie. . . . She is a strange creature and her playing is strange, like a mood that passes into you."<sup>26</sup> Aunt Morag's character is played with humor, but nevertheless the ongoing social commentary that she provides is structured around the polarities of whiteness and blackness, as indeed is the metaphorical relay of the "barter" scenes in the film, in which Ada, by indicating the dark material of her skirt, bargains to play only "for" the black keys on the keyboard, so halving the time it will take her to buy back the piano. Blackness, the black keys of the piano, and the darkness of her external appearance are thus set up to stand for sexuality and transgression. This kind of metaphorical schema, Richard Dyer claims, is typical of colonial discourse:

In the realm of categories, black is always marked as a colour (as the term egregiously acknowledges) and is always particularising: whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularising quality, because it is everything – white is no colour because it is all colours. . . . This property of whiteness, to be everything and nothing, is the source of its representational (and pre-

sumably colonial) power. . . . Whiteness [is] associated with order, rationality, rigidity, qualities brought out by the contrast with black disorder, feyness, easygoing irrationality and looseness.<sup>27</sup>

However, opposition between black and white in *The Piano* is neither simple nor complete. It could be argued that whiteness, the whiteness of the body stripped, also entails vulnerability, and there is another discourse involving Flora, who appears more and more white, like an angel (she is wearing wings in one sequence) as she becomes more colonized. It is quite a disturbing discourse, which makes whiteness seem like a force of moral totalitarianism. But black and white metaphorical schemes are one of the most consistent structuring devices of the film, and along with many other omissions or trivializations, relegate Maori in the film into the position of "other," useful to the white folks as an aid to revitalization through contact with Nature, natural sexuality, and spirituality. Although Campion is clearly aware of and concerned about the "real world" impact of colonization on Maori, she has not, in this case, been able to develop discourses that do not reproduce conventional attributions of power.

## FEMINIZATION

*The Piano* may fall short of deconstructing difference in the realm of racial articulation, but it does an excellent job of challenging it in the equally fundamental realm of sexual difference.

When Stewart discovers that Ada has disobeyed him, outwitted him, and is still in contact with her lover, he snaps and drags her outside toward the chopping block. It is what we would expect both from a melodrama and from the fairy tale motif of Bluebeard-and-the axe, which has been employed several times earlier in the film. Mutilation (psychological and/or physical) is a fitting end for a woman who has transgressed society's laws in such a determined fashion. Not only is it a punishment that reasserts the power of the patriarchy, it is also one of the few outcomes sufficiently impressive to do justice to the magnitude of Ada's emo-

tions. At this point the negative forces invoked in the film are at such a high pitch that it seems the plot must soon reach exhaustion. Either Baines should gallop in to destroy Stewart and replace him as leader of the family, or Ada will die and the survivors will suffer huge, cleansing doses of Guilt.

Instead the punishment itself is tinged with black humor – Stewart cuts off just the tip of one finger and not Ada's entire hand – while the film goes on for another twenty scenes or so. At this stage the maverick quality of Campion's play with the elements of her craft comes out into the open, structurally and in terms of character.

Melodramas were originally peopled with characters so clearly recognizable that they became emblematic. In *The Piano* the visual assurance with which the characters are depicted makes it easy to perceive them as emblems. Ada has already been described; darkly clad around white skin, her clear-cut shape echoing her emotional self-containment, repressed but passionate, she is a close cousin to the governess-heroines of the Brontë novels and their visual adaptations. Stewart is also severely dressed, but his clothes are a little too small; he is a gentleman who cares too much about how he appears to others. His authority is undermined by his pretentiousness. Towering over Ada, he slips easily into the role of tyrant. Baines, on the other hand, has hybridized with the natives; partaking of their ease with the land, he dresses informally, in softer tones, with a softer silhouette. He has even had his forehead marked with rudimentary *moko* in imitation of their bodily adornment.

Modern melodramas are a little more concerned with moving beyond the status of emblem to create characters who are "believable" and complex while remaining distinct and recognizable. Professional scriptwriting texts sometimes provide checklists to assist authors in the judicious construction of characters who will have enough linked character traits to be consistent, but enough inconsistencies to be "human" and not dull.<sup>28</sup> What happens in *The Piano* is that Campion has constructed entities who initially look like characters but gradually become sites of such inconsistency that they challenge notions of both dramatic and gender identity.

It is a truism that female characters in literature and film are often shaped into representations of just a small range of the possible models of femininity. One of the great achievements of *Campion's* film is that, for most of it, Ada's character succeeds in operating out of several contending metaphors of femininity at once. For example, she is both a victim and a persecutor, just as she is simultaneously a sexually experienced woman, a mother, and someone who manages to seem like a nun. Her unwillingness to commit herself either in speech or in facial gesture provokes others into great efforts to interpret her thoughts and determine her character. Her lack of expressivity is so marked that Stewart is filled with hope that she is warming toward him when she inclines her head by a few centimeters and gives him a tiny, wormlike smile. Thus the scene in which he spies on her making love with Baines is motivated by ambivalence; in a sense, he is getting what he wants finally, an insight into her desire, but of course that desire is not directed toward him. Moreover, he is portrayed (his inability to stop looking, his dog licking his hand) as degraded by his self-positioning as voyeur.

When female sexuality is the subject of investigation in film, as it so often is, male voyeurism is usually the means of investigation. A film arranged around the male gaze typically exhibits a proliferation of shots of female bodies arranged to prioritize their sexuality and large numbers of close-ups that offer the faces of women as texts to be scanned for desire and submission. In the full Hollywood close-up, with its backlighting, use of special lenses, and so on, filters and veils are sometimes added to images as delaying devices, doubling ideas of beauty and adding mystery in the service of the representation of the seductive and duplicitous power of femininity. It is always female desire that hides behind the veil and must be coaxed out from it.

Because female subjectivity rarely survives unmolested in the cinema and female desire is elicited primarily in the service of male pleasure, the veil is something that exists only to be removed. But then, according to Mary Ann Doane, once torn from the woman, it serves to conceal something else even more com-

pletely, the operation of male power and desire as symbolized by the phallus.<sup>29</sup> Metaphorically, that suggests that masculine authority, like whiteness, functions as an unremarkable norm. Literally, naively, it means that male bodies, complete with genitals, are almost never seen on screen: Power functions best when it is untroubled by the possibility of exposure.

In *The Piano* a number of things happen in regard to the representation of the sexual. Ada, for instance, sometimes has the power of the gaze, making the men into objects for her visual control. When she looks at Stewart with judgment, he is unable to rape her. Her face is a mask that resists interpretation; it leaves people, apart from her daughter, abandoned at her surface and drives both Baines and Stewart half-crazy with frustration. So, the "male gaze" associated with the power structure of gender relations is rejected or at least resisted.

Sometimes the gaze is shared or alternates between Ada and Baines, an egalitarian situation that many feminist critics have imagined but few directors have ever produced on film. Sometimes the viewer gets to look at Baines's body as a sexualized body, without any transmission through another character's implied viewpoint at all. *The Piano* is full of memorable images, but perhaps the most astonishing is the sight of Baines, alone and naked, circling the piano and caressing it with the sensuality he wishes to share with Ada. He is also given the largest, most static close-ups in the film and is treated, on occasion, with the visual trappings usually reserved for women. In his rough, wooden hut his bed is shielded by a pink, lacy veil, which we notice for the first time when he is beginning to doubt that he will ever get Ada willingly to have sex with him. The veil becomes associated with his desire and powerlessness. In the scene in which Baines speaks his desire for Ada, the ways in which the cinematography and direction "feminize" him are particularly evident. The camera is positioned midway between the two characters, switching viewpoints either side of a boundary represented by the veil.

As Ada moves for the first time to try to seek him out, her desire is activated and becomes penetrating. The gaze belongs to her

and, at this moment, so too does the power. The unusual nature of this move is reinforced by the visual play on the use of the veil. We initially see Ada's face through it in the usual way, but it is actually Baines who is to be found behind it and who is then revealed, entirely naked. Although, at the beginning it was he who was making her strip for his pleasure, he now has stripped himself and is begging her to be with him. At the end of the sequence, while she is clothed, he is passively at the mercy of her gaze, although, because she is no longer definitely indicated as being in the picture, he is really at the mercy of ours.

As for Stewart, the putative patriarch whom Campion has said is the most interesting character in the film for her, he too is the rarest of things in film, a vulnerable man who comes to understand that he has been sabotaged by the limited definitions of masculinity within which he has tried to live. For the majority of the film he has been in a territorial struggle with Baines over Ada as a valuable sexual and cultural commodity, a woman who holds out the possibility of the creation of family as well as the satisfaction of personal sexual desire. When the struggle between them comes to a head, after Stewart has attacked Ada, he goes to Baines's hut to confront and possibly kill him. It is the kind of scene we have seen many times before, but this time Stewart can not do it. His own sense of meaning and purpose are not sufficient to the act; in fact, he seems to feel that there is nothing left to kill. He says: "I look at you, at your face, I have had that face in my head, hating it. But now I am here seeing it . . . [sic] It's nothing, you blink, you have your mark, you look at me through your eyes, yes, you are even scared of me . . . [sic]." <sup>30</sup>

For a melodrama to entail a failed revolt against Patriarchy the Patriarch has to stand firm, as it were, to be the phallus from which all power descends. Well, the patriarchy in *The Piano* is not only divided into two, into Baines and Stewart (as female characters have so often been divided in film); in the person of Stewart it is also divided against itself. Stewart tries to control Ada, to make her love him, or at least to make her obey him, but he cannot. Even his attack on her with an axe, which is motivated at the col-

lective, mythical level of narrative by means of the Bluebeard story, does nothing more than expose his own desperation and make him a horror to himself. Stewart is a sad man whose myth has run out of validity and, through him, one effect of Campion's film appears to be to make simple nonsense of the idea that there is a central, male source of meaning and power.

The closest the film comes to setting up an alternative, female source of authority is in the penultimate scene, when Ada throws herself into the sea attached to her piano. An attempt at suicide is an understandable reaction by a woman forced to confront the possibility that she has no reliable existence underneath the surface she has presented to the world. It is an hysterical choice many thwarted heroines have made in the past. In terms of the film's discourse about motherhood, the sea is also the place where Ada could regain her own "imaginary plenitude," although that meaning would come at the cost of her death: "Down there everything is so still and silent that it lulls me to sleep. It is a weird lullaby and so it is; it is mine."<sup>31</sup>

Instead, she finds that something new emerges, a "Will," some sort of force, without personality or gender, that naturally, automatically, chooses to go on living. In the face of that kind of force, her elaborate defenses are no longer relevant. It is an experience that partakes of the mystical and that parallels Stewart's realization that his enemy has no special existence. So, what could be a resolution in terms of a gender victory becomes a shared understanding of the mutability of all social identity.

The extra ending, the happy-ever-after-on-the-verandah scene that has plagued so many viewers, then becomes both more understandable and more enjoyable. It can be seen as a bit of a joke, a return to the expected genre finale, a retreat from pretension and masochism, a reminder that this is a film and a suggestion that life shouldn't be taken too seriously, that as Ada now knows ("I teach piano now in Nelson. George has fashioned me a metal fingertip; I am quite the town freak, which satisfies"),<sup>32</sup> it is all merely a game of appearances, constructed over her deep-sea insight into the openness of her own nature.

## NOTES

1. For example, Campion says that she is "not interested in being a feminist or not a feminist" but does agree with her interviewer's suggestion that she is attracted to the idea of a "multiple or fluid feminine identity" that could be seen as sharing points in common with French forms of feminism (Miro Bilbrough, "Different Complexions: Jane Campion, an Interview," in *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Jonathan Dennis and Jan Bieringa, 2nd ed. [Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1992], 102).
2. Campion, quoted in an interview with Miro Bilbrough, *Cinema Papers* 93 (May 1993): 6.
3. Bilbrough, "Different Complexions," 100.
4. See, for instance, the New Zealand television current affairs program *20/20*, which screened an item called *The Piano: Story of a New Zealand River* on 19 July 1994 on TV3. It outlined details of the previous project, noting that there had been discussions with Jane Campion about the possibility of her directing the piece.
5. Jane Mander, *The Story of a New Zealand River* (Auckland: Godwit Publishing, 1994), first published in 1920 by the Bodley Head.
6. *Ibid.*, 6 and 29.
7. *Ibid.*, 48.
8. *Ibid.*, 50.
9. *Ibid.*, 49.
10. *Ibid.*, 75.
11. *Ibid.*, 92.
12. *Ibid.*, 36.
13. *Ibid.*, 279.
14. Jane Campion, *The Piano*, published script (New York: Hyperion, 1993), 76; Jane Campion and Kate Pullinger, *The Piano: A Novel* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 140.
15. Miro Bilbrough, interview, *Cinema Papers*, 6.
16. *The Independent on Sunday* 17 October 1993, quoted in Lynda Dyson, "The Return of the Repressed? Whiteness, Femininity and Colonialism in *The Piano*," *Screen* 36.3 (Autumn 1995): 275.
17. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 184.
18. Robert Lang, *American Film Melodrama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 4–5.
19. Campion, *The Piano*, published screenplay, 17.
20. Steve Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," *Screen* 27.6 (Winter 1986): 17.
21. Peter Matthews, "Garbo and Phallic Motherhood: A 'Homosexual' Visual Economy," *Screen* 29.3 (Summer 1988): 20.
22. For discussion and illustration of these various mythic representations of women, see Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The*

- Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
23. For further discussion of *The Piano* in relation to postcolonial theory see Jane Roscoe and Ann Hardy, "Scratching the Surface: *The Piano's* Post-Colonial Veneer," *SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* 42/43 (April–October 1996): 143–57.
  24. Campion, *The Piano*, published screenplay, 143.
  25. *On Film* (December 1993): 3.
  26. Campion, *The Piano*, published screenplay, 92–93.
  27. Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (London: Routledge, 1993), 141–42.
  28. See, for example, Linda Seger, *Creating Unforgettable Characters* (New York: Henry Holt, 1990).
  29. Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales* (London: Routledge, 1991), 63–64.
  30. Campion, *The Piano*, published screenplay, 114.
  31. *Ibid.*, 122.
  32. *Ibid.*