

CASE STUDY: *THE PIANO* (JANE CAMPION, 1993)

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Jane Campion is one of the few women directors who could justifiably be called an auteur director. Her early films, in particular *An Angel at My Table* (1987) and *Sweetie* (1989), brought Campion's unusual and darkly humorous films to the attention of an art-house audience. It was *The Piano* (1993) though, a complex, poetic film, which received international recognition, gaining a number of Oscar nominations and receiving the award for Best Script (Jane Campion), Best Actress (Holly Hunter) and Best Supporting Actor (Anna Paquin).

At times melodrama, at times art film in its expressionistic style, *The Piano* portrays the experiences of Ada, an elective-mute woman who emigrates to New Zealand from Scotland with her daughter Flora. Ada's father has arranged her marriage to Stewart, a man she has never met. Ada brings her beloved piano to New Zealand which causes conflict with her new husband. This tension results in an employee of Stewart, Baines, showing sympathy for Ada's predicament. Ada falls in love with him and they eventually have a passionate affair.

The conventions of melodrama are shown in the portrayal of the central relationships; Ada is wilful and stubborn, yet is desired by two men who try to control and contain her. The element of hysteria typical of melodrama is evident at the film's climax when Stewart severs Ada's finger, in a symbolic gesture that suggests castration. Music in melodrama is an important signifier in expressing emotion; in *The Piano* it is used as a motif for Ada's feelings and emotions that she cannot express verbally. Yet Ada's lack of voice makes it difficult to identify with her as a truly romantic heroine. The film also takes on many of the conventions of an art film in its heavy use of symbolism, its expressionistic style and a narrative which sees the piano as an extension of Ada, which in turn becomes a fetishised object of desire.

On one level the film recounts the tale of a woman at the mercy of a patriarchal society in which she has little power; Ada is forced into an arranged marriage by her father, treated as a commodity by Stewart, and is initially seen as little more than a prostitute by Baines; but it is Baines who is able to transfer the relationship from one of power to one of compassion and tenderness.

Many aspects of the film do however represent the female as strong willed and powerful. Ada is determined and obstinate, even though she loses a finger because of her insistence on continuing to see Baines. Flora is a replica of her mother, feisty and determined. The other female characters, even though having a two-dimensional, pantomime dame quality, are strong and vigorous. The interior scenes also infuse the film with a positive quality around the home, which is always a safe haven, whether as protection from the weather, the Maoris or sensual and sexual pleasure.

Gender roles in *The Piano* are strongly defined through clothing. Ada is shown in tight fitting tops and waist cinching dresses, not only emphasising how tiny and delicate she is but also her female sexuality. The whiteness of Ada's skin is contrasted by the dark clothing she wears; her voluminous Victorian clothing is shown as impractical in the New Zealand climate, yet Ada often looks comfortable in her dress as opposed to Stewart, whose too-tight clothing makes him seem absurd and stiff (Campion purposefully made his clothes too tight to enhance this point). Baines,

also a white European, has though, in contrast to Stewart, adapted to the New Zealand environment. His dress is loose and casual, reflecting a shifting of his values and an alignment with the native Maoris. The Maoris, although often seeming like comic caricatures, are shown dressed in a mix of male and female clothing, suggesting an ambivalence regarding their gender roles.

Ada's underwear becomes an object of fascination for the audience and of fetishisation for Baines. We frequently see Ada in petticoats and underwear, whilst playing with Flora but especially so in her relationship with Baines: in one scene Baines smells the top she has just taken off; in another sequence he becomes fascinated by a tiny hole in her stocking which reveals a glimpse of skin.

Campion undercuts conventional audience expectations of gender in the development of their relationship; it is Baines first removal of clothing which is so startling for both the audience and Ada, as until then it is Ada who has been placed in a vulnerable, feminine position. In this sequence there is a reversal of cinematic conventions: Ada removes the curtain (coded red for danger) which reveals Baines unclothed, but he also represents a threat; the game has moved on from being sensual to directly sexual. Ada is confronted by Baines' naked body and, as we see this sequence from her point of view, we cut to a reaction shot in which she is at first startled but does not look away. In this case the gaze, the look, is not male but female.

Much of *The Piano* is seen from Ada's point of view, emphasising our identification with her. Indeed Ada's lack of voice can be seen as a symbol of her withdrawal from patriarchal society. We hear Ada's voiceover at the beginning and end of the film, but all other communication is through the visuals and music. Although we frequently see shots of Ada's face, it is generally expressionless, almost blank, making it difficult to identify with her as one would in a conventional narrative.

The act of looking, the gaze, takes on a complex relationship between the audience, the spectator and the different characters in the film. A key sequence which exemplifies this is when the relationship between Ada and Baines changes to one of mutual attraction; firstly Flora spies on the couple and this changes her relationship with her mother, as an element of jealousy is brought in, but the scene also moves Flora to a new sphere, in which she is a voyeur made aware of her mother's sexuality. In a later scene Stewart spies on Ada and Baines making love, and stays there watching, clearly aroused by what he sees, in an instance of what is called the scopophilic drive. Yet the audience does not stay with Stewart, the film cuts to an interior medium shot and the sequence is imbued with a golden hue, sensual rather than explicit or fetishising the female body, as is so usual in patriarchal cinema. There is no sense of the couple being aware of an audience, or Ada's body being the subject of the 'male gaze'. Neither looks at the camera, yet the camera contrasts Baines' muscular, squat masculine body with Ada's tiny feminine one. The sequence concludes with a shot of Stewart surveying the couple from underneath the floorboards, when a button from Ada's dress falls through a hole onto his face. Stewart is in the position of passive voyeur, but the scene also drives home his ineffectualness, his impotence, with a deep sense of irony.

A later sequence again reverses the traditional function of the look as instrument of the male gaze; when Ada is in bed with Stewart she explores his body by touching and stroking his back down to his buttocks, strangely sensual; rather than sexual. It is unusual in film for the male body

to be explored and eroticised in this way. Stewart is bathed in a warm light and has a passive position enforced upon him by Ada; when he attempts to be active Ada rejects him.

Patriarchal cinema generally fetishises sex by emphasising voyeurism and fragmenting the female body or associating it with related objects or clothing such as underwear. Campion plays with this convention by showing Baines fetishise Ada's clothing but extends this to include the piano; thus, although the piano functions as Ada's voice the fetishisation takes on a surreal, almost absurd quality. In a perceptive article on the use of clothing in *The Piano*, Stella Bruzzi points out that the film is a

“...complex feminist displacement of the conventionalised objectification of the woman's form dominated by scopophilia and fetishism.” (Bruzzi 1995: 257)

By the final stage of the film Ada's life has affected us deeply; the gradual building up of empathy with Ada has been subtly woven into the film, so that when the final confrontation between her and Stewart occurs we are almost as traumatised as Ada by what happens. Stewart's retribution is terrible, acting as a symbol of phallic dismemberment or cliterectomy. Stewart's aim is to control Ada's sexuality and spirit. In this sequence we continually have reaction shots of Ada and are placed to suffer with her. She visibly shrinks before us as she falls to the ground fully punished for her transgression. Stewart has now taken on the role of evil persecutor and in the narrative of melodrama Ada has to leave or be destroyed. The axe can be seen as a symbol of phallic destruction associated with the Europeans: in the Bluebeard shadow play the axe is used to kill his wives, and an acting out of the play in an earlier sequence foreshadows Stewart attacking Ada; Stewart is identified with the axe, seen carrying it, chopping wood and trees which directly associate him with patriarchal and colonial destruction.

The landscape not only acts as a metaphor for Ada's state of mind but is also used to inform us about the people in the film and their characters. The boggy undergrowth in which Ada finds it so difficult to move suggests her inability to escape; she is trapped. This motif is constantly reinforced by the cinematography, where the forest is the limit of Ada's horizons; she lives in a dense, almost knotted forest paralleling the wild woods of folktales which are suffused with erotic symbolic significance. Stewart's immediate world is surrounded by grey, petrified, half-dead tree trunks. He is referred to as 'old dry balls' by the Maoris and the contrast in landscape between him and Baines emphasises Stewart's impotence and inability to give love. Baines' hut is lush and verdant, part of the forest, with which he is at ease.

Ada represents Western femininity in contrast with the Maori women who are presented as coarse and loud, making lewd suggestions to Baines. Yet Ada, by her association with Baines, is different; she is able to blend into the woods wearing garments which seem to take on the same hues of blue and green which predominate throughout the film. Campion uses stock stereotypes of the Maoris as noble natives, natural and easily able to express their sexuality, thus giving a rather superficial interpretation of the race who are seen in terms of civilised versus uncivilised.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of *The Piano* is the mother/daughter relationship, a theme which is often explored through melodrama. In the film Ada and Flora have a symbiotic relationship which is broken only by the intrusion of Stewart and Baines. Flora is literally Ada's

voice, acting as a mediator between Ada and the rest of the world. The two are often shown in tight, claustrophobic shots and there is a sense of almost Oedipal jealousy; for instance, Flora is in her mother's bed whenever Stewart visits. When Flora eventually aligns with Stewart to stem Ada's affair with Baines she precipitates his retribution on Ada; Flora chooses the path to Stewart rather than take the piano key, inscribed with words of love from Ada, to Baines. Flora has been introduced to the dangerous forces of sexuality and the film is to some extent a rite of passage for her. When these dark forces are unleashed Ada, in effect, uses her daughter as a go-between and their relationship is changed.

In the final stages of the film the piano has become a tie with the past and in a symbolic gesture, when Ada is on the boat with Baines and Flora, she insists the piano is thrown overboard. Ada is pulled in too and we think the film will end on this tragic note, but she releases herself and in voiceover tells us, 'my will has chosen life'. Yet the life she has chosen, to live with Baines in Nelson as a piano teacher, does not seem convincing or a particularly satisfactory ending, at least not for a melodramatic heroine – she is now contained by Baines.

The Piano works on a visual, poetic level which is at times dark and disturbing, yet its central discourse is an exploration of sexuality, and especially female sexuality. Patriarchal filmic conventions are reversed in portraying a heroine who often has control of the look: the woman is subject rather than object and, at times, it is the male who is the object of the female gaze. But *The Piano* is much more than a reversal of patriarchal mainstream film conventions; it is one of the few films directed by a woman to achieve critical and financial success and yet still retain its art-house character.