

Jane Campion's
The Piano

Edited by

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Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>page</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>		xi
<i>Glossary of Terms</i>		xiii
Introduction		
“A Strange Heritage”: From Colonization to Transformation?		1
HARRIET MARGOLIS		
1 Music in <i>The Piano</i>		42
CLAUDIA GORBMAN		
2 The Last Patriarch		59
ANN HARDY		
3 <i>The Piano</i> , the Animus, and Colonial Experience		86
JOHN IZOD		
4 Ebony and Ivory Constructions of Maori in <i>The Piano</i>		114
LEONIE PIHAMA		
5 Foreign Tunes? Gender and Nationality in Four Countries’ Reception of <i>The Piano</i>		135
STEPHEN CROFTS		
<i>Filmography</i>		163
<i>Reviews of The Piano</i>		167
<i>Select Bibliography</i>		191
<i>Index</i>		193

Introduction

“A STRANGE HERITAGE”: FROM COLONIZATION TO TRANSFORMATION?

I think that it's a strange heritage that I have as a *pakeha* New Zealander, and I wanted to be in a position to touch or explore that. In contrast to the original people in New Zealand, the Maori people, who have such an attachment to history, we seem to have no history, or at least not the same tradition. This makes you start to ask, “Well, who are my ancestors?” My ancestors are English colonizers – the people who came out like Ada and Stewart and Baines.

(Jane Campion, “The Making of *The Piano*”)¹

Although President Clinton is quoted as saying that he couldn't understand “what all the fuss [was] about,”² *The Piano* won three U.S. Academy Awards in 1994, for best actress (Holly Hunter), best supporting actress (Anna Paquin, the youngest actress ever to win the award), and for best screenplay (Jane Campion). In 1993 it also shared top French honors, the Cannes film festival's prestigious *Palme d'or* (with Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*), making Jane Campion the first woman and the first New Zealander to win this award.³ In the wake of its Cannes success, *The Piano* received extraordinary critical and popular attention, and by the time it opened in the United States, in late 1993, word of mouth about it practically assured its commercial success.

Like *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), though, *The Piano* generated a popular discussion that was often as divided as it was intense.⁴ Negative comments ranged from individual perfor-

mances and dramatic structure to artistic license with natural landscape, from art-house pretentiousness to political incorrectness. Stephen Crofts notes elsewhere in this volume that critical responses were remarkably open about the unusual extent to which emotional responses to the film colored intellectual evaluations. For example, Sue Gillett admitted in the pages of *Screen*, the prestigious British journal of film theory, that “*The Piano* affected me very deeply. I was entranced, moved, dazed. I held my breath. I was reluctant to re-enter the everyday world after the film had finished.”⁵ Perhaps even more startling was the film’s effect on everyday lives. Pauline Grogan, a New Zealander who lived as a nun for twelve years, has written that after viewing *The Piano*, which “trigger[ed] memories of [her] experiences with” a priest who had abused her for years, she sought help from a counselor who helped her to work through the issues associated with her “non-assertive involvement” with the man.⁶ More prosaically but equally substantially, Stella Bruzzi explains that her *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* “is the last stage of a long and varied journey that began with the first UK screening of *The Piano*.”⁷

For many women, then, the film had remarkable practical consequences. For many men, its story of a woman’s sexual awakening supposedly holds little interest (witness President Clinton’s response, or consider the negative responses of male reviewers included at the end of this volume). For many feminists, male or female, *The Piano*’s tale of sexual bartering and supposed choices is not what it is touted to be. And many people sensitive to racism and colonialization take offense at its representation of Maori – the indigenous people residing in the South Pacific islands that they named Aotearoa and that the British colonized as New Zealand.⁸ In fact, the response to it in the director’s own homeland has been a mixture of pride and discomfort.

Interesting as all this is, perhaps the most amazing thing about *The Piano* is that a relatively young woman from Aotearoa New Zealand with only one “real” feature film previously to her credit managed even to make such a film, much less to achieve such a

success. So a good starting point for understanding *The Piano* and its significance may be Jane Campion herself – writer, director, auteur – and where she comes from.

Campion was born in 1954 in Wellington, the capital of Aotearoa New Zealand.⁹ Her parents, Edith and Richard Campion, have been much involved in various ways in theater throughout their lives, she primarily as a performer and he as a producer. In addition, as an heiress, Edith was able to subsidize an attempt in the 1950s to establish a national theater company, a significant part of the country's artistic history but also an example of the (still current) financial difficulties facing arts projects in a country with such a small population.

Although exposed early on through her parents to both theater and a wide range of films, Jane Campion chose, as an undergraduate, to study anthropology rather than drama at Victoria University of Wellington, despite her own interest in acting.¹⁰ Like most young New Zealanders who can, she soon went abroad, using the opportunity to study art in London and Australia and, eventually, film in Australia. She attributes her “creative confidence” to her parents' encouragement, but she has also expressed embarrassment at their theatricality,¹¹ an embarrassment in line with conservative attitudes of New Zealanders during her childhood. Yet the tradition of amateur theatrics is historically strong in Aotearoa New Zealand. The sort of painful ambiguity experienced by sensitive and talented individuals because of a private appreciation for and a public embarrassment about the arts appears in *An Angel at My Table* (1990), Campion's film about her compatriot, the author Janet Frame, whose early life embodied this dilemma.

For Campion, family matters; so interviewer Diana Wichtel has noted, citing as evidence the dedications of *Sweetie* (1989) to her sister, Anna, and of *The Piano* to her mother, Edith.¹² And the title of Wichtel's interview along with Campion's variously reported expressions of love and affection for her native country at the time of *The Piano's* release indicate her strong feeling for her homeland. Yet she left shortly after finishing her undergraduate degree and stayed away for a decade. The explanation can be

found in part in what is known as “the tall poppy syndrome.” This refers to a tendency New Zealanders have to cut down to size anyone who seems to stand out from the ordinary – unless that person achieves massive success, preferably abroad, in which case he or she gets elevated to national hero status. Campion left in part to escape this phenomenon, in part for the greater freedom for personal growth and exploration available to her abroad, only to find that the success of *The Piano* brought her directly up against criticism said to originate in the syndrome.¹³

When Campion left her homeland, it had no film industry. By the time she returned to make *An Angel at My Table* as a three-part television project, having made various short films, one telefeature, and one feature in Australia, a Kiwi community of filmmakers and a government-subsidized system of financial support had come into being.¹⁴ Significantly, the circumstances in which Campion worked up to the point of making *The Piano*, however difficult they may have been financially, had afforded her an artistic control that is generally unavailable to directors working within the Hollywood studio system. The early films that Campion produced in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand endowed her with some international recognition and the ability to attract star performers of the caliber and drawing power of Holly Hunter, Sam Neill, and Harvey Keitel. For the sort of story that she had been wanting to tell since before she produced *Sweetie* (1989),¹⁵ though, she needed both the artistic freedom she was used to and the financial power of Hollywood. She found the solution by filming in Aotearoa New Zealand with an international crew, an Australian producer (Jan Chapman), and French funding.¹⁶

BECOMING AN AUTEUR

Australia had a thriving film industry of its own from the silent era until World War II's demands for resources closed down most local filmmaking efforts. In the 1970s, the Australian government, as part of a general commitment to the arts grounded in the belief that they contribute to the development of a sense of

national identity, funded the Australian Film, Television, and Radio School (AFTRS). The hope was that rejuvenating the local industry would combat the homogenizing influence of Hollywood imports flooding the Australian market.

The artistic impulses of individual filmmakers, from this point of view, were therefore seen as subservient to the need to produce an identifiably Australian national cinema. The Australian domestic market is large enough to sustain such a national cinema, although the desire to crack the international film market has led to conflicting demands between the culturally specific and the internationally acceptable. In contrast, New Zealand filmmakers cannot survive on the basis of a domestic market, and so the pressure in contemporary times has been to balance the need to produce exportable films with a government-mandated and market-supported requirement that films from Aotearoa New Zealand reflect the country's uniqueness in some way.

One simple but key example of the difficulties Antipodean filmmakers face is language. The shared use of English ought to help Antipodean filmmakers on the international market, dominated as it is by U.S. productions. However, English as it is spoken in the Antipodes differs sufficiently in terms of accent and idioms as to make it frequently unintelligible to most members of the key U.S. market. Some Australian filmmakers have been willing to modify their films' language to accommodate the U.S. market – George Miller's *Babe: Pig in the City* (1998) being a recent case in point – and the New Zealand Film Commission has been said to pressure filmmakers to modify soundtracks for similar reasons.

As Mary Cantwell notes in a 1993 interview with Jane Campion, "Entering the Australian Film, Television and Radio School . . . is tantamount to becoming a part of the Australian film industry in that it's financed by the Government and gives its students – only 25 are chosen every year – a small stipend."¹⁷ Campion herself acknowledges that AFTRS "'gave me the opportunity, the equipment, the contacts with other students,' and the chance to study other film makers" as well as put together a portfolio.¹⁸ In 1973 Gillian Armstrong was one of the few women included in

the first AFTRS class,¹⁹ and before Campion's rapid rise to international fame, she was Australia's best-known woman director. The significance of Armstrong's success with *My Brilliant Career* (1979), her first feature film, cannot be underestimated, especially in terms of easing the way for other women filmmakers in Australia. Yet, compared to Campion, Armstrong looks like a mainstream filmmaker. Over in Aotearoa New Zealand, the point has not been lost on Gaylene Preston, the most significant woman director resident there, who recognizes that her own work can now be situated "in a larger context. There's something Australasian going on among women's films, probably since *Sweetie*."²⁰

Armstrong, that is, was not alone for long. In fact, the film industries of both Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand have been more open to women working as producers, directors, and even cinematographers and other members of technical crews than has been the case in Hollywood. This is not to say that it has been easy for women to make films in either country. However, the chances are that women who obtain funding for their films are more likely to get to make the films they want to make, free of the sorts of constraints associated with filmmaking within Hollywood's studio system.²¹

As early as 1987, before Campion's first regular feature had appeared, the editors of *Don't Shoot Darling! Women's Independent Film-making in Australia* had identified her as an auteur, "in the wake of Armstrong"; "her black comic vision and quirky use of *mise en scène* mark her films with a distinctive personal style which hovers somewhere between surrealism and absurdism. Although not wont to labour feminist messages, her films, like Armstrong's, are clearly concerned with the position of women in the family and in society."²²

Freiberg, writing a separate essay on Campion in *Don't Shoot Darling!*, notes that her work is both "unusual" and "not easy to label or define." What Freiberg identifies, in an unusually prescient analysis of a young filmmaker's work, is Campion's ability to straddle potentially oppositional forms: art cinema and the commercial film, narrative fiction and socially committed observa-

tion, “an exploration of the banal and the profound.”²³ Retrospectively, Gaylene Preston has said that, while attending the market side of the 1990 Cannes Film Festival, she determined that the recipe for international success for films from the Antipodes was to create a film that is non-dialogue-based, features stars from Hollywood, exploits the landscape, and has sex and violence. In the struggle to produce a film recognizably of this region yet able to crack the international market, Campion, according to Preston, “solved a central problem – of dialect – and of central casting – by making one of them mute and one of them taciturn.”²⁴

Of course, one of the difficulties of discussing directors as auteurs is that film is a collaborative art. Campion’s collaborations have been widely noted, most especially her early work with cinematographer Sally Bongers and her coauthorship of scripts with Gerard Lee. In addition, she has regularly worked with performers and technical crew on more than one project, for example, actor Genevieve Lemon, editor Veronika Jenet, cinematographer Stuart Dryburgh, and producer Jan Chapman.

Although she herself has spoken of her difficulties with collaboration, she receives regular praise from those with whom she has collaborated. Maori actor Tungia Baker, for example, has spoken positively of her experience on *The Piano*, and Holly Hunter and Martin Donovan each praise the supportive environment that Campion creates for actors on set. Campion herself says, “I’m able and not able to take collaboration.” What this means in practice may be explained by Laura Jones, who has scripted two of Campion’s features and who describes Campion as listening to everyone on set and respecting what they all have to offer while maintaining her own vision, an opinion supported by Sam Neill. This would seem to accord with Campion’s own comments: “I reckon the director is a facilitator [and] a note-taker.”²⁵

Yet Campion’s originality cuts across these collaborations. As Sally Bongers, her cinematographer on *An Exercise in Discipline – Peel* (1982), *A Girl’s Own Story* (1984), and *Sweetie*, notes, neither she nor Campion were much appreciated by their teachers at film school, where they met, but their appreciation for each other’s tal-

ents changed their lives.²⁶ After *Sweetie*, Campion stopped working with Bongers, but she readily acknowledges Bongers's contribution: "I think what Sally did in *Sweetie* is wonderful, and I couldn't have done it without her at all because no one else would have understood."²⁷ As Campion has matured as a director, she has learned how to achieve her own vision. Stuart Dryburgh, for example, talking about his camerawork on *The Piano*, notes that "the camera's viewpoint . . . is that of a witness directing the viewer's attention in a very intimate way. Sometimes we go places where the camera can't really go. . . . It wouldn't be a Jane Campion film without some wittiness in the framing."²⁸ Her signature, in other words, which had become almost instantaneously identifiable, established as it was by the visual appearance of her student films and *Sweetie*, remains apparent in her later, more mainstream films.

Writing about those early films, Freiberg calls *Passionless Moments* "the least disturbing and lightest of [Campion's] films" and attributes this quality to her collaboration with Gerard Lee.²⁹ Campion praises Lee's "suburban lyricism," his "light and charming" tendencies, compared with her own "heavy-handed" material.³⁰ Yet she's frequently praised for her own humorous touches. Williams quotes both Dryburgh and producer Bridget Ikin on the pleasures of working with Campion, because Campion is so human, the suggestion being that her sense of perspective on the relative value of the personal and professional keeps the personal in its proper, valued place.³¹

The Piano is obviously Campion's most significant solo writing effort, but the writers with whom she has collaborated have been exceptional. Apart from Gerard Lee, she has also worked with Helen Garner and Laura Jones, writers who share the experience of having also collaborated with Gillian Armstrong. Jones wrote scripts for Armstrong's *High Tide* (1988) and *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997), as well as Campion's *An Angel at My Table* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. Garner, who wrote Armstrong's *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (1992), scripted the Australian telefeature, *Two Friends* (1986), which wasn't released in the United States until 1996. For Freiberg, not even Campion's art-house-style presentation can salvage the "simplistic class analysis of [Garner's] script" for *Two*

Friends; because “Garner’s fiction is social realist, rather than absurd and quirky, . . . she would not seem to be the ideal collaborator for Campion.”³² Yet *Two Friends* is important in Campion’s oeuvre both because it is her transition piece from short to long films and because it illustrates her ability to combine the accessible with the arty.

It is also important because it, along with *Sweetie*, began to give her the experience and the track record that would be necessary if she were to persuade producers to fund a project dear to her heart. For as early as this, Campion knew that she wanted to write and make a historical film set in Aotearoa New Zealand and she had already begun a script for what was to become *The Piano*.

On the surface, nothing she had done before compared with this project. Turning her eye from her contemporary environment, Campion wrote about Ada, a mute young woman who leaves Scotland with her daughter, various household goods, and her beloved piano to enter into an arranged marriage with Stewart, an unknown colonialist in nineteenth-century Aotearoa New Zealand, a land yet to be fully settled and domesticated. Stewart cannot appreciate either her need for the piano as a means of self-expression nor the close, even exclusive relation she has with Flora, her daughter. However, Baines, another settler who assists Stewart, especially in mediating between him and the indigenous Maori whose language and customs Baines has come to know and sometimes share, does appreciate both.

The marriage gets off to a bad start when Stewart leaves the piano on the beach where Ada and Flora land. Baines eventually offers to purchase the instrument from him in exchange for a piece of property Stewart desires, and the two men arrange for Ada to instruct Baines in how to play it. Unwillingly, she and Flora struggle through the difficult bush from the desolate settlement where Stewart has built his house to the more congenial environment where Baines has erected a hut amid the trees. Eventually he persuades her to engage in a bargain: She can regain the piano if she will play for him while he watches. The watching develops into more active contact, and the two become lovers, only to be

betrayed by Flora, who has grown weary of being sent outside during these “lessons” and who feels excluded from the once all-absorbing relation that she had with Ada.

When Flora alerts Stewart to the situation, he exacts an extraordinary revenge, first barricading Ada and Flora into his house and then, after Ada breaks a promise not to have any contact with Baines again, taking an axe to the tip of one of her fingers. Finally disgusted by what he has become in his frustrated attempt to gain Ada’s love, Stewart relinquishes her to Baines, who, with Ada, Flora, and the piano, sets off in a *waka*, a Maori canoe, for a new life elsewhere in the country. However, Ada orders the piano to be tipped overboard, despite Baines’s protests, and her foot gets caught in one of the ropes attached to the instrument. Instead of drowning, though, she chooses to live, and, once resettled in the town of Nelson, she is content to learn to speak, play her new piano with the silver-tipped finger that Baines has fashioned for her, and be the town’s “freak.” At night, her voiceover tells us, she still dreams that she chose instead to stay underwater, with her beloved piano.

THE PIANO IN THE CONTEXT
OF CAMPION’S PREVIOUS WORK:
FORMAL AND THEMATIC CONTINUITIES

Campion’s early work has been identified as difficult

to label or define: it sits somewhere on the edges between experimental and art cinema, between the narrative fiction film and the social issue film, between anecdote and aphorism, and between an exploration of the banal and the profound. Campion’s films are not explicitly didactic; but they make sharply pointed observations about the unequal distribution of power in our society – and especially the unequal position of women and children.³³

Produced as her first student film for AFTRS in 1982, the nine-minute short *An Exercise in Discipline – Peel* can be taken as emblematic of recurrent themes in Campion’s later work. Usually referred to simply as *Peel*, this story of a trio who sit by the side of the road waiting for the young boy and mature woman to accept

the male driver's right to discipline them for throwing orange peel out the window presents a fight over power within an ambiguously situated family, simultaneously isolated from the rest of the world yet engaged in intense relations among themselves. Almost all of Campion's films since have explored the irony either of apparently powerless women exerting control over their family environment (Sweetie and Ada by means of their dysfunctional behavior, for example) or apparently powerful women being dominated by that environment (Isabel's abdication of power in the face of Oswald's seduction, in *The Portrait of a Lady*).

From the beginning, according to Redding and Brownworth, Campion's themes have been apparent. *Peel* "is a study in claustrophobia, family relations gone wrong and the perils of family road trips, themes Campion has examined and reexamined in her films," and "*A Girl's Own Story* foreshadows all of Campion's longer work, with its themes of seeing the truth versus stating the truth, longing to belong and the oppression of children by their families."³⁴ Set in the 1960s, the twenty-seven-minute *A Girl's Own Story* (1983) features adolescent girls who explore their own sexuality, engage in incest for the sake of warmth and companionship, and experience their parents' alienated emotional and sexual entanglements. Meanwhile, family, school, and church show them no successful examples of human togetherness. The protagonist especially must battle with a threatening older sister, a depressed mother, and a philandering father, while pregnancy dooms her friend to the cold misery of a home for unwed mothers. "Subjects such as sibling incest, child abuse, clinical depression and obsessiveness are the staples of Campion's films. The family is represented as a site of moral danger and thwarted emotion."³⁵

Campion herself dismisses *After Hours* (1983), a twenty-six-minute film about the damage done by sexual harassment in the workplace produced for the Sydney Women's Film Unit and distributed by Women Make Movies, as lacking interest because it is about something that is a given rather than being debatable.³⁶ Yet its subject matter – gender relations marked by an imbalance of power as well as the importance, even as a lesser theme in this film, of the mother–daughter relationship – situate it easily within

the rest of Campion's oeuvre. It is exceptional, however, since, although not a documentary, it is more expository than any of her other work and hence is the closest to a documentary film that Campion has produced. Stylistically, it is the most straightforward of any of her films, lacking the outrageous touches that have come to be associated with her work: for example, the odd framing in *Sweetie* derived from thinking in terms of still photography,³⁷ Flora's cartoon vision of her "father" going up in smoke in *The Piano*, or the home movie version of Isabel's journey in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Certainly it is her least personal project.

In fact, her career has been characterized by the near absence of subordinate positions on others' projects as well as an unusual degree of artistic control over her own projects.³⁸ This control seems generally to lead to narrative ambiguity, especially in terms of choices that characters face in the end, and to stylistic strategies more typical of art-house rather than mainstream cinema. Situating Campion in relation to choices facing feminist filmmakers in the 1980s, Freiberg notes that Campion chose fiction filmmaking over documentaries but avoided

conventional fiction films, which construct their narrative in a linear and chronological fashion, moving progressively from enigma through suspense to climax and resolution. Instead, she strings together a series of equally-weighted discrete scenes or sketches (*Passionless Moments*), or starts with the climax and unreels the narrative in reverse order (*Two Friends*), or fragments the flow of the narrative into separate self-contained scenes or episodes (*After Hours*, *A Girl's Own Story*). Her endings are also unconventional: far from offering the audience an emotionally satisfying resolution or closure, they are enigmatically and disturbingly open.³⁹

Freiberg is writing about the early work, yet her comments apply to the later work as well, although both *The Piano* and *Portrait* show signs of increasing conformity to more typical linear and chronological storytelling. (Stylistically and narratively, *The Piano* is Campion's least episodic film.) The endings remain ambiguous, the humor quirky, and the social commentary an embedded

thorn. These are films in which the “buried levels of narrative can take many viewings and still remain fruitfully unresolved.”⁴⁰

One constant is Campion’s preoccupation with sex, identity, and power, which sets her apart more than might be immediately apparent, for, as Linda Seger notes, “A female view of the erotic in film is elusive.”⁴¹ Asserting that “Campion is not obliged to provide positive images of women or their sexuality,” Ruth Watson notes that *A Girl’s Own Story*, *Sweetie*, and *An Angel at My Table* share a representation of “the development of female sexuality [that is] more grubby than gracious.”⁴² *Peel*, *Sweetie*, and *The Piano* include scenes in which females urinate more or less publicly, and *An Angel at My Table* shows Janet Frame’s terrified reaction to the onset of menstruation as well as her student habit of disposing of sanitary napkins in a cemetery. Isabel Archer on screen is a far more sexually alive character than in the novel’s pages, her sexual fantasies in marked contrast with her staid behavior and her chaste, constraining clothes. *The Piano*’s representation of Ada’s sexual awakening marks a transition in some ways between the bloody, violent, grubby physicality of the earlier work and the restrained, elegant, and clean sexuality of *The Portrait of a Lady*.⁴³ The violence of the struggle over power, though, remains present, for Campion’s *Portrait* shows Osmond physically abusing Isabel, something that James’s version studiously avoids.

Although Bruzzi claims that Campion does not identify herself as a feminist – Campion “think[s] that my orientation isn’t political or doesn’t come out of modern politics”⁴⁴ – virtually all of Campion’s films have been analyzed on the assumption that they should be seen within a feminist context. The most obvious reason for this starting point has been her concern with the dynamics of gendered relations, associated as they are in her films with power, women’s sexuality, and women’s access to subjectivity. Bruzzi and Pat Mellencamp, for example, each write of her films in terms of feminist film theory, specifically, how she situates her spectators in relation to relations based on looking (the gaze), as well as of how she inverts traditional representations of male and female characters as (sexualized) objects to be looked at. Early on, New Zealan-

ders such as Ann Hardy and Ruth Watson noted that Campion consistently distanced viewers from her characters, forcing spectators into unusual and often uncomfortable positions, despite the humor often involved. In *The Piano*, Campion puts characters themselves, and us along with them, into distanced relations mediated by spectatorship, for example, Stewart and Flora are both driven to voyeurism by the developing sexual relationship between Baines and Ada.⁴⁵ A point often noted about *The Piano* as a feminist film is that it simultaneously makes a man the object of the gaze and the female protagonist the active sexual agent. Harvey Keitel had already undressed before the camera in *The Bad Lieutenant* (Abel Ferrara, 1992), but in *The Piano* he does so not just for the camera and the audience but also for Ada to look upon.⁴⁶ And when Ada's sexual desires have been awakened but her access to Baines has been restricted, she turns to Stewart and begins to explore the possibility of sensual contact with him. Since she disallows his touch in response, he is left in a vulnerable position, and this vulnerability interests Campion: "It becomes a relationship of power, the power of those that care and those that don't care. I'm very, very interested in the brutal innocence of that."⁴⁷

With the exception of *After Hours*, Campion's films have all included children in significant ways. In *Portrait*, Osmond raises his daughter, Pansy, to be the pattern of pure modesty and obedience. Innocent on the surface, she seethes with repressed desire, kept under control by the fear that Osmond inspires in her. Sexually attracted to the menace lurking behind Osmond's courtship, as evidenced especially in the scene in which he kisses her in the underbelly of an Italian church, Isabel identifies with the helplessness that Pansy feels.

In *The Piano*, Flora is a storehouse of strongly subversive emotion, constantly intervening in relations among adults. Mellenkamp discusses the relationship between Ada and Flora in terms of the representation of female desire expressed in "sexual versus maternal" terms. On the one hand, Ada moves away from her daughter; on the other, Flora betrays her mother. Although they are reunited by Stewart's violence, "The relationship between mother and daughter is no longer a preoedipal fantasy of mater-

nal perfection.”⁴⁸ In contrast, Osmond’s violence toward Isabel has an ambiguous effect on her relationship with his daughter.

The mirror effect of Ada and Flora’s physical appearance and their dress has frequently been noted, often as an indication of their preoedipal relationship. *Portrait* suggests an equivalent, though perverse, bonding between Osmond and Pansy, which makes Isabel something of an interloper between them. To some extent, her decision whether or not to stay with or return to Osmond is connected with her commitment to Pansy, with whom she would seem to have little in common except the tie with Osmond.

In both films, a husband’s violence toward his wife and alterations in the parent–child bond contribute to momentous choices. In both, the extent to which the heroine is free to choose is itself an issue. That these films end with women facing limited possibilities about their relationships to the men and children in their lives connects them firmly with the cinematic tradition of the woman’s film. Additionally, in generic terms both films are also historical dramas – period pieces – and so their heroines are constrained by the mores of their times. In both cases, though, Campion brings a contemporary eye to bear on her characters, to the extent even of including anachronistic touches.⁴⁹

As Bruzzi reads Campion’s reworking of material typical of the classic woman’s film, *The Piano* takes “traditional mechanisms of desire and modes of articulation in order to question and subvert them, and, essentially, to give twentieth-century feminism a voice in situations where in the past such an intervention has not occurred.”⁵⁰ Clearly, Campion’s *The Piano* has found a special place not just within her own oeuvre but within the context of both national and international cinema history.⁵¹

THE PIANO IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CINEMA OF AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

When a national cinema has developed in the shadow of films produced in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia, it has difficulties distinguishing itself from these other influences.

However, two characteristics have always stood out in the films produced in Aotearoa New Zealand for domestic and international consumption: the extraordinary beauty of the country's landscape and the exotic appeal of Maori. *The Piano* makes significant use of both. In addition, it is the sort of psychodrama that Robson and Zalcock say characterizes films by Kiwi women filmmakers. At the same time, it avoids the "man alone" or male-buddy themes characteristic of films by Kiwi men. Furthermore, *The Piano* is unusual in that it deals with the country's colonial history without resorting to the Western genre as a format for representing that history. *The Piano* thus both resembles and differs from other films produced in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The man-alone theme is not unique to Aotearoa New Zealand, but its importance for the film industry of this country is exceptional. For example, films by Roger Donaldson (e.g., *Sleeping Dogs*, 1977) and Geoff Murphy (e.g., *Goodbye Pork Pie*, 1981), which can be said to have kick-started the contemporary efforts of New Zealand feature filmmakers, are essentially about male buddies on the run from threatening authority figures. Their flight allows the filmmakers to exploit the country's scenic beauty and to exalt the ruggedness of men who can survive and prosper in such a place, largely by use of their wit but also sometimes through sheer strength and determination.

The theme has its quintessential model in John Mulgan's 1939 novel entitled *Man Alone*. In this now canonic story (that few Kiwis have actually read), a man inadvertently gets involved in a murder and takes flight into the rugged bush, where he manages to elude the police, occasionally helped by sympathetic folk whom he meets along the way. Mulgan, writing from the perspective of an expatriate living in England, takes a critical view toward the national character. As he sees it, the physical difficulties of making a living in such a rough country mean that there is no time for the niceties of life, and the brutality of the situation is compounded by greed and indifference to human values on the part of those who might do better. Overall, though, what makes *Man Alone* such a cliché of Kiwi culture is not Mulgan's critique of

Kiwi society but the book's picture of a man surviving by himself in the bush, struggling with but accommodating himself to nature, triumphant in the end.

No plot could be further from the general interests of either Kiwi female or Maori filmmakers, as their words and films attest. The few feature-length fiction films that have been made by Maori tend to deal, one way or another, not with heroic individuals but with community issues: for example, Barry Barclay's *Ngati* (1987) and *Te Rua* (1991), Merata Mita's *Mauri* (1988), or even Lee Tamahori's *Once Were Warriors* (1994). The closest that films by Kiwi females may be said to have come to the man-alone theme might be Melanie Read's *Trial Run* (1984) and Gaylene Preston's *Mr. Wrong* (1985). Among the first feature-length fiction films directed by women in Aotearoa New Zealand, both of these are gender-bender films, but neither involves straightforward and simplistic role reversals. Although *Trial Run* deals with a woman's successful attempt to live alone in the country despite mysterious threats to her safety, the heroine is situated within a family context, the setting is tamed countryside rather than bush, and her ultimate success is not so much a triumph as an endurance.

So, although the bush does play a significant role in *The Piano*, and that significance does involve the relationship of two strong-willed Pakeha men to it, *Campion's* story bears virtually no comparison either with examples of the male-buddy film nor expressions of the man-alone theme. In other words, she manages to play off a characteristic of Kiwi culture by distinguishing her film from both the male norm and the alternatives that have thus far appeared.

Yet, in terms of landscape and the traditions of representing it in Aotearoa New Zealand, *Campion* is less unusual. On the one hand, *The Piano* does take advantage of the scenic beauty Aotearoa New Zealand typically offers. The shot of the piano left on the beach has accrued an iconic stature, while the beach itself has become a desirable location for filmmakers worldwide, managed and marketed as such by local government officials. On the other hand, *Campion's* use of the blasted setting for Stewart's house, in

pointed contrast to Baines's more ecologically integrated living quarters, plays on a tradition of using the landscape for symbolic as well as straightforwardly representational purposes. In contrast with images of the country meant to entice settlers such as Stewart and Ada, a number of photographers and painters have used the landscape as commentary on the country's national and spiritual identity – and its state of health.

Historically, visual representations of Aotearoa New Zealand, no matter what medium is involved, have emphasized the picturesque at the expense of reality. The opening of *Once Were Warriors* upends this tradition when a simple shift of the camera reveals an exquisitely beautiful landscape to be merely a billboard advertisement located in an urban concrete jungle. Although Linda Dyson says that in *The Piano* “the use of aerial shots . . . is reminiscent of the dominant genre of landscape photography in New Zealand which constructs the landscape as a prelapsarian paradise,”⁵³ *The Piano*, like *Warriors*, does not provide the usual scenic beauty traditionally offered by government-sponsored films promoting the tourism industry. Campion herself has commented on her emphasis on mud, but Annie Goldson refers to local criticism of the film for “mix[ing] North Island and South Island bush with impunity.”⁵² At issue, of course, is the authenticity of representation.

The Piano has nonetheless been seen internationally as a New Zealand film, and in a positive way, drawing tourists, foreign investment in local filmmaking through coproductions, and other filmmakers interested in the dramatic locations available. For these reasons, the New Zealand government and the New Zealand Film Commission have been happy to claim *The Piano* as a New Zealand film and to speak of it as positively promoting the country's image internationally.

Less positively received has been the film's representation of Maori. The published responses of bell hooks and Leonie Pihama have already been referred to, and Pihama's essay included in this volume further develops the critique of Campion's use of Maori in *The Piano*. It is indeed easy to make the case that Campion has represented Maori in stereotypical ways, even through the film's



Ada (Holly Hunter) and Flora (Anna Paquin) make their way through the bush. (Courtesy of CiBy Sales Ltd.)

music, as Claudia Gorbman's essay in this volume perceptively notes. Typically, Baines is a more sympathetic character than Stewart because he is more in touch with the Maori among whom he lives and they in turn are more in touch with nature. Their "naive" response to the theatrical performance is also a sore point for many viewers. Even the visual presentation of Maori in contrast with Flora and Ada has been criticized:

Whiteness as purity is a recurring motif in the film. While the Maori are at one with the bush (to the extent that they are even visible) the film continually privileges whiteness through the play of light against dark, emphasizing the binary oppositions at work in the text. This whiteness is enhanced by the use of filters, which means that while the darker skin tones of the Maori are barely discernible in the brooding shadows of the bush, the faces of Ada and Flora, framed by their bonnets, take on a luminous quality.⁵⁴

Perhaps the most condemnatory judgment of all comes from Barry Barclay, the first Maori director to produce a feature film, for

whom *The Piano* is “one of the most obnoxious films I know of from the point of view of white supremacism.”⁵⁵

Traditionally, Aotearoa New Zealand has developed a reputation for good, bicultural race relations, and officially it is a bicultural country. Historically, however, there have been difficulties, and the 1980s saw a major renaissance of Maori cultural and political presence. In 1990 the country celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Treaty of Waitangi, the closest to a founding document that Aotearoa New Zealand has. These celebrations accelerated changes in government–Maori relations because they highlighted the treaty, which forms the basis for attempts by Maori to achieve legal redress for long-held grievances, primarily those concerning land rights and the economic and cultural consequences of their loss and abuse.

Campion, having left the country in the 1970s, was largely out of touch with many of these developments pertinent to issues that influence or even underlie the story she has to tell. She herself has publicly recognized that gap in her knowledge of her own country’s culture. Coming to grips with what the shifting emphasis onto biculturalism means led to a shift in the story she ultimately had to tell.

She began with a love story influenced by early readings of the novels of Emily Brontë and other nineteenth-century women writers. She felt a kinship with Brontë particularly because of their similar experience of an extraordinary landscape. Land, though, in a bicultural Aotearoa New Zealand, inevitably implies a Maori presence – for the *tangata whenua* are, literally, the people of the land. For Campion, a “colonial, it was a conjunction of trying to understand something about the beginning position of New Zealand and it also gave me the opportunity to discuss love. . . . To me it was also great and daunting that here I had a story where I would have to sort stuff out for myself” about Pakeha/Maori relations both in the colonial and the contemporary eras.⁵⁶

The key question is whether Campion has integrated Maori into her story with respect for their own integrity or whether she has colonized them, in yet another act of Pakeha appropriation.