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HARRIET MARGOLIS

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-

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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-

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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-

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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*

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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

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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

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