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[The Piano](#)

Director Jane Campion was trained as an anthropologist. Now she's turned her hand from interpreting fables to making them.

Alan A. Stone

THERE IS A MOMENT in *The Piano* when the crazed husband takes an axe and chops off his wife's finger. We do not see the awful blow, but both times I watched the film the audience gasped and a few women hurried from the theater. It is a disturbing but crucial scene, the culmination of a sado-masochistic screenplay which has been condemned by some as harmful to women and welcomed by others as an important feminist work. Critics have been more nearly unanimous in their praise for *The Piano*, and for writer and director Jane Campion. A New Zealander, Campion made two previous low budget films with relatively unknown actors which attracted little notice and small audiences. But their quirky originality established her reputation among film cognoscenti. *The Piano*, by contrast, is both an astonishing artistic achievement and a major motion picture. Featuring Holly Hunter and Harvey Keitel, it has made Campion an overnight celebrity. She is being hailed as a "natural" and "original" film maker, and no doubt she is.

Campion was also trained as a social anthropologist, however, and that training -- particularly the work of Levi-Strauss -- has had a profound impact on her directorial imagination. More than just a spectacular period piece or a feminist tract, *The Piano* is an anthropological excursion into the 19th century. And for Campion herself, it marks a shift from ethnography to fable-making.

Campion as Ethnographer

Campion's first esoteric film, *Sweetie*, was more "clinical" case history than screenplay. If it fails as a movie, it can be recommended as an instructional film for family therapists. *Sweetie*, the beloved daughter who turned out badly, is a greedy, impulse-ridden woman who constantly discomforts her family. Fat, if not morbidly obese, she is an unattractive personality in an unappealing body -- repulsive to conventional movie audiences. Fellini, fascinated by the grotesque, often gave such ugliness cameo roles in his films. But it is difficult to imagine any commercial film maker, even Fellini, choosing someone so utterly lacking in elements as completely unphotogenic as

utterly lacking in glamour, so completely unphotogenic, as heroine. There can be no doubt, however, that this was Campion's conscious aesthetic choice, for we see traces of the same kind of "ugly" choices in her two subsequent films. Campion is interested in *Sweetie* for all of the anthropological reasons that would repel an "escapist" movie audience and makes no effort to prettify her. If documentaries can sometimes make ordinary people seem repulsive, Campion's unblinking camera makes *Sweetie* into a strangely compelling figure. She reveals *Sweetie* through the eyes of her long-suffering sister, who as participant observer in the family dynamics provides an ethnographer's perspective.

Angel At My Table painted on a broader canvas of dramatized biography. Though still working on "clinical" material, Campion demonstrated impressive cinematic talents -- among them an almost uncanny ability to involve an adult audience in the world as seen through the eyes of a growing girl. The girl is enormously appealing, though the child who plays her would have been quite unacceptable by Hollywood's anorexic casting standards. Her total vulnerability invites us to identify with her as we could not with *Sweetie*. Campion shows the child packed into one bed with her sisters, stealing coins from her father's pocket to buy candy to buy friends, listening in terror to her parents quarrel, being shamed in the "rite of passage" that comes with the tell-tale blood of menarche, experiencing the barrier-reef of adolescent self-consciousness that in her case is never overcome, and discovering the psychological salvation that can be found in a talent -- for her, writing. The fat, red-headed child looked like one of a kind; but then Campion paired her with an adult actress who was entirely convincing as the little girl grown up. It was already evident in *Angel* and *Sweetie* that casting is one of the most remarkable gifts of this extraordinary director.

The plot line of *Angel* seems scarcely believable, but is apparently the true story of New Zealand writer Janet Frame. The awkward but appealing child grows up to be a psychotic adult and spends eight years in a mental hospital. Subjected to more than 200 electro-shock treatments, she is spared a lobotomy only because her short stories are belatedly published, winning her a prize. She goes on as a survivor, forever fragile. Campion's anthropological background is still in the directorial foreground as it was in *Sweetie* and it keeps this film from being a remake of *Cuckoo's Nest*. Campion's ethnography gives us less of the '60s romantic/political stereotype of madness as social/political oppression and more of its subtle human complexity. True, the psychiatrists mis-diagnose the heroine (schizophrenia instead of depression) and the mental hospital is not user-friendly. But she is never simply a victim. Indeed, the always vulnerable Janet Frame seems to keep throwing herself in harm's way.

Contemporary anthropologists are obsessed with the problem of point of view. They are all too aware of the role Christian colonizers played in constructing the image of the heathen savage. The anthropologist saw the savage he had imagined -- the alien other. Campion seems to have recognized the problem and set out to solve it in her films. Anthropologists traditionally go into the field to study some exotic tribe; Campion stayed

home and made the mentally ill woman the subject of her study. As a beginning film maker, she was a superb ethnographer of her own society, able to describe without judging. But Campion's observant camera also sees context; each woman's mental disorder becomes a window into the madness of the quotidian world. These films do not explain away mental illness; they describe it, with unswerving exactitude, as a curse beyond any measure of blameworthiness.

Campion as Mythmaker

The Piano is simultaneously connected to these earlier films and a total departure from them. *Sweetie* and *Angel at My Table* each featured an obviously disturbed woman; so does *The Piano*. But the women in those films were certifiably deranged, while the heroine of *The Piano* is mysteriously different. She is mute, but her silence is willed, rather than a symptom of conventional madness. Here, Campion creates a timeless aesthetic truth of her own, rather than capturing a new slice of social reality. The characters in *The Piano* are allegorical figures, not ethnographic case histories. Campion still has an anthropological signature, but this time it is the anthropologist as expounder of myths and fables. The result is an instant classic. Umberto Eco has written that cult movies must be divisible into pieces, each strong enough to stand alone, clearly linked to earlier texts, and a source of instant associations that make the pieces unforgettable. *The Piano* may not become a cult film but it meets Eco's criteria. Each scene is powerful enough in its images to impress itself on our mind's eye, and each resonates in our conscious memory and instantly connects with our unconscious archetypes. If it is not a cult film, it takes its place with other gothic tales that haunt our memory.

Wuthering Heights has been identified as the major literary inspiration for the story. But there are many other influences -- among them, *African Queen*. Where *Wuthering Heights* and *African Queen* left all the sex to the imagination, however, *The*

Piano insists on the central role in the narrative of explicit, if not graphic, sexuality. We see in this insistent sexuality the anthropologist's reading of Freud. *The Piano*'s mood is gothic, its temporal context is Victorian, the scene is New Zealand, but its sexual overtones are decidedly Freudian (including that brutal axe scene). As a whole generation of feminists has recognized, Freud misconstrued almost everything about female sexuality, but he did see more clearly than anyone else the intimate connections between physical/moral revulsion and sexual attraction. What is most disgusting is very close to what is most exciting in all its polymorphous variations: that is the secret of the bedroom that everyone knows and almost no one acknowledges. And it is the theme of *The Piano*, elaborately played out in High Gothic. Campion's movie brings her audience back to the romantic mystification of sexuality as the unpredictable and dangerous spark that sets the fire of love.

But none of these derivations really captures what is most striking in Campion's directorial signature. Cultural anthropologists influenced by Levi-Strauss have produced a

anthropologists influenced by Levi-Strauss have produced a fascinating literature interpreting myth, folklore, fables, sacred texts, and social structures. One of Levi-Strauss's own great essays reinterpreted the Oedipus myth as an attempt to understand the mystery of human conception. There, as in his account of *The Raw and the Cooked*, he found the deep structure in binary oppositions of concepts or terms. The myth works toward a mediation or solution in a quasi-logical dialectic. But the rules are elusive and decoding the deep structure of myths is usually a desiccating process. It is like the molecular biologist reducing the myriad works of nature to four bases in endless variation on a double helix. The discovery process inspires awe but the bases do not.

Campion has turned this process of interpretation on its head. Inspired by the skeleton, she has put flesh on the bones. *The Piano* has a classic deep structure of binary opposition, but Campion's myth overflows with passion as it employs Freudian erotics and archetypal symbols to explore a woman's *imprisonment and freedom*. The movie begins in shadows with what seem to be heavy indistinct bars: perhaps an abstract expressionist painting. We gradually realize that in this first image we are seeing a woman signify her own state of imprisonment. The bars are her fingers held up in front of her eyes. Campion, the artist/anthropologist is literally showing us the world view of her heroine Ada (Holly Hunter) through her heroine's own eyes. The camera looks out through Ada's imprisoned gaze, and the audience sees a work of art. That consolidation -- individual perspective transformed into artistic vision -- is the hallmark of Jane Campion's achievement in *The Piano*. Ada spreads the fingers of her prison and the first distinguishable images emerge, still dark and obscure like a scene from a dimly remembered dream. Ada's voice-over establishes the basic premise of the plot: as a young girl she vowed never to speak and with a will of iron has persevered. What we are hearing, she tells us, is not her speaking voice but the self-imprisoned voice that sounds inside her mind.

Ada's iron will is at times as mysteriously other to her as it is to us. She is possessed by this other will, as if by an evil incubus that periodically descends on sleeping women and uses them. In this curious doubled quality of Ada's psyche -- free will and imprisoning will -- we have *The Piano's* guiding binary opposition. Ada has an illegitimate daughter, Flora, who understands her mother's sign language and speaks for her, mediating her mother's relationships to the men in her life. Through most of the film we have to wait out the doubled dialogue, sign language and then speech. Flora also doubles her mother's emotions, resonates to her mood and appearance. Campion makes the point pictorially by having this symbiotic mother and daughter tilt their heads in the same way at the same time. And Flora, like her mother, is no ordinary human being. She is a kind of spirit, disturbingly precocious and surprisingly capable of good and evil. She will determine her mother's fate.

We learn from the voice-over that Ada has been given in an arranged marriage to a man she has never met and is being sent out to him in New Zealand. Played against this portentous plot

introduction, Flora comes crashing down the long hall of a Scottish country house on 19th-century roller skates. She will be a spirit of uncontrolled exuberance, a perfect complement to the silent fury of her mother who expresses her passions only through her beloved piano.

Campion quickly establishes all the premises for her storytelling. There is not an unnecessary moment in the film and even the most extraordinary visual scenes are not prolonged. And she has somehow inspired her actors to the same discipline. Holly Hunter and Harvey Keitel are remarkable as Ada and Baines, as is Sam Neil in the difficult part of the strange and insensitive husband, Stewart; and Anna Paquin gives a brilliant performance as the spirit/daughter. The first darkened images of the film are dream-like, and so in different ways are all the scenes that follow. Campion has put these dreams together like pearls on a string, except that each of her pearls is distinct and memorable. Nothing in her earlier work prepared us for the power and inventive beauty of *The Piano's* cinematography. Campion captures the trip from Scotland to New Zealand in one shimmering shot of a dory seen from beneath the water. Mother and daughter dressed in black are carried to the beach on the shoulders of sailors. They are small and fragile compared to the men and all the human figures are insignificant against the churning surf of New Zealand. Campion's surf is supernatural in its primeval power and her cinematography shows us another world which in its primitive magnificence reminds us of our own insignificance. When Ada and Flora are set down on the strand with all of their belongings, it is difficult to believe these delicate Victorian creatures will survive.

The camera pans the beach and we briefly see Flora bent over and vomiting: a parsimonious signifier of their wretched voyage and a typical Campion "ugly" touch. The camera pans to a large collection of packaged possessions spread out along the beach. And there in all its real and symbolic weight, against the background of the massive crashing waves, sits Ada's prized possession, her crated piano. The artifacts of Victorian civilization stranded on the antipodal beach and their owners dressed in elaborate layers of clothing seem ominously out of place. This is the meeting place of two worlds and mother and daughter are chattel sold from one to the other. Ada and Flora, out of Scotland and far from ordinary, are, with the other British émigrés, the anthropological specimens -- the alien others -- of Campion's film. The Maoris appear in this film not as exotic objects of study but as a Greek chorus and contrast; the clarity of their naive innocence is testimony to the civilized eccentricity of the white folks.

Ada's future husband, Stewart, and her future lover, Baines, arrive with a group of Maoris to help bring the women back. Ada and Flora are virtually zoo "specimens" as the two white men and the Maoris, more and less obviously, examine them. No director can have taken greater pains to make her leading lady look plain. Ada's hair is hidden in a black bonnet and the camera feasts on the severity of every expression of this unadorned heroine. Campion makes that naked face unforgettable. Stewart responds negatively to Ada's "heterogeneity" and he complains to

responds negatively to Ada's strangeness and he complains to Baines that the undersized Ada is stunted. He will never overcome the sin of his instant reaction, and he compounds the difficulty when, with the certain judgment of a man confident of his reasonableness and virtue, he refuses to carry Ada's unwieldy piano back to their settlement. Imprisoned in her muteness, Ada's piano is the sole source of her freedom -- playing works of her own creation. Campion's symbolism, like Freud's, makes the connection between the sacred and the profane. Playing the piano is Ada's consuming and sacred passion, a cry of the free spirit up to heaven. But playing the piano also has a sexual meaning that comes straight out of the Freudian text as a symbol of autoeroticism. The man who is to be Ada's husband is oblivious to all this. He abandons the icon on the beach. No film ever had a more perfect title.

Campion immediately reveals the instant chemistry of emotions among the characters on the beach. The future husband responds to his mail order bride like a man who has been cheated on the deal but swallows his gall. The future lover looks at her with sympathetic curiosity. Ada, the center of the triangle smolders with rage and despises them both. When the husband who is apparently unable to consummate his marriage leaves on a trip, she turns to Baines only in the hope that she can induce him to fetch her piano. Whatever else Baines is, he is a perfect Levi-Straussian figure: a white man gone native with tattoos on his face, he mediates the categories of British and Maori. He is a man without education, without manners, and without restraints; in every respect, the antithesis of Ada. And in a Levi-Straussian myth he is the perfect match for her.

Baines is intrigued enough to take mother and daughter back to the beach, where Ada plays her piano in passages of exultant reunion while Flora in her white petticoat dances and does cartwheels. The scene ends with an aerial shot in which we see that a huge sea serpent -- a classic symbol in fables of origin -- has mysteriously appeared, beautifully constructed out of shells and sand. Flora seems to emerge from it as they leave. Out of this ceremonial gathering on the beach has come a serpent, and out of this serpent has come a spirit/maiden, and out of this spirit/maiden will come disaster. It is anthropological storytelling, and Campion's touch of magical realism. There is no musical instrument more romantic than the piano and whatever symbolism it conveys should not obscure the beautiful music it produces. Ada's music is art as the liberation of imprisoned passion.

Once intrigued by Ada, Baines is now hooked and devises a scheme. Ada's husband is desperate to buy property, fence it in, and put his stamp of personal ownership on it. Stewart is the Levi-Straussian antithesis to the Maori: he exemplifies the colonizing white man's preoccupation with individual ownership of land, whereas the supposedly savage Maoris regard their lands as a sacred communal resource of the people. The Maoris consider the husband's acquisitiveness a kind of foolishness, natural company for his "dried up balls." Campion packs this anthropological conception into the husband's character along with Freudian obsessive compulsive traits. "Old dried up balls" is

an impotent man destined to be a cuckold, a character and a caricature at the same time. The half-native Baines takes advantage of the colonizer's greed for ownership and exchanges 80 acres of his own land for the piano. The husband, undone by his greed, has sold his wife and he insists that she give Baines piano lessons.

Baines has no interest in piano lessons. But he talks Ada, who finds him repulsive, into an exchange. She will earn her piano back, black key by black key, if she will tolerate his indecent sexual advances while she plays. Ada, forced to submit to unwanted contact with Baines to regain the piano her husband sold without her consent, is doubly wronged by men. But Ada's need for the piano outweighs her rage and resentment. She is imprisoned and Baines begins to use her in a one-sided relationship located somewhere between rape and forced prostitution. Despite the awful crudeness and the indignity of it all, however, we begin to sense Ada's willingness as Baines ups the stakes, more keys in exchange for more sexual favors from Ada.

By giving her the power to bargain with him, Baines has liberated something in Ada. He is the only man in New Zealand to appreciate her beauty and to respect her autonomy. Still, what is going on has all the overtones of sado-masochistic domination with the unwilling female victim eventually exploding into passionate response to this repulsive and coercive man. For some feminists this kind of interchange is the most hated reenactment in the repertoire of sexual narratives. It reinforces the male fantasy that what a woman wants and finds exciting is sexual brutality from a primitive man. Campion has certainly played out this masochistic and Freudian version of female sexuality to demonstrate another variation of imprisonment and freedom. There are dangers of overinterpretation here, of smothering Gothic narrative under Levi-Strauss and Freud. But Campion's arch symbolism makes the temptation too great to resist. Her heroine Ada is at the same time a spirit being who creates beautiful music and a sexually repressed European woman repelled by the new world. Campion repeatedly portrays Ada stepping into the muck and mire of the New Zealand landscape with shoes totally ill suited for the purpose and her skirt dragging in the filth. Baines as the "repulsive" European gone native reconciles her to the new world. He is also the one who recognizes the sexual passion contained in Ada's piano playing. He breaks into Ada's sublimated autoeroticism with a brutal display of his own and then both are imprisoned by their passion for each other. Despite his coarse sexual overtures, Baines is somehow worshipful, and in the course of his masturbatory exploitation of Ada has fallen in love with her. Sickened now by his coercive and degrading bargain, he wants Ada only if she wants him, and is prepared to send her away. He returns her piano. She must now give herself to him of her own free will, if at all, and that is the liberating moment when her sexual passion explodes -- first in furious slaps and then in eager, openmouthed kisses. Naked, Holly Hunter is suddenly ravishing. Now imprisoned by sexual passion, Ada is ready to rush to Baines whenever she has the chance. But Flora, shut out of her exclusive

place in her mother's heart, spies on Ada. Transformed by envious rage, she turns into the evil spirit and betrays Ada to Stewart.

The husband's own sexual advances have been refused and his potency is in question with what he had taken to be a frigid and prudish woman. He learns otherwise when he pursues his wife to Baines's hut with its see through walls, and, like Flora before him, watches Ada's unrestrained sexuality. He is amazed, part peeping Tom and part outraged husband. At this ultimate moment of high melodrama, Campion strikes a low almost vulgar note. Ada has arrived in all of her elaborate Victorian clothing. Baines, unable to wait, is down on his knees under the hoop skirt tent, and Ada leans back in apparent pleasure. While the incredulous husband watches, his dog begins to lap his hand noisily in another unmistakable doubling. Campion finds humor in Levi-Strauss's binary variation.

The husband satisfies himself in some strange way by watching - - at least he does not interfere. But after this he unsuccessfully attempts to rape his wife and then imprisons Ada and Flora in the homestead by nailing shut the door and windows. Now possessed by an uncontrollable sexual passion, Ada begins to fondle her daughter as Baines had fondled Ada. Campion had earlier shown the mother and daughter to us in overexcited tickling play emphasizing their libidinal bond that shut everyone else out -- particularly the impotent husband who watches them. Now she has her heroine move to the edge of overt sexual contact/sexual abuse of her daughter. Ada wakes in apparent horror. Losing control, she turns to her husband to exorcise her sexual passion in a controlled way. She will be sexual with him but he must accept her touches without touching her. Here Campion plays another Freudian card and has Ada's scented hand stroke between her husband's buttocks. It is not sexual attraction, but the classic victim as victimizer. Reenacting her own experience - - another doubling -- she does to her bewildered husband what Baines did to her, succeeds in gaining control of her sexual passion, and is able to promise her husband she will not go to Baines. Trusting and misunderstanding her, he takes down the bars.

But Ada is still in love with Baines and he is now more important than her self-expressive piano -- as she proves by removing a key, marking it with her promise of love, and pressing Flora to take it to him. Feeling the loss of her mother's love as bitterly as Stewart, Flora, the evil spirit, takes the tell-tale key to him rather than Baines. The piano has lost a key and now the wife will lose her finger. Here the archetypes of the unconscious resonate with fantasies of ritual mutilation. Campion has shown us a symbolic clitoridectomy, Ada cut off from the flesh of her passion. The scene that is so objectionable is essential to Campion's narrative. The punishment symbolically fits the sexual crime. Castration of women by clitoridectomy was once prescribed by western physicians as a treatment for excessive masturbation and as a religious ritual continues to this day for millions of African women. Campion's scene, whether feminist or not, speaks eloquently of patriarchy's brutal denial of female passion in all its liberating possibilities

recreating possibilities.

Flora, a witness to the price of her act of betrayal, screams in horror, but even more eloquent is Ada's muteness. Silently, she staggers a few steps into a puddle and with her hoop skirts billowing around her collapses in the mud. Flora is made to deliver the finger, instead of the piano key, to Baines.

Stewart, unable to be a man with his strong wife, is now sexually aroused by her victimized condition and undoes his pants. But when Ada's eyes open, Stewart is stopped in his tracks, and hears the voice that sounds in her mind. He must let her leave with Baines.

Their belongings, including the piano, are placed in a Maori vessel and they set off from the beach in a spectacular scene. When they are at sea, Ada unexpectedly tells Baines through Flora that she wants the piano thrown overboard. He reluctantly complies and when the piano is heaved into the sea it begins to sink like an anchor. And like an anchor it has a rope which snakes around Ada's leg and pulls her out of the boat and under the sea. The piano that liberated her passion is now to be the cause of her final imprisonment. It is an appropriate tragic ending of the melodrama -- or so Campion wants us to think, as she prolongs the scene in slow motion. But Ada suddenly resists, regains the surface, and is saved. Her inner voice tells us that it was not she who chose to live but the imprisoning iron will that is the other. Here, for the first time, Campion's narrative seems to falter in uncertainty.

The film ends with ambiguity. Baines, Ada, and Flora move to a town where Ada, fitted out with a metal finger, gives real piano lessons and is learning to speak. Baines is there to love her and so is Flora. But Ada dreams of still being attached to the piano in the deep sea. Here we return to *The Piano's* deep structure of imprisonment and freedom. Imprisoned by silence, by passion, by bars, by men, by New Zealand, by Victorian custom, and by the will that was not her own, Ada escapes to freedom and finds her voice. But in that escape she loses her finger, her piano, her passion, and her genius. Caught, finally, in the ordinariness of a life without art, she dreams of the imprisoning silence of death.

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