The Piano (1993)

Heike Paul

dir. Jane Campion; prod. Jan Chapman; screenplay Jane Campion; photography Stuart Dryburgh; music Michael Nyman. 35mm, color, 117 mins. Jan Chapman Productions CIBY 2000, distrib. BAC Films, Miramax Films.

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The Piano, a settler-colonialist melodrama set in 19th century New Zealand, is an internationally acclaimed film—winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival (awarded for the first time to a film by a female director) and of three Oscars. Initially considered an *auteur* film (Jane Campion was the creative mind behind the film as writer and director), *The Piano* successfully brought »antipodean cinema« (Moine 189) to screens worldwide and due to its sheer popularity quickly moved beyond the label of an »art film« (Simmons 149).

The film about a Scotswoman being sent to the colony with her young daughter (and her piano) has had a mixed and even polarized critical reception. On the one hand, it has been widely applauded as part of a global history of films by women and for women with its focus on a narrative of female emancipation. Feminist critics such as Denis Bauer, Pennie Pflueger, and Hilary Radner have appreciated Campion's depiction of female subjectivity and desire in what was described as a »feminist tale of resistance« (Bauer). The film is also seen indebted (unacknowledged by Campion herself) to Jane Mander's 1920 book *The Story of a New Zealand River* (Fox), whose author was a New Zealand journalist and novelist who later became an activist in the women's suffrage movement in the U.S. On the other hand, critics (mostly) from New Zealand, strongly criticized the film for its colonialist and racist depiction of the indigenous population of Aotearoa. For all its cinematographic dream-like atmosphere and enchanted alterity, the film bears obvious similarities to films in the colonial melodrama-mold and portrays Māori characters in racialized stereotypes. Both, seemingly incommensurable perspectives (feminist and postcolonial) have shaped the critical discourse around *The Piano* as melodrama.

The protagonist, Ada McGrath Stewart (played by Holly Hunter) has been mute since she was six years old, expressing herself in a sign language that her daughter Flora (played by Anna Paquin) can translate—and through her playing the piano. Still, her voice opens and ends the filmic narration speaking from the off. Little information is offered about the father of her child when Ada is sent as a mail-order bride with her daughter to New Zealand to marry colonial landowner Alisdair Stewart (played by Sam Neill), a man she has never met. In her new home in the »bush,« she meets other British settlers, among them George Baines (played by Harvey Keitel), a neighboring farmer who seems to have »gone native«: He wears an incomplete *moko* (facial tattoo) and socializes with the Māori population in their language. In fact, Hendershot reads him as representative of a non-traditional, i.e. non-hegemonic, European masculinity (100). What unfolds is a dark love story that has been said to echo Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (for its Gothic elements and its evocation of 19th century Victorian literature; Hendershot; Peréz-Riu), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (for its feminist impetus; Pflueger), and John Huston's *African Queen* (for its colonialist underpinnings; Frey). In sum: »Campion's twentieth-century story of liberating passion both relies on and reproduces nineteenth-century western colonial mythologies of sex and race, the fundamental ›relationships of power‹« (DuPuis 52), and thus the feminist and the postcolonial reading of the film are intertwined after all, in complex ways. Moreover, from the perspective of disability studies, the portrayal of Ada's muteness and mutilation »challenge[s] conventional representations of disability« (Molina 280) by envisioning different forms of language and communication (sight and sound) and thereby granting Ada a subject status and agency.

From the beginning, Alisdair, rigid and narrow-minded, cannot quite grasp the importance of the piano for his wife-to-be and her single-mindedness about playing it—and after her arrival he leaves it behind on the beach—it seems extravagant and out of place in the colony. After transportation has been organized (it is the Māori working for the white settlers who carry the instrument from the seaside to the house), George, who is intrigued by Ada's obsession with the piano, suggests buying it from Alisdair in return for a piece of land and piano lessons from Ada. Alisdair agrees, and Ada, outraged by this transaction (she writes on her notepad: »The piano is mine. It is MINE«), eventually complies as this is the only way for her to have access to her instrument. Her visits to George take a different turn, as he wants to watch and touch her while she is playing. Through sexual favors, he suggests, she can earn the piano back, key by key. During their »lessons,« little Flora has to remain outside and, used to being around her mother constantly, she becomes jealous of George, prompting her to insinuate to her stepfather that George does not play the piano when Ada visits. When Alisdair stops by George's house, he, unbeknownst to Ada and George, voyeuristically witnesses their sexual intimacy. Soon thereafter, Alisdair locks his wife and her daughter up, boarding the windows and bolting the door. When Ada tries to send a message with a piano key to George through Flora as a token of her affectionate longing, Flora takes it to Alisdair instead, who, enraged, cuts off Ada's digit finger. During her recovery and a delirious sleep, Alisdair finds Ada communicating with him, quasi-telepathic, discouraging his rape attempt of her and asking him to let her go away with George. In the end, George, Ada, and Flora leave, yet the film offers two different kinds of closure (Simmons 154-55): Ordering the piano to be plunged overboard as their boat departs, Ada willfully steps into a coil of rope tied to the piano that drags her down to the bottom of the sea with it. Her death seems imminent, signaling a tragic, melodramatic

ending to the tale of illicit love, now on the verge of becoming respectable. But then she struggles to free herself from the rope, eventually reappears on the surface, and is helped back into the boat. In the final ending, the three of them settle in Nelson, and the glimpses of their new life show Ada and her piano to have become thoroughly domesticated: she wears a prosthesis (made by George) for her missing finger, gives piano lessons, and practices speaking with a hood over her head. These disciplining acts question the idea of a »happy ending« and signify conventional domesticity and containment that are at odds with the earlier female liberation plot of the film. The latter, however, is compromised from the beginning, as it is predicated on the aesthetics and politics of colonization of »other« others, the indigenous people of New Zealand. The film does little to project an intersectional approach to its subject matter, instead, it relies on well-rehearsed colonialist formulas of romanticization (of nature: the New Zealand forest is cast as Gothic scenario) and infantilization (of people: the Māori appear mostly as child-like and lacking libidinal control).

Following the path of feminist interpretations, scholars have extrapolated from the intra-diegetic performance of the »Bluebeard«-fairy tale in a shadow play in the film and have pointed to a tradition of feminist re-telling of this story in the work of women writers (including Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter). In *The Piano*, »Bluebeard is not so much a story referred to in the film, as the film's underlying story« (Lovell-Smith 43) as the tale is seen to be reworked in *The Piano* as well—involving all standard features of said fairy-tale: captivity, violence, mutilation, and a (piano)key. Alisdair as a lesser Bluebeard chops off Ada's finger, as she has the »key« and sends it to George against his order. During the play, its make-believe effect generates strong responses from the Māori audience who (it is suggested) are so naïve as to take the violent proceedings on the stage at face value and make the performance end prematurely.

This is where the illusion of the film's narrative of female emancipation with its »surreal aura of emotional intensity« (DuPuis 57) ends as well, because the emancipation plot centered on Ada in the orbit of the white settlers clearly exploits the indigenous population, as »the film's sexual symbolism relies heavily on profoundly racist depictions of the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand and on culturally coded, deeply racialized representations of their land. […] In scene after scene, the Māori and their land have very little: independent meaning outside their metonymic representations of the white characters and their relationships« (DuPuis 52 and 66). U.S.-American critic bell hooks has similarly contested *The Piano*'s feminism: »*The Piano* seduces and excites audiences with its uncritical portrayal of sexism and misogyny. Reviewers and audiences alike seem to assume that Campion's gender, as well as her breaking of traditional boundaries that inhibit the advancement of women in film, indicate that her work expresses a feminist standpoint.« This is not the case; instead, this melodrama »betrays feminist visions of female actualization« (hooks). This criticism of *The Piano* and at times also of melodrama *per se*, may be quite harsh, but it points to the political at the core of the aesthetic. After all, Campion's film is a melodrama about race, colonialism, gender, and sexuality, whose 19th century setting is imbued with allusions to Freudian psychoanalysis, in particular the »dark continent«-metaphor he reserved for the psyche of women. While the analogy of the unconscious and the undoing of what has been psychologically repressed with an unknown territory and its »discovery« qua colonization and re-settlement may make for spectacular cinematography, it also re-enforces the colonial gaze, this time through the »imperial eyes« (Pratt) of a woman.

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