# Weird Lullaby

## Jane Campion's *The Piano*

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### Abstract

This article examines the construction of woman's voice, gaze and desire in Jane Campion's Oscar-winning film *The Piano*, 1993, with particular reference to the film's central character, Ada, and to the traditional female figures which her character suggests – siren, mermaid, Little Red Riding Hood, Bluebeard's wife. It investigates the ways in which *The Piano* interrogates and disturbs traditional patriarchal narratives, ways of speaking and seeing, and patriarchal constructions of bodily pleasure and desire; revealing these as partial, hard of hearing, short sighted and incapable of pleasure. It argues that while the film succeeds in this interrogation, it goes further in its attempt to envisage forms of speech, sight and pleasure which do not conform to traditional models based on the notion of rigid oppositions between self and other, masculine and feminine, active and passive. Instead, by focusing on mutual pleasure, sensuality, communication and the ability to be moved, it sets in motion 'other' ways of experiencing and understanding women's voices, looks, desires.

It concludes that *The Piano* articulates a demand for an encounter with men, in which women are neither marginalized as 'the feminine' *nor* re-incorporated into a patriarchal order; and imagines the possibility of both autonomy and connection, power and pleasure.



### Keywords

Campion; *The Piano*; representation of woman; silent heroine; 'the gaze'; communication


### Men's tales, women's tales

Men's tales, whether they are the traditional tales of myth and folklore, or the scientific tales which make up discourses such as psychoanalysis, are a set of fictions about women which say a great deal, and yet nothing at all about their subject matter. Such tales are often composed as riddles, but they turn women into riddles. They pose questions like 'what do women want?' but do not allow women to compose an answer:

> women . . . are considered merely as the *objects* of desire, and as the *objects* of the question. To the extent that women '*are* the question', they cannot *enunciate* the question; they cannot be the speaking *subjects* of the knowledge . . . that the question seeks.
>
> (Felman, in de Lauretis, 1984: 111)

If it is men who ask the questions, unsurprisingly it is male desire which the answers address. What she wants turns out to be what he wants. Within such tales 'the itinerary of the female's journey . . . is guided by a compass pointing . . . to the fulfilment of the promise made to "the little man" . . . And so her story . . . is a question of his desire' (de Lauretis, 1984: 133). But this begs questions of a different sort. What happens when the question is asked by a woman? What happens if *she* is allowed to tell the tale?

Jane Campion's film, *The Piano*, is the tale of a woman's journey from her father's to her husband's house, and is, according to Campion, 'a gothic exploration of the romantic impulse' (Campion, 1993a: 6). Both Gothic and Romantic tales have been seen as offering their female characters and readers a pleasant journey within the structure of a patriarchal narrative (Modleski, 1982: 40–1). What he wants turns out to be what *she* wants. Like most art created by women in the period during which *The Piano* is set, these are tales in which women's questions and voices are 'heard only indirectly' (Bruzzi, 1993: 7).

Ada, the heroine of *The Piano*, is silent; she cannot speak. What is more she recalls a number of figures from traditional tales – the mermaid, the silent bride, Little Red Riding Hood, Bluebeard's Wife, Barbara Allen – which on the face of it suggest little hope of her winning the right to speak. Such figures seem only to embody that set of questions which men have asked about women and answered themselves, finding them to be alien, disorderly creatures who bring down punishment upon themselves unless they sacrifice themselves for love, trading their desires for men's protection. *The Piano* is haunted by these 'other' women, and, like them, Ada is first punished for her behaviour and then saved by men. Yet it is from such unlikely material that Campion constructs what must be seen as a woman's tale, in which her character, Ada, speaks seductively for female desire.

The power of the 'one' over the 'other', of the Patriarch over women and children, and the colonial over indigenous peoples, demands the erection of a regime of representations which approve only what he says and sees, allowing him to define them, secure them in their place, while relegating *their* speech, *their* looks to a chaotic realm of unintelligibility. The setting of *The Piano* with its emphasis on displacement – of Ada and her daughter from their own country to this new land, of the Maoris from the ownership of their own land – draws attention to the ways in which the patriarchal and colonial Symbolic Order marginalizes women, children and indigenous peoples. At the same time, this context of displacement in a country not yet colonized provides the setting for struggle and resistance; it is 'a space of difference' (Gillett, 1995: 285) and possibility.[1] What I want to argue is that *The Piano* disrupts this regime of representations, holds a mirror up to it which reveals it as partial, hard of hearing, short sighted and incapable of pleasure. What is more, it sets in motion 'other' ways of experiencing and understanding women's voices, looks, desires.





## The silent bride

There is a long established tradition of tales whose heroines are silent. Often they come from the sea, as Ada does when she travels to meet her husband. This tradition includes tales of selkies and undines, mysterious sea-brides who take human husbands for a time, and who will not speak of where they come from, as well as the more modern Little Mermaid who trades her tongue and her underworld kingdom for love and is required to suffer and die for it. Marina Warner argues that such tales may have their origins in classical myths of sirens, whose beguiling voices represent knowledge. In these later versions, Warner argues, depictions of the sirens' wisdom are replaced by fascinated representations of 'the feminine'; the sea-bride/mermaid stands for a mysterious female 'other' world which is both alluring and dangerous. Typically, this figure can only redeem herself through her own obliteration (Warner, 1994: 396–408).

This tradition works to position women as embodiments of sex and death, and proclaims that women are ultimately unknowable as speaking subjects. It makes women a silence into which men speak, a blank sheet on which male desire inscribes its fears and fantasies. In *The Piano*, Stewart, Ada's husband, can only hear his wife's silence as that of a 'dumb animal'. For him, Ada's piano, which she tells us is her voice, is merely a thing which can be bartered for land, and her body is just another object which he has acquired for his use. Warner notes that silent heroine tales both celebrate and challenge the silence and silencing of women. Silence may denote sincerity, offer proof that the heroine is above corruption, although as often as not it may be a mechanism by which male characters are redeemed or simply suited. But silence may also be mutinous – a refusal to speak. Analyses of nineteenth-century women's hysteria have drawn attention to the element of defiance in silence which might be seen as a refusal to speak men's language, to sweeten compliance with assent. Thus, 'Ada is mute . . . unresponsive, taut with restrictions and unexpressed anger' (Warner, 1994: 405).

Ada has not spoken since she was six years old. Her silence is ambiguous; a 'dark talent', and within the film it highlights the silencing of female tongues and enacts a refusal of the dominant tongue – for speech may be a trap used from outside herself as a means of making sense of her. As Kaja Silverman argues, 'the female subject ... is associated with unreliable, thwarted, or acquiescent speech' (Silverman, 1990: 309). What she says carries no authority; moreover, 'she is spoken even when she seems to be in control of her own speech' (Silverman, 1990: 312–13). Within mainstream cinema the synchronization of her appearance and her voice act as the means of her surveillance. Under a controlling gaze, she 'becomes almost synonymous with the corporeal and the specular'; her body is constructed 'in ways which are accessible to the gaze' (Silverman, 1990: 313). This process works not only to enforce the position of woman as an object which is looked at, but to construct her as that which connotes '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' (Mulvey, 1989: 19). Unlike other forms of looking, the male gaze is an attempted act of possession and ownership in which woman is given meaning, held in place and turned into an object of desire which contains the threat that she represents for man. Furthermore, as writers such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have stressed, language is the currency of the Symbolic Order and the Father. To speak as a woman may only be a choice between unintelligibility or having to 'attest in a familiar language to dominant values' (Silverman, 1990: 313). Silverman argues that a disembodiment of the female subject, which would allow her to be seen without being heard, or heard without being seen, would render her 'inaccessible to definitive male interpretation ... put her beyond the control of the male gaze [and] ... open the possibility of woman participating in phallic discourse, and so [escape] the interrogation about her place, her time and her desires which constantly re-secures her' (Silverman, 1990: 313). In *The Piano* Ada's voice is disembodied; put into the mouths of other silent heroines, translated (by her daughter, Flora) and 'performed' through sign language and balletic gesture, and these displacements work to disrupt synchronicity and make a kind of gap in her positioning as insufficient, known, lacking. Ada's voice is always elsewhere; in her fingers, in the piano, in her daughter's mouth, in her music. Key images in the film reinforce this disembodiment very strikingly; we first see Ada as a blurred, delicate, red pattern, which slowly becomes an image of her face, covered by her fingers, while her 'mind's voice' addresses the audience directly. This serves to position her as inaccessible to a male gaze, while investing her disembodied voice with authority. Her own silence is presented as ambiguous, 'I don't think of myself as silent', and the reason for it, mysterious, 'no one knows why. Not even me.' At the end of the film we see Ada's silent body floating at the bottom of the sea, while she addresses the audience again, speaking of her new-found voice, a voice which still claims





silence as her own, 'It is a weird lullaby; and so it is. It is mine.' Such complex images, which work to disembody and privilege Ada's speech and silence as the organizing voice of the film, also work to interrogate commonsense notions of language, expression and understanding. For while the film shows Stewart as hard of hearing and invests Ada's voice with authority, it also refuses to make that authority oppositional and fixed, to make it into a *thing*. Ada's voice is not simply another voice, another version, but something set in a different register altogether. It suggests something of both Irigaray's *le parler femme* and Kristeva's *semiotic* – in which that which is repressed (woman, the marginalized) exceeds and disrupts the master language of the Symbolic Order. Throughout this tale Ada's voice speaks sensuously, inventively through play, touch, dance, song and storytelling. With Baines, the man who becomes her lover, she establishes a complex system of communication, organized around clothes, sensuality and Baines' desire to listen to her music. Indeed Ada's voice is most closely associated with a music which expresses her 'strange will'; a displaced voice, wayward and compelling. This notion of voice as music is a seductive one; it envisions communication as a process which is infinitely changeable (Ada's piece is reworked constantly to express her mood and her desires), sensual, and ambiguous – for music refuses to be reduced to a matter of statements and demands, questions and answers. Ada's desire cannot be 'expected to speak the same language as man's' (Irigaray, in Bruzzi, 1995: 264) and 'Her "style" resists and explodes all firmly established forms, figures, ideas, concepts' (Irigaray, in Moi, 1990: 145); if Ada is, in many senses, a character in someone else's stories, her music marks an insistent, ravishing kind of speech which knocks against the sides of the story, refusing to be wrapped up neatly inside it. Ada will not give a coherent or credible account of herself within the terms of narrative. She will not be interrogated, explain herself or 'attest in a familiar language to dominant values'. She is even audacious enough to demand a listener; refusing to let herself become a blank sheet for men to write upon (white sheets are shown in the film as backdrops for Bluebeard's unfortunate dismembered wives), rejecting sheet music for her own compositions, insisting on her desire for a lover on whose mind she can 'lay thoughts ... like a sheet'. Ada is less 'unknowable' than misunderstood by her husband, but all the same she will not easily explain herself. For, as Ada tells us from the outset, she fails herself to comprehend her mysterious relationship to her own voice and finds her own will 'strange'. Perhaps she does not know what she wants to say either. If *The Piano* initiates an exploration of language and of 'expression beyond language' (Francke, 1993: 51), of communication between mother and daughter, of desire between woman and man, it is one which will not be content with simple answers. To the question, 'What do women want?', Ada does not offer an explanation. Perhaps

the only possible answer is that first she must be listened to if she is to discover what she wants.

## Bluebeard's wife

Tales like 'Bluebeard' and 'Little Red Riding Hood' provide moral commentaries on the wayward curiosity of women, their desire to look and the punishment they should expect for this. Like the narrative of the Fall, such tales use female curiosity as an emblem of the dangerous nature of women's sexuality, though, by sleight of hand, it is the danger to women, not men, which the tales insist upon. The beastliness of the men who mete out punishment in these tales is, however, rarely subjected to comment or judgement; husbands must be obeyed, wolves are simply wolfish.

In these tales 'looking' usurps male privilege, shows heroines who put their desires first and intrude into powerful spaces from which they are forbidden. They are punished not only literally and bloodily in the course of the story, but also by the structure of the narrative itself, which metes out punishment, inviting the reader to focus on her, look at her. And she turns out to be what is most visible; her body: the shame of Bluebeard's wife is made visible as a bloody mark, Red Riding Hood's culpability is displayed in her costume and she is turned into an object of the wolf's 'big eyes' before she is devoured. In *The Piano*, Ada too is frequently constructed by her husband as an object of the male gaze. This gaze cannot see *her*; it is self-reflexive. He gazes on himself, on his own desire: 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice his natural size' (Woolf, 1929: 35). As he prepares to meet her for the first time Stewart uses Ada's portrait as a mirror. He goes to enormous, even bizarre, lengths to construct her in his own image, make her part of his story; staging a 'wedding' picture with the help of romantic props in a sea of mud, dressing his wife in a borrowed gown and cutting her daughter out of the picture altogether. Later he turns a crack in Baines' cottage door into a peephole in order to spy on their love-making. While the film alludes to tales of women's fatal curiosity it is Stewart's voyeurism, his inability to see anything other than himself, which is highlighted as perverse.

Analyses of the gaze (Mulvey, 1989) have tended to focus on the impossibility of breaking away from a structure which necessitates a dominant subject and submissive object. E. Ann Kaplan argues that while it might be possible to produce films in which the woman looks, the structure of looking remains the same. Thus the man may become an object of the woman's gaze and the woman the 'bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action' (Kaplan, 1984: 330). But in the process the man becomes feminized





and the woman is masculinized. They have changed places but the places are still the same. In *The Piano* such specular logic is both interrogated and undercut. The controlling gaze of Stewart is revealed as a perverse gaze and divested of its power. For although Ada is constructed by Stewart as an object of his gaze she offers him an impassive mask-like response – *so* blank contrasted with her expressiveness elsewhere that it becomes a rebuff, a mutinous hiding place for herself. Stewart's attempts at a controlling gaze which will secure the illusion he needs to see are continually undercut by Ada's blankness and are largely unsuccessful. Ada's 'wedding' is a cheap stunt where even the Reverend tries on the wedding dress, itself a photographer's prop. Patriarchal fictions of ownership unravel as Ada tears off the cheap dress.

If Stewart's controlling gaze is rebuffed and mocked, ways of seeing which evade dominant structures of looking and being looked at are set in motion in the depiction of Ada's relationships with her daughter and with her lover. They open up a space where difference is not recast as the 'one', a reflection of 'men at twice their size', or the 'other', unfathomable, alien, lacking. Whereas Stewart's gaze is an attempt to contain Ada, to pacify and control her, the looks which Ada exchanges with Flora and Baines open up possibilities, create pleasures, negotiate bargains, admit difference. Thus, the relationship between Ada and Flora is established in a series of scenes shot in a glowing golden light where they play, telling tales together. Here, looking involves sensual rather than sadistic pleasure, proximity rather than distance. Looking is an exchange, a joint venture, a mutual enjoyment. Ada and Flora enjoy a 'mutual gazing' which Kaplan argues is 'set in motion in the mother–child relationship' (Kaplan, 1984: 336), and which she tentatively suggests might provide a model for a kind of looking which not only allows for a change of subject position, but offers a different structure of looking altogether. Ada's relationship with Baines is also constructed through unusual and challenging kinds of looking. An early scene, showing Ada's reception by her husband and his entourage, singles out Baines as a man who sees what others miss. To the Maoris she is 'pale as angels', to Stewart she is 'stunted'. Only Baines sees *her*, simply as 'tired'. But the film does not simply set Stewart's gaze in opposition to the looks of Flora, Ada and Baines in order to provide a simple contrast between 'male' and 'female' realms. While a certain mirroring of looks and speech of and between the women in the film suggest the difference and marginalization of women's language and culture, they also suggest tensions within and between women. Ada and Flora often mirror one another, they speak, look and move as one; when Ada takes Flora to visit Baines for the first time their looks and movements are very obviously and precisely synchronized. Similarly, Nessie's voice is often an

echo of Aunt Morag's and their Maori servant girls sing the national anthem in unison. Visually, aurally and physically, then, the women in the film often appear as pairs or doubles. But these doubles are unhappy and trapped; Nessie's echoing of Morag shows her to be a pale and dominated shadow of her aunt, the Maori servant girls sing an anthem which is not their own. If Ada inhabits a female realm which resists patriarchy, it nevertheless leaves her sealed up, separate, unable to act on her desires. Indeed, it is the awakening of Ada's desire for Baines which disrupts her closeness to Flora and her disconnection from the wider world – after this Flora will be shut out of the love-making and left to peer voyeuristically in, like her 'father'. Ada's desire reaches out to demand an encounter with another, with someone who in many ways appears to be her enemy; a man who has bought her voice and intends to watch her play.

The scenes in which Ada 'teaches' Baines to play the piano are important in establishing the terms of this encounter between a woman and a man, which marks a split between Ada and Flora and a departure from their shared world. These play with a kind of looking which eschews a simple model of surveyor and surveyed, of active/passive looking. Ada and Baines play with the power of the look and of desire, carefully, precisely, thoughtfully. Stewart has traded Ada's piano with Baines for land. Ada is to win back her piano by allowing Baines to do 'things' while she plays; allow him to watch her, listen to her, touch her. While it is Baines who initiates this bargaining system it is Ada who elaborates the complex system of rules which govern the detail and currency of the bargain; when and at what Baines may look, what touching will be permitted, what value each action will carry (reckoned in black keys – when they are all used up the piano will be hers). This is a private and unusual negotiation which avoids conventional structures of voyeuristic male gazing. Each scene between them is carefully choreographed to focus on their responses to one another so that it is their negotiation with power and with power in looking which is highlighted. Their sense of uncertainty about how to proceed, about how to negotiate the rules of their own strange game, disrupts any sense of a fixed regime of male/female positioning. Initially it is Baines who looks at Ada as she plays, although his face clearly registers responses to her music as well as the desire to look. As their relationship develops there is a greater exchange of looks between them, and eventually a point at which looking is replaced by other sensual pleasures as they become absorbed, reflective, enraptured by the music. Baines listens, Ada plays for herself. The characters mirror one another; Ada rapt in her playing, Baines burying his face in the jacket she has removed on his request. The conventional repertoire of cinematic looks is abandoned in favour of something stranger and subtler. But this process is not shown as a natural, inevitable journey





towards love. Ada monitors the proceedings closely and is quick to redraw boundaries which are overstepped. A wrong move on Baines' part is met with angry resistance; in one scene Ada destroys the mood with cheery, mocking music, in another she snatches back the jacket which Baines is caressing. Through this system of bargaining Ada finds that not only is she literally able to win back her 'voice', but that her own desire and male desire might not be mutually exclusive after all; the longing, loving looks which are initially directed at her piano eventually include Baines himself; and while Stewart uses her image as a mirror for himself, Baines' interest prompts Ada to cast long adoring looks at herself in a mirror. Baines' desire, receptive and attentive, uninterested in set-pieces of sexuality, a listening desire, does not lead to the negation of her own desire, but stokes it, confirms it, makes space for it. What Ada discovers is the possibility of a life where she is not fixed either in the patriarchal order which her husband represents or the otherwordly, mutinous, female realm she has previously inhabited.

The exchange of looks between Ada and Flora, Ada and Baines, takes place within a charmed circle of their own making which Stewart cannot penetrate. Stewart is excluded from their pleasures, can only intrude clumsily or play voyeur and in this sense it is *his* lack which is underscored within the film. However, lack and plenitude, sadism and closeness are not, in this scheme of things, immutable characteristics of sexual relations. If Ada, Flora and Baines look and speak and desire differently, it is because they choose to act in this way. Confined by a system which would fix them as representatives of an 'other world', see and hear them as denizens of a dark continent, they use their 'dark talents' to disturb this system, to sidestep and rewrite its rules. The power of the male gaze, as illustrated in the tales of 'Red Riding Hood' and 'Bluebeard', is questioned and redefined. When Ada and Flora journey through the wood to Baines' cottage, the wolf which awaits them is simply a dog which Flora alternately torments and caresses. If Baines is a wolf, he is one whose look nourishes rather than devours. Flora, dressed in red riding hood and cape, peering into the private, forbidden space which her mother has claimed, discovers no hideous secret, no carnage there. Instead it is her assumption of the role of obedient daughter, Daddy's girl, which unearths the terrible violent face of Stewart, the respectable and orderly Patriarch. The mythic figure of rapacious male desire, outcast, animal, unstoppable, is rewritten here, just as Ada's Red Riding Hood is rewritten as the figure of a woman whose curiosity wins her voice back and wins her a listener too. Earlier I argued that Ada's voice and image are disembodied, displaced elsewhere to inhabit other bodies, other figures; allowing her to escape from 'the interrogation about her place, her time and her desires which constantly re-secures her'. The effect

is to disrupt and disturb the figures of heroines who have been trapped in patriarchal narratives. Red Riding Hood finds an ally in the wolf, the silent sea-bride learns to speak, Barbara Allen escapes death, and Bluebeard's wife makes him listen and let her go. Simultaneously, the defining power, the specular logic of the male figures in these tales is disturbed and interrogated. Baines, as wolf, gladly gives up his power over Ada because it makes her 'a whore' and him 'wretched'. In contrast, Stewart, like Bluebeard, forbids his wife to look, represents her desire as dangerous to herself and brands her as shameful. But his attempts to tame her – his looks, his attempted (and bungled) rape in the woods – fail; his voyeurism, fear of desire and violence mark him as the repressed and dangerous figure in this tale. Like Bluebeard he takes an axe to his wife for her desire and her disobedience; eye, phallus and axe make one last desperate attempt to 'clip her wings'. But again, this scene of Ada's punishment works to undercut the positioning of woman as spectacle, drawing attention, not to the horror of Ada's guilty and wayward body, but to that of Stewart's attempt to control it. Stewart's frenzied violence, Flora's terror and Ada's resistance in this sequence mark a de-eroticization of the fantasy of castration. The ugly and bloody assault in a drenched and mud-soaked clearing highlights Stewart's lack of control and mastery, even in the moment when he attempts to 'castrate' his wife, mutilating a part of her which clearly speaks her waywardness (the finger with which she writes her desires on the body, on the piano with which she speaks). The implicit violence of patriarchal relations is made frighteningly explicit here. Flora's terror that he will 'chop her up' evokes the figure of the castrating Father, but his power to castrate is ultimately shown to be illusory. Stewart cannot tame his wife and his attempts to master her work to point up his lack, his loss. Ada loses a finger (but not her powers of communication or her desire), Stewart loses his wife and child along with his authority and his self-respect. In an ironic presentation of the Bluebeard tale as a play which Ada, Stewart and Baines attend, the power of Bluebeard is unmasked and undercut. He is discovered to be a shadow-figure, a masquerade. Maori warriors, outraged at the cowardice and violence of this narrative, storm the stage to discover the paper-thin theatrical devices which maintain it. Bluebeard is revealed as 'the prick behind the Phallus' (Gallop, 1982: 15–32), dressed up in cardboard armour, brandishing a fake axe behind a sheet. 'Behind the sheet' Stewart is bewildered, vulnerable and terrified, a father who can only demonstrate his own power, his own wholeness through the mutilation of his wife. Ada's look illuminates this fear; it is as though the looking glass in which he seeks to see himself reflected is turned back on him, unveiling his pretension to authority and making visible the cracks in his assumption of sovereignty. When he attempts to rape her a second time, while she is sleeping, it is her look which stops him. It is also her look which makes him listen to her and let her go. And 'As he watches her his face transforms; his eyes fill, his lips soften, and his eyebrows take on the exact expression of her own' (Campion, 1993b: 113). Stewart mirrors Ada here for the first time, instead of turning her into his mirror. He suffers her look and hears her for the first time. He learns that 'One must listen to her differently in order to hear an "other meaning" which is constantly in the process of weaving itself' (Irigaray, in Marks and de Courtivron, 1980: 103).





*The Piano* picks away at patriarchal discourse, specular logic, phallic power; unravels it and shows us something different, something better. When Ada leaves, she is branded and scarred, but her mutilation is a sign of her escape; she has not been annihilated, she is no longer a figure in somebody else's story and she is learning to speak.

## Bodily pleasures

Stewart's inability to respond to Ada suggests a lack of imagination and, more than that, an absence of bodily pleasure; the loss of the ability to be moved. Although Stewart's desire is for his wife, he is unable to give or receive love and pleasure. For him, affection is something bestowed on dumb animals and he is aroused when she is fleeing or unconscious. He cannot accept Ada's caresses either; her curiosity and desire appal him. Ada's voice, look and desire function for Stewart merely as disturbances and obstacles which demand to be tamed, contained or cast out. But if Ada is a site of disturbance, she is also a player in an erotic heterosexual encounter which privileges bodily pleasure, response and the ability to be moved over traditional power relations, beyond the blind spot of patriarchal sexuality.

The erotic sensibility which informs Ada's encounter with Baines, beyond this blind spot, refuses conventional cinematic representations of sexuality. Jane Campion writes:

> I have enjoyed writing characters who don't have a twentieth-century sensibility about sex. We've grown up with so many expectations that the erotic impulse is almost lost to us, but these characters have nothing to prepare them for its strength and power.
>
> (Campion, 1993a: 6)

Campion's project, then, involves an attempt to shrug off modern conventions and understandings of desire. But this is not about stripping away convention to reveal the raw, 'natural' impulses underneath. If the scenes between Ada and Baines provide a striking contrast to the brutality which passes for desire in Stewart's world, or the fearful response with which he meets Ada's caresses, or to our contemporary sexual litanies of toys,

techniques and confessions, it is not through a portrayal of instinct unleashed from the bounds of propriety. Instead, Campion's depiction of their erotic encounter is more like the choreography of a dance, the composition of a piece of music. It is a cultural event, a social encounter. Conventional set-piece representation of sexual desire is replaced by an intricate and highly individualistic exchange worked out through details of clothing, movement, position and space. Each of Ada's visits marks another tentative step in describing and negotiating the relations of power and desire, closeness and separation between them. As she reworks her music, as they bargain for more contact, less contact, work out the details of the boundary between them, they are forced to revise and reconsider the nature and meaning of their encounter. Response, pleasure, the ability to be moved are made human, social here, rather than being outlawed into some kind of 'natural', animal realm. Ada and Baines are like puppets which have struggled free of their strings, and like puppets, move hesistantly, refusing a script in which desire, or love, is simple, obvious, inevitable. They abandon prescribed courting rituals, inventing one to suit their situation instead. Another disembodiment is involved here; the piano becomes the medium of desire, the object which stands in for the body (especially Ada's body – imbued as it is with her scent and with the smell of seasalt), which both covet, and both caress. And through a refusal of script and a disembodiment of desire, a gap is opened in which the characters are separated and made to negotiate a path to each other. Formally, this is accomplished through the complex choreography of the scenes in which the space of Baines' hut is crossed and recrossed. Initially, they move in separate spaces; contact is subject to negotiation, moments of looking and touching must be thought out, bargained for. As they move around, away from and towards the piano, they describe the reworking of their social positions and power and move towards a reconsideration of the terms of their bargain. Baines discovers that there is little pleasure in buying Ada's presence; Ada, having won her piano back, that it is not enough, it no longer gives her pleasure. They move beyond the original terms of their social relationship, giving up the object around which they have based their bargain, and through which they have expressed their desire.

By moving beyond the blind spot, and refusing a script, Ada and Baines are, in a sense, returned to their bodies. Disembodied from the dominant regime of representations, they are re-embodied in a space in which they can discover bodily pleasures. Desire is different here; it counters 'the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibilities of resistance' (Foucault, 1981: 157). In this our contemporary emphasis on the *sight* of sex (an oculocentrism of





both theory and practice) is displaced by a rapture of the senses; of touch, hearing and smell. Theirs is 'not a language of surfaces to be staked and claimed' (Gillett, 1995: 277). The texture of clothes, the smell of bodies, the sound of the piano are central to their experience and expression of pleasure. And this pleasure is pleasure both in each other and in themselves. As Baines buries his head in Ada's jacket, breathing in its smell, Ada shivers in rapture at the sound of her own music. Baines' desire fills her with a pleasure of herself. After they have made love Ada touches herself, looks at herself with pleasure. By refusing to be objectified, she wins back her own body, her own pleasure. And Baines wins too; by giving up his right to buy, to gaze; by listening, responding, allowing himself to be moved, he separates himself from Phallic logic, Phallic power, wins back his body, his pleasure. The rigid oppositions, the fixed boundaries which arbitrarily divide the world up into 'one' or the 'other' have been crossed. There is space here for mutual pleasures.

For the female spectator, Ada's haunting and powerful music opens up a space for a similar response. The spectator is invited to view, but also to become involved, to be moved. Ada's music is 'a mood that passes through you . . . a sound that creeps into you', and like the Siren's liquid song, brings about a response felt in the body and the senses. Her voice creates a mood of uneasiness as well as of rapture. Marina Warner quotes Ruth Padel on the power of such music:

> Innards can be damaged by what comes in through sight and hearing, wounded by emotion. But 'what comes in' also stimulates, and gives innards skill and power. The innards' vulnerability is precious, and makes them a source of power and knowledge. 'What comes in' moves them.
>
> (Warner, 1994: 402)

'What comes in' moves Stewart and his Aunt Morag in a way they can only find distasteful and unnerving (Ada's music unsettles them; it is not 'plain and true', it does not follow strict time). The crossing of boundaries between 'one' and the 'other', the disruption of ways of seeing and hearing which function as a means of surveillance and silencing, and of ways of desiring and loving which seek to turn women into things to be bought and exchanged, catalogued and utilized is disturbing, even terrifying. 'It is in this holy terror of love that we find . . . the source of all opposition to the emancipation of women' (Carter, 1979: 150).

Ada's relationship with Baines is set at a sensual borderline which they open up to 'what comes in', what moves them. The spectator's experience takes place on a similar borderline; she is invited to participate sensually in the film itself. This experience also demands an openness, a receptiveness; it implies movement for it involves 'the communication of the gentle

caress, the smoothing of nimble fingers over sheets and scales' (Francke, 1993: 51). Ada's keys are not, after all, keys to Bluebeard's room or to his dreadful secrets, but keys for playing on, causing shivers with. Bodily pleasures, the ability to be moved, are central to this experience; this cinema of the senses enacts a seduction, wriggles away from answers, demands a response, a listener. With caresses, glances, murmurs and music, *The Piano* enmeshes the spectator in an erotic encounter in which she does not have to lose.

## Learning to speak

At the end of *The Piano*, Ada is forced to choose between two fates: that of a silent but beautiful return to the sea, or that of life as an ordinary mortal woman, learning to speak. As Marina Warner comments, in fairy-tales the mermaid is often erased 'when she wants to leap out of her in-between-ness and become a full human being' (Warner, 1994: 406). For Ada this leap is a perilous one and one that she does not take easily. It is unclear which choice will erase her. Death, an absolute silencing, will certainly rub her out, though perhaps in some peculiar way it will allow her to retain something of her enigmatic self. The leap into life, into speech or the beginnings of it, on the other hand, signals a leaving behind of that in-between-ness which has protected her by making her inaccessible to surveillance; now she will be less magical, less set apart and perhaps she will have to give up her 'dark gifts' for something more prosaic. She will not even have the dubious glamour of being a Bluebeard's wife; instead she will merely be Baines' wife in a provincial town. If she learns to speak she risks being re-inscribed into a phallic order which will speak her, render her at once fully known, yet invisible and unheard. And in the superficially fairy-tale ending which sees her happily settled as a wife and mother, her strange music domesticated for the drawing room, she risks being 'known' in an extremely over-determined way. Yet if the film offers an ending which appears to subscribe to conventional notions of 'what women want', it surely challenges and undercuts them in the way it establishes the terms of Ada's decision to live.

When Ada is a child she loses her voice. But, as I have argued, that loss is also a refusal, a kind of escape. At the same time this escape traps her somewhere else, in the loneliest of places. Ada's music becomes her voice, and the piano, her body. Her longing gaze at the piano articulates her desire to be re-connected to herself and her playing establishes a circuit by which this connection is accomplished – desire, gaze, voice and body are connected in a way which moves her. Ada's playing privileges her own active desires over those of the men she encounters, but this activity runs in a closed circuit. She has sealed herself up; safe and impenetrable. She may disturb and rebel by speaking in a language men cannot understand, but she is not heard by them either. Ada's music is essentially one piece, reworked over and over to express all her emotions, a repetition; a kind of eloquent stuttering. It is not a conversation, not an encounter.

When Ada is married she loses her voice again – her piano is abandoned and then traded for land. Ada wins back her piano, but finds that she no longer wants to play it. She has discovered that speaking is no longer enough. She desires to be heard and she has found somebody who will listen to her. This desire splits her from the other-world which she has learned to live in.

Ada's decision to enter into the world of speech, then, is not the end of a story about either simply gaining a voice or giving up a voice, but a more complex process of finding a listener, and, more than that, someone with whom she can communicate. Ada is not an answer to men's questions, or a mirror for their desires. She demands, and gets, an encounter. Only after Baines has shown himself equal to this, and even Stewart has been moved to hear her 'mind's voice', does she entertain the possibility of learning to speak. But even after Ada has won back her piano and a new life with Baines and Flora, she remains unsure of her own desires. This time she throws her voice away, and contrives to throw herself overboard with it; she is dragged into the sea, tied to her piano. Ada is as enchanted by the vision of her own silencing as the spectator is by the stunning image of her at the bottom of the sea –

> What a death!
> What a chance!
> What a surprise!
> My will has chosen life!
> Still, it has had me spooked, and many others besides.

Ada's will remains strange to herself, even as she chooses life with Baines. And in a sense it continues to remain strange. Ada persists as an ambiguous figure, neither fully known nor knowing, even as she embraces provincial life. She has a metal finger now, fashioned by her new husband. It taps when she plays; a reminder of her escape, an emblem, not of shame, but of survival and of her own strange will. She is 'quite the town freak . . . which satisfies', and that 'freakishness' prevents her from being re-secured, fitted easily into her place as romantic heroine, wife, mother.

She is learning to speak, practising her sounds, which are strange, 'bad'. Her head is veiled. In this way, her voice continues to be disembodied, made strange, and when she addresses the audience again to describe her new life it is still her mind's voice which speaks. Moreover, she retains the

image of herself at the bottom of the sea, and the sound of her own weird lullaby; the silence. This is, perhaps, a silence of another kind; the space of herself which refuses to be, cannot be fully known. She remains an unsolved riddle, which refuses to be reduced to logic or to complementarity. She has not, finally, crossed over; instead she retains the power of both speech and silence; she has chosen both.

## Notes

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1 *The Piano* has been criticized for its representation of the indigenous people as an exoticized nature in opposition to the white man's culture, in which Ada's relationship with Baines, the white man who has 'gone native', plays out a 'fantasy of colonial reconciliation' (Dyson, 1995: 269). I argue that while the film certainly foregrounds Ada and Baines' story, it does this without positioning them between nature (the land, the Maoris) and culture (the building of a white culture). Instead *The Piano* suggestively links marginalized groups in terms, not of their essence, but of their positioning, in order to interrogate and 'make strange' the viewpoint that makes them 'other'.

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