

The Piano

AN ESSAY ON JANE CAMPION'S FILM

ONE OF MY AUNTS was born with no fingers on her right hand. She used to play the piano. My mother and all my aunts and all their friends used to play the piano. Nobody was brilliant at it; but they all did it. Many (but not all) girls of my generation learned to play too. I was so possessive of our piano that I carved my name into the back of it. Teaching girls to play the piano is less common now, not such a matter of routine. Times have changed.

But *then*, with your hands and feet you gradually got control of this big apparatus, and when it did your will, you could make it sing. Then it would express your feelings. Playing my piano gave me not only some power, but some voice. Power and voice were hard for girls to come by, and so the piano was a most treasured thing. If you had a piano to play and a horse to ride, you were almost complete.

Pianos have always attracted and fascinated me, and I have come to associate them with women and diaries and emotion, with power and sexuality. The diary was the safe private place in which women of last century could express their feelings and thoughts in words; the piano was private and subversive, yet at the same time it was safely public. Your audience pays attention as you tease the tunes from the strings. The strings are struck by hammers which get their signal from the keys which are struck by you. The glorious power in the fingers! (And imagine that clever aunt who could do it without fingers, too.)

The piano is made from beautiful wood, carved, with brass or silver candlesticks; it might have red silk behind fretwork; it might have images of flowers or birds inlaid in the surface of the case. It is a sweet, romantic, beloved thing. Like a big smile, the keys (made, once upon a time, from the tusks of elephants) lie before you, silent, waiting for you to strike. The pic-

ture of a girl at her piano is a charming picture—the girl is safe behind closed doors, attached to the furniture, making pretty sounds. She feels good because she has the power to make music; her guardians feel good because she seems, while charming them, to be still within their control. A girl who practises the piano is not out in the woods with boys

But what if you disrupt this picture of closeted innocence and virginity. What if you begin to see the girl as a being in search of some power; and you see the piano as her very centre of expression. Detach her from her piano and look with her inner eyes at that piano. The smiling mouth of the keyboard might be vaginal, mightn't it? Is the girl seated before a huge carved piece of female genitalia?

Jane Campion recently made a film in which a mute Victorian woman, Ada, used her piano in a most dramatic way to speak for her, to give her some power to move beyond the confines of her closed and stifling world. One narrative of this film

The Piano is an eerie and terrible dreamscape in which the piano is vaginal, and is also a separate piece of property to be transported and bartered; another narrative is that of the story of Ada's life. If you are pulled deep enough into the dream narrative, you are likely to overlook the oddities and inconsistencies in Ada's life; but if you can resist the power of the dream, you might be troubled by the things that appear to pass for story, but which don't add up. Of course the dream and the life overlap and interweave—so that it is not always possible to tease the two apart.

The piano itself straddles both narratives, but in the early scenes on the beach, its reference is surreal, and so it is first located in the dream in the mind of the viewer. But I have to go back *before* I even entered the cinema, for such is the nature of modern film that the viewer carries first the images from the *publicity*. First of all I heard that Jane Campion, whose work I admire, had made a film called *The Piano*. A blunt noun of a title, summoning at once strong and deep emotion and meaning for me. (Abstract titles such as *Indecent Proposal*, *Gross Misconduct*, *Basic Instinct* blur in my mind and I can't remember them, but *The Piano* was charged and unforgettable from the beginning.) Next I saw a picture of a small flat piano with four heavy carved legs stranded on an empty beach. So strange, so compelling. I was hooked, enchanted. I don't know now whether this still ever appeared in the film, but it was my leading image. Then I saw one of the pictures of the faces of Ada and her 10 year-old daughter Flora in their severe black dresses and bonnets. The eyes gaze each at different angles, filled with knowledge, power, and filled, above all, with *will*. Something dark and terrible appears

to be going on. I began to see pictures of the crated piano accompanied by a bandaged piano stool and a bandaged sewing table. Something has been wounded. Then pictures of Ada in full doll-like black Victorian regalia. She reminded me of the ghost of Miss Jessel in *The Innocents*. Something spooky here.

So I entered the dream before the film came to the cinema.

One of life's treats is to read essays by Helen Garner. The only piece I read about *The Piano* before I saw the film was written by Helen Garner for *The Independent Monthly*. She was *crazy* about *The Piano*. Many people were. Many other people were very critical indeed. I wondered why the reactions were so extreme.

I was gripped by the film and the phenomenon of the film. Hence this essay. What I saw was the disjunction between the fabulously powerful dreamscape and the lack of continuity, of credibility in the story of Ada's life. I want to examine this disjunction. I don't necessarily always want everything neatly explained, but in the case of *The Piano* I (willing to be drawn along by the surreal and seduced by the images and symbols) saw questions posed but never answered, and I found myself hampered by the gaps.

By the time of writing this, I have read and heard many responses to the film. I have also read the script which was published—more of an artifact than a straight script—six weeks after the film was released here.

The story is set in 1847, a date chosen by Jane Campion because that is when *Wuthering Heights* was published. There are resonances of the Bronte novel in the film. The mute Ada (single mother) is sold by her Scots father to Stewart in New Zealand. She takes with her her two means of communication—her daughter and her piano. In the wilds of New Zealand she finds Stewart unfeeling ?he trades her piano with Baines for some land. She then buys back the piano by playing for Baines, and by removing her clothing bit by bit. Stewart loses Ada to Baines, and in his rage he attacks the piano with an axe and chops off Ada's index finger. Ada and Baines set off by boat to live elsewhere, and Ada orders the piano to be thrown overboard. It drowns and she nearly drowns with it, but frees herself in time and begins a new life with Baines. She starts to learn to talk, and she teaches music using a silver index finger and a new piano.

Ada stopped talking when she was six. I wonder why. She doesn't know, herself. The young actor, Anna Paquin, who plays Flora comments: 'Some of the time I think Ada's a bit weird. Like, what happened to her that she doesn't speak? She hasn't spoken since she was six years old!' I think the question of why Ada is mute is a critical one. I thought throughout the film

that an answer was going to become apparent, but it never did. The question hung in my consciousness all the time, and it still does. After all, the whole *business* of the piano and its fantastic role in the lives of the characters depends on the fact that Ada stopped speaking when she was six. Did her mother die then? Did some other dreadful event take place? The story of the piano was set in motion when Ada went mute. Why, why, why did Ada do that? The film does not have the quality of a fairy tale in which strange things can be accepted without motive, rhyme or reason. In dream we accept; but the fact of the silence does not have the nature of a dream. It is such an odd and dramatic piece of behaviour, and I think a story-teller can't be allowed to shrug it off. I find it very telling that Anna Paquin chose to comment on it. One sentence of explanation could have laid the problem to rest. Why didn't Jane Campion give us that sentence?

I have moved pianos across the city. These pianos were wrapped in blankets like Spanish horses at a bullfight, and moved around by men whose job it is to shift pianos. But the pianos always ended up hideously out of tune and needed a lot of love and attention before they would sing again. Imagine Ada's piano in its crate on the high seas. Then it gets left on the beach and the waves wash round its legs. And the mist comes down. It makes for glorious images, this poor piano, but what are we to *believe* about it? Could it really survive all that? Hundreds of thousands of pianos were brought to Australia and New Zealand by sea last century, and many were no doubt spoiled. I wondered how Ada's could survive the treatment it received. (In an arresting publicity still—a shot that I think is not in the film—Flora is sitting on the piano as it stands on the beach. I doubt that Ada would allow her to sit on the piano. But it makes a dreamy image, the child in white lace petticoats posing on the piano on the wild and wonderful shoreline.) As part of the dream imagery this piano is superb—as the centre of a story it is problematic.

Baines can't read; Ada knows this. Yet Ada sends Baines a love message written on a piano key. Ada is an angry, self-willed, scowling woman, but she is not stupid. It is this kind of puzzle that holds up the story for me while I wonder *why* Jane Campion had Ada remove a key from her piano (!) and send a written message to a man who couldn't read. Such events happen in dreams, of course, but if the dreamscape has crossed over into the story at this point, there is no clear indication of the fact. In the published script of *The Piano* Baines takes the key to some schoolchildren for interpretation. So it seems that at some point Jane Campion thought about the problem of read-

ing, and then decided to skip it. The real problem is not so much that Baines doesn't get the key read, as that Ada writes on it in the first place.

That Baines should receive a key of some kind is, however, very significant, because he is a mis-placed Bluebeard figure marked by the beard-shaped blue tattoo on his nose and forehead. Bluebeard was a monstrous man who murdered his wives, keeping their bodies under lock and key. Ada is Stewart's wife in the sense that he has bought her from her father, but there is, strangely, no apparent wedding ceremony; nor does there appear to be any consummation. It is Baines who gets Ada by Ada's consent, selling herself to him for her piano, and falling in love with him in the process. Since it is Stewart who wields the axe, he and Baines make up two parts of the Bluebeard in Ada's life. There is a theatrical performance of a shadow play of *Bluebeard* which sharply draws our attention to the theme of the murderous husband. And in the same concert Flora gets to dress up as an angel. The angel and Bluebeard motifs move across the two narratives, now in a real world, now in a shadow world.

When Ada and Flora arrived on the beach one of the Maoris thought they were angels. Flora acts as a messenger, and she also represents vitality, spirit, innocence and light. She carries not only life but death, being the instrument of her mother's betrayal. She is air (and there is plenty of earth and oceans of water, as well as a remarkable bit of fire). This film stays close to the elements. Flora is very knowing in her innocence, and she is associated with freedom from the opening scenes. All the Europeans except Baines are strapped into boots, but at the beginning Flora's boots not only have wheels, but roll about by themselves. (I can't understand why Jane Campion decided to have rollerskates in 1847 when rollerskates were not invented until 1874. But there they are. They occupy the territory of disjunction between the story and the dream. Perhaps they should be located in the dreamscape. Shakespeare, after all, could easily have dreamt rollerskates.) The more I think of it, the more I think *The Piano* is about kinds of freedom (and power), and the more I see Flora as the human being at the centre of things.

She is the part of her mother that is alive and running and flying and dancing and speaking. She is confined and restrained with her mother, and as her mother is, by the masculine world and by the clothes she wears. But when she and her mother and the piano sail away from stuffy Scotland and are dumped on the wild and primitive shore of a distant land, her clothes (like the clothes of her mother) start to come off and she can run round in her petticoat sometimes, and do cartwheels on the sand. She has the freedom and the power and she is her mother's voice. In her role as turncoat messenger

she has the plot in her hands. Her mother is punished for infidelity by losing a finger, and Flora, dressed as an angel, is splashed with the spurting blood. If I have to pick the most shocking thing in *The Piano* it is the sight of Flora the angel splattered with her mother's blood and screaming like a girl in a horror movie. Suddenly Flora is de-flowered, menstrual, murderous, a fallen angel, a wailing banshee. And then (oh yuk of yuk) Stewart gives Flora another message—she must deliver to Baines the finger wrapped in a cloth. (You often think, as you watch movies—well, I could imagine doing that, and that. Then you get to a bit where you say—no, no, no, I can't do *that*. I reckon I couldn't carry the finger.)

So there is the bloodied angel running off with her mother's finger, and meanwhile Baines has just got hold of the piano key with the message. His joy at the key is short-lived, for Flora hands over the finger. Flora crouches, crushed and incoherent, in Baines's hut. Her freedom has gone; her voice and power—gone.

Because (perhaps) of my aunt without the fingers, I have always been interested in the meaning of fingers. We used to have little cakes, you know, called 'lady fingers' and if they were on the table when that aunt was there, I used to feel very embarrassed, but the aunt didn't seem to care. In finger-lore the index finger is 'the mother'. (The middle finger is 'the father'.) The mother was the most magical—it guided, showed, beckoned, blessed, cursed. People used to fear the pointing of a witch's index finger. Orthodox Jewish women still wear their wedding ring on the index finger because the ring will stop the finger from casting its spells. So Stewart knew what he was doing when he deliberately chopped off Ada's index finger, avoiding all other fingers. And he disconnected her from her spell-binding piano (also mutilated).

With the severing of the finger, a spell is, indeed broken. Ada's life is quite, quite changed from this point. His rage spent, Stewart thinks he can hear Ada telling him to let Baines take her away. This voice in his head is one of the more irritating elements in the disjunction between the story and the dream. If the only thing the story-teller can come up with (in order to move the plot in the direction she wants it to go) is a voice in a character's head, things are getting pretty risky. In obedience to this improbable voice (and I mean it is improbable in the film's own terms), Stewart gives Ada and Flora and the piano to Baines and they sail away to live in a house with lace curtains. Ada is still a piece of property, but at least she loves her owner and he loves her. That's a start.

But I kept thinking—she has to die. Everything is telling me she has to die.

There is no future for Ada. Flora has a future, what with everything she has been through, and with her regained power, freedom, voice. And yes, Ada first tells the sailors to throw the piano into the sea; then she decides to follow it by deliberately trapping her foot in the rope as it snakes into the water. For one of her will, suicide at this point makes perfect sense. I found Jane Campion's choice of words to describe Ada's decision very strange. She writes that Ada steps into the loop of rope 'out of fatal curiosity, odd and undisciplined'. This is one very peculiar woman, we know that, but would she really, at the moment when she is on the brink of some sort of happiness, give in to 'fatal curiosity'. Suicide, yes; but *curiosity*? What it looked like to me was that she was going to follow the piano and grab Flora and drown the lot of them. Perhaps even Baines, why not.

There follows one of the greatest sequences in cinema. Ada and the piano sink into the sea which embraces them with all the power of the unconscious mind of God. The tragedy, the glory, the moment. But suddenly Ada changes her mind, kicks off her boot and frees herself and is saved. I couldn't believe my eyes. I was very displeased. But it gets worse. In the house with the lace curtains Ada wears a floral dress. I don't mean to suggest that she should have forever worn the old complex and restricting black dresses, but the dimension she has lost is striking. She has no finger, no style, and no guts. Added to that, she is learning to speak, and wears a black cloth over her face. What? Now, women who cover their faces are in deep trouble. For all that the veil is to help with the speech, by showing us Ada with her particularly compelling face obliterated, Jane Campion tells us in our heart of hearts, dream of dreams that this is no happy ending.

As soon as Ada kicked off her boot, I had had enough. I watched the rest of the film in detached disbelief, not just at the mish-mash of the story, but that a director with the brilliance that enabled her to create, for instance, the image of the piano on the beach, the image of the drowning piano, could so damage her creation. The silver finger that Baines makes for Ada is certainly very remarkable, but is it probable? Particularly useless for playing the piano.

That is where the plot ends. But wait—Ada's imagination takes over and we have the real and desired ending. Desired by Ada, me, and Jane Campion. Ada imagines her piano in its ocean grave, and imagines also herself floating above it. In the stillness and the silence Ada is lulled to sleep. We are treated to another of these wonderful images, the images that Jane Campion creates with such love and passion. The piano is on the seabed with its lid fallen away. 'Above floats Ada, her hair and arms stretched out in a gesture

of surrender, her body slowly turning on the end of the rope. The seaweed's rust-coloured fronds reach out to touch her.' The real Ada (that is, the *dream Ada*) has drowned with her piano. The freaky woman in the flowery dress with the black veil and the silver finger is a sham.

The dense fabric of powerful images and symbols in *The Piano* overwhelms the pattern of character and plot so that motive and logic fade and fracture. It seems to me that whatever happens, the story of the piano, Ada, Stewart and Baines is a mess. But out of it, with its mud and blood and water is born Ada's voice, spirit, flower, Flora. It isn't put like that at the end of the movie, but in trying to make sense of the spaces and dislocations between the conscious and unconscious stories, I have realised that if this thing is going anywhere, it's going with Flora. And Jane Campion knows that.