

Gail Jones: *The Piano*. Series: Australian Screen Classics, Sydney: Currency Press 2007. ISBN: 978-0-86819-799-9, AUD\$ 16.95. **Reviewed by Mandy Kretzschmar,** Research Academy Leipzig

The Piano is another recent instalment in the *Australian Screen Classics* series published jointly by Currency Press and The ACF/ National Film and Sound Archive. As series editor Jane Mills points to the significance of national cinema in cultural heritage in the preface, this handy paperback provides an intelligent, illuminating and dense interpretation of one of the masterpieces of antipodean screen culture. However, it fails to pose one question: What is Australian about this film? This international co-production (New Zealand, Australia and France) is set in 19th century New Zealand, is directed and produced by Jane Campion (born in Wellington, but working in Australia) and peopled with actors from the United States, New Zealand and Canada. The soundtrack is by an English composer.

In an assemblage of nine chapters, distinguished Australian novelist Gail Jones observes the interplay of the social, historical and cultural aspects as well as the aesthetics of the film and ponders the strengths and shortcomings of the cinematographic translation of the narrative. Similar to a voice-over or the 'mind's voice' of the main character Ada, Jones accompanies her readers in a chronological manner, escorting them through the experience of seeing the movie again. Her lyrical re-description pauses at times, allowing the reader to perceive in a very sensual way different angles and perspectives of the motion picture. The strength of this essay lies in a literal translation of Jane Campion's visual aesthetics, in short the contextualisation of the image. In less than one hundred pages, Jones is able to realize her ambitious and impressive project.

Her introductory chapter "The Sea, the Sea" begins with one of the last and most agitating images of the film, the drowning of Ada, the female protagonist. Through a detailed, sensual description of the

heroine, tied to her beloved piano, floats to the bottom of the ocean Jones points to the iconic place of the sea and from there develops her research perspective. Her focus is upon “the physical quirks of *The Piano* (its representations of the body and sense experience) and “its peculiar, and peculiarly insistent, metaphysics” (4). However, her aim to provide the perspective of someone “who sees the movie for the first time” (5) is a clear understatement. The additional knowledge carefully interwoven into the unfolding interpretations is based on careful research of a variety of sources. For example, she frequently refers to Campion’s project *Ebb* which was never produced, but offers striking similarities in deeper themes reoccurring in *The Piano*.

In the following two chapters Jones offers an introduction to the plot, the main characters and their relations to as well as their dependencies on one another, the storytelling and literary influences. Sometime in the second half of the 19th century, the mute Scottish heroine Ada McGrath is sent to colonial New Zealand, where according to her father’s wish, she is married to Alisdair Stewart. Accompanied by her young daughter Flora, probably the offspring of an illegitimate relationship, mute Ada manifests an iron will, communicating through her Broadwood piano and Flora. As Stewart trades his new wife’s piano to colonist George Baines in exchange for (Maori?) land (even though George cannot play the piano!), Ada is seduced into a romantic relation in order to recover her precious possession. As the plot develops further, Flora betrays her mother. In a move of dramatic violence, Stewart attacks Ada and cuts off her index finger, later confronting Baines. Nevertheless, the story resolves romantically as Ada, Baines and Flora settle together in Nelson and create a new family.

The Piano is a provocative film, as Jones emphasizes, especially in regards to racial, sexual and colonial representations. Through an analysis of inter-cultural scenes involving Maori and Europeans, Jones approaches the critiques of earlier reviewers about stereotypical depictions of the indigenous population (26 passim). Thus, she summarizes the ethical challenges to filmmakers in questioning if the relations between Maori and Pakeha are justly

represented (21). The strength of Jones' analysis is to offer different readings of colonial culture without aiming to reach a singular conclusion. For example, at a theatre night taking place in the school hall, the mixed audience is shown the play *Bluebeard's Castle* performed partly as a shadow play and by a group of young children dressed in white. Jones argues that this violent narrative in which Bluebeard murders his six wives, but is outwitted by the seventh, symbolizes similar desires and betrayals as in the main narrative. During the performance, some of the Maori tear away the screen to 'save' the screaming women on stage. The incapability to differentiate between the real and the theatrical has been interpreted as dishonouring the Maori, depicting them as naïve and simple. As criticized by Bell Hook and Leonie Pihama, *The Piano* thus reinscribes the dichotomy between Maori nature and European culture (Mayer 2007:154). However, Gail Jones favours a different, less convincing interpretation. Rereading the moving images in a positive light, she identifies the noble aims motivating the action of the Maori making allowance for their non-understanding of an unfamiliar cultural form (32). In comparing this misunderstanding of vision to the first public screening of an arriving train by the Lumière brothers in 1895, Jones claims the significance of shadow and light as well as illusionism as particular themes reoccurring throughout Champion's career as filmmaker.

The emblematic title of the following section "Hush-hush-hush" pinpoints the issue of sound and its absence in *The Piano*. Jones asks how Champion represents her silent heroine. As Jones observes, there are different ways to express and communicate, referring as an example to the intimate scenes between Ada and Flora where sound is absent, but language is expressed in signing or Ada's voice-over. The larger part of the chapter, however, is dedicated to the "prosthetic of identity and self" (37). The piano serves as Ada's displaced voice, thus being a substituted or extended body part (40). Jones not only reflects upon the music by composer Michael Nyman, but also about the way Ada never plays from sheet music to express her feelings as evident in the title of the signature tune "The Heart asks for pleasure first". Without Ada's consent, her husband Stewart hands the piano to Baines in exchange for land. Jones

recalls how the musical score in the scenes between Baines and Ada accompanies, even anticipates the intensity of their developing erotic relation. She supports her argument in referring to the titles of the soundtrack such as "Big my secret" or "The Attraction of the Pedalling Ankle" (40).

The detailed approach and passionate encounter with the screen culture of Jane Campion is advanced to its climax in the following chapter. In "Erotics, Feeling and the Masculine", Jones composes a picture of erotic symbolism and the exploration as well as manipulation of gender roles in *The Piano*. Carefully choosing sample scenes, she discusses masquerade and cross-dressing as a way of investigating gender roles, Stewart's attempted rape of Ada, the sexual agency of Ada finding no understanding in her husband as well as the depiction of the heterosexual romance with Baines turning from harassment and sexual exploitation into love. Her vivid descriptions are supplemented by a variety of references, such as when she discusses the wedding photograph scene criticizing the arranged marriage and disadvantaged woman as similar to in *The Portrait of a Lady* (47). Apart from the importance of symbolism, Jones also reflects upon how the visual material is staged and framed, the so-called *mise en scène* (Giannetti 2002:44). As Jones notes, the emotional response of the audience is achieved by making use of facial close-ups, especially Ada's. Further it is argued that restrained filming and voyeurism are combined when Stewart watches Ada's and Baines' lovemaking (53).

In "Mutilation" and "The Uncanny Child", Jones concentrates upon the trauma narrative and Flora's role that is often overlooked by critics. Stewart having discovered the love affair, boards up the house as a cage to keep Ada from continuing her relation to Baines. However, in an act of self-mutilation, taking and inscribing a key of her returned piano, Ada seeks a renewed meeting. But Flora, asked to act as a go-between, betrays her mother and turns in the evidence to Baines. Jones recalls the violent attack of the husband, the slowing time and vision, the soundtrack and close-up shots as well as the child witness to the cutting off of Ada's finger. A possible interpretation of Stewart's attack as a 'castration' of Ada is discarded

by Jones, however without the appendant reference to the cited reviewer. A major reason that the book is so compelling is Jones' engagement with all aspects of the movie, but especially the development and contradictoriness of the characters. This is most obvious in her analysis of the mother-daughter relation. Flora is the second heroine, well aware of her illegitimate existence. Ada and she are the primary lovers as Jones concludes (61).

The last chapter titled "The Three Endings" is a detailed interpretation of the film's closure. Jones discusses the near-drowning of Ada, her domestic happiness in Nelson together with Baines and Flora, as well as the final cut back to the heroine floating attached to her piano at the bottom of the ocean. Again, Jones engages with feminist theory in referring to Stella Bruzzi and interpreting the Ada's rescue as offering a future instead of 'executing' the female protagonist "in the cause of poetic coherence" (69). The image of Ada as a piano teacher in Nelson is but a disappointed happy ending as Jones argues. It is shortly curtailed in Ada being haunted by her vision. Jones summarizes that the return to Ada's vision in the closing is a triumph to show the audience "that all cinema is in the end a phantasm" (72).

Throughout the essay, Gail Jones utilizes a wide range of secondary sources to embed *The Piano* in Campion's filmography, drawing on interviews, referring to literary inspirations and comparing the approach to main themes like sexual fulfilment to her earlier films such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Rebecca*. Her reference to an entry in the production dairy of Claire Corbett, the assistant director, about the male and female crew having to wear a dress as a "masquerade of gender" on costume day is but one delightful example (44). One shortcoming though: despite an extensive bibliography, endnotes are scarce and at times the reader is unable to retrace supporting documents. To make a further suggestion to the series editors, an index would have enabled the readership to find selected information quickly and easily, especially if used as a secondary source in film history. Although Jones' references to Campion's allegiance to European cinema, especially Antonioni and Bertolucci are frequent (10), only in passing does she mention the

popular success of the film which, after all, won the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes and three Academy Awards. (5).

In the end, despite the richness of the poetic reflection upon this cinematographic masterpiece, the reader is left with the question about the "Australianness" of the movie. As represented by the editors, *The Piano* is an Australian Screen Classic. One might muse about the attempt to claim the ownership for Australian national cinema as an act of cultural independence and to constitute one's global success. However, a different, more convincing interpretation is possible. This series offers the unique opportunity of a work-to-art, a possibility to review a film in applying one's one specific style of criticism and thus to remember and evocate the visual experience again. Thus, it is Gail Jones as an Australian novelist confirming the iconic status of the film.

In a personal conversation with Gail Jones in October 2008 in Karlsruhe, Germany, she gave away that *The Piano* was not among her choice of films she would have liked to review, when asked by the editors. However, her illuminating, passionate encounter with the screen art of Jane Campion speaks another language.

Bibliography

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Geoff Mayer/ Keith Beattie, *The Cinema of Australia and New Zealand*, London 2007.