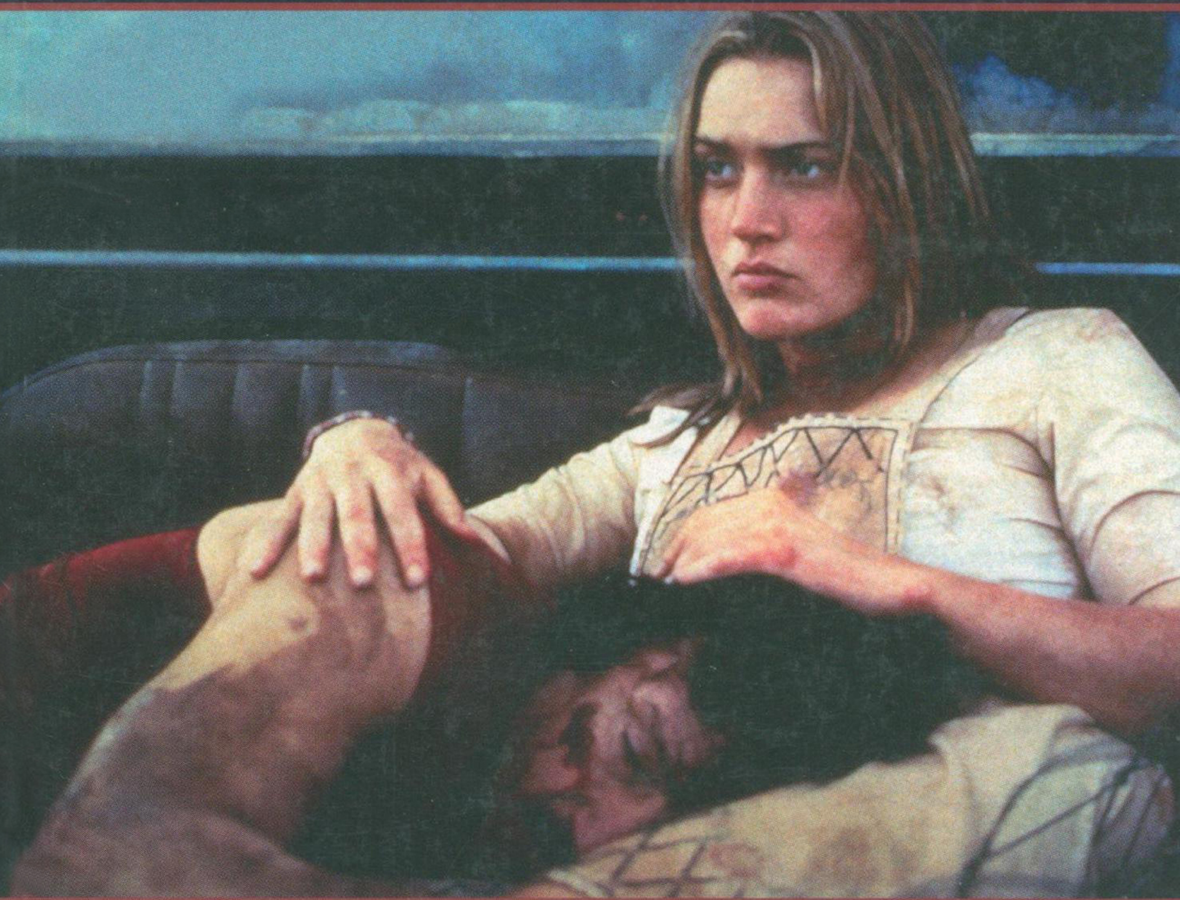
WORLD DIRECTORS



JANE CAMPION

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Dana Polan

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WORLD DIRECTORS

JANE CAMPION

Dana Polan

For my nieces, Kelly, Leigh, Kyra and Moira, and their creative worlds

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One
Resonant Melodies

The Iron Chef, a Japanese cooking show that has acquired a cult following on cable TV for its kitschy mix of samurai style and culinary intrigue, is a quintessential spectacle of machismo. Bedecked in samurai costumes, standing erect and brandishing their kitchen tools as if they were the fetish objects of an elite Ronin clan, the 'Iron Chefs' face 'Challengers' in the gladiator-style 'Kitchen Stadium', engaging in man-to-man combat over the 'secret' ingredient with which they have one hour to prepare a five-course meal for a panel of judges. Throughout, they are accompanied by the trappings of culinary manhood – knives wielded like swords, deferential sous-chefs and underlings, and, in particular, the swelling of imperial, martial music (lots of brass and percussion, with big crescendos). It's a macho extravaganza complete with excessive physicality (the utensils that swoop through the air to chop up fish and fowl), surly sweatiness, taunt, bravado and braggadocio.

Yet, an episode broadcast in May 2000 marked a departure from the exclusively masculine domain of Kitchen Stadium when a young woman chef came as the Challenger, necessitating a means to represent her difference from the male chefs within the highly stylised production. At first, the show tried to contain the difference of femininity by treating the woman's presence as not so different at all: initially, there was the same military music, the same fever-pitch narration that renders the competition as a veritable sports event of talented Titans in battle. But as the narrator began to discuss the personal triumphs and tragedies that the chef had faced and surmounted – especially a traumatic divorce – the music turned in abrupt fashion from military aggressiveness to none other than the lush romantic strains of the Michael Nyman soundtrack for Jane Campion's *The Piano*.

What strikes me about this dramatic shift into the register of the personal and, in particular, of personally felt emotional trauma is the matter-of-fact telegraphic directness of the reference to *The Piano*. The film's

soundtrack is assumed to easily, automatically, inevitably and logically connote the realm of the feminine personal, a space of romance sparked and thwarted, a site in which emotional life asserts its irreducible importance even against the demands of a masculinised and professionalised world. The music so associated with *The Piano* becomes here a veritable fixed signifier of affect, emotion and inner value – all associated intimately with the particularity of being a woman. (Is it by accident that the videotape version of *The Piano* available in the USA begins with an advertisement for a free-phone number from which to order flowers and floral arrangements, set to the luxuriant music of Vivaldi?)

The Piano is now a major point of reference for our contemporaneity, an imposing artistic production that for many people encapsulates, for better or for worse, a stylistic and thematic impression of feminine feeling. The exemplary nature of *The Piano* as a condensation of the parameters of such a cultural representation allows it easily to lend itself to stereotyping, as its citation in *The Iron Chef* signals. It can lead as well to parody. For example, the TV show *Saturday Night Live* did a sketch called 'The Washing Machine' with a Holly Hunter look-alike caught in romantic mystery while her daughter cartwheels around her on the surf-swept beach in front of a large white washer. Similarly, *All Men are Liars*, the first feature film by Campion's former boyfriend and collaborator Gerard Lee, begins by chronicling how a piano taken away from a woman by her husband is smashed to smithereens in a highway accident while in transit! In a joint interview, Lee and the film's producer, John Maynard (who has also produced some Jane Campion films), make explicit that this opening intends a direct jocular reference to *The Piano*. For Maynard, 'We thought that opening a film with a woman who doesn't speak playing a piano – already a proven success – would be a good way to start an Australian movie.' And Lee is even more explicit about a need to demarcate himself from Campion: 'We're great friends with Jane and there's nothing personal in it, but I suppose it is taking the piss out of auteur film-making.'[1]

Even more striking in its appropriation of motifs from *The Piano* as reuseable figures of romantic exoticism for directly commercial purposes is a television advertisement starring Anna Paquin (who plays the young

daughter Flora in the film), produced the same year as *The Piano* for media giant MCI's Internet network services. To exotic indigenous music, Paquin dances lyrically in silhouette before a setting sun; then in close-up before a bonfire she extols in an awe-struck voice the virtues of new global communication: 'A brain inside a head in Ohio is studied by a surgeon in Tokyo. A mother's face in France appears on a telephone in New York. A virtual journey to any moment in time. The possibilities are endless.' As the last phrases are uttered, there is a quick shot to what seems to be an American Indian in tribal outfit and then an image of Paquin dancing on a beach in ways that directly approximate early shots from *The Piano*. Here, we can see many aspects of that film turning into shorthand clichés that ironically can be used to advertise technology-dependent global multi-nationalism: a fascination with elemental forms and forces (the light of the setting sun, the poetic glow of the bonfire); an expression of mystery and even of the mystical that implies deeper secrets to the universe (as Paquin lists the miracles of new communication, her voice fills with wonder, her eyes open wide in amazement, her face offers the most meagre hint of an enigmatic smile); an intimation that we can enter a mythic realm (the 'virtual journey to any moment in time') in which 'normal' physical laws of being are to be suspended (the mythic journey here being provided by new technology); a sense of life's deeper meanings as radiating through forms of affect (the music, the dance), rather than through rationality alone. There's even an echo of *The Piano*'s enlistment (and for some critics, exploitation) of images of indigenous people as indexes of the exotic and ineffable mystery. The quick shot of the 'native' man hints at a timelessness while establishing indigenous culture as so obviously 'primitive' that it cannot enter the technologically modernised world (the 'native' does not speak, is not shown to have access to the promises of a media revolution that is indicated as having the potential to unify sites of advanced capitalism – for example, New York, Tokyo, France). *The Piano* here becomes an inspiring source for an intensely mythic and yet modern appropriation.

And the fact that *The Piano* stands for something special and does so in stylistically and thematically special ways – namely, the representation of womanly sensibility – can also make it a target for a re-masculinising

disdain that would like to take a distance from all things feminine. For instance, in Kevin Smith's sophomoric comedy version of religious (or anti-religious) allegory, *Dogma* (1999), a battle between a lapsed angel (Ben Affleck) and two totally cool grunge dudes on a sacred mission is punctuated and resolved by the cataclysmic appearance of God on the scene. God is represented as a mysterious woman (played by rock star Alanis Morissette) with a Mona Lisa smile and bountiful pre-Raphaelite tresses of curly hair and dressed in a long flowing gown. This feminine God does not speak but moves through the battleground and makes miracles happen through ineffable mystery. The Gen-X dudes express relief at God's salvation of the world, but also guy-culture's impatience with her silence and enigmatic countenance (manifested by the knowing but unrevealing smile on her face that suggests her prepossessed grasp of the deep nature of things). As one of the two dudes angrily wonders, 'What the fuck is this? *The Piano*? Why isn't this broad talking?'

For better or worse, *The Piano* has become the symbol of what the 1990s came to term 'the chick flick'. As such, it could be used to symbolise a range of emotions and experiences associated with a feminine realm. Thus, in a moment of comic irony on the television show, *Dharma and Greg* – about a couple from varied backgrounds (his family is wealthy and waspy, her parents are hippies) – Greg realises that he doesn't know much about the personal emotional life of his gruff, reserved father and gets Dharma to charm the father into answering biographical questions. When they pore over the results, Greg is surprised to discover that his father has listed *The Piano* as his favourite film, since this choice does not seem in keeping with his father's conservative, no-nonsense masculinised approach to life. But Dharma then explains that the father picked this film since, for him, it reduces down to the story of a mute woman stuck on an island, an obvious wish-fulfilment image for how he'd like women, including his own wife, to be: silent and confined.[2]

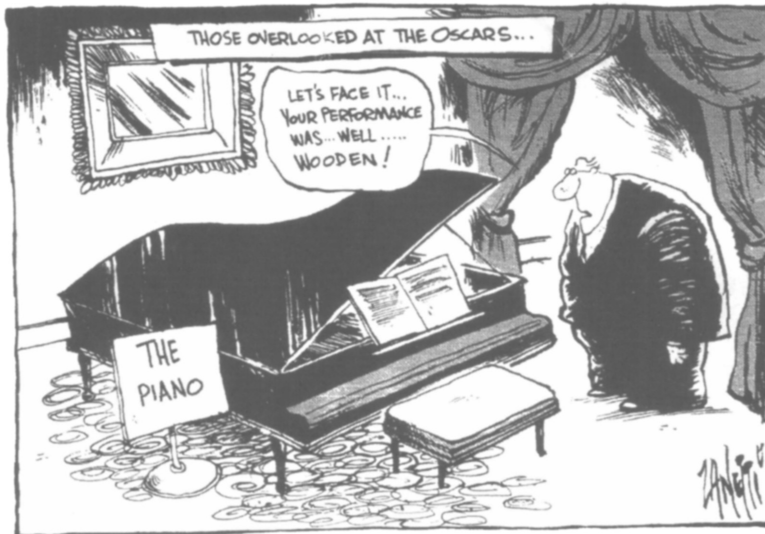
The success of Campion's film makes it a key work in our historical moment. Both in the ways it was marketed in the global independent film business and in the ways this marketing was matched by the resonances its story and style seem to have had for many viewers, *The Piano* marks some-

thing special in the history of non-Hollywood cinema (even as it perhaps makes overtures to Hollywood, as we'll see). The overall statistics are telling. Jane Campion's two feature films before *The Piano*, *Sweetie* and *An Angel at My Table*, each made around $1 million in the US market, and £136,962 and £365,805 respectively in the British market. (According to the Australian Film Commission, *The Piano* made AUD 11.2 million in its release there, while *Sweetie* made 4 million.) *Sweetie* and *An Angel at My Table* were independent foreign films, distributed in very limited ways with limited promotional campaigns to a niche market of art-film audiences – the resultant box office for them is not surprising. In parallel fashion, Campion's two feature films after *The Piano*, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Holy Smoke*, were not mass-market box-office successes, the former making a little less than $4 million in the USA and the latter a little less than $2 million (in Australia *Holy Smoke* made AUD1.4 million). The UK revenue was £681,082 for *The Portrait of a Lady* and £323,851 for *Holy Smoke*. (To put the implication of such box-office results in perspective, it might be noted that *The Portrait of a Lady*'s budget was US$30 million.)

But *The Piano*, while costing between $7 and $8 million to produce, made over US$40 million in the US market (it was the tenth highest grossing film of 1993), AUD12,328,604 in Australia, £4,848,517 in the UK, and more than US$100 million worldwide. For a foreign film released by an independent distributor, this certainly easily qualifies as a smash hit. *The Piano* stands out in Campion's career as a major commercial sensation, one that moved beyond art-film audiences to cross over into a mainstream market.[3]

This financial success was matched by a success on the awards circuit. The recognition started with the film's appearance at the Cannes Film Festival where it won a Best Actress award for Holly Hunter and shared the Palme d'Or (the highest award) with the Chinese film, *Farewell My Concubine*. This represents the first time in the Cannes festival's history that a woman director won the top award. On its release in the New Zealand-born Campion's adopted country Australia, the film swept the Australian Film Institute awards, winning in eleven categories out of thirteen. In several countries, it revealingly won the Best Foreign Picture

award (for example, this is the one category that it placed in at the César awards, France's parallel to the Oscars), but in the USA, undoubtedly because of its crossover success and its use of English language and American stars, it was clearly treated by the big award organisations less as a foreign film than as a mainstream film with a proper and appropriate place in the context of US film distribution and exhibition. Thus, it was nominated for a very impressive eight Oscars (Best Picture – a category that has admitted only a few foreign films during the history of the Oscars – Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Editing, Best Cinematography, Best Costume Design, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress) with Holly Hunter and Anna Paquin winning the Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress awards respectively, and Campion herself winning the Best Original Screenplay award. (The Best Film, Best Direction, Best Editing and Best Cinematography awards that year all went to *Schindler's List.*) We might also note that *The Piano* received great intellectual or scholarly attention (as witnessed in the bibliography to this



Cartoon. Reproduced by courtesy of Paul Zanetti, Paul Zanetti Illustrations

volume). Campion's earlier films got some reviews and had a few essays devoted to them (some in Australian publications that evidently wanted to applaud what they saw as a new voice in Australian film-making). The later films get a fair number of reviews – as if critics felt impelled to judge if Campion could keep up her success after *The Piano* – and understandably, there is a dossier on *The Portrait of a Lady* in *The Henry James Review*. But to a much greater extent than the other films, *The Piano* receives discussion in the form of anthologies and critical essays. It is certainly a film that many people have felt impelled to write about (often for very affective and personal reasons, as we'll see).

Since its release in 1993, *The Piano* has come to be seen as one of the supreme signposts of the art of feminine sensibility. (For the moment, I would like to bracket out the question of the relationship of such sensibility to a more specifically *feminist* one.) While, as we will see, a focus on the feminine from a particular perspective of affect and personal suffering can also be said to characterise the earlier films of Jane Campion, the rich emotionalism of *The Piano* seemed, to many cinema-goers, to herald something new in the director's career and even in the overall cultural history of woman's representation. This film divides the career of its director. As a consequence, a traditional authorial analysis which would look at thematic continuities and artistic refinements in the unfolding of an overall aesthetic project crashes up against discontinuity, against the fragmentation of an *oeuvre*. This disjunction fuels much of the concern in the following pages to offer a close stylistic analysis of the films that Campion has signed. The purpose is not to find in each film a richness that can then be treated as a progressive unfolding of an overall genius; rather, it is to pinpoint the material particularity of each of the films and resist their assimilation to an expressive aesthetic that would need to see them as interconnected emanations of an artistic spirit. While we might not want to go to the extent of fully disavowing the director as deliberative agent in the work of film production – as did much of the anti-auteurist film theory of the 1970s – we need to put directorial agency in its proper place, seeing it as one factor only in stylistic and thematic decision.

Two
Desiring the Director

> The process of the writing [of a life] may be set down as simply as laying down a main trunk line from Then to Now, with branch excursions into the outlying wilderness, but the real shape, the first shape, is always a circle formed only to be broken and reformed again.
>
> Janet Frame, *An Angel at My Table*

The place of the director is a divided one – divided, for instance, internally by the complexities of the psyche (against authorship as conscious intention, psychoanalysis reminds us of all that is unconscious and even conflictual in expressions of will, intention, desire, deliberative agency), but also divided by social forces that mean that the director's voice is only one among many (the many others who work on the film, but also the many who distribute and promote the film and the many who consume it, all according to their own social agencies and agendas).

Indeed, in a general survey of issues in director studies today, film scholars Toby Miller and Noel King take the case of Jane Campion as showing some of the problems of assuming that the director's voice and vision offer an exclusive explanation of the significance of films:

> [W]e can ask how the Australian-based New Zealand film-maker Jane Campion was pronounced an auteur. After having directed a feature film, a mini-series, and a handful of shorts, Campion was said, with *Sweetie* (1989), to possess a distinct connotative stamp, a set of concerns about the power in the everyday and the underside of life, the abject, that which is best evaded and ignored. The smallest units of audiovisual style were taken as signs and symptoms of this vision: framing, tilts, cutaways, visual jokes, and music. ... But what happens to these auteurist certainties when we turn to the figure of Gerard Lee, who wrote and co-directed the 'Campion' short, *Passionless Moments* (1983/84) and who co-wrote the screenplay of *Sweetie*, based on personal experience? Or when we turn to Sally Bongers, the director of

> photography who has a distinctive style of lighting and framing that puts energy into set-ups rather than camera movements? It's an enduring problem for auteurism to distinguish between these industrial and personal identities and their responsibility for texts.[1]

We need to take such cautions to heart. To study a career means today to avoid imagining a creativity that derives from individual genius or talent. To argue that films by a certain director have some stylistic regularities or even some regularities of subject matter would have to take place without assigning unified meaningful connotations to them, including even the connotations of personal vision.

It is, I would imagine, always possible with a group of objects (such as a series of films) to come up with some qualities they share (especially as one moves higher and higher into generalities). In the case of films signed by one director, it is tempting to imagine that because they share this signature, they must consequently and inevitably share other qualities (for example, stylistic regularities, thematic meanings) – what Miller and King refer to as 'connotative stamp' – and that pinpointing and appreciating these should be the goal of critical activity. But it is this temptation that can be resisted: the director can, for instance, be studied not as a source of aesthetic distinction but as an effect, a series of meanings attributed to the director by cinema-goers and by other users (for example, film distributors). Thus, in some of the pages of this study, I will be concerned less with what Campion films 'mean' than with what various 'user-groups', such as the emotive fans of *The Piano*, take them to 'mean'. It would seem critically benign to imagine that various works by an artist might exhibit continuities. The questions this raises, though, are what critical status we give to these continuities and what causal explanation we offer for them. (To take one of my favourite examples, B-director Arthur Lubin went from directing 'Francis the Talking Mule' films in the late 1940s to turning out episodes of the talking horse series *Mr Ed* in the 1950s, but one would probably want to see such regularities not as 'symptoms' of a personal vision but rather as demonstrations of the pressures and constraints of the production system for hack directors. At best, one wouldn't want to *interpret* the regularities in

Lubin's career so much as account for the impersonal institutional and industrial reasons for their existence. And in that case, the fact of regularity would not easily be the basis of an affirmative aesthetic judgment; that is, the career is not more artistically valuable because it is regularised. To refer to an 'Arthur Lubin film' is not to speak of a source of meaning or aesthetic value: 'Arthur Lubin' in this case is not the name of an author but refers instead to the operations of a production system and the non-creative role B-directors were assigned within it. 'Arthur Lubin' is the name for a lack of authorship.)

It is possible, then, to imagine that regularities in a career could be disconnected from any concern with an individualised personal vision. With respect to Miller and King, for instance, we might imagine that the recurrent look of Campion films derives as much from other people who worked on them (people she often chose to work with). And we would then want to be open to the possibility that the various workers on a film could internalise each other's stylistic or thematic preoccupations to such a degree that nothing in the film could really univocally be assigned to this or that person individually. For example, even when Sally Bongers doesn't work on a Campion film, it might be the case that it has some of the 'Bongers' look. Influence does not always derive just from immediate contribution. (In the Conclusion, I return to some specific concrete cases in which Campion's work as an author blurs or blends with other authors.)

The name of 'Jane Campion' has mattered in particular to many people because it is a woman's name and can refer thereby to the complicated destiny of the female artist, especially in a domain such as the cinema so frequently dominated by men. In the 1950s, when film criticism sought to treat directors as the auteurs (authors) of their films, the emphasis tended to be on male directors – treated as veritable heroes – who by force of will, commitment to a vision, sagacity and energetic force managed, against the pressures of the studio system, to imprint their identity on films. For example, US critic Manny Farber's classic essay from 1957, 'Underground Movies', on action directors such as William Wellman and Howard Hawks, has as its not-so-hidden subtext a desire to shore up a particularly virile image of tough masculinity and to promote directors of brute determination, rather than

those of liberal sensibility or sensitivity (Farber's example of the latter is Fred Zinnemann with *High Noon* or *The Nun's Story*).

In recent years, to a large degree under the influence of feminism, there has been an attempt in film study to examine the hitherto neglected careers of women directors. For example, there have been full-length books devoted to Alice Guy, Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino. Inevitably, the study of the woman director has to eschew some of the mythology of virile heroism that distinguished the earlier attention to male directors: for instance, in her book on Dorothy Arzner, Judith Mayne emphasises how that director was far from the image of the rugged loner individualist that distinguished male auteurism, living and working as she did with a necessary dependence on a community of other women. In her very work ethic, Arzner, as Mayne depicts her, deeply felt the need for bonding and emotional connection, and this, Mayne argues, inspires the Arzner films themselves, which are often about communities of women.[2]

Despite Campion's own often ambiguous relationship to feminism –

Campion on the set of *Sweetie*

reflected, for instance, in the debates around the sexual and racial politics of *The Piano* – and despite the temptations that director study runs of falling into myths of personal vision, it can be of polemical usefulness to study her career. Campion's career shows, in the very tensions it exhibits, some of the options open to women artists and the expectations placed upon them within a complex cultural sphere such as that of global art cinema.

Rather than as the signature or symptom of a unified vision, it might be best then to treat the name 'Jane Campion' as signalling what French philosopher Michel Foucault terms a space of 'dispersion' – the name of the author as a shorthand for all the forces that work against unity, against the career as a coherent unfolding of a vision.[3] There is, for instance, as the example of cinematographer Sally Bongers suggests, the dispersion of authorial responsibility among the many members of the production team so that paradoxically to call a work a 'Jane Campion' film may be to recognise how she helps facilitate work communities where various contributors can all make their mark. But there is also a dispersion to the career itself: even as most of the films signed by Campion centre on women's experience – often a cruelly depicted one in which women bear the brunt of the world's potential for violence – there are variations, even contradictions, in tone and treatment of this experience from film to film.

Again, it is for this reason that the following pages involve close readings of the films: the point is less to catalogue recurrences of style than to chart divergences. First, there are divergences between style and subject matter that complicate simple associations of Campion's films with a singular vision (for example, a vision centred on a feminist intepretation of everyday existence). For instance, several of the early films deal with real-life issues – especially issues of personal safety and sanctity – that confront women, but the weird style of these films can have the effect of making these issues one more example of a curious surreality (what we might call the David Lynchian aspect of Campion's early films) that finally seems more absurd than realist. In the very estranging effects of their style, the films can work to turn real-life dilemmas into modernist symbols of ambiguity (was there, for instance, incest between Gordon and his daughter in the film *Sweetie*?; was the heroine of the early short *A Girl's Own Story*

actually molested?). Just as the study of women directors can serve as a corrective to the masculinising and heroicising trend of auteurism, so too does a reminder of subject matter that deals with women's issues help to eschew formalist positions that would see film as little more than experimental play with no real-life purchase and thereby help us understand how spectators can find great emotional resonances in the Campion films.

In the case, for instance, of *The Piano*, close analysis of its treatment of subject matter is useful because fans have clearly identified the film as being about issues of selfhood and sexual identity; at the same time, stylistic analysis can pinpoint the ways in which the film formally constructs its appeal and, for some critics as we'll see, does so at the cost of obscuring issues around race and sexual violence.

Films are commodities that circulate through markets from producers to consumers. As such, they can be treated within a political economy that takes the specific traits of any individual item for sale as less important than market pressures, advertising efforts, organisation and defence of means of distribution and codified rules of consumption (for example, in the Golden Age of Hollywood cinema, many people went to the movies not for individual titles but out of a generalised desire for Hollywood entertainment). At the same time, it is clear that different classes of films circulate differently: markets are about the production of value, and there are diverse strategies for attributing value to this or that individual film. For instance, writing of the international art cinema that gained such attention from urban professionals in the 1950s and 1960s, film scholar Thomas Elsaesser suggests that international film festivals were one of the key institutions for differentiating films (those that were selected versus those that were not; those that won prizes versus those that came away empty-handed) and assigning value to them. As Elsaesser puts it, 'festivals are the markets that can fix and assign different kinds of value, from touristic, politico-voyeuristic curiosity to auteur-status, and set in motion the circulation of new cultural capital, beyond the prospect of economic circulation (art cinema distribution, a television sale)'.[4] Certainly, the festival venue has been important to the circulation of Campion's films through culture.