

THE PIANO: DEFINING THE "NATIONAL"

Author:
Genevieve Faust

Faculty Sponsor:
Terry Byrne
Department of Communication Studies

ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

A national cinema speaks to the audience of a specific nation. A national cinema, however, may speak in different ways to viewers in different nations. Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1992), for instance, is interpreted by viewers in some nations as a woman's film and by viewers in others as postcolonial. These various analyses suggest that national cinemas may be part of an international cinema. Campion's *The Piano*, for example, localizes the cinema while also contributing to the international cinescape.

Involving the collaboration of Australians and New Zealanders, *The Piano* is one of the "mixed productions" that typified the 1990s (O'Regan 73). The question of Campion's national identity arises; is she a New Zealander or an Australian? Although she lives and works in Australia, she is a New Zealander by birth. This has led to debates as to whether *The Piano* is an Australian or a New Zealand film and who the target audience is.

Better to address these questions, it is necessary to define the term "nation." On the one hand, it can be geopolitical. In this case, Australia and New Zealand are separate entities; a film targeting a nation in terms of its geopolitical boundaries is targeting members of a specific country. "Nation," however, can also refer to a dispersed people, or diaspora. Moreover, a filmmaker can target an audience with an "other" commonality and treat this group of individuals as a nation. Nationalistic identifiers include: religion, language, appearance, ethnicity, and various other aspects of culture, such as allegiance and history.

Deciding where one nation leaves off and another begins can be very difficult, and the conclusions are often ambiguous. According to Tom O'Regan, in films involving Australian and New Zealand collaboration, "close cultural, language and historical links forge an Australasian film-making and identity" (72). In this way, Campion has targeted an Australasian audience, "reflecting the close economic, cultural, political, social, and historical links between Australia and New Zealand and the significant New Zealand migrant presence in Australia" (O'Regan 73).

The Piano, along with other films set and shot in New Zealand, has attracted an Australian audience that reflects on the growing identification within the two countries. By the 1990s, Australia no longer viewed New Zealand as a "poor relation" (O'Regan 73). These collaborations are, thus, naturalized to their target audience. They become "part of the international cinescape, taking [their] part alongside other national cinemas and Hollywood cinema" (O'Regan 10). As *The Piano* was shot on location in New Zealand, the familiar scenery is meant to further the audience's identification with the film and its discourse. Australians and New Zealanders recognize the presence of various religions and ethnicities in *The Piano* and view such social complexities as a natural part of their "nation."

The range of contributors to the making of *The Piano* means that this national cinema not only reflects a broad Australasian identity, but that it also stands "on the margins of the more dominant film cultures of the USA, UK and continental Europe" (O'Regan 109-10). Thus, a film such as *The Piano* has found a place in the dominant film culture. Its market for exhibition and distribution, its use of the English language, and its close connection with American and British cultures allow it to pass for being American or British. This assimilation into American and British cultures is demonstrated through the

film's Oscar nominations and awards. These characteristics, while expanding the potential audience of the film, also keep Australian and New Zealand films from creating their own distinct identity.

One must account for such cultural assimilation when discussing Australian and New Zealand films. Indeed, it can create confusion about the filmmaker's intentions. Analyses of *The Piano*, for example, range from feminist to postcolonial and race-based readings of the film. It must not be forgotten that "national cinemas work to be local while streamlining themselves to be of interest to audiences outside" of their target nation (O'Regan 51).

As national cinema, *The Piano* is socialized, identifying a social issue that may be of significance to a culture. From this perspective, *The Piano* addresses issues of patriarchy, colonialism, and racism by situating Australians and New Zealanders in their own history and providing education and cultural information. In the film, patriarchy, colonialism, and racism collaborate to ally Stewart and Baines and make the British Empire's colonial system work (Reid 108). To those with an Australasian identity, the film uses New Zealand's colonial history to argue that patriarchy and colonialism are both "system[s] of fraudulent exchanges" (Reid 113). According to Mark Reid, "Fraudulent sales are *The Piano*'s central metaphor which is recycled in Stewart's partitioning of Maori land as he possesses and abuses Ada's body, finger, and piano. Similar to the frauds of Stewart, Baines appropriates moko tattoos" (113).

The film can also have social significance to American and British audiences. America shares historical origins with New Zealand and Australia; as British colonies, each conquered its land and indigenous people (O'Regan 18). Moreover, both Americans and British share a "common language and a broadly similar cultural view" with Australians and New Zealanders (O'Regan 18). Such cultural likenesses make it possible for these audiences to find continuities between themselves and Australians and New Zealanders. In particular, American and British audiences regard *The Piano* as a feminist film, focusing on Ada's "emotional, social, and psychological problems, which are connected to the fact that she is a woman" (Sharp and Gillard 111). They also focus more on Ada's economic powerlessness as a Victorian woman than on the colonial system.

Maria Margaroni talks of "the convergence of gender and postcolonial concerns in Campion's film" (102). According to Margaroni, the body of the female protagonist is a metaphor for the landscape of the mid-nineteenth-century colonized Maori country (95). Both are objects of colonial oppression, both are silenced, and both represent hope that the New Zealand postcolonial nation will build a future for itself (Margaroni 96).

These various interpretations of the film may result from national differences. For example, "Australian films place the protagonist as the victim not agent of history, whereas American film makes the protagonist drive the narrative and so become an agent of history" (O'Regan 198). This could explain why American and British audiences sometimes overlook the historical implications of the film and focus, rather, on its presentation of femininity. They are not accustomed to a protagonist being subordinate to society and look for the characters to effect social change.

The Piano encourages much discussion and debate, or in post-structural parlance, it is discursivized. The film, like many other Australian-produced works, is attractive to a wide range of audiences. Each group raises its own questions about Campion's film and the message delivered through the medium. Some individuals focus on the maltreatment of the Maori while others concentrate on masculine control and femininity; all are attempting to answer questions raised by the film.

Sometimes, the discourse becomes passionate. Maori feminist Leonie Pihama, for instance, indicates that "these are the portrayals that add to the perpetuation of belief systems that undermine not only [the Maori] position in this country but also [their] intelligence" (Reid 108). Furthermore, they should not be "sold to the world as an authentic depiction of [Maori] people" (Reid 108). Helena Sharp and Garry Gillard emphasize feminist aspects of the film. They argue that Ada does not speak because "her father told her to be silent" (110). Although the film does not reveal the reason for Ada's muteness, the novel by Campion and Kate Pullinger does (Sharp and Gillard 110). Sharp and Gillard also propose that Ada took control of her own speech as part of "her personal quest...to deal with masculine control and gain autonomy" (110).

In addition to its socialization, filmmaking is a form of social problem solving; it locates social problems, identifies their causes, and develops solutions to them (O'Regan 18). *The Piano* uses cultural

differences to make the social domain “available for filmic expression and critical exploration,” such as gender, ethnic, and indigenous issues (O’Regan 265, 269).

One cultural cleavage visible in the film involves the Aboriginal or Islander and the non-Aboriginal, or settler. *The Piano* shows settler culture as oppressing indigenous people, who claim equal rights in the distribution of goods and “feel that their historic ownership of their respective lands should entitle them to something more” (Sykes qtd. in O’Regan 275-6). Campion’s film provides “the wider community with ways of ‘knowing Aborigines’ which Aborigines then need to negotiate” (O’Regan 277). According to Marcia Langton, audiences “do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists” (qtd. in O’Regan 277). Pihama supports this assertion: “The images presented in *The Piano* say much about colonial perceptions of the indigenous people, as these perceptions have endured to the 1990s” (qtd. in Reid 115). Aboriginal people criticize films such as *The Piano* for failing to illustrate how Aborigines and Islanders are meaningful to themselves (O’Regan 277). *The Piano* depicts the Aboriginal people as an asset and a factor in the success of the colonial system.

Cleavage between the national and international is also prevalent in the film, as Campion explores the process of establishing a sense of identity at an international, national, and subnational level. At the subnational, Stewart, Baines, Ada, and Flora are all defined, in part at least, by being different from the Maori. According to Pihama, images of whites are positioned in front of a background of Maori characters (qtd. in Reid 115). The Maori provide contrast to the white characters’ culture by acting as an “authentic, unchanging and simple way of life” (Pihama qtd. in Reid 115). Baines is defined, at times, through his differences from Stewart. Although Baines is not a native, his facial tattoos and ability to speak Maori separate him from Stewart and hide his role in the colonial system. As Lynda Dyson explains, Baines “is able to arouse Ada’s passions because he is closer to nature than Stewart” (qtd. in Reid 110). Unlike Stewart, he knows when to use blackface and local vernacular and when to distance himself by race, class, and gender (Reid 113). This cleavage between the national and international shows that some filmmakers are concerned with societies in transition interacting with the wider world, as well as exotic indigenes.

Particularly for American and British audiences, issues of gender take precedence. In other Australian and New Zealand films, women do not participate as men do in the creative, technical, and administrative processes (O’Regan 288). In *The Piano*, however, Ada exercises a certain kind of power over the two men. As their desire for Ada increases, they become vulnerable and disempowered (Sharp and Gillard 111). Jane Campion, herself, is “Australasia’s most high-profile and lionized auteur director” (O’Regan 288). As such, the film shows a feminist contribution to the cinema and illustrates a feminist approach to the depiction of social reality (O’Regan 292). In other films, women are objects of gaze; meant simply to be looked at. *The Piano* counters this male bias typical of Western storytelling (O’Regan 294). Ada, even though she does not speak, expresses herself eloquently. Through her music and actions, she becomes much more than an object of gaze and takes the authoritative voice from the male characters as she gains autonomy. Campion has stated that her exploration of the romantic impulse critiques the power of eroticism (Campion 6).

According to Maria Margaroni, “Although...it is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation, I...cling obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained” (103). *The Piano*, although aimed at an Australasian audience, offers much to American and British audiences, as well. Although Campion’s comments on colonialism may not be apparent to an international audience, her feminism is. National cinema localizes a film while also contributing to the international cinescape. International audiences provide new eyes through which meaning and significance are perceived. Perhaps, with time and recognition, Australasian cinema will establish a more distinct identity and do more than assimilate itself into the dominant film culture. For now, this form of national cinema works on a local level while attracting the interest of worldwide audiences.

REFERENCES

Campion, Jane. “Jane Campion on her Gothic Film ‘The Piano.’” *Sight and Sound* 3.10 (1993): 6.

Margaroni, Maria. “Jane Campion’s Selling of the Mother/Land: Restaging the Crisis of the

G. FAUST: *THE PIANO*: DEFINING THE "NATIONAL"

Postcolonial Subject." *Camera Obscura* 18.2 (2003): 93-123.

O'Regan, Tom. *Australian National Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Reid, Mark A. "A Few Black Keys and Maori Tattoos: Re-Reading Jane Campion's *The Piano* in PostNegritude Time." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 17.2 (2000): 107-116.

Sharp, Helena and Garry Gillard. "'A Path of Great Courage': *The Piano*." *Australian Screen Education* (2004): 109-112.