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Contemporary Women Directors

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Reaction Papers 1: *The Piano* (1993)

Jane Campion's *The Piano* is one of the most haunting and beautiful love stories I have ever seen. It's a peculiar story on communication, sexual pride and an older traditional European society which seems to be slowly leaving them behind. Ada arrives on a bleak stormy beach along with her young daughter Flora played extraordinary by the young Anna Paquin. They have arrived onshore to finally meet Ada's new bachelor Stewart. Immediately it comes clear that Stewart has paid for his new bride, because of the direct coldness towards her, treating her less as a loving wife and more like property he just purchased.

Ada has painstakingly brought her beloved piano all the way along from Scotland, which obviously means a great deal of importance to her. And yet Stewart callously orders his men to leave it on the beach in the mud and the rain, selfishly deciding it would be too much trouble to have it be carried inland towards their home. Ada is clearly mute and her only forms of communication and expression with the world are through her younger daughter and her piano. The musical keys are in many ways her very own voice, and immediately her new husband strips

it from her. It seems Stewart doesn't mind quiet women who do not have a voice, knowing quite well when buying her she was deaf and mute.

No romantic intimacy develops between Ada and Stewart and one day she decides to go down to the beach to play her piano and she catches a neighbor named Baines playing it. This neighbor seems to be a lonely and mysterious man, a whaler who tells Ada that he loves the sound of a piano and asks her if she can teach him. She agrees and this begins Baines slow seduction, as he offers a trade of her piano for sexual favors. This slow but tense and erotic build up leads to the two giving into their temptations and desires, which ultimately leads to romance. This is the very moment in the film in which I could feel a female director behind the camera telling its story. Director Jane Campion handles the slow building up of the stories erotica unlike how a male director would approach such material. There seems to be much more careful cinematic subtlety with how the sexual moments are crafted. Campion creates the perfect amount of sensual and tender restraint and poignancy for this sequence to work, something only a woman could probably understand and achieve so effectively.

I've seen about three Campion films and all her films have been extremely fascinating and artistically challenging. Her first feature film was *Sweetie*, which I thought was beautifully shot and presented a unique and quirky style masked with sadness and black humor. I enjoyed her film *An Angel at My Table* more as it told a powerful and unforgettable true story of writer Janet Frame who was wrongly diagnosed and put away for schizophrenia. So far from the three I've seen, *The Piano* I believe is her most perfectly crafted film. It's a Gothic romantic story that explores erotic desire, the longing for affection and love, and creates an unforgettable Victorian parable in which women are ruled by a male hierarchical society.