THE PIANO

Great Movies Series – Third Age Learning
Presented by Dr. Kathleen Cummins
What Will We Do Today?

- Examine *The Piano*, a landmark film in the context of:
  - *Film Scholarship*
  - *Women Filmmakers*
  - *Herstories on Screen: Feminist Subversions of Frontier Myths.*
- **Screen** the first act of *The Piano*
- Discuss Jane Campion’s use of genre, fairy tale, the gaze and her representation of Maori people.
Herstories on Screen

- Examines "10 fictional narrative feature films directed by women from four different white settler nations: Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the U.S."
- Subvert tropes strongly associated with "frontier myth-histories" (e.g., the Western).
- Female emancipation and resistance.
Herstories

- Tracey Moffat’s *Bedevil* (AUS, 1993)
- Gillian Armstrong’s *My Brilliant Career* (AUS, 1979)
- Sandy Wilson’s *My American Cousin* (CAN, 1985)
- Norma Bailey’s *The Wake* (CAN, 1986)
- Anne Wheeler’s *Loyalties* (CAN, 1986)
- Merata Mita’s *Mauri* (Aotearoa/New Zealand, 1988)
- Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (New Zealand, 1993)
- Nancy Kelley’s *One Thousand Pieces of Gold* (US, 1991)
- Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (US, 1991)
Herstories and the Second Wave

- **Term** *herstory*: “history considered or presented from a feminist viewpoint or with special attention to the experience of women.”

- Films reflect the key debates that animated what is commonly referred to as second-wave feminism or the “women’s movement” of the 1960s and 70s.
  - struggles focalized around gender equity, reproductive rights, the nature of gender, and the role of the family.
The Piano: Production Details

- Release date: 1993
- Director/Writer: Jane Campion
- Producer: Jan Chapman
- Stars: Holly Hunter, Harvey Keitel, Sam Neil, Anna Paquin
- Genre: Drama, romance, period-piece
- Country of Origin: Australia, New Zealand, France
- Production Company: CiBy2000
- Shot on location in New Zealand
The Piano: A Landmark Film

- Won **three Academy Awards** in 1993 for Best Actress (Hunter), Best Supporting Actress (Paquin) and Best Original Screenplay (Campion).

- Campion **nominated in the Best Director category**.
  - In 1993 was 2\(^{nd}\) woman to have been nominated.

- Campion won the prestigious **Palme d’Or** at the **Cannes Film Festival**.
  - **only woman in the festival’s 75 year history to have won that award.**
The Premise

- Set in a mid-19th century New Zealand.
- A young mute single-mother, Ada (Holly Hunter), is shipped with her daughter, Flora (Anna Paquin), off to the New World to marry a man she “has not yet met”, Alisdair Stewart.
- Ada’s husband forces her to give her beloved piano to Baines.
Themes

- Patriarchal oppression
- Mother-daughter bonds
- Female sexual desire
- Female transgression
- Betrayal
The Piano and Women’s Cinema

- The first wave of women’s filmmaking, **late 1970s to the early 1990s**.
- Many landmark women’s films came out of this period.
- Significant number of women filmmakers set their narratives in rural landscapes **representing or evoking iconic frontier spaces** in their respective white-settler nations.

Julie Dash
The Push for Women Filmmakers

- During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of national film training and financing programs were put in place to address issues of gender and racial inequity in the film and television industries in Canada, Australia, New Zealand/Aotearoa, and, to a lesser extent, the United States.

Merata Mita
Screening

- **Screening Questions:**
  - How does Campion cinematically (use of shots, music, sound and dialogue) construct Ada’s point of view?
  - What are the most significant relationships in the film?
  - After watching this opening, how would you describe Ada and Flora?

- Screen opening of the film (20 min.)
Melodrama and Female Authorship

- Feminist film scholars have identified melodrama as a genre that explicitly addresses a female spectator and is seemingly a vehicle and outlet for female desire.

- Female authorship in the cinema has been historically tied to melodrama.

Jane Campion on the set of The Piano.
The Piano and Genre

- *The Piano* is a revisionist film, re-imagining the Hollywood Western and the melodrama through a feminist lens.
- Weaves a “strange lullaby” about a white-settler family in an untamed wilderness.
- Dramatic conflicts are all focalized around domestic turmoil rather than frontier territory wars.

Stewart bullies Ada
Frontier Hero Subverted

- Campion subverts the rugged lone white male frontier hero of the Western through Baines
- More primal and brooding than rugged
- Frequently appears in the nude, evoking the beast in the boudoir figure of horror, although Baines is not really a serious threat.
The Piano and Fairy Tale

■ Campion’s deployment of “Bluebeard” by Charles Perrault (1628-1703) serves as template for the structure of the story.

■ Bluebeard - an innocent new bride who has married the murderous wealthy aristocrat whose wives keep disappearing in the confines of his castle.

■ A cautionary tale about domestic violence.
■ Criticisms about Campion’s depiction of the Maori people and mis-representation of their culture.

■ “They were sort of draped around the shrubbery and stuff, like some kind of spectacle, you know—hovering.” (Mita)

■ “The Piano provides a series of constructions of Māori that are located firmly in a colonial gaze.” (Pihama)
Ada: A Transgressive Heroine

- Ada’s actions are driven not by maternal desire but rather by her fetishistic desire for her lost piano and, later, her sexual desire for George Baines.
- Campion constructs Ada as a rebellious daughter who subverts the rules of the patriarchal family.
The Mother-Daughter Reversal

- In some sense, Campion (dis)places the maternal role onto Flora, constructing a role reversal between mother and daughter.
- They are two sides of the same coin.
- Driven by her (maternal) desire to save the patriarchal family, Flora shifts from aiding her mother to trying to control her, especially in regard to her mother’s affair with Baines.
The Female Gaze/Voice

- Campion constructs Ada’s point of view and voice through her gaze and, ironically, her voice, despite the fact that she is mute.
- Ada’s voice is so powerful that it transcends conventional speech and discourse.
- The power of Ada’s will.
Questions, Comments?