Discussion Questions for Women in Film Gathering, March 14, 2012:

Focal Film: *The Piano* (1993; Australia/New Zealand/France; Written and Directed by Jane Campion)

This film is both a “female focused film” (that is, the protagonist is a woman) and a film written and directed by a prominent female auteur.

Jane Campion’s films without exception focus on female characters who push the boundaries of what society sees as acceptable behavior for women. Some are based on real people, such as Janet Frame, a New Zealand author whose life story is told in the biopic *Angel at my Table*. *Bright Star* explores the relationship between 19th-century British poet John Keats and his muse Fanny Brawne. Other female protagonists are purely fictional, as with *Sweetie*, which looks at two sisters, one of whom suffers from serious psychological disorders. For *The Piano*, Campion has explored the fictional life of an arranged-marriage bride, mute by choice, and her quest for identity and independence in colonial New Zealand.

The main characters are:

* Ada McGrath, a mute woman from Scotland who has been sold into marriage by her father (played by Holly Hunter)
* Flora McGrath, her 11-year-old daughter (played by Anna Paquin)
* Alistair Stewart, Ada’s new husband, a New Zealander (played by Sam Neill)
* George Baines, a New Zealand neighbor (played by Harvey Keitel)

1. Do you identify with the character of Ada? In what ways, and at what points in the story?

2. One of *The Piano’s* main motifs is that of voices—Ada’s literal lost voice, her interior voice (that we hear through voiceover), her use of the piano to “speak,” the psychic means by which Ada was able to communicate with Flora’s father (and, later, Baines), and her daughter Flora’s role in interpreting her signing (which is also a kind of private communication between mother and daughter). In Ada’s voiceover, she tells us that she has willed herself not to speak since she was six. No explanation is given, and we are left to wonder if this is an act of passive aggression or a quirk of character (Bihlmeyer, 2005). What do you think?

3. The use of the piano in this film is more than a motif—it’s a full metaphor for Ada’s identity. What are some ways in which the piano stands in for aspects of Ada? For things that are happening to her and around her?

4. A Cleveland State University masters thesis by Patrika Janstova, completed in 2007, systematically content analyzed all of Jane Campion’s films, comparing their content and form to that of a matched set of other films. The thesis found that Campion’s films are significantly more likely to: (a) present a female point of view, (b) include characters that exhibit a psychological disorder, appear to be lonely, and are not happy, (c) depict characters traveling, notably to other countries, and (d) include characters who must deal with a variety of family issues and dysfunctions. It seems clear that these thematic motifs are present in *The Piano*. Why do you think Campion uses these motifs?
5. Patrika Janstova’s thesis also found Jane Campion’s films to be significantly different from the films of others in terms of film production techniques. It was found that Campion’s films are significantly more likely to: (a) incorporate closeups of the extremities of the human body (i.e., arms, hands, legs, feet), as well as tight closeups of touching, (b) use extreme closeup images of mirrors and windows, (c) use a handheld camera, (d) use slow motion, and (e) use color filters. Did you notice any of these trademark styles in *The Piano*? What do you think Campion is trying to convey with these techniques?

6. Like some of Campion’s other films, this one includes male frontal nudity. She has noted that critics and even (male) crew members have sometimes been shocked by this, which she finds amusing, given that “from a woman’s point of view, you see naked women all the time in films.” Your thoughts on Campion’s notion of parity in this regard?

7. Similarly, Jane Campion has stated on a number of occasions that one unique aspect of her filmmaking is the inclusion of a fairly free expression of female sexuality, which is not ordinarily portrayed in film (Lundy, 2009). And, Patrika Janstova’s thesis did find Campion’s films to include significantly more kissing, sexual behaviors, and nudity (both female and male). Both *The Piano* and *Portrait of a Lady* (based on the Henry James novel) seem to exemplify this in particular. What impact does this have on audience reception, do you think?

8. Campion’s one-time significant other and co-writer for her first feature *Sweetie*, Gerard Lee, has noted that the film set for that movie was “female dominated.” This included women in the two main acting roles, plus women in the crew positions of director, co-writer, director of photography/cinematographer, and editor. Gerard Lee has noted that he felt marginalized in this environment. Similarly, *The Piano* included women in various high-level positions. Your thoughts on the impact this may have on actors’ performances, and on the overall climate of the film set?

9. Based on critical responses to her films (including some booing by critics for her first feature, *Sweetie*, at the Cannes Film Festival), Campion has noted that there is “a lot of aggression toward women expressing themselves.” Your thoughts?

10. Scholar Greg Bentley’s essay on *The Piano* in *Literature/Film Quarterly* calls the film “a political film... about the politicalization of sexuality, feminism, colonialism, and environmentalism.” How are these conflicts demonstrated in the relationships Ada has with the other characters in the film?

11. Much film scholarship has examined the “male gaze”—the typical way in which (a) male characters are depicted watching female characters, (b) the male audience members watch the male characters watch the female characters, and (c) the male audience members identify with the male characters. Much has been written about how this is the dominant way in which people (mostly male) watch films—a very patriarchal model. Obviously, Jane Campion presents an alternative to this model. In a 2005 article in *Cinema Journal*, Jaime Bihlmeyer itemizes ways in which *The Piano* presents a *female gaze*: For example, Campion refuses to use point-of-view shots for male characters when we might expect them (e.g., when Stewart looks at Ada through the camera); Campion allows Ada to look directly at “us,” breaking the fourth wall and thus confirming the fact that the female character has a vision; Campion replaces the typical male
voyeuristic view with point-of-view shots showing what Flora sees through the cracks in the wall. Do you notice a “female gaze” in the film? What do you think of this notion?

12. The treatment of Maori culture in *The Piano* has been analyzed. In one analysis, author Anna Neill notes that Campion might be drawing a parallel between the treatment of females by males and the treatment of Maoris by white colonists. What do you think the film is saying about authentic Maori culture, and the British colonial impact on it? (Side note: Campion has said that writing *The Piano* allowed her to speculate on the nature of early 19th-century colonists in New Zealand, from whom she is descended.)

13. What functions does the character of Aunt Morag serve? What does her portrayal seem to say about the accepted roles of women in society?

14. How about the character of Baines? What does his portrayal seem to say about the relationship of colonists to the Maori? About the relationship of men to women?

15. Authors Helena Sharp and Garry Gillard note that *The Piano* contains more than a hint of the “paranoid gothic thriller” genre (e.g., *Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre*). Indeed, Campion says that she was partly inspired by *Wuthering Heights*. What are your thoughts on this?

16. For this film, Jane Campion became the second female director to be nominated for an Academy Award for Directing. (The first was Lina Wertmuller, for *Seven Beauties* in 1975.) Campion lost to Steven Spielberg for *Schindler’s List*, but won for Best Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen. The film was nominated for eight Oscars in all. What can you see in this film that distinguishes Campion’s work in such a way that attracted world attention?

17. Both Holly Hunter and Anna Paquin won Academy Awards, for Best Actress in a Leading Role and Best Actress in a Supporting Role, respectively. What do you think so distinguished their performances?

18. Are there any particular messages and meanings in this film that have personal importance to you? Are you able to connect with this film on a personal level?

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