

TONY MOORE

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AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

the
barry mckenzie
movies

TONY MOORE



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AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

JANE MILLS
Series Editor

Our national cinema plays a vital role in our cultural heritage and in showing us what it is to be Australian. But the picture can be blurred by unruly forces including competing artistic aims, inconstant personal tastes, political vagaries, constantly changing priorities in screen education and training, and technological innovations and market forces.

When these forces remain unconnected, the result can be an artistically impoverished cinema and audiences who are disinclined to seek out and derive pleasure from a diverse range of films.

Screen culture, of which this series is a part, is the glue needed to stick these forces together. It's the plankton in the food chain that feeds the imagination of our filmmakers and their audiences. It's what makes sense of the opinions, memories, responses, knowledge and exchange of ideas about film.

Above all, screen culture is informed by a *love* of cinema. And it has to be carefully nurtured if we are to

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understand and appreciate the aesthetic, moral, intellectual and sentient value of our national cinema.

Australian Screen Classics will match some of our best-loved films with some of our most distinguished writers and thinkers, drawn from the worlds of culture, criticism and politics. All we ask of our writers is that they feel passionate about the films they choose. Through these thoughtful, elegantly-written books, we hope that screen culture will work its sticky magic.

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THE SEA, THE SEA

Jane Campion once spoke of a movie, *Ebb*, which she considered, but never made:

It was an imaginary story about a country where one day the sea leaves, never returns, and the way in which the people have to find a spiritual solution to this problem. The natural world had become artificial and unpredictable and the film spoke about faith and doubt. The inhabitants of this country had developed a certain form of spirituality, hearing voices, having visions.¹

There is something strangely compelling in this mini-narrative, and in oblique ways it speaks of the concerns of *The Piano*. A movie premised, hypothetically at least, on loss and redemption, on a spiritual struggle to deal with the bewildering subtraction of something that had seemed otherwise essential, *The Piano*, also, attempts to 'solve' certain conditions of absence and estrangement, the world made unfamiliar, the challenge of recovery, of forms of damage that can only be negotiated by visions. Curiously, too, *The Piano* works with a sensibility of *immersion*, as if in a dialectical gesture willing the *flow* that *Ebb* hypothetically cancelled. According to cinematographer, Stuart Dryburgh,

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Part of the director's brief was that we would echo the film's element of underwater in the bush. 'Bottom of the fish tank' was the description we used for ourselves to define what we were looking for. So we played it murky green-blue.²

What symbolic sea-space is this? Why the wish for a fish-tank filter of murky aquamarine? And what directorial command, therefore, to obliterate visually, if only in certain scenes or as a suggestive and subliminal trace, the necessary division of earth and ocean? The nineteenth-century critic John Ruskin once famously described the sea as 'an irreconcilable mixture of fury and formalism', expressing exasperation at its representational challenge. What is worth exploring, I think, are the ways in which *The Piano* is hinged on just this kind of contradiction: an aesthetic of both containment and excess, the rhythmical unrolling of images, recurring with wave-like regularity, but also their overlapping, an interior turbulence, a sense of spill into dimensions of sublimity and vastness. Every movie, of course, is a *motion* picture, a system of fluctuation and 'continuous mobility'.³ What is interesting here is the wave-motion of certain movies, the forms in which they rehearse the making and unmaking within the frame, their spatial and temporal logic, their manufacture of cinematic coherence, their roiling to the shore of a more-or-less specific conclusion.⁴

Revising *Ebb*, the *look* of *The Piano* is thus often submarine: there is a watery quality to many of the shots, and New Zealand, the principal setting, is remade as a perilous and drenching heterotopia, a place not for touristic or colonial satisfactions of the picturesque, but somewhere other-worldly, deep, bluish, strange, somewhere, indeed, that might ultimately suck one under, or dissolve the self into place in disturbing ways.⁵ Described by one writer as 'a muddy, glutinous (and) fluid landscape', it might also therefore be read as *feminised*.⁶ The sea is recurrently

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evoked, prayed to in a Maori ritual, photographed as bands of light and dark, or thundering dramatically at the limits of the visible world.

Add to this Michael Nyman's famously hypnotic score, which swells and rises, ebbs and flows, saturates the crucial scenes in an irresistible tonal wash. The soundtrack, that is to say, is also fluid; its motifs recur in a kind of compulsive repetition, based in part on the composer's knowledge of the forms of baroque rounds and canons. The music crests and falls and superimposes; it moves with broad tidal sweep, just as waves do. The climax of the narrative, such as it is, is the heroine's near-drowning. She descends to expressionist film-making, lapis light and a lush enveloping score, seeming to go down and down, way into shadowy depths, so that her ascent and recovery seem almost a continuity mistake. (More of that later.) And the movie ends, as viewers may puzzle-headedly recall, with an image of the heroine, Ada, suspended beneath the ocean, swaying, darkly obscure, within light-shot currents. Her dress oddly resembles a domed sea creature, ballooning around her. She is filmed from below, as if the camera has finally sunk to the ocean floor, as if that is where the directorial and cinematic consciousness of *The Piano* finally comes to rest. It is *drowned, but seeing*. There is then a cut-to-black, and a quote from *Silence*, a poem by the English poet Thomas Hood (1799–1845), one which initially was to have been used in *Ebb*.⁷

There is a silence where hath been no sound,
There is a silence where no sound may be,
In the cold grave—under the deep, deep sea.

In one of the boldest conceptual moves in *The Piano*, the deep, deep sea that is the destination of this movie is paradoxically both the emblem of the persistence of desire (life) and the loss of desire (death). The voice-over speaks both alive and *posthumously*, claiming



The stranded piano.

the territory Roland Barthes once identified as the impossible space of pure fiction, the ‘scandal’ of enunciation where none should truly exist.⁸ The sense of oceanic conclusion, of altered perception, of the beautiful and terrifying reversibility of things, are all contained in the last image and the ripple-lines of quotation that follow it.

So how do we arrive at such a moment of spooky audacity? At such a haunting, deliquescent, point of view? How has this second *Ebb*, or this putative *Flow*, returned the ocean in a post-colonial narrative?

And what does it mean to align passion with natural forces, to situate subjects in the drag and undertow of altered states and rhythms? In this essay I wish to address the physical quirkiness of *The Piano* (its representations of the body and sense experience), and to investigate its peculiar, and peculiarly insistent, metaphysics. This is a movie much written about—sometimes in depressingly reductive and schematic ways—yet it carries an

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aesthetically distinctive poetics, even as it rehearses familiar genres with mostly familiar movie stars. Famously, too, *The Piano* inspires adoration, sometimes to the point of gushy devotion, so I wish also to examine its remarkable emotional appeal. Its popular success—as the winner of three Academy Awards in 1994 and the prestigious *Palme d’Or* at Cannes in 1993 (shared with Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine*)—has in many ways occluded the formal qualities of the movie, and presented it, predictably, in more market-driven terms: the virtuosity of the stars, the sexual plot, the dank exoticism of darkest New Zealand. Early reviewers sometimes offered appalled condemnation: Stanley Kauffmann calls it ‘an over-wrought, hollowly symbolic glob of glutinous nonsense’ and says:

‘[I] haven’t seen a sillier film about a woman and her piano since John Huston’s *The Unforgiven* (1960) in which Lillian Gish had her piano carried out into the front yard so she could play Mozart to pacify attacking Indians.’⁹

More often, however, the reception was one of extraordinary praise, often couched in highly emotive terms: ‘For a while I could not think, let alone write about *The Piano* without shaking. Precipitating a flood of feelings, *The Piano* demands as much a physical and emotional response as an intellectual one ... I wanted to rush at the screen and shout and scream.’¹⁰ Such strong identifications and fervent responses have formed the basis of both feminist and anti-feminist criticism and been the reason for the film’s acceptance or rejection. Acknowledging its emotional appeal, another critic writes: ‘The film gives *reason* nothing to do.’¹¹ So in this essay I shall impersonate the visitor from the land of *Ebb*, who sees the movie for the very first time. I shall assess its unearthly and controversial visions, its attractive powers, and its capacity to alienate and to entrance.