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CHAPTER FIVE

Psychic Cleavage: Reading the Art Against the Politics in Independent Film

Has Ada ever spoken to you?...I heard her voice. Here in my head.... She said, I'm afraid of my will, of what it might do. It's so strange and strong.

—Stewart to Baines, *The Piano*

Yet this Red Riding Hood falls head over heels in love with the wolf, who turns out to be not a sheep in wolf's clothing, but a recklessly romantic Prince with dirty fingernails.

—Vincent Canby

The Piano seduces and excites audiences with its uncritical portrayal of sexism and misogyny.

—bell hooks

The voice Stewart (Sam Neill) hears in his head is Ada's (Holly Hunter) "mind's voice" which the audience hears twice: in voice-over narration at the opening and closing of *The Piano*. The otherwise mute Ada describes her mind's voice to nine-year-old Flora (Anna Paquin) while attempting to explain the disappearance of the child's father. The scene is subtitled for the audience as mother communicates with daughter in sign language. Ada tells Flora that she did not need to speak with him (he remains unnamed) as she could, instead, lay her thoughts in his mind, "like they were a sheet." They were never married, however, because he got frightened and stopped listening.

The "fairy tale" ("Forceful Lessons" 18) Vincent Canby describes is a film "so good, so tough, so moving and, especially, so original" ("Early Favorite" C13)—similar high praise repeated by many other reviewers of *The Piano*.

hooks's indictment of the film as sexist and misogynist appears in an article in which she contrasts widespread criticism of gangsta rap to praise for *The Piano* (26–29). hooks argues that young, African American men are blamed as

individuals for sexist, misogynist, and violent lyrics although no attempt is made to identify and critique the cultural context in which gangsta rap exists. It is that surrounding cultural context, the "larger structures of domination" (27), that socializes individual behavior and, indeed, is necessary for the continuation of those dominant systems. "It is much easier to attack gangsta rap than to confront the culture that produces that need" (29). The cultural context must change in order for, in the instance of gangsta rap, young black men to be socialized differently. At the same time, hooks contends that the similar omission of a cultural and historical context in *The Piano* results in a sexist portrayal of women that reinforces patriarchy and, in its depiction of the Maori, racism. "Violence against land, natives, and women in this film…is portrayed uncritically, as though it is natural, the inevitable climax of conflicting passions" (28). However, in stark contrast to gangsta rap, *The Piano* is applauded for doing what it does because it falls within the boundaries of high culture.

These three epigraphs mark helpful parameters for an examination of the reception of the 1993 film, written and directed by Jane Campion, and distributed by Miramax. While whole-heartedly agreeing with hooks's assessment of the widespread omission of social, political, economic, and psychic aspects in the analyses of cultural products dealing with gender, race, and many other issues, I would argue that her example of *The Piano* is a poor choice precisely because it is one of the rare filmic instances in which female sexuality and identity are expressed in cultural and ideological terms. Her indictment of *The Piano* as misogynist may reside more squarely with the film's critical reception than in her having exhausted potential readings of the narrative text itself. It is necessary to layer into the processes of meaning production the effects of interpretive, reception, or audience discourses. In the instance of this analysis, the primary interpretations assessed are those of reviewers of *The Piano*, a second tier of interpretation that comes after industry personnel and before a wider market of the film's targeted viewers. The issue at hand is how reviewers' readings influence the stabilization of a text's meanings.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which newspaper and magazine reviews affect public interpretations of films. While they may serve as indicators of how films can, and perhaps are, being read, they clearly do not speak for all viewers. However, their public role may help forge culturally negotiated interpretations of any given text; they may participate in the consolidation process of what come to be widely accepted readings. Certainly the movie industry perceives the influence of reviewers to be important, indicated, for instance, in the widespread incorporation of quotes from critical reviews in the body of a film's own promotional material. The use of quotations is meant to appeal to the "objectivity" and "expertise" signified by critical practice.

Speaking of the intraindustry influence of film reviewers, Martin Scorsese notes, "I kind of depend on the critics. They make it possible for certain people at certain studios at a given time to give me money for the next picture. That's the key thing" (qtd. in Hirschberg, "Two Directors" 94)

The influence of reviewers may be even greater for the independent industry, which considers positive reviews an important measure of a film's likely success in its decision to distribute a work, and one of the most effective means of promoting it subsequently. With some high-profile exceptions such as Miramax, which utilizes large advertising and promotional budgets, independent distributors rely heavily on positive national and local reviews. Conversely, the effect of negative reviews can be fatal to a film's outcome. For instance, a Zeitgeist distributed film, *Vermont Is for Lovers* (1993), never played in New York, the most important independent market in the United States as well as the homebase for the distribution company, because of a negative review by Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* after the film was screened at a festival in the city. According to Zeitgeist cofounder Emily Russo, "That made it impossible to open here effectively" (qtd. in Glucksman, "More Things Change" 28). Similarly, one can remember John Pierson's explanation, cited in chapter 3, of the significant extra work put into the New York release of *Slacker* (1991) in order to overcome a poor review in the *New York Times* (also by Canby). And although independent filmmakers may dread the possibility of negative reviews killing any chances for their film, they are simultaneously dependent on earning some critical attention before they can even hope to receive distribution because of the importance placed on positive reviews in distributors' assessments. The screening of a number of nondistributed films at the Lincoln Center, sponsored by the Independent Feature Project, is perceived as a positive move because it "will assure filmmakers a *New York Times* review, which may help garner national distribution" (Garrett, "New Venues" 16). A similar argument suggests that the "real award" in being chosen for the New York Film Festival is the "virtual guarantee" of a *New York Times* review (Basoli, "2000" 30).

However much mainstream reviewers influence positive or negative audience responses to a film or help shape specific readings of a film's narrative, their critical practice can stand as emblematic of common, dominant reading practices. That is to say, critical activity can indicate something about the contemporary processes and politics of hermeneutics. As Meaghan Morris argues:

> In the heterogeneity of a postindustrial culture, reviewers of film are not arbiters of taste, or judges, or even representative consumers, but mercenaries in the stabilizing force of the Thought Police. We do not decree what should be thought about any par-

ticular *film*; but we do help to patrol the limits of what is safely *or* adventurously thinkable as *cinema* at any given time. (111)

The permissible boundaries of film reviewing—what can be said about films and how—can tell us something of the way cinema may be culturally constructed at any historical moment. At the same time, widely accepted versions of a film's meanings are not the only way a work may be interpreted; reviewers' reception of a text should not be elided with the text itself, omitting alternative or multiple readings as, I believe, bell hooks does. By offering an alternate interpretation of *The Piano* from my own situated viewing position (as a feminist and a proponent of identity politics), I argue that instead of *The Piano* being excused in ways that gangsta rap is not, largely through its classification as high art, the film's reception actually mirrors the same cultural omissions hooks identifies. By praising it as high art, reviewers refuse to recognize the cultural and historical dynamics represented in the film. In other words, condemnation of gangsta rap without contextualization and high-art praise for *The Piano* may have parallel detrimental effects in marginalizing alternative cultural positions and function in similar ways in the continuation of prevailing ideological discourses and power structures.

Selling a Love Story

hooks's contention that *The Piano's* designation as an art film shields it from ideological scrutiny derives, in part, from reviewers' responses to the film. Her article quotes Roger Ebert: "One of the most enchanting, startlingly original, erotic love stories ever filmed!" (27). Ebert's sentiments, and some of his choice of words, are repeated from review to review: erotic, passionate or sensual, and most frequently of all, romantic.[1] These defining frames of reference are then recycled as the film's own claims through its print ads. Miramax, the U.S. distributor, selected an image of a smiling Holly Hunter, her eyes shut, as Harvey Keitel, standing behind her, kisses her cheek. The ads follow the standard practice of accompanying the image with reviewers' quotes. Varying with each specific market, a local film critic is cited, along with additional nonregional citations. For instance, one version of the ad in the *Los Angeles Times* reads, in bold print: "'A wildly beautiful love story!', Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone*; 'Breathtaking…exhilarating…a triumph!', Vincent Canby, *New York Times*; 'Passionate and romantic!', Kenneth Turan, *Los Angeles Times*". A comparable version in the *New York Times* includes: "'Exhilarating!', Vincent Canby, *New York Times*; 'A Masterpiece! A tidal wave of sensuality!', Jami

Bernard, *New York Daily News*; 'A riveting, erotic film!', David Ansen, *Newsweek*". In the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Carrie Rickey's "A recklessly romantic, sensual and passionate film!" is accompanied by the same Roger Ebert quote cited in hooks' article.

Much less frequently cited in reviews are the disturbing aspects of the film's love story, and only rarely are links made between *The Piano*'s elements of violence or degradation and its eroticism, a link made explicitly and repeatedly within the text itself. George Baines's (Harvey Keitel) arrangement with Ada to barter the return of her piano for sexual favors, one black key at a time, is prostitution. Although no money changes hands in this business transaction, Baines has identified something equivalently crucial to Ada's survival. Ada's recognition of the transaction's nature is implicit in her lack of sexual response to Baines, remaining motionless when he touches her, until after the deal is canceled. Stewart, Ada's husband, nearly rapes her twice, the second time while she is still unconscious after he has chopped off her finger with an axe. This mutilation is Stewart's response to Ada's affair with Baines, accompanied by threats to repeat the action in the future if she continues to see him.[2] Stewart has the apparent legal right, as Ada's husband, to enact this punishment; no criminal repercussions occur. He also has the apparent right to physically barricade Ada in the house as a means of preventing her from seeing Baines—nailing shut the windows and doors from the outside.

Ada has no say in her piano being left on the beach, no say in its sale to Baines or in the requirement that she give him piano lessons. Her very presence in nineteenth-century New Zealand is the result of economic and legal constraints imposed on her as a woman, her father having arranged for her marriage to this unknown man. The implication exists that her father chose such a remote marriage because she had "erred" in the past (her illegitimate daughter), her previous sexual transgression making her unsuitable for a less distant, more desirable arrangement.

All the acts of violence or constraint imposed on Ada are tied to sexuality in some way, whether through the "transgression" of her previous sexual experience, Baines's desire for her, or Stewart's possessive rage in response to her affair. If there are no repercussions for Stewart, there certainly are for Ada; she suffers the consequences of other people's desires enacted on her. In addition, she is consistently punished for her own existence as both a woman and a sexual being, seemingly impossibly contradictory categories. This can be seen no more clearly than in the central metaphor of the film—her piano.

That the piano represents Ada's sexuality is made clear from the deep pleasure that transports her when she plays, ecstatically transforming her face and loosening her normally rigid body. It is also made evident in the fero-

cious desire with which she fights for the instrument she must have. It is the depth of her desire and the transformation it creates that Baines recognizes when he leads mother and daughter back to the abandoned piano, watching carefully as Ada plays her music while Flora plays on the beach.

Simultaneously, however, the piano also represents the repression of Ada's sexuality and the sublimation of her sexual desires into her music. Images of the repression of women's sexuality recur in the film, from the layers of hoops, skirts and underclothing that render Ada's body hidden and inaccessible to the dark and airless house into which she is barricaded to prevent her from seeing Baines. The contrast between Ada and Baines during his piano lessons is striking. He is able to display his desires, along with his body, for instance suddenly appearing naked, while she must conceal her desire and simultaneously police or withstand his. He has the ability to speak his desire, to ask for what he wants in progressive steps, from touching her arm to lying naked beside her, while her sexuality is silenced. The numerous instances of playfulness and physical affection between Ada and Flora indicate Ada's ability to be tender. Hers is not an individual failing of coldness, but the collision of her sexuality with external forms of repression.

The sublimation of Ada's sexuality into her music, the piano embodying her body, occurs because Ada, better than anyone, understands that—within the context in which she lives—sexual desire, both her own and others', is a dangerous force that will bring her punishment. Indeed, the unleashing of her sexual desires leads directly to her permanent physical mutilation by Stewart.

But unlike the classic cinematic depiction of women's sexuality as transgression meriting only punishment, Ada's sexuality is a force of power and ecstasy: the erotic, passionate, and sensual that critics describe. The fault lies, precisely, in the cultural context surrounding Ada. In this narrative perspective it is Stewart who errs for his desire to own her as he desires to own land; for his complete inability to understand that which he wishes to possess, whether Ada or the Maori's sacred burial ground. It is Baines who comes to realize he has erred in attempting to have her by buying her: "The arrangement is making you a whore and me wretched. I want you to care for me but you can't." From this narrative perspective it is Ada who does not err: she has kept her capacity to feel what she feels despite the pervasive tactics of oppression that surround her; she has nurtured the strong and delightful girl who is her "illegitimate" daughter.

In its complexity, the representation of women's sexuality in *The Piano* is unusual. The intensity of Ada's desires are inseparable from the threat of violence to body and soul. It is the film's encompassing portrait of the power of desire coupled with the potential for punishment that makes its representation

of women's sexuality so compelling and, arguably, recognizable to many women's lived experiences.

While the piano symbolizes Ada's sexuality, its passion and repression, it has also become her voice. Ada has been mute from the age of six, we learn during her opening voice-over, the same age, "five or six," Stewart later tells Baines she began playing the piano.[3] We also learn from Ada's narration that her silence does not originate from a disability or illness but is the result of her own volition.

Ada's muteness recalls the feminist narrative thematic of silence in films such as Marleen Gorris's *A Question of Silence* (1981) in which three women, strangers to each other, beat and murder a man in a dress shop one day, a man they do not know. The women refuse to speak in their own defense. They resist all demands to explain their motivations because under the dominion of a patriarchal societal structure they cannot do so in any way that would make sense in terms of legal, psychiatric, and other discourses. Prevailing concepts of sanity, reason, and so on, would only serve to indict them in a world in which women have no language or voice of their own, and so, the women opt for the resistance of silence.

Ada's muteness has similar qualities of passive resistance. In the cinematic depiction of a world in which the individual cannot single-handedly overcome oppressive social structures, all that is left to Ada is a retreat into the resistance of silence. In Ada's case, because of the force of her will, her withdrawal is not the silence of timidity or defeat. Ada's muteness and her will are inseparable. Describing her decision to stop speaking through sheer force of will in the opening narration, Ada explains, "My father says it is a dark talent and the day I take it into my head to stop breathing will be my last." And during the film's closing voice-over, after her near drowning, she continues, "My will has chosen life. Still, it has had me spooked and many others besides." In classic realist or normative realist traditions, Ada's willfulness would be cause for narrative punishment. Here it is her will that enables her to survive (her drowning, her marriage), and it is her will that renders her silence a resistance. Together, Ada's sexuality, in its expression and repression; her silence; and her will—"so strange and strong" as her mind's voice tells Stewart—all comprise Ada's character and the force of her circumstances.

If, as I am arguing, the links between desire and violence, oppression and resistance, are so prevalent in *The Piano* how, then, does one account for reviewers omitting them? Indeed, praising *The Piano* as a sensual, sexually charged love story without specifying its disturbing elements of violence, degradation, intimidation, legally and economically mandated dependency, and so on, leaves that reading's viewers with an alarmingly perverse "romance" in which Ada is

swept off her feet by a man who attempts to buy her body and affections (in an arrangement not dissimilar to the marriage deal cut between her father and Stewart) and that Ada apparently likes. Or at any rate, if she initially balks, her resistance is broken down by this "recklessly romantic Prince with dirty fingernails." In this reading, taken up by a wide spectrum of popular reviewers, as well as in the distributor's promotional campaign, the film becomes a traditional love story between three individuals: Ada the woman, Baines the good lover, Stewart the bad lover, thus reverting to hegemonic cultural notions of romance and an equally familiar cinematic exemplification of the romance genre. To see *The Piano* as simply "enchanting" or "charming" is to negate the context of power structures, the cultural/historical discourses, in which the individual characters are embedded. Without reference to acts depicted in the film such as rape, prostitution, and spousal abuse, reviewers fail to link sexuality and the treatment of women with patriarchal discourses, and therefore have to—or choose to—opt instead for the ever-reliable "wrong man" theory in which Baines supplants the hopeless Stewart and a gender equilibrium is successfully reimposed.

While Ada and Baines are romantically united in the film and this is indeed an erotic love story, the significance of their relationship makes little sense—except in the deeply disturbing terms of violence and possession as pleasure, the misogyny that hooks identifies—in the absence of reference to surrounding, depicted hegemonic relations. The omission of the dark elements of the film in many reviews was noted by some reviewers. In *Ms. Magazine*, Kathi Maio, while calling the film brilliant, noted that *The Piano* was winning most praise from male critics who were labeling it as "feminist." Maio writes that, in contrast, a number of women commentators were disturbed by the "grand passion" between Ada and Baines because it is based on a "sexual shakedown," Baines's extortionist arrangement of bargaining piano keys for physical intimacies with Ada (84). Ultimately, Maio argues that the film is a feminist story because of Ada's direct negotiations with Baines, unlike the marriage deal between two men; because Baines is capable of questioning his position in relation to Ada and comes to realize that "love cannot be coerced"; because Ada chooses who she will love. "In similar stories, only madness or death offers comfort to the woeful, willful heroine. But Ada refuses to become the mad woman in the attic or the tragic loser washed out to sea." In this argument, the film is successful despite the foundation of the central coupling in a sexual shakedown. In contrast, it is possible to argue that the film is compelling because of the source of the romantic relationship; its origination in a sexual-financial transaction, made possible by an imbalance of power, links the individual stories to larger cultural discourses.

Living in Culture

Although both men are colonizers, what separates Baines from Stewart is his potential to recognize that which eludes Stewart: the distinctions between possession and passion, ownership and love. What links Baines to Stewart, and to every other character in the film, is that he is not immune to nor can he live outside the bounds of ideology, that he, like all the characters, are historically and culturally constructed beings. Baines eventually cancels the deal and returns the piano, having come to realize what he wants from Ada is that which he cannot coerce—the reciprocity of her feelings. However, in the process his greater economic and social power is made clear because he has the means to obtain the piano from Stewart while Ada does not and because he can, and does, force lessons from her.

Ada's initial attitude toward Baines, informed by class, is further indication of every character's lack of immunity from hegemonic discourses. When Stewart first tells Ada about the lessons she must give, her response is, "He's an oaf. He can't read. He's ignorant." Ada initially disdains Baines for his illiteracy, personal hygiene, and living conditions in contrast to Stewart's more acceptable "landed gentry" surroundings and comportment: Stewart's combing his hair, for instance, before greeting Ada contrasts with the close-ups of Baines's dirty fingernails.

Unlike mainstream cinema's narrative of individualism in which single entities fight the system and prevail over hegemonic structures, no character in *The Piano* lives beyond the jurisdiction of ideological forces. Indeed, no world beyond hegemonic cultural/historical discourses and forces exists in the diegesis of the film. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than with Flora, a character who sympathetically engages us and whose youthfulness might suggest a measure of innocence. Yet despite Flora's powerful will, which mirrors Ada's own, despite her strong imagination, which fabricates the colorful tales she tells, despite her adamant assertions to the contrary, Flora too falls prey to gender-divided power relations. Early on, as mother and daughter are alone and stranded on the beach, awaiting Stewart's arrival, Flora vows, "I'm not going to call him Papa. I'm not going to call him anything. I'm not even going to look at him." But by the time Stewart barricades Ada in the house (immediately following his first attempted rape of her in the woods, interrupted only by Flora's arrival), Flora has relented and blames her mother for the imprisonment, "You shouldn't have gone up there [to Baines], should you. I don't like it, nor does Papa."

It is Flora who betrays her mother by becoming, after all, the good daughter. As Carolyn Steedman notes, "[t]he essence of being a good child is taking

on the perspective of those who are more powerful than you" (*Landscape* 44). Ada tells Flora to take a piano key in which she has burnt the words, "Dear George you have my heart Ada McGrath," to Baines, saying it belongs to him. Instead, Flora responds to the rule of the father, taking the key to Stewart and explaining, "Mother wanted me to give this to Mr. Baines. I thought maybe it wasn't the proper thing to do." The receipt of the engraved piano key results in the already frenzied Stewart chopping off Ada's finger with an axe and sending that to Baines instead—carried by a hysterical Flora, a cruel reward for the child's dutifulness to him.

Although every character is informed by and shares complicity in hegemonic social relations, and although those power relations prevail throughout the diegesis, for reviewers, particularly male reviewers, it may be more comfortable to see the film as a "grand passion" in Maio's words, the more familiar struggle between hero and miscreant, right and wrong man, than as an indictment of gendered power relations. It may be more palatable to believe that some individuals, like Baines (and perhaps themselves), comprehend and act on what wrong men, like Stewart, fail to get. This could account for the film's widespread interpretation as a high-art romance, leaving the text's references to and resonances of gendered power structures obscured or obliterated. While such a reading may represent the desired interpretation for many reviewers, it is also necessary to account for the aspects of this particular narrative that allow such a reading to become the reviewer-preferred one. As David Morley points out, "It is central to the argument that all meanings do not exist 'equally' in the message: it has been structured in dominance, although its meaning can never be totally fixed or 'closed'" (qtd. in Masterman 218–219).

While there has been much debate about the extent to which meanings are structured within the text ("structured in dominance"), instead of being the result of interpretive acts, following Morley's argument, the encoding process manages, guides, or enables potential readings to some significant degree. In the case of *The Piano* this occurs in complex ways, particularly in the overlap and competition among differing aesthetic and narrative representational discourses.

Combining Storytelling Modes

A striking aspect of *The Piano* is its strategy of combining prevailing and alternative modes of storytelling. In the accessibility of its storyline, a largely nonfragmented diegetic space predicated on psychological identification with central characters, and with the decision to cast recognizable Hollywood actors, *The Piano* reflects normative realist cinematic practices. In its visual appear-

ance—both mise-en-scène and camera work—and in certain other narrative choices (for instance, the thematic motif of silence coinciding with a central concern of the feminist avant-garde), the film is an extension of alternative traditions. This strategy of combination creates a hybrid narrative form that is one of the hallmarks of independent film and that serves to open up certain narrative possibilities.

In its accessibility, and thus its potential for more widespread popularity, *The Piano* sidesteps some of the difficulties of a more "purely" but still successful art-house film like Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1993, released by Sony Classics), which received reviews praising its visual splendor but questioning the "slightness" of its content (Feay 18).[4] This perceived slightness, however, can be attributed as easily to *Orlando*'s unfamiliar narrative strategies than to any lesser ambitions on the film's part.

However, as an embodiment of alternative practice, *The Piano* avoids some of what have been argued are the possibly inherent pitfalls of normative realist cinema. For instance, experimental formal elements assist in keeping the audience aligned with Ada's story, so that they understand events from her perspective. Indeed, this occurs to a remarkable degree for a film in which the main character is mute. Camera, score, and mise-en-scène (e.g., its palette) supplant the convention of narrative "intermediaries," that is, characters who explain the purported central characters' circumstances (as we will see with *The Accused*)—disability or victimization apparently precluding them from doing so on their own behalf. In the process, the intermediaries arguably take over the narrative because it is they who undertake the dramatic journey, coming to see the world or themselves differently through contact with the "other."[5] Although Baines returns the piano to Ada, his behavior does not take over to the extent that the central narrative concern becomes the story of his redemption through her love[6] or of his struggle to avenge her mistreatment, as is too often the case in depictions of heterosexual romance. Rather than a struggle between the right and wrong men attempting to "protect" or possess her, the story remains Ada's: she escapes from Stewart through the strength of her mind's voice; she saves herself from drowning—neither are Baines's doing.

Further, and crucially, alternative narrative strategies help keep the story embedded in the discourses of distorted power relations instead of having the story revert to the individual who fights—and triumphs over—the system. This is evidenced in our ability to perceive Stewart's actions to be as pitiable as they are loathsome, he too being a product of the belief systems and hegemonic discourses that engulf him. Another, more common narrative course would be to depict Stewart as the singularly obsessive and often inexplicably motivated villain relied on by some Hollywood narratives, whose villainy can only be

accounted for, seemingly, by individual choices. But as discussed above, no one in this film exists beyond or outside of patriarchal ideological structures, just as in *Orlando* no diegetic world is posited outside of categorization by gender. Filmmakers like Potter or Campion choose alternative narrative modes precisely because it frees them from the confines of normative realism's equation of cultural categories and sociopolitical problems with individualism and free will, and in turn, with the narrative representational codes of three-act structure.

Three-Act Structure

Examinations of *Orlando* and *The Accused* (1988), directed by Jonathan Kaplan and released by Paramount, can help provide insight into *The Piano*'s hybrid processes of signification. The subject matter of all three films has to do with gendered discourses of power. In content or political concerns the three films can be regarded as taking comparable positions in the representation of gender relations. At the same time, however, the films exist on a continuum of narrative practice from *The Accused*, most closely the product of Hollywood's search for mass audiences and humanistic messages (normative realism), to *Orlando* which refuses a coherent diegetic space and classical modes of character identification (linking it to avant-grade practices). The following analyses pinpoint some of the ways the narrative choices made by each film affect the cultural discourses mobilized. How do the specific narrative discourses employed enable and promote or conversely obscure and limit the representation of the politics of gendered power relations?

The Accused is a film that attempts to tackle difficult issues around rape, and in some aspects it succeeds. It also sparked public discussion on the subject of rape beyond the bounds of the text (Corliss, "Bad Women" 127). The film, based on a highly publicized actual event, tells the story of Sarah Tobias (Jodie Foster) who is gang-raped in a bar while a number of spectators cheer and goad the three rapists on. Kathryn Murphy (Kelly McGillis) is Sarah's court-appointed attorney who pursues a plea bargain in the case against the rapists but comes to realize she was wrong to have done so and subsequently brings the cheering onlookers to trial.

The Accused purposefully takes on issues concerning the legal system's (mis)treatment of rape victims. This is evident in the film's title with its subtext of ambiguity. Who is the accused in this instance? The men who raped and those who goaded the rapists on? Or Sarah, whose alcohol consumption, previous drug-related arrest, and sexual life, render her a bad witness and this a poor case? We see this thematic concern in the early scenes, which focus on the legal

business of collecting evidence. Sarah is photographed, probed and questioned—no one is intentionally cruel, but the process itself is dehumanizing. The film critiques what occurs to the individual in the process of trying to make a case.

This critique is largely formulated through the issue of class and the relationship between Sarah and Kathryn. Distinctions between Sarah as working class and Kathryn as middle class are drawn in numerous ways, including dress, behavior, language, education, living conditions (trailer or modern apartment), and professions (waitress or lawyer). Sarah accuses Kathryn of wanting to plea bargain because Kathryn perceives her as a "low-class bimbo," verified by Kathryn who argues vociferously to her boss not to go to trial because she has "no case," largely as a result of who Sarah is.

Distinctions between the two main characters, once established, are used to argue out the value of different discourses, different kinds of experience. On Kathryn's side, it is a legal discourse; on Sarah's part, a personal discourse; for instance, in the competing claims of the needs of the individual who has been raped versus the requirements of legal process and evidence. A number of ways are depicted in which Sarah is shown to suffer repercussions from the rape (cutting off her long hair, a symbol of women's sexuality; her isolation and lack of support; the self-destructive accident in which she twice rams into the truck of one of the taunting men).

The narrative ostensibly positions Kathryn as wrong on both the class and experiential levels. It is Kathryn who realizes that she has made a mistake in plea bargaining, motivated by her own and others' perceptions of Sarah's character, and that she has erred for having made the decision without consulting her client, thus robbing Sarah of her voice. When Sarah is in the hospital after the car accident, she tells Kathryn, "He figures I'm a piece of shit. Everybody figures I'm a piece of shit. Why not? You told them that. I never got to tell nobody nothing. You did all my talking for me." In an interview, Jodie Foster elaborated on this aspect of Sarah's character: "All that matters to Sarah is that she tell her story.... If she tells her story, then it happened, and that means she's human"(qtd. in Taitz 15). It is this realization that prompts Kathryn so adamantly to take on the criminal solicitation case, too late to try the rapists but able yet to prosecute those who goaded. And in addition, it represents a last chance to give Sarah a voice, by providing her an opportunity to testify, as she so deeply desires, about her experiences from her own perspective.

In other words, it is Kathryn who learns from Sarah; it is Kathryn who changes. At the level of the cultural discourses set in motion by plot and character, the film validates Sarah's discourses, both class and experiential, or at least argues they should be valued equally with Kathryn's.

However, at the level of cultural discourses invoked by setting and genre—as a courtroom drama—the legal discourse increasingly takes over screen time, story focus, and Sarah's discourse of personal experience. In the last weighty portion of the film, Kathryn's language, not Sarah's, dominates the story and establishes the frame of reference by which we judge dramatic events. In the film's increasing narrative shift to courtroom drama, to weight placed on the outcome of the verdict and legal satisfaction, the moral and dramatic victories occur in Kathryn's terms. Sarah's experience is increasingly engulfed by the trial itself, by the outcome of the legal not the personal process. At the end of the film we are left with a sense that the repercussions of the rape itself have been overcome, that with the legal victory Sarah's psychological and emotional difficulties are also resolved. Certainly they are absent from the final moments of the film, in the beaming and legally victorious Sarah in the courtroom and on the courthouse steps.

The narrative of *The Accused* does contradictory things simultaneously on the levels of plot and character versus genre and in the cultural discourses that are summoned by these competing narrative elements. In story terms of plot and character, Sarah's class and experiential distinctions are validated. In terms of legal discourse, in the increasing shift to courtroom drama, Kathryn's class and experiential distinctions take precedence. In this sense, Sarah loses control of the story. The authority of experience gives way to the greater authority of the law; the personal shifts to the judicial; the dramatic outcome is dependent on the ability to argue and prove a case rather than on dealing with rape on a psychological level. The ability to argue and prove the case *becomes* the way of dealing with the rape.

Further, Sarah loses control of the story in the visual or formal representation of the rape itself. As Carol Clover points out (83), it is the testimony of the initially reluctant witness Ken Joyce (Bernie Coulson) that permits the visual presentation of the rape. Although Sarah too testifies, it is Ken's version, his words and his point of view that controls the camera. This is when we, the audience, *see* the rape, when it is made filmically "real" for us. Even the prosecution, in its summation, makes it clear that it and Sarah would have lost the case were it not for Ken's testimony. So, he also makes the rape "real" for the jury. In controlling the camera in the representation of the rape, Ken—not Sarah—validates the reality of the rape. While the film's story line pays lip service to Sarah's opportunity to speak for herself, its formal or aesthetic discourses, once again, reduce her to voicelessness. In this instance, the representational discourses of plot and character operate in opposition to aesthetic discourses.

If viewers are not familiar with the highly publicized case upon which the film is based, the text makes clear, at the beginning and throughout, that at the core of this story is a brutal gang-rape in a bar at which onlookers watched and cheered instead of intervening. Indeed, the opening scene of the film portrays Sarah running out of the bar immediately after having been raped. This initial sequence alerts the audience to the existence of a visual record of the events of that night. We are positioned, at this stage, on the exterior watching Sarah leaving from the door of the bar into the street. We have yet to be shown the interior, the visual record of what transpired on the other side of that door.

We are given signs to expect the enactment of the rape although it does not actually occur until late in the film. Its presentation is postponed, prolonged, deferred. And when it does arrive, it is played out in vivid, lengthy visual and audio detail. But the question is why? What is its dramatic necessity at this point, or at all? We have long believed Sarah's version of events, long sympathetically identified with her character. Emotional affiliation rests with Sarah and against the men on trial whom we want to see convicted (the text's equation to the reinstatement of justice)—all without having seen the gang-rape.

In the three-act structure of normative realist cinema, the third act encompasses the climax and resolution of the film. The climax is the dramatic high point, the moment of culminating action, conflict, excitement. The representation of the rape is promised, but withheld. In doing so, the narrative and sexual climaxes of *The Accused* coincide, heightening the impact of both.

We are left with the often-debated quandary, so frequently attributed to normative realist practices, of whether plot and character maintain a dominant authority, allowing the film to examine a genuinely important social issue. Or conversely, the extent to which other aspects of representational discourse (for instance, in the sequencing, duration, and mise-en-scène of the rape) subsume the social to a pretext that is portrayed merely to allow the representation of a pleasurable act of sexual violence. In other words, is the depiction of the rape—and of Sarah's entire story—exploitative, or is it disturbingly graphic but ultimately necessary? At issue is how certain story and aesthetic elements work together (or fail to) so that particular ideological constructs remain narratively dominant, and so, as referent to an outside reality, a social world beyond the film is sanctioned as is and, perhaps, further solidfied.

As has often been noted, the narrative techniques and modes of representation of normative realism, with their emphasis on plot and character, are deeply embedded in the ideology of humanism. Originating with the Enlightenment, humanism is described by Jürgen Habermas as "the belief, inspired by modern science, in the infinite progress of knowledge and in the infinite advance toward social and moral betterment" (4). Humanism valorizes the human subject as the

center of knowledge and action. It posits a notion of self or subjectivity derived from and commanded by the individual. The pervasively replicated humanist myth of individuals fighting and triumphing over the system mistakenly construes individuals and the cultural/historical discourses which construct them as separable. Whether the narrative structures of normative realism are ineffectual in their ability to interconnect social beings with power structures, or whether normative ideologies are rendered more effective by their seeming invisibility, the narrative practices of normative realism, as *The Accused* indicates, fail to make surrounding hegemonic forces apparent, much less the central subject of the film.

Alternative Narrative

If we turn to *Orlando* we can see how, in contrast, this film's adoption of alternative narrative techniques works to maintain the power of hegemonic discursive formations, not the individual, at center stage. *Orlando* follows the never-aging title character over four hundred years, initially as a young man, one day awakening to find herself transformed into a woman. One of the principal themes explored is gender distinctions as culturally, not biologically, determined. As such, the text explores gender as a fundamental organizing principle of experience. The film elaborates its ideas on gender through two approaches: in the first instance, as culturally imposed, and in the second instance, varying across time. On the one hand, there are the differences in treatment toward Orlando when she is a woman and when she is a man, such as the loss of her land, her more restrictive and cumbersome dress, and so on. On the other hand, there are depictions of gender traits as part of historical fashion, not inherent aspects of personality. This latter is bookended by the opening and closing voice-overs. In 1600, "There can be no doubt about his sex, despite the feminine appearance that every man of the time aspires to." And in the present day, "She—for there can be no doubt about her sex…with the slightly androgynous appearance that many females of the time aspire to." In order to convey this dual concept of gender as culturally imposed as well as varying across time, elements of mise-en-scène serve multiple purposes. Wardrobe, for instance, becomes more restrictive and cumbersome once Orlando is transformed into a woman. However, dress had also been excessively resplendent in her days as a man, prompting awareness of contrasts with modern concepts of masculinity and femininity.

Although the film tackles issues surrounding gender, an initially curious aspect is the casual, almost cursory, manner in which the moment of biological

transformation is portrayed. Orlando, played by Tilda Swinton, simply wakes up one day to find she is now a woman. The character does not seem particularly disturbed by this, emphasized by her words, "Same person. No difference at all, just a different sex." There is no build-up of tension or suspense, no striking camera work, little that calls attention to the transformation. This can be contrasted to the moment of revelation in *The Crying Game* (1992) in which the entire first half of the film builds to the dramatic impact of both the main character Fergus's shock and the audience's shock. In *The Crying Game* the moment is heightened by distinct use of camera: a tilt down that settles on the body part, the male genitalia, previously concealed from us. In contrast, Orlando stands reflected in a mirror in wide shot, a full frontal view including her face, simply visualizing what, in a sense, we have known all along.

We have known it all along because of performance and visual presentation, again in contrast to *The Crying Game*. In the latter film much care is taken to conceal Dil's (Jaye Davidson) biological identity—indeed, much of the film's success hinges on this. In *Orlando*, we are aware that Swinton is a woman playing a man in the first portion of the film. Little attempt is made to alter her voice or mannerisms; neither Swinton's appearance nor her behavior are strikingly different after the transformation. However, because one of the subjects of the film is gender, and in particular its effects on women, Orlando's identity as female is given precedence, both as an actor and as a character.

If Orlando's change of biological sex is minimized formally, in terms of camera, mise-en-scène, and performance, the intent is to emphasize the extent to which gender is not embedded in the body or in the person but imposed on that body and person by outside social forces. Therefore Orlando, the physical being and character, stays relatively consistent while it is the world beyond her—its demands, expectations, and perceptions—that alter as a result of biological difference.

And indeed, land is bestowed on Orlando when she is a man but legally taken away from her when a woman. Same land, same person. Yet everything is different. In order to achieve this, the film takes its focus away from character and forces our attention to the surface. Instead of character development, we find an emphasis on the visual. The locus of audience interaction with text is pushed from identification with the psychic and emotional state of the character to appearance, manner, costuming, and so on. *Orlando* relies on the representational effects of spectacle, posing, and performance, rather than on character development, naturalistic acting, or psychological identification.

Here we can see how alternative modes of representation can be used to circumvent some of the deficiencies of hegemonic cinema's normative realism. It is *Orlando*'s careful undermining of the prominence of plot, diegetic space,

and character identification that shifts the focus from Orlando the individual to surrounding, larger cultural and ideological discourses.

Although events occur in the film (the change of sex, relationships, etc.) they do not transpire in a cause-and-effect manner in which each event, hinged to the last, moves the dramatic action forward. Instead, the visuals are the structuring principle. We journey through the story by means of an accumulation of visual impressions or tableaus encompassing different eras and under the subjects Death, Love, Poetry, Politics, Society, Sex, and Birth. While these represent a reverse causality of life, from death to birth, they do so in a metaphorical rather than in a literal or plot sense. Diegetic fidelity is disrupted by the central character's recurring gazes and addresses directly to camera; disjunctions in narrative continuity are created by, for instance, entering a maze in one century, leaving it in another.

Characters are not drawn in terms of the complex, psychological portraits of normative realism. Orlando is not a character with well-defined personality traits. We know her largely as conforming to broad categories of man and woman across time. The tools to identify with her character are withheld because in this narrative view the individual does not have ultimate effect either on the world-at-large or over her own life. In this depiction, the surrounding culture constructs the individual. And so, there is a quality of acceptance on Orlando's part when she is faced with losing her house and land. She reads the legal document delivered to her, does not like it, but signs it anyway. In another film, one could easily imagine this as the central series of events, the dramatic struggle, in which the character takes on the legal establishment, fights for her rights, and wins or loses—in another film such as *The Accused*.

Moving away from the principal representational codes and conventions of normative realism permits a film like *Orlando* to break from a reinstatement of prevailing cultural/historical discourses and, instead, shift toward a critique of their replication. However, it should be noted, as Judith Mayne observes, "if, consequently, there is no such thing as an inherently radical technique, then there is no such thing as an inherently conservative one" (172). Attributes of mise-en-scène, for instance, in and of themselves do not bear the capacity to critique; instead, they are given significance in the context of their use and in contradistinction to existing conventions of a dominant cinema. The meanings of formal techniques are dependent, in other words, on the narrative operations of their positioning, functions, and uses.

Orlando and *The Piano* both serve as models for independent narrativity, the former by developing avant-garde attributes into a more narrative form; the latter by taking a more hybrid approach between alternative and normative realist discourses. In terms of alternative sensibilities, Ada's muteness serves as

one way to deemphasize normative modes of identification with character. The audience has limited access to Ada's thoughts directly, certainly those that normally would occur through dialogue are not available, nor is there an intermediary character who interprets her. We search for clues to her emotional and psychic state elsewhere—in her relation to her music, in the film's strikingly moody camera work, in elements of mise-en-scène such as wardrobe. Indeed, costuming is as vital and vocal an element of storytelling in *The Piano* as it is in *Orlando*, in for instance, the use of hooped dresses and petticoats that encumber Ada as she tramps through the mud, that conceal her body and repress her sexuality, and that engulf her beneath the sea as she almost drowns.

In general, as reviewer Carrie Rickey writes of *The Piano*, "the exposition is principally visual" ("Mute Woman" W3). There is a kind of looseness in the film's cause-and-effect structure, for instance, in the sequencing of scenes. Framing and composition are used as frequently as event to elaborate story progression, such as in the repeated, striking two-shots of mother and daughter side-by-side, looking eerily similar in their poses, hats, and expressions, reminding us of the construction and transmission of cultural structures from generation to generation. Pictorial displays drive the story, from the high wide shot of the piano abandoned on the beach, denoting Ada's loss, to the image that begins on Ada's hand behind her back, travels up to her braided hair, and from there moves to the startlingly similar undergrowth of the New Zealand bush. In finding visual links between human appearance and place, we recognize the tangled circumstances in which Ada is caught. And, as in *Orlando*, rhythm and movement are established through the reliance on appearance and gaze of the main character in close-up. Although the diegesis is never ruptured, as in Orlando's direct addresses to the camera, the piercing quality of Ada's returned look is constantly reiterated.

Ada's formidable will, taking the form of passive resistance, compares to Orlando's acquiescence instead of action in response to the loss of her land. One cannot fight while barricaded in the master's house; no ability to speak exists when the only language available is the master's. Such elements, in keeping with avant-garde traditions, help the films maintain centrally in our field of attention both the individuals affected and the cultural and historical discourses from which they emerge and by which they are bound.

Simultaneously, *The Piano* weaves its narrative out of plot, character development, naturalistic acting, a coherent diegesis, and other normative realist representational codes. Such a merging of elements from two legacies, so often seen as oppositional, provides the audience with familiar pleasures of the text *and* keeps cultural formations and power relations foregrounded. In contrast to, among others, the feminist avant-garde of the 1970s and early 1980s, more

recent film theory and independent practice have come to recognize elements of normative realist narrativity as significant, useful, and, indeed, pleasurable. By being inclusive of the pleasures of familiar modes of storytelling, a film such as *The Piano* increases its potential of receiving more extensive distribution and promotion. In gaining wide-reaching distribution, the possibility for greater audience address is created, a difficulty never satisfactorily resolved by the political avant-garde, and a significant consideration for socially or politically motivated filmmakers.

Reading Independent Narratives

I have argued that one of the achievements of *The Piano* is its merging of mainstream with avant-garde aesthetic and narrative legacies. In doing so, while also maintaining a popular audience address, discourses of individualism are prevented from subsuming those of gendered power relations. However, the problem remains precisely the strong tendency on the part of many reviewers to read the film as a story of individualism: a right versus wrong man romance, and thus obliterating the cultural/historical discourses enacted in the text. The foundation for this reading rests in the attributes of normative realism, which, as *The Accused* shows us, return too easily, some would argue inexorably, to the cult of individualism and free will. Simultaneously and seemingly contradictorily, the emphasis on nonnormative representational codes—the look of the camera and mise-en-scène standing in for more familiar forms of character identification—allow this film to be more easily interpreted as an "art" film.

At any given moment, *The Piano* stakes out the territory of one tradition, alternative or normative realist, but then must depart from these assumptions and codes in order to claim the ground of a differing narrative heritage. This creates gaps in its potential meanings or readings. In its hybrid strategy of combination, applicable to other independent films, the process of narrative signification is opened to slippage. A striking instance of this can be seen in the final portion of *The Piano* comprising, in a sense, three closing sequences: Ada's near-drowning and last minute, self-willed resurrection from "the cold grave, under the deep deep sea";[7] the epilogue describing Ada's, Flora's, and Baines's new life as a family in Nelson; and the final shot of the film, a long take showing Ada caught beneath the sea, not escaping, not setting her foot free from the rope that ties her to her sunken piano, instead, motionless too long to survive as the camera slowly pulls farther and farther back.

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at risk for her, for women, in that she almost drowned, that her will almost succumbed. Its purpose is to remind us that the cultural imperatives of power relations do take prisoners, despite Ada's own narrow escape. This could be considered an accurate, or certainly reasonable, way to interpret an experimental visual. In contrast, it has been suggested to me that the entire epilogue of Ada and Baines in their new life together is a "flash forward" that takes place in Ada's imagination in the moments just before her drowning (as is the case, for instance, at the conclusion of Lynne Ramsey's *Ratcatcher,* 2000). This reading, too, is dependent on the final long take of Ada motionless beneath the sea, a shot held too long to allow hope that she survives. But in this instance, in order to understand the epilogue as a flash forward occurring only in Ada's imagination, the closing image in which Ada fails to resurface is read as realism, as a literal rather than a metaphorical visual record. This reading, also, is a reasonable assumption in the context of mainstream cinema's realist practices. Both interpretations—metaphor or flash forward—are textually plausible readings.[8]

All readings remain potentially ambiguous, as David Morley points out; they are nonfixed or open within a certain range. That is, not all meanings are possible, but no single reading exhausts all potential meanings either. However, *The Piano*'s strategy of hybridity further erodes the codes, assumptions, and boundaries of particular representational traditions as determinants of meaning. Whether one understands the final portion of the film as shaped by the symbolic of an alternative filmic tradition or by the specificity of normative realism is not simply a question of preference but a fundamental distinction in the processes of narrativity between normative realist and alternative cinema.

If a viewer accepts the final image literally, the film's closure plumbs the depths of bleakness. For Ada, as for other women within this ideological fold (that is, all women in this diegetic perspective), no way out exists. Despite Ada's will, she has no effective resistance to the configurations and restraints of existing power relations except through death. However, a reading of the close that foregrounds the final shot as metaphorical, and therefore the flash forward-epilogue sequence as literal, veers dangerously close to Hollywood's happy endings predicated on myths of individualism. Despite the clink, clink, clink of Ada's newly crafted metal finger on the piano keys as she plays—the haunting audio reminder of the costs to body and spirit—the individual can triumph over injustice, and in her new life with Baines, Ada can reach a gender equilibrium within the construct of the family romance.

One may conjecture that Campion's discomfort with the limitations of either formula for closure prompted the multiple resolution in a kind of hedging of bets against the bleakness of one and the suddenly too well-lit, easy resolution of the other.[9] More critical to the discussion here, however, is the way the film's

closure(s) indicates how a viewer might maneuver through differing processes of representational practices and the varying cultural discourses invoked by each, opting for a certain interpretation over another at any given moment.

Interweaving experimental aesthetic and narrative elements with those of normative realist cinema is precisely what makes interpretations of *The Piano* so given to slippage and, further, what makes the film exemplary of certain tendencies in contemporary independent film. Exemplary because of its hybridity, for instance, as in independent film's efforts to mediate binary oppositions such as form/content, art/politics, and Hollywood/avant-garde. Without the incorporation of nonnormative elements, *The Piano*'s narrative could not veer so adeptly from the individual's struggles to a critique of the historical structures that surround and construct us. It is not restricted to certain readings in the same ways as is the narrative of *The Accused.* Yet, it is this same incorporation of alternative practices and codes in *The Piano* that makes it possible to *refuse* the broadening of the scope of discussion from the individual to larger social forces.[10] Certain re/viewers opt instead to obliterate the cultural "big picture," obscuring it behind the film's experimental aspects: its visual uniqueness and departure from traditional narrative modes. Concealing it, in other words, under the rubric of art. That which leads Roger Ebert to describe *The Piano* as "startlingly original," Vincent Canby to call it "so original," and Jami Bernard to hail it as "A masterpiece!" also permits Canby to continue as follows. "This is filmmaking of such original effect that to ask Ms. Campion about her experiences as a woman director seems beside the point. She is a woman, a fact that shapes her own experiences; but it doesn't have anything to do with her artistic powers" (Canby, "Campion" 17).

Contrary to hooks's contention that *The Piano* is granted a dispensation because of its label as high art, crucial portions of the film's potential meanings are erased through its classification as such. Art films are designated as a separate category in which viewers (as well as, in many instances, their makers) are not held to account in similar ways as they are for social issue films. It is almost inconceivable, for instance, for a reviewer to omit the repercussions of rape or Sarah's silencing in *The Accused* and dwell on the work instead as a female buddy film. Yet *The Piano* was widely discussed in the popular press as an erotic romance without its many instances of violence and degradation meriting so much as mention. In this conceptualization, formal elements such as the look of the film can be enjoyed for their artistic qualities without having to link them back to the narrative's processes of meaning production. One can "appreciate" Ada's and Baines's travails without questioning one's own place in the depicted structures of power relations. Canby is able to state that Campion's existence as a woman has nothing to do with her artistic powers because he, along with the

majority of mainstream reviewers, relies on humanist notions of art. Here, humanist modernism constructs the works it claims for its own as *above and beyond* social categories or cultural constructs such as gender, in favor of universal truth claims. And in doing so, it continues the submergence of voices such as Ada's.

Following hooks's line of argument, if gangsta rap is condemned by condemnation, *The Piano*, then, is condemned by high (art) praise. hooks interprets the film as the majority of reviewers do and on the basis of that same reading she criticizes, as misogynist, the film they praise. And within the perimeters of the reviewer-preferred reading, hooks's argument makes sense. However, too much is at stake in the act and politics of interpretation to surrender to others' readings so easily or to give away, without resistance, the possibility of alternate interpretations, as hooks does in this instance.

Speaking of the work of researchers, and I think by implication this argument can be extended to all readers, Ien Ang argues that the purpose of research is not "the search for (objective, scientific) knowledge," but the construction of interpretations, of certain ways of understanding the world, always historically located, subjective, and relative" ("Wanted" 105). Ang continues by saying that what is at stake here is, precisely, "a politics of interpretation" (105). In shifting conceptual frames from objective knowledge to constructed knowledge, certain questions are immediately problematized: Whose construction(s) prevail and why? Which, or whose, interpretations are admissible for consideration, discussion, and negotiation? In this formula, interpretation becomes a discursive construction of knowledge.

The point in this analysis of *The Piano* is not to suggest that independent film as a category of cinematic signification is unable to traverse the legacies of both mainstream and avant-garde, failing to surmount the density of one or the danger of prepackaged ideology in the other. Quite the contrary, the notion of hybridity as a property of independent film is one of independent cinema's defining and most promising traits. It is to suggest, however, that interpretation is both an act of representation and a political act: an act of representation in the sense of a determining moment in the production of an artifact's meanings, and political in the specifics of and struggle for control over those meanings. Films made by women or expressing women's experiences are insufficient without the corollary recognition, in the realm of reception, of what they seek to do and how they strive to do it. The struggle to represent unheard voices and marginalized lives cannot occur solely at the level of production or be placed only on the shoulders of filmmakers; they must exist equally in the critical activities of reviewers and viewers.

The issue is not only that acts of interpretation help construct their own object, "producing" the text in the process of decoding it, as noted by literary theorist Marcel Cornis-Pope (4). Specific readings can also be imposed at the expense of other interpretations that are thus dislodged. This matches the concept of the function of reviewers, described by Meaghan Morris, as paradigm guardians, determining what is safely or adventurously thought about film at any moment. Its opposite in Morris's terms, is the act of "political reviewing," and I would add political viewing, which "is a matter of changing what can be *said* about film" (121). Or as Edward Said notes, in his consideration of the debates around canonical texts and cultural literacy, too much emphasis has been placed on what should be read, rather than on how it should be read (328).

A film's meanings are solidified, among other sites, through the discussion surrounding its reception, for instance, in the press, in popular opinion such as word-of-mouth, and in other forms of negotiated opinion. Along with representational, institutional, and cultural/historical discourses, interpretation should be a recognized site of struggle with equivalent discursive implications in the maintenance or modification of existing power structures. The act of interpretation should not be surrendered without resistance; the existence of alternative readings should not, as in the case of *The Piano,* be dislodged so easily.

I return to *The Piano* for a final time, in order to look at its text-within-a-text performance of the Bluebeard "fairy tale" and to the Westerners who bring such dramatic enactments to their colonial outposts. Both populations of viewers, colonizing and indigenous, perform interpretations of the play within the film. The stage is set with the blood-soaked heads of Bluebeard's ex-wives poking through holes in the curtain, as Bluebeard, in shadow play, is about to behead another wife. Shouting, "Coward!" some of the Maori men storm the stage. The Europeans' response is condescending tolerance of Maori "naiveté" for their inability to distinguish reality from representation. But of course, and not without irony, the Maori are prescient. For the performance in which Bluebeard is to behead his wife but is halted by Maori intervention foreshadows Stewart taking an axe to Ada's finger. Further, it is the Maori who are depicted as understanding that representation and reality are inseparably integrated. The play within the film stands in for its external frame—the film itself. Bluebeard's assumption of ownership over his wives is mirrored in Stewart's, Ada's father's, and Baines's sense of prerogative over Ada. Both populations, European and Maori, carry out an act of interpretation of the same performance, and in the

end, it is the Westerners who are shown to be naive for their conviction that one can neatly distinguish fact from fiction, reality from representation, and objective knowledge from discursive construct. It is the Westerners who, in error, see narrative representation as harmless entertainment, just as reviewers of the external frame, the film *The Piano*, see it as a harmless romance.