Touching the Past: Jane Campion's *The Piano* as an Example of an Auratic Adaptation

Marcin Jauksz

ORCID: 0000-0002-8337-3640

I started Early – Took my Dog –
And visited the Sea –
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –

And Frigates – in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands –
Presuming Me to be a Mouse –
Aground – opon the Sands –

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Boddice – too –

And made as He would eat me up –
As wholly as a Dew
Opon a Dandelion's Sleeve –
And then – I started – too –

And He – He followed – close behind –
I felt His Silver Heel
Opon my Ancle – Then My Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl –

Until We met the Solid Town –
No One He seemed to know –
And bowing – with a Mighty look –
At me – The Sea withdrew –[1]

The woman on a beach in Emily Dickinson's poem plays with the elements, invokes deities, and translates the emotions triggered by the morning tide into the rhythm of her footsteps. An everyday relaxing walk turns into a game. It is a race against death,[2] a serious excursion, and an expedition during which the woman probes the limits of civilization, looking into the abyss and facing her inner self ("exorcising and exercising awareness"[3]). It is also a metonymy for an erotic game.[4] All these three interpretive paths overlap, covering the woman's footprints. Walking between the known ("the Solid Town") and the disturbing and the aggressive (the Sea which may eat the woman up), but also the tempting (pearls), the woman follows a path that allows one to mark the boundary of longing and desiring, defining the dynamics between one's world and the world that lies beyond, in the realm of the unknown.

In the poem *I started Early – Took my Dog* –, Dickinson locates the woman between two houses: her house and the house of the sea, which is also divided. Mermaids live in the basement and Frigates sail in the Upper Floor. Thus, an imaginary structure, and perhaps also a hierarchy of intimacy, is imposed on the myth of fluidity. The tiers of the sea correspond to the tiers of man. The rising tide touches and reveals the layers of clothing. This erotic scene is saturated with numerous mythical connotations: it is clear that the Sea rapes the woman. On the other hand, the feet that are immersed in sea foam remind one of the birth of Aphrodite. The poem thus combines self-knowledge with the exploration of one's sexuality.

I would like to compare the rising tide described in the poem to the hands of George Baines, one of the two men competing for Ada, the main character in Jane Campion's *The Piano*. It is his determination and the fact that he manages to acquire Ada's piano – the thing that she cherishes most – that allow him to take advantage of her during their piano lessons and lead to the scene described in the poem, when the touch of the sea moves higher and higher. Ada

[1] E. Dickinson, *The Complete Poems,* New York: Faber and Faber, p. 357.
[2] J. Reeves, *Preface*, in: E. Dickinson, *Selected Poems*, ed. J. Reeves, London: Heinemann 1959, p. l.
[3] K. Stocks, *Emily Dickinson and the Modern Consciousness*, Houndmills: Macmillan 1988, p. 87.
[4] See: L. Wagner-Martin, *Emily Dickinson. A Literary Life*, Palgrave Macmillan 2013, p. 68.

visits George's house and undresses gradually. Every time she recovers one part of her beloved instrument. Let me focus on the scene when George touches Ada for the first time. He lies down under the piano, next to her shoe, which is placed on the pedal, begging and demanding that Ada raise her dress higher and higher. Firstly, and importantly, he sees Ada's bare skin through a tiny hole in her stocking.[5] The close-up on the skin and Baines's dirty fingernail creates an unusual impression on the viewer. Torn underwear and a dirty finger are utterly realistic, but also violate the rules of the romance, the historical *decorum* of seduction. At times, Campion uses naturalistic imagery in a symbolic manner (for example, the mud in which the protagonist keeps collapsing), but also to show how violating the boundaries really feels, as experienced by Ada. In a period drama, as Stella Bruzzi observes, "clothes themselves become significant components of a contrapuntal, sexualized discourse,"[6] and dirt and poverty inscribed in the underwear point to an era of tenderness, which makes itself known when one least expects it.

Indeed, Baines, determined as he is, nevertheless tries to be gentle; he wins Ada over step by step, piece by piece (of clothing), in stages (looking at more and more bare skin). A bit like the sea in Dickinson's poem, but more respectably. Scared, Ada runs away more than once, but she always comes back, even when she wins the entire piano back. Perhaps, especially then. Ada's mythologized poetical origin story as a captive allows us to point to a cultural context (scandalous from the perspective of some feminist interpretations[7]) that emphasizes the will of the victim in a mythical order, insofar as a woman, like a prey, as Jean Paul Roux argues, surrenders herself to the hunter, associated with a predatory cat or bird, with "a smiling look":

> A virgin knows how to run away. A mature woman is more likely to be caught: she is not as strong as she used to be and no longer has to defend her virtue. Epic legends and myths tell us a lot about kidnappings – Io, Europa, Medea, and Helen of Troy were all kidnapped – and Herodotus writes (…) ironically "to kidnap women is wrong, but once the deed is done, to make it the basis for serious reprisal is foolish, since clearly the ladies would not have been captured if they were not willing." (…) All peoples with traditional culture know that wild game cannot be captured or killed against its will, then hunting is futile. This is also the case with women. When she fights back, when she wins the race, there is no need to insist. Merlin was in love with Viviane. But he wanted her to come to him voluntarily; he tried to seduce her. He was trying to win her over, and she hated him more and more.[8]

[5] *The Piano* (1993), dir. J. Campion, 00:44:40. Henceforth, references to the film are marked directly in the text with the abbreviation P. and information about the hour, minute and second of a given scene.

[6] S. Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema. Clothing and Identity in the Movies*, London: Routledge 1997, p. 36. Bruzzi also discusses the first scene of caressing: "This gesture is, on one level, a very straightforward signal of Baines's desire for Ada, and Ada registers this through the startled but not unpleased expression on her face in the subsequent shot. Its eroticism, however, as a cinematic image rather than an idea, is created by the multiple juxtapositions of colour and texture: the two skins (one masculine and swarthy, the other feminine and 'white and hairless as an egg'), the heavy blackness of the stocking, and the delicate, if a little perfunctory, edging on Ada's white petticoat;" *ibidem*, p. xiii.

[7] According to Carolyn Gage, Alisdair Stewart is a "violent rapist," while Baines is a "sleazy rapist." The movie, though it could be a feminist story, "derails into a pro-rape piece of hetero-patriarchal propaganda." Quote after: H. Margolis, *"A Strange Heritage": From Colonization to Transformation?*, in: *Jane Campion's* The Piano, ed. H. Margolis, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, p. 28.

[8] J.-P. Roux, *Kobieta w historii i micie* [Woman in myth and history], trans. B. Szczepańska, Warsaw: Volumen 2010, p. 230.

One the one hand, George only seemingly does not resemble powerful mythical kidnappers who often emerge from the sea, or the cynical Paris or London bourgeoisie who spied on women they wished to seduce.[9] His power over Ada, which he gains very quickly, disregarding Ada's husband, stems from his understanding of just how important the piano is for her. Unlike other mythical or bourgeoisie seducers, however, George will relinquish his power. What he gets by forcing a sexual encounter is not what he really wants. In Campion's story, the victim is not happy as long as she is forced to come to her tormentor, attracted by the piano. Neither does Baines want it, and perhaps that is why, ultimately, he is wiser (in spite of being uneducated) than the legendary Merlin mentioned by Roux. George is clever and, in many ways, as calculating as Emily Brontë's Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*, but his gentleness makes him come to terms with losing his beloved, especially when he loses faith that he will be able to get her back.

The director makes an important comment regarding the nature of Ada and George's relationship. Although the New Zealand bush replaces the English moors, both spaces can be considered equally attractive for this tale of love, violence, and longing. In an interview with Campion, Miro Bilbough observes that the movie is set at the same time when Brontë wrote her novel and asks the director about the "epochal stream of consciousness," as if surrounding the entire globe. Campion observes:

> I felt very excited about the kind of passion and romantic sensibility writers like Emily [Brontë] were talking about. I thought it would transpose effortlessly to the situation where I was setting my story, in 1850s New Zealand.
> I feel I owe a great debt to the spirit of Emily Brontë. And perhaps not only her, but also Emily Dickinson for other reasons. (…) In a way, Dickinson led such a secret life, and my main character, Ada, does as well. She is secretive not because she closeted herself in a room, but because she won't speak.[10]

Both Ada and George are lonely. The live away from the Solid Town and thus they grow closer. They are both outcasts. When she arrives on the island, Ada is carried to the beach by the crew of the ship, like the piano that is so dear to her, like an object. Uncouth sailors leave her on the beach alone in the company of her daughter, Flora. She spends the night there, awaiting her husband (whom she has not yet met) and her future, whose twists and turns she is not able to foresee (she will be separated from the piano). Like the tide that will surprise both her and Flora. However, along with her husband and Maori porters comes George and it is for him, like the woman in Dickinson's poem, that she will be born out of sea foam. When the man agrees to take her to the beach some time later as a guide and sees her play

[9] See: J. C. Bologne, *Historia uwodzenia. Od Antyku do dziś* [History of seduction: From ancient times to the present], trans. K. Marczewska, Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa 2012, p. 257, 263.

[10] M. Bilbough, J. Campion, *The Piano*, in: *Jane Campion Interviews,* ed. V. W. Wexman, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 1999, p. 115. Contemporary critics agree that "secrecy," the importance of which Campion emphasizes in this quote, is an important common denominator for both authors. Margaret Homans observes: "Even so, none of the women poets of that era led what anyone would call an ordinary life. Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson embraced the limitations of their circumstances, Brontë resenting every excursion outside her father's home and Dickinson cultivating an even greater seclusion;" M. Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity. Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1980, p. 16.

the piano among the elements, a feeling will arise and a game will begin, which Campion will show throughout the entire movie.

Over the last thirty years, *The Piano* has been subjected to great critical attention and the interpretations of the movie allow one to disregard the obvious in the act of careful reading.[11] Certainly, however, it is difficult to fully discuss a work that aims to elude the viewer and critical interpretations. "They shut me up in Prose –/ As when a little Girl/ They put me in the Closet –/ Because they liked me 'still'–," writes Dickinson in one of her poems, pointing to the philosophical problem of framing/interpreting a subject, against which Ada's story can also be read. Dickinson juxtaposes prose and the economic, yet intense, language of her poetry. Prose, of course, does not refer to the narrative as such, but begs the question of the novel as a point of reference, which has influenced greatly the nature of literary and artistic communication, as analyzed by Walter Benjamin. Indeed, changes described by Benjamin are reflected in the changes in the visual arts at the turn of the last century, which we can also notice in *The Piano*. According to Ryszard Różanowski:

> The rise of the novel in the modern era is for Benjamin one of the first signs of the decline of the art of storytelling as the transmission of experience. (...) The spoken word ceases to be *the* privileged medium, the story does not require the privileged presence of the storyteller, and the reader is as lonely as the author. Novels are no longer told.[12]

For Benjamin experiencing art *in statu nascendi* was crucial. Thus, he argued that the development of print and the privatization of reading mark the beginning of cultural transformations whose counterpart in the visual arts was the invention of photography and then its "coming to life" in the medium of film. Benjamin famously argued that losing contact with the artist, and the technical reproduction of a work of art which gained immense popularity in the twentieth century, would mark the end of aura. In his famous essay, still considered an important point of reference for culture and film studies scholars, he wrote:

> *The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition.* By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.[13]

[11]See: among others, the above-cited collected volume *Jane Campion's The Piano*. In Poland, one of first academic interpretations by Elżbieta Ostrowska may be found in *Sztuka interpretacji klasycznych i współczesnych dzieł filmowych* [The art of interpreting classical and contemporary films], Łódź 1995.

[12]R. Różanowski, *Pasaże Waltera Benjamina. Studium myśli* [Walter Benjamin's Passages: A study of thought], Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego 1997, pp. 199-200.

[13]W. Benjamin, *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, in: *idem*, *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books 1969, p. 4.

Despite its ambition to adapt, film contributes to the process of liquidating the value of cultural capital. Indeed, Benjamin's observations are important, though not crucial, for film. As Laura U. Marks writes:

> I argue that film or video may be considered to have aura, because it is a material artifact of the object it has witnessed. Thus cinema functions like a fetish, in the anthropological sense described by William Pietz: an object whose power to represent something comes by virtue of prior contact with it.[14]

In the movie, in which the titular piano is a fetish, the fictitious nature of the story could essentially weaken its aura: in her research on tactile cinema, Marks focuses primarily on documents or movies which merge fiction and non-fiction. At this point, however, we should comment on the intertextual network, which provides context for Campion's story.

> I admire Dickinson and Brontë, the sensibility their bring to their work and to the world. Both were recluses and they held their sensibility at some cost to themselves. In some way, I feel I am a kind of charlatan who can live in the world quite happily because I'm quite sociable. I use and put their labour into a more popular and acceptable form, and sometimes I feel guilty as I think it's corrupted use of their pure wisdom.[15]

On the one hand, the theme of depreciating the present in relation to the "golden nineteenth century" encourages one to refer to Georg Steiner and his cultural diagnoses concerning the present. However, the fact that Campion only feels "guilty" for a little while allows us to re-examine this adaptation of the sensibilities of writers who are important to her. In the context of the expressed kinship and uncertainty, we can once again pose the question of (re)creating aura as the secret ambition of those who set their narratives in the past, creating stories that try to capture the "real presence" of the past, even if the only tools we have are interpretive speculations on fleeting experiences recorded in literature, giving rise to an intertextual game. When an artistic undertaking is inspired by focused reflection on the past, which, thanks to heirlooms and written documents, can be visualized, the seemingly irretrievable may become the subject of aesthetic pursuits.

Adapting the era that is long gone, making sure that its vision and the cognitive abilities of the contemporary recipient are in sync, confronting the viewer with history: this is the starting point for arranging material signs of the past in order to better understand the community of horizons that connect the present with the past. The dream to capture the aura of the times works against the current of changes that, in Benjamin's view, lead to the loss of aura by works of art. The spirit of post-auratic times is inextricably linked to the hope of evoking presence. Paradoxically, therefore, the reproducibility of a work of art and the lack of control over its final form force much more focused directing, which brings to life something that is as powerful as a real historical artifact. Indeed, it is not a specific text that is adapted, but

[14] L. U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham: Duke University Press 2000, pp. 20-21.

[15] *Jane Campion Interviews*, op. cit., p. 116.

rather a synergy of a series of readerly experiences, which are arranged into a plot similar to the ones generated in a given epoch, and yet different. Such an approach may, in particular, help us understand how effective collective artistic endeavors (film, comic book, theater) are, insofar as many creative voices create a single (more or less coherent) work of art.

* * *

Interestingly, at the beginning of *The Piano* the viewer may experience a perceptual dissonance. The viewer may take a moment to realize that the first look at the world is a look through someone's fingers. The heroine is looking at the world and so is the viewer – with her, thanks to her. Indeed, in a sense, also with anxiety and fear (covering the face, not looking as an expression of fear), with a playful intention (hide and seek). "The voice you hear," a child says off camera, "is not my speaking voice but my mind's voice" [P. 00:01:15]. This is a paradoxical statement. A character who is, in so many ways, so secretive, at the same time wants to tell us about herself. The first time we see Ada – huddled up under a tree like a child – is as symbolic as when we see her arrive on the beach, anticipating life planned by someone else. At the same time, when the woman and her daughter wait together on the beach, we see (aesthetic) hope, shown in/as a spot of light created by a makeshift tent-lantern in the dusk. We focus on it and remember it; it stands out like the piano which emerged from the sea onto an empty beach.

Campion forces the viewer to experience the whole spectrum of emotions in these opening scenes: with Ada, they are looking curiously through their fingers at Ada's daughter who is learning how to ride a pony; with Ada, they recoil from the hostess's stern gaze at her father's house, refusing to play the piano; with Ada, they feel disgust when they watch her child vomit and the sailors urinate on the beach. Cinematic image and sound work together, striving to show the physical dimension of both experiences, including disgust, which mark important stages of this journey. According to Carol Jacobs, "[t]he film urges us to look. Like the dog coaxed from under the veranda during a heavy rainstorm, we are bound to get wet."[16] The haptic nature of the aesthetic experience may be trivialized, but, on the other hand, the political nature of Campion's film invites metaphors which suggest involvement on the part of the viewer. From the very first scene, Campion plays with the sense of touch, showing a world that, in synergy with touch, may be "told" in a story, and perhaps – recreated – in/as realistic mimesis and romantic evocation.

Fingers and touch are indeed important: in the movie, fingers touch the piano keys, the past (with Flora's father) and the present (with George). Sensual interactions start with details, close-ups; Campion shows both moments of fulfillment and moments of disappointment. For example, in one excellent scene Stewart has tea with Aunt Morag and questions his wife's mental health because he saw her "playing the piano" on a table. A discreet conversation, with other people present (including Baines, who is listening, holding his cup of tea), is combined with a subtle play of objects that relieve anxiety (fan, tea). On the other hand, such ob-

[16]C. Jacobs, *Playing Jane Campion's Piano: Politically*, "MLN" 1994, vol. 109, no. 5, p. 759.

jects also mask the fear of going mad. There are two important shots at the end of this scene: a close-up of Morag's hand placed against her heart, shown through the fan that is vibrating nervously, and Alisdair's cup, shown from above (from his tilted perspective), as he stirs his tea. Alisdair says that silence can be considered a good thing, hoping that in time his wife will show him more affection [P. 00:28:15]. Stewart's fear for his wife going insane is similar to Linton's fear for Catherine, since nothing can stop her from longing for Wuthering Hills and Heathcliff, especially at night. It is also a reflection of cultural violence, thus described by Emily Dickinson in one of the poems chosen by Campion

> Much Madness is divinest Sense –
> To a discerning Eye –
> Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
> 'Tis the Majority
> In this, as all, prevail –
> Assent – and you are sane –
> Demur – you're straightway dangerous –
> And handled with a Chain –[17]

Let us focus on "a discerning Eye." It is a telling metaphor in the context of the movie, which may, after all, embody Dickinson's early modern spiritual diagnoses. The discerning eye is a key to Campion's *Piano*. The "discussion over tea" defines the categories that Ada must accept or reject, but it is obvious from the very beginning that she is not of this world, that the categories of her husband, who leaves the piano on the beach, are not hers. When Ada wants her instrument back, she is accused of "mental retardation." Such a diagnosis was to be expected in a colonial household. The fact that music is a language in which Ada communicates will be revealed to Stewart's interlocutor, Aunt Morag, only later, when she will talk to Nessie about how music may physically move a person. Even this, however, will be an offense in a world where art is and will remain only a distraction or a form of entertainment.

When Alisdair and Aunt Morag talk about Ada's mental state, Baines is able to come up with his plan to take over the piano and win Ada's affection. Campion suggests a series of romantic (crazy) reevaluations in this scene. After all, objects communicate emotions, fears, and hopes of the characters: for instance, they tremble, showing just how insecure the characters are.[18] In the next scene, we see an ax. It functions as an ordinary everyday object, as a symbol of punishment for curiosity and promiscuity in a staging of the story of Bluebeard, and, finally, as a tool of real punishment inflicted on Ada. Thus, Campion will set the scene for her drama: a drama in which people and objects play at times equal roles. *The Piano* is one of those movies in which, as Marks writes, "haptic images may encourage a more embodied and multisensory

[17]E. Dickinson, op. cit., p. 214.

[18]It is an interesting sequence, because the colonial space of this elegant "living room" is expressed through such traditional pieces as a fan, a tea set, furniture. What the characters talk about, Ada's alleged mental problems, is also connected with something you would find in a living room, namely a piano. However, since the instrument is so big, it is left outside, in the wild. Ada is "othered" despite her potential affinity with what the colonists aspire to.

relationship to the image" because "in combination with sound, camera movement, and montage, [it] achieve[s] sensuous effects."[19]

At this point, let me return to Benjamin, whose theory was reformulated by Marks, allowing us to re-examine objects reproduced on film. Although they are detached from their time, they do not have to lose their cultural authenticity and the ability to mark the past (especially communal past). Everyday and ordinary life and ordinariness as such, present even in the most spectacular epic, characterize every epoch. Różanowski argues:

> Benjamin liked mystery, but at the same time he was fascinated by the most inconspicuous details, ordinary objects belonging to the everyday world. It was not so much a manifestation of a personal inclination as a method by means of which he hoped, on the one hand, to present the sudden transformation of interior space into exterior space, and, on the other hand, to present the familiar and the common as the unrecognized or as the misrecognized.[20]

Importantly, Ada's New Zealand adventure is a journey from the inside (her hidden, mediated voice) to the outside: from the depths of the "soul," whatever it may be, symbolically shown at the beginning, the viewer moves towards a sensual experience of reality, from deep and sticky mud, to the ecstasy of love and the naked body of a lover. The love provoked (it is a better word than "awakened") by Baines grows out of the sensual; in order to get to know Ada's secret (perhaps Baines discovers it when he first goes to the beach with Ada and Flora), Baines has to touch her skin. Subtle as it may be, through a tiny hole in her stocking, the touch moves Ada. The theme of romantic love is thus rendered more complex through the reference to nineteenth-century biological theories of experiencing the world. And although the fact that Baines is "wild" and "anti-bourgeois" (he is close with the Maori people) is in keeping with the conventions of the nineteenth-century romance (this trope was used by Emily Brontë in *Wuthering Heights*[21]), it is how he communicates with the woman he loves that confirms that the "hunter" and the "prey" are (inter)connected. In-between two houses, as if in Brontë's novel, Ada must finally discover who she is. In one narcissistic scene, she takes a long look at her face in the mirror, which she then kisses, thus finally awakening and recognizing herself. Her lover did the same first.

By making this story of a romantic conquest, on the one hand, an undertaking which, as in Brontë's novel, is closely related to the economic realities of a specific community and, on the other hand, a relationship in which understanding the carriers of feelings and values is of great importance, Campion manages to do both, adapt the spirit of the mid-nineteenth century and reflect on the very act of storytelling. Let us refer to Niklas Luhmann in order to better understand how the use of nineteenth-century novelistic and poetic emotional codes brings to life an auraptation – a fictional story set in the past:

[19]L. U. Marks, op. cit., p. 172.

[20]R. Różanowski, op. cit., pp. 216-217.

[21]See: C. P. Riu, *Two Gothic Feminist Texts: Emily Brontë's* Wuthering Heights *and the film*, The Piano, *by Jane Campion*, "Atlantis" 2000, vol. XXII, no. 1, pp. 163-173.

> The function of love as a medium of communication is to enable the otherwise improbable. In colloquial language, this function is encoded as "understanding;" it comes to the fore when it comes to the desire to understand and where the impossibility to understand forces us to transcend the immediately possible. Since attempts are made to move beyond simple observation, it becomes understandable why all objective, generalized determinants of love, such as merit, beauty, and virtue, are ultimately rejected, and the principle of making the unlikely possible is increasingly personalized. The medium makes use of a person. It is necessary to know it as well as possible in order to grasp or even assume what constitutes its own world and what functions as a comparative scheme.[22]

Luhmann also points out that the desubstantization of the subject in the eighteenth century means that "the Other must be recognized in relation to his environment and to himself."[23] This change, on which *The Piano*, as a period drama, also comments, may be discussed in relation to the aesthetic agreement Campion negotiates in her film. If we combine the question of the medium, presented in the film through the prism of a fetishized instrument, with Benjamin's fear of depersonalizing the relationship with a work of art at the turn of the twentieth century, it can be suggested that Ada's story, with its focus on (mis)communication, among other things, presents a new type of aesthetic experience which attempts to recreate the bond with (it seems) the lost forms of the sensuous.

We can see this in how the characters look at one another and at themselves (in a mirror). The motif of wedding photography used by Campion and the accompanying scenes of dress fittings point to the nineteenth-century culture of the spectacle; when the characters look at themselves, Campion frames their experiences in the context of new "ways of seeing," first witnessed in the nineteenth century. As one of the characters suggests, a photograph may make up for the fact that the wedding ceremony did not take place. However, we realize that it is not true when we notice the sad look on Ada's face: she sees her reflection in the mirror dressed in a white dress and, at the same time, the viewer also notices the second gaze reflected in the mirror: that of Flora, who is grumpy, angry, full of remorse [P. 00:16:15]. The girl has the right to be angry for a number of reasons, but we are able to fully understand only the one she expresses: she wished to be in the photo; she needed attention (her rebellion against her mother and betrayal will eventually grow out of dissatisfaction). The photograph that is to seal Ada's fate puts an end to the child's presence and manipulates history, replacing the real experience of the wedding ceremony with an artifact. At the same time, however, it is an attempt to recall those early portraits, which for Benjamin still had an aura, despite the dehumanizing eye of the camera. However, Campion shows us the eye that is looking through the lens, inspiring reflection on the mediated experience captured in a reproducible work of art. This reflection starts with a recognition, insofar as the viewer (instead of the photographer) is suddenly very much present on the "margins" of the scene that is about to be cut and edited. Indeed, like the dog in Jacobs's metaphor, the viewer is to feel the discomfort of being exposed to rain, combined with Ada's anger at

[22]N. Luhmann, *Semantyka miłości* [The semantics of love], trans. J. Łoziński, in: *Antropologia ciała. Wybór tekstów* [The anthropology of the body: Selected texts], ed. M. Szpakowska, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 2008, p. 244.

[23]*Ibidem*.

being there in the first place: in New Zealand, in front of Stewart's house, in the mud, in the rain, in front of the camera.

It was in the second half of the nineteenth century that the objectivity of visual experience was first questioned.[24] Advances in the psychology of perception made in the last decades of the long century provide context for Benjamin's perspective. Old epistemological models were questioned, and new philosophical concepts of the subject were born. Indeed, new art was born as well, one that reflected these experiences. As Dorota Łuczak observes:

> the breakdown of the *a priori* cognitive unity of the world is associated with the emergence of a contingent and psychological capacity for synthesis and association. This means that the perception of the whole world is replaced by shifting relations of forces beyond the control of the subject.[25]

Campion shows such awakened desires discreetly. When Ada leaves the house, after Alisdair asks her to play "a song," the camera shows her through the window as she wanders around the muddy yard. The camera zooms in on Ada's back and her hands folded behind her, and finally, the back of her head through which the viewer apparently enters a silent forest, insofar as the scene ends with this image [P. 01:07:37]. Alisdair does not understand Ada, who refuses to use the piano for his entertainment; what the instrument has become in recent weeks, what it meant for her earlier, makes her husband's request sacrilegious. Ada eludes the role that her husband assigns to her; she escapes to the edge of the bush. Perhaps it is there, if we look for interpretative support in Dickinson's poetry, that she bonds with the Absolute that is otherwise absent in *The Piano*. Musical genius, superimposed on the prosthetic nature of the piano, can perhaps be revealed thanks to the last verses of the poem "He fumbles at your Soul":

> He fumbles at your Soul
> As Players at the Keys
> Before they drop full Music on –
> He stuns you by degrees –
> Prepares your brittle Nature
> For the Ethereal Blow
> By fainter Hammers—further heard –
> Then nearer – Then so slow

[24]"We are fully aware today that photography is not a neutral registration of the visible, but the product of a device designed specifically for the visual recording and ordering of certain aspects – and only certain aspects – of the external world. In addition, the cameraperson makes choices and decisions (regarding the motive, framing, optics, photo emulsion, posing, not to mention all decisions regarding prints) which influence the photographic image. When the photograph appeared, it was seen as an unquestionable representation of what is, a positive truth. Photography and photographic representation enjoyed unconditional trust;" Henri Zerner, *Spojrzenie artystów* [The gaze of the artist], in: *Historia ciała. T. 2. Od rewolucji do I wojny światowej* [The history of the body: Volume 2: Since the revolution to WW1], ed. A. Corbin, trans. K. Belaid, T. Stróżyński, Gdańsk: słow/obraz terytoria 2013, p. 99.

[25]D. Łuczak, *Foto-oko. Wizja fotograficzna wokół okulocentryzmu w sztuce I połowy XX wieku* [Photo-eye: Photographic vision around oculocentrism in the art of the first half of the 20th century], Kraków: Universitas 2018, pp. 136-137.

> Your Breath has time to straighten –
> Your Brain – to bubble Cool –
> Deals – One – imperial – Thunderbolt –
> That scalps your naked Soul –
>
> When Winds take Forests in the Paws—
> The Universe – is still –[26]

Ada is possessed by naturalistic, sensual desires. This vision is combined with a harmonious suspension: ecstasy? An orgasm? In Campion's movie, nudity is won, guarded, and revealed to the wrong person. It evokes key love myths found in Western civilization, while at the same time demonstrating that the brilliant moviemakers wished to, above all, seduce the viewer. The prosthetic character of the piano as the voice at the heart of the story and the actual prosthesis that Baines makes for Ada in her "posthumous" life complete the list of nineteenth-century fictional themes which center around giving a sensual form to fleeting dreams. As Antoine de Becque observes:

> cinema records bodies and tells stories through them, which means it makes bodies sick, monstrous and – sometimes at the same time – very pleasant and attractive. A raw record, similarly to locating in fiction, relies on this disease and its beauty, which take the form of a terrifying disfigurement or a perfect transformation. Frankenstein's monster, in a way, is to film fiction what *L'Arroseur arose* is to the French scenes filmed by the Lumière brothers: the bodily accident that gives rise to the story. Popular cinematographers understood this very early on, even before the great producers of silent movies: the viewer comes to see the body on the screen, so if possible, it should be strange, frightening, impressive, wonderful, perverse, delightful. It is a direct and obligatory relation: the body on the screen is the first trace of the faith in the spectacle and, at the same time, the place where the spectacular is revealed above all else.[27]

Even though from today's perspective we want to argue with the fact that art, in keeping with Benjamin's diagnosis, is detached from romantic sources of presence, the experience of cinema that emerges from it is much more sensual and haptic. Postmodern adaptation embraces the re-evaluative desires and the fetishistic feelings of the author of *Passages*. It also grows out of the spirit of the last *fin-de-siècle* and the moment in which the process of remaking and adapting gains, as Julie Sanders has shown, "a specific rhythm and meaning." Indeed, "late twentieth-century postmodernist theory (…) has made us intensely aware of the processes of intervention and interpretation involved in any engagement with existent art forms."[28] At the same time, however, we have also re-negotiated the need for subjectivity in a work of art, the human element, tangibility. For "the new Victorians," *The Piano* displays these two late twentieth-century tendencies perfectly:

[26]E. Dickinson, *op. cit*., p. 100.

[27]A. de Baecque, *Ekrany. Ciało w kinie* [Screens: The body in film], in: *Historia ciała. Tom 3. Różne spojrzenia. Wiek XX* [The history of the body: Volume 3: Different perspectives: The 20th century] ed. J.-J. Courtine, trans. K. Belaid and T. Stróżyński, Gdańsk: słow/obraz terytoria 2014, pp. 349-350.

[28]J. Sanders, *Adaptation and appropriation*, Abington and New York: Routledge 2006, p. 148.

> From its title to the fetishized object of that title, from the haunting, at times overpowering musical score to the notion of speech suppressed, sound and its absence infuse *The Piano* with a surreal aura of emotional intensity. Holly Hunter's piano solos function as forcefully in the film as does her ability to convey a wide range of emotions in absolute silence. Like her character Ada's self-enforced muteness, the presence of evocative "natural" sounds functions almost as a persona – ocean waves crash on barren shores, incessant rain pounds rooftops, exotic birds call through thick forests in counterpoint to the lack of human conversation. As well, Campion's reliance on the act of seeing as a cinematic device marks both knowing and the refusal to know, what can be seen and what must not be. Perception thus appears to order the film's visual ontology, paralleling its insistently emotive soundtrack.[29]

Du Puis uses the word "aura" but not in Benjamin's sense. However, thanks to the theoretical reevaluation made by Marks, it may be applied in the context described above, concerned with discovering experiences in a plot saturated with symbolic artifacts framed by historical intertexts. "The auratic character of things," Marks writes, "is their ability not simply to awaken memories in an individual, but to contain a social history in fragmentary form."[30]

In Campion's movie, the relationship between image and sound, as means of expression, redefines the ways in which these dimensions are intertwined in life. Such aesthetic and cinematic foundations of experience allow us to draw on anachronistic, from the perspective of the author of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ways of experiencing works of art. In auraptation, the viewer's gaze, interacting with characters and spaces, reactivates, by means of a medium that was originally supposed to put an end to aura, elements of aesthetic experience from the transitional era, from the nineteenth century. The self-awareness of the nineteenth century allows moviemakers to symbolically reconstruct, playing with themes related to the technical possibilities of the new media, an intense sense of presence. Careful references to nineteenth-century culture, especially the works of Dickinson and Brontë, and close-ups, combined with Ada's story, who enters a new exotic world (in all its meanings), create a structure of tensions which unveils what has remained hidden for a long time. Indeed, after over a hundred years, thanks to the (re)construction of fictional historical plots, Campion opens the door to the nineteenth century.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[29]R. du Puis, *Romanticizing Colonialism. Power and Pleasure in Jane Campion's* The Piano, "The Contemporary Pacific" 1996, vol. 8, no. 1, p. 57.

[30]L. U. Marks, op. cit., p. 120.

References

Baecque, Antoine de. 'Ekrany. Ciało w kinie'. In *Historia ciała. Tom 3. Różne spojrzenia. Wiek XX*, edited by J. J. Courtine, translated by K. Belaid and T. Stróżyński, 347-367. Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria 2014.

Benjamin Walter. *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*. In *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books 1969.

Bologne, Jean Paul. *Historia uwodzenia. Od Antyku do dziś*. Translated by K. Marczewska. Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa 2012.

Bruzzi, Stella. *Undressing Cinema. Clothing and Identity in the Movies*. London: Routlege 1997

Dickinson, Emily. *The complete poems*. New York: Faber and Faber 2018.

Homans, Margaret. *Women Writers and Poetic Identity. Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1980.

Jacobs, Carol. 'Playing Jane Campion's Piano: Politically'. *MLN* 109 1994, vol. 109, no. 5 (1994): 757-785.

Jane Campion Interviews. Edited by V. W. Wexman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 1999.

Luhmann, Niklas. *Semantyka miłości*. Translated by J. Łoziński. In *Amtropologia ciała. Wybór tekstów*, edited by M. Szpakowska, 242-247. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 2008.

Łuczak, Dorota. *Foto-oko. Wizja fotograficzna wokół okulocentryzmu w sztuce I powłowy XX wieku*. Kraków: Universitas 2018.

Margolis, Harriet. '«A Strange Heritage»: From Colonization to Transformation?'. In *Jane Campion's* The Piano, edited by H. Margolis, 1-41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000.

Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press 2000.

Puis, Reshela du. 'Romanticizing Colonialism. Power and Pleasure in Jane Campion's «The Piano»'. *The Contemporary Pacific* 8, no. 1 (1996): 51-79.

Reeves, James. *Preface*. In E. Dickinson, *Selected Poems*, ed. J. Reeves, vii-lii. London: Heinemann 1959.

Riu, Carmen Pérez. 'Two Gothic Feminist Texts: Emily Brontë's «Wuthering Heights» and the film «The Piano» by Jane Campion'. *Atlantis* XXII, no. 1 (2000): 163-173.

Roux, Jean-Paul. *Kobieta w historii i micie*. Translated by B. Szczepańska. Warsaw: Volumen 2010.

Różanowski, Ryszard. *Pasaże Waltera Benjamina. Studium myśli*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego 1997.

Sanders, Julie. *Adaptation and appropriation*. Abington and New York: Routledge 2000.

Stocks, Kenneth. *Emily Dickinson and the Modern Consciousness*. Houndmills: Macmillan 1988.

Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Emily Dickinson. A Literary Life*. London: Palgrave Macmillan 2013.

Zerner, Henri. 'Spojrzenie artystów'. In: *Historia ciała. T. 2. Od rewolucji do I wojny światowej*, edited by A. Corbin, translated by K. Belaid, T. Stróżyński, 79-108. Gdańsk: słow/obraz terytoria 2013.

KEYWORDS

adaptation

materiality

aura

Abstract:
In this article, I attempt to define a new phenomenon in world contemporary cinema. Thanks to new visual means of expression, with a focus on their haptic nature, film tries to recreate moods and sensitivities associated with the past. As an informed reading of Emily Dickinson's poetry and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Jane Campion's *The Piano* becomes an example of a plot that is, on the one hand, filled with perspectives, motifs and situations from these works and, on the other hand, thanks to the stylistic multisensory nature of cinema, recreates the nineteenth-century dynamics of relations and moods recorded in historical sources in specific characters and objects. Thus, it becomes an auraptation (auraptation: auratic adaptation), an adaptation of the aura found in the literary testimonies of a given epoch. It translates a story that was not created in the nineteenth century into the present and the contemporary media.

INTERTEXTUALITY

women's film and writing

19TH CENTURY FETISH

Note on the Author:
Dr Marcin Jauksz is Assistant Professor at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. He earned his PhD with the book *Krytyka dziewiętnastowiecznego rozumu. Źródła i konteksty "Pałuby" Karola Irzykowskiego* [The Critique of Nineteenth-Century Reason: The Sources and Contexts of Karol Irzykowski's "The Hag"], an examination of one of the most original Polish early modernist novels in the context of nineteenth-century philosophy and prominent crypto-autobiographical texts of the era (Stendhal, Poe, Komornicka, Sienkiewicz among others). The book received the Konrad and Marta Górski Thesis Award in 2011. He won a scholarship from the French Government in the years 2008–2009 and received a Fulbright grant in 2018–19. His current projects include research on relations between social studies and changes in the rhetoric of the novel as well as on "coming of age" films in the early 21st century. He has published in, among others, *Wiek XIX* [The 19th Century], *Porównania* [Comparisons] and *Polonistyka* [Polish Studies].