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Was Ada McGrath a Cyborg, or, the Post-human Concept of the Female Artist in Jane Campion's *The Piano*

This inquiry will concern the concept of the female artist as articulated in the 1993 film production from New Zealand, *The Piano*, written for the screen and directed by Jane Campion. The concept or rather construct of female creativity in this film has been built on the basis of and in conjunction with the historically variable binaries of nature/art (artifice) and human (organic)/non-human (inorganic) that in Western culture have more often than not acquired gender-inflected connotations. Yet the problematics of female artistry has never been of crucial importance in interpreting the film's plot. Because of the romantic and sentimental story-line the movie enjoyed tremendous success with audiences all over the world. The enthusiasm of its initial reception was, however, followed by mixed reactions from American conservative critics in particular – a response discussed in detail in Barbara Johnson's famous essay of 1998, "Muteness Envy." In this piece Johnson addresses the theme of female muteness in Western art and culture in general, the culture, she claims, which aesthetically idealizes the female lack of voice and thus is unable to tell the difference between violence against a woman and her pleasure (1998: 137).

The following analysis will of necessity refer the reader to the main points of Johnson's excellent argument, one of the central theses of which is that while the screenwriter and director herself, as well as the majority of the viewers, read the narrative of the film as a powerful romance, feminist readers could not help but see Ada McGrath's story as a tale of exploitation: "…Ada is passed from father to husband as a piece of merchandise…" (143); "As bell hooks has noted, the film reveals an analogy among sexual violence, patriarchal power, colonialism, capitalism, and violence against the earth. By romanticizing the borderline between coercion and pleasure in the sexual domain, the film implicitly romanticizes the rest of the chain as well" (148). While adopting an identical stance vis-a-vis the film's representation of female "muteness," this paper will attempt to explore the intricacies of the movie's historical (or a-historical) anchorings of its construct of the female artist as embodied by its heroine, the mute Ada McGrath.

Given that the film perpetuates the oppressive aesthetic idealization of female silence, it might be interesting to check whether there is any possibility that the postmodern film director, Jane Campion, does after all, in between the lines as it were, problematize, question, if not subvert the conventional boundaries of gender, nature and culture, nature and artifice, nature and art, producing a latent, counter-hegemonic "radical pastoral" (Garrard 2004: 187). The first thing she obviously does is

distance us from her characters and the events of the plot through space and time: the story takes place in New Zealand, the most remote of the British colonies in the nineteenth century. We are to see the events and protagonists through the haze of historical oddity and the exotic environmental quaintness, underscored rather than undercut by an attempt to enhance the "real" by images of incessant rainfall that changes the earth under the characters' feet into omnipresent, all-pervading mud. The area in which Ada McGrath lands with her daughter after their sea-journey from Scotland looks deserted and covered by the primeval forest of exotic plants and palm trees that grow into the viewer's consciousness as conspicuously as the *dramatis personae* themselves.

The silent participation of the trees (nature) in the human drama is further confirmed by the scene in which the Maori children together with Flora, Ada's illegitimate daughter, playfully enact sexual intercourse with a tree trunk as a mock partner. Alisdair Stewart catches Flora at this "dirty act" and makes her literally wash the "offended" trunks with soap and water – a truly and emblematically Victorian reaction to the subaltern's sexual freedom, while at the same time a confirmation of the movie's subtext of middle-class reverence for the romantic idea of the inherent sanctity and spirituality of nature. Flora, just like her mother elsewhere, serves in this episode as a liminal figure: a precocious child in the style of Hawthorne's Pearl Prynne, she stands in between the debilitating social conventions of the colonizer and the "natural" and "holy" excess and exuberance of the colonized. Yet eventually she grows into a much more ambiguous participant in the triangle drama that befalls her mother and the two men who meet her on the beach on the cloudy day of her arrival: Alisdair Stewart who has literally bought Ada for a wife from her father, and the uncouth George Baines who becomes first her reluctant admirer, and then her passionate lover.

It might be indeed hard to see a thus conceived romantic story otherwise than in the context of Fredric Jameson's Marxist critique of the a-historicism of postmodern nostalgia movie-scripts in which quasi-historical representation of the past amounts to a series of token images evoking the aura of the "real" historical moment, while in fact covering up the grim reality of economic exploitation and social injustice (1999: 574-5). Romanticizing the exotic environment, making palm trees stand for Dionysian self-abandon rather than represent a material and resource of economic value to be exploited in the Western colonial system, turning the eponymous piano into an instrument of wielding power by triumphant (even though apparently mute) femininity, and an axe into a tool of passionate revenge rather than a means of patriarchal control and discipline: these provide enough evidence of the film's latent complicity in idealizing female subjection to make one want to join in the legitimate feminist condemnation of the movie's narrative as an insidious cover for the culture's real oppression and exploitation of both the female and the colonized Maoris. As an indignant viewer quoted in Johnson's essay complains: "Serious movies can still get away with torturing women in the audience by portraying them as vulnerable heroines and forcing them through a soft porn experience… What is staggering is how we're asked to relinquish instantly the resentment and obstinacy we've felt on [Ada's] behalf. She may fall in love right on time, by [Baines's] emotional time table, but why should we?" (145).

However, what the above unmasking of the movie's ambivalent motivations does not take into account is the complexity of its construction of Ada's functioning as a female artist in the thus conceived, idealized reality of nineteenth-century colonial life. Just as Johnson underlines, both in the film and in the novel published as a follow-up immediately after the movie premiere in 1993,

Ada's muteness is presented more as a gift, a talent, and proof of her extraordinarily strong will than as a weakness and disability. In fact, even though she refuses to talk, she communicates with the external world by means of written messages: she writes, and above all she plays the piano, deeply impressing others by her music, commanding, refusing, or imploring with a force and persuasion much greater than those of anyone else around her. Ada's power, in the oddly rarified network of usual social relations within a small, petty middle-class community relegated to the farthest corners of the Empire, seems to ensue from her aesthetic ability as a music maker, a self-styled composer and performer whose playing disturbs rather than pleases. To Aunt Morag, the epitome of petty middle-class respectability in colonial surroundings, Ada "does not play the piano as we do…. [S]he is a strange creature and her playing is strange, like a mood that passes into you…. To have a sound creep inside you is not at all pleasant" (P, 178).[1] It seems that unlike the other white women in the colony, Ada does not help solidify and support the partriarchal symbolic, but instead "meddles" with it profoundly and dangerously by appropriating, against the gender-inflected rules of the Kantian aesthetic, the role of the artist who alone has the power to contact and express the natural sublime. The role of Kant's artist was to impose (male) order on the grand chaos, the violent and formless (therefore female) matter of nature. Ada McGrath counters and defies these limits and categories, as she is both a female and an artist, conjoining the realms of nature (by being a mother) and romantic art (by being a maker of music which, in Flora's mythopoeic interpretation, originated in her mysterious communion in and with the forest).

Moreover, Ada's romantically uncontrollable inspiration and performance do not result in harmony: it is not the idea of order that drives her creativity, but an unmediated contact with the sublime awe which she wishes to convey, not to subdue; hence the effect of disturbance and turbulence, rather than peace and pleasure, that the ladies of the community object to in her playing. She seems to both embody and perform the yet-inarticulate, the pre-semantic and pre-syntactic as parameters of the pre-symbolic, rather than contribute to the aesthetics of tranquility, balance and order induced out of disparate elements of chaotic nature. This singularity and liminality appear to especially attract the two males Ada is brought into contact with in her exotic adventure, and, as the critics emphasize, this attraction clearly effeminates both of her partners.

While ostensibly deprived of power because of her alleged muteness and serving as an object of transactions among the males, within the culture's symbolic Ada acquires in fact the privileged position of an artist, i.e. the master (mistress?) of signification, which allows her to exert a shattering authority over male emotions. With Baines the case is more obvious since, in the first place, he affiliates himself willingly with the natives (always effeminized in the colonial symbolic): he sports a Maori tattoo on his face and body, talks their language and lives with a local woman. All this situates him as a liminal shepherd figure in the pastoral landscape zone between wilderness and civilization (Marx 1986: 43-4). Ada's own liminality on the borders of male/female, art/nature, nature/culture appeals to him because of the half-felt correspondence and analogy to his own situation, combined with his suggested sensitivity to her sublime art. The latter aspect, however, does not pertain to

[1] Quotations from the original source come exclusively from Jane Campion, Kate Pullinger, *The Piano*, New York: Hyperion, 1994, marked in the text by the letter P.

Stewart who does not seem to possess any extra artistic sensibility or inborn refinement of spirit: a down-to-earth businessman, he also remains a complete innocent in matters of sex and love. Ada's growing sensuous sophistication becomes a source of her power over Stewart, which he translates into the physical image of the piano, or rather: the body of an instrument comes to signify for him, just as for Baines, Ada's body. That is why, when intercepting the inscribed key with Ada's message of love for Baines, he drags his wife away to cut off her finger – a key for a key, a sign for a sign – and thus to castrate her, to deprive her of her "phallus," her uncanny privilege and influence over his body and soul. It is important to note here that his act of vengeance is made possible by Flora's cooperation. The impish "child of nature" she nevertheless sides loyally with her adopted "daddy": due to her innocent betrayal of her rebellious mother Flora undergoes her painful rite of passage into the patriarchal symbolic by assuming the controlled position of a male's faithful assistant, with all its emotional and social consequences.

Stewart's revenge seems to settle the score: Ada cannot play anymore, she is incapacitated as a mistress of signification and an uncanny wielder of emotional power. Here, however, enters the motif of the prosthetic body, an artificial, metal finger that Baines procures for his beloved. It makes an appearance only at the end of the narrative but seems to introduce significant interpretive clues as to the possible bearings of Ada's final domestication as a housewife and music teacher in the town of Nelson. The metaphoric resolution of the conflicts and tensions that drive the desires behind the plot (Brooks 1989: 711-2) suggests the conventional "…and they lived happily thereafter," yet this metal-piece artificiality at the core of the apparently easy happy ending seems to explode in advance any possible reading of joyous celebration: in one of the final shots in the movie we see Ada standing by a (new) piano (we learn from her voice-over that she has her new metal finger now, which was made by Baines, and that due to this she can give piano lessons in the town), and we hear her strike some notes, but the musical sound she produces is accompanied by a metallic fall of her prosthetic finger on the piano key: there is no question of the previous uncanny enchantment ever occurring again. We may be thus expected to realize that although Ada is happy as a wife she is totally disempowered and incapacitated as an artist: she can only re-produce, and clumsily, someone else's (which includes her own previous self's) artistic work.

In the epilogue to the book that accompanied the movie, during her remaining time with Baines and Flora in Nelson, Ada is said to have enjoyed the status of "the town's freak, which satisfied" (215), and that was probably the only social position she could have obtained at the time of the story: firstly, because any conjunction of the organic and inorganic before the onset of modern technology equalled monstrous, since radically unnatural. In addition, her reputation as "strange" – due to both her muteness and her disturbing music – must have influenced the townsfolk's judgment: Ada as characterized in the movie simply had to be seen as far from the lower middle-class ordinary. Yet the perspective we are invited to assume as viewers of the film, together with the film director, is that of the postmodern end of the twentieth century, and if we look at Ada in the context of the early 1990s idea of the female cyborg, her story acquires a deeper and more resonant meaning, just as her complexity as a construct of female artistry becomes more challenging.

The tendency to combine the image of femaleness with technology initially appeared with the second Industrial Revolution at the turn of the nineteenth century (Goody 2007: 110-11). It was

then that the machine came to be perceived as potentially human, and the female as the mysterious, never fully understood human form began to be linked with machinery and the technological sublime, if only by association with the bodily sexual and reproductive functions (Braidotti 2002: 217). It was during the first two decades of the twentieth century that the radical linking of the female with the machine began to acquire the meaning of existential and aesthetic liberation from phallogocentric models of subjectivity and creativity: the enhanced affinity of the New Woman with technology came to "express the ambiguities of the real/artficial, natural/technological divide: what the linking of woman-machine suggests is that there is no 'real' thing to improve on, only a process, a becoming-woman/becoming-machine which produces radically new subjectivities beyond the humanist models of self and the anthropomorphic figure of the productive machine" (Goody, 113). Further, what the conjunction of the machine and the body could mean was "the co-extensivity of the body with its environment or territory," the "collective and interdependent" status of the organism (Braidotti, 227).

There exists a long tradition of modernist experimentation encoded in works and texts of female artists, in which the prosthetic composition and extension of the body signifies liberation from cultural and physical constraints (Goody, 113), arguing for the cultural constructedness of the body and the self, further pointing toward the hopeful import of Donna Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs" of 1991, where the cyborg, defined as "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of science fiction," with "no origin story" (Haraway 1997: 149, 151), heralds a "contradictory" being "that undoes the ideals of organic wholeness and technological perfection." (Goody, 111) The image of the cyborg, the bizarre combination of the organic and technology "can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms" (Haraway, 1997: 482), and thus Ada's liminal status as a woman pianist with a prosthetic finger can be read as undermining a whole knot of apparently clear-cut binaries of nature and culture, body and machine, natural birth and mechanical production. Her being both an artist and a "vessel" of "natural reproduction" contradicts and defies the founding binaries of nineteenth-century aesthetics, and, in the further instance, those of "'White Capitalist Patriarchy' (how may we name this scandalous thing?) that turns everything into a resource for appropriation" (Haraway 2004: 147).

Yet at the same time that Ada represents *oikeion* as opposed to *politikon* (Lyotard 2004: 135), the sphere of the hidden, domestic, and secluded (also in the sense of the Freudian uncanny) in contrast to the public and political, she also clearly evokes associations with, if not stands (in feminist readings) for *oikonomikos*, the economic, first by being perceived as an object of economic transaction between her father and her husband, then by entering the sphere of the middle-class household and assuming the position of Baines's economic partner: while he supports his family, Ada and Flora, by establishing himself "with a trading business from the port" (P, 215), she does it by giving piano lessons. This role domesticates her but does not turn her into a common housewife: due to her functioning as a music teacher in the community she becomes an economic agent herself (by, as it were, selling her aesthetic know-how).

Yet her transformation (underscored by the dramatic scene of sinking the piano) from the rebellious romantic artist into an economically active member of a middle-class family does not necessarily mean her aesthetic disempowerment, if, again, we look at her through postmodern eyes. This can be proved by a recourse to the modern(ist) economy of artistic production in which

aesthetic objects, made democratically accessible by means of mechanical reproduction, lose their "aura" of seclusion, sacredness, and otherworldly mystery (Benjamin 1989: 574). Whilst losing the aura, they nevertheless do not cease to be perceived as aesthetic; on the contrary, their frequent simultaneous functioning as objects of everyday use acquires attributes of the uncannily aesthetic due to the technique of repetition with a difference: "if you focus your attention on 'please pass the butter' and put it through enough permutations and combinations, it begins to take on a kind of glow, the splendor of what is called an 'aesthetic object'" (Kenneth Rexroth in Kostelanetz 1980: XV). Ada's mechanically produced sounds – metallic, repetitive and economically motivated – appear no longer romantic, but they prefigure the time to come, the era of the machine, when the concept of the aesthetic and the production of beauty undergoes radical change to embrace the machine and technology as they replace the natural sublime.

It is important to notice that Ada's decision to sink the original piano is deliberate, if also spontaneous: she decides to get rid of the piano of her own free will, not pressed by anyone, even though it was made clear to us before that the piano had been the token of her goddess-like status as a unique (because female) artist. This, and her prior "castration" by Stewart lead to her transformation ("meta/l/morphosis") into a cyborg – the quasi-nineteenth-century image of a freak, a copy without origin, an "unnatural" creature, read in the film's postmodern script in terms of her re-articulation of the old romantic mythologies of nature and art as appositional and mutually exclusive: it is rather that, as a mother, an artist, and a cyborg she makes them compound, combined and co-extensive. The new piano in Ada's Nelson household is thus no longer a site of wonder and metaphysics – it becomes a tool, an instrument of work. Ada's renunciation ultimately evokes Donna Haraway's final statement in her Manifesto: I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess, meaning: I would rather abdicate from the role of the ostensibly elevated but secretly abused object of cult, longing and adoration, to become a wondered-at and weird, yet reluctantly accepted partner to my lover, and a producer and craftsman (crafts-woman), if only within the limits of *oikeion,* rather than a living statue of obscure perfection and the mute cipher of the unacknowledgeable, unmediated sublime.

If we now ponder on Campion's odd choice of the "freaky" resolution to her story in which a romantic female artist loses her art because of patriarchal violence prompted by vengeance and sexual jealousy, instead of looking at Ada's prosthetic finger as a sign of defeat and eternal limitation of female creativity by the patriarchal symbolic, we might as well see it as an augury of the future re-articulation of the paradigms of selfhood, gender, art, and nature, so that these categories become "co-extensive," interfused and interdependent on one another, co-active rather than agonistic. In this way, the postmodern cinematic narrative of the strange fate of a romantic female composer and pianist can be read as that of one of the early versions of the cyborg as the creative female self, to first signal its defiance through the awkward (and man-made) prosthesis, to eventually signify the future overcoming of all – organic, cultural, and/or technological – barriers to female creativity.

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