

Breaking the
shackles:
transforming 'the
piano' from script to
screen



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Jane Campion's dramatic and societally informative film 'The Piano', scenes 112-119 are key in conveying Campion's messages around the restrained society depicted in the mid-19th century era in which the film is set. These scenes act as the emotional and thematic pinnacle of the film, bringing to fruition and building upon the established imbalance existing between two of the main characters, Alasdair Stewart (Sam Neill) and his imported, mute wife Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter), and using atrocious violence in order to condemn restrained society. Throughout the film, these two characters are depicted as the antithesis of the other in terms of adherence to this restrictive and restrained society - Stewart values the patriarchal system of the time, and views women, including Ada, as subordinate, and requiring control and management. In contrast, Ada is depicted as socially deviant, evident through her state of elective muteness, but also through the stubborn nature she exhibits in the face of men. The unease existing in the relationship between these two is shown to be ultimately the result of the restrained society in which they live, and of the disparity between the two in terms of their societal views and expectations. Scenes 112-119 fundamentally act as the most significant moment in the film in which Campion condemns the restrained nature of society, through the abhorrent violence on Stewart's behalf, and the society he comes to represent, in cutting off his wife's finger in an intensely brutal manner. In these scenes, and the foundational scenes before it, Campion employs filmic techniques such as the use of music, lighting, framing, costume and casting in order to enhance the clear intentions of these scenes as outlined in the script, in order to make them more visually arresting and effective in

engendering the viewer to align themselves with Champion's negative view of the restrained society at the time.

These intentions of scenes 112-119 are highly dependent on both the respective characters of Ada and Stewart, and the nature of the relationship existing between the two. The characters contrast with one another in terms of their adherence to societal expectations, especially in terms of gender roles. Ada is consistently depicted as a woman who runs against the societal grain of the time, in which women were commonly treated as beings intended to live under a set of restrictions valuing restrained and dignified behavior. This is conveyed very holistically throughout the movie, despite Ada's muteness, through the casting of Hunter in the role and the visually arresting performance she gives which helps transform the character of Ada. This is exemplified in Scene 10, in which Ada conveys vigorous disdain for the seamen's wishes, and does so by employing a sign language that is composed of sharp and nimble movements, evoking a socially deviant and defiant spirit in the face of men, whilst women, according to the societal values of the time, were expected to wilt in confrontational situations with men. This defiance is reinforced further by Ada's facial expression in this scene, with an incredibly steadfast glare employed by Hunter in this scene. One of Champion's principal reasons for selecting Hunter to play Ada over other actress was that ' her gaze was stupendous' - Champion evidently places high importance on Hunter's ability to convey her stubborn and strong-willed nature through her facial expressions, in order to emphasize Ada's societal deviance. Neither the nature of sign language or Ada's facial expression are dictated in the script, and therefore transform and embellish

Ada's character to leave the audience with a distinct impression and understanding of Ada's true stubborn and deviant essence, implying her lack of societal adherence.

Stewart, in contrast, is portrayed in the film through many filmic facets, as well as dialogue, as a typical patriarchal colonialist of the time who values the restrained way in which society generally expected people to behave. The casting of Sam Neill in the role of Stewart was important for Campion as she wanted the character to have a charm and attractiveness about him, and this aids in Neill's depiction of Stewart as a character who struggles to come terms with the confrontation he experiences at the hands of Ada's deviant and standoffish nature. An example of this can be found in Scene 49 in which Stewart asks Ada whether he should give her a goodnight kiss. Ada of course remains silent, phasing Stewart and causing him to pause awkwardly for a moment before exiting the room without speaking. The atmosphere in the room which Stewart enters is described as 'impenetrable' in the script, indicating that he finds it incomprehensible and displacing. The portrayal of Stewart in this scene by Neill is pivotal in the accentuation of this impenetrableness and the imbalance that exists between the two, in terms of the nervousness and trouble conveyed by Neill's overwhelmed facial expressions, which works in tandem with his initial charming and tender persona as cast by Campion, as a result of being faced with a woman who symbolizes the confrontation of his every societal belief. This is transformed further from the script by the way in which Campion directs this exchange between Ada and Stewart, in which she frames Stewart's face in a very tight, close shot, which helps to convey the magnitude of the provocation Stewart

experiences as a result of this woman who shatters Stewart's shell of disillusion in terms of the restrained society he knows, and comes to represent throughout the film. Costuming is also vital in Campion's depiction of Stewart as an adherent to the restrained society, in that he frequently wears heavy, dark and constrictive clothes with many layers and tightly fastened buttons that are described as 'muddy and out of place here in the bush', implying Stewart's earnest to uphold the traditional European garments and the restrained nature of society associated with them. In contrast the more socially deviant character of Baines, with whom Ada shares a deeper connection, tends to wear lighter and more airy and open garments, speaking further volumes about Ada's social deviance.

After carefully constructing this social imbalance in the relationship of Ada and Stewart, it is in Scenes 112-119 that Campion hopes to deliver her views and values around restrained society in an emotionally striking and potent way to the viewer. In Scenes 112-119, Stewart is alerted to Ada's attempt to convey her love to her clandestine partner, Baines. Stewart erupts into an unquenchable rage and chops Ada's finger off with an axe, restricting her principle form of self-expression in rendering her incapable of playing the piano. The most important transformations made by Campion from the script in order to condemn the restrained society of the time include the use of music throughout the scenes (as well as the absence of sound), the lighting and camera coloring techniques employed, and the framing used in particular shots. These filmic techniques allow Campion to transform a script with thematic bones into an emotionally arresting sequence that transcends the screen and works to condemn Stewart and the restrained society he

embodies through the emotionally fraught nature of the scene and its abhorrent violence.

According to Campion, the music, composed by Michael Nyman, is 'the heart of the film'. No musical directions are specified for Scenes 112-119 in the script, however the musical arrangement within the scene is pivotal in conveying the critical messages of the scene, and is therefore a significant transformation that Campion made from script to film. The music commences once Stewart picks up the axe, and works in combination with the way the shot is framed. Stewart is stumbling, almost blindly, down a steep hill, and the music has an almost trickling or cascading quality as it grows louder and more fast in tempo, helping to emphasise Stewart's emotional and mental unravelling. This helps to build tension in the viewer early in the scene, and deepens the ominous atmosphere of the scene. The music plays its most crucial role however, when Ada is being dragged by Stewart toward the woodchop - as she gropes to get away, and as Stewart gains more and more control over Ada, the tempo of the music increases to a rapid and feverish tempest of sound which attempts to both emotionally capture and overwhelm the viewer here. Another notable feature of the music at this specific point is that it becomes more skewed and off-beat, almost lopsided, deviating from the general rigidity in the rhythm of this piece ('The Heart Asks Pleasure First'). This change in rhythm most practically helps to peak the audience's attention to the scene, hence making them more receptive to the views and values associated with the scene, but also is representative of the imbalance and stress Ada is being put under, and cause them to feel repulsed by the treatment of Ada by

Stewart, ultimately with the hope of creating disdain in the viewer for the restrained society that Stewart is fundamentally tied to. After Ada's finger has been chopped off, the intense music immediately drops away to nothing, before entering a significantly more gentle and slow phase, which evokes a sense of the sheer shock, violation and defilement Ada has experienced at the hands of Stewart here, through the depressively dull and downtrodden music, engendering anger against Stewart. Ultimately, the music in Scenes 112-119 plays a number of intricate roles which help endear the viewer to plight of Ada, and engender disgust in the viewer for Stewart's treatment of Ada, and the restrictive societal views from which this stems.

Another significant transformation made by Campion from script to film in order to condemn restrained society is the atmosphere created and captured in the scene through the use of camera coloring and scenery. The scene starts out in a relatively bright and lush environment, before Stewart learns of Ada's intentions, and here it is evident that a naturally colored or no color lens is being used on the camera. As he becomes enraged however, the sky darkens, and the camera color darkens to a blue hue which creates a darker air. The scenery also transitions in this way, changing from the fecundity of the wild New Zealand bush to the harsh, dying trees and mud surrounding the colonialist cottage of Stewart. This transition of scenery is effective in creating an ominousness and disturbance in the viewer which causes them to further distance themselves emotionally and thematically from the character of Stewart, who is evidently giving rise to this disturbance. None of these atmospheric changes are dictated in the script, and are yet further filmic transformations that Campion makes from script to film in order to

degrade the integrity of Stewart's actions, and consequently the restrained societal state he upholds and promotes.

Framing of shots is also crucial to the thematic intentions of scenes 112-119; the way in which the scenes are captured not only gives rise to a level of pity and angst for what is happening to Ada at the hands of Stewart, but also involves the audience in what is occurring on scene, hence making them more emotionally receptive and engrossed in what they see. The most notable example of this is when Ada, in the clutches of Stewart, is being pulled closer and closer to the woodchop. We then see Ada briefly escape, and in a direct close up shot she grapples and flails in the mud directly into the face of the camera. This draws the viewer into the scene; the shot has an air of Ada appealing to the viewer for help due to it being directly face-on, and therefore the viewer is intended to feel a great emotional tension. This shot is also significant in that due to her flailing, Ada does not stay fully in the frame but rushes in and out, almost like a blur, which helps to accentuate the rapid desperation of her movements and emphasize the fear she must be experiencing, helping to further the viewer's intended impression that the violence and manhandling of Ada is deplorable and condemnable. Once Ada is reeled in again by Stewart, the audience is provoked to feel great disgust for the man who is inflicting such emotionally torturous violence upon Ada - and as established earlier in the film, this dominant management and control of women evidently stems from Stewart's societal beliefs and values, all of which adhere to a restrained society, which the viewer is here provoked to condemn.

Fundamentally, Scenes 112-119 are centered on the egregious violence inflicted upon Ada by Stewart, and through filmic transformational techniques involving music, framing, lighting, setting and scenery, Campion brings the scene to life in such a way that the viewer is intended to be both disgusted by Stewart's violence, and deeply endeared towards Ada, as well as women of the era in general, who are assumed to be treated in the same subordinate manner. Darkness, tension and a great sense of brutality are established around Stewart and his actions through these filmic transformations from the script, which helps promote a higher level of disdain and shock for Stewart and his actions than if the script were simply to be read. In this way, the scenes are visually transformed so that the viewer is intended to resent the restrained society that is upheld by Stewart throughout the film (mainly through the casting of Neill and costuming) and grow a higher level of appreciation for Ada's strong-willed and stubborn nature, and therefore the less restrained society she represents through this behavior.