

**Extract from *Jane Campion*, by Deb Verhoeven, Routledge Film Guidebooks, 2009. Pp 33-42.**

## **Chapter 1**

### **Becoming Jane Campion: Modes of Auteurism and the Media**

Something happens to people when they meet a journalist...  
Janet Malcolm<sup>i</sup>

Meeting her is like watching her films: you tend to be  
swallowed up whole.  
Fiona Morrow<sup>ii</sup>

Authorship is a critical component of the way many films are marketed in the media. In the case of art or 'indie' cinema such as that produced by Jane Campion there is a demonstrable commercial need to continue with the idea that the creative artist is the principal source of cinema expression and communication. Throughout her career there have been many different ways in which Campion has been described in the media as an auteur. These ways of understanding Campion's auteur status are not mutually exclusive and often run alongside each other or up against each other in ways that aren't always logical. Consider for example that Campion is the director of one of the industry's most profitable cross-over films (*The Piano* moving successfully from art cinemas to multiplexes) and yet in many media accounts she continues to be described in terms that paint her at the margins of mainstream cinema, as an oppositional voice to the vagaries of studio production. These methods of presenting Campion might vary according to the inclination of the journalist, the anticipated audience for the media outlet, the particular film Campion is being interviewed about and so on. They may be invoked by, or attributed to, Campion herself. They circulate at different intensities, ebb and flow at different moments in her career.

In particular, media interviews provide useful insights into how a filmmaker understands their capacity to work and be creative, revealing what Janet Staiger calls their 'technique of the self'.<sup>iii</sup> The presentation of filmmakers in these interviews speaks to wider concerns about how media consumers are expected to appreciate the filmmaker's evident display of creative agency as an elaboration of their individual self, or as the outcome of a divergence between authenticity and performance. Rather

than simply providing access to the filmmaker as an authoritative or uncomplicated source, interviews are a valuable place to identify how filmmakers participate in a system of film promotion which places enormous value on their presence. And yet even the value of the filmmaker's attendance is not so simple. What becomes evident through the course of many of Campion's media interviews for instance is a kind of doubled-purpose: in which the journalist locates Campion within the tenets of traditional auteurism (as the straightforward source of creative inspiration and the authoritative interpretation of the films under discussion) often *against* the filmmaker's own attempts to speak differently, to tell of commercial realities and personal ambivalences. And in specific circumstances, for example in defending her 'self' against media criticism (that she is inauthentic or somehow 'absent' from her works), Campion has alternatively drawn on the image of the filmmaker as a continuous, fully present and coherent creative agent.

Interviewing filmmakers seems to be important for media outlets in order to provide an additional step in the imposition of authorial will, guaranteeing the film text's meaning or the correctness of particular interpretations. Many interviewers and interviewees reiterate the traditional auteurist idea that authorial intention occurs prior to expression (in showing this, I meant that) particularly when filmmakers in promotional media interviews conducted at the time of a film's theatrical release usually speak after the text not in advance of it and are therefore able to very neatly, retrospectively confirm their objectives.

Campion herself is also discursive on the process of being interviewed and has on occasion expressed her discomfort at the conventions of this form of industry promotion and enquiry. In a notable interview for the *LA Weekly*, Campion pointedly asks her interviewer, Judith Lewis, if she has ever read *The Journalist and the Murderer*, Janet Malcolm's reflection on the exploitative ethics of media interviews and to which Campion likens their situation. Campion then goes on to describe her growing disenchantment with her own media performances:

[I]n the beginning you're kind of chuffed that people are interested in you, and you believe it. It's all so simple, really, so childish: Very simply and babyishly you trust them all and you say things thinking it all sounds so cute. And then you read it.<sup>iv</sup>

But even armed with a newfound sense of distrust she realizes there are further problems in her dealings with the media; 'I'm an idiot, because as soon as I say

something I think I can stick with, I immediately realize the opposite is true.<sup>v</sup> Campion's description of an internal contradiction goes some way toward thinking of the auteur as someone less than constant, instead troubling and dispersing her own agency as the organizing principle for understanding her films (and her relationship to them).

Earlier, Campion had described her reluctance to participate in the publicity process, preferring not to be photographed for one interview, '[B]ecause it doesn't fit with what I perceive as my role. It's alright for the actors, they have to promote their image, but I am just a maker of products'.<sup>vi</sup> The idea that directors aren't in the image business but are simply engaged in the production of films as 'products' sounds at first like a world-weary assessment of the grim realities of the film industry. But in fact these self-effacing sentiments don't attend to so much of what is involved in contemporary film production and promotion. Michael Budd has written on the pervasive way in which art cinema in particular differentiates its products as prestigious, cultured and individualistic and how it transforms the 'artistic personality' of the art film director into an exchangeable commodity.<sup>vii</sup> But Budd also notes that, 'the commodification of art cinema is always uneven and incomplete' describing instead, 'a tension, largely invisible to viewers, between standardization and novelty.'<sup>viii</sup> The picture of Jane Campion that emerges in English language media reviews, interviews and promotional campaigns traces this uneven tension through a series of overlapping, sometimes contrary approaches to her practice and status as a filmmaker from the very inception of her working life.<sup>ix</sup>

## **1. The Auteur of Early Promise, or L'Enfant Auteur'**

Jane Campion's career has been characterised from the outset by a climate of fervent expectation. Citations for her student films at the 1984 Melbourne International Film Festival acclaimed her 'compelling stylistic innovation'. Fresh out of film school, with no feature film in sight she was already vaunted as 'one of our most significant talents' in the Australian media.<sup>x</sup> A year later, in 1987, Freda Freiberg published an extraordinarily prescient article solely on Campion's short film efforts in which she described her as an 'unusual talent' possessed with a 'powerful visual style'.<sup>xi</sup> By January 1988 she was one of six filmmakers predicted by an Australian media outlet to be a 'film high flyer'.<sup>xii</sup>

This early recognition of Campion's promise also very consistently claimed for her a distinctive signature. An article on upcoming Australian women directors published in the late 1980s anoints her as someone 'rapidly achieving auteur status'. It continues, describing how her, 'black comic vision and quirky use of *mise en scene* mark her films with a distinctive personal style which hovers somewhere between surrealism and absurdism.'<sup>xiii</sup> That such an inexperienced director could be announced as an auteur after only a handful of short films strongly suggests that, for these commentators at least, the definition of the auteur had shifted from its classical incarnation in which particularly accomplished directors are singled out for their expressive technique and intentions to the idea that there is a semiotic shortcut to identifying auteurism, an on-screen taxonomy that simply cautions 'author at work'. Thomas Elsaesser, writing in the mid-1990s identified a shift in what the auteur was understood to mean, away from a traditional reliance on the textual presence of self-doubt or self-expression, metaphysical themes or the particular 'indeterminacy of reference' critics prized as 'realism'. Instead, he argues, contemporary auteurs dissimulate or disguise the signatures of their self-hood, demonstrating authority and authenticity through their command of, 'the generic, the expressive, the excessive, the visual and the visceral.'<sup>xiv</sup>

Whilst for many this observation of a newfound emphasis on performative signature moments has been a cause for celebration of Campion's filmmaking prowess, it has also been a cause of criticism especially as her career has advanced. For the film critic Adrian Martin, her films have become 'immobile, leached of life, fixed in compulsive repetitions of signature-effects'.<sup>xv</sup> And more recently, in a review ominously titled 'Master or Myth?', he notes that, 'Campion is too fond of symbolic inserts' and in relation to her use of camera style he describes the 'look' of the film as, 'laid on...without development or modulation' causing it to become 'tiresome and its aesthetic returns diminish'.<sup>xvi</sup> On the other hand, Todd McCarthy in *Variety* describes that same film's visual approach as 'emotionally effective', noting how Campion layers the film with, 'innumerable visual details that combine for an almost palpable atmospheric density'.<sup>xvii</sup> Both critics and fans alike are in agreement that Campion's films strive for stylistic distinction, irrespective of their belief in her success or failure at achieving this.

Much earlier in her career it is possible to see how the commentary around Campion's signature film style methodically weaves an image of her in terms of the

classical auteurist precepts: ‘originality’, ‘authenticity’, ‘non-commercialism’ and so on. Film journalist Lynden Barber, writing about the 1990 mini-series turned movie *An Angel at My Table* described it as ‘instantly recognizable as Campion – economical, feminine and full of shots that set the eyes whirring’. Campion herself he calls ‘eccentric and original’.<sup>xviii</sup> Writing on the same film in the *LA Times*, Mark Chalon commends the film which he says, ‘never seems less than genuine, it’s consciously anti-commercial’.<sup>xix</sup>

In order to sustain their claims for Campion’s distinctive signature at this early stage of her career, film critics appeared determined to demonstrate a stylistic and thematic connection between her two early features, *An Angel at My Table* and Campion’s previous film *Sweetie*, despite their evident differences. This is in part an extension of traditional auteurist approaches to individual films in which the critic’s role is to scour the film for signature moments and motifs that reveal the text’s reliance on an individual author, stitching a sequence of films together with the threads of biography. The laboured work these critics make of connecting Campion’s films might also be a way of avoiding a direct evaluation of the film at hand, in this case *Angel*, preferring instead the pleasures of a predictive reading that arises from the critic’s prior knowledge of its ‘author’. In this way, the critic is not reading the films per se but the reputation of the auteur. Jonathon Rosenbaum’s droll summary of contemporary authorship; ‘[A]uteurism exists largely for the convenience of critics and other packagers. It’s mainly a way of reading movies, not of explaining how they’re made’, might just as easily be rewritten to suggest instead that auteurism is mainly a way of reading filmmakers, not of explaining how they make films.<sup>xx</sup>

In her interviews with the media, Campion herself was quick to point out the industrial reasons for the stylistic divergence between these two works – *Angel* an adaptation originally made for television and then later released to cinemas; *Sweetie* an original screenplay made specifically for cinema release: ‘With the subject matter of *Sweetie* I always imagined it as having a very adventurous visual style – looking at the exoticness of suburban life. With *An Angel at My Table* I felt any treatment that interfered with your relationship to Janet Frame would feel like a filmmaking conceit. You needed to keep it very simple.’<sup>xxi</sup> Here Campion reiterates a distinction between film and television that underscored the historical emergence of auteurism as an industrial category designed to elevate cinema from the wash of other media images emerging in the 1950s and beyond. Cinema would be associated with creative and

personal visions whereas the mass entertainment of TV would not. In talking about the film some years later Campion restated these associations: 'I guess I'm a kind of a film snob and even though I think the Janet Frame story as you'll see here is very touching and very affecting, to me its still like a TV series and I like film that's a little more risk taking or bold'.<sup>xxiii</sup> And yet, some years later again, in thinking about what she might do after her long break from filmmaking Campion seems to have reconsidered the value of television production, no doubt inspired by the emergence of the highly successful, prestige production models offered by cable channels such as HBO: 'I think that's actually a more radical medium. You can do things quickly and interestingly with stories that are so hard to do in feature films.'<sup>xxiii</sup> (See Figures 1.1 and 1.2.)

Film critic Steve Weinstein looked further afield for an explanation for what he saw as the formal deviation between *Angel* and *Sweetie* suggesting that Campion's change of tack was prompted by the negative attention received by the earlier film. In response Campion reiterates her concern for delivering Janet Frame's story with a minimum of personal embellishment but admits that the shift in tone had unanticipated benefits for her own career:

Janet's story is very emotionally based, and I felt that to be real theoretical about it or to make it a vehicle for my own quirky style was to disempower her story ... It's not a signature piece. It's a story that I loved and, and I was happy just to be a loving and honest custodian for it. I am committed to experimenting further, but I enjoyed doing Janet Frame because it destroyed the opportunity for people to categorize me.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Despite Campion's careful distinctions, Weinstein manages to find a further basis to connect the films, asserting that *Angel*, 'mines much of the same emotional territory Campion has explored previously: family, the artistic temperament, sex, madness, superstitions and the unconscious mind.'<sup>xxv</sup> So, should a stylistic distinction unravel the fabric of authorial coherence then a thematic preoccupation will surely sew it back together again.

Like Weinstein, many other critics found reason to link the two films through the prism of Campion's authorship. The influential *Variety* review of *An Angel at My Table* by David Stratton noted:

One of the many remarkable elements of this beautiful film is the way the characters, though all based on real people ... seem to have stepped from other Campion pics. They have the

same sweet eccentricities and sexual and emotional hang-ups as the characters in *Sweetie* and the director's short films. Family scenes are also instantly recognizable as Campion's work....Campion demonstrates, once again, that she has a special vision of the world.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* echoed this: 'The wonder of *An Angel at my Table* is that so much of it plays as if it had sprung from the imagination of the same young woman who made *Sweetie*'.<sup>xxvii</sup> The *Village Voice* correspondent concurred, 'The painful, beautiful *An Angel at My Table*, now being released as a film isn't nearly as skewed as *Sweetie*, but it's recognizably a Campion work ... another triumphant chapter in Campion's ongoing *A Girl's Own Story*'.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Given the stretch in connecting *Sweetie* to *Angel* on the basis of stylistic similarities, perhaps what is going on here for critics is something less about whether there is a consistency of signature between these two films, and more about Campion's ability to repeatedly fulfill expectations about authorial influence. That Campion is consistently *seen to be trying* her hand is just as, if not more, important than the specific continuity of her penmanship. This perceived inclination for making evident the director's presence in her films might at one level run counter to the familiar auteurist belief that great directors unconsciously and effortlessly articulate their selves through a sequence of texts. Reviewing *Holy Smoke* for example, Stanley Kaffmann notes as a problem, the 'stertorous doing' in Campion's filmmaking.<sup>xxix</sup> In her early career, in 1986 Campion herself declares, 'It's better if you aren't trying so hard – things you really badly want often go wrong; I find its best to take it easy'.<sup>xxx</sup> But only a few years later, she counter-suggests that, for her, there is a substantial amount of preparation required in making a film, drawing particular attention to the exertion entailed in her filmmaking:

I think what goes wrong is that people don't realize how hard it is to do good work. That may sound awfully school maamish of me, but you can't just turn up on the day and call yourself a director. The homework is horrendous and you have to be prepared to compete with world standards.<sup>xxxi</sup>

In emphasizing the arduous nature of her work, Campion conforms to the cultural commonplace that success will only be achieved through hard effort and professionalism. It is the *effort* of ability, premised on the idea that auteurism is something that is done, often with difficulty, that particularly informs the next

auteurist mode typically associated with Jane Campion and perpetuated in media commentary about her.

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<sup>i</sup> Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, London: Granta, 2004, p. 32.

<sup>ii</sup> Fiona Morrow, Jane Campion, 'The Director's Cut', *The Independent*, 17 October, 2003, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/film-and-tv/features/jane-campion-the-directors-cut-583580.html?service=Print>

<sup>iii</sup> Janet Staiger, 'Authorship Approaches', in David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (eds.), *Authorship and Film*, New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 49–52.

<sup>iv</sup> Judith Lewis, 'Wholly Jane', *LA Weekly*, 19 January, 2000, <http://www.laweekly.com/ink/09/film-lewis.shtml>.

Here Campion echoes Janet Malcolm's observations of what happens in media encounters: 'One would think that extreme wariness and caution would be the order of the day, but in fact childish trust and impetuosity are far more common.' (Malcolm, p. 32)

<sup>v</sup> Lewis, 'Wholly Jane'.

<sup>vi</sup> Virginia Wright Wexman (ed.), *Jane Campion: Interviews*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999, p. 14.

<sup>vii</sup> Michael Budd, 'Authorship as Commodity: The Art Cinema and *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*', *Wide Angle* 6, no. 1 (1984), p.16.

<sup>viii</sup> Budd, 'Authorship as Commodity: The Art Cinema and *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*', p.19.

<sup>ix</sup> For a detailed account of German media accounts of Jane Campion's films see Stan Jones, 'Ecstasies in the Mossy Land: New Zealand Film in Germany' in Deb Verhoeven (ed) *Twin Peeks: Australian and New Zealand Feature Films*, Melbourne: Damned Publishing, 1999, pp. 151-170.

<sup>x</sup> Phillip Adams, 'The Subtlety of the Subtext', *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 18 January 1986, p. 11.

<sup>xi</sup> Freda Freiberg, 'The Bizarre in the Banal: Notes on the Films of Jane Campion', in Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed, and Freda Freiberg (eds.), *Don't Shoot Darling: Women's Independent Film Making in Australia*, Richmond VIC: Greenhouse, 1987, p. 328.

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- <sup>xii</sup> In *The Bulletin*, 2 January 1988, cited in Meredith Quinn and Andrew L. Urban (eds), *Edge of the Known World: The Australian Film Television and Radio School. Impressions of the First 25 Years*, Sydney: AFTRS, 1998, p.136.
- <sup>xiii</sup> See the editors' 'Introductory Notes' on textual analysis, in Blonski, Creed, and Freiberg (eds.), *Don't Shoot Darling*, p. 279.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Putting on a Show: The European Art Movie', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 4, no. 4 (April 1994), pp. 22-27.
- <sup>xv</sup> Adrian Martin, 'Losing the Way: The Decline of Jane Campion', *Landfall*, vol. 200, no. 2, 2000, p. 101.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Adrian Martin, 'Master or Myth?' *The Age – A3*, 13 November, 2003, p. 6.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Todd McCarthy, 'In the Cut', *Variety*, 15 September 2003, vol. 392, no. 5, p. 24.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Lynden Barber 'Angel With an Eccentric Eye', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 September 1990, p. 75.
- <sup>xix</sup> Mark Chalon Smith, 'A Disturbing but Uplifting *Angel at My Table*', *Los Angeles Times (Part F)*, 7 May 1992, p. 2.
- <sup>xx</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum to Jim Jarmusch in Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Dead Man*, London: British Film Institute, 2000, p. 84.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Katherine Tulich, 'The Big Screen', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 1990, p. 31.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Jane Campion speaking on the director's soundtrack, *An Angel at My Table: Criterion Collection DVD* (1990).
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Gary Maddox, 'For film-maker Campion, it's a wrap – for now', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 2003, p. 3.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Campion interviewed by Steve Weinstein, 'Critics: Now She's a Sweetie', *San Francisco Examiner-Chronicle*, 23 June 1991, p. 28.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Weinstein, 'Critics: Now She's a Sweetie', p. 28.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> David Stratton, '*An Angel At My Table*' (Review), *Variety*, 20 June 1990, p. 32.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Vincent Canby, 'In the End Literature Conquers All', *New York Times*, 4 October 1990, p. C26.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Georgina Brown, 'Down Under and Dirty', *Village Voice*, 21 May 1991, p. 58.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Stanley Kaffman, 'A Passion in the Desert', *The New Republic*, 7 February, 2000, p. 26.

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<sup>xxx</sup> Andrew Urban, 'The Contradictions of Jane Campion, Cannes Winner', *The Australian*, 21 May 1986, republished in Wexman, p. 15.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Hunter Cordaiy, 'Jane Campion Interviewed by Hunter Cordaiy', *Cinema Papers*, no. 81, 1990, p. 36.