

Heat and Pleasure down under: *Holy Smoke* and Its Challenges

Shen Shiao-Ying

ABSTRACT

Through an analysis of Jane Campion's *Holy Smoke*, this paper looks at the turn-of-the-millennium filmic exploration of female experience, specifically as this experience is articulated through filmic representations of heat. By bringing in two other Australian films—*A Song of Ceylon* and *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy*—the paper further probes the question of how the notion of visual pleasure can be understood in a different light as female filmmakers are increasingly engaged in the construction of the visual.

KEY WORDS

Jane Campion, *Holy Smoke*, Australian cinema, Laleen Jayamanne heat, *A Song of Ceylon*, Tracey Moffatt, *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy*, pleasure, disarticulation



Disarticulation

In Jane Campion's latest feature, *In the Cut* (2003), when detective Malloy (played by Mark Ruffalo) offers the word "disarticulated" to explain how a female was murdered, the word is highlighted by way of a close-up as the protagonist, Frannie (Meg Ryan), notes it down in red ink on a pad. The word not only fascinates the language-immersed Frannie (an English professor), but also encapsulates what Campion has been attempting through all of her features since *The Piano* (1993). Campion's heroines all struggle to come into being by way of overcoming the mediation, the opaqueness of language. Ada's (Holly Hunter) refusal to speak in *The Piano* conveys her distrust of words and her desire for understanding and fulfillment through non-verbal means—through music, through the body. In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), Campion's interpretation of Henry James's Isabel Archer (Nicole Kidman) shows the character, so much deceived by manipulative words, attempting through sheer will to clear out a decent spot within the corseted space of European dwellings she has trapped herself in. And in *Holy Smoke* (1999), Ruth (Kate Winslet) embraces the epiphanic love showered upon her through the single touch of her Indian guru, while words from home trick her into coming back to the stifling and sterile Australian suburb she had adamantly distanced herself from.

It is not only the female protagonists of Campion's films who need to distance themselves from words in order to attain some form of self-knowledge: Campion's own filmic aesthetics reveals the filmmaker to be constantly countering her films' dialogues with their

visuals and soundtracks in order to bring forth each text's varying connotative layers. These acts and moments of "disarticulation" propel Campion's films and their females into intense and deadly journeys. Portrayed (embodied) literally in *In the Cut*, to "disarticulate" means to decapitate, to "lose one's head"; Campion's females need to access something other than intellectual language or romantic imaginings in order to survive. And Campion accesses her own talent for netting suggestive images to articulate extreme and unusual emotional and psychic states, thereby making her films go beyond the merely narrative: *Piano*'s dismembering of the finger, *Portrait*'s snaking skirt trains, *Holy Smoke*'s naked pissing, *In the Cut*'s "disarticulation" violently inked in red across the white page of a notebook—all of these striking images capture the central meaning. But there is more.

A key issue is that of how these films manage to set up landscape/visualscape as innerscape. The chilly seacoast and the rain forest's tangled roots in *Piano* announce Ada's impassive stance towards her arranged marriage and subsequent turmoil as she opens up to her own desires. *Portrait* stages Isabel's amorous encounter with Gilbert Osmond (John Malkovich) in the warmth of southern Italy but sets it in a subterranean vault exposing Isabel's readiness for romance and her blindness towards the shadowy elements within Osmond's personality. *Holy Smoke* gives us the humid warmth of India and dry heat of the Australian bush, and vibrantly colorful, kitschy, exotic, computer-generated visuals: all of these point to the vital, youthful, mesmerizing, fantastic aspirations, struggles, and possibilities in/of Ruth. And then we have the confusion of blossom petals for snow at the beginning of *In the Cut*, the hot sticky summer of the East Village: the "ruins" of New York City bare Frannie's reluctance and also her willingness to enter a world of intimacy which has shown itself to be potentially brutal and deadly.

Campion's articulation of her heroines' fates is further coded through her choice of colors. The bluish and somber, neutral coolness of her period films suggests the absence of verbalism in *Piano* and wintry, frozen indecision in *Portrait*. The golden and brownish heat and warmth offer freedom and compassion for Ruth in South Asia and a

U-turn from the death drive for Frannie. Through her four feature films Campion consistently foregrounds her interest in studying female desire and psychology, at the same time managing to make these studies incorporate parts of her own makeup—her Kiwi roots, her European heritage, her adoption of/by Australia, her cinematic community. Campion, aside from her talent for visuals, incorporates herself into her films in order to enable her white female characters to attain some form of self-knowledge in the end. Here I would like to propose that the enabling elements are often related to cultures of warmth, of the other, of sensuality: these are places (or spaces) where Campion's battle of the sexes can be staged and her protagonists can gain awareness. This empowering transformation is most vibrantly brought forth in the 1999 film *Holy Smoke*.

Indian Passage

Nadine Gordimer, in her article "Across Time and Two Hemispheres," opens a tribute to her American friend Harry Levin by citing a phrase from E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*: "only connect." Gordimer recollects how Forster's novel on India triggered her awareness of her society, "where there was no connection recognized between ourselves, the whites, and the surrounding blacks. A world of strangers" (111). And she ponders, "Only connect: was it possible, for me? for us?" In a way Jane Campion asks the same question, through not so much racial as sexual tensions in her films. Campion's females struggle to connect with themselves, find wholeness within themselves, and question the validity of their aspirations by testing them through some form of romantic or sexual interaction. In *Holy Smoke*, the filmmaker does not directly cite Forster; she makes her own passage to India to find some answers in her quest for connection.

Campion opens *Holy Smoke* with a bus ride; on the bus the white Ruth stands among Indian males. Through close-ups one sees her moist, youthful, glowing flesh inviting a sensual, anonymous male touch. The Australian Ruth Barron seems like the typical white youth in search of

the exotic: she is curious about Asian spirituality, bored with the materialistic world, eager to test her capacity for the immaterial. The opening sequence continues with Neil Diamond's "Holly Holy," the sounds of the teeming streets of Chandni Chowk, Delhi, the rising smoke of *chai* (Indian spiced tea) morphing into the film's title.¹ We sense that Ruth will be touched by the exotic and sent on a pilgrimage that might give her a glimpse of the transcendent. In this exotic Indian land Ruth, gazing upward and twirling around as she hears the rhythm of a "holy" tune, is primed for a euphoric soaring, an opening of her "holy eye" (third eye). However, Ruth's opening to the other, to the touch of her Indian guru, leads her back to her own Australian desert, where she is forced to confront her own demons, her fear of her own nature. Ruth locates in India-in the exotic other-her own lack, that embracing love which she thinks has been lost in her own Australian home.

In Forster's *A Passage to India* the Indian heat is constantly highlighted: "India does wonders for the judgment, especially during the Hot Weather" (23); "There's nothing in India but the weather . . . it's the alpha and omega of the whole affair" (43). Heat becomes the cipher of the other in Forster's novel; it is within the Heat that a young Englishwoman's (Adela's) fear, perplexity and clarity are played out, and the conflict between Anglo and Indian cultures is staged. As a filmmaker raised and shaped in New Zealand and Australia Champion knows well about heat, and in *Holy Smoke* she uses it to stage her battle of the sexes. What is refreshing about *Holy Smoke*-and quite a few other Australian films-is that heat is now no longer a state from which Anglo-whites escape (as to the Himalayas in Forster); Ruth *seeks* Indian heat, a deeper level of kindness is reached in the Australian desert heat, and compassion becomes finally possible only when Ruth and her mother return to the Indian heat. There is no longer that urge to escape the heat, no longer a nostalgia for coolness; heat is no longer treated with ominous dread, as Forster treats it near the end of the Mosque section of his novel: "the Hot Weather was approaching" (91). Instead, Champion in *Holy Smoke* gives another twist to the notion that heat can be the "alpha and omega of the whole affair," that it can "do

wonders for the judgment.”

After just one viewing of *Holy Smoke*, viewers will surely sense the film’s “warmth”: the golden, ocher, magenta colors; steamy India and the Down Under desert; close-ups of flaming matches and gas stoves. Campion gave us wetness and water in *Piano*, ornate mansions and cultured gardens in *Portrait*; if, as Dana Polan put it in the BFI World Directors Series on Jane Campion, *Piano* conveys deep emotionalism and *Portrait* intellectual coldness (143), then where do the heat and warmth of *Holy Smoke* take us? They take us to a sweltering openness and nakedness.

In *Holy Smoke*’s early Indian sequences, Ruth’s receiving of Baba’s touch, the opening of her inner eye, is presented like a burning open of the forehead, with golden, fiery rays all around, kindling precisely the change the spoiled suburban Ruth has been craving. Then back in Australia, as she agrees to move to the outback house and face cult “deprogrammer” P.J. Waters (Harvey Keitel), the start of their cult-deprogramming session is announced by the striking of a match. The flame ignites the two characters’ duel-like questioning of the state of Ruth’s soul, an intense and incendiary conversation. The deprogramming steps succeed in pushing Ruth to a dramatic transformation, a change again accompanied by fire. Ruth’s initial Indian conversion is outwardly represented by the mark on her forehead, the white sari she wears, and her act of burning her air-ticket home. Her Australian transformation shows itself by way of her stripping and burning her “Indian prop”—her sari. In the desert night,² illuminated by the flames of her burning sari, Ruth emerges totally naked, devastatingly confused; her Indian epiphany programmed out of her, she is left stark naked, with nothing but her fleshy body. Without suburban comforts or Baba’s love, the naked and exposed Ruth regresses to a primal infant state, crying for affection, for immediate physical warmth; when denied she pees uncontrollably, exhibiting her elemental fear of abandonment, of being left with nothingness. But by daring to expose herself in this way, with her luminously lush body she now manages to clamber her way back to some sort of a footing, turns the tables on her de-programmer, exposes PJ and forces him to face his

own vacuity.

Holy Smoke not only frames its heroine in fire and flames; it also throws its male protagonist into the blaze. PJ starts out by being the “holder of the flame”—he strikes the match and lights the stove; he talks about the spark of the soul, about how “the soul is the match, . . . the flame that can light your path . . .” But halfway into the film, when Ruth dares to light her own match and burn her sari, *Holy Smoke*—and this is something quite rare among Campion films, which uniformly focus on female transformations—makes room for a male transformation. As with Ruth’s donning and shedding of her sari, PJ’s transformation becomes evident through his change of clothing. After adding an unexpected sexual dimension to the deprogramming process and submitting to Ruth’s young and powerful body, PJ allows himself to be stripped and made over into a “fun-loving woman,” one who wears lipstick, a tight red dress and a scarf in her (his) hair. In this feminized attire and wearing just one cowboy boot, stripped of his macho armor, PJ runs into the desert chasing after Ruth. And in the desert heat comes his “conversion.” Just as Ruth’s divine Indian experience erupts in an ecstasy of computer graphics, PJ’s comes in the form of a fantastic hallucination. In it Ruth becomes a many-armed and gorgeous, golden Indian deity looking at him and beckoning to him with infinite kindness. Letting go of his earthly ego, nakedly open to his own essences, PJ surrenders and prays to this golden mirage to the tune of The Shirelles’ “Baby, It’s You.”

Both Ruth’s Indian vision and PJ’s other mirage happen in the heat of the two lands. Enveloped by heat, their judgment is overcome with wonder. The heat intensifies our sense that Ruth and PJ are ripe for transformative experiences. Yet to probe the spiritual in this film, whose exploration centers on the youthful and rather bratty Ruth, Campion chooses a lighter, more kitschy style. Ruth and PJ’s epiphanic moments are youthfully psychedelic and Bollywoodishly over-the-top. However, this lighter tone, this sense of “fun,” does not diminish the seriousness of Ruth and P.J.’s experiences.³ *Holy Smoke*’s halfway hut in the Australian desert operates like the cave in Forster’s *Passage to India* (in this hut, the site of their de-programming sessions, PJ at one

point says “we’re still in the cave”); in this isolated, warm and womb-like space, Ruth and PJ mirror and echo each other, seeking out what the other is doing with his/her soul and serving as foil to that. Through sexual contact they further exact a nakedness and openness from one another, from the other, making possible the honesty that comes to them one year later in Jaipur (Ruth) and Los Angeles (PJ).

Holy Smoke begins in a somewhat mischievous manner, identifying the spoiled but truth-seeking Ruth with Neil Diamond’s “Holly Holy,” singing of a “lonely child. . . . Holly holy dream,” and correlating the macho, cowboy-booted American PJ with Neil Diamond’s “I Am . . . I Said,” a song about “a frog who dreamed of being a king, and then became one,” about “an emptiness deep inside.” But after Ruth and PJ’s “cave” experience the film drops the pompously masculine Neil Diamond and concludes with the very tender Annie Lennox’s “Primitive,” which soothes us with the fundamental transiency of being: “time will catch us in both hands, to blow away like grains of sand . . .” At the turn of the century Jane Campion, near the end of *Holy Smoke*, offers us a Down Under “truckbed pieta” (Murphy 36): Ruth cradling the spent and emu-shit-covered PJ; the spoiled *Sans Souci* girl, after her passage to (and in) India and her desert revelation, finally finds a kindness within, coming near that touch of truth which initiated her whole journey.

Ever since *The Piano* attracted major international attention in 1993, Campion’s films have all been dutifully reviewed by critics. While *Portrait* received numerous serious reviews which mainly examined it as an adaptation of the Henry James original, *Holy Smoke* has garnered little sustained, serious analysis since its release four years ago. However, some of its initial reviews expressed a sense of genuine surprise. *Time*’s Richard Schickel and *The Nation*’s Stuart Klawans, neither of whom quite embraced *Piano*, both found in *Holy Smoke* an inviting openness. Schickel, who observed the “strained improbabilities” in *Piano*, notices a “looseness” in *Holy Smoke* which “freshens the film and gives it somewhat the quality of being surprised at its own journey” (73). Klawans has a similar impression. Having found Campion to be somewhat of a puppeteer with *Piano*, in which

“everything was decided in advance,” he appreciates *Holy Smoke*’s “willingness to plunge into the human muddle”; he welcomes Campion’s more observant stance towards her characters, her looking upon Ruth and PJ “from a slight distance and (often enough) an odd angle,” and salutes the filmmaker’s capacity for surprise (35).

To me it seems that this looseness, this capacity for surprise emerges from Campion’s rare concession to the possibility of male transformation in *Holy Smoke*. In most of her films Campion has focused exclusively on female growth; male figures exist merely as either facilitators or detractors to such growth. However, in *Holy Smoke* the sense of heat, the lighting of the flame, the appetite for growth is allowed to both Ruth and PJ. Campion presents us with a middle-aged PJ seduced by Ruth’s youthful and powerful sexuality, and through his submission to the female he is given the chance to bare himself and see himself. In the end PJ becomes “reprogrammed” by his desert experience. While repeatedly highlighting and ironizing male culture, “male games” with close-ups of toy soldiers, boys with toy guns, grown-ups in ridiculous cowboy costumes, *Holy Smoke* allows PJ to gradually wash himself clean of that kind of superficial maleness, the maleness of his initial American cowboy-like machismo. PJ’s transformation is punctuated by his contact with water, leading finally to the rain in LA as he is washed out of the Down Under desert muddle and baptized into a productive family life (producing twins and a second book no less) with the magnificently female Pam Grier.

Forster’s *A Passage to India* shows the clash of cultures with lines like “the Hot Weather was approaching” (91), and concludes the overheated court trial with the arrival of monsoon rain. Campion also makes good use of heat, fire and water in her *Holy Smoke*. However, seven decades after *Passage*’s final stasis — the irreconcilable friendship between Aziz and Fielding — the ending of Campion’s millennium film has been found by some critics to be “surprising and optimistic” (Gillet). Campion offers us a glimpse of Ruth and PJ one year after their desert encounter: each person’s one-year-later is visualized as a computerized postcard with images of life in Jaipur and LA, with intimate voice-overs reading out their loving messages to

each other. This ending suggests the continued meeting between the East and West while also giving us the sense of a productive marriage between a mature black woman and a mature white man. This futuristic moving-image postcard shows warmth in the heat and rain, the coexistence of paper postcard and electronic mail, a welding of film and computer imaging that does not attempt the spectacular but simply the wondrous instance of human connection. No millennium wish could be better.

Yet especially female viewers may sometimes be annoyed by the way Campion's sexual and romantic clashes always function primarily as an education for her white female protagonists. "Heat" in the form of bare-chested Maoris in *Piano*, heat as the Indian setting in *Holy Smoke*, heat as the other exists marginally in her films, and Campion's females are arguably not really interested in the cultural other. Heat is merely the triggering device setting off the females' explorations of their own desires. Ada is not interested in the Maoris; her orientaling fascination with an exotic other really extends no further (or deeper) than Baines' (Harvey Keitel) facial tattoo. Young Ruth's fascination with her Indian guru is more a rejection of vacuous relationships back home than a true embracing and understanding of another culture.

What is therefore especially appealing at the end of *Holy Smoke* is the return to the cultural other. After her confrontation and gaining of wisdom in the Australian desert, Ruth returns to India's heat; this time she is with her mother, who during her first South Asia visit nearly had a fatal asthma attack from Delhi's humid heat. *Holy Smoke* begins with the superficial attraction for white people of Asian spirituality, but it ends, not with Ruth returning to India "to fight poverty there" (155) as Polan broadly read it, but with mother and daughter volunteering in an animal shelter. In this return there is less romanticizing and patronizing of the other. Ruth's chosen boyfriend in India is still white, but there is now a new openness to the other, to the alien culture—Ruth tells PJ in her postcard that she has now read the complete *Bhagavad Gita*—and it is an openness shared by her Australian mother. With *Holy Smoke* Jane Campion, as in her early *Two Friends* (1986) and *Sweetie* (1989), expands the female experience; rather than limiting it to a young female

individual she brings in the familial, making a link across generations. Ruth's mother no longer chooses to side with the father. Early in the film, when Ruth is being rounded up by her male kin and calls for her mother, her entreaty is met with weeping inaction on the mother's part. By the end of the film, having experienced the "deadly" heat of Chandni Chowk, the place of Ruth's transformation, and having watched Ruth sing and dance to Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know" and come to appreciate her daughter's youthful exuberance, the mother joins Ruth in Jaipur and finds her own rejuvenation in the Indian heat. With *Holy Smoke* Champion takes a break from gothic romance, recuperates the mother, and offers us a rare felicitous ending whereby realization and understanding become possible not only for a young heroine but also between generations and between sexes.

But: "only connect"? Early last century, Forster could only meet that enquiry with "No, not yet" (312). In 1999 Champion showed us individual connections, connections between the sexes and generations, but real cross-cultural connection? Maybe still not yet. Yet at least Ruth and her mother are now capable of coming to India and sharing the heat. The lighting of matches, the flame and fire in *Holy Smoke* are articulated as a "spark of the soul" ("the soul is the match") but to know the soul, to access the soul, Champion relies on the sexual. It is through their sexual contact that Ruth and PJ plunge into a deeper exploration of the self. Heat as the sensual is often used in stories set in South Asia. In David Lean's film adaptation of *A Passage to India* (1984), instead of the novel's car accident which cements Adela's engagement with Ronny, the film sends Judy Davis' Adela into the heat of the day in a ruined nude sculpture garden with screeching wild monkeys, and makes the couple's engagement a result of Adela's sexual stirrings and confusion. In *Heat and Dust* (1983), the early Merchant and Ivory project partly set in colonial/British India, the English wife played by Greta Scacchi, instead of heeding the husband's advice and heading toward the cool mountains before the heat came, insists on sharing the heat, and through the heat she makes a sexual connection with an Indian other. In the present-day part of *Heat and Dust*, the Julie Christie character visits India in an attempt to understand that past encounter of

East and West, and comprehends the past only through her own sexual knowing of the other; in the Indian heat she repeats the past and conceives another East-West child.

In these films heat embodies the other, and the other, if not incarnating the sexual, has at least the aura of the sensual. Heat in these texts can be an ominous presence, something to be dreaded, escaped. But when heat is actually experienced by the films' white characters (often their female leads) it unsettles them and leads them to an expected, agonizing knowing of the self. And this knowledge proves ultimately to be productive. In Campion's *Holy Smoke*, it is the female Ruth who takes the initiative and opens herself to the Indian heat, dares to meet up with the cocky American PJ in the Australian desert, submits herself and seduces PJ into an exploration that saves her from complacent suburban blandness and PJ from his macho hubris.

Tainted Pleasure

Jane Campion, as a filmmaker quite knowledgeable about classic English novels, might have had Forster's seminal novel at the back of her head as she and her sister plotted out *Holy Smoke*. More unequivocally than in the early-twentieth-century *A Passage to India*, in the end-of-the-century *Holy Smoke* the Anglo-Whites' response to heat/the other can shift from dread to acknowledgment, from urgent desire to flee to unperturbed sharing of heat. Of course, the Anglo-Whites in *Holy Smoke* come not from England but Australia, a land whose own desert dryness and heat figure significantly in the film. Another set of films with past-present, Anglo-South Asian and British-Australian links are the 1934 EMB (Empire Marketing Board) documentary *Song of Ceylon* and the 1985 avant-garde film *A Song of Ceylon*. The former is a British documentary, a 39-minute classic by Basil Wright, the latter a 51-minute film by Sri Lankan-Australian Laleen Jayamanne. By digressing and having a look at these non-Campion filmic texts, I hope to show how other Australian films ponder and react to the Anglo legacy, and to further elucidate both the weakness and strength in Campion's work.

While Basil Wright's work can be accessed without too much difficulty in places with a serious interest in film studies, Jayamanne's work can be very hard to locate and is most likely much less known.⁴ However, her film was discussed in the 80s by Australian film scholar Barbara Creed. Jayamanne herself has written and commented on her own work, and these comments have been collected into her recent book, *Toward Cinema and Its Double: Cross-Cultural Mimesis*. And Patricia Mellencamp discusses Jayamanne together with an Aboriginal-Australian filmmaker in "An Empirical Avant-Garde: Laleen Jayamanne and Tracey Moffatt."

A glance at the titles of the two films shows Jayamanne's desire to address the classic film from half a century earlier. The point she makes with her title is to stress her film's particularity: her film is only *a* song of Ceylon, made at a time when Ceylon, officially renamed Sri Lanka in 1972, is (was) no longer Ceylon. In Jayamanne's own discussion of her film, she touches upon her titling strategy; she asks whether her appropriation of Wright's film title is simply "a matter of an erudite quotation to be followed by further displays of knowledge of film history, or is the way it functions an index of some other process" ("Speaking" 150). Of course Jayamanne wants her title to function as "an index of some other process," and not simply as an erudite reference. Jayamanne's title launches her film into a process of postcolonial reflection, destabilizing the orientalism and exoticism in the 1934 British gaze at Ceylon. Jayamanne's film, unlike Wright's work, has no "image" of Ceylon whatsoever. It does not gaze at any exotic, primitive or "natural" world of Ceylon/Sri Lanka. What it does give us are images of South Asian faces and presences, not in any familiar oriental setting but in, for instance, a European parlor with a grand piano.

For many who have not and might not ever have a chance to view Jayamanne's film, a look at her more accessible writing can offer a taste of her creative approach. In Part One of her book, *Toward Cinema and Its Double*, there is an article on Campion: "Postcolonial Gothic: The Narcissistic Wound of Jane Campion's *The Piano*." Jayamanne structures her 24-page paper into 19 subtitled segments, and

fragmentation is very much Jayamanne's preferred aesthetic tactic. While Wright's film is thematically organized into four parts, Jayamanne's is really a series of twelve sequences.⁵ While Wright gives a smoothness to his images and organizes them under his four themes, Jayamanne links her images in staccato fashion; showing more interest in tableaux, she creates a tone that has been repeatedly described as "hysterical."⁶ While *Song of Ceylon's* voice-over narration echoes its visuals, Jayamanne's multiple voice-overs are often at odds with the visuals.⁷ In other words Jayamanne, aside from her title, does not visually or aurally quote Basil Wright's film; rather, aesthetically and ideologically, she desires to thoroughly destabilize what Wright's work represents.

While Wright's 1934 documentary might appear to be politically quite incorrect today, scholars such as Don Fredericksen and William Guynn have tried to recuperate the film by means of a Jungian reading and an analysis that shows how Wright worked against the British "Art of National Projection," the major documentary movement of Wright's time.⁸ Fredericksen stresses the spiritual quest embedded in Wright's film; Guynn highlights how Wright, while silencing the Ceylonese, also critiques the propagandish nature of the Art of National Projection and the "callous and exploitative" nature of the British presence in Ceylon (97). Jayamanne's *A Song of Ceylon*, on the other hand, though borrowing Wright's title, is far from trying to pay tribute to Wright's work. Its ambition is to produce a postcolonial, gender-conscious rendering of a corrupted, contaminated, hybridized "neither here nor there"⁹ Ceylon ("Speaking" 162). Jayamanne fragments the human body (by showing anonymous hands creeping at the edge of frames), destabilizes gender (using a transvestite to play a Kim Novak look-alike), stills the motion in her picture (employing *tableaux vivants*), and disembodies, multiplies and makes dissonant the voices on her soundtrack (three male and one female voice). Jayamanne has given us a fragmented and hysterical text, difficult to pin down, undermining any approach to give it an assured reading.

Viewing *A Song of Ceylon* in the 21st century, while understanding Jayamanne's political gesture-her desire to rework

feminist film aesthetics in 1985-I find it hard to totally share Barbara Creed's enthusiastic 1987 response to *Ceylon*.¹⁰ What I find lacking in my viewing experience is a sense of pleasure. The desire for visual pleasure used to be anathema in feminist film theory; however, as argued in Catherine Fowler's "Cinefeminism in its Middle Ages, or 'Please, Please, Please Give me Back My Pleasure': The 1990s Work of Sally Potter, Chantal Akerman, and Yvonne Rainer," during the 90s, as some feminist filmmakers have aged, feminist films have also adopted a more relaxed attitude toward conventional visual pleasure. Fowler shows how Rainer's *Privilege* (1990) articulates the depressing realization that the dominant male gaze disappears simply as a function of the filmic female subject's aging process (58); at the same time, this realization offers these directors a post-menopausal, post-visual phase of filmmaking, allowing them a more liberated attitude towards conventional visual pleasure. As a female film-viewer in 2004 (not necessarily post-menopausal), I desire from female filmmakers filmic encounters more along the lines of Fowler's sense of Sally Potter's *Tango Lesson* (1997): "an emphasis on a sensual gaze alert to light, movement, and shades in black and white or color and that therefore creates highly tangible spaces that charge the bodies moving through them with energy" (59). Isn't it possible in 2004 to demand that the sensual be at the same time political? To be engrossed and at the same time unsettled? To be pleased and at the same time challenged? These experiences are possible and can be further affirmed through the (far from menopausal) work of Aboriginal-Australian visual artist Tracey Moffatt.

While Jayamanne might be unknown to serious film viewers, Tracey Moffatt is an artist no cultural scholar can ignore in Australia. Moreover, outside Australia Moffatt's work was showcased in New York City's Dia Center in 1997, and Ronin Films is now distributing some of her films and videos in DVD form.¹¹ What is seductive in Moffatt's work is that even in her individual photographs one can sense the call of an entrancing story; her work invites you to approach it, to gaze at it, luring you with the promise of a secret about to be unveiled.¹² The female body is not de-sexed but milked for all it can possibly

suggest. In her *Something More* (1989) still photograph series, one picture (#3) has the very *guapa*¹³ Moffatt herself in a bright red-and-black floral patterned high-slit cheongsam sitting in an ocher setting with a pigtailed young Asian man dreamily laying his head on her lap. This 98 x 127 cm photo seems to invite one to project onto it the “melodrama of land, settlement and violence” (Martin 14), to think back on and imagine the pioneering golden days, the mixing of white, Chinese, and Aboriginal presences, and its synchronous or subsequent violence of assimilation and eradication. In her work, Moffatt gives us sumptuous colors or haunting black-and-white (as in her *Laudanum* series, 1998); she invites us to gaze, and in that gazing allow the pain and uncanniness of history to emerge, displacing our expectant moment of melodramatic indulgence.

If this one Moffatt photo teases us with such associative dramas, her films evoke intense sensual thinking.¹⁴ Moffatt’s 1990 *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (17 minutes),¹⁵ with its stunning color and smooth and jarring aural treatment, hits one with the wounds and tendernesses of an Australian maternal melodrama. This short film opens and ends with Jimmy Little’s performance of his 1964 hit “Royal Telephone.” The Aboriginal showman’s velvety singing draws one into an outback mother-daughter story: a daughter’s sense of entrapment, as she cares for a withering mother while recalling tender and loving childhood moments with the mother, is caught within an explicit studio setting. Railroad sounds point to the daughter’s desire to flee from the dryness of outback life; at the same time, Moffatt manages to bring forth the sensuality of the desert heat. As the daughter, played by the very physical Marcia Langton, hoses and cools herself down with water, the stifling present is intercepted with snippets of childhood memory in which playful and comforting beachside moments with the mother are recalled, thus highlighting the simultaneous oppressiveness and warmth of one’s physical response to heat. The daughter’s dark voluptuous body and the pale mother’s gnarled, aged feet, Jimmy Little’s sweet singing voice and the frustrating radio static, bare outback setting and dramatic studio colors weave a luscious and tainted Australian melodrama, luring us into the harsh reality of assimilation

and unsettling us with the tenderness still strikingly present in that hard history.

Laleen Jayamanne in her excellent analysis of *Night Cries* has noticed the “suspicious” glossiness of the film, yet still sees it as embodying “a certain unusual daring in Australian cinema.” She shows how Moffatt performs a complex mediation which suggests the possibility of reconciliation, even before the idea became state policy (12).¹⁶ Whether it is the “glossiness” or the “frank glamour” (Martin 15) critics note in Moffatt, the sensuousness or the pleasure one experiences in her work, these do not undercut the overt political meaning of her texts. In this age of the “post” (post-capitalist, post-modern, post-colonial . . .), the pleasure Moffatt offers does not so much attempt to counter the objectifying gaze but rather draws out our awareness of the complicity of pleasure, the power of pleasure to lure us to see, feel and learn.¹⁷

Campion’s *Holy Smoke*, of course, being a commercial narrative film, does not attempt the fragmentariness or avant-gardism of Jayamanne. However, this does not suggest a lack of feminist concern or consciousness in *Holy Smoke*: Campion offers us a classical beginning-middle-and-end narrative structure, refreshingly telling another woman-centered story in which a battle of the sexes leads to female development. Perhaps what often identifies and undermines Campion’s narrative work is this intense focus on romance and the sexual side of female experience; everything in a film serves that exploration. When asked about her choice of the Maori elements and landscape in *Piano*, Campion admitted that she does not know Maori culture very well and that the film “could have inserted more Maori elements but they wouldn’t have been integrated into the story”; as to the New Zealand setting, Campion thought the wild landscape suited the story because it could highlight the harshness and darkness in romanticism, letting nature be seen as “greater than you, your spirit or humanity even” (Caputo 75). When speaking of *Holy Smoke*’s Australian outback with Kathleen Murphy, Campion emphasizes the “transcendent” sense of the vast landscape shots: “There are marvelous, beautiful certainties that we can forget: the sun coming up, the moon,

night and day. All these are very important to me. The inexorable movement of the earth, from day to night, night to day, gives certainty. No matter where you go, these things go on" (35). Campion seems to be constantly desiring to transcend the local and reach for something beyond it.¹⁸ It thus comes as no surprise that critics would read *Holy Smoke*'s outback as belonging in a "mythic zone" (Murphy 35) or embodying the "post-national"—"a spatiality in transit, a vulnerable geography of fleeing connection" (Polan 155). Campion's urge to go beyond the local has also been perceived as a postmodern impulse in which nature and the body become vehicles to articulate a spiritual materialism, a desire for something that escapes and exceeds human meanings (Alemany-Galway 320). Unlike Moffatt, whose staged other outback highlights the local and allows locality and all its historicity and political-ness to emerge, Campion's landscapes always point towards somewhere else: Campion's local does not want to stay local.

Finding Campion's use of landscape wanting, let us go back again to her staging of sexual politics, which all the other filmic elements in her films ultimately serve. Many might agree that the most powerful image in *Holy Smoke* is that of Kate Winslet's full naked body set against the outback terrain. With all its youthful potency and vulnerability, Winslet's body, while a powerful weapon in her battle against the male de-programmer, does not have the sense of history of the clothed body of the more aged Marcia Langton in *Night Cries*, nor the sensuality, the sense of pressing and frustrated desire Langton can embody. As for Ada's (Holly Hunter) body in *Piano*, it is sedately framed like an oil painting's gothic nude, quietly declaring Ada's choice of the purely sensory world. And in *In the Cut*, a film promising from the outset sexual explicitness, the slim Meg Ryan is paired with the properly romantic, wholesome, still a bit boyish and wholesome Mark Ruffalo: thus the film's sex scenes offer us a tameness that queries the strong attraction *and fear* the Meg Ryan character experiences in her sexual encounters. Such a coupling undermines the edginess and danger that we expect from a suspense thriller and from the dynamics between its leading couple. (Nick Damici, who plays wife-beating Detective Rodriguez, fits much better as the "worldly,

tough, a little over the hill . . . corrupt emotionally”¹⁹ macho Detective Malloy.) If, as Campion herself has stressed, *In the Cut* is about probing “the romantic myth in Western society,”²⁰ if it is a story in which “sex and the body are where the truth lies” (Francke 19), then while we do see the body (even a close-up of an erect penis—a prosthesis was cast for it) there is, in the bodily encounters, too much moisture and humidity and not enough heat; for heat is what we need here to drive us toward some form of truth. While a film like *La Pianiste* (2001) unflinchingly takes us through all the emotional and physical masochism and confrontations that ultimately lead to the Isabelle Huppert character’s awareness and her ability to walk away, while Catherine Breillat’s *Romance* (1999) hounds us with sexual contacts until we glimpse some aspect of sexual-romantic truth, Campion’s sexual stagings are constantly just one image away from the truly “sexual.”

In a film set in post-9/11 New York, Campion places her harrowing climax in an abstracted, phallic lighthouse, yet to get an R-rating (instead of an NC-17) in the American market, she cut shots of an erect penis from a film whose truth is supposed to lie in sex and the body. *In the Cut*, like other works of Campion, refuses to totally bask in locality and sexuality. Still, these lacks in Campion’s work do not diminish her as a filmmaker who can offer us striking visuals and engrossing narratives. Tracey Moffatt in one of her conversations states the ultimate task of her art: “*Again I’m not trying to be overtly political, because this would be too boring to look at. I’m just trying to make images that ‘hold’, using beauty and composition. As a picture maker this ability to ‘hold’ is the hardest challenge of all.*” Campion can hold us with her images, pleasure us with her narratives, but please, please, please give me more heat.

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NOTES

¹ In the press release and literature dealing with this 1999 Campion film, the film’s title sometimes also appears with an additional exclamation point