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Deconstructing the mythology of gender in Western films in *The Power of the Dog*

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Abstract. The film *The Power of the Dog*, directed by Jane Campion and adapted from the novel of the same name, reexamines the myth of masculinity in the Western genre within the contemporary discourse of "toxic masculinity" and deconstructs it within the framework of gender relations. Through the denaturalization of violence and domination in Western films, the movie exposes the gender ideology and historical-cultural roots underlying the romanticization of male power. Campion's adaptation practice goes beyond merely responding to contemporary social issues; instead, it probes the historical mechanisms through which masculinity is produced, presenting gender identity as something constructed and fluid within cultural practice.

Keywords: Campion, Western films, toxic masculinity, gender relations, film adaptation

1. Introduction

The renowned New Zealand director Jane Campion was the first woman in history to win the Palme d'Or and to receive two nominations for the Academy Award for Best Director. Most of her films center on female protagonists who have suffered personal trauma, exploring the complex relationships and conflicts between female subjectivity, the expression of desire, and socio-cultural discourse. By foregrounding the dangers encountered by women's emotional and sexual desires within a patriarchal world, her works deconstruct traditional myths of family and romance. When female directors create films about female characters, feminism inevitably becomes a central issue in the discourse surrounding their reception. In fact, many feminist scholars and film critics have categorized Campion's works as "domestic melodramas or women's films" [1], advocating a feminist consciousness and sensibility while labeling her a "feminist director and artist" [2]. Campion herself, however, has consistently rejected the label of feminist filmmaker. She has stated that she does not make films "from an explicitly female perspective", because, "like anyone else", she possesses "a masculine side". She emphasizes that this is "not about political feminism", but simply about being "a filmmaker" who, at a certain stage, happened to be interested in women and their stories [3]. Evidently, Campion consciously resists any fixed model of femininity and the all-encompassing feminism associated with such definitions. When Campion returned to the big screen with *The Power of the Dog* (2021) twelve years after the release of *Bright Star* (2009), the above perspective could already be extended into a broader reflection on and critique of all fixed gender norms and paradigms. For the first time, she cast male characters as protagonists, focusing on the rugged and masculine world of the American West in order to

reassess the myth of "masculinity" constructed over more than a century of development in the Western film genre.

Campion's *The Power of the Dog* is adapted from the 1967 novel of the same name by American writer Thomas Savage (1915–2003). The story centers on four members of a reconstituted family living on a cattle ranch in the American West during the 1920s. What makes the novel distinctive is its direct engagement with a subject rarely discussed at the time: repressed homosexuality concealed beneath violence, misogyny, and homophobia in a ranching world that tolerated only one acceptable form of masculinity. By retelling a story set in the past, Campion presents the old Western world—commonly imagined by audiences as populated solely by men, guns, and animals—while focusing on destructive masculinity and the repressed desires and traumas hidden beneath it. Yet the film is simultaneously a story about the present. Against the backdrop of controversies surrounding a series of remarks and actions by the 45th President of the United States, Donald Trump, together with the global spread of the #MeToo movement beginning in late 2017, "toxic masculinity" became a widely debated topic. Campion's work directly engages with these contemporary concerns. Film critics have regarded the term as a key concept for interpreting *The Power of the Dog*, arguing that its subversion of the traditional masculine ideal of the classic Western positions it as an "anti-Western". However, "toxic masculinity" itself is a discursive expression frequently employed in contemporary Western media and social platforms to individualize and gender social problems while neglecting the substantive contexts behind various forms of behavior. Rather than promoting gender equality, such discourse risks reinforcing stereotypes, intensifying gender antagonism and discrimination—an outcome fundamentally at odds with Campion's opposition to essentialist notions of gender identity.

This paper argues that *The Power of the Dog* does not simply display a series of "toxic" behaviors in order to deconstruct the classic cultural icon as an individual gendered subject. Through the reimagining or "sampling" [4] of the original source material and by reintroducing the often absent context of gender relations into the Western genre, Campion reexamines the myths and flaws of archetypal identities deeply embedded in historical and cultural traditions. Her aim is to reveal how classic Western films, through "hero worship", advocate hegemonic masculinity and, under the binary opposition of good and evil, legitimize and even romanticize violence aimed at dominating others as an attractive construction of gender essence—the true source of toxicity. In this sense, *The Power of the Dog* should not be understood as an "anti-Western", but rather as a "post-Western". From a historical perspective, Campion conveys her reflections on cultural landscapes, social issues, and cinematic heritage, demonstrating the multiple layers of meaning inherent in adaptation as a form that transcends time and space [5].

2. "Toxic" behavior within the context of gender relations

On the dust-laden ranch, cowboys wrestle and grapple while cattle and horses move restlessly beneath clouds flooded with sunlight. Through the wide-angle cinematography of Australian cinematographer Ari Wegner, the remote valleys of Otago in Campion's native New Zealand convincingly stand in for the vast, desolate wilderness of 1920s Montana. Yet as the camera gradually loosens its gaze, increasingly adopting handheld shots to capture intimate bodily movements and emotional details, the film, as one critic observed, becomes "a chamber piece painted on an epic canvas" [6]. On the one hand lies the boundless and magnificent landscape of the Old West; on the other are the tormented inner worlds of people trapped within claustrophobic domestic spaces. Like solitary figures adrift in small boats at sea, they have nowhere to escape, imprisoned both by their relationships with one another and by their own secrets. At its core, *The Power of the Dog* by Thomas Savage seeks to explore intense familial tension and the complexity of human psychology—precisely the terrain in

which Jane Campion excels. Yet Campion does not follow conventional adaptation practices. Instead, she undertakes extensive "de-verbalization" in her adaptation. She boldly removes the interior monologues and retrospective flashbacks that explain characters' motivations and behaviors in the novel, choosing instead to probe their concealed inner worlds through the direct confrontations characteristic of Western films and through close attention to bodily and sensory detail. In particular, she confines the aggressive, combative, rugged, and violent masculinity traditionally defined and idealized by the Western genre largely within domestic space and gender relations, transforming it into both a disguise for and a refuge from desires considered unacceptable for the male protagonist within his historical era. Consequently, masculinity ceases to function as a heroic assertion of justice and gradually becomes a devastating tidal wave of pain that harms both self and others alike. The once open and expansive Western setting thus slides inexorably toward a suffocating Gothic atmosphere of gloom and psychological terror.

Through the stark contrast between the Burbank brothers, *The Power of the Dog* foregrounds the gender values of the Western world, which venerates a singular form of masculinity. Phil Burbank (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) and his younger brother George (played by Jesse Plemons) jointly manage the family ranch. Having grown up inseparable, they still share a double bed in accordance with family custom and tradition. Yet their personalities and conduct are fundamentally incompatible, and their positions within the ranch hierarchy are entirely different. George, overweight and slow-moving, is gentle, shy, and complacent. Even while riding horseback, he remains dressed in formal suits, preferring to supervise business operations by automobile and handle financial matters. In contrast to George's modernized gentlemanly demeanor, Phil—who spends his days in worn, filthy spurred boots and leather chaps, laboring alongside the ranch hands—perfectly embodies the traditional image of the hard-edged cowboy and the associated ideals of bravery, toughness, and self-reliance. Tall and physically powerful, Phil believes that "a man is forged through endurance and hardship". He is an exceptional horseman and outdoorsman who personally undertakes demanding ranch labor and castrates bulls with his bare hands. At the same time, he is an outstanding Yale graduate in classical studies, highly intelligent, skilled at braiding rawhide ropes, and accomplished at playing the banjo. Thus, within the cultural world of the American West—defined by a "strong work ethic" and characterized by a combination of "heavy physical labor and static wealth" [7]—although both brothers are ranch owners, only Phil, with his superb horsemanship and physical resilience, becomes the leader and heroic figure admired and followed by the cowhands. Phil learned horsemanship and every necessary survival skill from the deceased cowboy Bronco Henry, whom he reveres as a masculine ideal. He idolizes the ranching profession and ruthlessly displays cruelty toward anyone who fails to conform to the harsh frontier masculinity derived from Bronco Henry's teachings. For example, he humiliates George by calling him "fatso" for avoiding ranch work, assaults a drunken and despondent doctor, drives away Native Americans who come to purchase hides, refuses to wash himself to entertain the governor and his wife, and mocks the frail young Peter (played by Kodi Smit-McPhee), who decorates tables with paper flowers, as a "sissy". Phil despises femininity and refinement above all else. Consequently, when a woman enters the stable family structure he knows so well—disrupting his routines, habits, and all-male territory—his anger, hostility, and rejection reach their peak. He regards George's new wife, the widowed innkeeper Rose (played by Kirsten Dunst), as a "scheming opportunist" coveting the brothers' wealth and an "intruder" seeking social advancement for her son Peter. When Rose practices the piano in preparation for entertaining the governor and his wife, Phil deliberately flaunts his superior banjo-playing skills in order to humiliate and ridicule her mediocrity. Unable to endure Phil's relentless psychological abuse and intimidation, Rose collapses emotionally and descends into alcoholism. This pivotal mid-film sequence, rich in symbolic implications of gendered power struggle, unfolds entirely without dialogue and takes place within the concealed domestic interior rather than the open outdoor

spaces where classic Westerns traditionally stage confrontations between good and evil. By foregrounding domestic interiors and gender relations—elements usually marginalized within mainstream historical narratives—and indeed making them central, Campion's adaptation conveys a historical understanding of the mythologized masculinity of the Western genre through the contrast between old and new contexts and between heroic and tyrannical masculine images. The hero's intelligence, courage, and competence remain visible, yet his unquestioned righteousness is dismantled; viewed through the temporally displaced lens of the contemporary era, he comes to embody what is now labeled "toxic masculinity".

In the contemporary West, the concept of "toxic masculinity" has become a dominant framework through which both the public and academia interpret gender dimensions of social problems. It refers to a series of gendered attitudes that appear more frequently in male behavior, including "extreme competitiveness and greed; disregard for or lack of consideration for the experiences and feelings of others; a strong desire to dominate and control; an inability to provide support and care; fear of dependence; constant readiness to resort to violence; and the stigmatization and suppression of women, homosexuals, and men displaying feminine characteristics" [8]. In the film, Phil's actions correspond closely to these characteristics. However, "toxic masculinity" itself is based on a "misreading" [9] of Raewyn Connell's research in health studies and criminology concerning "toxic" performances of masculinity. As a term that flattens all hierarchical theories of masculinity into a simplistic label, it cannot adequately explain either the contextual specificity of Phil's behavior or its deeper historical and cultural causes. In fact, "toxic masculinity" is not a newly coined contemporary term, but rather one with a complex history and constantly shifting fields of application. It originated in the men's movement in Europe and North America during the late twentieth century. Advocates sought what they called a "deep masculine essence" to replace "hypermasculine" or "warrior-like" [10] masculinity, while simultaneously promoting a return to fixed gender roles and expressing a strongly anti-feminist political consciousness. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the term was primarily employed in therapeutic and criminological contexts as a label applied to marginalized men affected by violence, broken family life, or unemployment. By contrast, beginning around 2016, Western media and social platforms increasingly used the term in discussions surrounding Donald Trump and the #MeToo movement to describe forms of "socially regressive masculinity advocating domination and control" [11] associated with white elite male power holders. The term also appeared in public discourse and scholarly analysis concerning mass shootings, male trauma caused by masculinity, and sexual violence against women, functioning as shorthand for misogyny, homophobia, aggression, dominance, and violent tendencies among men. Eventually, the phrase expanded without limit into an all-encompassing label applied to virtually any terrible act committed by men.

Although statistically many perpetrators of social violence are male, once these social problems are fundamentally gendered and systemic issues are reduced to decontextualized interpersonal behaviors, debates over whether masculinity as embodied by individual men is "good" or "bad", "toxic" or "healthy", lose much of their significance. The purpose of Campion's adaptation is not simply to impose a twenty-first-century term onto male behavior depicted in a twentieth-century novel, nor merely to reverse the moral binary of traditional Westerns. Unlike Western media discourse and many scholars who pathologize certain behaviors and simplistically label them "toxic masculinity" in a decontextualized and ahistorical manner, Campion appropriates the classical discourse and value structures of the Western genre while simultaneously subjecting its celebrated masculine ideals to a destructive reinterpretation within the context of contemporary Western culture. In doing so, she demonstrates what Estella Tincknell describes as a "reflexive approach to the adaptation process" [12]. Through a historical lens, she scrutinizes the singular masculinity advocated by Phil —or what Connell terms "hegemonic masculinity"—and the "toxic" effects it produces, suggesting that the real problem may lie not in masculinity itself, but in particular gendered constructions. On the one hand, this

aligns with Campion's longstanding cinematic commitment to resisting and transcending fixed gender models and norms; on the other hand, it runs directly counter to the broader tendency within contemporary Western public discourse to genderize a wide range of social problems through the concept of "toxic masculinity".

3. The romanticization of "toxicity": gendered ideological construction

In *The Power of the Dog*, the ideological construction of the Western genre is primarily revealed through the characters' awareness of and conversations about the heroic images and values mythologized by Western films. In particular, Phil repeatedly dwells on the past, obsessively recounting the legends of Bronco Henry, whom he regards as the greatest cowboy, as well as his mentor, closest companion, and protector. Phil reveres the past while disparaging the present. When discussing the twenty-five years he and George have spent managing the family ranch, he finds the experience uninspiring and repeatedly invokes Bronco Henry's adventures as a model for present action. If this merely suggested Phil's admiration for a particular survival ethic of the Western world, his later remarks to Peter about what constitutes "a real man" explicitly connect frontier survival with gender difference: "There are some letters carved on the cliffs behind the ranch, dated 1805. They must have been left by members of the Lewis and Clark expedition. They were real men of their time". On the one hand, this statement reflects the social division of labor based on power (and violence) and wealth that historically characterized the American West. Within this system, women were often excluded from direct participation in wealth distribution and consequently occupied a subordinate social position. Under conditions of extreme imbalance, men inevitably became the active subjects, while women were reduced to dependents or even deprived of subjectivity altogether, transformed into "property" awaiting allocation. Thus, "real men" became, to a certain extent, synonymous with "real people", while traditional femininity was excluded from the attributes associated with successful survival and conquest. Women existed merely as moral symbols responsible for sustaining the continuation of this world through the maintenance of domestic order. On the other hand, Phil believes that the survivalists of the past defined all the qualities of a "real man". This continually remembered and idealized "past" is precisely the history of westward expansion that Western films have romanticized for more than a century.

The story of *The Power of the Dog* takes place in 1925, and strictly speaking, it is not a conventional Western in terms of historical setting. In American Western films, "the West" is less a geographical concept than a historical one, referring specifically to the westward expansion movement that began in the late eighteenth century and continued until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. During this period, the geographical "West" continually shifted as eastern settlers migrated westward and expanded the frontier until it reached the Pacific coast. Consequently, early American Western films were essentially historical films. They depicted white settlers violently displacing Indigenous peoples and establishing settlements in newly occupied territories, thereby narrating the founding process of the United States and shaping a national character. André Bazin described the Western as the "quintessential American film" and a "myth" of American history and culture. By this he meant that, although the genre is "far removed from historical reality" [13], it nevertheless became a crucial vehicle for articulating the values through which America understood itself as a nation and a people. In particular, the Western created the first major American cultural hero of the twentieth century: the lone cowboy—brave, rugged, and morally righteous—who establishes and protects law and order in the wilderness. This figure became one of the primary symbols of the American spirit. Under the ideological banner of spreading civilization and eliminating savagery, Westerns constructed a binary opposition between good and evil while glorifying the building of an empire upon the ruins of genocide and stolen land. Violence was thus represented as both natural and necessary for survival. The right of the strongest to establish rules

became the fundamental logic legitimizing the rule of plunderers. Within this cultural narrative, only physically stronger men were imagined as capable of conquering the untamed frontier. As a result, the cowboy who resolves conflict through violence and confrontation emerged as the sole heroic figure—regional survival itself became gendered. Since the release of *The Great Train Robbery* by Edwin S. Porter in 1903, Western films have legitimized, idealized, and mythologized this history of hardship and violent conquest precisely through the construction of cowboy heroes representing civilization, justice, and strength and through the "hero worship" surrounding them. In doing so, the genre defined the concept of the "real man", established hegemonic norms of masculinity, and disseminated beyond the domestic readership of Western literature the values of "survival and domination of the strong" supported by those norms, thereby reinforcing the principle that might makes right.

It is therefore evident that the "hegemonic masculinity" defining the standards of the "real man" within a specific historical context first manifests itself through concrete behavioral practices. In the "post-frontier" era depicted in *The Power of the Dog*, Phil closely associates the "real man" with the images, behaviors, and spirit displayed by pioneers and explorers during westward expansion—that is, with the "strong" who could survive harsh landscapes and compete for wealth. These qualities represent the dominant survival ethos of the Western world: extreme competitiveness, emotional suppression except for anger, maintenance of a hardened exterior, and the demonstration of strength. Phil himself embodies these ideals. He pursues physical toughness, reading *Physical Culture* magazine, which promotes slogans such as "Weakness is a crime—don't be a criminal". He is obsessed with adventure and emulates the survivalism of earlier frontiersmen. He rejects all refined lifestyles, bathing only once a month during the summer in a hidden pond rather than a bathtub, and adopting as a personal credo: "I stink, and I like it". Moreover, as Raewyn Connell points out, "the public face of hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily that of powerful men themselves, but rather the mechanisms sustaining their power and the motivations that lead many men to support it" [14]. As a structural concept, hegemonic masculinity concerns the institutionalization of male power and the processes through which it acquires dominance. In contemporary Euro-American culture, this dominance rests upon two foundations. First, as patriarchal theory suggests, it depends upon the domination of women. According to Connell, masculinity should not be understood as a fixed or essential gender identity, but rather as a product of gender relations, because "gender is always relational" [15]. This explains Phil's intense hatred and denigration of femininity. Campion highlights this point through an original scene added to the film adaptation, in which Rose comments on "male nature" after suffering Phil's psychological abuse. When Peter asks whether Phil's "cruelty" is responsible for her emotional and physical suffering, Rose replies: "He's just a man. Men are like that". The dominant conception of masculinity in this historical period naturalizes, genders, and thereby legitimizes the cruelty and violence Phil displays while plundering and controlling the dependent Rose as the behavior of a powerful male survivor. Second, hegemonic masculinity depends upon hierarchies among men themselves—that is, the dominance of hegemonic masculinity over subordinate masculinities, and the stigmatization and marginalization of masculinities that fail to conform to hegemonic norms. In *The Power of the Dog*, this is most clearly reflected in the contrast between the aggressive and domineering Phil and the quiet, sensitive George, who occupy radically different positions within the ranch hierarchy, as well as in the transformation of Phil's attitude toward Peter. Upon first meeting him, Phil humiliates Peter, mocking him as a "lady" because he is capable of crafting delicate paper flowers. Later, he criticizes Peter for wearing canvas shoes instead of riding boots, accusing him of being a weak and effeminate "sissy" spoiled by his mother. Yet when Phil observes Peter standing among the cowhands with feminine mannerisms while calmly enduring their ridicule and harassment, he recognizes a hidden toughness and resilience beneath the boy's seemingly fragile exterior.

Motivated by a mixture of personal desire and self-interest, Phil begins to take Peter under his wing and resolves to transform him into a "real man".

Phil maintains the masculine values he identifies with through the domination and control of others, while this very behavior—rooted in violence and the appropriation of others' means of survival—is itself gendered and naturalized. This reflects the destructive potential, or what contemporary discourse terms the "toxicity", of the gender ideology embedded in Western films. As scholars have argued, the emergence of the term "toxic masculinity" itself results from the insistence on a singular model of masculinity—that is, the maintenance of hegemonic masculine norms—and reflects the "worst" aspects of the dominant Western ideology used to "construct masculinity and manhood" [11]. Fundamentally, this ideology is grounded in the romanticization and mythologization of historically dominant male images and survival practices. In Phil's case, this manifests as the idealization of the past embodied by Bronco Henry. Hegemonic masculinity is undoubtedly conceptual and stereotypical, because the actual practices of most men differ greatly from its normative ideal. Yet even so, the gendered ideological construction itself compels men to fear being perceived as insufficiently masculine should they deviate from hegemonic standards of the "real man". In the intensely masculinized world of the American West, once the repressed desires underlying Phil's obsessive idealization of the past are gradually revealed, audiences come to understand that it is precisely his fear of being regarded as insufficiently masculine that drives his excessive pursuit of masculinity. Phil continuously performs gendered bodily and emotional violence in order to conceal a sexual orientation that does not conform to hegemonic norms. The self-repression, denial, and self-loathing underlying this concealment constitute a crucial dimension of his psychological complexity. Thus, the characters in *The Power of the Dog* are neither heroes nor villains. There are no purely good or evil figures here—only the complexity of the human heart and the struggle for survival amid conflict and opposition within a particular historical context. In this way, Campion dismantles the binary worldview and corresponding moral judgments of good and evil that dominate the narrative structure of classic Westerns, exposing instead the more authentic desires and realities of survival concealed beneath the romanticized veil of history.

4. Rejecting moral didacticism: nothing but the body and survival

When discussing her motivation for adapting *The Power of the Dog*, Jane Campion explained that she was immediately captivated by the novel's opening: "A book can sit on my shelf for two years if I don't get around to reading it. But once I started, it began with Phil castrating a bull, and I thought, 'Oh, there's something else going on here'" [16]. In the original novel, Thomas Savage describes Phil's skilled castration of a bull as follows:

Phil always did the castrating; first he slit the bottom of the scrotum and tossed it aside; then he squeezed out one testicle and then the other, cut the iridescent membrane around them and tore it away before throwing them into the fire of the heated branding iron. Surprisingly, there was very little blood throughout the entire process [7].

On the surface, this passage establishes the imagery of violence that permeates the novel. Thereafter, every scene involving Phil centers upon violence, whether openly displayed or forcibly repressed. Campion's cinematic adaptation of this sequence likewise seeks to construct Phil's image as a man capable of violence without hesitation or bloodshed. Against the tightly accelerating rhythm of the soundtrack, Phil strides through clouds of dust while cattle scatter before his intimidating presence. A ranch hand assisting in restraining the bull exclaims in surprise: "Why aren't you wearing gloves?" As Phil rapidly and precisely performs the castration, he calmly replies: "I don't need them". This additional line of dialogue serves two purposes. On the

one hand, it emphasizes Phil's fearlessness and toughness as a survivor of the Western frontier; on the other hand, it foreshadows his eventual death from an infected wound on his hand, caused precisely by such reckless bravado. Within the novel itself, however, the "something else" to which Campion refers does not fully emerge until the final revelation of Phil's repressed desires through his inner confession. Only then does the opening metaphor disclose its deeper thematic significance: the castration of desire itself. When *The Power of the Dog* was published in the 1960s, most discussions surrounding it centered on moral judgments framed by the opposition between good and evil, a conventional structure frequently employed by traditional Western novels and films. In the twenty-first century, however, Phil's obsessive longing for and remembrance of Bronco Henry, together with the nature of the desire revealed through his attraction to Peter's idealized masculinity and talents, can be discussed far more directly. Taking advantage of the particular capacities of cinema, Campion pushes beyond the limitations of language itself. By capturing bodily movement and sensory detail, she creates what has been termed a "haptic or embodied cinematic encounter" [17], bringing Phil's repressed desiring body—suppressed within dominant historical narratives—directly before the audience. Yet for a man living in the isolated valleys of the American West during the 1920s, there can be no open acknowledgment of forbidden desire. There exists only anger and violence privileged by gender. Phil's fear of exposing his true self and being cast out by society compels him into an almost pathological obsession with constructing a non-feminine exterior and using violence as a means of concealing his desires and proving his masculinity.

It is therefore evident that Phil's unspeakable desire is central to the complexity of his inner life and personality. Whenever he desires Peter or Bronco Henry, he is forced to confront the reality of what he perceives as his own "deviant" desire. His fundamental obstacle lies in his self-awareness, and within the cowboy world in which he lives, such self-awareness is terrifying. As the novel itself states, he would become "a low creature abandoned by society" [7], stripped of the very possibility of survival. Phil once used this phrase to describe Peter's predicament: mocked and despised because his feminine mannerisms embodied what the Western world regarded as the lowest form of masculinity. Yet Phil also marvels at Peter's ability to disregard the judgment of others, openly display himself, and fully accept who he is, thereby revealing a different kind of masculine toughness and resilience. Phil, by contrast, can only force himself into conformity with hegemonic ideals of masculinity through the repression—or "castration"—of desire. He cannot endure the danger and rejection that would accompany exposing a self the world refuses to tolerate. This fear is subtly suggested by his habit of avoiding the ranch hands with whom he works every day and bathing alone in a secluded pond. In the single moment when Phil confronts his desires in their most genuine and shameful form, Campion transforms the body into a conduit of consciousness, making silence the point of entry into interiority and allowing audiences to experience a series of intense sensory and emotional states that remain historically unspeakable. When Phil smears mud across his body or wipes himself with the handkerchief embroidered with Bronco Henry's initials, the trembling handheld camera moves increasingly close to his face and body. These shots do not merely depict what he is doing; rather, they suspend narrative progression itself, allowing viewers to experience Phil's actual thoughts and feelings. Through what theorists describe as "haptic visuality", Campion captures the corporeality of the body and penetrates directly into Phil's unspoken inner world through narrative gaps and silences. Consequently, when this vulnerable and metaphorically "naked" moment is accidentally witnessed by Peter, it immediately provokes Phil's overwhelming rage.

To some extent, Phil's internal experience of "different masculinities" shapes his outwardly "toxic" behavior. Adhering to the hegemonic masculine norms of the Western world, Phil reconstructs himself as a hypermasculine, homophobic, and misogynistic ranch owner—a predator who suppresses or expels anyone who fails to conform to his idealized masculine order. On the one hand, this stems from his repression of his own desires and his idealization of the masculinity represented by Bronco Henry; on the other hand, it reflects

his struggle for survival within a gendered Western world defined by rugged masculinity. By embodying the figure of the violent predator, he attempts to eliminate the possibility of becoming prey himself. From this perspective, Phil's own statement—"If the world was going to hate him, he'd hate it first"—becomes deeply revealing. His cruelty and malice can be understood as preemptive acts designed to confuse and defeat potential critics. Violence and hostility thus become his mode of survival within a gendered world governed by the law of the strong. This constitutes the first layer of meaning behind the title *The Power of the Dog*. Phil perceives in the interplay of light and shadow across the rocky mountainside the astonishing image of a hunting dog chasing its prey, and he uses this vision as a test: those incapable of seeing it lack intelligence and insight. Phil identifies himself with the violent and predatory dog, firmly believing in the inevitable conclusion of the hunt: "The dog will always catch its prey".

Yet within the gendered relational framework emphasized by Campion, Phil's survival depends upon plundering and controlling the survival of others. He drives the emotionally collapsing Rose into alcoholism and manipulates Peter in order to isolate Rose even further. Phil believes himself to be the only perceptive hunter, but he is not the only one possessing "*The Power of the Dog*". Once Peter perceives Phil's true desires and conceals his own desire for revenge, the previously stable power relationship between predator and prey gradually disintegrates. As critics have noted, "in Campion's world, desire often places women in danger—whether through their own desires or those of others" [18], and this remains true in *The Power of the Dog*. The uncontrollable emergence of genuine desire, like the exposure of an open wound, places Phil himself in danger. Instinctively, Phil protects himself from intimacy of any kind. Yet Peter seizes upon the moment in which Phil reveals both desire and vulnerability. Exploiting Phil's trust and kindness, Peter deliberately causes him to contract anthrax through infected rawhide, ultimately leading to his destruction. In the original novel, Peter's hidden revenge is only revealed through the final plot reversal. Campion, however, signals from the very beginning of the film that this is a story about conflict and survival, and about a son's revenge undertaken to save his mother. The opening voice-over comes from Peter himself: "After my father died, I wanted nothing more than my mother to be happy. If I didn't help her through this—if I didn't save her—what kind of man would I be?" This introduces the second layer of meaning behind the title, which derives from *Psalm* 22:20: "Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from *The Power of the Dog*". In the *Bible*, dogs symbolize evil forces. Peter therefore regards Phil as an evil power threatening the survival of the mother he loves and obstructing her pursuit of happiness.

From Phil's emotional transformation toward Peter to his ultimate death, Campion initially establishes a series of archetypal oppositions between good and evil, thereby developing the narrative in a manner that appears politically and structurally predictable. She then abruptly pushes the story into an unstable realm far beyond the audience's moral expectations. As a result, the classic Western emphasis on the binary opposition between good and evil becomes insufficient to explain the characters' psychological complexity and the violent conflicts shaping their survival. In fact, this approach is consistent with Campion's longstanding rejection of moral didacticism achieved through portraying characters merely as victims. Neither Rose and Peter in their suffering and oppression nor Phil in his tragic destruction is represented as a pure victim. This overturns the conventional narrative trajectory of classic Westerns, which rely upon absolute moral oppositions and mutually exclusive distinctions between good and evil, while also disrupting the latent moralization that accompanies victim-centered storytelling. Consequently, audiences are not encouraged simply to identify or empathize with a single character; rather, they are invited to perceive and experience the effects of trauma itself, whose essential nature and precise causes often remain concealed by the film.

5. Conclusion

The Power of the Dog marked Jane Campion's triumphant return to the big screen after a twelve-year absence. Like all of her previous works, the film that ultimately earned her the Academy Award for Best Director is bold, unconventional, unpredictable, and saturated with psychological complexity. Whereas Campion's earlier films focused primarily on controversial explorations of female psychology and desire, her adaptation of *The Power of the Dog* signals a shift in perspective toward destructive masculinity and repressed male desire. Yet in its recontextualization of the masculinity mythologized by the Western genre, the film continues Campion's longstanding rejection of fixed gender models—a position already evident in her earlier female-centered works—which she consistently exposes as products of socio-cultural discourse and ideological construction. Consequently, when engaging with the contemporary Western public discourse surrounding "toxic masculinity", Campion does not seek merely to condemn it or to provide direct moral instruction. Instead, she historicizes the phenomenon, encouraging audiences to understand it within broader historical and cultural structures. Beyond the apparent narrative trajectory of conflict between good and evil, she reveals the entanglement of violent rage with profound pain and despair. *The Power of the Dog* thus performs a precise and thorough dissection of the gender mythology embedded in the classic Western. Unlike the hazy romanticism associated with *Brokeback Mountain*, Campion's film is harsh, unsettling, tragic, and cruel. It tells the story of desires incapable of expressing themselves, submerged beneath characters whose lives are relentlessly shaped and constricted by violence. In this sense, rather than attempting simply to correct or overturn the classic Western, *The Power of the Dog* may be understood as a profoundly irreverent response to the revisionist Western tradition represented by *Brokeback Mountain*. Campion's adaptation practice, as described by Adrienne Rich through the concepts of "re-vision" and the "act of looking back" [19], critically interrogates, challenges, and ultimately transforms the legacy of Western cultural heritage.

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