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The Power of Playing with Genre: The Western Gothic Melodrama in Jane Campion's

The Power of the Dog (Netflix, 2021)

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When discussing *The Power of the Dog*, critics tried to pinpoint which genre the film is set in. Many associated it with the western and films such as *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956),¹ *Giant* (George Stevens, 1956)² or the cinematography of Anthony Mann.³ Some evoked gothic⁴ and the horror genre, citing Hitchcock⁵ and *Psycho* (1960) in particular.⁶ A few noted the connections between *The Power of the Dog* and earlier historical melodramas by Campion, particularly *The Piano* (1992).⁷ But several critics also abandoned any attempt to situate the film within pre-existing genre categories, focusing instead on the singular qualities of the film itself.⁸ This complex crossing of genres was also reflected in the promotion of the film and in interviews of the filmmakers. Campion cited the western as a framework and nodded to connections with her own filmography.⁹ Cinematographer Ari Wegner mentioned the gothic and horror genres as inspirations for the visuals of certain scenes¹⁰ and composer Jonny Greenwood concurred that the score intended to draw from western tropes but displaced them onto uncanny territory.¹¹

One of the reasons for this generic undecidability is the original material itself, Thomas Savage's 1967 novel *The Power of the Dog*, reissued in 2001 with a preface by Annie Proulx. The novel was the dominant framework for Campion's film rather than any particular genre,¹² and it already subverted clichéd western tropes of hard-boiled white masculinity and epic narrative sweep to oscillate between the psychological thriller and the historical melodrama.

Rather than catering to any particular or several distinct genre frameworks, *The Power of the Dog* thrives in genre hybridity, revealing not so much what separates more or less

established genres and narrative modes in popular fiction but rather what those genres and modes have in common, and what they can reveal of one another when combined. In her approach to genre, a question the director had to address when dealing with such a recognizable framework as the western, Campion acknowledges her debt to film and cultural history by establishing conversations with earlier works set in specific genres – such as *The Searchers* or *Psycho* – but she also nurtures a highly reflexive point of view on genre conventions that sets the film apart from such history.

Scholars working on genre in film studies have now largely rejected the concept of purity and the normative approach to genre categories that dominated earlier analyses.¹³ In film genre theory, hybridity comes to be recognized as the norm rather than an exceptional feature of genre expression.¹⁴ The western genre itself is a case in point as its singular and recognizable aesthetic and narrative features have turned it into a staple object of film genre studies, yet its history betrays constant movement across genre boundaries. The western has arguably borrowed from, and influenced, any other genre of Hollywood production, including the various genres and modes involved in *The Power of the Dog* – the melodrama, the gothic, horror, and the psychological thriller. The interest of *The Power of the Dog* when it comes to genre lies in its indiscriminate use of various genre conventions within a western framework to serve its singular story. Genre becomes a means of expression rather than a structural constraint.

Genre hybridity, intertextuality, and reflexivity also serve a political purpose in the film, which is to examine and redefine the gendered politics of Western cultural history. Here, the director advances on familiar terrain as many if not all of her films address that very question.¹⁵ Yet, if her previously female-led films also explored the vulnerability and violence of masculinity, *The Power of the Dog* is the first of Campion's films to focus on a male protagonist, albeit in arguably the most iconically masculine framework of Western cinema –

the late-nineteenth-century US-American West. Protagonist Phil Burbank (Benedict Cumberbatch) resonates with Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) from *The Searchers* for his tortured psyche and repressed desires, but his admiration for, and performance of, the iconic cowboy also align him with PJ Waters (Harvey Keitel) in Campion's *Holy Smoke* (1998), establishing Phil within Campion's earlier explorations of masculinities.

This chapter purports to analyze the effects of genre hybridity in Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog*. The chapter starts out by establishing Campion's reflexive treatment of genre conventions, with a focus on the use of western landscapes. *The Power of the Dog* introduces a visual distance with the epic landscapes of the US-American West that steers the film away from the historiographic and mythic functions of the genre. Instead, the film uses landscapes in relation to characters' and the narration's emotional charge in a way that reveals the familiarity of the western genre with melodrama. The chapter then expands on the idea of genre crossings as revealing the hybrid nature of genre categories by exploring other aesthetic and narrative aspects of the film explicitly situated at the crossroads of different genres. This section focuses primarily on the horror sensibilities mobilized in the filming of interior spaces, and how gothic tropes and intertextuality are used to bridge these sensibilities to the western within the larger framework of costume drama. Finally, the chapter analyzes genre hybridity as a tool for an exploration of gender politics that articulates masculinity as performance to a history of representations. This section discusses more specifically how the film's bridging of the western with melodrama and horror serves to compare and contrast different forms of masculine performances, and how genre hybridity in the film creatively rewrites the gendered formulas of filmic genres.

The melodramatic western

The western and the melodrama share an old history dating back to the earliest days of cinema, when “western” was simply a qualifier and western melodramas were a popular formula.¹⁶ This history became a footnote of western film studies after the western established itself as a subgenre of the historical costume drama in the 1920s with big-budget productions such as *The Covered Wagon* (James Cruze, 1923) and *The Iron Horse* (John Ford, 1924). Scholars of the genre have then expounded on the functions of the western as national mythmaker¹⁷ and historiographic vehicle,¹⁸ or they focused on the western’s primary concern with the performance of masculine feats and with action over introspection,¹⁹ but they tended to overlook the genre’s connection with the more feminine mode of the melodrama.²⁰ *The Power of the Dog* retrieves that connection.

Reflexive approach to western landscapes

The Power of the Dog consciously steers away from the sort of collective, historical, and mythical meanings often identified with the western genre and it does so especially through its treatment of landscapes by adopting a reflexive approach to the expansive vistas of the western wilderness. First, the recreation of 1925 Montana through location shooting in New Zealand establishes the historical US-American West as a cultural construct. Second, whenever the film uses exterior shots, they either appear in frame-within-the-frame compositions that emphasize their artificiality or their composition is meant to undermine linear perspective. The opening shots of cattle and cowboys keep the natural backdrop out of view so that the first visual contacts viewers have with the landscape are shots of exteriors seen through windows. These restricted views of the outdoors become a common visual feature in interior scenes and a recurring visual motif throughout the film, either in the form of frame-within-the-frame shots through doorways or interior shots or scenes including open

windows and doors. The second shot involving natural exteriors is a pan shot including a window within the brothers' bedroom. This view through the window as well as others in the film were achieved during studio shoot by hanging a matte on the set printed with photographs of the location.²¹ The blurry aspect of the static matte in this scene as well as its composition – an arrangement of three trees of various heights balanced by a soft hill – emphasize its pictorial, rather than illusionist, quality. The repetition of these compositions takes on a reflexive function as they visibilize the creative operation of framing and underline the western landscape's status as an image and a cultural construct.

When landscapes aren't reframed through windows or doorways, their composition often challenges linear perspective. Linear perspective towards the horizon, especially associated with empty vistas of desert landscapes, has been identified as one of the visual features of the western naturalizing Manifest Destiny.²² By challenging linear perspective in landscape shots, Campion refuses to partake in the imperialistic tendency of the genre. For instance, the first long shots of exteriors in the film during the opening cattle drive to Beech either emphasize flatness through lateral movements and separate fore- and backgrounds or embed the herd in the setting, leaving the vanishing point offscreen. Resistance to linear perspective is in part due to the consistent use of computer-generated images to modify the composition of backgrounds in exterior shots according to narrative needs.²³ For instance, natural backgrounds are flattened out in the long shots involving the Red Mill inn in Beech to emphasize Rose and Peter's isolation, while they are raised up in long shots of the mountain range surrounding the Burbank ranch to express confinement. The result is a sense of disconnection between profilmic foreground and computer-generated background in shot compositions which often seem biplanary. Biplanarity is not simply the consequence of a technical choice but is exploited aesthetically as well, since the distinction of fore- and background is often highlighted by the use of blur or lighting. Even in the most expansive

exterior shots – a bird’s-eye view of a car on a country road or the 8-second arc shot around Rose and George against a mountain vista – the landscape is clearly layered in two disconnected planes. Either reframed or flattened, shots involving western landscapes consciously undermine the perspectival grandeur of myth-building and its imperialistic foundations.

Western landscapes and the melodramatic mode

Rather than serving an ideological purpose, the landscape in *The Power of the Dog* serves narrative functions that recover the western’s melodramatic potential. One of the defining features of melodrama, which Christine Gledhill characterizes as a mode rather than a genre, is its use of setting to “externalise the inner states of characters”.²⁴ *The Power of the Dog* expands on the psychological realism of melodrama by using landscapes as a narrative amplifier as well as a reflection of character psychology. For instance, the quick passing of cloud shadows on a mountain seen through a window after Phil’s letter writing is all at once another reflexive frame-within-the-frame shot of a western landscape, the visual amplifier of a narrative complication, and an expression of Phil’s mind clouding over at the prospect of his brother’s marriage. The two long shots of the Burbank ranch filmed against a backdrop of surrounding mountains also gain meaning from character psychology. The first instance – a night shot with the sound of Phil absently playing the banjo and a tiny light at a window competing against towering dark mountains – expresses Phil’s loneliness and sense of abandonment as he waits alone in his room for his brother’s uncertain return. The second instance is set at sunset, the ranch bathing in a golden hue, yet with mountains still dark and a soundtrack of atonal strings and brass. The shot reflexively signals the end of the film (which

nearly opens on a sunrise) and expresses the other characters' relief at Phil's death and the foreboding emergence of a new "dog" to replace him.

Some landscape shots devoid of human presence strictly serve to amplify narrative developments. The 10-second still shot of ragged hills brushed by intermittent sunlight and the distant sound of thunder which precedes Rose's arrival to the Burbank ranch announces the storm to come between Rose and Phil. The 25-second pan caressing the curves and crevices of bare hillsides to the sound of dissonant strings and brass amplifies the sensual tension between Phil and Peter and foreshadows the invisible murder about to take place in the following scene. Other landscape shots strictly mirror character psychology. The 8-second arc shot of Rose and George quoted above offers one of the most expansive landscape vistas of the film right after both characters shared a loving moment that brought George to tears. Such uses of landscapes as invested with an empathetic emotional charge – in the sense that the setting reflects characters' emotions and amplifies them for viewers – are common in Campion's filmography. One can think of the ocean amplifying Ada's joy when she reconnects with her instrument in *The Piano* or the blooming apple trees framing the budding romance of John Keats and Fanny Brawne in *Bright Star*. The epitome of the melodramatic use of landscapes in *The Power of the Dog* is the dog-shaped shadow on the mountainside visible only to Bronco Henry, Phil, Peter, and the audience, which expresses the shared secret and tightens the emotional connection between Phil and his two male love interests. The western landscape is thus reframed as a site of emotional engagement with the characters rather than as an external force that needs to be conquered. As most characters involved here are white men, the focus is displaced from the extent of male actions needed to tame the land to the depths of male emotions magnified in the environment.

Recovering western melodrama

Rather than opposing the western genre and the melodramatic mode, *The Power of the Dog* establishes their essential kinship through the characterization of its protagonist Phil Burbank as a cowboy and star-crossed lover victim of an oppressive society. To Phil, the western landscape offers a haven from social prejudice and a place to freely express his most intimate desires. This is where the western essentially meets melodrama, when the West becomes an opportunity for unrestrained self-expression and when melodramatic “excesses”²⁵ can unfold without moral judgment. *The Power of the Dog* is here aligned with a more liberal version of frontier mythology, visible in populist and revisionist westerns from *Jesse James* (Henry King, 1939) to *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2004), which represents the wilderness as a site of emancipation and self-realization, a utopian shelter from civilization.²⁶ When other male characters are present with Phil, he performs the domination of nature and men in a more overtly imperialistic western fashion, for instance when he skins a cow or castrates a bull. But when he is alone in nature, the wilderness becomes a sacred space that allows him to nurture his love for Bronco Henry, as indicated by the handheld camerawork and lush green color palette – unique in the entire film – of the outdoor masturbation scene. The dog-shaped shadow on the mountain visible only to the male lovers ultimately connects both the melodramatic and imperialistic trends within the western: it confirms the land’s role as ally and protector and evokes the threatening potential of the West and westerner’s violent masculinity.

While Phil’s vulnerability gradually reveals itself beneath his macho performance through the infusion of the western with melodrama, the absence of the melodramatic mode in Peter’s relation to the land indicates his domineering drive beneath an appearance of vulnerability. Peter establishes a connection with the western landscape based on forms of utilitarianism and exploitation typical of an imperialistic outlook. He harvests the wilderness

for rabbits to dissect and diseased rawhide to kill Phil. A gifted hunter and tracker, he is able to expose Phil's intimate spaces and penetrate his secrets. In the only outdoor horse-riding scene other than the opening cattle drive, an inexperienced Peter is seen negotiating rough terrain with his horse in a manner that positions the wilderness as a physical obstacle to master. The aesthetics of the scene stress western conventions, multiplying shots of the lone rider in the landscape, either embedded in it or emerging out of it, with arcing camera movements suggesting mastery, close-ups of his face studying the terrain and reverse close-ups of the horse's hoofs in precarious progression. Peter has shed his tennis shoes for legitimate cowboy boots emphasized in close-up and the French horn soundtrack is meant, according to composer Jonny Greenwood, to evoke the "pent-up masculinity" as well as "enormous" scale of this conventional western sequence.²⁷ The absence of the melodramatic mode and emphasis on exploitation and competition in Peter's relation to the land convoke the more overtly imperialistic version of frontier mythology²⁸ and establish Peter as another "dog" to be reckoned with even before this side of him is revealed narratively.

Aesthetically reframed and flattened or narratively repurposed through psychological realism, exteriors in *The Power of the Dog* consciously reject the ideological charge of the western to reveal the genre's familiarity with melodrama. The melodramatic mode steers the film away from male action towards an exploration of the characters' emotions and psychology amplified in the setting. The presence or absence of this mode also serves to contrast the male protagonists and reorient viewers' emotional engagement: as growing emotional intimacy turns the domineering cowboy into a vulnerable human being, the characterization of the bullied boy as a westerner indicates his potential for violent retribution.

Gothic as a bridge from the western to horror

The treatment of exteriors in *The Power of the Dog* provides a telling example of the film's tendency to operate – and thrive – at the crossroads of genres. The framework of the western is displaced from its mythic and historiographic functions to reconnect the genre with its intrinsic melodramatic potential. The same goes for the film's treatment of interior spaces, which bridges the western genre to horror through their common history in the gothic mode.²⁹

The western gothic

The first shot of the Burbanks' house interior establishes an aesthetic approach to the building that introduces a gothic style in the western setting: a still, low-angle shot frames the entrance hallway from the bottom left corner to the top of the staircase in the top right corner. The shot composition favors slanted lines and crooked angles; the set design features dark woods (floor boards, staircase, wall paneling, furniture) and hunting props (mounted heads); the hard lighting coming in from the second-floor windows cuts in the frame and enhances dark areas. The dark set design, slanted lines and angles, and chiaroscuro lighting characterize virtually every scene shot within the common spaces of the house, as well as some of the scenes in Phil's bedroom. Such gothic style, like melodrama, is an intrinsic aspect of the western genre. The noir western cycle of the 1940s is a case in point, with films such as *The Ox-Bow Incident* (William Wellman, 1943), *Pursued* (Raoul Walsh, 1947), or *Colorado Territory* (Raoul Walsh, 1949). The chiaroscuro lighting, slanted lines and Dutch angles can be traced back to the treatment of the Spanish Bit ranch in *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946) while the mansion-like dimensions of the ranch, its dark set design, the frame-within-the-frame views of exteriors, and the sense of isolation in a wide natural expanse recall the visual construction of the Reata ranch in *Giant* (George Stevens, 1956). The connections with *Giant* are narrative

as well as visual, as Stevens's classic also focuses on a newlywed woman trapped on a wealthy western ranch where she is bullied by her husband's jealous sibling (a woman with male-coded attributes). Here, themes of female entrapment and the menacing presence of a male monster – the evil sibling and, in the case of *The Power of the Dog*, the dog-shaped shadow on the mountain – bind the two films together in the gothic style.³⁰

The Power of the Dog also resonates with previous gothic westerns through the theme of spectrality. Walsh's *Pursued* used superimposition – the typical special effect of cinematic ghost stories – to visually imprint the haunting presence in Jeb's mind of his childhood tormentor. *The Power of the Dog* does not resort to ghostly special effects but still plays on the spectrality of its characters, particularly exploring two distinct aspects of spectrality through the contrastive characterization of Rose (Kirsten Dunst) as an invisible presence and Phil as a visible absence. Rose repeatedly finds herself alone in empty rooms or is not acknowledged by other characters. Her association with white and costumes that blend into the dominant color palette of shots seal her ghostly invisibility. Phil's psychological torture eventually leaves her drained as a corpse, her pale figure, red eyes, and dirty hands shut out of the barn by a creaking door that evokes a coffin. Phil, on the other hand, is spectral not by erasure but by extension of his presence beyond visibility. His unexpected penetrations of the frame reveal both a lurking quality, establishing offscreen space as a potential source of danger, and the character's ability for sudden apparitions. These traits are connected with a sense of monstrous menace through repeated low angle shots on his hardened face as he deals Rose psychological blows. The distinct modes of spectrality are thus weaved into the larger gothic trope of male monster and female prey.

The sights and sounds of horror

The Power of the Dog does not simply summon the gothic history of the western but uses gothic style as a link between the western and horror genres. The treatment of the Burbank house was meant to evoke a “horror film”, according to cinematographer Ari Wegner. This can particularly be felt in the mise-en-scène of chiaroscuro lighting and high contrast sound mixing. Viewers’ attention is drawn towards the dark areas of the chiaroscuro frame by positioning in the shadows the most meaningful elements on screen, especially the actors’ faces which are often backlit (Rose and Phil in particular). The (in)ability to see, thematized figuratively in the lighting and narratively in the dog-shaped shadow on the mountain, reflexively engages the viewers’ (in)ability to form meaning out of partial or elliptical information. The lighting style is thus the visual expression of a narrative structure determined by the unseen and the invisible, a feature quite common in horror films.³¹

Impaired visibility redirects characters’ as well as viewers’ attention to sounds. Emphasis is frequently laid on characters listening to the sounds made by others. The sounds resonating in the house – steps, clanking dishes, love-making, a creaking door, whistling – give information about the characters’ whereabouts, but also violate intimate spaces and become means of aggression. Phil’s boots and spurs and his whistling are the most obvious examples. The sound, heard as soon as Phil first enters the Burbank house, establishes his power over the space in a western-like fashion.³² Later close-ups of the boots stress the assaultive significance of the sound. His whistling, resonating in the house and carried over to the alley, evokes a common trope of horror films since *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931), and functions as a torture instrument. The high contrast sound mixing emphasizing foley sounds supports the gothic aesthetics of the Burbank house but also connects the gothic with the horror genre through intertextuality. Phil’s threatening power is thus drawn both from a history of western villains and horror killers, bound together in the historical costume drama through the gothic style of the ranch.

As this last example suggests, the articulation of horror with the western also unfolds at the level of characterization. Phil and Peter are two monstrous characters that operate at the crossroads of both genres. One low angle on Phil mentioned above is so extreme and canted as to evoke German expressionism and its influence on the visual style of horror.³³ As Phil is positioned at the top of a staircase, the shot resonates with a similar framing of Michael Myers in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) as the killer, knife in hand, looks for his victim over the second-floor handrail. Phil's weapon in that case is the banjo, harking back to another musical duel involving a banjo in *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), which is another hybrid film crossing the western and gothic horror genres. Intertextuality in this moment connects Phil once more to both genres and their shared history. As for Peter, he is associated with the western genre through his relationship to the land as seen above, yet he is also most explicitly characterized through horror conventions. The importance of his relationship with his mother, his slender and self-effaced demeanor, his penchant for cutting up small creatures, and his ability to hide in plain sight are reminiscent of Norman Bates in *Psycho* (a likeness reinforced by the physical similarities between actors Anthony Perkins and Kodi Smitt-McPhee). Like Phil, Peter operates at the crossroads of both genres. His skills as a tracker turn him into a stalker as he watches Phil naked and he is framed in another slightly canted low-angle close-up as he sets out for the western horse-riding scene analyzed above. But unlike Phil, whose violence is mostly exerted at the psychological level, Peter's potential as a genuine killer is expressed in the most horror-like shot of the film: a cut to Peter's backlit legs as he silently enters an occupied bedroom dragging a motionless lump in a sack. *The Power of the Dog's* exploration of genre hybridity thus operates at the level of characterization, with the ostentatious cowboy drifting towards horror before he is redeemed through melodrama while the passive victim/quiet killer gradually invades western territory. In both cases, the Burbank

house is the space where those genres meet and where those character arcs cross, its gothic style providing common ground for their articulation.

The soundtrack plays a crucial role in establishing a favorable creative space to work and bend genre conventions. Doubling the film's approach to genre, it introduces an unsettling dimension within a western framework. Composer Jonny Greenwood described this process for *The New Yorker*: "it was about using traditional instruments but having them sound like there's something slightly wrong with them".³⁴ The opening cello pizzicato, which is repeated with variation at different moments in the film, is picked in a roll pattern evoking the banjo, but producing a lower pitch and with a built-in tension created by the contrast of quick rhythm and slow melodic development. The "archetypal western instrument"³⁵ of the banjo, used to build a sense of community in westerns such as *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), is thus present in a spectral quality, the intended effect being the evocation of a "slightly claustrophobic feeling".³⁶ A real banjo does appear in the diegesis, to similar effect: it is either associated with Phil's loneliness or used as a weapon on Rose. The mechanical piano, another typical western instrument, was played with a tuning wrench: "The result is that you're hearing something you're familiar with, but then you hear notes sliding within it, which is hopefully quite unsettling."³⁷ The instrument is more directly associated with Rose and its disharmonious, detuned notes are meant to express her degeneration. The piano is also present diegetically and twice played to western expectations (tipsy moments of collective joy), although each time it is staged as a nuisance and produces unease for the protagonists. Peter's aural characterization – lingering, atonal violins and French horns – is less western-like and more explicitly foreboding, yet it is often audible precisely in western-like scenes: Peter's visit to the cemetery overlooking the cattle drive, Peter's horse-riding scene, and a 25-second pan on a bare western landscape that precedes Phil's murder. As Neil Lerner notes of music in horror films, "the genre of horror turned to unresolved dissonance,

atonality, and timbral experimentation as part of its characteristic stylistic qualities.”³⁸ The soundtrack of *The Power of the Dog*, described by critics as uncanny and foreboding³⁹ or dark and disturbing,⁴⁰ merges these qualities with a western framework, bringing the western and horror genres closer together.

Campion’s film thus works at the intersection of genres, revealing a common aesthetic and narrative ground uniting the western to melodrama and horror. Intertextuality comes in to position the film in, and connect, various genre histories while pointing to the hybrid history of the western genre itself. As this chapter will now demonstrate, the film’s position at the crossroad of genres frees the film from any particular genre formula and allows it to rewrite these formulas in creative ways. It also serves the film’s political exploration into the representations of masculinity, and how such exploration reflects back on the genres themselves.

Masculinities in context

The histories of cinema as a cultural medium and as an industry have made it so that genres are gendered. Westerns are often understood to be for and about men, and were often promoted to target young boys in particular.⁴¹ Melodrama is usually read as a feminine mode,⁴² and films sharing in that mode were advertised as “women’s pictures” in the heydays of the classical era. Horror films are arguably less clearly gendered in terms of narrative, audience, and promotion, and there is a long literature of horror film studies that debated the patriarchal or subversive nature of the genre.⁴³ Yet some subgenres such as the female gothic that inspired the Phil/Rose/Burbank house part of *The Power of the Dog* catered to female audiences⁴⁴ while others such as the slasher for which *Psycho* was a precursor and with which Peter is associated often reproduced a patriarchal ideology.⁴⁵ Working at the intersection of

the western, the melodrama, and horror allows *The Power of the Dog* to play their different gendered formulas against each other, revealing the ideological load in the genres' histories and providing opportunities to redefine them.

Humanity and sensuality in the West

The reference to the melodramatic history of the western in *The Power of the Dog* allows the film to humanize the genre by displacing the focus from the performative construction of a male hero to the vulnerability, intimacy, and sensuality of various characters sharing the space of the story. The film uses the psychological realism discussed above along with shifting focalization to elicit empathy in multiple directions. Phil's emotional perspective is privileged through numerous close-ups of his face and direct looks at the camera, making viewers the object of his ire or sharing in his intimacy. The barn where he seeks release or comfort and builds a relationship with Peter becomes an externalization of his inner states. Although Phil initially appears as the main protagonist, empathetic investment is soon directed towards other subjectivities as well. The film's chapter structure reflects this shift from Phil (chapter I) to Phil and George (chapter II) to Rose (chapter III) to Peter (chapter IV) to Peter and Phil (chapter V). Yet, even within chapters, focalization adopts alternative subjective viewpoints, so that the emotional and psychological effects of characters' interactions and their underlying power dynamics are as visible as their causes. One example is Phil's unexpected mentoring of Peter in chapter V being framed through Rose's anguished perspective through close-ups and editing.

Shifting focalization functions as a humanizing device deconstructing character types – Phil the iconic cowboy, Rose the damsel in distress, George the gentleman savior, Peter the delicate tenderfoot – and offering viewers an insight into the vulnerability of all the

protagonists: Phil's pain as he feels disconnected from his brother and his tearful hope when Peter seems to offer love; George's loneliness and love as he sheds a tear in front of Rose; Peter's hurt to be humiliated or as he reminisces his father's suicide; Rose's pain to see her son bullied and be humiliated herself, and her final nervous breakdown. While Phil's pain is quickly revealed beneath his hateful demeanor, the responsibility of the other characters in the production of interpersonal violence is exposed as well: George unwillingly sets Rose up for humiliation by buying her an expensive piano and inviting the governor to hear her play; Rose unwillingly sets Peter up for humiliation by suggesting he displays his paper flowers on a table where cowhands will dine; and Peter takes Phil's life for tormenting him and his mother. Such emotional depth constructs violence in human interactions as a complex network in which everyone is both victim and perpetrator.⁴⁶ The legitimacy of a violent resolution to ethical and ideological tensions, a structure which westerns often organize through the motif of the showdown,⁴⁷ is thus completely undermined. What is brought into focus is the psychological toll of living in the historical West, where the dominant feeling appears to be entrapment and isolation and where characters are crushed and constrained by geographical as well as social "strictures".⁴⁸ The source of all violence suffered and exacted lies in the characters' subjection to social prejudice and gender norms that transcend and oppress them: Phil psychologically tortures others because his homosexuality is an unbearable deviance to himself and society; Rose degenerates partly because she is a victim of class prejudice unable to meet the expectations laid on an upper-class wife; Peter is abused because he does not conform to the cultural standards of masculinity and, as this chapter discusses below, he kills because he is performing the part of a western male hero.

Not only does the western melodrama offer an opportunity to empathetically explore the characters' psychology beyond genre formulas and reveal the destructive operations of gender norms, it also opens the western framework up to sensuality and eroticism. Several

shots emphasize touch and texture, and the characters' sensual connection with their world: Rose and Peter touch Peter's album; Rose rubs her nose in rabbit fur and enjoys soft deerskin gloves. Sensuality is especially present in the characterization of the cowboy Phil. Several close-ups on his hands show him rubbing the stamens of Peter's paper flowers, stroking the leather of Bronco Henry's saddle or fondling Bronco Henry's scarf. His physical relation to cowhide and rope-making verges on the sexual. The narration repeats a close-up on Phil's hand tightening the braid against his hip with a forward thrust, raking focus along the strip of hide emphasizing texture and tension (with additional close-ups of Phil's hand rubbing the rope and inserting the tip of a strip in the braid the second time). Most of these shots involve iconic western paraphernalia, their sexual charge in *The Power of the Dog* contributing to expose them as cultural fetishes. The connection of these objects with Phil's homosexual desires also foregrounds the homoerotic subtext of the western genre.⁴⁹ The melodramatic mode, with its focus on characters' emotions, thus brings out the western's potential for alternative sexual politics.

Performances of masculinity

The exploration of the western characters' vulnerability also reveals masculinity as a performance. At first glance, Phil is the epitome of the iconic western cowboy in terms of physique, costume, behavior, and charisma. His masculine cowboy persona is the most ostentatiously visible aspect of his identity, stressed by the narration through framing and composition. The most violent parts of Phil's profession are framed in close-ups of his hands and knife slicing through flesh (skinning a cow; castrating a bull), the sound work emphasizing the violence exerted on a body. Each time, other cowhands provide an audience to the performance of his skills. Details such as his pride in not wearing gloves despite the

risk of injury indicate the character's staging of his own masculinity. The time setting of the film in 1925 becomes significant in that regard: Phil plays the hard-boiled cowboy for young cowhands who grew up with western film stars like Broncho Billy and William Hart as their role models. At the diegetic level, the cowboy is a cultural icon already laden with cultural significance involving gender.

Phil enjoys playing the part of the cowboy to the verge of stereotype, adopting affectations and preferences that would have their place in a dime novel (never taking a bath, rolling his cigarettes one-handed, relishing elk liver cooked on the coals). But Phil is a Yale graduate and heir to a powerful Eastern family, a New England Brahmin rebranded as a cowboy much like Theodore Roosevelt. The casting of British theater actor Benedict Cumberbatch as Phil amplifies the fabricated and performative aspects of the character. Phil's own idea of manhood is borrowed from a mythical past – the “real men in [the] days” of the Lewis & Clark expedition – and from a character with a western movie name: Bronco Henry. That Bronco Henry is never seen but only narrated by an enamored Phil confirms the degree of fabrication associated with iconic male figures in a western setting.

Phil's masculinity appears all the more artificial that no other character in the film shares his version of a masculine performance, although many admire him for it as they would a fictional western hero. Peter is slender and delicate and George is round and caring. The former is an intellectual and the latter a businessman, and neither cares for Phil's act. The cowhands do admire their boss, yet even they do not share in his hard masculine type, but are boyishly homoerotic: they giggle together, talk about male love, and fool around naked in the river. Many are young and impressionable and some appear as vulnerable as Peter. Even Phil actually appears childish, sleeping next to his brother in their boys' beds, acting out when upset, or mockingly imitating Rose's voice to himself. The underhanded mind games he plays

at Rose's expense are the stuff of sibling rivalry rather than the actions of a responsible adult. In many ways, Phil is a spoiled brat who has grown good at playing cowboys.

While the melodramatic aspect of *The Power of the Dog* brings out the homoerotic and performative aspects of masculinity in the western, its connection with the horror genre offers an alternative framework for the representations of violent masculinity. Just like Phil, Peter also performs the precepts of a culturally-constructed masculine ethos. He invokes masculinity as a moral framework for action in the opening voice over ("what kind of man would I be if I did not help my mother? If I did not save her?") and responding to Rose ("Where would a man be if he always did what his mother told him?"). In both cases, the construction of masculinity depends on a denial of female agency. The first instance also places the film's narrative within the framework of the captivity narrative, aligning Peter with the generic expectations of western male heroism. Peter thus abides by patriarchal western standards of masculine behavior much like Phil does, which sets them apart from the other male characters. The use of French horns in association with Peter, the instrument of "pent-up masculinity" according to composer Greenwood, was meant to out Peter as another masculine performer.⁵⁰

Yet, Peter's performance of violent masculinity does not correspond to the regime of visibility associated with Phil's but operates strictly in concealment or offscreen, in keeping with the horror connotations around his character. Twice Peter is shot from the back bent on a table peering over his shoulder, his body hiding the focus of his attention on the tabletop so as to suggest a penchant for secrecy. His killing of three chickens, two rabbits, and Phil's murder are all invisible to viewers, although there is a gradation towards visibility: from a proleptical mention (the chickens), to an elliptical reveal (the dissected rabbit), to an offscreen killing (the snap of the rabbit's neck), to an onscreen murder unbeknownst to viewers (Phil's poisoning). The horror in Peter's casual familiarity with death only appears mediated in

reaction shots (Lola discovering the dissected rabbit; Phil watching Peter snap a rabbit's neck). In the end, Peter appears as the meaningful dark spot pointed out by the chiaroscuro *mise-en-scène*, the key to the entire narrative hidden in plain sight much like Norman Bates in *Psycho*. He achieves western male heroism when he eventually saves his mother as announced in the opening voiceover, but as he does it in concealment and unbeknownst to all, viewers have been manipulated as well. In a few moments, the melodramatic helpless victim is revealed as an active schemer, stealthy killer, and successful savior. As they are left to ponder on such an unexpected resolution in the standards of the western genre,⁵¹ they can begin to grasp the awesome extent of the character's control over the narration.

Masculinity, power, and violence

Phil is certainly staged as the alpha male through sound work (the boots and spurs) and *mise-en-scène* (his spectral quality). He controls the main spaces of the Burbank house through his association with a diagonal axis of the hallway from the living room and entrance door to the top of the staircase. Introduced as the first shot of the interior of the house as Phil enters it, the axis is exploited twice to stage Phil's power plays with George and Rose as he occupies the vantage point at the top of the stairs. Yet, Peter's power is built up from his introduction in a voiceover framing the entire narrative during the opening credits. His introducing shot then disrupts the established patterns of the film in terms of setting, characters, soundtrack, shot composition, and color scheme (a close-up on a pair of scissors cutting strips of red paper in shallow focus to the notes of the mechanical piano). The introduction of a scene with a cut to the character's hands in the act of cutting (a reflexive device foregrounding the operation of editing and aligning the character with an editorial authority) is repeated later with Phil, starting a pattern of associations between Phil and Peter that puts both characters on a par.⁵²

As Phil and the cattle arrive in Beech, a digitally-composited shot shows Peter's upper body overlooking the entire outfit in the background. One minute and fifty seconds of running time after he first sets foot on the ranch, he takes over Phil's power axis in the Burbank house. As he is being harassed by an entire camp of cowhands, a back-and-forth lateral tracking shot follows him withstanding and exhausting the cowhands' verbal abuse. Eventually, Peter is the one commanding the entire living room in a static long shot and occupying the high ground whereas Phil exits the picture in muted plain shoes and in a frontal (rather than diagonal) shot of the staircase as he descends to his death. Even though Phil and viewers may scoff at Peter's father's idea that his son was too strong and not kind enough, the narration has proven him right from the start.

Peter's power is thus established by the narration even as western genre conventions would have viewers expect the more ostentatiously masculine cowboy to prevail. The concealed aspect of his actions and awesome extent of his control feel like a shot in the back to Phil and viewers because of genre expectations established by the western framework, while the humanization of Phil through melodrama confuses the ethics of Peter's violent retribution. What remains is a sense of the ubiquitous violence exerted by gender norms. *The Power of the Dog* highlights the pervasive quality of gender norms that operate in visible and invisible ways as well as their destructive consequences both psychologically and physically. The power of the populist western to envisage utopian alternatives and the power of melodrama to foreground the oppressive charge of social norms – Schatz's social "strictures" – are thus combined into a criticism of gender as a constraining and oppressive system. The articulation of genre categories also grounds this social criticism in cultural history, foregrounding the ways in which performances of gender are informed by cultural texts and genre formulas. But as the emphases on homoeroticism and sensuality suggest, *The Power of*

the Dog also exploits genre hybridity as a creative force to rewrite genre formulas and draw new representational frameworks from which to understand and experience gender.

Conclusion

The western genre has been hybrid from the start, and its multiple cycles throughout its more than a century of existence have relied on borrowings from, and crossovers with, other genres. The gothic as well as the melodramatic modes are ingrained within its history and have fueled its stories and visuals for long. In mobilizing them, *The Power of the Dog* revives that hybrid history of the genre and establishes itself within it. It pays tribute to earlier hybrid works such as *Giant*, as well as films more conventionally set in a specific genre such as *The Searchers* and *Psycho*, and builds upon them to produce a 21st-century hybrid film exploring the gendered politics of cultural history and their resonance in the present.

This chapter first discussed the reflexive distance established by the film with conventional genre features, focusing on the representations of western landscapes in particular. While the epic landscapes of imperialist mythmaking are reframed and contained through various visual strategies, the melodramatic mode redirects their function towards the amplification of the narration's emotional charge and character psychology. The film draws on the more utopian credentials of frontier mythology found in a certain tradition of western films intended to rewrite the (sometimes sexual) politics of the genre, and the focus shifts from male actions to (mostly although not exclusively) male emotions. The articulation of western and melodrama also serves characterization by grounding narrative development in the contrast between the characters' emotional connection with the landscape.

This chapter then built on the revelation of the western's hybrid history and the creative potential of genre hybridity to focus on the use of the gothic mode as a bridge

between the western and horror genres. The aesthetic choices drawn from the noir western and gothic productions such as *Giant* establish *The Power of the Dog* once again in a specific history of the western, revealing within it the presence of tropes and themes such as entrapment or spectrality seemingly alien to the genre. But gothic elements in the film also serve as a bridge between the western and the horror genre, investing the western with the dreadful weight of an invisible threat and connecting that dread to a form of monstrous masculinity. The articulation of genres here again serves characterization, as it allows to compare and contrast different kinds of monsters and their relative abilities to haunt and kill.

The final section of the chapter focused more specifically on an analysis of the gendered politics of genre hybridity in *The Power of the Dog*. The articulation of genres in the film ultimately serves a political purpose which is an exploration of masculinity and its representations, as well as a creative redefinition of the gendered politics of cultural history. Reviving the western melodrama allows Campion to humanize the masculine world of the western by exploring vulnerability, intimacy, and sensuality. It also offers the opportunity to embrace the homoerotic subtext of the western and contributes to reveal masculinity as a performance and a cultural construction. Bringing out the horror sensibilities of the gothic western allows the director to contrast different, yet equally destructive, regimes of violent masculinity. The mobilization of different genres finally suggests the ubiquity of gender as a normative system in cultural history and reveals how it affects every area of culture and every person subjected to it. In the end, viewers are left to ponder for themselves the moral weight of an unexpected violent resolution performed within the frame of a masculine ethos, with no satisfying ground to rest their judgment. The inescapable moral quandary about the legitimacy of Phil's murder at the individual level leaves only one avenue of clarity at the political level: a criticism of masculinity as a set of culturally-constructed principles and behaviors that corrupts the self and society.

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¹⁸ Janet Walker, *Westerns: Films through History* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 7.

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²⁰ See for instance the distinction Elsaesser makes between westerns and melodramas on the question of the possibility of successful action: the former allow it because of the open nature of their setting while the latter often trump it, documenting failure instead, because of their penchant for confinement. Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the

Family Melodrama,” in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy, 68-92 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 78-79.

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²² Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre’s First Half-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 55. Manifest Destiny is an expression invented in the mid-19th century that came to designate US-American imperial ideology. It expresses the idea that the United States was divinely destined to colonize North America and expand its enlightened civilization.

²³ My argument rests on the analysis of the VFX breakdown video provided by Alt, the company in charge of visual effects on *The Power of the Dog*. They claim more than 200 shots.

<https://www.altvfx.com/work/the-power-of-the-dog/> (accessed October 24, 2023).

²⁴ Christine Gledhill, “The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation”, in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 1992), 1; 23.

²⁵ Frank Kelleter et al. (ed.), *Melodrama!: the Mode of Excess from Early America to Hollywood* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2007).

²⁶ Cultural historian Richard Slotkin labels this the populist version of frontier mythology. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*, 22-24.

²⁷ Jon Burlingame, “Jonny Greenwood on the Dark Power of His Music for ‘The Power of the Dog,’” *Variety*, November 17, 2021.

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²⁸ Slotkin identifies this as the progressive version of frontier mythology.

Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*, 22-24.

²⁹ Helen Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 34. See also Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996).

³⁰ Fred Botting, *Gothic*, 5-6. The female gothic has been influential on Campion's filmography and its themes structure some of Campion's earlier films, especially *The Piano*. See Ellen Cheshire, *In the Scene: Jane Campion* (Twickenham: Aurora Metro Books, 2018), ebook.

³¹ Adam Charles Hart, "Millennial Fears: Abject Horror in a Transnational Context," in *A Modern Companion to Horror*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff, 329-344 (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 339.

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³³ Harry M. Benshoff, "The Monster and the Homosexual," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, 116-144 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 135.

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⁴¹ See for instance Lee Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 220.

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⁴³ See for instance the various and complementary contributions on the gendered politics of horror in Barry Keith Grant, *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).

⁴⁴ Helen Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, 36-38; 44-48.

⁴⁵ Tony Williams, "Trying to Survive to the Dark Side", in *The Dread of Difference*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, 192-208 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 195-200.

⁴⁶ In his analysis of family melodrama, Elsaesser comes to analyze films which "manage to present *all* the characters convincingly as victims" and sees in this trait an expression of "the typical masochism of melodrama".

Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama", In *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy, 68-92 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 86.

⁴⁷ William J. Devlin, "No Country for Old Men: The Decline of Ethics and the West(ern)," in *The Philosophy of the Western*, ed. B. Steve Csaki and Jennifer L. McMahon, 221-240 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 226.

⁴⁸ *The Power of the Dog* adds the geographical conditions of the historical West in the western genre to the strictures that Schatz identified as a characterizing feature of melodrama: "the ultimate *resignation* of the principals to the strictures of social and family tradition". Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981), 222.

⁴⁹ Campion here transforms a subtext into the text. Drawing on Laura Mulvey and a psychoanalytical approach to gender in Hollywood film, Neale argues that masculine genres such as the western are "founded upon a repressed homosexual desire".

Steve Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983), 13.

⁵⁰ Jon Burlingame, “Jonny Greenwood on the Dark Power of His Music for ‘The Power of the Dog,’” *Variety*, November 17, 2021.

<https://variety.com/2021/artisans/awards/jonny-greenwood-power-of-the-dog-score-composer-interview-1235113926/> (accessed October 24, 2023).

⁵¹ Peter achieves western male heroism by using a weapon – poisoning – often coded as feminine, which further confuses viewers’ expectations as well as the gendered politics of the western and horror genres.

⁵² Other examples include cut transitions from one character to the other or the characters being reframed by white cloth, which associates Peter with death and foreshadows Phil’s own obliteration.