

‘Quoting Cowboys’

False Idols of the Mythical West in *The Power of the Dog*

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ABSTRACT

Although the events of Jane Campion’s *The Power of the Dog* (2021) miss the golden age of frontier stories in the American West, its sullen protagonist clings obsessively to the myth of the cowboy—the ultimate figure of American masculinity, by then belonging to a distant past—as a means of disguising his taboo homosexual desires. Attempting to mimic the cowboys of old and stake his claim over the mythical landscape of the classical Western, Phil Burbank (Benedict Cumberbatch) hides his shame behind layers of grime and aggression that the film gradually reveals as a mask—a mask which, as its cracks begin to show, reflect the fictitious nature of the idealized masculinity he is desperate to embody.

Jane Campion’s *The Power of the Dog* (2021) begins with a question: “What kind of man would I be if I did not help my mother?” asks the enigmatic Peter Gordon (Kodi Smit-McPhee) over a hauntingly dissonant score, which already hints at the tension permeating Campion’s adaptation of Thomas Savage’s 1967 novel. While setting up the motivation behind Peter’s actions, the line also introduces a question that drives another major character, Phil Burbank (Benedict Cumberbatch): what exactly makes a man? From the moment we meet him, Phil is obsessed with recapturing an image of manhood that is rooted in the past. “They were real men in those days,” he mourns to young Peter (01:22:58-01:23:00), having suddenly taken the boy under his wing after relentlessly ridiculing him for his effeminacy. Of course, what Phil reverently refers to is the mythic cowboy of the boundless West, the ultimate icon of Americanism and traditional masculinity—an identity Phil adopts as a way of masking his repressed homosexuality. Although he attempts to teach Peter to take up the same guise, his own persona is riddled

with contradictions that reveal the mythic cowboy as fiction—an ideal belonging to an unreachable past.

As scholar Heike Paul writes in *The Myths That Made America*, the myth of the West adapts a “much older” (312) pastoral fantasy of simplicity and self-sufficiency which, coupled with the expansionism at the heart of the frontier myth, transforms the American West into a land bigger than itself—a utopian landscape at the edge of wilderness and civilization that enables a return to the past through a return to the land. Where these two aspects of Western mythology collide is where the cowboy arises as a nostalgic, gendered ideal: the “masculinist” frontier hero tasked with protecting an idyllic way of life by asserting dominion over the land—a task largely accomplished through self-legitimized violence (Paul 314). The Western genre is thus built on the mythology of the cowboy, an ideal that Phil is intent on embodying and perpetuating through his mentoring of Peter in *The Power of the Dog*. From the film’s opening shot (Fig. 1), which references John Ford’s *The Searchers*’ iconic final image (01:58:37)—John Wayne,



Fig. 1 | Phil framed by the ranch window in *The Power of the Dog*, 00:01:51. Netflix, 2021.



Fig. 2 | John Wayne wanders back into the West at the end of *The Searchers*, 01:58:37. Warner Bros., 1956.

framed by a doorway, walking alone into the desert (Fig. 2)—Ari Wegner’s cinematography invites us to consider Phil as a hardened, Wayne-esque cowboy with little interest in civilized domestic life by tracking him through the windows of the ranch house (White 25) (00:01:51). At first, this representation of Cumberbatch’s character appears accurate: he refuses to bathe in the house, wear gloves while doing the castrating, and tells his brother George Burbank (Jesse Plemons) of his desire to ride into the wild and live off the land using only his physical prowess. But the longer we watch, the more is Phil’s behaviour revealed as inauthentic.

Despite Phil’s posturing, *The Power of the Dog* comes not in the midst of cowboy culture, but on its heels. The film is set in 1925, thirty-five years after the U.S. Census Bureau’s

declaration that the famed frontier no longer existed (Paul 313). As Campion herself observes, “[*The Power of the Dog* is] a ranch story . . . Nobody’s got a gun . . . the cowhands are working there because they love cowboys of old and they are getting their clothes from the mail orders” (Thompson). They are not, despite Phil’s best attempts to convince the world otherwise, *real* cowboys; what he does is mere imitation—a “quoting of cowboys.” Try as he might to project authenticity, Phil lives “just on the end of that mythology” and cannot transcend a poor reenactment of the cowboy lifestyle (Thompson). In fact, although the figure we meet is a rough-spoken, bath-averse ranch worker, we soon learn that his past lies far from the rural West. Before taking over the ranch twenty-five years prior, Phil had been Phi Beta Kappa at Yale University as a high society



Fig. 3 | A bodybuilding magazine bearing Bronco Henry's signature in *The Power of the Dog*, 01:15:28. Netflix, 2021.

Classics scholar. More importantly, the aggressive homophobia he directs toward Peter is a facade meant to disguise his own suppressed homosexuality. Everything about Phil, from his clothes to his speech, is part of a “performance” of masculinity (Aranjuez 19), an overcompensation for the aspect of his true identity that brings his manhood, in the context of his time and place, into question. Furthermore, not only is Phil’s display of extreme masculinity a performance, but it is also, in the words of gender theorist Judith Butler, “a ‘compulsory performance’” (qtd. in Aranjuez 19, emphasis added)—a well-constructed act learned from and enforced by his now-dead mentor, Bronco Henry.

While he never appears in the story, Bronco haunts Campion’s film with the same mythical weight of the cowboy. At the Burbank ranch, the cowhands build folklore around him, sharing stories of his grandiosity and toasting to his name; and Phil, as if he cannot help himself, brings him up incessantly, unwilling to let Bronco’s legacy be forgotten. In the eyes of the men who knew him, Bronco was the epitome of the masculinity that they aimed to embody. To Phil, he was “the wolf who raised [him],” who brought him closer to the agrarian myth of the old American West by teaching him “ranching,” and, in consequence, how to be a man (00:09:43–00:10:10). Yet Bronco was more than a mentor to Phil: he was a lover, the object of the very taboo desires driving his masculine performance. Staying true to the secrecy of their relationship, Campion reveals its true nature only through props—the handkerchief Phil uses to masturbate, embroidered with “B.H.”; Bronco’s saddle, which Phil lovingly polishes, handling it with a sensual touch; and the bodybuilding magazines in Phil’s hiding place in the woods. The latter bear two noteworthy details that further clarify the film’s backstory: a handwritten label claiming ownership by Bronco, and the tagline, “Weakness a crime; Don’t be a criminal” (Fig. 3). While these props confirm Phil’s homosexuality to Peter and the audience, they also expose

Bronco’s, further bringing into question the idealized image of the cowboy.

Moreover, while the act of perfecting the masculine persona offered to him by Bronco earns Phil the fear and respect of his fellow men, it also “affords him a type of pleasure beyond sex” (Aranjuez 27). Because he successfully displays a form of masculinity so contrived as to be beyond questioning, Phil is allowed to navigate masculine spaces and form relationships, albeit superficial ones, with other men at the ranch, like his brother and fellow ranch workers. Having lost his homosexual bond with Bronco, the man who simultaneously offered him the taboo connection he craved and instructed him on how to best disguise it, Phil clings to homosocial bonds largely built on the culture of hypermasculinity they cultivate. Rose Gordon’s (Kirsten Dunst) arrival on the ranch, however, disrupts this dynamic. Critic Patricia White notes in “Women Auteurs, Western Promises” that “white women have been central to the mythology of the Western, representing the triumph of garden over wilderness or the grit that helps ‘destiny’ manifest itself” (32). For Phil, however, Rose brings along a femininity that threatens his sanctuary as well as his facade, as it reflects the exact quality he fears in himself and which, when he sees Peter display it without shame, incites him to torment the boy. His hatred of mother and son thus stems from a complex mixture of “displaced self-loathing and -policing” (Aranjuez 21) and a need to assert his masculine authority.

Nevertheless, the movie’s setting—so intrinsic to Phil’s carefully constructed masculine identity—is as much an illusion as his cowboy persona. The land and its connotations of freedom and opportunity in the myth of the West are a central part of the film’s cinematography. Wegner, *The Power of the Dog’s* director of photography, notes that in scouting the locations for the film, Campion placed great emphasis on considering Phil’s connection to the landscape: “[Campion] felt we needed a place where the mountains could be close



Fig. 4 | A Native American trader and his son in *The Power of the Dog*, 01:40:37. Netflix, 2021.

enough to touch. Something that Phil could feel a connection to, in terms of how he felt about *his* place.” Like the cowboys he admires, Phil claims ownership over the land; he looks to the hills and finds meaning in the figure of the dog, in the very ability to see it, while others cannot. However, while the story is set in Montana, the real locations used by Campion are not in America but in New Zealand, the director’s “backyard” (Wegner). While speaking of building a “massive ranch . . . in southern New Zealand” for shooting exteriors, Campion describes the space as having a “mythic, epic feeling about it, that [they] couldn’t find [in America]” (Thompson). In a film that centres around a man’s obsession with retaining the sacredness of the American West, this production detail adds a layer of irony that enriches its themes, strengthening the idea of the West not as a tangible place, but as an idea—one that, if challenged, would endanger the mask Phil has built for himself.

Still, or perhaps *because* of the West’s metaphorical nature, Phil puts great emphasis on his self-proclaimed dominion over the ranch and its surrounding landscape—“his” territory. While the film does not broach settler colonialism directly, the peripheral presence of Native Americans at the Burbank ranch mounts a subtle critique of the colonial past from which the cowboy cannot be separated. Whether in its “agrarian” or “expansionist” form, the myth of the American West relies on the “dismiss[al]” of “the [I]ndigenous population as inhabitants of the land” (Paul 325), and Phil’s own myth-building is no exception. Throughout the film, be it by demanding “any Indians camping . . . be moved off the property” (01:03:12-01:03:20) or burning hides rather than selling them to Native American traders, Phil denies these peoples any access to the land and its resources in an effort to reinforce his own authority and claim over settled territory—and, in consequence, strengthen his cowboy persona. In doing so, however, he prompts a reversal of the traditional

hero-villain dynamic of the classical Western, wherein colonization is a righteous campaign to defeat the monstrous “Indian,” and which requires the victimization of the white American woman for the heroic cowboy to rise. Another marker that *The Power of the Dog* eschews the golden age of frontier stories is that its Native Americans (Adam Beach and Maeson Stone Skuggedal) appear not as fearsome, animalistic enemies at the heart of the conflict, but as non-threatening, displaced figures unreasonably antagonized by the ranch’s occupants (Fig. 4). In this way, they are not unlike Rose, whom Phil targets in part because of the perceived threat she poses to his ownership of the property. In fact, Campion makes a point of aligning Rose—whose victimhood is explicit—to the Native Americans: when it finally comes, her rebellion against Phil is an act of kindness toward them. By giving away the hides, Rose uses her “grit” (White 32) *against* rather than *for* the settler narrative wielded by Phil, challenging his authority on the ranch as both patriarch and colonizer. In her tearful acceptance of the traders’ gift, a pair of “deliciously soft . . . beautiful” leather gloves (*The Power of the Dog* 01:40:30-01:40:44) which symbolize protection all the more blatantly given the film’s ending, the Western’s traditional victim and victimizer establish mutual compassion. Or, at the very least, they establish mutual respect. In the vacuum created by this subversion, Phil arises as the source of their mutual suffering; in Campion’s West, the pseudo-cowboy becomes the antagonist.

Phil’s claim over the land and its associated mythology is also bound to his unique ability, learned from Bronco, to see the image of a barking dog on the hills facing the ranch. He boasts this sight as something that sets him apart from others—namely his brother, George, whom Phil dismisses with a smirk when a fellow rancher asks whether anyone has seen what Phil sees (00:23:09-00:23:16). After all, George, whom we first meet in the bath as an antithesis to the ever-filthy Phil



Fig. 5 | Phil gazes up at the hills around the Burbank ranch in *The Power of the Dog*, 00:23:24. Netflix, 2021.



Fig. 6 | Phil and Peter observe the figure of a barking dog in *The Power of the Dog*, 01:24:37. Netflix, 2021.

and later see almost exclusively in his crisp suits and behind the wheel of his car, appears more interested in retaining the aura of his “cosmopolitan upbringing” (Aranjuez 22) than tending the ranch with his brother. Much like his relationship with Bronco, however, Phil’s ability to see the dog is bound in contradictions: at the same time as it represents the ideal masculinity he aims to project and later teach, it also reflects his self-inflicted isolation, and the longing he feels for the companionship he shared with his now-dead mentor. When he gazes up at the hills, seeing what no one else seems capable of seeing, Phil’s expression fills with a sadness that hints at his loneliness (Fig. 5). It is not surprising then, that after choosing to mentor Peter by shaping him into the masculine cowboy Bronco taught him to be, he would be eager to

share with him the knowledge of the dog (Fig. 6). In a surprising turn, however, Peter admits to having spotted the figure upon his arrival at the ranch, a revelation that exposes the cracks in Phil’s persona: whereas Phil had to be taught to see the dog—and, in parallel, to be “a man”—Peter, conversely comfortable with exhibiting the feminine traits Phil wishes to purge, possesses a more inherent sight. The moment offers a glimpse into Peter’s real nature and intelligence, which he disguises throughout his time with Phil as a means to deceive him and, ultimately, take his life. But it also brings into question the sanctity of traditional masculinity that Phil is so desperate to impart. Of what value, then, are Phil’s lessons to Peter? Of what value, in a new and developing age, is the myth of the cowboy?

When Phil dies at the end of the film, in a way, so does his idealized image of the utopian West and its masculine hero. Peter, his would-be protégé, rejects the mantle Phil believes, for most of the movie, that he needs to pass on, as Bronco did for him. Ultimately, his carefully constructed mask—the layers of grime and aggression he refuses to wash off, should his true self be revealed—are taken away upon his death, leaving only the skeletal figure of a clean-shaven, unrecognizable man, stripped completely of his power and unable to control how others perceive him. His obsession with becoming the

cowboy of old, so destructive of himself and those around him, is meaningless in the end. The revelation of Peter's murderous plot casts a chill over the film's final moments, but, at the same time, the man's absence appears to lift a weight off the other characters, as if they, without his overbearing presence, can drop their own masks as well, letting go of the mythical past he fought so fiercely to maintain. ■

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