

# ***Lupinus Homo* – Classical Mythology reshaping intergenerational and gender conflict in *The Power of the Dog* by Jane Campion (2021)**

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## **Abstract**

*The Power of the Dog* by Jane Campion (2021), with a screenplay adapted from the novel of the American writer Thomas Savage (*Salt Lake City 1915 – 2003*) is a powerful work that reflects on family tensions, intergenerational relationships, brotherhood, and the conflict between real and expected sexual identities, in a Genesisiac and wild environment (American western landscape), where humanity and animality cross each other and collide.

With this text, it is our objective to show how the film adapts the autobiographical novel by Thomas Savage, that is, to analyse the relationship between the film and the homonymous literary novel and, above all, to explore the role of the founding myth of Rome – the founding brotherhood of Romulus and Remus, the children of the she-wolf, then violently dismantled, so that the city and the community could prosper. In this sense, the Montana ranch, the centre of interpersonal tensions generated by the destabilizing presence of the feminine, is, from the perspective of the Reception Studies of ancient mythology, the microcosm of a community stuck to the stigma of stereotypes of a masculinity closed on its limits.

**Keywords:** Classical Reception Studies, Family, Homosexuality, Mythology, Romulus and Remus

## **Introduction**

### **Tragical patterns in *Power of The Dog* of Jane Campion: broken brotherhood; broken parentality**

After a twelve year silence, Jane Campion presented, in 2021, *The Power of The Dog* - a revisited western based on Thomas Savage's 1967 novel<sup>1</sup>. It was filmed in the arid landscapes of Montana, in an environment of male dominance. The protagonist and villain (Benedict Kumberbach in the role of Phil Burbank); Jesse Plemons as George Burbank, Phil's younger brother, having the young Australian actor Kodi Smit-McPhee, in the role of Peter Gordon, the antagonist and hero, George's stepson. The relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist evolves from a spontaneous mutual antipathy and repulsion to a calculated closeness and intimacy, which will result in the villain protagonist's catastrophe and revenge for the suffering caused by Phil Burbank to his sister-in-law, Rose Gordon, played by actress Kirsten Dunst.

In the background, there can be found functional references to the literary and dramatic genre of

Tragedy: a chorus, consisting of the ranch cowboys and workers, who witness and judge the characters and the relationships they weave between each other; the "Patriarch-Gods", with a divine status, the usually absent parents of the Burbanks brothers, the Old Lady and the Old Gentleman, with scarce but eloquent presences on the scene.

In fact, the significance of these ancestors is expressed by their absence: they live, by choice, in a luxury hotel in Salt Lake City. So, they left the ranch in the care of the dysfunctional brotherhood of Phil and George. Likewise, Romulus and Remulus are the descendants of a powerful family, with gods and kings (Mars, Rea Silvia, Numitor, king of Alba Longa), but they were abandoned to their fate. They prospered together, but the burden of the past and the mission of a future to be built has split them apart to the point that one of them had to die. The *hybris* and the plot of the tragic hero (a negative hero, a villain hounded by a structural *hamartia* (tragic failure), which we understand here to be Phil, who chooses to oppose the generational renovation of the ranch. The *peripeteia*, the sudden reversal of fortune of the tragic hero; followed by the *catástrofe* (Phil goes from leader to man fatally wounded by a physical disease, a metaphor for his character illness). We also have room for *catharsis*. The funeral ceremonies dedicated to Phil and the dialogues between the characters represent a moment of reconciliation by order of the Patriarch-Gods we spoke before. Also Peter's monologue, in off-screen voice, concluding the film, sums up morality: he, invested as an angel of justice, overrides the hero's *hybris* and re-establishes order in the polis (regarding the social function of classical tragedy), but also in the kingdom (regarding the mythological narrative of Rome's origin)<sup>2</sup>. In this matter, the ranch is, symbolically, a familial and a political unity in a starting point, in the fragile moments of its inception and in choosing the best leadership model to ensure continuity.

In a mythical past, not represented in the film, the exiled and distant Old Gent and Old Lady (the Patriarch-Gods) abandoned the harshness of life on the ranch that brought them fortune to sons, Phil and George. These ones remain united by a symbolic orphanhood, by the mission to make the house and the legacy received prosper. In a way, it is a paralysing legacy and a non- virtuous fraternity. Intrigue can also be found as the triggering element of the *plot*, initiated by the crisis that shatters the vital brotherhood between Phil and George: the gentle younger Burbank brother, unexpectedly, marries Rose Gordon, the widow of a suicidal doctor. With her comes their son, an intelligent and shy man, formerly called by Phil and

by the cowboys employed on the ranch “Sissy”; “little lady”<sup>3</sup>, “Ms. Nancy”; “faggot”. This young boy is very conscious of his duty to care for and protect his mother.

The two brothers, united in the legacy they have received, diverge on the path to follow: Phil, the elder, constantly relives the episodes from the past that brought them together. George suffers from the loneliness to which Phil’s haughtiness and misanthropy has dragged him to. The brotherhood changes from being virtuous to becoming pathological when, due to Phil’s violent character, prevents his brother from living a happy marriage with Rose and, through the marital bond, promote the continuity of the ranch with new generations.

Finally, Peter, Rose’s son, solves the problem: aware that his mother’s happiness and marriage cannot survive the toxicity of Phil’s brotherly oppression, he pushes the latter into catastrophe. In this sense, family relationships are questioned in their various dimensions: on the one hand, the symbolic orphanhood of the Burbank brothers feeds their distorted brotherhood; on the other hand, Peter’s love for his mother is intensified by the traumatic suicide of his biological father and the and the promise to protect her. His “kindness” depends on his ability to protect the fragile. The strength that John identifies in his son as capable of causing hurt, must be directed to protect the weak, in a reconstruction of filial *pietas*: Firstly, we must protect our most beloved one’s (cf. Sl 22,20 “Deliver my darling from the power of the dog”, 2h1’).

In the novel, the last words between father and son reinforce the handover from a defeated father leaving his son the mission to protect, with his strength, those he loves, in a clear anticipation of the final events between Phil and Peter which will fix the familial difficulties<sup>4</sup>.

### The myth of the founding of Rome in the path of the Burbank family

Jane Campion preserves the narrative potential of the novel, being conservative in her adaptation<sup>5</sup>. She herself acknowledged that the film stemmed from a deep admiration for John Savage’s novel, which she read compulsively. In her interviews, she is explicit in considering the autobiographical character of the novel, having even visited the ranch where the young Savage is said to have lived. The author also emphasises the theme of repressed homosexuality, something that transpires as structural in the filmic character of Phil. The film is also quite conservative in the presentation of the temporal and spatial sets, keeping the narrative line in a mimetic effort to follow the axes of the novel<sup>6</sup>. We identify an enormous clarity and formal definition in the separation of the scenes according to the spaces of the action (interior of the house/exterior; city/ wilderness)<sup>7</sup>.

The Burbanks’ ranch is a stronghold of human civilization in an extreme space: the Patriarch-Gods bequeathed to their children the prototype of a primary community, congregating men, cowhands, for the work of raising cattle and taking care of the land. Since

this is a revisitation of the Western<sup>8</sup>, In J. Campion’s characterisation of the ranch, and particularly of the interior spaces of the house, she reinforces the idea of it being a frontier, where the seed of a civilised and cultured humanity was established: the piano, the table service, the presence of the maids, the upholstered chairs, the chessboard, the floor tapestry, the paintings on the wall, the bathroom with white chine, they all refer to an effort at being civilised sown by the Burbanks. In the novel, the Burbank’s ranch is presented like the first place with electricity in the region. All these decorative efforts to preserve a comfortable way of life seem to be polluted and abused by Phil’s brutal manners: he does not clean himself, he advances with is heavy cowboy boots and leather and furry clothes as an animal disguise, with noisible footsteps and loud voice.

This deliberate drive towards civilisation on the part of the Burbank patriarchs manifests itself when they send the brothers to Yale University: the intelligent Phil graduates, but prefers to return at kind of primal brutality and wildness that he never got rid of and that befits the Ranch’s original moment. Phil is, to this extent, a character averse to evolution. The “fatso”, “gordo” (sic) and limited George was not successful in his academic life and remained in the second line of a possessive brother. However, he maintained a polite and discreet character, just the opposite of the male stridency of his brother.

Furthermore, the film’s editing makes formal use of appropriately numbered theatrical scene separators (like stage curtains in a theatre): I-at the ranch, gathering of cattle, preparations for the departure to Beech (*characters presentation*). II -at the ranch, taming of the horses. George and Rose marry; Phil’s hostility toward Rose begins (*first plot*). III- in Herndon, at the inn where Rose and George settle Peter in Herndon to continue his studies IV- Rose drives down the street in Herndon to spend the holidays at the ranch; Phil’s aggressiveness extends to Peter (*second plot*). V- At the ranch, the ranch community gathers for a picnic; Phil changes his attitude towards Peter (*peripeteia*). Peter’s action precipitates Phil’s death (*catastrophe*) and, at the funeral ceremonies, the *catharsis*. In the film, the real motivations of Peter’s attitudes toward Phil are only completely revealed, and shared with the audience, at the ends, which permit us to place this moment as an *anagnorisis*. In this way, the narrative structure of the film follows a schematic line that can easily correspond to the parts of a formal classical tragedy, according to the Aristotelian theory<sup>9</sup>.

The simplicity and clearness also mark the scarcity of the words employed by the characters: the landscape, the actions, gestures and exchange of glances between the characters are valued as coherent holders of meaning, in which, more important than what is said (*logos*), is what is done (*praxis*), that is, the acts and gestures of the characters on stage. In this matter, Campion’s adaptation of Savage’s novel masterly captured the narrator’s words and thoughts, as well as the character’s direct speeches, selecting and transforming them into filmic expressivity.

As we said, the adaptation of Thomas Savage's novel to the film script favoured Jane Campion's tragic structuring: it concentrated time and space: for example, in the novel we get to see the depth of George's suffering as he grew up. Unattractive, shy, he was prey to his brother's controlling sobriety (Savage 1967,79) sic. Phil's point of view: "All George had to do was look at himself in the mirror to know that the girlies wanted was not him, but his name and money"). Elsewhere, the Burbank brothers' entrance into college is narrated in an analepse. Phil attracts the attention of fraternities and girls (Savage, 1967,103) "like priced beef", which he loudly rejects. Two years later, when George followed his brother's footsteps, he wished and prepared himself to be welcomed by the Yale academic students community and fraternities. No one showed up, perhaps because of his older brother's attitude. But the burly, big-footed George believed his inadequacy was to blame. He conformed to loneliness until Rose appeared in his life, and saved him from "being alone" (Savage 1967, 108 "I was just going to say how nice it is not to be alone". At this point, romance and film are brought together: the newlywed couple is having a picnic on the way from Herndon to the ranch, and Rose teaches him how to dance. Jane Campion deleted episodes, somewhat redundant due the filmic economy. For example, the story of Rose Gordon's first family (Savage, 1967, ch. II), when she was married to John Gordon, a physician, alcoholic and suicidal. Educated and kind, maladjusted to Beech's rancher society, he regrets that the town has no "civic pride" (sic Savage, 1967, 39 "from the Latin *civitas* meaning city"). Beech residents do not plant or water flowers, and they let rubbish pile up. He praises his family, wife and son, because they they bring beauty to their house with flowers, and Peter has the skill to make nice and realistic paper flowers. His pride in his son<sup>10</sup> leads to the embarrassment of hearing a cynical and aggressive rancher, someone proficient in ancient Greek, calling his son "Sissy". This sparks a fight in the saloon, with John being humiliated by the bully, yet quite cultivated, rancher. This significant episode in the novel is overlooked in the film, for important reasons to the considering main focus of the film. In fact, John Gordon and Phil Burbank knew each other and fought at the saloon, for petty reasons, nevertheless important enough to justify Peter's father's fall into depression and suicide. The magnitude of this fact, essential in the novel, represented another motivational factor for Peter's revenge, besides what the director wanted to highlight.

From this episode onwards, John Gordon is in crisis: he admires his beloved son's talent for observing and reproducing naturalistic and anatomical drawings, but fears for the misunderstanding of a world that expects other qualities from a man. This background does not appear in the film, but its communicative potential, which in the book is deposited in the focus of an omniscient narrator, is reflected in the calculated closeness between Phil and Peter, when the latter tells him his childhood memories, and, in a way, roots his strength of character and parental pietas. The

two share secrets from their past, models of bruised paternal affection. They draw closer in the memory of phrases-teachings that have marked them. Phil talks about Bronko Henry, Peter about John Gordon:

PHIL: Bronko Henry told me that a man's made by patience and odds against him.

PETER: My Father said obstacles, and you had to try and remove them.

PHIL: Another way to put it. Well Pete, you've got obstacles, that's a fact, Pete-me-bye.

PETER: Obstacles? Peter's eyes are thoughtful.

PHIL: Take your Maw today or any day. How she's on the sauce. [...] I'm guessing you know she's been half shot all summer.

PETER: I know she has. She didn't use to drink.

PHIL: Didn't she now? (Using an Irish accent)

PETER: No, she never did.

PHIL: But your Paw Pete?

PETER: My Father?

PHIL: I guess he hit the bottle pretty hard. The booze.

PETER: Until right at the end. Then he hung himself. I found him, I cut him down but he was, he was gone.

[...]

PETER (CONT'D) He used to worry that I wasn't kind enough, that I was too strong.

PHIL: You, too strong? He got that wrong, you poor kid. Things will work out for you yet.

In another moment, the film expands the novel's direct discourse, but, while staying true to what remains explicit in the words of the omniscient narrator, focused on revealing Phil's thoughts, it concentrates and, in the film, gives substance to Phil's hatred of Rose, using two different moments of Phil's speech in the novel, merging them together in the film:

(Savage, 1967): "...Phil continued to smile, than said clearly: I'm not your brother."

(movie) Phil I'm not your brother and you're not my sister, you're a schemer. It worked on George but it won't work on me.

It is also only hinted Rose's dedication to clearing the vicinity of the house of the rubbish accumulated by years of neglect, and her effort to create a beautiful garden in a land so hostile, helped by her son. J. Campion changed others, merging them into one: among the characters who appear in the film are the episode of the native american and his son who, in a horse wagon, seek to visit the birthplace of their tribe and the tomb of their ancestors, and are blocked by Phil, buying the dried furs destined to be burned. In the film, Rose exchanges them for the handmade gloves of embroidered pelica (1h40'). In Savage's novel, it is a van that comes from the city and engages in the tanning business, and Rose sells the furs for \$30. So, two different novel episodes resumed in a single one, at the film.

Also the opening episode of Savage's novel, when Phil is castrating, without wearing gloves, with clean precision, fifteen hundred calves, is found in act V, when Rose and Peter arrive for the boy to spend his first summer at the ranch (1h). However, the narrative

line and the most relevant events are preserved, letting us capture an expressive cinematic adaptation of an excellent novel<sup>11</sup>.

Proceeding to the content analysis, we find indications in the film, some more subtle, others more evident, which allow us to glimpse a dialogue with Roman mythology and ancient culture that we think to be relevant for the hermeneutics of the film. Our point of view is that Phil's repressed and trapped homosexuality, combined with a visible exhibition of a stereotyped homophobia (accompanied by his cowhand workers) is more a symptom of a dysfunctional global picture that affects the male characters as members of a recently established community, condemned to disappearance and generational intransmissibility. That is why the arrival of a lady with the status of spouse is so menacing to the fixed male structure of relationship at the ranch.

It is in this sense that we consider the evocation of the myth of the foundation of Rome, as an explanatory strategy from our point of view. Phil walks ahead of the other cowboys, towards the saloon (8'34"). He directs a contemptuous glance at the women offering their services there, while they serve the drinks.

Phil awaits his brother for the toast-ritual of mission accomplished. The men ask him if something should be said, and he says no, without his brother the ritual is not fulfilled. George arrives late and refuses his brother's glass. He seems to be far of those paralysing rituals of male solidarity (George drinks the spirits in two similar sips while Phil downs his in one, desecrating the libation ritual). His brother scolds him:

(9'47") PHIL: Twenty-five years ago, where were you George boy?

(George babbles):

GEORGE: with you

PHIL: i'll tell you, a chubby know-nothing, too dumb to get through college. People helped you fatso, one person in particular taught me and you ranching so we damn well succeeded.

GEORGE: Yes, yes Bronko Henry.

PHIL: So to us brothers, Romulus and Remus and the wolf who raised us.

GEORGE: To Bronko.

PHIL (CONT'D): Il Lupo.

The two brothers are linked by an affective orphanhood. Their parents (like Mars and the Rea Silvia, respectively god and priestess of the goddess Vesta in Rome) were soon absent from caring for this brotherhood. They grew up and protected themselves as best they could, Phil, stronger and wiser; George, less gifted, somehow complementing each other, but protected by a mythical figure, not a she-wolf, as in the case of Romulus and Remus, but a Wolf (in Phil's words). This tutelary character, Bronko Henry, has its own altar in the ranch, to which Phil pays tribute. The fact that the Romulus and Remus myth is distorted here, twisting the maternal figure of the She-Wolf into the patriarchal figure of the Wolf (the alpha male, the leader of the wolf pack) refers us to Phil's inability to tolerate the opposite sex. His misogyny extends to

his mother, from whom he cannot tolerate the smell of toiletries in the bathroom, in such a repulsive manner that he never uses it and explodes when Rose Gordon, his sister-in-law, enters his world.

The two brothers, so close that they share the same room until adulthood, are heirs to the ranch that lies on the edge of civilised land. The last humanity before mountains, that are as beautiful as they are terrible in their magnificence, solitude and dangers within; a vast and inclement climate, in a desert landscape traversed by herds of cattle and solitary men, surrounded at its borders by the others that are payed with Phil's hate: poor emigrants farmers, shepders and native american reservation camps. We are, therefore, in a land of extremes. Phil is bound to this allegiance to the past. In the Bronko Henry's evocation scene we have just narrated, we notice that George is more detached from this bond.

George is able to see the present. He comforts Rose, when she wept over the way they treated her son, and scolds her brother for his brutality. The brother defends himself with the pedagogical argument: "someone should toughen the boy up".

In Phil's vision, men should merit that brutal nature. In scene II, while the cowboys are distracted doing stunts on their horses, Bill is followed by three cowboys and they remain staring at the mountains. The shadow of a dog projected onto the mountainous terrain, only visible by Bronko Henry; Phil and, later, the sagacious Peter:

BOBBY: (a cowboy) What is that you see there Phil?

BOBBY: Are there rats up there?

JOCK: (another cowboy) Has anyone else seen what you seen Phil?

BOBBY: George... ?

PHIL: Nope, not him.

BOBBY: Come on Phil what is it? There is something there right?

PHIL: Not if you can't see it.

J. Campion has captured in the film the aspect of Phil chthonic attachment to the territory he considers his own: in the novel, he rises and watches over palisades, preventing illegal entries of poor emigrant farmers and native americans. In the film, this defence of the boundaries of his property appears diluted in the work of the ranch (1h32', setting up palisades; 1h42' he becomes angry when he learns that the leather has been given away, although its final destination was fire). He displays *auctoritas*, defending his territory and property like a king would do for his kingdom. His legitimacy, like that of the founding twins, comes from transcendental initiation into the interpretation of space. Phil inherited from Bronko Henry the ability, the supernatural power, to see the dog, the domesticated wolf useful to communities, in the mountains he considers his own. His brother does not have this mystical gift, and, in this sense, Phil stands alone in the revelation of the dog as the symbolic animal of a fragile community.

Simultaneously, George claims space, geographical and social, outside the established territorial and formal boundaries from which he comes for. He is more willing to the transformative and evolutionary mix. In Beech, for instance, he helps the busy Rose Gordon serving customers, like a waiter (24'46").

Friendly and affable, his brother considers him limited in resources, the "underdog" of the pack. He is unable to visualise the barking dog in the projected shadows of the mountain, an illumination that only Bronko, Phil, and later, Peter received. Instinct of possession, protection, affection, and complaisance are feelings that Phil manifests towards George. When George returns to the ranch, his brother interrogates him, and reminds him of the past: (28h40") the girls his mother brought home as potential relations bumped into Phil's crass cynicism. For him, his brother's need for female companionship can be solved by going to prostitutes. The male brotherhood should not be disturbed by the permanence of a woman on the ranch. So, Rose's arrival at the ranch (39'18") exposes Rose to Phil's violent exclusion, but it's also a sign of the separation of goals between the two brothers. Rose will not take part of the sisterhood or integrate the community:

Rose: Well brother Phil, it's good to have arrived.  
PHIL I'm not your brother and you're not my sister, you're a schemer. It worked on George but it won't work on me.

The brotherhood broken by Rose's presence leaves traces of tension in Phil: the empty bed beside him, the lock on the bathroom that closes, the wood of the furniture that creaks at the sound of intimacy between brother and sister-in-law (39'30-40"). Phil takes refuge in his sacred place, Bronko Henry's saddle-altar, which he compulsively polishes; he purifies himself in the secret lake. There, the primitive man covers himself with the regenerating earth, like the chthonic character he is, and by remaining half submerged, he assumes a posture of a predatory animal (42'25").

Rose's presentation dinner to the patriarchs of the family and the state (the governor and his wife are invited) constitutes a key moment for the affirmation of the new family, initiated by George, and the courage to renew generational stagnation (52'03"). It is a moment sabotaged, firstly, by Phil's malice, who remains seated on his saddle-altar, secondly, by the insecurity of Rose, who gives in to Phil's negativity. The Patriarch-Gods leave the awkward dinner (59'20"). In Savage's novel, they confess to each other their disillusion, that we can perceive by gestures, in the film.

Campion assumed, in interviews and commentaries about the film, that he sought, in her first foray into male main characters, to establish the male counterpoint to *The Piano* (1993), in which her focus was on a female character<sup>12</sup>. In this interview (2'40-5") she describes how she came upon Thomas Savage's novel (1967), interpreting it as autobiographical.

Thomas Savage also grew up on a cattle ranch after his mother's remarriage, so the existence of a "demonic

step-uncle" bullying the teenage Thomas Savage is a plausible character. Or, we think it more likely, it was just Savage's way of exorcising, in literature, something he still did not know or prefer not to reveal, that is the gay identity. After he got married, started a family and already had a career as a writer, he acknowledged to be gay. This was a common pathway in public and private lives. In this matter, we think that the identification of Peter Gordon as the novel's author's alter-ego, dealing with a repressed homosexuality is, somehow, limited. Young Savage's, as wlee as young Peter's sexual identity may be only a part of the personality of this uprooted young man, starting over in a rough environment, facing new relationships and the challenges of adaptation. J. Campion gives to Phil Burbank an openly homophobic personality, fighting with its own unrevealed homosexuality: the excess in the exteriorisation of the stereotypical traits of masculinity (physical strenght, resistance to pain, direct and brutal speech, leadership, domination over the group as the alpha-male, the rejection of the rules of politeness etiquette and hygiene; the refusal to dance (film 18'26"); aggressiveness towards females (film 32'20" after learning that his brother had married, he beats the mare and calls her a "whore" and "flat face bitch") correspond to strategies disguising his gay nature before the community.

But one wonders if Phil Burbank might not, symbolically, also represent Savage himself: locked in his identity confusion and repression, and therefore as someone justifying his defensive behaviour at a more immature stage of his life, searching for self-recognition in a landscape and a time when male roles were more categorised, and had more defined boundaries when compared to now. Phil is a villain of paradoxical traits: the smartest of the brothers, the one with a natural gift for music, playing on his banjo any melody he hears. He graduated in Classical Studies from Yale, with honours. He collected with the meticulousness of a scientist spearheads and fossils that he found in his land (1h10'11"). Phil's paradox is well expressed, when the Patriarchs of the family and the town (parents, governor and governor's wife) insist on meeting the Burbank brother who "can talk to cows in Latin". Phil's death, the dead of the repressed gay man locked in his world of classically masculine role models, may represent, in Savage's book, the liberation of the author's person as an outspoken gay<sup>13</sup>.

Raised as a good son and brought up by his mother, Peter has peculiar interests: as his mother likes flowers, he mounts them on paper. Politely, he serves the rough cowboys who fill his mother's dining room with neatness and grooming, leading Phil to ridicule him in front of his men, calling him a "little lady" and using one of his flowers to light his cigarette. We then see him outside spinning a hula-hoop bow in what appears as a gesture of frustration at the collective humiliation he has endured (15'40").

But this silent, stoic boy is capable of killing the chickens his mother serves. Heir to his father's medical books, he dissects rabbits and applies the *coup de grace* to one that has been wounded with a precision

that impresses Phil. His arrival at the ranch (1h02') provokes Phil to repeat the insults, but, unexpectedly, Phil's obedient border collie plays with Peter, which surprises Phil.

He integrates harmoniously into space, without disturbing it, with discreet steps, the curiosity and analytical spirit of a scientist: he observes the birds, the flowers, plays with the dogs. He shows himself to not be disturbed by the bullying. In moments of conviviality of the ranch community, Peter displays fortitude and indifference to insults and whistles when he walks, in a calm and serene step, to go and observe some birds (1h17'59"). This temperament leads Phil to a change of attitude: recognising his potential as an apprentice, and seeking also to free him from the evils of a female education (1h35'37"), he assumes himself as his mentor, just as Bronko Henry had done with him. The glances exchanged show Phil and Peter's mutual curiosity, but also an ambiguous game between master and disciple, between the hunter and the prey.

Already in the stable, Phil allows Peter to sit in the saddle-altar of Bronko Henry, and the passing on of the testimony begins. Phil chooses Peter to pass on the wisdom of the territory given to him by Bronko Henry, the ability to relate to the territory (1h21'12"). Phil sees in Peter the insensitivity to men and the sensitivity to both nature and territory that Bronko and Phil had, as well as the ability to see what normal men couldn't see. They belong to a community of priestly and celibatarian males, invulnerable to women.

Phil's vulnerability to Peter, and their mutual affinities drag him into catastrophe. Peter is, first of all, loyal to his mother, whom he wants to save from the self-destruction caused by Phil's cruelty. Only one of them, Phil or Rose, can remain in George's orbit. The sharpness that Phil admires so much in Peter makes him vulnerable to a trap: he gives him some raw hide, in reparation for his mother's gesture of having offered to strangers the raw leather that Phil considered his own. But that was the hide he had removed from a cow that had died of anthrax. The kinship and identification between the two, through the intense exchange of glances, the lingering gesture of Peter's bare hand on Phil's arm and Phil's hand on Peter's neck consummate a deceptive union (1h45' "PHIL: I wanted to be like you, Phil. PHIL: It's damn good of you, Pete").

Phil needs the leather to finish the rope he promised as a gift to Peter, and it is Peter who cut the last pieces for this one. Infected with anthrax, Phil dies in a few days, by a tragic carelessness impossible to be committed by the cynical Phil. Although he always worked with bare hands, he never went near animals killed by anthrax.

In a way, Phil's inhumanity and coldness, manifested in his savage misanthropy, guaranteed his invulnerability. By creating a bond with Peter, whom he received as his apprentice and successor, endowed with the same qualities that allowed him to see the dog in the mountains, ready to receive his legacy, he unprotects himself and is annihilated.

George, the "underdog", is a character who imposes himself by the few lines we heard from him and by his

constancy. We perceive a devalued power not seen by the others: he makes brief comments on his brother's brutality, imposes a consummate marriage on him, devalues Phil's complaints about his wife's greed and alcoholism (1h41' he takes care of his wife, emptying the bottle of whiskey that she keeps on the bed), saying only that 1h43 "Rose is not well, Phil. She is ill"). In the novel (Savage 1967, 128), Phil's condescending leadership over his brother manifests itself in the academic journey of the two. Phil advises George to drop out, in the face of poor school results, because:

(sic) "If I was you, I'd drop out the end of the year. You better face up to the fact that you ain't got the equipment for this so-called high education. No good battering your brain against a stone Wall, kid".

Thoughtfulness emanates from George's gestures. The "pack" or chorus of cowhands sense George's quiet power: no braggart or bullier, no passionate moods, serene and prescient (Savage 1967, 127 sic):

Still they weren't comfortable in the bunkhouse if George was abroad; he had a queer authority, without even knowing it. An ability to upset you, maybe because he so seldom opened his talker, and his silence made you look in upon yourself.

Neither the book nor the film explicitly addresses homosexual acts or behaviour, remaining on the threshold of allusion or suggestion<sup>14</sup>. However, the gestures that accompany the final dialogue between Phil and Peter, in which the latter entwines the rope he wants to give Peter as a gift, sealing the friendship, have erotic suggestions: the exchange of glances, the exchange of confidences, the cigarette that circulates between the two, Peter's enigmatic but wet-lipped smile. It is an act of domestication and seduction in progress from an *ephebus* to a harried and wild creature, a wolf-man, who allows himself to be struck in his repressed vulnerability.

Phil's sudden death means the unlocking of the Burbank family's future. We find, in the film and the novel, this sense of restored continuity and even relief, only possible with the elimination of Phil, the wild brother, so that the civilised brother can prosper and, with him, the ranch and family harmony.

At the funeral ceremonies, the grief-stricken but serene-faced Old Lady emotionally hands Rose the family rings (1h57'). It thereby legitimises her as a full member of the family, custodian and transmitter of the Burbank legacy into the future. In the novel, the episode appears narrated in the dialogue between the two Patriarch-Gods, on return to Salt Lake City, after the funeral. In a sense, the two viewed Phil's death as an inevitable fatality, hopeful and liberating (1h58' George conveys to his parents the invitation to spend Christmas at the ranch with them).<sup>15</sup>

At the ranch, Peter circulates, in the company of his collie friend, and the barking of the dogs is heard. In the living room, he opens a book with the *Officium*

*Defunctorum*, which contains SL 22 inc. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?". This Psalm usually accompanies not only funeral rites but every moment of challenge, and tribulation of a suffering soul pleading for help from the power of God, which is quite appropriate for the moment that simultaneously is happening at the city. Peter reads verse 20, the same one we will encounter at the beginning of the novel as a significant call (2h1) "Deliver my soul from the sword, my darling from the power of the dog".

Peter emerges as a god of justice, the one who drives the power of the dog, i.e. Phil, the wolf-man, away from his mother (Savage 1967, 307 sic "because the dog was dead.").

In this way, the film ends with Peter looking at the couple restored in harmony, George and Rose, in a tender kiss, and placing under the bed the rope that Phil had made for him.

## Conclusion

### How to neutralize the power of the lupinus men.

The film raises the issue of the cultural myth of the creation of American culture and civilisation, taking the territory of the West as the space in which identities are defined but also in which the traumatic experiences of the past flow, related to individual solitude in the face of family dissolution and the vastness of a space to be explored, on the frontier between the civilised and the savage<sup>16</sup>.

Generational ruptures, by death (Peter's father) or by abandonment (the parents of the Burbank brothers) give birth to characters conditioned by loneliness. Each responded differently to the trauma of abandonment: Peter became the vigilante, George shook off the past and sought to remake a future, Phil crystallised, in the memory of a surrogate father-friend, Bronko Henry. The paths of these three characters are not compatible.

As a revisited Western, reformulation of the classic model with interesting results (e. g. Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*; Hang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*) sough often to question male traditional roles and the myth of the invulnerable and emotionless characters that inhabit a territory also harsh. We also find in Jane Campion's film a reversal of the myth of the American hero: the strong, insensitive, rugged, masculine, belligerent characters, gives way to more complex ones, bearers of less stereotypical sensibilities.

In this conclusion, we want to return to the central argument of our text, now within the framework of American mythology associated with the re-emergence of a new world, associated with the Western as a filmic product.

During the film, we are impressed by the dramatic nature of the character Phil: in backlighting, his haughty body stands out, his legs covered in animal skin. Instinctive and irascible, attentive to the signs of nature, Phil seems to be adapted to this primal world, which he makes and in which he is made of, in perfect bravery: he is the *lupinus homo*, a man-animal, wolf, because he is the adoptive son of a wolf (Bronko Henry).

In this context of a civilisation in its infancy, the Burbank Ranch resembles Rome: a city conquered on the swamps of the Tiber river, a place of refuge for the twins Romulus and Remus, adopted sons of the she-wolf, pursued by the gods and hostile neighbours. They build palisades and define a territory for the sacred and inviolable space of the city. Other young boys, equally undesirable in their communities of origin, join them, in a group of male solidarity<sup>17</sup>. According to the legend, Romulus, will kill his brother, applying justice against his uncontrolled and disrespectful brother Remus.

After the settlement of the territory, Romulus and his companions realise that the city will have no future if they do not ensure generational continuity. In other words, women are missing if the city is to progress. In the legend of the origins of Rome, the integration of the female element takes place through a kidnapping of the Sabine women, followed by war and a treaty with this neighboring tribe. This myth intends to explain the marriage ritual and the fact that women in Rome are companions and co-heirs of citizenship in an harmonic and prosperous city.

It is this capacity for integration of the feminine element that Phil does not have. As we said, his nature is mainly misogynistic. This background strongly hostile to the female element will, if uncontrolled, sacrifice the happiness of the brother, the ranch and thus the microcosm of an original civilisation it represents. For the community to progress, man has to crush the wolf within himself, and silence the barking dog, in a surrender to domestication and culture.

## Final Notes

<sup>1</sup> The film received the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival 2021; Best Film BAFTA 2022; Hollywood Foreign Press Association Golden Globes for best film and best directing 2022; Oscar for best directing 2022 and the award for best film, best director and best adapted screenplay at the Critics' Choice Movie Awards 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Winkler 1985, 523.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. a stereotypical way of indicating the female gender: the mare "whore" and flat face bitch"; the mother, haughty and untouched goddess (sic Old Lady); the sister-in-law, a "schemer" and "gold digger".

<sup>4</sup> Savage 1967, 47: the last dialogue "JOHN:...you must be kind, be kind. I think the men you will become could hurt people terribly, because you're strong. Do you understand kindness, Peter? PETER: "I'm not sure whether i do, father. JOHN: well then: to be kind is try to remove obstacles in the way of those who love or need you. PETER: I understand that".

<sup>5</sup> Stam, Raengo 2004 1 "film, we are reminded, is a form of writing that borrows from other forms of writing".

<sup>6</sup> Monaco 2009, 51; 59 "film is limited to a shorter narration than the novel"; like painting, prose narrative has in the twentieth century turned away from mimesis and toward self-consciousness".

<sup>7</sup> Borden, Essman 2000, 30-41.

<sup>8</sup> Carter 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Aristoteles, *Poetics* VI, 1448b-1453b.

<sup>10</sup> Savage 1967, 40 "a boy twelve studying the drawings of Vesalius (Andreas Vessalius séc. XVI, father of modern medical anatomy studies) and reading very deep material at the age of twelve years. Will you imagine that!".

<sup>11</sup> Stam, Raengo 2004, 45 "In the case of filmic adaptations of novels, to sum up (...) source-novel hypotexts are transformed by a complex series of operations: selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation, popularization, reaccentuation, transculturalization (...) 46 "the linguistic energy of literary writing turns into the audiovisual -kinetic-performative energy of the adaptation".

<sup>12</sup> In its own words "almost a companion piece to *The Piano* - "an exploration of masculinity in maybe the way that *The Piano* was of femininity». In "Dame Jane Campion: the power of the filmmaker" Saturday Morning, 13 November 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Fojas 2011, 93-101. *Brokeback Mountain*, by Ang Lee, 2005. This film, also a revisited western set in contemporary times, explores the same stereotypical categories of masculinity that are erected by the victims as barriers of defence against the violence of a community strongly averse to homosexuality. Camouflaging the true self therefore involves reinforcing to the point of caricature the expected traits of masculine behaviour.

<sup>14</sup> The most obvious, yet treated in such a way as to suggest ambiguity: (1h12'20") Phil bathes in the secret place of the two brothers' childhood. Lying in the sun, he caresses himself with the monogrammed handkerchief bearing BH's name, in a masturbatory suggestion. When Phil tells Peter he was saved by his mentor Bronko Henry, "more than a friend" because he saved his life: sleeping on the mountain, he saved Phil from hypothermia when they slept naked exchanging body heat (1h48"). In the novel, more than an explicitly evoked homosexuality, signs of the male complicity that Phil absolutely tries to preserve are evident, a world in which the presence of women is a deregulating element. More than homoerotic affection, misogyny is relevant (about the impossibility of sharing the bathroom with his mother Savage 1967, 101: "of course, Peter never did go in there, somehow uncomfortable with the Old Lady's Things, her scents and colognes, her pear's soaps and monogrammed towels. The place had the offensive odor of women...").

<sup>15</sup> Savage, 1967, 306. In the novel, the Old Lady confesses to her husband that she had expected such a strange event. And it manifests: just as she had always had Old Gent, Rose will also have George.

<sup>16</sup> Morris 2016, 136-144. "the cowboy; breaking from mother, orphanhood".

<sup>17</sup> Titus Livius, *Ab Vrbe Condita*, I, 4-8.

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"Brighter and clearer than anywhere else"- listen to Kim's Hill's interview with Dame Jane Campion here 20'48" podcast *Saturday Morning* <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/saturday/audio/2018820385/dame-jane-campion-the-power-of-the-filmmaker>, (consulted at 5 March, 2022).

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