

Trinity Hawkins

E 314J

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Jane Campion's Gods and Monsters

To touch is to feel in the world of *The Power of the Dog*. Campion's beings are interested in what's tactile. They seek to graze, to press a palm, to smooth a hand over, to press a finger into. Hands are a tool of both deliverance and destruction. In her first feature film in 12 years, auteur Jane Campion taps into the realm of what is natural to her - the unnatural. In the cinematic universe of Jane Campion, to be human is to be monstrous and ever is this seen as clearly as it is in *The Power of the Dog*.

We see a landscape of bodies, other ranchers, bathing in a stream together, uncaring. Then one of Phil, rancher on the terrain in which these characters live, riding alone along a pond with only his horse. He stops to undress, away from the rest. The shot is of him, alone. There is an almost ritualistic nature to this undress; he's done this before. Every touch is careful, tightly wound. The camera is tight on his face as he moves the cloth over him. This is a holy moment. Campion imbues the entire film with the sense that there is something wrong. Something has happened, something will happen, something is happening. The anticipation eats on the edge of every scene; but in this scene, the anticipation pauses. We are with Phil, lying in the reverie of the moment.

In the world of the film, we hear very little about the characters' relationship to modern organized religion. There is scripture recitation, but no scenes of a pastor, or pictures of Jesus. It is unimportant. Their gods are earthly and unseen. Phil's god is his ghost, Bronco Henry, and

while the film shows little to no physical consummation of desire, the emotional torment is the overarching impetus to his actions. Phil envelops himself within the memory of Bronco Henry within both that scene and throughout the film. Campion makes a deliberate choice to not show Bronco Henry; we have never seen God, we would not see Phil's. It is unimportant. What Campion deems important is how what's unseen impresses itself upon what is. Phil's desire for Bronco Henry is eternally unconsummated because he will never see him again. This in itself lays the groundwork for the masterful ending Campion crafts. Death is the final plane on which we must cross. In working to kill Phil, Peter delivers both his mother from the torment of being reminded of her precariousness while also delivering Phil from his ghost. In killing Phil, Peter performs an exorcism. Death is the only place he will be free.

In this film, along with the many of the other female auteurs seen this semester, Campion's own cinematic gaze is interested in what makes people tick. According to her, the line between what is holy and what is depraved is thin. Easy is the descent to hell, Campion says, and even easier is the freedom from what comes next.