

Body and Power: Analyzing the Body Narrative in the Movie The Power of the Dog from the Perspective of Image Symbols

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Abstract: Renowned director Jane Campion is celebrated for her distinctive films that offer a female perspective and emotional depth. Her Netflix film, “Canine Power”, even won her the Best Director award at the 94th Academy Awards. Campion consistently employs the human body as a potent storytelling tool, addressing complex societal issues. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of Campion’s use of the human body in her films. It employs literary and textual analysis methods, starting with the research’s significance, methodology, and existing scholarly context. Key concepts in cinematic body narrative theory are also explained. The paper dissects Campion’s body narrative techniques, emphasizing the symbolism in portraying bodily elements like limbs, facial expressions, and costumes. These elements serve as vessels conveying profound themes and connecting characters to the narrative. Moreover, it delves into the representation of the body and self-awareness from a feminist standpoint in Campion’s films, exposing the physical challenges within a patriarchal society and exploring themes of loss and identity crisis. The analysis also scrutinizes how the body symbolizes power structures. Finally, the paper explores the cultural significance in Campion’s body narrative, examining the interplay between physical and spatial dimensions in society. The research’s significance, methodology, and existing scholarly context.

Keywords: Jane Campion, *The Power of the Dog*, body narrative

1. Introduction

The film *The Power of the Dog*, directed by New Zealand’s Jane Campion and adapted from American author Thomas Savage’s novel of the same title, marks Campion’s initial venture into the traditionally masculine Western genre. This cinematic work is characterized by profound metaphorical expressions, where symbols assume a significant role. The intricate details of props, character development, scene construction, and narrative progression are replete with a multitude of symbolic elements.

This research paper focuses on the application of body narrative theory to the film *The Power of the Dog*. Despite the scarcity of existing literature on the film, it is evident that the available research lacks comprehensiveness. In the realm of film, the progression of the plot relies heavily on the movements and actions of the characters’ bodies. The body, serving as the primary vessel for character embodiment, plays a central and ubiquitous role in shaping the narrative. Typically, the body’s function in cinema involves conveying character traits and propelling the narrative forward.

Nevertheless, due to the inherent richness of bodily movements, they often possess the capacity to supplant plot content, presenting the audience with a wealth of non-verbal and visual communication. Consequently, the utilization and manifestation of body narrative theory in the realm of film and television are commonplace. Employing the theory can offer a fresh perspective on interpreting films, enriching existing research findings.

The advent of modernism has brought the aesthetics of the body to the forefront of film and television studies. Examining the art form of film through the lens of body narrative aesthetics holds practical significance. This paper seeks to integrate various theoretical frameworks, including psychoanalysis, film semiotics, and body narratology, primarily employing literary and textual research methods. It aims to provide a multifaceted exploration of body narrative within Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog*. Such an approach not only enhances our comprehension of Campion's cinematic work but also contributes to a deeper understanding of her as an artist. Furthermore, it holds research significance for the aesthetics of body narration within the realm of film.

2. Body as Narrative Codes

2.1. The Meaning of Character's Face

In the early 1920s, Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs garnered significant acclaim from Western film theorists for profound insights into the close-ups of faces in cinema. He was aptly dubbed “the poet laureate of close-ups of faces.” Balázs contended that the conveyance of human thoughts initially found expression through facial expressions, with language and gestures subsequently enhancing this form of non-verbal communication. Furthermore, face-to-face interaction provided a more intuitive means of communication, but with the advent of the printing press, written words gradually supplanted facial expressions as the primary conveyors of knowledge [1].

The emergence of cinema ushered in unprecedented possibilities for the exploration of facial expressions. In his work “Film Aesthetics,” Béla Balázs asserted that characters’ faces have the capacity to communicate sentiments that elude verbal expression. Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein similarly extolled the close-up in film for rediscovering the “silent language monologue of the face.” Facial expressions serve as the projection and presentation of emotions, with the intricacies of facial morphology offering a rich tapestry for the articulation of subconscious thoughts.

Jane Campion's film *The Power of the Dog* masterfully leverages facial expressions to unveil character depths and mental states, propelling the narrative forward. A pivotal moment occurs when Phil, having lost all animal hides, receives cowhide from Peter to weave ropes. In this exchange, Peter not only demonstrates his loyalty to Phil but also reveals his aspiration to emulate him, evoking profound emotions within Phil. The sudden warmth dispels Phil's sense of isolation, galvanizing him to craft a rope overnight as a token of his appreciation.

Within the dimly lit confines of the ranch hut at night, the contrast between Peter and Phil becomes starkly evident. Phil, positioned in the shadows, weaves the rope with his back turned to Peter, adopting a posture of relaxation and trust. In contrast, Peter was situated behind Phil, bathed in a warm yellow sidelight that obscures his facial expression, rendering it inscrutable [2]. A pivotal scene unfolds when Peter lights a cigarette, showcasing the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the two characters before the audience. As he takes a drag and passes the cigarette to Phil, his eyes exude a teasing and exhilarated quality, underscored by a palpable sexual tension. The act of smoking is laden with masculine symbolism, symbolizing the externalization of male power. The ensuing close-up shot captures Phil with a cigarette in his mouth, enshrouded in shadows, symbolizing his submission and vulnerability beneath Peter's dominance.

This nuanced portrayal underscores the intricate dynamics between the two characters, delineating Peter's inner strength and Phil's inherent fragility. Phil's contemplation of gifting the rope he painstakingly weaves to Peter until his eventual demise serves as a poignant testament to his emotional vulnerability and acknowledgement of his inability to match Peter's unwavering strength.

2.2. The Meaning of Arms

At the level of shaping the character image, it is the body that generates the character, including semantic and thematic meanings. This kind of body is not just a material body but a cultural body formed in the social context and cultural connection [3]. Director Jane Campion, in her movie "Piano Lesson", uses the piano as a symbol of the protagonist Ada's heart and spiritual world. The piano, as a symbol of industrial civilization, is in stark contrast to the life of New Zealand's aborigines. The process of human beings employing their hands to produce and play the piano is, moreover, a process of integrating limbs and tools. The foolish girl Ada manipulates the sound of the piano to convey her emotions and communicate with the external world [4].

The body language can convey the meaning of, etc. For example, the changes in the shape of the limbs of the characters in dance works can convey the strength and beauty of the human body. Through the expression of body language, the audience can intuitively perceive the character, living habits, and other characteristics of the characters. The phenomenological film theorist Sobchak believes that film is the subject of seeing and feeling. She proposed the "embodied quality of film". She said: "Our experience of a film is not through the eyes. We are seeing, understanding, and feeling the film with all our physical existence." Phil is different from the typical image of a cowboy in traditional Western movies. He sits on horseback all day or spends time in a tavern. He is excellent at manual work and likes to play musical instruments, especially the banjo. In the camera, Phil, as a "qualified" cowboy, neatly disembowels the cow and exfoliates the skin to dry. The cowhide is carefully cut, kneaded, braided, and woven into a leather rope. Phil's body is concealed with mud, and he insists on not wearing gloves during the castration of calves, which is a metaphor for his hiding and castration of his homosexuality [5]. Peter is also a thoughtful person who is superior at masterly work. He can generate exquisite paper flowers to decorate the dining table, and he can calmly dissect rabbits with a scalpel. When his mother asks him if he can help butcher the chicken, he looks weak but states "no problem" in an understatement, and he finishes the chicken killing and gutting perfectly. Rose got soft gloves from the Indians, and a close-up of her wearing gloves in the picture symbolizes her longing for a pleasant and cheerful life. At the end of the film, Phil wets the cowhide rope in a bucket and soaks his hands in water, and the cowhide infected by anthrax bacteria touches the wound on his hand, but he is still weaving the cowhide rope with his hands overnight without recognizing it. It symbolizes the end of his gradual death, and this cowhide rope will be given to Peter, which embodies an iteration of "power" and is, in addition, the evil of human nature as a metaphor for the theme *The Power of the Dog*. In *The Power of the Dog*, the audience can equally feel the embodiment of this image, accompanied by the characters' delicate hand movements - stroking the hemp rope, stroking the cheek with a sweat towel, etc., can substitute their own bodies to watch, understand and feel.

2.3. The Contrast of Clothing as a Metaphor for Cultural Change

The background of the movie *The Power of the Dog* is the western United States in 1925. It is an era when modern civilization and traditional cowboy culture collide. Cultural conflicts mainly include foreign colonization and native Indians, elites, cowboys, and more. From the costumes on the stage, we can see the distinct contrast between Phil, who represents cowboy culture, and his brother George, who represents modern civilization. In the first half of the film, Phil is dressed in a cowboy outfit and

occupies the centre of the screen, emphasizing his leadership among cowboys, while the younger brother, George, is dressed in a suit and leather shoes, which seem out of place with the surrounding denim. The fundamental conflict between the two brothers revolves around the core conflict of “power”, which can be extended to the right to express. Phil graduated from Yale University with a more senior education but rejects modern civilization and advocates traditional cowboy culture. Due to his absolute strength, under the leadership of his strong male power, the ranch is efficiently run, and he additionally attains a senior social status. The younger brother, George, has not received an elite education, but he habitually wears suits and leather shoes and looks like a businessman.

The costume design of the movie *The Power of the Dog* is extremely distinctive, and the meaning of the body is also infinite. These symbols of body clothing not only meet the visual viewing needs of the audience but also become the internal driving force in the internal narrative of the film. As one of the visual parts of the film’s audiovisual elements, clothing significantly strengthens the film’s visual language. Costume design is key in shaping the body’s character and setting off the atmosphere of film and television. The use of colour in movies also indicates gentle and masculine qualities. Delicate colours frequently appear in the female discourse system. For example, Peter always wears the white shirt she wears, and the clothes of the female character Rose have many silk, white, and floral elements, all of which are the embodiment of female discourse.

3. The Body under the Discipline of Power

The dominant narrative motif of Western films is revenge and confrontation. In American Western films dominated by male characters, the act of revenge highlights the significant plot of American personal heroism [6]. However, the movie *The Power of the Dog* is a literary work. The narrative style of this film is different from that of traditional American Western films - the protagonist grasps a revolver and rides a horse for revenge. It emphasizes rhythm and heartiness. Although it is however the motif of revenge, it is moreover like a war without gunpowder. The chief characters, brother Phil, brother George, and boy Peter, form a triangular control cycle chain. “Confrontation.

3.1. Phil’s Mental Castration of Tough

The image of Phil is a typical Western cowboy. Under the patriarchal society, he advocates masculinity and strong masculinity. The contradiction in the character setting is that his love object is a man. This was not accepted in the society at that time. This hidden “shortcoming” was also a hidden symbol of feminism, which made him fear the real self deep in his heart, and it was difficult to open his heart to the outside world. He had a strong self. Conservation awareness can be seen in Phil’s sleeping position, which appears many times in the movie. Although it is a large double bed, Phil always sleeps on the side of the bed in the curled-up sleeping position of a baby. On the psychological level, it means that he lacks a sense of security in his heart, which is in stark contrast to his external enduring image. To cater to the mainstream society and better integrate into the male-dominated environment, Phil personally views men and women as complete opposites in his heart, and he dislikes all femininity. He graduated from Yale University with a major in classical literature but is completely resistant to the upper-class elite culture. Regarding shaping his image, he strictly dresses up in cowboy attire, grows a beard, is dirty all over, looks sloppy, speaks rough, arrogant, and conceited, and often satirizes others bitterly, completely concealing the fact that he is thoroughly educated. There is a scene in the movie where Phil castrates a calf. He is skilful and Roseless and the cowboys around him recognize his technical authority. Phil is also decisive in his spiritual castration.

There are two descriptions of Phil bathing in the film; Phil is used to bathing in outdoor spaces, bathing in an open environment is in line with the eclectic and rough characteristics of male discourse. In contrast to the younger brother George bathing in the bathtub at the beginning of the film, bathing

in the indoor bathtub symbolizes refined life, and delicacy is not a traditional male discourse trait, the image of the bathtub is usually related to women. Phil deliberately chose to avoid bathing in indoor bathrooms to express his rejection of the “soft” nature of women. Phil’s act of covering his body in mud after taking off his denim clothes outdoors shows that he refuses to accept his vulnerable self after taking off his disguise. After Phil walked into the water to take a bath, the water surface in the lens composition occupied two-thirds of the frame, squeezing the space where Phil was. The shaky shots and oblique composition reflect the panicked mood of the characters. Even in such a hidden environment, Phil still could not relax his tense nerves, reflecting the oppression of the entire patriarchal environment all the time [7].

The second bathing scene is to show the difference between Phil and other cowboy companions. First, Phil is far away from his companions, walks to the river to take a bath alone, and sinks into the water. While the other cowboy companions gathered to take a shower, fight, show their bodies frankly, and sunbathe, Phil’s efforts to escape are in stark contrast to the other cowboys’ indifference. The director then used Peter’s discovery to explain the reason. Peter, who appears to be on the “effeminy” side, discovers Phil’s secret space and opens his case, which contains several magazines showing the male figure, labeled “B. H.” (Bronco Henry) [8]. The name of this character appears many times in the movie, but “I only heard his voice, but never saw him.” Henry is Phil’s spiritual leader, guiding Phil’s growth like a guide and guiding Phil to grow into maturity with the image of a spiritual father—Denim. Peter’s discovery is like tearing off Phil’s disguise, allowing the audience to see the spiritual world that Phil tried his best to hide—he has a different feeling for Henry, and homosexuality is not allowed, which is the “softest” in his heart. This is why he must work hard to create a strong appearance in a “strong” social environment, trying to separate himself from the “soft.” The extreme contrast between the inside and the outside makes Phil an incompletely strong person who is “hard on the inside” and castrates his spiritual world.

3.2. Peter’s Spiritual Acceptance of Himself

Peter’s father died young, and he is more inclined to “soft” traits in appearance as he lives with his mother. With a moderate face and a thin body, he is completely unconventional from the capable cowboys around him. The audience can learn about Peter’s hobbies through the camera’s capture of the character’s behavior and habits. He made paper-cut flowers to make his mother happy, and he also liked to cut attractive pictures and stick them in his notebook. After Phil satirized him bitterly, he shed tears. When the cowboys were drinking and eating lively in the house, he walked out of the room alone. Turning the hula hoop to calm down, these appearance and behaviour all highlight the “weak” characteristics of the characters. At the beginning of the movie, Peter’s character monologue, “After my father passed away, I merely hope that my mother can live happily. If I don’t help her tide over the difficulties and save her, then who am I?” The mother upholds a firm defence attitude and “save”—the meta-motivation of this role’s action.

Contrary to his weak appearance, Peter is determined, and he can bear it quietly if he fails to achieve his goal and then kills him with one blow. Peter’s inner coldness is also reflected in the follow-up plot. To begin with, he comforts the frightened rabbit in front of his mother. When he returned to the room, he killed the rabbit and dissected it expressionlessly, and then explained to others that he was practising to practice medicine. This behaviour was quite different from his weak appearance. Because Phil could not accept the fact that his younger brother George and Rose were married, he made things difficult for Rose and satirized her, causing Rose to fall into a mental breakdown. Peter decided to “revenge” his mother. Resonate and gain his trust. In a conversation between Peter and Phil, Peter told about his father hanged himself with no expression on his face, and he seemed to express no emotion in the process of taking down his father’s body, but this detail was ignored by Phil. Peter’s father has long explored the powerful side of Peter’s heart, worried that he is

not kind enough, but Phil scoffed at Peter's words, conceited, he only believed what he saw on the surface, but could not read people's hearts. Phil and Peter look at "Mountain of Dogs" together under the long-range lens, and the cowboys with Phil are all "seeing mountains as mountains", and only Peter can see the clue like him—the dog-shaped shadow. At this moment, Phil is following Peter. When he arrived at himself when he was a teenager, it seemed like a "miracle" left by Henry. When Peter was passing through the crowd, the cowboys around him were taunting Peter with the sissy and other unpleasant words. Peter neglected him and strode forward to Phil. This resolute move refreshed Phil's impression of Peter. Phil recognized the tough side and got closer to him, wanting to teach him how to ride horses, weave leather ropes, make him a qualified cowboy, and treat this young man like Henry. Peter respects Phil on the surface and seems to want to empathize with Phil and make Phil no longer lonely, but he is focusing on his revenge plan against Phil, planning murder for the camp step by step.

4. Body Symbol Presentation in Space

In his *Film Aesthetics and Psychology*, Jean Mitri said bluntly, "Heroism is patriarchal worship". The cultural connotation of heroism in the Western world is, to a certain extent, the manifestation of patriarchal consciousness and patriarchal consciousness, and based on it, the worship and belief in the body, violence, and power have been formed. Western films are typically told from the male perspective, and women frequently appear as men's vassals. They ordinarily possess two identities: prostitutes and ladies, who do not have independent thinking and cannot be treated equally. Director Jane Campion in *The Power of the Dog* tried to introduce the audience to a female perspective, breaking the traditional male discourse system.

"Body Symbol" is the image presentation of people in the film text. In the film, the body image is concretized through the image, and the body image as a symbol is the unity of the carrier and the object. The body exists in the image space, and in the text space of the screen, the body remains the basic unit of film creation, and the body completes the characters in the space. Image shaping and film narrative development.

Unlike most Western cowboy films' brisk, free, and romantic background music, *The Power of the Dog* introduces the narrative with a simple melody and repeated mandolin sounds. The tone is dull and gloomy, which is in line with the male discourse system. In the ranch villa, with the sound of music, the audience enters the interior scene. The interior of the ranch villa is dimly lit; only the dim wall lamp at the corner of the stairs and a lamp on the table are dominated by dark and dull tones like black and brown. The monotony of the colour symbolizes the exclusivity of the male world. Black and brown colours show a calm atmosphere and meet the masculine qualities of men, while slight colours that symbolize softness and sensibility—blue, pink, and white are unallowed. Stairs and furnishings all reveal the spirit of classicism, and the composition of a considerable number of closed lines in the camera, which divides the picture regularly, reflects the characteristics of patriarchy.

5. Discursive Expression of the Female Body

Peter and his mother, Rose, in the Moulin Rouge restaurant, are both female characters, so the environment in which the two characters live is equally full of a female-specific atmosphere. For example, the paper flowers made by Peter are placed on the table, and the table is surrounded by a circle [9]. The masculine cowboy, an ornament representing femininity, was sarcastically damaged by Phil, who tried to highlight masculinity, representing the blow to women's discourse in a male-dominated discourse environment. Peter's tears symbolize the quality of women's forbearance.

The Moulin Rouge Restaurant and the Ranch Villa represent two gender discourse spaces. The Moulin Rouge Restaurant contains information about femininity—bright interior light, exquisite

decoration, etc. When Rose marries into the Ranch Villa, it also transports these women together. The characteristic part is brought into the ranch villa, like the exquisitely decorated bedroom. The existence of Rose has impacted the original purely male discourse system space of the two brothers. "Windows" are ubiquitous in the Moulin Rouge restaurant. There is a door between the kitchen and the restaurant. A piece of glass is missing from the four windows on the door. Rose, the restaurant hostess, looks at the restaurant's situation through this window in the kitchen. The space represents a scene under the female discourse system, and after Peter is satirized by Phil and other cowboys while serving his mother, Rose, he hides back in the kitchen and cries because the male discourse system rejects him. Rose observes the dynamics of the restaurant through this window, pays attention to other people's evaluations of herself, and examines her inner self at the same time. Beauvoir said women are not born but shaped. It is the simultaneous embodiment of "Other" and self [10]. In a patriarchal society, "Other" is defined by men as "absolute Other", which violates the relativity of "Other"; that is, women are in the position of men. Subordinate status, Rose's evaluation of herself depends partly on men's evaluation of her scrutiny and partly comes from her own cognition, which is in line with female psychology.

Nick Brown said: "The point of view is a complex interactive relationship between the way we observe and what we watch" [11]. *The Power of the Dog* has always been completed under the gaze of the neglected disabled maid. Under the same foreground shifting shots at the beginning and the end, the maid leads the audience's point of view, together with the "other" "Perspective watched Phil's life killed by "manliness." Including Peter, every "weak person" in the long-term bullying from, participated in the against the fat and lame maid urged Rose to operate Phil's plan. The cowhide for the rope was sold, and Rose retaliated with the cowhide in exchange for a pair of warm gloves, which offered Peter the opportunity to give the diseased cowhide to Phil. This series of butterfly effects jointly contributed to a collective victory in which the exhausted forces eliminated *The Power of the Dog* and completed a disintegration of the dominant masculinity.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis and interpretation of Jane Campion's films through the lens of body narrative have unearthed profound cultural insights. Throughout her work, the body serves as a metaphorical cipher, playing a pivotal role in advancing the narrative. Jane Campion skillfully illuminates the intricacies of gender, power dynamics, familial ties, love, societal constructs, and cultural nuances within the context of the times. The subtle nuances of limb movements and attire serve as windows into the psyche of the portrayed characters. It is evident that both male and female bodies are multidimensional entities, and the narrative emphasizes the absence of absolute dominance or oppression by any one party.

This paper specifically delved into the analysis of *The Power of the Dog*, employing the concept of body narrative to interconnect narrative elements through both bodily and object symbolism. This approach revealed underlying conflicts in the film, such as the dichotomies of strength and weakness and the clash between cowboy culture and modern civilization. By guiding the audience through this exploration, the film's value and significance were further elucidated, particularly in the realms of characterization and thematic discourse. The analysis of *The Power of the Dog* was carried out using a psychoanalytical lens and narrative binary opposition.

Drawing from the framework of body narrative theory, this paper provided a comprehensive and multi-faceted interpretation of the body's role in Jane Campion's film *The Power of the Dog*. This interpretation not only enhances our comprehension of Campion's cinematic oeuvre but also carries significant research implications for the aesthetics of body narrative within the realm of filmmaking.

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