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# Queering the gaze: homoeroticism in alternative Western movies

Lenaïg Priser

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Université de Bretagne Occidentale

## **Queering the Gaze: Homoeroticism in Alternative Western Films**

Lenaig Priser

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Under the Supervision of Dr Elizabeth Mullen

Master TILE (2022 - 2023)



Campion, Jane. *The Power of the Dog* (01:32:08)



**Faculté  
des lettres &  
sciences humaines**



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# Table of Contents

## Part I: Historical Construction of Masculinities, the Cowboy Myth and the Queer Gaze:

### 1) American Masculinity and its contradictions:

- a- Homosociality and the construction of manhood (p8)
- b- Homophobia and the fear of not measuring up (p10)
- c- Phallic power and the importance of firearms in the US (p12)

### 2)The Cowboy Myth:

- a- Fundamentals to the understanding of American masculinity (p14)
- b- Denying homoerotic subtexts in cowboy narratives (p16)

### 3)The Queer Gaze in cinema:

- a- The Male Gaze versus The Queer Gaze (p17)
- b- Possible interpretation of the cowboy myth on screen (p20)

### 4)Beyond the traditional cowboy: cultural contexts:

- a- *Point Break* (1991) Kathryn Bigelow (p23)
- b- *The Power of the Dog* (2021) Jane Campion (p26)

## Part II: Physical Power, Power of the Body and *Point Break*:

### 1)Wet westerns and action films

- a- Male bodies and the buddy movie (p29)
- b- Kathryn Bigelow's wet western, *Point Break* (p32)

### 2)Displays of male power

- a- Exclusion of the female (p36)
- b- Sexualization of male bodies (p38)
- c- Bonding action scenes (p41)

### 3) “You know there’s no way I can handle a cage, man”: Physical freedom and death

- a- The articulation of masculinity and sacrifice in *Point Break* (p42)
- b- The implicit recognition of escaping civilising structures (p43)

### **Part III: Psychological Power, Social Constructs and *The Power of the Dog*:**

#### **1)Power of the group over the individual**

- a- The group versus the individual (p46)
- b- Phil and Peter as individuals (p48)

#### **2)The figures of masculinities**

- a- Phil's contradictions (p52)
- b- Showing emotions (p54)

#### **3)The gaze:**

- a- Who holds the gaze? (p57)
- b- The camera's eye (p61)

## Table of Illustrations

Figure 1: Kathryn Bigelow, *Point Break* (p34)

Figure 2: Kathryn Bigelow, *Point Break* (p34)

Figure 3: Kathryn Bigelow, *Point Break* (p34)

Figure 4: Kathryn Bigelow, *Point Break* (p34)

Figure 5: Kathryn Bigelow, *Point Break* (p40)

Figure 6: Kathryn Bigelow, *Point Break* (p40)

Figure 7: Jane Campion, *The Power of the Dog* (p49)

Figure 8: Jane Campion, *The Power of the Dog* (p49)

Figure 9: Jane Campion, *The Power of the Dog* (p51)

Figure 10: Jane Campion, *The Power of the Dog* (p51)

Figure 11: Jane Campion, *The Power of the Dog* (p60)

Figure 12: Jane Campion, *The Power of the Dog* (p60)

Figure 13: Jane Campion, *The Power of the Dog* (p60)

## Introduction

Mainstream cinema is an industry in which men are present and leading on all fronts, whether in acting or in production and direction of films. Yet masculinity as a subject is not investigated proportionally, and is often left undiscussed, resulting in the creation of archetypes and mechanisms that are not necessarily challenged, such as the Western myth for instance. Roughly a century after its establishment, the myth of the American West has become embedded in people's minds and cinematic landscapes. The figure of the solitary straight white cowboy facing the unknown has shaped masculinity constructs in America, to the point where it has become paradigmatic. Yet the elaboration of such a myth is based on the negation of all other factual and fictional representations of masculinity in the Western myth.

In order to counter the establishment of such archetypal representations of masculinity, and to give more space for progressive stories and gender expressions to come to light, alternative directions have been taken in the past thirty years regarding the treatment of the western myth. Kathryn Bigelow's 1991 *Point Break* reinterprets the codes of the Western genre to offer a subversive reflection on the way cinema draws parallels between physical power and hegemonic position within homosocial groups. Thirty years later, Jane Campion presents *The Power of the Dog*, adapted from the eponymous novel from Thomas Savage in 1967. As the movie explores the place of queer narratives in cowboy stories, it also raises questions regarding the erasure of homosexual records both in relation to history and fiction.

Intrinsic to representations of American culture, the Western myth takes its roots in the early days of cinema, where the spectacular and easily recognizable codes of the genre are what made him famous. Though mainstream cinema rejects massive parts of the cowboy life in the production of archetypal illustrations of cultural American masculinity, the historical dimension of the myth still remains visible. In alternative cowboy narratives, the idea of a queer gaze brings the place of homoerotic tensions into consideration. Linked to masculinity



constructs, forms of power and place within society, homoeroticism not only appears to be a central component of the creation process, but also allows new readings to come into sight.

Throughout the analysis of the two selected films, this study will explore how cinema can be used as a tool to investigate masculinity constructs on screen, and to what extent those representations influence cultural understanding of manhood in the USA. As masculine power is mainly divided into its psychological and physical facets, this thesis will analyse how those components allow hegemonic heterosexual masculinity to persist through the erasure and disavowal of homoerotic tensions. By examining the contradictory notions behind the display of masculine power, this study aims to create a space in which homoeroticism is embraced as a tool to explore in depth homosocial interactions rather than simply denied.

Focusing on the creation and establishment of the well coded Western myth, research on gender construction, queer theory and cinematographic theories, this study will examine the mechanisms behind masculine hegemony on screen, as well as the challenges that arise from it. These notions will be explored through the analysis of two alternative western movies, Kathryn Bigelow's 1991 *Point Break* and Jane Campion's 2021 *The Power of the Dog*. As both works have been made by women, the question of the gaze and the place of the movie director also comes to mind.

As for the research methodology, this thesis will be divided into three parts. The first part will take stock of the existing research on American masculinity, the Western genre and the Gaze, and will work as a structural basis against which the two selected films will be studied. Part two will use these theories in the analysis of *Point Break* in order to examine the display of physical masculine power, and the final part will mainly focus on the social constructs that govern homosocial milieus and interactions through the examination of Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog*.

## **Part I: Historical Construction of Masculinities, the Western Myth and the Queer Gaze:**

### **1) American Masculinity and its contradictions:**

#### **a) Homosociality and the construction of manhood:**

Michael S Kimmel writes in his article “Masculinity as Homophobia” that “manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval” (214). This gives us a first insight into how hegemonic heterosexual masculinity is expressed and constructed. By stressing not only the importance of the Other, but especially men’s peers, Kimmel expresses the necessity for men to construct their identity in relation to other men, in a search for validation. Hierarchy is essential in the understanding of masculinity, and the validation men constantly look for can only be granted by other masculine figures, potentially the ones considered as hegemonic models of masculinity. The quest to obtain other men’s approval seems to invade every part of men’s lives, as Kimmel points out:

*Think of how men boast to one another of their accomplishments – from the latest sexual conquest to the size of the fish they caught – and how we constantly parade the markers of manhood – wealth, power, status, sexy women – in front of other men, desperate for their approval (214).*

Masculinity, then, is something that men construct and express for members of their social group, and the search for validation by their peers participates in men’s impulsive search for empowerment. Because human beings are gregarious animals, the group creates a reassuring and competitive space in which males feel more powerful. Yet, being part of the group entails, as written above, notions of comparison, which shows the paradoxical aspect of homosociality: men seem more at ease to evolve in groups in which they constantly have to measure up, rather than risking to stand out. Individuality scares men, not only because it takes away from them the possibility of comparison, but mostly because it turns them into figures of alterity. As a result, males tend to search for homosocial groups in which they can

remain dominant. Professor Bird states that “the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity is explored through investigation of male homosocial interactions”, implying that the interactions within homosocial groups support and reinforce traditional features of hegemonic masculinity (121).

Homosociality, defined by organisational behaviour specialist Lipman-Blumen as the non sexual attractions held by men (or women) for members of their own sex, is a defining feature of manhood (Bird, 121). The stress on the non sexual aspect of the attraction is not anodyne and marks a clear distinction between homosociality and homosexuality. Incidentally, homosexual attraction is most often disavowed in homosocial groups, and is perceived as a threat to the traditionally heterosexual male bond. Traditionally homosocial groups, such as the army or sports teams for instance, organise themselves around codes that displace any potential homoerotic tensions.

According to Professor Justin Wyatt, “homosociality, unconstrained by social conventions can foster a homosexual relationship” (55). To him, homosocial bonding needs to happen according to established conventions of masculine identity so as to avoid potential homosexual bonding. Intimacy and vulnerability for instance are avoided, in favour of more “masculine” interactions. What appears here is the realisation for straight men that the line between homosociality and homoeroticism can be a thin one, coupled with a feeling of threat induced by homosexuality and its closeness to the effeminate Other. As a result, the only way to escape the anxiety linked to the negation of masculinity is to perform said masculinity according to the established conventions of heterosexual hegemonic masculinity.

As previously mentioned, comparison and hierarchy are part of masculinity constructs, and those notions shape the highly regimented places in which men evolve together as a united group, facing the threatening otherness embodied by homosexuality. If trying to bond with their peers seems to be primordial for men, it has to be done by repressing the potential tensions (sexual or not) that could result from it.

## **b) Homophobia and the fear of not measuring up:**

As men are afraid of standing out, the figure of the Other brings us back to the notion of alterity in masculinity constructs. This Other is considered powerless in the way that he is not part of the hegemonic groups that define how manhood has to be expressed, and as a result, can not entirely achieve his masculinity. The most striking example regarding this fear of exclusion is the cultural figure of the sissy. Being called a sissy is insufferable for a man because this insult is associated with the notion of femininity. Traditional hegemonic masculinity is based on the complete erasure of anything remotely feminine in one's identity, and it starts at a very young age (Kimmel, 2006, pp 214 - 215).

This fear of being perceived as weak or effeminate is, as Kimmel puts it, what "dominates the cultural definition of manhood" (214). Masculinity is constructed against a necessary figure of the Other, embodied by women and gay men, that males in search of power come to oppose. Yet, even if the Other works as a structuring basis against which masculine codes are constructed, the necessity of excluding said Other in the building up of manhood is most often disavowed

Men unite against what they consider different (hence threatening), and exclude this figure of the Other. Otherness is most often embodied by the homosexual man, who in the popular imagination cannot fit in with straight men because he is considered too close to femininity. It is through this process of exclusion that the distinction between hegemonic models of manhood, and isolated figures of alterity originates. When uniting against considered subaltern forms of masculinity, men make sure that their masculinity is validated by the hegemonic group, and that they indeed belong within the group. Excluding the other is a means for men to find reassurance among their peers.

In this sense, hegemonic manhood is grounded in shared homophobia. Yet, homophobia plays a huge part in masculinity constructs, and goes beyond the "irrational fear of gay men" (Kimmel, 214). It is not the fear of homosexual men, nor the fear of being perceived as such that shapes manhood, but rather the fear of other men themselves.

Competition between men is at the core of their homophobia, and is linked with notions of anxiety and shame. As Kimmel points out:

*Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see that fear. Fear makes us ashamed, because the recognition of fear in ourselves is proof to ourselves that we are not as manly as we pretend [...]. We are ashamed to be afraid (214).*

More than the anxiety of being unmasked and emasculated by members of the same sex, homophobia in this context is first and foremost a fear of being confronted with his own failures and weaknesses. Kimmel uses the word “pretend”, which reveals that men are aware of manhood being a role to endorse and perform to others, and that they use this as a cover to hide their flaws. Acknowledging their inadequacies would mean taking the risk to reveal that they, in fact, lack potency. However, what seems to scare males the most is the idea of other men making them face their flaws, especially in front of the group, because the humiliation that would result from such revelation would annihilate their masculinity.

Men are ashamed of being afraid because fear is the antithesis of hegemonic masculinity. While being one of the gears of masculinity constructs, fear has to be disavowed and hidden so that male can reach more powerful figures of manhood, and take a higher place in the social hierarchy of masculinity.

The dynamics at the root of masculinity constructs are contradictory ones. Homosociality, while being a primordial need for men to express their manhood, creates internalised homophobia due to the ongoing competition between men. Expectations of masculinity constructs generate anxieties that are solved in the identification with the hegemonic figures of manhood, and emulation between men that feel themselves as alike creates exclusion, as well as a clear distinction between hegemonic and non hegemonic forms of masculinity.

Gender studies have started to put the light on how the gap between hegemonic and said subaltern forms of masculinity is illustrated. Present in fiction as well as in reality,

firearms are known to be associated with markers of manhood, and their symbolism is deeply rooted in American masculinity constructs.

**c) Phallic power and the importance of firearms in the US:**

In the understanding of American masculinity, one parameter stands out and has become a distinctive feature of the field of study. Central to masculinity constructs, firearms are also considered inherent to American culture. The right to bear arms in America entered the Constitution as the Second Amendment in 1791, but guns had been around for years already. Yet, firearms started to emerge as a characteristic of the American way of life during the Gold Rush and Conquest of the West in the late 18th and early 19th century. Psychologist Joe Pierre questions the influence of mainstream cinema in the glamorising and normalising of violence and guns, especially when shown to young people. Made popular with the appearance of Hollywood and mainstream cinema, firearms appear to be synonyms of power, as well as tools used to defend the hero's ethics and beliefs, inspiring other men to do the same. Dr Pierre explains that:

*[...] The ubiquity of guns in popular culture normalises the use of guns and gun violence in our lives. And the way that gun violence is depicted, with a hero soldiering on after being shot instead of screaming in agony as they're bleeding out on the ground, can insure us to the horror of violence and reinforce the fantasy of "good guys with guns." (Pierre, Psychology Today, 2015).*

In fiction as in reality, using a gun is also a symbolic rite towards manhood, turning boys into men through the drawing of first blood (King, 91). Older men teaching young boys how to shoot illustrates the transmission of a traditional masculine strength across generations. In a time of decline for male supremacy, firearms bear the "symbolic expression of masculine potency in an unmistakable way" (Cawelti, 39). Guns therefore allow the traditional imagery of men being in power to remain, and reassert the male domination over not traditional forms of masculinity. Holding a gun is also a way to become close to the traditional American hero by embodying the movie star firing his weapon to defend freedom. Chivalry is after all the most traditional representation of heroic masculine behaviour, and has been reworked into different forms in fiction, as the army fighter, the detective as well as the

cowboy facing the wilderness of the west. The film hero and his weapons continue to inspire generations of men to try and resemble the male figures cinema glorifies.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, firearms are understood as symbols of the phallus, tools to assert the dominion of hegemonic forms of masculinity and to displace castration anxiety. The gun is indeed considered to be a phallic symbol, whose possession allows men to displace fears of emasculation (Kelley, 101). In other words, firearms somehow replace the penis, or serve as metaphors of it in masculinity constructs. It becomes a symbolic way to measure up to other men.

The phallus is, according to psychiatrist Jacques Lacan, firstly experienced as a lack. This disruptive realisation creates a gap between the mother and the child, who will try to regain his mother's attention by possessing the said phallus. To do so, the child creates himself a "montage of images corresponding with whatever he deems as desirable for the mother itself" (Brenner, 2018). Identification with masculine figures is the very first step in a child's search for the phallus, which will deeply influence masculinity constructs. As a result, men holding guns on screen are understood as bearers of the phallus, turning into models children should aim to resemble.

The gun, because of its symbolic significance as the phallus, also carries a sexual reading. The homoerotic dimension of the gun is historically and culturally found in the duel. While it has replaced the swords in a man to man fight, the gun nevertheless did not dilute the homoerotic tensions of the duel. The ritual of the draw, as captured in cinema, creates an anxious excitement palpable in the way duellists stare into each other's eyes while taking their pistols out of their holsters. The tension created by the use of shots and counter shots as well as tilt shots emphasises the eroticism of the duel scenes. The camera is also used to illustrate the penis by sensualising the gun, making it an object of desire for the other men, both on screen and in the audience. The idea of bullets penetrating the adversary's body, even from a distance, exemplifies the sexual aspect of firearms, revealing the homoeroticism carried in the duel. Finally, guns are metaphors for sex talk, especially when mentioning the genitals. Comparing the male body to a weapon turns it into an "instrument of power and control" (King, 89), reasserting once again the hegemonic aspect of the phallus. Those power

dynamics belong to phallogocentric discourses, in which the vocabulary used to refer to male sexual organs becomes an instrument of hierarchical constructions between men (King, 90).

More than being a phallic symbol, the gun is before all a synonym of power, used by men to take their place within extremely codified and hierarchical homosocial groups. According to Kelley, killing another man allows one to take one's place in the chain of power (Kelley, 105). Does the power of firearms reside solely in their possessions or do they need to be used to become tools of hegemonic masculinity? The male hero is most often described as bearing qualities of control, elegance, and reluctance to shoot, which oppose him to the cowardly man who can not control himself and shoots (Cawelti, 40). The dichotomy presented here is not only the hero/villain one, but it also illustrates the gap between the man in control, certain to possess the phallus, and the weak man who feels the need to shoot to prove his masculinity. In this case, violence arises from the "despair engendered by the recognition of the impossibility of a permanent and stable male identity" (Kelley, 99). The strength of firearms comes from the idea of having them rather than using them. "Real men" should not feel the need to shoot to show their phallus to other men. Yet, it appears that in 21st century America, shooting is increasingly becoming considered as a fun activity (Pierre, *Psychology Today*, 2015). Largely influenced by action and western movies, American people want to experience the thrill of shooting. Moreover, not only does firing a gun give a sense of potency to people holding and firing their arms, it is also a way to reassert notions of protection and bravery in the USA. Firearms are, after all, the array of the most famous American hero, and largely participated in the establishment of the Western Myth.

## **2) The Western Myth:**

### **a) Fundamental to the understanding of American masculinity:**

Among the highly conventional male groups we have mentioned, there is one wherein the homosocial bond is particularly important, and in which homosociality can be identified with notions of intimacy while still perfectly illustrating the fundamentals of hegemonic masculinity. By excluding non hegemonic forms of masculinity as well as women from ranches in the first place, cowboys, right from the beginning, were able to create a homosocial



safe place in which they interacted according to what was considered proper by traditional masculine codes. The fear of exclusion did not have its place because the Other had been clearly identified, notably through confrontations with the natives who defended their lands (Nodjimbaden, 2017). These dynamics allowed cowboys to investigate their power as well as reinforcing their male bonds.

Originating from the 19th century in Texas, “the cowboy, his guns and his horse are deeply embedded in the minds of people, in America and abroad” (Munden, 102). Associated with the Gold Rush and the Conquest of the West, cowboys also rose in popular imagery as the white American men who conquered a land upon which America's economy had been built. Being at the same time extremely recognisable, but also an emblem of mystery, the image of the cowboy facing alone the wild and unknown American landscape has largely participated in the construction of American masculinity in the way he embodies the independence and freedom Americans cherish.

With time, these men became an archetypal representation of white American masculinity, and is, as Munden puts it: “fundamental to an understanding of the cultural content of American life” (111). As important as it might seem, the figure of the cowboy is nevertheless a myth, based on representations as much as on misrepresentations. Because the West is considered the birthplace of America, and in order to support white supremacist discourses based on homophobia and racism, images of the cowboy that challenge conceptions of traditional masculinity have been dismissed over time (Miller, 2021).

Western narratives do not take into account the presence of non-white, not-straight cowboys, and this mechanism has a direct influence over masculinity constructs. Cowboy narratives firstly appeared in novels, but the genre quickly moved to mainstream cinema which was expanding in the 1930s. Fiction has instrumentalized the cowboy and turned him into the emblem of white hegemonic masculinity, denying America's historical roots to queer people and people of colour (Miller, 2021). This process prevents non hegemonic men from feeling part of their own history, as well as to find models of identification in the past, which

reinforces the notion that America has been built by WASP<sup>1</sup> men, giving them materials in their claims for “Making America Great Again”<sup>2</sup>.

**b) Denying homoerotic subtexts in cowboy narratives:**

History acknowledges the presence of non heterosexual men living on ranches, and same sex interactions were even accepted until the 19th century, when the apparition of the “negative medico legal category of homosexuality” changed the story (Patterson, 2008). Yet, the concept of homosexual cowboys challenges traditional assumptions regarding the Western myth. Because cowboys were not feminine enough to fit in the category of the homosexual sissy, therefore shaking the well established order of masculinity constructs, traces of same sex relationships among cowboys had to disappear to make room for the fictional hero that rose in the popular imagination.

The mythic construction of the cowboy erased any trace of homosexuality, and instrumentalized these men to create a symbol of hegemonic masculinity. The 20th century brought a distinction between masculinity and male homosexuality, turning those concepts into categories that exclude each other (Patterson, 2008). Homophobia, as it has been discussed previously, places love between men as a negation of their masculine identity (Patterson, 2008). Being neither feminine nor masculine enough to fit in the traditional established gender categories, the cowboy’s identity seems rather fluid. Carrying at the same time the archetypes of conventional masculinity and the secret of his sexuality, he is an illustration of the contradictions that characterise masculinity constructs. The primal response to such conflict happens to be the disavowal of the tensions responsible for it, in this case, through the creation of male representations that do not take homosexual relationships into account.

The process of creation of the Western myth appears to create yet another conflict. The cinematic genre of the Western turns the cowboy and his way of life into an object of fiction, using an arsenal of glamorising codes that form an integral part of the myth that surrounds it. The panoply of the cowboy, born of necessity to fit his lifestyle, has been taken and reshaped

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<sup>1</sup> White Anglo Saxon Protestant (Larousse)

<sup>2</sup> Political slogan popularised during Donald Trump’ 2016 presidential campaign, originating from the Reagan Era

in the form we know from popular cinematographic works (Munden, 106). The aim behind such codified costumes is the establishment of codes that are nowadays known to belong to the male cowboy, and are used as a reinforcement of masculine codes for the spectator to identify with. Western clothing style, while rendering the cowboy iconic, also asserts a certain eroticism in the way it “accentuates and decorates the male body” (Patterson, 2). Leather, silver accessories and fitting denim not only belong to the cowboy but can also be associated with the sadomasochist milieu, thus revealing the homoerotic dimension of the western genre. Stuck in between fiction and history, the character of the cowboy struggles to evolve in the contradictory environment that is cinema. While trying to play his part as a representation of traditional American masculinity, he loses sight of his authenticity. Still, the visual codes that have moulded him into a cliché also allow a certain liberty of interpretation, among which queer readings are considered.

### **3) The Queer Gaze in cinema:**

#### **a) The male gaze versus the queer gaze:**

First theorised by Laura Mulvey in her famous essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in 1975, the notion of the male gaze is a fundamental basis of film studies. Her definition of the gaze, summed up as follows, has been considered as a groundbreaking starting point in the understanding of the role of the audience in cinema:

*In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey, 808).*

Laura Mulvey bases her thesis on the dichotomy between active and passive roles, and associates the gaze with notions of pleasure, gender and power. According to her, the gaze belongs to the masculine gender who uses it to reassert its power over the displayed female figure, taking pleasure in her objectification. Yet, Mulvey fails to take into account the similar objectification and sexualization of *male* characters. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”

has been criticised over the years, mainly because of its heterosexual bias. In many cases it has been used as a structuring groundwork for the development of new perspectives on the gaze.

Film historian Steve Neale, for instance, argues that if cinema is indeed based on the pleasure of looking, this pleasure is drawn from watching the male figure rather than the female one. Quoting from Paul Willemsen's article on Anthony Mann, "Looking at the Male" (1981), Neale states that the pleasure experienced by the viewers "is predicated on the pleasure of seeing the male 'exist' on the screen" (Neale, 8). The satisfaction brought by voyeurism is constructed around two forms of desire: narcissistic identification and phantasy. Identification with the male hero on screen implies a contradiction between the desire to resemble him and the one to objectify and possess him through the gaze. It is specifically this mixed desire that is at the centre of what Neale claims to be a repressed homosexual voyeurism. To him, "male figures on the screen are subject to voyeuristic looking, both on the part of the spectator and on the part of other male characters" (12).

Action films of the 1980s and 1990s reinforce this idea in the way they display images of male bodies that can be read as erotic, but without enduring the same kind of sexualization the male gaze asserts over women (Shuckman, 672). Indeed, objectification of male characters through the gaze of the audience – that is to say a male one – would bring a homoerotic dimension to the cinematic experience. The potential homoeroticism carried in the gaze is troubling because it is a threat to the gender identification the audience encounters with male characters, and undermines the notion of power and control associated with masculinity (Neale, 5). Once again, homoeroticism appears as a menace to masculinity constructs. Acknowledging the erotic potential of male bodies in movies would weaken their position as leader of the action, and annihilate their hegemonic position as models of identification for the audience. Male characters on screen can not endure an objectifying gaze because their role as ever present models is crucial to gender construction and the development of the masculine ego.

Laura Mulvey's use of psychoanalysis in her understanding of mainstream cinema reveals the way male characters participate in the building up of masculinity. The audience

projects his look on this image of perfection the male protagonist embodies, and identifies with him as to reach this “more powerful ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror” (Mulvey, 810). The identification process, being part of the conception of the ego, then contradicts sexual interpretations that would do harm to the perfect – and impossible to reach – picture of the male hero. As a result, homoeroticism ends up being considered a threat to the established order of gender construction, and can only be solved through its displacement.

If male characters are not objectified the same way women are, it is also because they are traditionally in charge of making the story happen. The display of women slows down and even freezes the action, and it is up to the male hero to carry on the plot and resolve the story, refusing the weakening gaze of the audience by performing heroic and breath taking actions. Action films create a paradoxical place for male protagonists to evolve in. They indeed bear the contradiction of being both looked at, therefore passive, while being at the same time actors of their own objectification in the way they work to acquire the muscular body cinematic codes consider erotic (Shuckman, 677).

Besides, male protagonists not only escape the gaze of the audience with their ongoing movement, but also disavow the homoerotic tension found in the gaze of other male characters. Physical contact in fight scenes, homophobic jokes between buddies... Those features of the action genre support the film hero in his search for empowerment and reassertion of hegemonic heterosexuality, allowing him to fit in his social group rather than embodying the “Other” against which masculinity is built up. Yet, action films do feature a particular dynamic in the dichotomy incarnated by the couple formed between the hero and the bad guy. The antagonist, placed as a negative double of the hero, triggers a feeling of obsession shared by the two characters, and the agitation resulting from this becomes a driving force in the resolution of the plot. Patrick Schuckmann considers this traditional structure “to be heavily reliant on homoerotic desires, which [...] the American mainstream cinema so consistently denies” (677). Homoeroticism then seems to persist despite the efforts of mainstream cinema to displace it. Narratives are indeed constructed around a function of enjoyment, and this appears to work according to “a gendered logic of pleasure” (Schuckmann, 677).

This logic of pleasure felt in voyeurism and associated with a gender division of roles on screen, has been rethought since Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay. The biggest criticism "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" received was about this said gendered division. Indeed, the author relies on the work of Freud and Lacan to support her theory, yet none of them associated the gaze with gender (Manlove, 88). The cinematographic field of study goes beyond the gendered split between the active and passive sides of the gaze, and questions the roots of visual pleasure itself. Professor Clifford T. Manlove advances the idea that visual pleasure in cinema needs to be redirected in order to take into account more diversity on the side of the audience, such as homosexual men and female spectators for instance (Manlove, 86). By getting rid of the idea that only men possess the gaze, and that only they can use it to reassert their sense of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, it allows the object of desire himself to come into sight. Indeed, Jacques Lacan's concept of the gaze relies on the idea that the object of desire (the *object a*) is also staring at the voyeur. Inverting the look from the subject to the object's point of view counteracts with established notions of power, and brings a shift in the way men on screen undergo the gaze.

As male characters on screen use all their strength to escape the objectifying gaze, it seems that this struggle is vain. The gaze is an omnipotent part of the movie creation process, and it starts with the eye of the director and its camera choosing how they will capture the actor's best qualities to display them to the audience. By accepting the gaze, and becoming an active part of their sexualization, men can take control of it and embrace a new sense of power. However, it seems that because of mainstream cinema's efforts to deny male objectification, most men on screen are oblivious to their own sexualisation.

#### **b) Possible interpretation of the cowboy myth on screen:**

Steve Neale advances the idea that the pleasure to look at male figures on screen is particularly well expressed in the western genre, where a unique phenomenon happens. Here, voyeurism is linked with nostalgia, as well as "with an obsession with images and definitions of masculinity and masculine codes of behaviour" (Neale, 10). Male characters who appear on screen as having the established qualities of traditional masculinity embody the ideal ego men

in the audience are hoping to reach. In this case, pleasure does not only come from identification, but also from the reassertion and validation of the white heterosexual masculinity, illustrated by images of strong men facing both the West and the alterity of considered subaltern masculinities.

On the other hand, the Western genre creates a space in which male characters undergo what can be read as over sexualization. The cowboy's ornament can be studied in relation to masculine homosexual codes, and especially gay subculture's features such as fetishistic leather outfits (Shuckmann, 673). The cowboy's array, being based on leather and silver pieces, does remind of homosexual sadomasochist milieu, and fitting denim jeans tend to be associated with gay culture as well. By associating the cowboy with components that traditionally belong to male homosexual groups, western movies unconsciously put their hero under the gaze of an audience who understands those codes. As a result, the erotic potential of the cowboy is the privilege of an audience who understands, interprets and appreciates those codes.

The iconography of the western genre, when understood as a sexualizing one, produces a place in which identification becomes impossible for the audience, leaving men on screen solely as objects of desire. Besides, the erotic potential of the cowboy does not only reside in his clothing style, but also in all the aspects of his way of life that are part of his myth. Indeed, western movies rely on homosocial dynamics such as the cowboy and his acolyte trope, or the dichotomy between the good and the evil cowboy fighting each other until death. In most cases, women are entirely excluded from both the plot and the landscape, which reinforces the homoerotic reading of the western genre. Exclusion of women, apart from being historically true, poses the issue of the intra diegetic gaze. Steve Neale states that movies which rely on homosociality are places in which a queer gaze becomes paradigmatic:

*War films, westerns and gangster movies, for instance, are all marked by 'action', by 'making something happen'. Battles, fights and duels of all kinds are concerned with struggles of 'will and strength', 'victory and defeat', between individual men and/or groups of men. All of which implies that male figures on the screen are subject to voyeuristic looking, both on the part of the spectator and on the part of other male characters (Neale, 12).*

According to him, the tensions found in those movies, associated with notions of strength and power, are built upon a homosexual gaze. Laura Mulvey argues that male protagonists use the gaze as a tool to strengthen their hegemonic power over women (813). But when women disappear from the central dynamic, men are left with a gaze they need to redirect in order to remain dominant. The objectifying eye then falls on other male figures, and turns into a struggle for domination in which the homoerotic tensions are exhibited.

More peculiar to Western films, the most recognisable feature of the genre is the perfect illustrations of an intra diegetic queer gaze. Almost mandatory to every mainstream cowboy movie, the gun duel mentioned earlier is a transcription of the homoerotic tensions felt between male characters. Cinematographic techniques of close ups, shots and counter shots, as well as the vertical pans focusing on the cowboys' belts and gun holders strongly participate in making those scenes a defining feature of Western movies, while revealing the genre's erotic dimension at the same time. Duel scenes freezes the action for a moment, turning male struggle into pure spectacle for the audience (Neale, 12). In those few seconds, time is frozen to allow the eyes of both duellists to meet and express the passion of the moment.

The way central male figures undergo the gaze in cinema therefore seems paradoxical. By staying active to avoid the association with the passive looked-at women, male protagonists also become actors of their own objectification. In their search for empowerment and possession of the gaze, men meet the eye of the audience as well as other male characters, each of them being a threat to their hegemonic position. Yet, the erotic tensions that result from such dynamics seem impossible to escape, and the idea of a queer gaze is not anodyne. Not only does it take into account a more diverse audience, but it also allows a new exploration of genres traditionally considered as heterosexual prerogatives. In the case of the Western genre, in spite of all the efforts from the cinema industry to disavow them, it appears that the homoerotic tensions that remain might just be the historical truth of the cowboys' lives re-emerging.



#### 4) Beyond the Traditional Cowboy: Cultural Context:

##### a) Kathryn Bigelow's 1991 *Point Break*:

In an era where action films were still heavily influenced by the Reagan years, Kathryn Bigelow's *Point Break* came as a fresh renewal in the cinematic landscape of the 1990s. In a time when a woman behind the camera was still not anodyne, Bigelow managed to make her way up the Hollywood industry, and direct movies that opposed the normative structures of action films. Not only does she play with the viewer's expectation of the genre, she also challenges the established features of hegemonic masculinity, especially in the way she pushes the macho and toxic behaviours to its extreme (Hemphill, 62). Bigelow's approach to action film with *Point Break* almost appears as a parody of what came to be known as the Reagan Era, whose background shaped the movies that were released in the 1980s and early 1990s and culminated with Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* in 1991.

Ronald Reagan's presidency (1981 – 1989) indeed had a strong influence over representations of masculinity on screen at the time. Susan Jeffords theorised this phenomenon in her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994). She focuses on representations of bodies that are "cut, ripped, buffed, and sculpted", and how they entered pop culture as hegemonic masculine icons (Koppes, 530). Action movie characters in the 1980s used to acquire a masculine identity through their experience of violence and fights, and this is particularly where *Point Break* starts to mark its difference, and triggered a renewal in the way the place of action itself was being considered within the story. Journalist Mark Ciemcioch qualifies *Point Break* as a defining movie for the 1990s:

*Between the sights, sounds, and stars, Point Break felt like a new kind of action movie was being born after the gun-and-muscle thrills of the late 80s that culminated in Terminator 2: Judgment Day, released just a week prior. [...] For Bigelow, it was the movie's spiritual battle between law and freedom that appealed to her.*

While distancing itself from the paradigmatic action films of the time, *Point Break* actually gets closer to the spirit of the decade, and illustrates the Los Angeles of the time.

California had been the surfing and bank robbery capital of the world for years, which reached its pinnacle in 1992, and *Point Break*'s message definitely pays tribute to his era (Wood, 2015). Action and violence in the film do not happen for entertaining purposes, but rather to defend what Bodhi (Patrick Swayze) calls the human spirit against the capitalist system that had risen in the US:

*On a larger scale, the film's "spirituality over capitalism" message is a statement on the 1990s as a whole. Wedged in between the consumerism of the 1980s and the conservative 2000s, the decade was a time of transition from materialism to conservation, leading many Americans to pursue a more Zen-focused lifestyle like Bodhi [...] who swears that the Ex-Presidents' criminal activities were "never about money"—that they were "about us versus the system" and showing the world that "the human spirit is still alive (Wood, 2015).*

*Point Break* then offers action scenes that go beyond the traditional display of male potency and serve a greater purpose. Action is almost relegated to the background, leaving more space for more complex characters to evolve within the story, which in this case, breaks once again the codes of the action genre. The characters of Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves) and Bodhi (Patrick Swayze) represent the dichotomy between natural order and the law, one being a police officer and the other a thief. Yet, their characters and relationship go beyond the standard nemesis plot. In fact, Kathryn Bigelow plays so much with the conventions of genre that it becomes hard to define who the central protagonist really is. This dynamic, added to the chemistry felt between the two men make *Point Break* even more stand out from the cinematic landscape of the time.

The relationship between the two male protagonists did break the codes of the action genre and so forth it added a homoerotic subtext. The love triangle between Johnny, Bodhi and Tyler can be understood as a way for Bigelow to challenge and parody the conventions of male action packed films (Hemphill, 62). Moreover, if the homoerotic subtext can be so openly addressed, it is also due to Patrick Swayze's choice to "play it like a love story between two men", something that is even accentuated by the character of Tyler, who seems aware of her exclusion regarding the two friends and leaves because "there's too much testosterone around here" (Lane, 75, 76).

*Point Break* takes a stand as a groundbreaking action movie in the 1990s, but on the other hand it also feels impossible to assign the film to one category. Its subversive aspect destabilised masculinity by playing with its structuring norms, offering a variety of complex characters whose even more complex relationships challenge the established scenario of the action genre. Yvonne Tasker remarks that Kathryn Bigelow has once referred to her film as a “wet western” declaring that “rather than being centred on any tradition of detection or investigation, the film is usually given over to the spectacle of the male body engaged in physical feats such as surfing and skydiving” (Lane, 75)<sup>3</sup>. What matters here is not whether or not the movie features conventional characteristics of the western genre, but how those characteristics are seen through and re-interpreted.

Many parallels can be drawn between the traditional western narrative and the scenario of *Point Break*. Starting with the settings for instance, the surfer gangs conquering all of California every summer clearly reminds one of the historical conquest of the West. Besides, the dichotomy presented between the surfers who embody a lawless world, and Johnny Utah who represents the civilised order creates tension and friction which are reminiscent of the conflicts cowboys face in more conventional narratives. This conflict between freedom and law is also internalised in Utah’s character, who concretises the lonesome cowboy’s own internal split.

In many ways *Point Break* was the starting point of a new look on action films, detaching itself from the scarred heroes and action packed movies of the Reagan years to offer new perspectives on the genre. Not quite fitting in any of the established cinematographic categories, Kathryn Bigelow uses this fluidity to her advantage, playing with Hollywood’s normative structures to challenge them. By doing so, she created an alternative western movie, whose different layers and subtexts are still part of modern debates.

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<sup>3</sup> Tasker, Yvonne. *Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. Routledge, 1993.

**b) Jane Campion's 2021 *The Power of the Dog*:**

Twelve years after *Bright Star* (2009), Jane Campion came back in 2021 with a movie that somehow follows in the footsteps of *Point Break*. *The Power of the Dog* is indeed quite a surprising choice in terms of the director's previous works, as she had not experienced directing within the Western genre before. However, she managed to create the most awarded movie of its year, with twelve nominations at the Academy Awards and multiple other prizes.

Adapted from the 1967 eponymous and autobiographical novel by Thomas Savage, *The Power of the Dog* is as much traditional as it is subversive regarding its genre and realisation. Set in a ranch in Montana in the late 1920s, the film focuses on the lives and relationships of the two Burbank brothers. If the settings already place the story within the traditional features of the Western genre, it is mostly the characters that transport the audience into the atmosphere of the cattle world. The two brothers, Phil (Benedict Cumberbatch) and George (Jesse Plemons) together embody the dichotomy traditional cowboys face. The closer George gets to civilised society, the more Phil pulls away from it, seeking refuge in the freedom his way of life offers him. This dynamic reaches its climax when George gets married, creating a gap that illustrates the cowboy's internal split between natural and civilised order. Traditional cowboys are unmarried because their life conditions make it difficult to do so (Munden, 107). George's wedding turns him into a civilised townsman whose lifestyle is not the one of the cowboy anymore. On the contrary, Phil rejects both his brother and modern life to retrieve his freedom and potentially a sense of primal manhood.

More than an orthodox western film, Campion's work is a single-set psychological thriller, laced with elements of tragedy. This mix of genres is the perfect place to explore historical masculinity constructs with a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective. Since 2017, movements like #MeToo have deeply impacted cinematic institutions and raised crucial issues, among them toxic masculinity on (and off) screen. The tragic outcome of *The Power of the Dog* can be read as the fatal decline of once hegemonic masculinity built upon the erasure and exclusion of any forms of otherness, both in fiction and in reality.

The film's subversive aspect mainly emerges in the way Jane Campion presents masculinity. Set in 1925, the story's timeline corresponds to the decline of the cowboy era. Technological advances started to invade ranches, marking the beginning of a new era in which traditional cowboys struggled to find their place. The film encapsulates the consequences of modern life on the ranch with a special focus on how it influences masculine constructs. Campion's nuanced treatment of the characters offers a reversal to the myth of the American hero, in which "the strong, insensitive, rugged, masculine, belligerent characters, gives way to more complex ones, bearers of less stereotypical sensibilities" (Dias, 20). Not coincidentally, Campion chooses nontraditional actors, especially when it comes to the leading roles. Benedict Cumberbatch (*Sherlock*, *The Imitation Game*, *Hawking*) is known to play characters that are often non-traditional representations of masculinity, and he and young actor Kodi Smit-Mc Phee (*The Road*, *ParaNorman*) interpret their characters' masculinity along a wide and complex spectrum.

Jane Campion stayed close to Savage's novel in her adaptation, however she emphasised the homosexuality latent in the text, making it central to the plot even though it is never acknowledged aloud. Overall, *The Power of the Dog* uses "the territory of the West as the space in which identities are defined" and questions the cultural myth of American culture and civilization (Dias, 20). The character of Phil is indeed stuck in between his performative role as traditional hegemonic western hero, and his own desires whose repression is the cause of his suffering. His tragic death conveys the idea that the myth of the west and the established hero fiction has created is dying, allowing new forms of masculinity to assert themselves.

New representations of masculinity also have to do with the emergence of platforms such as Netflix, whose film productions have outnumbered mainstream cinema industry such as Hollywood in the last ten years. On top of turning cinema into a mass consumption mediatic form, Netflix also offers an enormous range of narratives in order to gather the biggest audience possible, which deeply influence movies' production, as it is the case with *The Power of the Dog*:

*Netflix and its competitors have brought about a transformation in distribution and, in general, in the entire cinema and television industry and market. These new groups and their huge amount of content make room for authors, topics, narratives and*

*products that had no possibilities in the former system, which has led to the deconstruction of some genres –in this case, the Western– (Heredia, 2017). One of the reasons for the new spectrum of options is the ability of the audience to participate in the conversation, moving from a passive to a more active entity, introducing their criticism, reviews or likes into different social media, and thus influencing the new productions, which must take into account what the viewer wants (Blanco-Herrero et al., 10).*

Nevertheless, *The Power of the Dog* did not please everyone, and the movie received one particularly harsh critic from actor Sam Elliot. The western character-actor disapproved the direction Jane Campion took when realising her movie, commenting on the latent homosexuality present in the movie, the place of a woman in the western genre, and the choice of actors. One might suggest that a parallel can be drawn between Sam Elliot and the character of Phil, in the way they both seem to feel threatened by inclusivity and societal changes. Jane Campion responded to such criticism by stating that “the West is a mythic space” which offers a lot of room on the range. Benedict Cumberbatch (Phil Burbank) furthermore responded to the comments, reasserting the need to “look under the hood of toxic masculinity and try to discover the causes of it” to prevent it from being passed on to the next generations (Malkyn, *Variety*, 2022).

Just like Kathryn Bigelow did with *Point Break*, Jane Campion presents a movie that goes beyond the traditional features of its genre, and whose plot and characters are much more complex than it might look at first sight. The two directors made particularly remarkable movies that both fitted and challenged the social constructs of their times, raising questions of genres, gender constructs, power... In spite of their thirty years difference, *Point Break* and *The Power of the Dog* mirror each other and provide quite a similar, yet alternative, perspective on the same issues.

## **Part II: Physical Power, Power of the body, and *Point Break*:**

Investigation of masculine power is central to films Susan Jeffords characterises as “male fantasy films” (western, war or action films from the Reagan-era for instance), in which hegemony is illustrated through the physical and the psychological sides of masculinity (Lane, 75). This part will focus on the display of the male body in Kathryn Bigelow’s 1991 *Point Break*, and explore the contradictions that appear between masculine force on screen and the potential sexualization that comes with it.

### **1) Wet Western and the Action Film:**

#### **a) The Male Body and the Buddy Movie:**

As explained earlier, *Point Break* does break the codes of the typical Reagan-era<sup>4</sup> action film, nevertheless it still encapsulates features of the hardbody genre. Professor of Film Dr Drew Ayers understands hardbody movies as falling into three categories: the “developing hardbody”, “the repressed”, and the “fully formed” hardbody (Ayers, 46, 50). Kathryn Bigelow’s treatment of her characters and of action films can be classified as part of the fully formed hardbody sub-cycle. Indeed, such movies “generally begin with an action sequence depicting the skills of the hero” (Ayers, 50). *Point Break*’s opening sequence (00:01:15 - 00:02:57) actually shows Bodhi (Patrick Swayze) surfing early in the morning, and Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves) passing with great success his shooting exam. Intercut shots of both demonstrations of physical skills, create a parallel between the two men, placing them already as future rivals. This dynamic which continues throughout the movie is also a defining feature of the hardbody movie:

*The parallel between the “good” hardbody and the “bad” hardbody is established at the beginning of the film, and the narration of the film intercuts their dual storylines, concluding with the merging of the storylines in a final showdown. The defeat of the evil hardbody at the end*

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<sup>4</sup> Masculine identity was the dominant subject in Hollywood cinema during Reagan and Bush Presidencies. Susan Jeffords explores the “correspondences between the public and popular images of Ronald Reagan and the action-adventure Hollywood films that portrayed many of the same narratives of heroism, success, achievement, toughness, strength, and good old Americanness that made the Reagan Revolution possible” (*Hard Bodies, Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, 1994, p 15)

*of the film signals both a personal, moral victory for the hard bodied hero in particular and for Justice in general (Ayers, 56).*

As the story unravels, this peculiar dynamics not only influences Johnny and Bodhi's relationship, but also forges the gap embodied by justice that stands between them.

The hardbody aspect of the movie is mostly borne out by the character of Johnny Utah, a young FBI agent. The introduction scene pictures him as a ballistics master even under the heavy rain and in the mud, getting a hundred per cent on his shooting test. At this moment, Utah embodies the traditional hardbodied hero, emblem of the nation under Reagan's presidency, reminding viewers of the idealised image of soldiers during the Vietnam War. Throughout the movie though, Johnny will trade his stereotypical hardbody persona for the freedom Bodhi offers him, leaving masculinity constructs of the 1980s behind, in favour of the more sensitive and complex masculine identity on the rise in the 1990s.

In *Point Break*, masculinity is expressed mostly through physical strength. The protagonists' bodies are not solely displayed as instruments of power or visual pleasure, they also become tools of the narratives. Here, the male body allows leading characters to evolve in the competitive extreme sport milieu, engaging in a fight to the death that will run on until the very last minutes of the film, in which spectacular action sequences and dynamics of chase play keep the audience on tenterhooks.

In *Point Break*, the bond between Johnny and Bodhi's relationship supersedes all their other responsibilities (one is a federal agent and the other the leader of a group of young surfers) in the tradition of the buddy movie. According to Professor David Greven, the buddy film articulates around a dyadic manhood:

*Dyadic manhood threatens to topple the reign of the heterosexual relationship presumably central to Hollywood film; and male-male relations of all kinds must now account for, contend with, and orient themselves around a central, often contentious, always complex relationship between two male protagonists played by two male stars of commensurate stature, who therefore demand equal attention and narrative importance (Greven, 24).*



Johnny Utah and Bodhi's relationship is indeed central to both the screen and the plot of *Point Break*, asserting the growing interest for such dynamics that was rising in the 1990s. Buddy movies of the 1990s most often examine masculine behaviours that distance themselves from the hardbodied heroes of the 1980s, and the relationships between two male protagonists are often based on more intimacy and sensitivity, which puts the lights onto the homoerotic dimension of the buddy movie (Ayers, 57).

While being inherent to the genre of the buddy movie, homoeroticism ends up either considered as a sub-text, or completely denied in order to preserve American masculinity. In his book "The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies", Vito Russo states that the display of homoerotic tensions in buddy films is perceived as a threat to the idealised visions of America, and to "real" manhood in general (Russo, 81). Besides, male intimacy undergoes a strong taboo on screen also because of the audience. As Ayers points out: the target audience of action films is "primarily male (and U.S. culture strongly devalues male homoerotic desire), shifting this eroticism becomes a central concern of these films" (Ayers, 51). Yet, homoerotic tensions seem to show through, especially in the way the two male protagonists interact from their first encounter on the beach (00:24:32). Not being able to tear their eyes off of the other, the two men size each other up. Tensions and competitiveness are asserted right from the beginning, and will rise in a tense way until the moment Bodhi recognises Utah as a former quarterback from their college years. Johnny's physical abilities are his entryway in the surfer group after Bodhi openly expresses the respect he has for him, laying the foundations of their buddy dynamics (00:26:50).

As previously mentioned, traditional buddy movies present a pair of same-sex characters working together towards the same goal. In *Point Break*, Johnny is actually trying to unmask the Ex Presidents, not knowing that he has befriended their leader. The "star-crossed" nature of their relationship creates the homoerotic tensions between the characters. Jacques Lacan's theory of desire presumes that "desire's aim is to reproduce desire, not attain its object", revealing that the attraction and chemistry felt between Utah and Bodhi can only exist as long as the chase game is on (Hart, 431).

Feminist scholar Tania Modleski questions the repression of homoeroticism in the buddy film, stating that the “censored subtext of homosexuality” is often so explicit that she wonders how the audience could ignore it (Hart, 432). Understandably, *Point Break*’s characterisation as a “wet western” (a film where cowboy tropes are displaced to the surfing world) confirms Modleski’s reading of homoerotic subtext.

**b) Kathryn Bigelow’s Wet Western: *Point Break***

*Point Break* being known as a “wet western” is not anodyne as it brings together notions of masculine potency and over-sexualization. While playing with the traditions of the Western genres, Bigelow also examines the spectacle of the male body, firstly as an essential component of her work, but mostly as a tool to investigate the mechanisms behind representations of masculinity on screen. Yvonne Tasker remarks that films from the 1990s are built upon a predominant focus on the display of the male figure:

*Bigelow has described the film as a sort of ‘wet western’, a phrase which indicates a distinctive, and very contemporary, combination. Themes and images drawn from the male contests of classic westerns of the past [...] are intertwined with the need for contemporary films to present their heroes either nearly naked, or in a series of clinging costumes that display the body. The context of the surfing movie then provides an ideal situation for the production of the body in action as a visual display (Tasker, 163).*

As aforementioned in the first part, Kathryn Bigelow plays with the conventions of mainstream cinema in order to create hybrid and challenging films. Here, the themes of traditional western movies act as a leading thread throughout the film, shaping the story’s dynamics and mechanisms. As more traditional cowboys conquer the Western landscape and mountains to accomplish their cattle work, surfers master the sea, using their physical abilities to claim this wild environment as their own. The power of the body is reasserted in the taming and riding of the waves. This affirmation of masculinity in the well coded and exclusive world of surfing reinforces the centrality of the homosocial unit. Johnny Utah for instance, starts being accepted as part of the group only after he proves himself during surf sessions and American football games. Consequently, belonging to the group is contingent upon physical strength.

According to Bigelow, *Point Break* is not a surfing movie since “surfing is a state of mind, a metaphor for something else. This is about personal challenge and a flirtation with death” (Bigelow, qtd. in Tasker, 163). By removing the surfing aspect from the plot, the audience is left only with features of the western film, such as the mythical gun duel between Bodhi and Utah (01:09:33). What is mostly striking in *Point Break* though, is the omnipresent dichotomy between freedom and justice, between the natural order and civilised legal institutions. Johnny Utah’s internal conflicts and oscillation between the two worlds culminate in the breathtaking backyard chase sequence, when he refuses to shoot Bodhi, his rival and nemesis but above all his friend. Emblematic features of the western genre, such as the near-duel scene in *Point Break*, show throughout the course of the movie as a latent reminder that the film is more than a “dumb movie for dumb people”<sup>5</sup> (Tasker, 107).

The following images (figures 1 to 4) are taken from *Point Break*’s duel scene between Johnny and Bodhi after an umpteenth bank robbery. The sequence revisits the codes of the famous duel scenes found in Western films, with intercut shots and close-ups focusing gradually on the characters’ eyes and ending with a long shot on the protagonist’s weapon.

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<sup>5</sup> “Critical characterisation of muscular cinema as retrograde for those who know no better” (Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies, Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*, 2002, 107)



Figure 1: Bigelow Kathryn, *Point Break*, 1991 (01:09:33)



Figure 2: Bigelow Kathryn, *Point Break*, 1991 (01:09:42)



Figure 3: Bigelow Kathryn, *Point Break*, 1991, (01:10:09)



Figure 4: Bigelow Kathryn, *Point Break*, 1991 (01:10:27)

If “wet” does not refer to the surfing side of the film, it might be suggested that the adjective carries a sexual aspect. When directing movies, Kathryn Bigelow is known for her subversive challenge of established cinematographic conventions. With *Point Break*, she renews the codes of both traditional western and action films, leaving more space for the display of male bodies. Surfing scenes for instance act as a link between action and objectification, displaying the male protagonists either partially naked or in wetsuits, revealing the erotic aspect of such sequences, while still avowing their masculine power:

*Action sequences up until then would often fake the actors running faster than they actually were, an explosion of strength too much for a camera to keep up with [...] But Bigelow’s tight framing in that snorkel lens brought the audience so close to these men that we could see every muscle straining, every rise and fall of the chest as they ran out of breath. She grounded the action in realism — and sparked the idea that “realness” was sexy (Wolfe, Rolling Stone, 2018).*

The eroticism found in Bigelow’s action scenes bring to the light the objectification masculine characters undergo within traditional male movies. Here, *Point Break* stands out from conventional action films in which the troubling homoeroticism resulting from male objectification is usually repressed (Shcuckman, 672). Sexualization of the masculine body is nevertheless a defining feature of *Point Break*, all the more so since it appears that only the two leading male protagonists experience it. By focusing almost exclusively on the leading couple, the camera eye creates a special environment in which erotic tensions can exist and be implicitly acknowledged by the characters. The homoeroticism that results from this process reasserts the homosexual subtext found especially in breathtaking and bonding action scenes of the film, also reinforced through the exclusion of female characters.

## 2) Displays of Male Power:

### a) Exclusion of the female:

*Point Break* pays tribute to the exhibition of male power in action, on the whole through surf and extreme sport sequences. Not only does surfing allow competitiveness between male protagonists, it also creates a well coded homosocial space from which women tend to be excluded. The only exception to this point is the character of Tyler, a “muscled, brash waitress with an androgynous name and physical features” (Wolfe, 2018). She is first introduced saving Johnny during his first attempt at surfing, and is acknowledged as part of the surfer gang. Her tomboy look and sharp tongue fit perfectly within the group without disturbing homosocial bonding, yet Johnny’s arrival brings a change to this dynamic. Tyler becomes a love interest linked to Johnny and consequently loses her place both within the group and on screen. Tyler’s relationship with Johnny turns her into a woman to the eyes of the surfer gang, making her lose her place as “one of the guys” and resulting in her exclusion.

As mentioned earlier, Johnny bears qualities of the hardbodied hero. Professor Drew Ayers states that the heterosexual romantic subplot of hardbody films needs to be eliminated to allow the hero’s triumph, which demonstrates how women in action films are considered as disturbing the smooth running of the storyline (55). Even more peculiar to the classical Western, “the focus is solely on the hero and his quest; his personal triumphs over evil overshadow any interpersonal achievements he might attain” (Ayers, 55). Yet, removing the romantic storyline from the main plot brings the place of women in action films into question, putting the light on Laura Mulvey's idea that cinema does not allow women to lead the action<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of the story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative (Mulvey, 810).

It is clear that neither *Point Break* nor, as we will see later, *The Power of the Dog* passes the Bechdel test<sup>7</sup>. To different extents, female characters are represented as disturbances to the homosocial bonding experience central to action and western films, and as such, end up excluded from the main plot.

The mechanisms of the Buddy genre, added to the presence of Tyler, create an impossible love triangle in which homoerotic tensions underlie each competition. From the moment the three protagonists meet, Tyler loses her place on screen in favour of the two male bodies, giving them more room to exhibit their masculine power and measure up to each other in dangerously lethal games. As Yvonne Tasker puts it:

*Point Break draws out the implications of Utah and Bodhi's flirtation with death, which is intimately bound up with their flirtation with each other, a relationship in which the woman, Tyler, represents a token object of exchange* (164).

What stands out here is Tyler's self consciousness about her exclusion, made salient when she walks out of the party, stating that "there's too much testosterone around here" (*Point Break*, 00:42:01). The clear acknowledgement that Tyler cannot find her place in this dynamic reinforces the homoerotic subtext of the movie, bringing to the fore the attraction felt between the two men. This attraction only grows stronger in the second part of the movie, when Johnny realises that the Ex Presidents are actually his friends, triggering the pursuit that will last until the end of the movie (1:00:32). As desire starts to mix with anger and frustration between Utah and Bodhi, Tyler completely disappears from the screen, as a way to let them finally bond in the epic chases and action scenes that follow. Tyler is not even mentioned in the final scene of the film, reasserting the idea that she has never stood a chance against the homoerotic tensions established since the two men's first encounter.

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<sup>7</sup> Alison Bechdel's test (1985) should also be mentioned. Her test allows us to see to what extent female characters are represented in a film. There are four questions that should be answered: Are there at least two female characters? Are the names of at least two female characters known? Is there a moment in the film when two or more women are talking to each other? Are they talking about something that is not a man? (Blanco-Herrero et al., 2).

## b) Bonding Action Scenes:

Throughout the course of its story, *Point Break* offers a range of action scenes whose intensity only escalates, ending up in a death struggle during the 50 Year Storm on Bells Beach, Australia. Here, action is never only just action as it creates the space in which FBI agent Utah and surf guru Bodhi keep finding themselves in competition with one another. . As discussed above, the exclusion of women from such sequences reinforces the homoerotic subtext of those moments.

Overall, action scenes that are typical of the male movie (chases, gun duels, skydiving...) carry a homoerotic subtext, perceptible in the exchanges of looks and reluctance to hurt the other one. The chase sequence (01:04:11 – 01:10:28) after an umpteenth bank robbery, ending up with Johnny's refusal to shoot, can be interpreted as the expression of the Lacanian desire. As desire aims to reproduce itself rather than reaching the object of desire, a chase that does not end allows the protagonists' pursuit<sup>8</sup> to continue, bringing a strong and mutual attraction to light. When Utah understands the impossibility for the chase to continue because of his knee injury, he shoots all his bullets in the air, giving free rein to his impulses with rage and frustration. For Johnny to shoot his gun in the air is not anodyne as it is reminiscent of an ejaculation, disclosing at the same time the erotic subtext of the film.

Fortunately, *Point Break* does not end with this sequence, and many other absorbing action scenes take the audience to the edge until the very last scene of the film. Indeed, Kathryn Bigelow offers two skydiving episodes, each in very different contexts and atmospheres. The first one (1:17:43 – 1:23:44) occurs the day after the Ex Presidents' break. Tensions are built up around understatements and a visible lack of trust from Johnny towards Bodhi, the FBI agent finding any excuses to not get on the plane or questioning who packed his chute. Tension in this scene is also created around sex talk, with Johnny asking "Are we gonna jump or jerk off?" (1:18:38), revealing that in spite of the growing hatred, desire is still omnipresent between Utah and Bodhi. This tacit attraction is mostly understated with the camera going back and forth between the two male leads with particularly close frames on their eyes and facial expressions. Clearly, as Yvonne Tasker points out, this scene characterises the latent homosexual desire of the movie:

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<sup>8</sup> Here, the idea of pursuit also induces a game of play tag between Johnny and Bodhi, which reaffirms their complicity.



*It is tempting to suggest that such a sequence, which allows an intense, and sentimental, closeness between male buddies, is rendered within montage since gay desire must remain unspoken within Hollywood's world. Yet homoeroticism is central to the male action movie, and while gay desire may be unspoken within dialogue, it is very much present within the frame. Indeed it is within the spaces offered by 'naïf montage', and by looks exchanged between characters and so on, that the popular cinema orchestrates a variety of desires and looks (Tasker, 154).*

A close examination of the first skydiving scene (figures 5 and 6) reveals Bodhi and Utah exclusive and intense connection in a shared experience of adrenaline.



Figure 5: Bigelow Kathryn, *Point Break*, 1991 (1:21:50)



Figure 6: Bigelow Kathryn, *Point Break*, 1991, (1:22:10)

The tone of the second skydiving sequence (1:41:27 – 1:46:58) following many deaths on both the robbers and the FBI sides, is at the opposite of the first one. Resentment and bitterness are taking over feelings of friendship and potential homoerotic desire on Johnny's side who refuses to look Bodhi in the eyes, conveying that previous notions of mutual respect and admiration are gone. Despite the mournful atmosphere, this skydiving sequence is as breathtaking as the other, if not more. Right before jumping off the plane, Bodhi openly addresses Johnny's feelings for him by saying that "I know it's hard for you Johnny. You want me so bad it's like acid in your mouth... but not this time!" (1:44:26), eventually inviting him to keep the game on and disclosing his own attraction as well.

Not being able to accept his defeat nor his impotence, Utah impulsively jumps without any chute from the plane, in a desperate last attempt to catch his rival. After grabbing him, they start falling, struggling with each other and above all refusing to be the one pulling the chute. The rebuff of being the first one to withdraw was also present in the first skydiving sequence, which can be understood as an attempt from both men to have the upper hand on the other, as a reassertion of masculine domination. Finally, Johnny opens the chute, potentially because catching Bodhi is more important to him than risking his life to prove his masculinity. In this instant, the time where all those buddies were bonding over surf sessions seems so far away, yet this recurring theme throughout the movie is as much responsible for *Point Break's* homoerotic dimension than the spectacular action scenes discussed above.

**c) Sexualization of the male body:**

*Point Break's* action scenes bear such a heavy homoerotic subtext in as much as they work as a stage on which masculine bodies are being constantly displayed. Critic Barry Keith Grant states that this is precisely this excessive display of the male body that makes the film a paradigmatic action movie (187). Kathryn Bigelow's habits of exploring and challenging traditional cinematographic genres is reinforced here, in the way she presents masculine characters in such a manner that it is reminiscent of the established objectification of women's bodies. As one of the few females specialised in action movies, her gaze is a powerful tool in the exploration and reflections over masculine identity.

Hardbodied heroes are indeed often feminised by the camera that fetishizes their hard and sculpted muscularity, as well as their athletic skills (Ayers, 42). As aforementioned, Johnny and Bodhi are subjected to particular focuses and close-ups throughout the numerous action scenes. Bigelow and her team even developed a wearable camera with a long snorkel lens, allowing the filming team to follow the actors more easily and catch their forms in movement (Wolfe, *Rolling Stone*, 2018). As Ayers puts it:

*In the hardbody genre, the camera treats the male body in much the same way as it has traditionally treated the female body: through excessively lingering shots, pans along the length of the body, and close-ups of specific body parts* (43).

According to Grant, Bigelow films the male bodies longer than necessary, turning them into “objects of aesthetic contemplation” for the spectator (179). Indeed, the opening scene sets the tone on the sexualization of male characters, filming them in slow motion when performing action, bringing to the fore their musculature and extraordinary abilities. The focus on the body especially concerns Patrick Swayze (Bodhi<sup>9</sup>), who is introduced as “making love to the ocean”, arching his back and dragging his finger sensually along the wave (Wolfe, 2018). As successful action stars rely on anatomy as much as acting, Swayze’s *soma* becomes part of his charisma, giving him this powerful aura that subjugates characters as much as spectators (Grant, 175).

### **3) “You know there’s no way I can handle a cage, man”: Physical freedom and death:**

#### **a) Masculinity and Sacrifices in *Point Break*:**

As violence escalates towards the end of the movie, the notion of death, associated with freedom and masculinity, becomes central to the plot. Johnny and Bodhi’s opposite relationship with death represents the gap that exists between them, marking how differently they express their masculine identity. Bodhi asserts quite early in the movie that he is not afraid to die, that “it is not tragic to die doing what you love” (00:41:52), foreshadowing

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<sup>9</sup> The pun on Bodhi’s name sounding like “body” is interesting to mention in this context, as it reasserts the predominance of the figure in the character’s development. Same goes for Johnny Utah, whose name reminds us of the D-day on Utah Beach, reaffirming his place as a typical idealised American hero of the Reagan years.

already the end of the film. Because fear is the antithesis of masculinity, Bodhi's acceptance of death places him as dominant to the other surfers, as well as to Johnny. Indeed, during the second skydiving scene, the FBI agent ends up opening the chute in an attempt to save his own life rather than fulfilling his mission, when Bodhi seems to welcome the adrenaline of death with open hands.

Freedom is Bodhi's most important value, and as so, he does not hesitate sacrificing other people's lives, as well as his own, in order to protect it. If Johnny is at first more reluctant toward death than his nemesis, he ultimately risks it when the object of his desire is on the edge of escaping. Critic Robin Wood understands the death of the protagonists in buddy movies as "the most effective impediment to consummation of the same sex relationship" (Hart, 432). The two protagonists' fight to death illustrates the homoerotic dimension of the movie, and the tragic impossibility for their desires to be released. Both Utah and Bodhi are so focused on each other that it causes multiple deaths on both sides, putting the accent on the egoist and exclusive dimension of their relationship.

When Johnny finally catches Bodhi, the robber begs him to let him go, telling him that there is no way he can handle a cage (01:55:09). Choosing death over the cage is a way for Bodhi to finally prove Johnny how he has trapped himself in the system. On the other side, Bodhi represents a sense of primal manhood, unrestrained and close to nature. As he perishes for his beliefs and values, Bodhi's death becomes "Christ-like" (Grant, 177). Bodhi develops into a martyr of freedom, generating empathy on the audience's side, somehow becoming the hero of the movie.

#### **b) Implicit Recognition of Escaping Civilising Structure:**

In *Point Break*, flirtation with death implicitly allows the character to escape civilising established structures. The leading pair symbolises the dichotomy between law and freedom, between nature and civilised order, which is a defining feature of the Western genre. The cowboy on the side of justice (here Johnny Utah) often faces a rival who refutes the established system of the civilised world. Throughout the course of the events, this parallel is being put to the fore thanks to the symmetry between the two leading protagonists.

As the story moves forward, Johnny finds himself stuck in between these concepts of justice and freedom, finding it impossible to reconcile them. Bodhi is in fact free from the capitalist system he refuses, but that makes him an outlaw, and his search for liberty causes deaths around him, leading himself to his own destruction. Yet, Bodhi somehow inspires Johnny, who finds himself drawn closer to the lawless and more natural world he represents. It is the pursuit of Bodhi that brings the FBI agent to the edge of law, reasserting his hard bodied features:

*In order to accomplish this task, the hardbody must often break the Law in order to restore the Law. As such, the hardbodied hero is [...] a liminal figure; he moves about in both the "civilized" and "uncivilized" worlds, yet he is a true member of neither (Ayers, 55).*

Even if Johnny does not break the law strictly speaking, he manages to escape the trapping civilised order at the end of the movie, when he gives up on being a cop and allows Bodhi to die freely. Here, the love for the sport and for the ocean becomes a passing totem of freedom from Bodhi to Johnny. The final scene is Bodhi's last attempt to make Johnny realise what life he could have instead of working for the system: "I'm gonna get to jail and I'll pay, and Johnny Utah gets his guy, right? [...] You're gonna be a big hero now. But look at it Johnny, look at it!" (01:55:46 – 01:56:01). When Johnny looks at the waves, he finally understands Bodhi's need for liberty as well as his own. By releasing the criminal, he is also freeing himself.

As they both escape the law, Johnny and Bodhi once again find each other in a pairwise dynamic creating tensions and attraction. The implicit homoeroticism in the refusal of established structures mostly shows through Johnny's inability to catch his rival. "I believe you're either scared... or you're getting too god damn close to this surfing guru buddy of yours" remarks FBI agent Angelo Pappas to Johnny after he let the Ex Presidents go, somehow openly acknowledging the two men's relationship (01:11:10). Johnny and Bodhi become a united pair rejecting traditional masculine constructs and a civilised world that will not accept them in the first place:

*A second major twist occurs in the final sequence and suggests the men's simultaneous rejection of the masculine ideal which rests on external symbols of power. [...] Johnny releases Bodhi, letting him surf his last wave yet knowing he will die in the process. In*

*a final gesture, Johnny throws his badge into the ocean, presumably to see it join with Bodhi's mask. Both law/order and nature have been refuted out of hand [...](Lane, 77).*

In the end, the biggest sacrifice in *Point Break* might be Bodhi's, whose death liberates Johnny from a structure in which he can not thrive. After the epic chase following the last robbery, Johnny says he has kept on surfing everyday (01:53:10), but it is only when his rival is gone that he gives up on being a federal agent, and walks away as a free man. Bodhi's message has been passed on to Johnny, completing the mentor/disciple cycle that started with the two men's relationship. After all, Johnny's statement that "he's not coming back" (01:58:01) can be applied to both men, inducing that they both escaped civilization and masculine social constructs.

## **Part III: Psychological Power, Social Constructs and *The Power of the Dog*:**

*The Power of the Dog* is a movie in which the psychological aspect of masculine power is brought to the fore. In her adaptation of Thomas Savage's eponymous novel, Jane Campion turned the partly autobiographical work into a psychological thriller centred around masculine social constructs and search for identity. This part will explore the influence of the group over individual identities, as well as the different figures of masculinities, and finally the omnipotent parallel between gaze and power in the film.

### **1) The Power of the Group over the Individual:**

#### **a) The Group versus the Individual:**

*The Power of the Dog* perfectly sets the scene for homosocial group behaviours to be studied. As explained in part one, men construct and express their gender according to the social group they evolve in, adjusting their behaviours to fit in (Richmond et al. 61). The power of the group over one individual is repeatedly brought to the fore in the film, revealing how one's identity is defined through social interactions:

*As a man enacts masculinity, he will receive social feedback about the appropriateness of his actions and he will adjust his self-image according to the differences between his actual image and the socially desired image (Richmond et al. 61).*

The idea of adjusting identity to fit in the group is especially true when it comes to the character of Phil. At the beginning of the movie, he raises his glass "to us brothers, Romulus et Remus, and the wolf who raised us!" (00:10:12). The references to the wolf are not anodyne because male groups tend to work like wolf packs, asserting Phil's place as the alpha. As such, Phil has to be the best rider, the smartest, the bravest – when he castrates bulls with bare hands for instance (01:01:51) – but also the meanest of them all. His employees encourage him to denigrate non-hegemonic figures of masculinity such as Peter. The more Phil feels enhanced for his smearing attitude and putting down others, the more he acts that way, forging and reinforcing his identity through the group's feedback.



Consequently, every man in the cowboy group is also validated as dominant, and they feel that they belong to the hegemonic side of masculinity. Being part of the group is indeed reassuring for those men who are portrayed as “little more than adolescents themselves – men who have failed to adapt to the wider world and have sought refuge in isolation, nostalgia, and the protective paternalism of ranching economics” (Scheckter, 42). Phil appears as their leader, and incarnates the role model ranch hands want to reach. In the context of the movie, Phil embodies traditional figures of masculinity from the past, and cannot stand any other form of masculine behaviours, either from Peter or even his own brother whom he puts down over and over due to his softer and more gentle attitude. Therefore, the ranch becomes an exclusively homosocial place in which alternative masculine enactments are fully rejected by the group.

While the group of ranch hands considers itself dominant, and reasserts this feeling through mutual self validation, it nevertheless needs to assure its perennial supremacy over others, a process which relies mostly on exclusion and discrimination. In *The Power of the Dog*, the cowboys openly reject young Peter because of his more feminine appearance. His closely fitting clean clothes, lack of physical strength as well as his shyness earn him the qualification of “sissy”. As aforementioned, the cultural figure of the “sissy”, because of its association with femininity, represents the absolute negation of one’s masculine qualities. Throughout most of the film, Peter endures various insults and nicknames such as “Little lady”, “Miss Nancy” and “sissy”, all revolving around his purportedly feminine features. It is through the exclusion of any closeness to femininity that the cowboy group asserts its own masculinity, rejecting both women (Rose) and less significant figures of hegemonic manhood (Peter and George).

Phil’s affirmation of male potency does not only show through his contempt for Peter, but also through the domination he performs on his brother. As owners of the ranch, both men could be regarded as equals, yet Phil clearly has the ascent over George, whom he repeatedly calls “fatso” and “a chubby know-nothing too dumb to get through college” (00:09:32). The hierarchy between the two brothers is reinforced as the ranch hands expressly consider Phil as their only leader, blindly following his orders and harassing Peter with no regard for the boy’s relation to George. Here again, the group has a strong effect over an individual’s social place and power in established institutions.

In his policy of feminine exclusion, Phil even goes so far as to get close to Peter in order to turn the young boy into what the cowboy considers “a real man,” telling him to not let his mum make a “sissy” out of him (01:22:10). Phil indeed holds the woman, Rose, responsible for both Peter and later George’s softness. The ostracism of the female is a central aspect of the plot and works as a structural basis against which manhood in the film is expressed. Phil’s decision to take Peter under his wing not only dealt a death blow on Rose, completing her isolation, but also highlights the two men’s similarities, despite what they care to admit.

#### **b) Peter and Phil as individuals:**

Although the group works as an empowering tool for individuals that fit within hegemonic clusters, it nevertheless has the power to erase someone’s identity in favour of the group’s social expectations. If Phil stands out as leader of the cowboy in comparison to his brother, it is mostly due to the fact that he corresponds to the ranch hands’ aspiration of leadership. As a result, Phil’s individuality has to remain secret if he wants to keep his place within the dominant group, where the only accepted form of distinctiveness is the one of the foreman.

Phil’s individuality is also expressed in the way he is filmed and framed in the movie. He is most of the time alone on the screen, and when he shares the picture with other characters, he is the only one moving or talking. Besides, Phil is recurrently framed through windows or door frames that create a massive black border surrounding him. By doing so, Jane Campion not only affirms her character’s individuality, but also conveys the idea that Phil is trapped in a life where he can not be fully himself, and has to perform a role to meet traditional masculinity standards. Social constructs of the time, added to his employees’ expectations of leadership, forced Phil to repress his homosexuality in order to protect his hegemonic position. The feeling of self hatred that originates from having to live as a closeted homosexual results in physical and psychological violence towards any figure of Otherness, behaviours that are paradoxically encouraged by the other cowboys.



Figure 7: Campion, Jane, *The Power of the Dog*, 2021 (02:01)



Figure 8: Campion, Jane, *The Power of the Dog*, 2021 (32:36)

The other figure of masculinity that stands out in the movie is Rose's son, Peter. The young boy distinct himself from the other men on the ranch in the way he does not fit in with the hyper masculine codes cowboys assume. Like Phil, Peter is most often framed alone on screen, where a use of shots and counter shots oppose him to the group formed by the ranch hands. His white shirts, shoes and hats also make him even more recognizable in the Montana landscape, and distance himself from the cowboys who wear darker tones. As white usually symbolises peace and purity in western cultures, Peter's association to this colour removes any potential danger coming from him to the point when he becomes a prey for the group.

Peter's attitude is also what isolates him from the grouping. Indeed, his shyness and his delicate manners are quickly understood as features of homosexuality by the other cowboys, who see in that another difference justifying the boy's exclusion. Yet the homosexual theme of the film is not carried by Peter solely, but rather shared by Phil, making them both individuals in comparison to the heterosexual group represented by the ranch hands. While the subject of sexual orientation is not openly talked about in Campion's film, it appears clear that both men acknowledge the other's sexuality, especially when they talk about Bronco Henry in the barn (01:47:04 – 01:51:07). Beyond the implicit recognition of the other's homosexuality, this scene is also a shared intimate moment between them, in which Phil not only shows his vulnerability to Peter but also accepts his own desires.

Figures 9 and 10 illustrate the numerous differences between Peter and the cowboys. This scene from *The Power of the Dog* visually reinforces the power of the group over individuals that do not fit within standard masculinity characteristics.



Figure 9: Campion Jane, *The Power of the Dog*, 2021 (01:02:36)



Figure 10: Campion Jane, *The Power of the Dog*, 2021 (01:02:26)

In the end, Phil comes off as being closer to Peter than to the ranch hands despite his constant effort to endorse hegemonic masculine features. When Phil finally stops harassing Peter and gets to know him, the two men find in each other an escape from the social expectations of the cowboy grouping. The secret of their bond also lies in the ability they have to see the dog drawn by the shadow on the mountain, something only Bronco Henry could see (01:24:27). More than a way for Peter to win Phil's respect, this moment also marks the differences between the three homosexual men and the figures of traditional masculinity embodied by the ranch hands<sup>10</sup>.

While Phil aims to fit in and lead the group of cowboys, he knows he has to hide a part of himself to the others, to the point of suffering from it. As a result, Phil displaces his sufferings in hatred for others. Paradoxically, the lonely man finds in his victim an echo of his own experience of exclusion, and ends up accepting the alternative figure of masculinity embodied by Peter, as well as his own contradictory feelings.

## **2) The figures of Masculinities:**

### **a) Phil's contradictions:**

*The Power of the Dog* features a wide range of male characters who constitute the spectrum of masculine identity. The movie focuses mostly on the two Burbank brothers as well as Peter, and explores how those three men build their identity in relation to figures of Otherness. This part addresses Phil's complex and contradictory identity, based on self repression as well as a refusal of civilisation or any sort of novelty.

One of the most defining aspects of Phil's character is the fact that he appears stuck in the past. Even if it is mentioned that the two brothers went to university, where Phil succeeded admirably in classics, he preferred the ranch life to civilization. The dinner scene with the Governor and his wife at the Burbank ranch illustrates perfectly Phil's refusal to join society. While the guests yearn for his conversation and wonder if he "swears at the cattle in Greek or Latin", Phil refuses to show up because he did not wash, showing up ultimately to humiliate

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<sup>10</sup> Bronco Henry's homosexuality is firstly revealed when Peter finds a box of old magazines with images of naked men that belonged to him (01:15:46).

his brother and step sister (00:54:20). Professor John Scheckter understands Phil as a complex character who prefers to misuse his gifts to degrade others:

*Phil [...] is clearly brilliant and almost as clearly sociopathic. He is one of the roughs, potentially a democratic hero after Whitman, a cowboy who has taught himself classical Greek. But Phil the cowboy wears his clothes until they must be buried, and Phil the classicist uses his knowledge to humiliate the protagonist's father so thoroughly that the insecure, pretentious man commits suicide (Scheckter, 42).*

Throughout the movie, Phil's rejection of modernity (indoor bathtubs, cars...) also illustrates his desire to remain close to his sense of real and more primal manhood, as he had been taught by Bronco Henry. In the documentary *Behind the scene with Jane Campion* (Bouchet and Mayow, 2022), the movie director states that "everything he has done is in the past. He can only love safely in the past. To love presently, as a closet homosexual, as a homophobe... is kind of impossible"(03:19). Refusing a way of life that is not the one he experienced with his late mentor is also a way for Phil to keep his relationship with Bronco Henry alive.

From what he had been taught with his late mentor, Phil believes that real men stand in the past, when the only model of masculinity was the established figure of the violent and dominant man. Therefore, Phil associates his actions and relations to others to the notion of being a hegemonic figure of masculinity. While it seems to work on the ranch hands to whom he incarnates the alpha, the lonely cowboy deep down knows that he actually would not fit within the group if he assumed his sexuality. In a world in which sexuality seems to be a defining aspect of identity, and as such influences an individual's place within the group, not conforming to the majority can result in exclusion (Breger, 76). In the case of Phil Burbank, being openly homosexual would cost him not only his position as alpha of the group, but would also result in the negation of his masculinity by other cowboys:

*[...] The behaviour of a heterosexual man, close to what we will call later the Marlboro Man, clashes with the behaviour of a homosexual man, with an identity much closer to the feminine idea (Blanco-Herrero et al., 3).*

As Peter's attitude appears to be closer to the feminine idea, he is immediately qualified as a homosexual by the ranch hands, becoming an easy target for Phil to reassert his domination. In the Netflix's documentary *Re framing the West: Behind the Scenes of Jane*

*Campion's The Power of the Dog* (2022), actor Kodi Smit-McPhee (Peter) explains how he perceives the character of Phil as a narcissist, whose habit to crush non-hegemonic figures of masculinity is part of a process of both earning and giving validity to a dominant masculine group (05:52). Yet, by humiliating Peter in order to maintain his leading role, Phil also reinforces his own internalised homophobia and self hatred. His constant oscillating between two identities result in a deep negative impact on both his self esteem and relations to others.

Phil's relation to masculinity is indeed built upon dominating any figure of the Other, even if those figures are his own brother and nephew. Yet, Phil's knowledge of him also being the Other because of his sexuality has led him to endorse the role of a hyper masculine leader, to the point where he can not stand any divergence from it. Consequently, Phil feels the need to harass men who present softer masculine identities (either his brother George or Peter) whom he likely perceives as a threat to traditional manhood. Arguably, Phil's homophobia could be understood as the reason behind his attitude towards the young boy, yet could it also be the result of the cowboy's repressed desire to enact and present a more feminine masculinity as well? Witnessing Peter being comfortable with both his sexuality and gender presentation despite society's expectations challenges Phil's conception of both established masculinity constructs as well as his relation to himself.

Finally, Phil's most visible contradiction appears in his sudden change of attitude towards Peter. After bullying him for months, Phil abruptly decides to take the young boy under his wing, something that, given the complex and mischievous nature of the cowboy, frightens Rose as much as the audience. In spite of his internalised homophobia and his self hatred for being a homosexual, Phil shows signs of attraction for Peter. Not necessarily sexual, the relationship that develops between the two men is based on intimacy, shared memories from the past and a growing mutual respect. This unexpected decision expresses the cowboy's loneliness and need for an understanding partner with whom he can be vulnerable.

**b) Showing emotions:**

Vulnerability being considered a weakness extends to the expression of any other emotions in masculine homosocial groups, in which emotional detachment is thought of as imperative (Bird, 125). By opposition, the open talk and expression of feelings is observed as belonging exclusively to the feminine world, resulting in the association of showing emotions



with femininity and fragility. As a result, masculine individuals who express their emotions end up being excluded (Bird, 125). In *The Power of the Dog*, the notion of fragility is borne by Rose, whom we witness crying for instance, while the other male characters show little to no emotions at all.

The repression of feelings has been theorised by Dr Ronald Levant in 1992 in his hypothesis of the Normative Male Alexithymia, which is defined as the “inability to identify and express or describe one's feelings” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). According to Levant, men who present symptoms of alexithymia have been discouraged from expressing their emotions by their relatives from a very young age, and as a result are not able to neither identify nor face their feelings once adults (Levant, qtd. in Richmond et al, 63). It seems that the historical and social context of the ranch life did favour masculine enactments based on emotional detachment rather than the free expression of emotions, especially when those emotions are regarded as feminine ones:

*These men showed the greatest deficits in identifying and expressing emotions that reflect a sense of vulnerability (like sadness or fear) or attachment (like fondness or caring) (Richmond et al, 63).*

This is well illustrated in Campion's movie, where all the men struggle to express their feelings. Admittedly, Phil does suffer from alexithymia, yet even male characters who do not present hegemonic qualities like Peter and George also struggle from stating their emotions. Peter most often seems detached, but he exteriorises intense feelings by repeatedly rubbing his thumb over his comb. On the other hand, George remains silent when facing his brother's angst, and most often struggles to find his words.

Men who aim to endorse traditional hegemonic masculine identities not only view the expression of emotions as a weakness, but also comprehend emotional restriction as a tool in competitive emotional environments (Richmond et al, 64). Yet, emotions associated with dominance and violence, like anger for instance, are not necessarily capped but rather serve as a reassertion of a man's hegemonic position. Often the result of a long previous inhibition of feelings like frustration or emotional injury, anger arises from the need to release those uncomfortable chords that could not be expressed in any other way by alexithymic subjects. Phil Burbank for instance repeatedly throws a tantrum on people's actions that displease him.

When George announces to Phil that he married Rose, the cowboy exteriorises his frustration by beating up a mare (32:48). Discovering that Rose gave the hides away pushes Phil to his limits, losing his cold and sarcastic habits and letting his rage explode (01:42:35 – 01:44:37). These violent events definitely forge Phil's hegemonic position and reputation, however it also feeds the self hatred vicious circle that prevents him from being himself and in which he is stuck.

Despite what has been explained earlier, there are still moments and places where Phil is portrayed as capable of vulnerability. The bathing scene at the end of part four shows the cowboy in his most sensitive and intimate moment (01:11:30 – 01:14:15). When alone in this sanctuary-like meadow, Phil lets go of his armour and seems to reconnect with himself. The way he sensually and tenderly caresses his own body with Bronco Henry's silk scarf not only states the nature of the two men's relationship, but also puts the light on Phil's loneliness and willingness to be loved. As this scene discloses a new facet of the cowboy where his desires show through his vulnerability, it also explains how Phil (consciously or not) uses anger and violence to hide his passion.

As the story unravels, Phil slowly starts to accept Peter and opens up to him on various occasions. In this process, the barn takes on an important role of a shelter in which Phil feels comfortable enough to express his feelings and talk about his sexuality. The barn acts as a comforting place for the lonely cowboy who finds consolation in the memories he keeps from Bronco Henry such as his saddle for instance. Phil indeed either polishes or sits on the saddle when in distress, which also reinforces the closeness and intimacy shared by the ranch man and his late mentor.

Besides Bronco Henry, Phil manages to show sensitivity only around Peter, who he allows to sit on his friend's saddle for instance. It is during shared moments in the barn that Phil opens up the most, and almost seems to accept who he really is. Peter actually has the ability to calm Phil down, especially when he tells him that he saved some of the hides necessary to finish the rope (01:45:26). In that moment, Phil turns emotive and struggles to prevent his tears from flowing, revealing to Peter and to the audience the complexity and intensity of his emotions. The very last moment Phil and Peter spend together is emotionally fervent (01:46:51 – 01:51:07). Beyond the very few words exchanged between the two men, the intimacy they share is reinforced by the dimmed light of the barn, which confirms the

undisclosed aspect of the conversation. The cigarette that goes back and forth between them is the epitome of this shared, intimate moment, puzzling Phil for whom the cigarette might act as a bond weaving around a secret they both know from now on.

Jane Campion's cinematographic direction most often revolves around the understanding of complex characters and studies their fragilities with great depth and sensitivity. This is how she managed to make a character like Phil Burbank likeable by the audience in spite of how he acts and presents himself. Her focus on the psychological aspect of her characters is a defining feature of her work, and is associated with the omnipresent notion of gaze in her movies.

### **3) The Gaze:**

#### **a) Who holds the gaze?**

Inherent to the process of movie making, the notion of the gaze is related to ideas of dominance, power and desire. Due to the universal dimension of the gaze, this final part will draw the two movies discussed earlier together in order to explore how the idea of a queer gaze brings new readings of both stories to the fore.

Many parallels can be drawn between Phil and Johnny Utah's experiences of the gaze, both in relation to other male and female characters, and in the way they undergo scrutiny themselves. At the beginning of the two movies, masculine leading roles are presented as holding the gaze over women, asserting their hegemonic position in homosocial milieus. Here, the look is rather a scrutinised one linked to a greater goal (Federal agent Utah observes Tyler in a work context and Phil uses his gaze to make Rose uncomfortable at the ranch) rather than a sexualizing one. Despite the growing relationship between Tyler and Johnny in *Point Break*, both women quickly disappear from the screen in favour of homosocial interactions, leaving the gaze in the face of his potential queer dimension.

The homoerotic dimension of the gaze shows through the numerous exchanges of looks between male characters on screen. The question of who possesses the gaze is not anodyne as it reveals the complexity of masculine relations as well as the latent homoerotic tensions mainstream cinema disavows. Here, both movies articulate around two pairs of male characters who seem to acknowledge growing desires between them. Subtler than the

chemistry felt between Johnny and Bodhi, the relationship between Phil and Peter is built upon a slow taming of the other, where the gaze turns into an inherent component of their non verbal interactions. If at the beginning of the movie, Phil uses his gaze over Peter to get him down, this dynamic rapidly changes as Phil starts to accept his attraction for the young boy.

Queering the gaze in regards to those movies is not benign because both works present a couple of male leading characters evolving in buddy dynamics. As the question of homosexuality is central to the plot of *The Power of the Dog*, the gaze then not only becomes a tool in the expression of desires but also explores different men's approaches to passion in relation to their definition of hegemony. For instance, Phil can not stand the idea of Peter being comfortable with his gender expression and his homosexuality, yet he sees the teenager's potential place by his side. Observing another man and gauging him before accepting him into a group is a necessary process into homosocial interactions and reveals how intrinsic the gaze is in social construction. As aforementioned, *Point Break* also features a buddy dynamic between the two male leads based on a constant competition and a sense of mentorship from Bodhi to Utah. When comparing the two films studied here, it appears that the gaze in homosocial milieu, and even more in buddy dynamics, constantly bears homoerotic tensions which can either be sexual or more related to hierarchical position.

While Phil seems to think of himself as dominating the ranch and everyone who lives there, he does not perceive Peter's piercing gaze over him. From the moment the ranch hands arrive at Rose's restaurant, Peter constantly keeps his eyes on Phil who he knows to be dangerous. It is Phil's over confidence that he has control over others with his gaze that causes his downfall and his death. Asserted in the very first seconds of the movie by the anonymous voice that the audience discovers later to be Peter's, his desire to save his mother from Phil provides an entire new understanding of the storyline after the ending. Peter's questioning what kind of man would he be if he did not save his mother not only reveals how he manipulated Phil into letting his guard down to kill him, but also puts the light on the young boy's hegemonic position. "He used to worry I was not kind enough. That I was too strong" says Peter about his dead father, reaffirming that the adolescent is much more powerful than Phil realises (01:37:33).

Figures 11, 12 and 13 are taken from various moments throughout Jane Campion's film. The three pictures bring the light onto a new reading of the story that can only be

understood after a first viewing of the film. Here, the three shots shift the understanding of who holds the gaze, therefore changing the notion of power on screen.



Figure 11: Champion Jane, *The Power of the Dog*, 2021 (00:07:28)



Figure 12: Champion Jane, *The Power of the Dog*, 2021 (01:15:40)



Figure 13: Champion Jane, *The Power of the Dog*, 2021 (01:31:41)

In the end of both movies, the two characters who appeared to be in control during all the film know a tragic death. With their death comes the idea of freedom, Johnny Utah finally breaks free from an institution he lost faith in, and Rose starts feeling better as her family is now safe. However, more than freedom for the two surviving men, the message behind the death of such traditional hegemonic figures can be the burying of old masculinity constructs, leaving place to a new, more nuanced type of manhood and masculine interactions. It is also the emergence of a new gaze, as much intra-diegetic as behind the camera. Far from the established codes and traditions of mainstream cinema, both movies offer a sensitive insight on the complexity of masculine social constructs and the tensions that occur within male homosocial milieus.

**b) The Camera's eye:**

The fact that both films have been directed by women raises questions regarding the movies' realisation process. If both movies abide the qualification of "alternative" here, it appears clear that the female gaze carried by the directors plays a huge part in the unconventional aspects of the movies. Kathryn Bigelow's subversive treatment of traditional cinematographic codes reinforces the notion that the director's gaze can definitely transform a story. Jane Campion, on her part, reframes the established story of the west to offer a new look on masculinity. On the contrary of mainstream cinema which strongly refutes any potential homoerotic tensions within established male movies, both film directors here seem to embrace it as a way to explore in depth the complexity of masculine social constructs.

As Steve Neale argues, the pleasure experienced in cinema revolves around the pleasure to look at the male figures, bringing into question the sexualization men on screen abide (Neale, 8). Yet, in the case of both *Point Break* and *The Power of the Dog*, the filming process includes the notion of a female gaze over male bodies, challenging the traditional idea according to which the gaze simply sexualises characters:

*Campion, one of cinema's great sensualists, captures Phil and his men with water glimmering in the sun off their nude bodies, muscles tensed, not a woman in sight. It's the inverse of film theorist Laura Mulvey's male gaze, in which the world is depicted from a masculine, heterosexual perspective that presents women as sexual objects (Vognar, Los Angeles Times, 2022).*

Campion's female gaze then does not objectify the cowboys but rather presents them in natural, daily life sceneries in which the aesthetic of the moment surpasses the presence of naked bodies. What is offered here is a sensitive insight into simple shared moments between men, devoid of the traditional objectification that would have framed them in close ups and slow motions, turning them into objects of contemplation.

Even when Phil is filmed in moments of vulnerability, it is not done with a sexualizing gaze but rather proposes a more sensual and intimate reading of these scenes. Phil's alone moments, either when he is bathing or when he polishes Bronco Henry's saddle are filmed in a way that displays his emotions and not his physical features. Those moments somehow even take on a sacred-like aspect where Phil immerses himself in the memories of his past love, revealing to the audience the extent of his feelings for his late mentor. Those scenes are as touching as they focus on the cowboy's loneliness rather than on his erotic potential. This shift of focus from the body to the emotions of characters is what makes *The Power of the Dog* stand out from other types of Western movies that traditionally create a parallel between physical strength and hegemonic position, resulting in a stronger objectification of the cowboy than what Jane Campion wants to offer.

Beyond refusing the over-sexualization of their characters, both movie directors also play with the audience by forcing it to face its own voyeurism. The black frames around Phil for instance, actually are doors and windows giving the impression that Phil is always under someone's scrutiny (either an intra-diegetic character or the audience itself), as well as conveying a sense of uneasiness. Rising tensions are also felt when Peter discovers the cowboy bathing in the river, where the voyeurism into such an intimate instant is suddenly broken by Phil's realisation that he is being watched. Forcing the audience to acknowledge its voyeuristic tendencies is a way for movie directors to refuse their characters' objectification as well as suggesting a deeper understanding of their mindsets and stories.

However, such treatment of the western genre and characters still seem to bother men who identify with the established notions of hegemonic manhood. Actor Sam Elliot's reaction to the movie for example reveals a lot on how new treatments of male characters are still received nowadays. Sam Elliot was indeed disturbed by the "allusions of homosexuality throughout the movie" and the fact that cowboys are "running around in chaps and no shirts", saying that it rubbed him the wrong way (Wolfe, *Rolling Stone UK*, 2018). It appears that in



spite of Jane Campion's efforts to free her characters from the diminishing male gaze, traditional expectations of gender expression continue to remain within the cinema industry. The fact that some people feel threatened by the decay of traditional models of hegemonic manhood in favour of more diverse masculinities proves the necessity for such movies to exist and to keep offering new perspectives when investigating masculinity constructs.

## Conclusion

American mainstream cinema institutions like Hollywood for instance mainly rely on the production of action-packed movies featuring masculine heroes that quickly become archetypal representations of traditional hegemonic masculinity. As the cinema industry still is nowadays mostly a patriarchal environment, the creation process is primarily achieved in a closed homosocial milieu, resulting in the disavowing of the homoerotic tensions and dynamics that are nonetheless omnipresent.

Traditional male films in particular articulate their stories around a predominant need to erase homoerotic tensions to the audience. For the sake of preserving “real manhood” on screen, those films endorse the contradiction of displaying hyper-masculine characters while at the same time denying their erotic potential. Male interactions in films are achieved with a specific willingness to displace homoeroticism, notably on stigmatised homosexual characters (Russo, 81).

Inherent to action films of the 1990s, buddy dynamics that however depend on the exclusion of females to achieve a homosocial environment in which male characters are constantly on display, refuse to acknowledge the objectification that lies behind those mechanisms. Homosexual characters being denied leading roles in action films illustrates how mainstream cinema fears the emergence of heroes that would affect the dominant position of its emblematic heroes.

A perfect illustration of the consequences of such denial is the Western genre. Ripped off of his historical roots to create an emblem of white straight hegemonic masculinity such as the Marlboro Man, the cowboy has been denied massive parts of his life on screen. Rare are the movies that dare to embrace the intrinsic queer and non-white narrative aspects of the Western myth that have nevertheless forged American culture. The aim behind the erasure of the cowboy’s queer history, then, is the reinforcement of hegemonic masculine codes on screen as well as on a cultural level. Indeed, men who perform traditional heterosexual dominant masculinity (and who like to refer to themselves as “real men”), usually are the audience for Western and Action films, also like to believe that the USA as it is known today has been built by men who resemble them (Nojimbadem, 2017).

However, such archetypal representations call for challenge, and alternative Western movies have started to emerge. The two films studied in this thesis dispute the disavowal of homoeroticism in cinema, and stand out in the way they explore and offer new readings of the Western myth. As Kathryn Bigelow and Jane Campion both work within mainstream cinema, they have used their extraordinary place as recognised female directors to subvert the Western genre from the inside.

By putting the light on how the codes and mechanisms behind paradigmatic action and western movies actually rely on homoerotic dynamics, the two film directors reveal how the cinema industry unconsciously articulates itself around the same component it so fiercely tries to deny. Whether it is in the action scenes that express the desire for the hero to possess his nemesis, or the buddy dynamics relying on intimacy and closeness, homoerotic desires are central to male movies, and often become a driving force in characters' motives and actions. The way *Point Break* and *The Power of the Dog* present male characters escaping civilising structures together can be understood as the historical homoeroticism of the Western myth showing through, reasserting how hegemonic masculinity can be an impossible to reach and trapping model in that it only grants validity to an exclusive minority of men, resulting in the development of insecurities and anxieties for a lot of men.

By offering films suggesting that alternative readings and movie making are possible, Bigelow and Campion create new and attainable ideals of masculinity on screen for a wider audience to identify with. Both movies' multiple layers of understanding fit and challenge the cinematographic expectations of their times, using this fluidity to be part of modern debates. It seems however, that even in a time in which discussions around sexuality, gender identity or feminism are becoming central to society, patriarchal assumptions still remain and advocate for the erasure of diversity. As long as these types of discourses will keep on existing, whether in cinema or in public life, producing movies such as *Point Break* or *The Power of the Dog* to counter such messages will remain crucial.

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