

Article

Paper Flowers: Jane Campion, Plant Life, and *The Power of the Dog* (2021)

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Abstract: Taking as its point of departure the place of the vegetal realm within Jane Campion's filmmaking, this article attends to both living and artificial plants, homing in on the exquisitely crafted paper flowers of *The Power of the Dog* to explore their entanglement with human power relations. Manmade flowers are clearly distinct from the flowers of the garden or the prairie, but in this Western, they form part of a broader floral aesthetic with their living kin. Drawing upon thought that stems from actual plants (Deleuze and Guattari's arboreal-rhizomatic thinking) and vegetal philosophy (Marder, Coccia), as well as parallel botany's attention to the artificial (Lionni), I follow the fate of one paper flower as it intersects with the gendered history of artificial flower making and floral sexual symbolism. Thinking with this paper flower, I engage with theories that variously question binary power relations (Cixous, Barthes, Steinbock), reading these alongside scholarship on sex, gender, and masculinity in the Western (Neale, Mulvey, Bruzzi), and broaching the hierarchies of settler colonialism. The film's floral aesthetic, I argue, challenges the either/or logic of male or female, masculine or feminine, and even though it cannot fully break away from the binaries it critiques, it is indebted to registering the importance of the nuance (Barthes) in the unthreading of power.

Keywords: Jane Campion; *The Power of the Dog*; the Western; artificial flowers; gender; masculinity; vegetal philosophy



Citation: Cooper, S. Paper Flowers: Jane Campion, Plant Life, and *The Power of the Dog* (2021). *Philosophies* **2022**, *7*, 143. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies7060143>

Academic Editor: Marcin J. Schroeder

Received: 31 August 2022

Accepted: 1 December 2022

Published: 13 December 2022

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1. Campion's Flower Power

In Jane Campion's filmmaking, plants may not always be central to the narrative of a given work or even particularly noticeable, thereby endorsing at times through the *mise en scène* philosopher Michael Marder's observation that plants have frequently populated the margin of the margin in the history of western thought [1] (p. 2). But some works, especially Campion's feature films, are indebted to kinship between humans and plants, making the vegetal more noteworthy than it may at first appear. Writing on Campion's filming of nature, film critic Pascal Binétruy positions her in an intermediary category between those filmmakers who consider the landscape they observe as painters, and those who film as geographers, specifying that Campion approaches nature as matter, that is to say as grass, leaves, bark, rock, and earth [2] (p. 109). Correspondingly, Campion homes in on the plants of the landscapes and urban areas she films. From the trees of *Sweetie* (1989), through the lush grass and woods of *An Angel at My Table* (1990), to the humid, muddy forest of *The Piano* (1993), the garden blooms and posies of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), the blossom shower of *In the Cut* (2003), and the flowers of *Bright Star* (2009), plant life has a vital presence across her work. Flowers are no less important in her most recent feature, *The Power of the Dog*. Divided into chapters and based on Thomas Savage's 1967 novel of the same name, the film confirms Campion scholar Estella Tincknell's sense of the filmmaker's talent as adapter [3], while not abandoning preoccupations for which she is celebrated as auteur. The film is set in the sagebrush plains and mountainous folds of 1920s Montana but shot on New Zealand's South Island. There are fleeting cameos from white rose buds in a wedding bouquet, pressed yellow prairie flowers in a scrapbook, dried flowers baked by the sun, California poppies planted in parched soil, along with wreaths and garlands of

white flowers in a funeral display. The film also includes handmade paper flowers, and these will be my main focal point in this article. More precisely, my reading of this film will focus on the significance of one such flower and on where attention to the smallest of details, the nuance as Roland Barthes terms it, can lead [4].

The flower in question is made on screen by Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee), one of the main protagonists. It is afforded several close-ups during the time it takes Peter to finish it, as well as in a later scene where it reappears in the more hostile hands of Phil Burbank (Benedict Cumberbatch), who insults and torments Peter using the flower before destroying it. Peter's mother Rose (Kirsten Dunst) will subsequently marry Phil's brother George (Jesse Plemons) and go to live on the Burbank ranch. Phil makes Rose's life hell and Peter avenges her suffering in the end by killing him. In Savage's book, Peter says that it is his mother who has "a way with flowers" [5] (p. 57), and in the film he says she was a florist. As cultural historian Kasia Boddy observes, a sizeable part of the burden of floral association has been placed on women over the centuries [6] (unpaginated e-book, loc. 109). Yet by establishing Peter as the artificial flower maker, both book and film challenge any fixed gender relation with the floral dimension. This more fluid gender relation that is forged with paper rather than actual flowers points indeed to the artificiality of "naturalized" gender identities. To date, *The Power of the Dog* has prompted stimulating scholarly commentary on its challenge to toxic masculinity and gender binaries [7,8] and has been understood as part of a wider move on the part of contemporary women filmmakers to revisit the Western genre critically, with Kelly Reichardt and Chloé Zhao offering other strong examples [8]. As film scholars Alfio Leotta and Missy Molloy note, dissecting "toxic masculinity" with the support of rugged natural backgrounds is not new to Campion's work [9]. Engaging afresh with this longstanding concern, my aim here is to show how flowers have a more prominent place in the film's power relations than has hitherto been observed.

Whereas Campion's attention to masculinity in the second decade of the twenty-first century has as its backdrop the #MeToo moment as it tells the tale of a century ago, Savage's vision of 1920s ranch life from the vantagepoint of the late 1960s was written at a historical moment of revolution and dissent in which flowers played a visible role. In 1965, Allen Ginsberg's suggestions for organizing peaceful protests and deflecting violence on a march began with "masses of flowers—a visual spectacle—especially concentrated in the front lines" [10] (p. 209). Flower power was a core non-violent aspect of the counterculture of the late sixties and early seventies. While Savage's and Campion's paper flowers seem at first to be on the side of non-violence, they do however come to bear a more ambivalent relation to such peaceable power. The initial paper flower of the film, even after its demise, is caught up in the most affirmative as well as the most poisonous human relations, which span intersections of gender, sexuality, and the hierarchies of settler colonialism. Attending to this embroilment, I begin by emphasizing a connection between the vegetal in Campion's wider oeuvre and this film's flowers through dialogue with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's arboreal and rhizomatic thinking which is inspired by plants. I then carry this forward to follow the fate of the initial paper flower whose destruction appears to conjure the plant-based equivalent of the sexualized wounding—castration or decapitation—of which Hélène Cixous speaks and which I discuss with reference to Marder's notion of plant-thinking and Emanuele Coccia's flower theory. Given that Marder's and Coccia's plant theories refer to actual plants, I engage additionally with the work of Leo Lionni and his parallel botany to account for the distinctiveness of the artificial flower. I interweave with this vegetal and parallel philosophy discussion of sex and gender in the Western scholarship of Steve Neale, Laura Mulvey, and Stella Bruzzi. Arguing ultimately that the initial paper flower opens onto a floral aesthetic that is not aligned with either the male or female, masculine or feminine, I draw upon Barthes's interest in using the nuance to outwit the power play of binary thinking and its influence on Eliza Steinbock's cinematic philosophy of transgender embodiment. Although this floral aesthetic turns out to be imbricated in the very binary power relations it otherwise questions, it ensures nevertheless that the paper flower remains disarmingly central to this all-too-human tale of love, jealousy,

bigotry, and revenge, becoming far more than a benign, marginal presence that is quickly dispatched.

2. Vegetal Campion and the Introduction of the Paper Flower

Prior to flowers, there are trees. Even though the family unit, as film critic Michel Ciment notes [11] (p. 9), is at the heart of Campion's work, trees are of equal importance in her first major feature. Campion's *Sweetie* is a tragicomic take on a difficult relationship between two estranged sisters within a dysfunctional family. In the opening aerial shot of a floral-patterned carpet, Kay (Karen Colston) announces in voice-over that trees scare her. Her superstition originates from the palatial tree house in the yard of the family home and the roots she imagined crawling under the house with their hidden powers. Her sister Dawn/Sweetie (Genevieve Lemon) will eventually die when this tree house collapses. When Sweetie is buried, a tree root prevents the grave diggers from lowering the coffin into the ground. This just confirms Kay's superstition about trees as, literally and metaphorically, the family tree splinters and breaks.

Also suspicious of trees, but for non-superstitious reasons, Deleuze and Guattari write that "there is always something genealogical about a tree" [12] (p. 8). Instead of heredity, they prefer more haphazard relationality, foregrounding the rhizome as a subterranean stem different from roots and radicles and declaring instead, "the rhizome is antigenealogy" [12] (p. 12). Likening rhizomes to their conception of a "plateau," they speak of both as always in the middle, never at the beginning or end [12] (p. 27). Critical plant scholars, Marder among them, have been quick to come to the defense of trees [13], with Jeffrey Nealon also pointing out that "rhizomatics" derives from discussion of plants without expanding to explore plant life per se [14] (p. 84). The rhizomatic impulse of Deleuze and Guattari's thinking is however apposite in the context of Campion's *Sweetie*, which witnesses the breakdown of genealogical ties alongside the uprooting and destruction of trees, paving the way toward varying human-plant relations that appear in later films. Trees are important within the landscapes of *An Angel at My Table* and *The Piano* too, both of which share gradations of a color palette of earthy greens and browns. The human-plant connections of Campion's films, as generative as they are destructive, are also forged frequently with flowers, and they oscillate between the arboreal genealogical line and more random rhizomatic becomings.

Women are sometimes linked to flowers through a name before any floral relationship develops in or beyond family lineages. Like Rose in *The Power of the Dog*, Pansy (Valentina Cervi) in *The Portrait of a Lady* has a strong bond with flowers, but they differentiate her from, rather than identify her with, her parents, symbolizing her innocence in contrast to their scheming. Flowers feature heavily too in *Bright Star* within the relationship between Fanny Brawne (Abbie Cornish) and John Keats (Ben Whishaw). Although their love is never consummated, such a desired outcome plays out metaphorically as Keats runs around a garden pretending to be a bee pollinating the abundant flowers, while Fanny and her sister Toots (Edie Martin) sniff them to find the best scent. Making the connection to reproduction more explicit, in the earlier *In the Cut* flower petals are associated retrospectively with the original family romance that led to Frannie (Meg Ryan) being born. A petal storm experienced one morning by her half-sister Pauline (Jennifer Jason Leigh) is also witnessed by Frannie, still in bed, who sees it out of the window in her half-awake state, thinking it is snow. She goes back to sleep to dream in sepia of a woman and a man skating on ice, all to the soundtrack of "Que Sera". Frannie later explains to Pauline that their father proposed to Frannie's mother while out skating. The confusion of blossom with snow brought back the dream of skaters, in the form of her parents, associating flowers with betrothal. Wherever the life cycle of flowers serves as an analogy for familial, heterosexual relations and marriage there is a risk of asserting ensuing essentialist, naturalizing links between pollination and fertility, along with the straight continuity of a familial line. In *The Power of the Dog*, Peter's flowers, whose paper substance is originally from plants, question this continuity.

Reproduction through pollination ensures survival in the world of living plants. When actual flowers are supplemented by artificial flowers, as they are in *The Power of the Dog*, we shift across the nature/culture boundary into artefactual production of flowers by human hands or machines alone. But plants have long been the basis of the manufactured object too. Cellulose, the main substance found in plant cell walls and responsible for making them stiff and strong, is used in the making of many things. It is the foundation of collodion and, of course, celluloid, both of which have not only been central to the history of the photographic and film industries but also the artificial flower industry. Collodion (nitrocellulose in ether and alcohol) was used in the nineteenth century before celluloid became a core material in the early twentieth century in the making of artificial flowers [15] (p. 111). Although not quite on a level with the film industry, the artificial flower industry was for a time a significant consumer of this flexible plastic, among other derivatives of cellulose, to fashion its desired objects, meaning that artificial flowers and the film image have had a close relationship from the outset [16]. The basis of paper also being cellulose, paper flowers no less than collodion or celluloid flowers are resolutely plant-based in their material substance, quite apart from any imitative relationship they may have with the flowers of the prairie or the garden. Through their very materiality, then, paper flowers bear a distant relation to the circuits of pollination that ensure the ongoing survival of living plants through sexual reproduction, even though they obviously halt that very process too. While the paper flowers of *The Power of the Dog* discontinue the reproductive network of the living plant world due to their artificial status, they still bind Peter intimately to his mother.

Continuing what Campion scholar Kathleen McHugh points to as a staple of the filmmaker's features, all of which make use of voice-over narration [17] (p. 25), Peter declares over a black screen and the credits at the start: "When my father passed, I wanted nothing more than my mother's happiness. For what kind of a man would I be if I did not help my mother? If I did not save her?" His sense of obligation to his mother sets up the strong genealogical mother-son bond, along with the question of what it is to be a man, on which the film depends. It is however the Burbank ranch and the brothers who run it, rather than Peter, who appear first when the film cuts from the black screen to images. Phil and George's ranch abounds with cattle and horses, as well as dogs and rabbits in later scenes, but the family name harks back implicitly to the famous American botanist, Luther Burbank, as well as pointing to the future location in California of major film studios, introducing a tacit link between flora and film, which will be foregrounded by Peter and Rose.¹ The accompanying Jonny Greenwood score of plucked cello strings gives the film an off-beat air from the outset, with instruments not played in the usual way. This sets up expectations for a new revisionist rather than neo-traditional Western, to use Steve Neale's post-1970s categorizations [18], in tune with the atypical contribution to the genre that Campion recognized in Savage's book [19]. An expansive vision of cattle herding, dusty mountainous terrain, and the grand, austere interiors of the ranch house, replete with servants, fill the screen in the opening moments such that the contrast in scope is great when the film then cuts to Peter for the first time. More specifically, it cuts to a close-up of the small pair of scissors he is manipulating as he slowly and patiently makes slits in a pink strip of paper (Figure 1). These cuts will form the sexual organs of a paper flower.

Grant Major, Head of Production Design, explains that attention to the smallest of details is a hallmark of Campion's filmmaking, describing how this was exemplified in the production of the paper flowers. He tells of how Campion and her friend Michelle Freeman, a set decorator, buyer, and dresser, had the idea for the look of the flowers. Campion apparently asked whether the film's props buyer, Alani McKenna, could find something, but they decided ultimately to bring Michelle back and they all worked together to come up with something Campion liked [20]. Major ended up making Peter's scrapbook too in which he sticks all kinds of images, along with pressed flowers (Figure 2). Peter will also request rose petals from his mother's wedding bouquet, although it is not said in the film that he will add them to his scrapbook as the novel suggests he will (Figure 3). Peter's floral sensibility is palpable from the start, and whereas the film cuts down the range of

living flowers that are mentioned in the book, it extends the scenes connected to the paper flowers.



Figure 1. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.



Figure 2. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.



Figure 3. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

From the close-up of Peter cutting slits in the pink paper, further close-ups show him building up this flower layer upon layer (Figures 4–6). Peter first coils around the slitted paper to form the heart of the flower, and then adds two sets of petals, which are tied to a stem. The part of Greenwood's score that accompanies Peter's fashioning of the first flower is titled "Paper Flowers". The piece is played on a detuned piano, which becomes associated with Rose and her gradual slide into alcoholism as the film progresses. The piano also links Rose to her previous occupation of playing the piano in a movie theatre. When she marries George, he gets her a baby grand piano, which Phil then uses to humiliate her, crushing her confidence by demonstrating his own musical prowess, outplaying her efforts to play Strauss's "Radetzky March" on the piano on his banjo, and then mocking her in front of the governor, his wife, and the brothers' parents when she is not able to perform. That the "Paper Flowers" music for the sequence of Peter's making of them is so fitting at this early stage in the film, though, is visible through close-ups of the paper Peter uses, since it is cut-up sheet music. Peter cuts along the lines of the staves in making the flower's center and its evenly pleated outer petals reveal the word "Mazurka." The link to his mother's musical background is built into the very material from which the flower is made, just prior to our first encounter with Rose. This in turn precedes Peter's visit to his late father's grave.



Figure 4. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.



Figure 5. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.



Figure 6. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Rose asks whether she can put Peter's paper flowers on the tables in the restaurant to adorn them for when the Burbank party comes into town. Peter consents, before taking a different paper posy to the graveyard, removing a dried bunch of flowers from a glass jar, and sticking the paper flowers directly into the ground at the dusty foot of his father's tombstone (Figure 7). Commemorating his relationship to a man of his past—his father—before becoming the point of entry in a following sequence to the antagonistic relation with the man who will dominate his immediate future—Phil—Peter's posies are more than the sum of their paper parts. Linking Peter to his mother and, more tangentially, his absent father, the flowers are bound to a genealogical lineage, but this is already a damaged family tree, and the more haphazard, antigenealogical relations that ensue will destroy the initial paper flower. This artificial flower takes on a life of its own in spite of this, though, overspilling historically gendered and sexual floral associations as well as its initial form, and leading from the arboreal and rhizomatic to a floral aesthetic.



Figure 7. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

3. The Unmaking of the Paper Flower, or beyond Castration and Decapitation

When the Burbank group enters the Red Mill restaurant for dinner, the paper flowers in vases catch Phil's eye, as he also notices and then stares at Peter who is waiting on another table. There is a close-up of the flower we saw Peter making, now in Phil's hands as

he twirls it around and looks back at Peter. As Phil wonders aloud “what little lady made these,” he runs an index finger around the rim, before pushing it directly into the center of the flower (Figure 8). Peter responds to Phil, declaring he made the flowers, mentioning his mother’s former occupation as florist, and explaining that they were meant to look like the ones in their garden. Phil and the others sniff them, as Phil says how real they are, continuing his mockery of Peter and evoking laughter from everyone except George. Phil then uses the flower as a spill to light a cigarette from a candle in full view of Peter, as he concludes a tale of the legendary cowboy Bronco Henry, and the flower ends up singed head downwards in the water jug on the table (Figures 9 and 10). The flower that mediates this fateful first encounter between Phil and Peter condenses issues of gender and sexuality that span vegetal and human worlds from the early-twentieth to the twenty-first century, from the history of making artificial flowers, through sexual symbolism, to the place of the flower in vegetal philosophical and parallel botanical thought.



Figure 8. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.



Figure 9. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.



Figure 10. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

By the time of the setting of Savage's novel in 1925, an Artificial Flower Industry was booming in the US, which included the preservation of natural flowers and plants alongside the manufacture of artificial flowers from paper and cloth² [21]. The making of paper flowers was also a means of generating income from home or just a popular leisure pursuit across America (and Europe) in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Jim Jarmusch's *Western Dead Man* (1995), set in the late nineteenth century, touches on this when William Blake (Johnny Depp) meets Thel Russell (Mili Avital), a former prostitute who makes and sells paper roses³. Paper has long been a popular substance in artificial flower making, which many writers of manuals on this craft put down not only to its malleability and suitability to the qualities of the flower, with crepe and tissue paper most favored, but also its economical price for both industrial fabrication and for the hobbyist [22] (p. 5) [23] (p. 6). Flower-making manuals were initially written by women and addressed to many different constituencies of women and girls [15,24–27]⁴. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, the addressees of these texts expanded, with Rosemary Brinley declaring artificial flower making in 1952 to be "a complete and satisfying craft for workers of all ages and both sexes" [28] (unpaginated e-book, loc. 1100–1109), and with more diverse expert crafters writing such manuals today [29]. Ahead of his time, Peter was engaged in what in the 1920s was still thought to be women's work or a lady's pastime, hence the deliberate wording of Phil's sneering question and the subsequent feminized and homophobic insults from him and his men, who attack how Peter walks and talks, right down to the white tennis shoes he prefers to wear instead of cowboy boots.

Adding to the ways in which Phil wounds with words, his insertion of his finger into the center of Peter's flower is aggressively sexual. In this, it resonates with earlier standout images in Campion's oeuvre. In her short film, *An Exercise in Discipline: Peel* (1982), a young boy sticks his finger into the center of the orange he is peeling in a phallic image that has drawn commentary as such from Campion scholars [30] (unpaginated e-book, loc. 703) [11] (p. 25). In *The Piano*, Baines (Harvey Keitel) caresses Ada's (Holly Hunter) flesh through a small hole in her stockings, creating an image which Dana Polan suggests incarnates the film's affective eroticism [31] (p. 44). In Phil's case, the fingertip that enters the flower is no less suggestive in its uneasy mix of eroticism and violation. Peter coiled the slitted piece of paper to make the flower's sexual organs whose purpose in nature is reproduction, but there is no distinction in the cuts he made between pistils and stigmas (female), and stamens and anthers (male). Both mother and son are targeted symbolically by Phil in his fingering of the ambiguous organs of this artificial yet "real as possible" flower, before he incinerates it. Phil arrests the circulation of the paper flower as object by defiling and

burning it. To explore the further implications of this desecration, it will be helpful to turn to vegetal philosophy: the philosophy of Marder and Coccia is rich in relevance to what the paper flowers of this film stand for and enact in their artificial equivalence to the vegetal world. It is however useful first to acknowledge in passing botanical work of a quite distinctive kind, which recognizes explicitly the importance of artificiality.

Anywhere that there is an artificial flower or fictional flower, there is an attempt to parallelize the living botanical world, and just such a parallel world is what we glimpse in Italian writer Leo Lionni's *Parallel Botany* published in Italian in 1976 [32]. This is a field guide to imaginary plants, which is full of references to real as well as invented places and people, and which is written with academic authority. Lionni's parallel botany is a more serious if still playful relative of Edward Lear's work on nonsense plants [33]—both deal with invented plants but are no less real for this. Through his words, Lionni lends substance to a parallel world of timeless and matterless entities. Whereas Lear's nonsense plants imitate the Latin structure of eighteenth-century naturalist Carl von Linnaeus's taxonomic naming, Lionni talks of how parallel botany falls *outside* Linnaean systems of classification [32] (p. 6), which have endured through to this day, and which were based on distinctions via sexual characteristics. By dispensing with this link, Lionni's parallel plants proliferate beyond set patterns of sexual reproduction, their catalyst being the richness of the imagination. Lionni dwells with the "paramateriality" of plants whose substance is said to elude chemical analysis and flout all known laws of physics [32] (pp. 11–12). Although the paper flowers of *The Power of the Dog* are clearly not matterless, being tangible and visible artefactual objects, they come to matter by questioning identity and binaries including that of nature/culture, and parallelizing both albeit in a more substantial way than Lionni's imagined plants. The importance of the artificial flowers' substance in *The Power of the Dog* leads us to the work of Marder and Coccia on actual plants, while retaining Lionni's focus on proliferation beyond set patterns of sexual reproduction.

It is hardly surprising that it is the head of the paper flower that is the main focal point in the sequences where it features, yet the significance of the head has wider ramifications when it comes to thinking with and about flowers in vegetal philosophy and beyond. In *Plant-Thinking* Marder mentions the German idealists who attempted to upturn metaphysics through their attention to plant life. As he notes, Lorenz Oken felt that the flower, not the root, was the highest instance of spiritual development that a plant may attain [1] (pp. 60–61). Oken's thought has been taken up more recently by Coccia. Coccia's theory of the flower understands it to combine the cerebral and sexual realms [34] (p. 138). The flower, he specifies, is not an organ but an aggregate of different organs modified to make reproduction possible [34] (pp. 125–131). Yet all plants seem to invent and open up a cosmic plan, according to Coccia, suggesting that there is a material (rather than nervous) brain at work too, immanent to organic matter, whose most obvious manifestation is the seed [34] (p. 133). The development of his thinking on this point is indebted to Oken who declares that "the flower is the brain of plants, the correspondent of light, which remains here on the plane of sex" [34] (p. 135, my translation). Like Coccia, Marder foregrounds the place of the seed in his plant-thinking, but he is closer to Deleuze and Guattari in their rhizomatic thinking when he elaborates on this.

Marder explains that germination "commences in the middle, in the space of the in-between," and the root and flower become variegated extensions of the middle "in marked contrast to the idealist insistence on the spirituality of the blossom and the materialist privileging of the root" [1] (p. 63). Taking up French poet Francis Ponge's pithy phrase that declares flowers and vegetal life in general to have no head (*pas de tête*), plant-thinking for Marder is a kind of thinking without the head: "Rather than search for a more accurate parallel to the objectively fixed head of any organism, post-metaphysical philosophy, in keeping with this ongoing transvaluation, performs a symbolic decapitation or castration of the old metaphysical values" [1] (p. 62). Marder's reference to a symbolic castration or decapitation is as critical of a phallogocentric masculine economy as Hélène Cixous was in her 1981 essay "Castration or Decapitation?" [35]. Cixous describes decapitation as the

fate of women within such an economy and Phil's destructive gesture towards the head of the paper flower seems the artificial vegetal parallel of this. Yet the ambiguities of the sex of the flower and its association with Peter as much as Rose suggest that something further and, following Marder, as well as Lionni, not quite so literal, is at stake. Instead of understanding Phil's belligerent move as marking the end of the paper flower and symbolically decapitating/castrating Rose and Peter, it is a beheading and unsexing of the old metaphysical values that the film initiates, as a kind of thinking without the head is unleashed between and beyond masculine and feminine economies.

In Campion's film, the old metaphysical values reverberate through to twenty-first century debates about toxic masculinity, revealing a deep affiliation with one of the Western's longstanding concerns. As Lee Clark Mitchell notes, the genre has fretted about masculinity from the beginning [36] (p. 4), and the threat of castration looms large. Focusing on the 1960s when Savage's novel was published, Steve Neale who comments on Sam Peckinpah's Westerns in particular, but draws upon Laura Mulvey's observations on John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), notes that the threat of castration is figured in wounds and injuries incurred by the likes of Joel McCrea in *Guns in the Afternoon* (1962), Charlton Heston in *Major Dundee* (1965), and William Holden in *The Wild Bunch* (1969) [37] (pp. 9–10). In *The Power of the Dog*, Phil is the castrator of bulls who goes gloveless at all times as a sign of bravado. The threat of the castrator being castrated becomes real, though, not through a shoot-out in his case, but through Anthrax poisoning that enters him via a gash in his hand which not only emasculates but annihilates. Phil's contention with masculinity clashes with Peter's sense of what it is to be a man, and this turns out to be deadly. Yet in contrast to Phil who reviles Peter's floral sensibility, his brother George actively imitates Rose's son when he takes his place in her restaurant one day, positioning the cloth over his arm, as Peter did to Phil's derision, to wait on tables. This recalls *Liberty Valance* in which Ranse Stoddard (James Stewart) dons an apron to help out Hallie (Vera Miles) in her restaurant. In Ford's film, Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) is associated with a cactus rose, which blooms in large quantities around his house and is placed on his coffin when he dies. Indeed, both *Liberty Valance* and the film Mulvey discusses in direct contrast, *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946), have flowers at their heart [38]. The unusual red cactus flower at the opening of *Duel* is synonymous with Pearl (Jennifer Jones), whereas the cactus flowers of *Liberty Valance* are associated principally with Doniphon and his demise. Flowers cross the gender divide in these two films, while *The Power of the Dog* combines this blurring of association in the center of the single initial paper flower. Speaking of living plants, but implicitly in tune with Lionni's parallel botanical move beyond set patterns of sexual reproduction, Marder notes their challenge to sexual difference, explaining: "a non-metaphysical reconstruction of plant ontology will liberate sexual difference from its confinement to a binary opposition of the two sexes and breathe new life into the phenomena of dispersed, perverse, and non-productive sexualities. Vegetal sexuality and the logic of supplementarity will henceforth reinforce each other" [1] (p. 86). Marder's description of this liberation from the binary is explicitly deconstructive in its reference to the supplement, but it is also reminiscent of Barthes's interest in baffling the paradigm when he discusses reading for nuance.

In his work on the neutral (*le Neutre*) and questions of nuance, Barthes's wish is to outplay paradigms of meaning dependent on an implacable binary logic [4] (pp. 6–7). He describes his aim as follows: "To describe, to unthread what? The nuances. In fact, I would want, if it were in my power, to look at the figure-words (beginning with the Neutral) with a skimming gaze that would make the nuances come out" [4] (p. 11). Nuances are the very things that are covered over in the authoritarianism of binary choices. "Either/or" distinctions obliterate what Barthes terms the shimmer of the nuance, as he declares that "the Neutral might reside in this nuance (this shimmer)" [4] (p. 83). This shimmer is central to Eliza Steinbock's recourse to Barthes in their philosophy of transgender embodiment [39] (p. 145). Rather than the binary logic of either/or, Steinbock argues that it is the "'angle' of the subject's gaze emerging in different contexts" that brings out the nuanced space of the shimmer [39] (p. 9). Steinbock's politically vital work attends to slight modifications

of gender outside of binary frameworks, which they liken to this nuanced, shimmering space. Although Campion's film, following Savage's book, is not concerned with transgender embodiment, Steinbock's interpretation of Barthes's nuance is nonetheless apt. It is pertinent to the paper flower, with its sexual organs that shimmer beyond the either/or of the male/female and this, in turn, unsettles alignment with the binary division of the masculine and feminine. Campion scholar Sue Gillett notes that her films do not represent power as dividing neatly along gender lines [40] (p. 12). The dominant power relations of this film are bound most strikingly to the threading/braiding/plaiting of rope, but an audio-visual unthreading is simultaneously discernible within this activity, in line with Barthes's nuanced challenge to power. It is the initial paper flower that sets this unraveling in motion.

4. A Floral Aesthetic

The floral aesthetic of this film emanates from the shimmering space of the nuance at the heart of the paper flower, whose neutrality is a function of not siding with the male or female, the masculine or feminine. While Campion herself declares that she does not think of stories as women's or men's pictures [41] (p. 193), her work has been considered a major force within "women's cinema" [42] and has long attracted the attention of feminist film critics [43]. *The Power of the Dog* continues this appeal, but its heightened focus on masculinity and its critique also reflects key tropes of what Stella Bruzzi terms "men's cinema" [44]. Whereas Neale and Mulvey pursue discussion of masculinity and the male gaze in the Western in terms of identification and desire in relation to bodies on screen, Bruzzi considers a masculine aesthetic that is reinforced through style and tone, and this chimes with *The Power of the Dog*. In preparation for making her film, Campion says that she watched Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) [45]. Shortly after the Burbank party rides into Beech, the men walk in a line towards a bar before arriving in the Red Mill restaurant, repeating the gesture of men walking purposefully through space, evident in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, which Bruzzi posits as a major trope of men's cinema [44] (pp. 74–75). Even more significant to my argument, though, is the disruption to the connection between onscreen body and identification apparent in Bruzzi's commentary on the final crane shot of Leone's 1968 film. She describes the shot as arresting in its epic sweep but not necessarily allied to femininity: even though it draws out from a focus on Jill McBain (Claudia Cardinale) it is more "an abstract rendition of masculinity" that engulfs her [44] (p. 72). Cinematography, editing, and *mise en scène* become points of identification that can provoke an emotional response that is not allied particularly to the embodied subject within the frame. Extrapolating from Bruzzi's argument in the context of Campion's film, even though the initial paper flower disappears as a subject within the frame, a floral aesthetic emerges in spite of this. The difference here from Bruzzi's points about a masculine aesthetic is that this floral aesthetic is not bound only to the masculine (or feminine).

As Ari Wegner, Director of Photography, notes, the pastel pinks of Rose's bedroom and the cool greens of Phil's willow glade stand out from the otherwise restricted dusty color palette drawn from the grass and hills [46]. These demarcate spaces of heightened femininity and masculinity respectively, but the overall vision of the film blurs these lines. Evelyn Cameron's photography of the early life of settlers in Montana in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century informed the look of the film [47], yet Phil's glade points implicitly to a different reference point. Prior to Peter's discovery of Phil's secret den and Bronco Henry's nude male magazines, Phil takes solitary, sensuous pleasure in the water and mud, lies on the grass in the sun, and caresses himself with a silky scarf embroidered with the initials B.H that he keeps down his trousers. These scenes and those of the ranch hands bathing and amusing themselves resemble an all-male painterly idyll from the work of Thomas Eakins. O. Alan Weltzien, Savage's biographer, notes that the author's critically acclaimed yet widely neglected stories are frequently entwined with the repression of same-sex love, drawn from Savage's own life [48]⁵. The film, following the book, is deeply

conflicted in this regard. The queer subtext of Campion's film has received criticism for being clichéd [49]. It has also garnered affirmative readings that nonetheless point to the "violent evasion" of its ending [50]. Imbued with Bronco Henry's memory, Phil's connection with Peter is a mix of hostility and eroticism that tries but fails to demarcate the masculine from the feminine, from the scene of the paper flower's probing and incineration onwards. Campion makes clear that a different tie binds the men as the film progresses, with the paper flowers giving way to a more explicit focus on the rope and its relation to animals rather than flora [11] (p. 212) [51] (pp. 231–242). But this shift is not a clean break.

Campion speaks of the rope as a "proof of masculinity" because it is used on the ranch to get animals into submission [52]. The rope is made from animal hides. We see the journey of the rope from live beast through slaughtered animal to hides being dried and prepared, before being cut up into strips for braiding. The scene referred to by Campion and her crew as the "love scene" centers on Phil braiding at night in Peter's company. It takes place in the dimly lit space of Phil's barn, which houses Bronco Henry's saddle that Phil lovingly polishes in earlier sequences as if massaging and caressing the late Bronco's body, and which Peter now touches. Phil places the rawhide strips that Peter gave him into a bowl, and we see blood seep from the open wound on his hand under water (Figure 11). When Phil plaits the infected strip of rawhide into the rope, he braids from crotch level, as Peter watches, asking about Bronco Henry and lighting a cigarette that he and Phil share (Figures 12 and 13). Akin to a post-coital cigarette, this moment recollects but also reverses the power relationship of the earlier scene in which Phil lights his cigarette with Peter's paper flower. With this echo of the earlier scene in mind, the explicit focus on the rope does not reduce the resonance of the paper flower even after its literal disappearance.

An earlier scene in which Rose trades Phil's hides with a Native American father, Edward Nappo (Adam Beach), and son (Maeson Stone Skuggedal) for a handmade pair of beaded and tasseled gloves bears out this continuing relation to the paper flower in audio and visual terms, while complexifying it. The tassels recall the slits of paper in Peter's making of the initial flower while also pre-empting the appearance of the rawhide strips that will become more prominent later. In Savage's novel, Edward and his son encounter Phil, rather than Rose, who refuses Edward's request to camp on the land as well as an offer of gloves, sending them curtly on their way. The book also specifies that it is the boy's mother Jennie who makes the gloves. While there is no reference to this feminine connection in the film, Rose is visibly moved as she touches the gloves, puts them on, and walks away holding her gloved arms up ahead of her as if mesmerized. Overwhelmed by the weight of this encounter, which is a fleeting reminder of the troubled settler-colonial history central to the Western genre, Rose then collapses. Carried to bed by George, her Prince Charming, Rose's trajectory is a modified, darker version of the fairy tale journey Cixous describes: "Woman, if you look for her, has a strong chance of always being found in one position: in bed" [35] (p. 43) (Figure 14). The pink hues of Rose's clothing, embossed with hundreds of little flowers (Figure 15), which hark back to the color of the center of Peter's paper flower, also relate her to a quite different bed, her flower bed, which she tends earlier (Figure 16). For Campion scholar Ellen Cheshire, the filmmaker's heroines are all in search of their own identity [53] (p. 14) and, for Rose, albeit less extensively in the film than the novel, her work with flowers is a desperate attempt to tend to her own sense of self. Rose abandons the flower bed and runs after Peter when Phil takes him into his barn. Both sequences—Rose leaving the flower bed, and her collapsing after giving away the hides—are accompanied by the detuned piano that first played over images of Peter making the paper flower. This music that is no longer attached to the physical object of the paper flower is, however, part of the fabricated floral *mise en scène*, which travels with Rose in sonic form and through the color and print of her clothing, including her donning of the Native American gloves, making momentary contact with living flowers along the way.



Figure 11. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.



Figure 12. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.



Figure 13. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.



Figure 14. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.



Figure 15. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.



Figure 16. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

The paper flower also lives on through the composition of the braided rope. The slits that Peter cuts into that first piece of pink paper are loosely replicated again in the pale strips of rawhide that hang out to dry on one of the ranch gates (Figures 17 and 18). The shot in which we see them drying is inserted between Phil's row with George about Rose giving away his hides, and the calming of Phil's temper by Peter who offers him the rawhide that he collected. Towards the end of the row with George about the hides Rose gave to the Native Americans, Phil yells out "They were mine!" as the images cut to the pale strips of rawhide dangling on the gate. Phil's forceful declaration of ownership brings together his contempt for the feminine and his sense of colonial entitlement to the land and its animals. Yet from the cuts of Peter's first paper flower, through the tassels of the gloves Rose accepts in exchange for the hides, to the dangling rawhide on the gate, his dominion is to be unsettled.



Figure 17. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.



Figure 18. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Peter enters the barn when George leaves, approaching Phil gently, nervously, taking off a glove and reaching out to touch him. Peter justifies having rawhide when questioned, saying that he aspires to be like Phil. Likeness was first spoken about by Peter when Phil

quizzed him about the paper flowers in the restaurant scene—“My mother was a florist, so I made them to look like the ones in our garden”—paralleling the feigned likeness to Phil that he declares he desires at this later climactic moment through the offer of his rawhide strips—“I cut some up, I wanted to be like you”. Phil responds to Peter emotionally, reassuring him that everything will be plain sailing for him from now on, clasping him around the neck as the camera turns around them. Wegner comments on this moment: “We wanted to feel this electricity. He [Phil] is spun by this very tiny gesture, by this one touch breaking his shell, it cracks. So that was our thought in the spinning camera, which is Steadicam—it’s both an unraveling and a tightening at the same time” [54]. Wegner’s description of an unraveling is similar in filmic terms to the kind of unthreading of power advocated in Barthes’s attention to reading for nuance. Phil may have burned Peter’s paper flower, but he accepts his rawhide, and Peter’s artifice brings about Phil’s downfall.

From being the original antagonist, Phil becomes more multi-faceted as the film advances; his vulnerabilities that first become obvious in the glade sequences combine his bullying with a seemingly incongruous sensitivity. Already hinted at intermittently in Phil’s changing attitude to Peter when they are alone together, a teary-eyed tenderness comes out when Peter first makes tactile contact with him in the barn, contrasting with Peter’s steadfast impassivity. Phil is disarmed of the might he wielded in this narrative that is otherwise propelled by his prejudices, and the power referred to in Psalm 22:20 that lends the film, following the book, its title is not where it was initially thought to be.⁶ The nuance that lies in that grey area between binary oppositions and that baffles them, is here to be found between Phil and Peter, threaded into the rope whose unthreaded composition from rawhide strips seen dangling on the ranch gate in the day and again in the barn sequence that night (Figure 19) carries with it a formal reminder of the sexual organs of the paper flower. Lying beyond the either/or of male/female organs and associated with Rose—her pink hues—as readily as they are with Peter—the slits he cuts at the start—the strips of the rope/paper flower variously bring the masculine and feminine into view depending on the angle of the gaze at any one moment in the film’s narrative, but they are never aligned definitively with either. That the strips relate formally too to the tassels on the gloves Rose trades with Edward Nappo and his son for Phil’s hides, brings an intersection with settler colonialism into view in passing here. While the hierarchies of colonialism remain entrenched as the Burbank ranch seems here to stay, and other binaries also reassert themselves as the film draws to a close, the initial paper flower’s unsettling presence is palpable through to the very end.



Figure 19. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

As Phil begins to soften towards Peter on their day out on a trail together, Peter tells of how his late father, prior to committing suicide, spoke of the need for Peter to show more kindness, and of how men are made through the removal of obstacles from their path. Peter removes the obstacle of Phil from his mother's life, wielding his "kindness" with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel cutting into Anthrax-infected animal flesh, which is not too dissimilar to the meticulous operation of scissors in the equally dexterous work that goes into the making of a paper flower. The equilibrium of Rose and George's relationship is restored in the closing moments of the film and Peter has got away with murder to achieve this. Less expansive than the final crane shot of *Once Upon a Time in the West*, the final camera movement of *The Power of the Dog* nevertheless assumes an importance of its own. Following on from the elliptical way in which Phil's death is presented, it connects Rose, George, and Peter seamlessly in spite of their occupation of separate spaces. The camera views out of an upstairs ranch house window in the semi-darkness alongside Peter who watches his mother and George return home after Phil's funeral. They kiss, surrounded by long, thin, slatted shadows (Figure 20).



Figure 20. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

The Power of the Dog invites us to look into the shadows. The most obvious example of this is when we, along with Peter, are prompted to see the barking dog's head in the mountains that only Phil and Bronco Henry had seen before, but the ending of the film has a subtlety that also calls to be read. The linear shadows recall so many different parallel lines of the film, from the doors of Phil's barn to the teeth on Peter's comb. Most powerfully of all, though, they bring back the specter of colonialism through the tassels of the Native American gloves, along with the striking images of the dangling rawhide strips, which return us, one final time, to the slitted pink paper strip that was coiled around to make the center of Peter's flower. While the main subject of the shot is Rose and George kissing in the dark, it is, to borrow Bruzzi's formulation, a more "abstract rendition" of the film's floral aesthetic that is evident in the lined shadows, before the camera then draws upwards and backwards to catch the faintest glimmer of a smile on Peter's face as he moves from blurred to clear focus and walks out of the frame. Rose re-emerges at the end with her Prince Charming as her avenging angel looks on from above, and the vertical genealogical potential of a family tree is forged anew, enclosed nonetheless in the unraveled heart of a beguiling paper flower.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to the Department of Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick for their thoughtful questions and feedback on a version of this article that I presented as part of their research seminar series in autumn 2022.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ I thank Michelle Devereaux for encouraging me to consider the significance of the Burbank name.
- ² Eight years later the industry would have its own code of fair competition [21]. However, the code underwent amendments in 1934 before being deemed unconstitutional in 1935 by the Supreme Court and scrapped.
- ³ I thank Tom Cuthbertson for reminding me of Jarmusch's paper flowers.
- ⁴ Not all early flower manuals name an author, but those that do are authored by women. Early French manuals address "lectrices" (women readers) and the "jeune fille" (young girl) [15,24]. An English guide cites paper flower making among "the many agreeable occupations of ladies" [25] (p. 2). Other manuals address ladies [26] and educators [27].
- ⁵ Savage was gay but married with three children to the writer Elizabeth Savage. In his fiction, as Weltzien notes, sexual minorities are frequently condemned [48] (p. 219).
- ⁶ In Savage's novel, and coupled with other prejudices, Phil is deeply anti-Semitic. For readings of the psalm that span Jewish and Christian traditions, see [55], and for a discussion of the psalm in relation to the film, see [56].

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