

‘Awake For Ever in a Sweet Unrest’: Yearning in Jane Campion’s *Bright Star*, *The Power of the Dog*, and
The Piano

“No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.”

– John Keats, ‘Bright Star’ (1818-1819)

Romantic Poet Percy Bysshe Shelley once wrote that love tends to an “invisible and unattainable point.” His reflection may also be extended to apply to desire as well as love, specifically as desire is expressed in the films of Jane Campion. For indeed, in Campion’s works, *Bright Star*, *The Power of the Dog*, and *The Piano* – presumed to be her masterwork – desire seems to be particularly defined by its lack of fulfillment: it is hardly even desire, but an acute and lasting yearning. Each character’s yearning serves as the principal driving force behind their actions, defining their very existences and creating in them a compulsion to immortalize and so preserve that which they yearn for. As Campion’s films ultimately reveal, however, it is not even the yearning for a particular object or person that endows the lives of each character with meaning, but rather the very experience of that yearning – of the ache of pursuit – itself.

Twelve years after making her last film, Jane Campion re-emerges in 2021 with *The Power of the Dog*, a burnished, leather-filled Western that follows the story of surly, imperious ranch-hand Phil (Benedict Cumberbatch) as he struggles to cope with his brother George’s (Jesse Plemons) marriage to struggling innkeeper and widow Rose (Kirsten Dunst) and her delicate, effeminate teenage son, Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee), especially as the two move into the wealthy ranch-owning siblings’ shared Montana house.

With Johnny Greenwood’s rumbling, cantering score playing in the background, we are introduced first to Phil. He is dirt-laden, swaggering, and brusque, but it is less than five minutes into the film before he makes his first fond mention of Bronco Henry, the brothers’ long-dead mentor to whom Phil remains significantly attached. He suggests to George that they go on a camping trip and “cook [some fresh elk liver] right there on the coals... like Bronco Henry taught us.” Before another five minutes are up, Phil cruelly reminds George of his academic ineptitude and how he owes the success of the ranch to Bronco Henry – “One person in particular taught you and me ranching so we damn well succeeded.” He then raises a toast “to us brothers, Romulus and

Remus, and the wolf who raised us,” and the other ranchers all echo, “Bronco Henry, Bronco Henry...” His name becomes a perpetual refrain, but it soon becomes clear that it is a song sung only by Phil. In only the next scene, with a fond and almost spellbound reverence, he tells the table about a time Bronco had performed the impossible feat of jumping a nag – something that “ain’t heard of”, as one rancher confirms – over the tables and chairs of the saloon piled in the street. Phil says to “put it down to amour” (amour being, of course, the French word for love) and calls on George for confirmation – but George “doesn’t know what [he’s] talking about.” The ranchers laugh, the piano picks up, and people quickly move on from the topic of Bronco, singing along – but Phil looks wounded, almost sorrowful, that their reactions do not meet the level of respect he would deem sufficient for Bronco’s story. When he stands up and yells at the pianist to, “Shut that down, or [he will]!” he reveals a curious and conspicuously disproportionate rage that reveals the depth of Bronco’s meaning to him.

Indeed, although Bronco is dead, Phil prodigiously keeps him alive, stoking the embers of his memory that threaten to go out through the preservation of pieces from his existence. A saddle, a grave plate that reads, ‘In Loving Memory: Bronco Henry, Friend’, a scarf... Phil holds on to this small collection of Bronco’s belongings so that despite his being no longer, Bronco’s physical presence almost occupies the significance of another live character. It is not only through these tangible objects that Phil keeps Bronco’s memory alive, but also through Phil’s continual references to him. It begins to feel like almost half his lines of dialogue contain a mention of Bronco. At various points throughout the film, he offers tidbits such as, “That saddle belonged to Bronco Henry. Greatest rider I ever knew”; “Bronco Henry told me that a man was made by patience and the odds against him”; or, “Most people look at [that hill] and just see a hill. Where Bronco looked at it, what do you suppose he saw?” Bronco Henry seems to pervade Phil’s existence, to the point that Phil is a walking homage to Bronco. His own character seems to be defined by his relationship to Bronco, with so much of his reminiscences of Bronco underlining all the lessons he was taught by him that are now of utmost value to Phil, from learning how to ride, to learning how to see. “He taught me to use my eyes in ways that other people don’t know how,” he recalls for Peter as they look at the hill which Bronco saw, not as a hill, but as a barking dog. This is a yearning that transcends conventional desire: it is tied into the immortal, for Phil, in yearning to preserve his connection with Bronco, preserves what he can of the man instead.

This yearning inflected with a concern for immortality may be seen also in Campion’s 2009 film, *Bright Star*, which recounts the true relationship between Fanny Brawne (Abbie Cornish) and Romantic Poet John Keats (Ben Whishaw) that took place from 1818 until Keats’ untimely death in

1821. Although relatively short-lived, their relationship before Keats' passing was characterized by yearning, as they spent much of their time apart, rather than together. In addition to that, due to Keats' poor financial situation, he was able to get engaged to, but never marry, Fanny. Although as a result of Keats' fame those unfamiliar with the film may be inclined to think its content is primarily about Keats, it is Fanny – the subject of Keats' poem, 'Bright Star' – who mostly occupies the role of protagonist. The film begins with a close up of her sewing, and ends with a shot of her walking, clad in mourning black after Keats' death, into the woods while reciting his poetry. The title card that appears immediately after reads, 'Fanny Brawne walked the Heath for many years, often late into the night. She never forgot John Keats or removed his ring.' Just as Phil keeps Bronco Henry alive through his remembrances of him, Fanny keeps Keats alive through her preservation of his letters to her (which in real life even contributed to the data of knowledge left of Keats), her recitations of his poetry (just as Phil repeated Bronco's lessons and musings on life), and the engagement ring that she wore until her own death despite never even getting married. And, just as Phil's character comes to be defined by his yearning for Bronco, this ending of *Bright Star*, with Fanny's recitation of Keats' poem and the title card that underlines how she "never forgot" Keats or removed his ring, highlights how Fanny's yearning for Keats is also characterized by his immortalisation. And indeed, immortality seems to be one of the film's primary preoccupations. For while Fanny immortalizes Keats through the actions she carries out as a result of her yearning for him, Fanny herself is arguably no-one. She becomes special only because Keats saw something special in her and immortalized it in his poems of her. Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* even plays over the credits at the end of the film, the poem he writes to that "immortal Bird."

Jane Campion's 1993 classic *The Piano* possesses a similar bent toward the immortalisation that happens when one yearns for something long gone, but where Phil immortalizes Bronco Henry through his yearning, and Fanny immortalizes Keats, the protagonist of *The Piano* immortalizes not a person, but a thing – specifically, the object after which the film is named. The story follows Ada (Holly Hunter), a mute woman who travels with her daughter (Anna Paquin) from Scotland to New Zealand to be married to a man she doesn't know in an arrangement carried out by her father. Although her piano is from the start more significant to her than anything else except for perhaps her daughter, her new husband, Alisdair Stewart (Sam Neill) trades it with George Baines (Harvey Keitel), his Māori-friendly neighbor, in exchange for Baines' land. The piano is established in the first scene of the film as a representation for Ada's voice when she narrates in the voiceover, "I don't think myself silent. That is because of my piano." She thus enters into a bargain with Baines which requires her to offer him her body in order to earn back her piano key by key – but through

this exchange, they build an attachment that crescendos to mutual yearning. It seems that *The Piano* is an outlier to *The Power of the Dog* and *Bright Star*, however, because while Bronco Henry and Keats are both dead, Ada and Baines not only both survive, but are permitted to live together, with Ada even learning to speak on her own. Their desires are satisfied, and so they do not need to yearn. And yet, it is an illusion – *The Piano* does not end on this happy ending, but on an eerie, lurid epilogue in which Ada confesses that she still dreams of her piano lying in the ocean where it sank. She narrates, “At night, I think of my piano in its ocean grave. And sometimes of myself, floating above it. Down there, everything is so still and silent, that it lulls me to sleep. It is a weird lullaby, and so it is. It is mine. There is a silence... where hath been no sound. There is a silence... where no sound may be. In the cold grave... under the deep, deep sea.” It is not a nightmare, but an attempt to reunite with her long-gone piano just as Phil attempts to reunite with Bronco through his preservation of his memory or Fanny attempts to reunite with Keats by keeping his ring on forever. Yet, where Phil and Fanny’s yearning strikes them with a tragic melancholy that instills in them a restless unhappiness, Ada’s yearning is strangely soothing, her words even taking on a rhythmic quality – “It is a weird lullaby, and so it is. It is mine.” While she yearns for her piano, that it was hers once is enough. As she says in the beginning, “Silence affects everyone in the end,” – and until that end occurs, Ada is comforted by her memories of her piano.

Each character’s yearning, however, fosters specifically the immortalization of the person or object yearned for, because the persons or objects are gone. Bronco Henry, John Keats, and Ada’s piano all become the “invisible and unattainable point” that their surviving lovers spend their lives tending towards as Shelley, a contemporary of the real-life Keats, decrees. Their yearning is not temporary, but eternal, becoming their lifelong pursuit and serving as the principal driving force behind all of their actions. The fixed unattainability of the objects of their yearning but their pursuit of them regardless of that unattainability means that it is the experience of this pursuit, the experience of this yearning, that takes on more significance and endows their lives with more meaning than the actual objects themselves.

The nature of this lived experience of yearning is expressed in the sensuality that saturates Campion’s works. For example, in *The Power of the Dog*, one of the most intimate scenes occurs when Phil draws out a scarf that turns out to belong to Bronco Henry from where it is tucked tightly into his trousers to draw it over his entire body in an achingly vulnerable, sensuous manner before proceeding to touch himself with it. While kneeling almost as if in prayer, he first wraps the scarf around his hand with all the fragility one would employ when handling an injured bird. The way he slowly draws the scarf across his arm while sitting straight-backed and solemnly suggests that the

scarf is a sacred object, and that this is a sacred ritual to which Phil devotes himself completely. This religiosity gives way to complete vulnerability when the shot cuts to a close-up of Phil as he lays on his back in the grass, dappled in sunlight, as he unfurls the scarf. The intimacy present in the scene is heightened by the handheld camera, which tilts gently upwards to feature a close-up of only the scarf and Benedict Cumberbatch's fingers as he softly, longingly caresses it. Cumberbatch's performance is raw and exquisite, providing a breath-catching fluidity and tenderness that is in stark contrast to the stiff, rough-hewn manner in which he has played Phil so far. The pale yellow scarf flutters in the leaves and wind and the sunlight, and the moment conveys a connection that transcends Phil and the scarf to knit itself together with the fabric of nature around them. Phil's hands move along the scarf like those of an ancient temple dancer. He draws the scarf along his nose to breathe in its scent, and his face is caught in an expression of rapture and submission. This moment between a man and a scarf is enriched with a sensuality that is absent in most sex scenes between human beings. Yet, it is more than likely that Bronco's scent has been long gone from the scarf. That this ritual is far too practiced. It is a painfully masochistic act to continue to torture yourself by holding onto, let alone basking in, the items of a lover who has long since departed, and so this act of beautiful intimacy is also an inherently masochistic one tinged with yearning. It is the same when Phil returns over and over to a saddle of Bronco's that he keeps under Bronco's grave plate. In a scene during which he hears George having sex with his new wife, Phil goes directly to where he keeps the saddle and polishes with a desperate, clutching neediness that is equivalent to anguish.

This dynamic of the lived experience of yearning as expressed through sensuality is echoed in *The Piano*, particularly in Baines' actions. His longing to be with her physically is drawn out over a series of visits. In one visit, the most he does is caress a hole in Ada's stocking. The close-up of his stocky finger over this tiny hole and the slowing, needful way in which Harvey Keitel rubs the sliver of the skin of her ankle is charged with longing. In another scene, Baines looks longingly at the piano while Ada is not there. He then gets up and takes his shirt off so that he is completely naked, then proceeds to dust off the piano with the same essence of the scene in which Phil polishes Bronco's saddle or plays with his scarf. In the absence of the object of their yearning, these characters attempt to fulfill their yearning in any way that they can, and the closest they are able to come is through the tactile experiences they create by imbuing material things with the spirit of the person they long for. When Baines cuts his and Ada's bargain short and returns the piano to Ada for nothing, Ada sits at the piano, but instead of playing it, she caresses it with the backs of her fingers. The piano has, even for Ada, become imbued with the memory of her time playing it with Baines.

She tinkles a few of the keys, and then, amazingly, stops, distracted – that the scene that directly follows sees her rushing to meet Baines confirms that her thoughts were of him. When she sees Baines, he mournfully confesses to her: “I am unhappy. ’Cause I want ya. Because my mind has seized on ya and can think of nothin’ else. This is why I suffer. I am sick with longing. I don’t eat. I don’t sleep. So if you’ve come with no feeling for me, then go. Go.” Baines’ dialogue reveals how his yearning has affected his life to the point where it has changed his physical habits, underlining the nature of the experience of yearning as it eats away at the minds of Campion’s characters, shaping the way they live and the actions they take.

In *Bright Star*, yearning is not expressed in such a physical manner. In fact, sensuality between Fanny and Keats is conspicuously absent considering how characteristic erotic touch is to the films of Jane Campion. In an interview with NPR, Campion reveals that, “I think the story touches me maybe because of the restraint that was placed upon [Keats and Brawne]. They got engaged finally, but they never did get married. ... I think it was interesting to me how intense and in love these two could be without having sex.” (Block) It is not that physicality is entirely left out, though – rather, physicality in *Bright Star* operates more in the emotional and spiritual, if not sensual, realm. In one shot, Ben Whishaw reads a letter from Keats to Fanny in a voiceover, “Write the softest words and kiss them, that I may at least touch my lips where yours have been,” while on screen, we see Fanny delicately holding the letter in her hands as if it is the face of her lover, and placing earnest, soft kisses onto the paper. The scene is part of a montage that sees Fanny’s room become increasingly filled with all sorts of colorful butterflies that Fanny keeps “in honor of [her and Keats].” When her mother questions the extravagance of the butterflies and her attachment to Keats’ letters, she explains, “When I don’t hear from him, it’s as if I’ve died. It’s as if the air is sucked out from my lungs, and I am left desolate, but when I receive a letter, I know our world is real. It’s the one I care for.” Ada is mute, and Phil, in his attempt to mimic the classic Western cowboy, a man of few (gruff) words – but words are the principal domain of Keats and Fanny, who are able to fabricate an entire reality dedicated to just the two of them out of their words to each other, as symbolized in their letters and poems. That Ada says that when she doesn’t hear from Keats, “It’s as if [she’s] died,” it also echoes the way in which Baines says that he is not able to eat or sleep in Ada’s absence.

The shifting way that yearning shapes the material lives of the characters of Jane Campion works hand-in-hand with the only goal that yearning after something that no longer exists can be, which is to catch in amber and immortalize that which they yearn for. Campion’s conception of yearning operates, then, in a liminal sphere: it is dynamic, yet static at the same time – a pursuit with direction, but no movement. Fanny’s engagement, but not marriage, to Keats, is the perfect

embodiment of the perpetual yearning for that “invisible, unattainable point,” an in-between point that seals her connection to Keats without ever fulfilling to be with him. It is as Keats articulates in ‘Bright Star’: “to feel for ever” the dynamic “fall and swell” of love’s ripening breast, but for that love to remain “still stedfast, still unchangeable”, preserved in the embalming silence of their ocean graves.

Works Cited

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