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# Feminist Filmmaking on Television

Lacan, Phallic Enjoyment, and Jane Campion's *Top of the Lake*

HILARY NERONI

Jane Campion's series *Top of the Lake* (season 1, 2013) and *Top of the Lake: China Girl* (season 2, 2017) mark her second foray into television since *An Angel at My Table* (1990). They reveal once again that television is a medium that accommodates Campion's long-time career concerns exceedingly well, especially her interest in narratives that wander as they follow the main female protagonist's passions. Taking full advantage of television's serial potential, Campion chases down not only multiple narrative strands but also the desires of Robin Griffin (Elizabeth Moss). Putting a woman at the center of a detective series also fits with Campion's long career of films that have women characters driving the narrative. In both seasons, Robin is a detective trying to solve a case while also trying to solve a mystery in her personal life. Both of these narrative threads become necessarily entwined at different points throughout the season. Robin's specialty is crimes against young women, especially of a sexual nature. Her defining feature, like that of every Campion hero, is her driving passion, in this case, for her work as a detective.

It is not just that she is good at her job but that the passion she has for her job dictates the contours of her life. When chasing down a mystery, she can think of little else, and the other aspects of life—romance, family, health, even food—become less important. In the episode “The Loved One,” for example, Robin has just met her daughter, whom she gave up for adoption.<sup>1</sup> The pathologist working on Robin's case calls her to his home in the evening to tell her about something strange he has found. Instead of wanting to hear the information, she uncharacteristically

shares that she just met her daughter and shows him a photo. He seems excited and then tells her the information that he discovered about the case: the fetus in the deceased victim's body doesn't match the mother's DNA. Robin leaves but then halfway down the hallway turns back and calls the pathologist out and tells him excitedly that she has just realized that the fetus was a surrogate baby. The pathologist is impressed but then kindly suggests that Robin come in for a drink. As a viewer, it is a touching moment, and you feel a wave of relief for Robin that someone has reached out to her. She grabs his head, kisses his forehead, and says, "Not now, I'm working," as she walks off with a glow to her and a bounce in her step. Robin's passion for her job is a passion that outstrips everything else in her life.

This type of female passion has been a trope in most of Campion's films. Campion's heroes include writers, pianists, and teachers, but they are all women whose passions express who they are and dictate the shape of the film. Robin, however, is Campion's first female detective, and she is utterly committed to her passion for the job. As in the example given above, it is clear that Robin's passion also allows her to avoid difficulties in her private life. This is also a trope in Campion's films, but each *Top of the Lake* season and each film demonstrate that what appears to be women avoiding private difficulties (family problems, children, past traumas) is instead an ethical commitment to their passion. The private eventually bends to the will of these passionate heroines. It is still unusual to see a central female character whose passion outstrips all for her, but Campion takes this one step further and leaves her main female characters within a community or family. Often, high-powered, passionate women do not have to continually deal with family or community; for Campion's heroines, however, this is precisely the point. In fact, Campion seems most interested in seeing how the family or community responds to such a woman. Not surprisingly, the reaction is not always positive, but this still does not deter the woman from her passion. For example, in *An Angel at My Table* Janet keeps writing even though her family wants her to act differently, her teacher puts her in a psychiatric hospital, and so on. In *The Piano* (1993), Ada (Holly Hunter) risks everything (her child, her position in life, and even her limbs) to continue playing the piano.

Campion's heroines are heroines of the drive. They have found the

object of their own drive and committed to it. In most of Campion's films, this often results in subtle and not-so-subtle disruptions to the traditional patriarchal family structure. After all, women in a traditional family structure are supposed to barely cater to their own desire let alone commit to a passion of the drive. The result can be devastating, such as in *Holy Smoke* (1999), when Ruth (Kate Winslett) exposes her father's affair because he disturbs her passionate quest for religious enlightenment, or in *In the Cut* (2003), where Frannie's (Meg Ryan) passionate search for poetry and sensuality leads her and her sister into harm's way. Campion heroines are at times passionate about things that may seem mundane to other people (Frannie's passion for subway poetry and found words, Ada's passion for playing piano only for herself and not for a proscribed audience, and so on) and do not end in grand productions.<sup>2</sup> *Top of the Lake's* Robin is in this way a quintessential Campion heroine. Her passion for her job pushes her life forward and remains the only thing in her life that lights up her face and her heart. As in her other films, Campion is also interested in what effect this has on those around her heroine. Though Campion's other films and television series have depicted women in male-oriented professions (writing, piano playing, etc.), the women are usually extracted from the center of these potential industries so that the only communities we see reacting to their passion and their choices are their family and sometimes the educational system.

*Top of the Lake* enters new territory because Campion has placed her passionate heroine of the drive in a profession (police detective) dominated by men and surrounded by the institutions of law enforcement. Campion imagines the effect that a passionate heroine of the drive could have on such a male-dominated space. This is enhanced by the fact that Robin is a detective of sexual crimes perpetrated mostly on young women. In both seasons, she investigates a crime against a young female (rape and murder, respectively). The effect of putting a female detective, who is passionate about her job above all else, in the midst of a male-dominated police force reveals many of the inherent sexist structures that exist in policing and in society at large. For example, in both seasons, which feature two different police departments, Robin is constantly being asked out, having passes made at her, or being flirted with. It is as if the men in her office cannot see her as anything but a possible date. There are only

one or two men in either space that just treat her as a colleague rather than make reference to her as a sexualized woman or ask her out. Additionally, the men in the departments are often callous in their responses to the female victims whom Robin investigates. For example, in “Episode 1,” when Robin speaks to the Sargent Detective about her concerns over returning the young, pregnant girl to her home of men, the detective says, “Well, she can’t get any more pregnant,” which clearly suggests that he does not care about the statutory rape that led to her pregnancy nor any possible repetition of it.<sup>3</sup>

Campion does not stop there. Robin’s drive within this male space results in Robin following a path that leads to sexual crimes. In doing this, she ends up also investigating why men would enjoy sexual assault. Are these acts even sexual? Are they about power? Who would commit such a crime? In solving the crime, Robin has to explore why men would sexually harass, assault, or murder women. She often discovers that the men involved are doing what they enjoy, and she has to examine that enjoyment. Ultimately, she discovers what Jacques Lacan calls phallic enjoyment, an enjoyment with a specific structure and object. In *Top of the Lake*, then, Robin detects—as we see through the form of the film and the narrative structure—the potential violence of phallic enjoyment and the way phallic enjoyment creates certain symbolic structures, communities, and restrictions on women within patriarchy.

### A Failed Enjoyment

Enjoyment holds a key philosophical place in the psychoanalytic lexicon. It marks an animation of the intersection of knowledge and desire. Lacan locates enjoyment in relation to signification. For Lacan, phallic enjoyment relates to the signifier, whereas feminine enjoyment arises out of the Real. In other words, feminine enjoyment arises where there is no signifier, in the gaps between signifiers. As Alenka Zupencic explains, “This enjoyment appears at the place of the lack in knowledge, it appears *because there is nothing to know there*.”<sup>4</sup> In this sense, feminine enjoyment can have a destabilizing effect on the signifying system because it marks where knowledge lacks and can thus put that knowledge into question. Phallic enjoyment, however, appears exactly where there

is knowledge. Enjoying the signifier seems like it should be a fulfilling endeavor, but in the end phallic enjoyment falls short. Its failure relates to the nature of the signifier and its capacity for delivering enjoyment. In other words, phallic enjoyment both comes to life through the signifier and is constrained by the signifier. Enlivened through signification, phallic enjoyment is clearly tied to the ideology out of which it emanates, which is why in our society it is most often tied to the structure of patriarchy.

Signification itself, Lacan argues, is based on a system that originates from a signifier without a signified, a signifier without any meaning but around which the whole system is structured.<sup>5</sup> In patriarchy, this signifier without a signified is the phallus. As the master signifier, the phallus signifies both male power and the impossibility of this power. Patriarchal signification then shapes enjoyment during the sex act, during which the enjoyment of the organ supersedes the encounter with the other. This is classic phallic enjoyment, which is why when discussing the sex act, Lacan theorizes that the barrier that prevents the man from engaging with the other with whom he is having sex is phallic enjoyment.<sup>6</sup> The enjoyment of the organ is the enjoyment of the fantasy of completing the master signifier, the phallus. The subject's relation to the master signifier informs the fantasy structure that supports sexual enjoyment.

This fantasy structure proposes an object that would serve as the missing piece completing the impossible-to-complete signification. This missing piece is precisely what phallic enjoyment enjoys. But this is why phallic enjoyment is necessarily a failed enjoyment. The missing piece exists only as a fantasy object. It has no real existence, a fact that reduces phallic enjoyment to an imaginary status. Because it attempts to confine itself to the signifier and disdains the Real, phallic enjoyment ends up stuck in the imaginary.

The difference between phallic and feminine enjoyment depends on the starting point. If one starts with the master signifier, then one's enjoyment is tied to trying to complete the signifying chain. In other words, the master signifier has no signified, and in phallic enjoyment we think we have found the master "signified." We enjoy the fantasy of completing the signifying chain. This is why Lacan suggests that phallic enjoyment remains a masturbatory enjoyment, or as he calls it, "the jouissance

of the idiot.”<sup>7</sup> It is wholly contained by one signifier—or organ, object, etc.—and succeeds and then fails in relation to that signifier. Since it is not tied to any Other, there is no sense to this enjoyment, despite its tie to the symbolic order, which is the order of sense.

Campion’s *Top of the Lake* pushes the viewer to recognize the way that certain men and male communities in patriarchy have taken the woman as the object of their phallic enjoyment. Phallic enjoyment of the woman would require turning her into a phallic object rather than engaging with her as a figure of lack. In this way, the fantasy structure surrounding phallic enjoyment equates the woman with the phallus. Within this structure, the woman becomes a substance like the sexual organ that could be the signified of the master signifier. It is a fantasy of the woman as not lacking and thus completely knowable. This degradation of the woman turns the woman from a lacking and divided subject into a positive object. Moreover, transforming the woman into the object of phallic enjoyment makes her knowable, containable, controllable, buyable, reified, and so on. In the end, however, this remains an impossible project; the woman’s lack cannot be stamped out. The whole project of sexist society then is an impossible one: to eliminate the woman’s lack. Even this makes sense within the logic of phallic enjoyment because phallic enjoyment always fails in the end. It is an imaginary stage in which the gaps of the symbolic are filled in by the fantasy of the woman as an enjoyable object.

### Phallic Communities

By focusing on detecting male enjoyment of sexual crimes, *Top of the Lake* allows us to see that when phallic enjoyment takes women as its object, there are disastrous consequences, consequences women have been battling throughout the history of patriarchal society. As the object of phallic enjoyment, women become the object of a specific form of violence. Campion’s *Top of the Lake* series powerfully exposes the violence toward women that arises when phallic enjoyment takes women as its object. Moreover, she explores the way that male communities are at times formed around this bond of phallic enjoyment. Both seasons explore violence toward women, especially young women. In order to find out who perpetrated the crime, Robin has to investigate the men

associated with the young women she is investigating. The bread crumbs she has to follow to solve these crimes are ones attached to phallic enjoyment shared by a group of men.

The first season of *Top of the Lake* follows Robin's return to her own town of Laketop, New Zealand. She has taken some personal time from her job as a detective in Sydney, Australia, to see her mother who is dying of cancer. When she arrives home, however, she is immediately called in to consult on a case of a 12-year-old girl, Tui Mitcham (Jacqueline Joe), who has tried to hurt herself by walking into a freezing lake because she is pregnant. Not having a specialist in the department, the local police reach out to Robin for help in the case. Robin agrees to help right away, almost relieved to have something to occupy her, but also because she becomes passionate about helping Tui. Robin's passion becomes nuanced by the revelation that she herself had been gang raped in her hometown when she was a teenager. It becomes clear that she chose her profession in part because of this trauma, which was never handled correctly by her family, the police, or this very community.

Robin begins her investigation of who raped Tui with Tui's criminal father and brothers. Matt Mitcham (Peter Mullan), Tui's father, seems to fit the traditional idea of a criminal. He runs a drug business with his sons out of his house, he murders someone who lets him down, and he is generally crude and violent. Both seasons of *Top of the Lake* present two types of male communities: one criminal and one within law enforcement. Both seasons also present the criminal community first and code them as dangerous, noxious, and clearly deplorable. But in the end the law enforcement community reveals itself to be just as involved in phallic enjoyment and sometimes in the crimes themselves.

Indeed, at the end of season one, Robin discovers that it is the police officer, Al Parker (David Wenham), whom she had relied on to help her with the investigation who actually committed the crime with some of his friends. Through his access to the proceedings as one of the investigators, Parker successfully throws Robin off the track of him and his friends by faking information that it was Matt Mitcham who raped his daughter. But as everyone relaxes, Robin finds a surprising clue that prompts her to return to Parker's house looking for Tui. She finds Tui there waking up from a drugged stupor and two of Parker's associates in



the basement dragging drugged out teenagers in front of cameras, taking their clothes off, and filming them. It is understood that Parker and his friends have been drugging these local at-risk teens and using them to make sex tapes. It's important to the series that he was not acting alone. The men bonded over their desire to take these teens as objects of their phallic enjoyment as they committed these acts together. Even though phallic enjoyment is masturbatory, it is often dependent on a group of men. The series reveals the way that phallic enjoyment depends on a real or imaginary audience of other men to validate the object choice as truly representative of the patriarchal order.

Matt Mitcham, his sons, and the policemen involved in the crime create communities structured around a phallic enjoyment of the woman as its object. A male community built around the phallic enjoyment of the woman as its object is often a violent community (whether physically or structurally violent). Violence arises as a response to the inadequacy of phallic enjoyment in relation to the woman. The woman can never really be taken as a proper object of phallic enjoyment because she doesn't actually complete signification. If phallic enjoyment is destined to fail anyway, taking the woman as the object of phallic enjoyment intensifies the failure because her actual being completely contradicts her status as the perfect fantasy object. The real woman suffers violence because she does not provide the answer that the fantasy promises.

The ideological patriarchal fantasy of the woman as object of phallic jouissance sets the stage for such desire. Films, television, advertising, and even social structures provide the environment within which the woman as object of phallic enjoyment is presented as a viable avenue for desire. The woman, however, can never actually fit this role. Violence then is often a response to the revelation that ideology has misled us or that the symbolic has gaps, incomprehensible fissures in its otherwise solid seeming presentation. Violence toward the woman herself who has failed to fit the role of the fantasy object is an all too common response, one that *Campion* details in this series both in the fate of the central victim and in the experience of many of the women throughout the series (Tui, the women who have moved to Paradise, Robin herself, Robin's biological daughter, the Thai women in the brothel—every one of these women has been a victim of male violence).

In the second season, *Top of the Lake: China Girl*, Robin has returned to Sydney to her old job. She appears to be melancholic and broken from her experiences in the first season, and it is unclear how she will find her way until a new case literally washes ashore in the form of a dead young woman in a suitcase. In this plot point, the series employs arguably one of the most common tropes of the detective fiction: the mystery of the dead girl. The first episode begins and ends with the dead girl, Cinnamon (Thien Huong Thi Ngyuen).<sup>8</sup> It begins with a scene in which the brothel manager, Dang (Ling Cooper Tang), and her helper, Bootie (Kim Gyngell), throw the suitcase in the ocean, and it ends with the suitcase washing ashore and Robin opening it. The beginning scene is particularly evocative as Dang and Bootie drag the suitcase to the edge of a cliff, which hangs over the ocean. The area that they drag the body through is a graveyard that goes all the way to the edge of the ocean. In this scene, as in many others throughout the series, the *mise-en-scène* reiterates the themes and emotions of the scene. In this case, death, which flows off the edges of the frame in the repeated gravestones, pervades the *mise-en-scène*, haunting the characters for the rest of the series. When Bootie shoves the suitcase over, the case gets stuck right before the edge, and Bootie has to take some risk to shimmy close to the edge and push it again, as if the suitcase is a reminder—or a remainder—that refuses to be hidden. Once the case falls into the ocean, the scene cuts to a shot under water as the case slowly descends and bubbles ascend. The murky, dark blue-green ocean shot harkens back to a similar shot in Campion's *The Piano* when a rope accidentally pulls Ada, the film's hero, into the depths of the ocean. The haunting scene with Ada's voiceover suggests that her potential death was almost a relief to her. The quiet of the ocean and the immanence of her own death allow for an instantaneous moment of deep reflection that propels her into a will to live. For Campion, the ocean is a dangerous place, but one that cannot contain the trauma of female subjectivity. Ada resurfaces to continue her commitment to the drive; in *Top of the Lake*, though Cinnamon has died, her body resurfaces and thus demands attention.

By focusing the second season on the mystery of a dead girl, Campion enters a cultural conversation perhaps to comment on previous methods of representation of dead female bodies. Episodes of *Law and Order*, *CSI*,

*Criminal Minds*, *The Killing*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *The Tunnel*, *Twin Peaks*, and *True Detective* all put a dead girl at the center of their investigation.<sup>9</sup> The dead female body remains intriguing to artists and critics alike. It has a special elevated status in the history of mystery narratives. Edgar Allen Poe, for example, is famous for saying that “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.”<sup>10</sup> The question here is, why? Why would the death of a beautiful woman be an especially poetical topic over say the death of a man or the death of a woman who is not so beautiful? Here I would suggest that the word “beautiful” further anchors the woman as an object of phallic enjoyment because female beauty in patriarchy is an essential part of the fantasy of the types of women who are supposed to deliver the greatest quantity of enjoyment.

The more “beautiful” the woman, the more she is considered an object of phallic enjoyment. In a discussion of the television series *Twin Peaks*, critic Sarah Marshall has mused that a dead woman inspires poetics because she is the ultimate passive female upon whom one can project any personality or desires. She argues, “A dead woman is utterly incapable of offering up even the most cursory contradiction to the narratives that entomb her as readily as any casket.”<sup>11</sup> For this reason, Campion creates a female detective whose talent is actually discovering as close to the victim’s truth as possible. When she first opens the suitcase in the episode “Paradise Sold,” Robin peers into the case and says, “Hello, darling, want to tell me what you saw?”<sup>12</sup> For this scene, Campion chooses to veer away from the tradition of showing the dead female’s naked body. Instead, she only hints at it through the reaction of the people who see it. Robin also takes two photos of the body, which is the only way the viewer sees it—very briefly on the small screen of her camera in the middle of a larger frame of the suitcase and the beach. The images go by quite fast, and neither of the photos is of the woman’s naked body, as they focus instead on her head. This is an important formal choice by Campion because it resists the traditional way of television series and films, which not only show the naked dead body but often inspect it with the camera. This choice to present the woman’s naked body as a spectacle either where it is found or in the morgue further attempts to objectify the dead woman. Campion, however, does not show the victim’s body, so that the moment

the body is revealed, Robin speaks to her as if she is a subject. This re-animates her in a certain way, turning her fantasized object status into an actual lacking subject. This is an important aspect of Robin's talent. She immediately is drawn to thinking about the female victim as subject; even Robin's facial expression is that of someone who is in the presence of a live subject, not a dead object of phallic jouissance. Robin almost smiles and her eyes are wide as if anticipating a response when she asks, "Want to tell me what you saw?"

The dead body as a cast-aside thing reveals the crime, but the dead body as subject suggests the potential to shed light on why this crime occurred and to expose the phallic enjoyment. This is why *Top of the Lake* spends so much time having Robin trying to figure out not only how the crime happened but why it happened. What led up to the crime? In this way, the woman's death functions like the return of the repressed. When discussing Poe's statement, Marita Nadal Blasco argues that the dead girl actually reinstates men's fears, saying, "The woman's death entails not the annihilation of the men's neuroses but, ironically, their return in a more compulsive and terrifying form."<sup>13</sup> To expand upon Blasco's idea, I would argue that the dead female body can be a moment of object spectacle, but it also signifies an even more horrendous return of the failure of phallic enjoyment and the presence of the lacking subject.

Robin's own awakening when on the trail of a case is partly what affects the viewer's relationship to the victim. When Robin is called in for the case, she immediately comes to life as she works to solve this mystery. Cinnamon, the young woman in the suitcase, is a Thai woman who lived in Sydney and worked as a prostitute. Prostitution is, of course, the ultimate expression of phallic enjoyment as women are literally bought and sold as pure fantasy objects. Campion is particularly interested in what men who pay for prostitutes have in common, and in this second season she depicts a group of men who come together specifically to bond over their exploits with prostitutes.

The scene features a group of young men (in their twenties and thirties) gathered together around several tables in a local coffee shop.<sup>14</sup> They are mostly white, and they are dressed like contemporary hipsters. Most of them have beards, mustaches, and longish hair; they are wearing t-shirts and jeans, or are dressed as if they just came from work. Campion

returns to this scene throughout the series. They clearly meet here together often for camaraderie. What is unusual is that they meet to discuss and rate the prostitutes that they have been with from several local brothels. The part of this scene that ties specifically into the plot of the series is that one of the young men, Brett (Lincoln Vickery), was particularly attached to Cinnamon, the young woman who has died and was a prostitute at one of the places that these men all frequented. He tries to help the police investigation at one point and then in the end goes down to the brothel to try to shoot those who may have had a hand in Cinnamon's murder, after which he himself becomes a wanted man by the police. Brett's involvement in the case doesn't happen until the end of the series, so until then the viewer doesn't have a clear idea of how the scenes with the hipster men in the coffee shop are linked to the larger plot. Instead of interacting with this scene purely for plot, the viewer engages with what the scene itself is about: specifically, the impact of encountering all these young men happily discussing and rating prostitutes.

The scene begins with a medium shot that includes two of the men in focus in the foreground and some of the others out of focus behind them. What is especially present and in focus are their laptops, which they are all looking at, in particular, one laptop screen in the lower right-hand corner reveals that they are looking at sexually explicit photos of young Asian women on brothel sites. The first image we see is of a young woman with a translucent white cut-off shirt and skimpy white panties. She is touching her crotch and looking suggestively into the camera. The photos that we see on their screens become more and more suggestive throughout the scene. The rest of the coffee shop in the background seems to be a normal bright cheery coffee and lunch place with young, mixed gender clientele. This is important because instead of this scene taking place in a dingy bar or even a dark and ominous coffee shop, it takes place in a bright, beautiful space (with cream and white on the walls, high ceilings, and windows that let in lots of light). The ambiance is modern chic with funky lights in the background and other young, clean-cut-looking hipsters populating the rest of the coffee shop. Although what the men are doing stands out, they don't necessarily stand out from this environment. Campion employs this *mise-en-scène* to emphasize that this male group, and what they are doing, is no longer some

seedy, back-alley activity. It now has its place right in the middle of the public space. *Campion* shows that this display of phallic enjoyment is no longer the obscene underside of ideology; it has become mainstream. In many ways, this image of a group of men bonding over their judgment of these women as prostitutes can stand in for contemporary practices of watching porn and sharing pornographic images that have become so prevalent in contemporary society. Additionally, it is a key part of the story that the women are all Thai. While prostitution is legal in Sydney, there are many illegal brothels as well, especially where women are brought in from other countries and held there until they pay back impossible sums of money. Their otherness becomes part of what makes them acceptable as objects of phallic enjoyment and their plight invisible to mainstream society.

During the scene, the friends bond over their evaluation of the women in these explicit images. One friend says, "How about Mimi?" The ring leader of the group replies, "Mimi, mate, cannot recommend. I mean let's be fair great body, B plus, B double plus, but bad attitude." During these comments, *Campion* pans over the image of one of these women on the laptop. The ring leader goes on to explain that when with her one time she kissed him without tongue and then gave him a "one-dimensional" blow job. Throughout these scenes, the friends rate the women by grading them or putting comments on their webpage, such as "Steep learning curve, Good nat. rack." In this way, they rate them as if they are a product that you would describe and rate on Amazon. The women are doubly reified as they are not present, and then they are being rated and purchased on the internet. They exist as products for the men and objects of their phallic enjoyment, an enjoyment simultaneously masturbatory and performed in common.

The moment anything reminds the men of the women's possible existence outside the fantasy space, they are disgusted. One of them, for example, while telling an elaborate story, in which he is rating one young woman in particular, explains that he was totally repulsed by a dirty diaper left on the bed, a baby crying in the next room, and the fact that she fell off the bed drunk. All aspects that suggest she is a subject with a child and desires that are not being met so that she has to be drunk to perform her duties. But this man recoups his own phallic enjoyment by saying

that you can't beat her for enthusiasm and that she really loves sex. On the one hand, he doesn't recognize the truth of her existence even though the signs are right in front of him; instead these signs simply denigrate the woman as fantasy object. On the other hand, he is desperately willing to accept the fiction that she presents of herself as enjoying sex with him so that he can secure her as an object of his phallic enjoyment.

Additionally, all of these conversations about their phallic enjoyment are what bonds them as friends into this group and defines the group as especially masculine. In this particular case, which acts as a larger commentary on contemporary society, turning the woman into the object of phallic enjoyment defines masculinity. The real object of this enjoyment is not the women at all but the other men. They enjoy sitting around the café and comparing notes infinitely more than the actual sex acts with the women. This places masculinity and its phallic enjoyment constantly in danger. The others might reveal and unman them at any time. At one point the ring leader of the group singles out one of the group for his high voice and encourages him to try to speak with a deeper voice. Of course, the implication is that a deeper voice would be more masculine.

This group also bonds over their shared knowledge that what they are doing might not be totally accepted, though Campion does reveal its mainstream nature through the *mise-en-scène*. The bond derives from their idea that there is some transgression in turning the women, in such a blatant way, into phallic objects. Campion brilliantly illustrates this by having them lower their laptop screens every time the waitress comes over to check whether they need any other food or drinks. They talk about women as phallic objects in obscene ways, and then they all stop and lower the laptops that are facing the waitress as she approaches. There are two other important aspects to this part of the scene. Campion juxtaposes the waitress with the images of the women on the laptop screens within the same frame. As the waitress approaches, Campion frames the group from over the shoulders of the men on the other side of the table. Because the waitress can't see their laptops, they don't fold them down, and when the laptops are left open from that angle, the waitress is within the same frame as the women on the computer screens.

This formal choice by Campion allows the viewer to see the way that once the men are fully immersed in taking women as the object of their

phallic enjoyment, then every woman becomes folded into this status. In addition, one could read this as a metaphorical critique of the effect that internet porn has on real relationships, since it is made clear in repeated scenes that the men are afraid to ask the waitress out. The series also suggests that they have somewhat pathetic lives. For example, Brett still lives with his mother even though he is in his twenties. In this and the other scenes like this, *Campion* clearly critiques the internet porn industry and the effect it might have on young men for whom it sets a fantasy stage for phallic enjoyment in the ultimate masturbatory scenario.

In the case that drives the second season, the death of Cinnamon is resolved at the end when we learn that she has killed herself. One of the women in the brothel comments that Cinnamon was always crying, so the viewer is led to believe that she was miserable and found her current situation unbearable. The women also comment that sex work is hard, unpleasant work, and once you begin there is no going back. Additionally, Cinnamon was pregnant with a baby implanted by a couple crazed to have a biological baby and bypass all legal methods that either hadn't worked or went too slowly for them.

In the second season, the series also extends its critique to a different kind of phallic enjoyment. Phallic enjoyment is certainly not exclusively a male domain nor is it exclusively within the sex act.<sup>15</sup> Robin's investigation into Cinnamon's death leads her to investigate not only the phallic enjoyment of the men who frequent the brothels but also that of the couples who seem to take both their unborn babies and the women carrying them as objects of a desperate phallic enjoyment. Though certainly there would be a way to enact a gestational carrier or a surrogacy without phallic enjoyment, the couples depicted in this series have tipped over into obsessional behavior, as they are crazed to obtain a baby. One woman has even been hospitalized in a psychiatric ward because she cannot deal with not being able to become pregnant or obtain a legal surrogate. These couples believe that having a biological baby will fix and complete the symbolic order. By not being able to get pregnant, they have come face to face with the inadequacies of patriarchal ideas about parenthood as their symbolic status within patriarchy seems to be unraveling.

In the face of this ideological failure—in which the failure of biology reveals the holes in the symbolic—these couples have turned the baby



and the carrier into objects they feel they must have in order to complete their lives and have some enjoyment. Like the men frequenting brothels, they pay for and believe they own the women and the babies they are carrying. They have lost sight of the subjectivity of both the babies and the women involved, and in their desperation have turned their goal of having a baby and those involved in achieving the goal into objects of phallic enjoyment. Seeing the baby and the woman carrying the baby as subjects to engage rather than objects to obtain for phallic enjoyment might have prevented them from attempting illegal implantation out of concern for the conditions and rights of the woman carrying the baby, which the series reveals to be quite inhumane. In this way, the series continues the critique of phallic enjoyment but complicates the viewer's understanding of the many ways it can create violence and injustice when you take a person as the object of phallic enjoyment.

### Female Responses

The series not only looks at men (and sometimes women) who turn women into objects of their phallic enjoyment, but also considers how women deal with being shoved into this position. The female characters throughout the series reveal both the lengths you have to go to as a woman to attempt to avoid the violence of being made into an object of phallic enjoyment and the melancholy and trauma that being made into such an object produces in women. *Top of the Lake*, season one, has an alternative community of women who are arguably all trying to recover from lives in which they had accepted their role as object of phallic enjoyment. The women are all living on a plot of land away from the town in huge steel shipping containers where they have created their own haven on a piece of land literally called "Paradise."<sup>16</sup> All of the women there are middle age, and they all have been traumatized by the men in their lives. They are broken and damaged but have found solace and support in this community of women.

Their leader is a woman named GJ (Holly Hunter), who is a kind of guru. She is an important counter-figure to the woman as phallic object because she rejects the symbolic all together. When an angry husband who has flown in and is trying to figure out what kind of place she is run-

ning says, "You're the teacher," she replies, "No, no teacher." The women there persistently try to install her as the master of their community, as their guru, but GJ resists this each time. She therefore resists both being an object and being a master, arguably two sides of the same coin. Masters or gurus put themselves into the position of another potential completion of the enigmatic master signifier. We often believe in our leaders because we think that they will complete the system of signification and make everything clear and fair. But leaders never fill this role completely because they are still lacking human subjects who will inevitably fail simply because no one can plug the hole in the dam of signification; there is always an unstoppable leak. GJ refuses to be the leader and, in this way, puts herself in the position of lack. What she does do is stay committed to that position of lack, which in turn is what allows the women to begin to recover from their various traumatic pasts.

GJ's refusal to be a guru and her refusal to be an object of phallic enjoyment makes her very confusing to the local men. She wears gender-neutral long pants and a long-sleeve shirt tucked in, clothes that do not emphasize her form. She also wears her very long, grey hair down, and it often covers her face. She sits and walks with a purpose that suggests contemplation and nothing else. When Matt Mitcham comes to Paradise to complain that the women stole his land, he sees GJ walking aimlessly past and says, "Is she in charge? Is she a she?" He is utterly confused by her appearance because she clearly rejects many tenets of patriarchal society. She lives on this remote land unconventionally (in shipping containers and with few comforts), with no men, and in an enigmatic, questioning way. Additionally, she spends her time contemplating nothingness and the unstable points of identity and meaning. As a man fully steeped in looking at women as objects of phallic enjoyment, he cannot even see GJ's gender. This creates an interesting disjunction between what the viewer has experienced vis-à-vis GJ and what Matt experiences. He cannot see her gender because he has relegated women to a certain object status, and she categorically refuses this position, which has the effect of nearly making her invisible to him. Moreover, it has the effect of confusing gender specificity, which suggests that blind commitment to gender categories also has something to do with the promotion of phallic enjoyment.

The effect of being turned into an object of phallic enjoyment in patriarchy leaves its mark on all the women who have come to stay there with GJ. Even though they have elected to come there to work on recovering from their experiences (at the hands of abusive men), they continue to obsess about men and talk about going back to their partners; one woman even tries to date Matt Mitcham, which doesn't end well. In many ways, this all-female community—held together by a woman who doesn't want to be their leader—presents a way station between the structures of patriarchy and the wilderness of New Zealand, which can be read as a marker of the Real, that is, a marker of the inadequacies of the patriarchal symbolic fictions. Campion emphasizes this in the *mise-en-scène* since the women's shipping containers are clustered together in the valley of a large, unpopulated swath of wilderness.

Paradise is on the outer edge of civilization. Campion has Tui stop in the women's camp before she disappears into the wilderness. She sits with the women and has an audience with GJ. Tui then goes on to hide from everyone in the wilds of the New Zealand mountains that surround the women's patch of Paradise. This way station of recovering subjects is tenuous, however, and doesn't offer anyone there any real resolution or any prescriptive advice on how to deal with the encroaching male communities. Instead, it is up to the lone female detective to solve the crime perpetrated on Tui and thus try to bring some justice for her.

Robin as an individual persists throughout the series as a complicated, flawed, but powerful response to the crimes committed against women. She herself, we discover in the first season, was a victim of gang rape as a teenager, and much of her demeanor and drive to help stems from this traumatic experience. She has a melancholic bearing in the world, and this melancholy actually feeds her determination to discover other women who have been assaulted. About melancholy and mourning, Freud argues, "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia, it is the ego itself."<sup>17</sup> Her melancholy, which is most apparent in the second season, matches Freud's description almost literally at the end of the first season, when she tells GJ, "I don't know how to keep living." GJ responds that she should die to herself, to her idea of herself because, she says, "there's no way out. Not for others, not for you." GJ's advocacy of the melancholic position haunts the series in more ways

than one. Robin, like a true film noir detective, has to die, or experience grave emotional trauma, more often than not in order to gain insight into her ongoing cases. In this way she has a tremendous relationship with loss that makes her status as a subject all the more apparent as she is investigating those who turn women into objects of phallic enjoyment.

Campion's series appears at a pivotal moment in American politics. Produced in Australia, it was shown on Netflix, Amazon Prime, and other sources in the US. Throughout 2017, numerous cases of sexual assault and harassment by high-profile men in politics and entertainment became public in America. It seems to have begun with the revelation that Donald Trump had sexually assaulted and harassed numerous women, which was highlighted in a video that went viral featuring the way he talks about women. In this infamous video, Trump explains that because he is famous he can walk up to a woman and grab her vagina without any consequences. The video also reveals that he sees women as objects of his phallic enjoyment and thus feels sexual assault or harassment is just his right. As fantasy objects, the women don't have rights; they don't have the right to be subjects and exist un-harassed. When Trump was elected president, his actions were in a sense condoned. The numerous public revelations of other prominent men who similarly harass and assault women in the work place, in the public sphere and in the domestic sphere, however, seem to be a return of the repressed. Campion's series reveals the violence (both structural and physical) that phallic enjoyment can do when it attempts to make women its object. Robin's melancholia and passionate drive to endlessly investigate how this violence occurs, set amidst complex narrative threads, reveals that female subjects can never be objects of phallic enjoyment; in the end their lack will always resurface.

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## NOTES

1. *Top of the Lake: China Girl*, “The Loved One,” season 2, ep. 2, dir. Garth Davis with Jane Campion, Sundance Channel, March 2013.

2. *Top of the Lake: China Girl*, “China Girl,” season 2, ep. 1, dir. Jane Campion, Sundance Channel, March 2013. See Hilary Neroni, “Following the Impossible Road to Female Passion: Psychoanalysis, the Mundane, and the Films of Jane Campion,” *Discourse* 34 (2012): 290–310.

3. *Top of the Lake*, “Episode 1,” season 1, ep. 1, dir. Jane Campion, Sundance Channel, March, 2013.

4. Alenka Zupencic, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 54

5. For Lacan, this structural position of the phallus (master signifier) is attached to enjoyment. He explains, “Everything is reduced to this signifier, the phallus, which is not rightly in the system of the subject, since it is not the subject that it represents but, if one might say, sexual enjoyment insofar as it is outside the system, which is to say, absolute.” Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVI: D’un autre à l’autre, 1968–1969*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 320.

6. Even this, however, is not a direct encounter. As Lacan argues, “It is very precisely, in effect, to the semblance of the phallus that the pivot point is related, the center of all that can be organized and contained of sexual enjoyment.” That is to say, we always interact with a representation of the phallus since the phallus itself is out of reach though it is at the heart of sexual enjoyment. Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVIII: D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant 1970–1971*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 170.

7. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 20: *Encore, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998)81.

8. *Top of the Lake: China Girl*, “China Girl.”

9. *Law and Order* (NBC, 1990–2010), *CSI* (CBS, 2000–2015), *Criminal Minds* (CBS, 2005–present), *The Killing* (AMC, 2011–2014), *Pretty Little Liars* (Freeform, formerly ABC Family, 2010–2017), *The Tunnel* (Sky Atlantic, 2013–2017), *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991), and *True Detective* (HBO, 2014–present).

10. Edgar Allen Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” *Graham’s Magazine* 28, no. 44 (April 1846), 164.

11. Sarah Marshall, “*Twin Peaks* and the Origin of the Dead Woman TV Trope,” *New Republic* (April 10, 2014), <https://newrepublic.com/article/117323/twin-peaks-and-origin-dead-woman-tv-trope>.

12. *Top of the Lake: China Girl*, “Paradise Sold,” Season 2, episode 1, 2017.

13. Marita Nadal Blasco, “‘The Death of a Beautiful Woman Is, Unquestionably, the Most Poetical Topic in the World’: Poetic and Parodic Treatment of Women in Poe’s Tales,” in *Gender, Ideology: Essays on Theory, Fiction and Film*, eds. Chantal Cornut-Gentile D’Arcy and José Angel Garcia Landa (London: Brill Rodopi, 1996), 152.

14. *Top of the Lake: China Girl*, "China Girl."

15. Colette Soler expands on this point when she argues, "Like the signifier, phallic jouissance is discrete and fragmented; it allows of greater and lesser amounts and can be appropriated by men or women, even though there is certainly a dissymmetry between the sexes when it comes to phallic jouissance." Soler, "What Does the Unconscious Know about Women?," in *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (New York: SUNY Press, 2002), 106.

16. Perhaps this is *Campion's* allusion to Toni Morrison's novel by the same name. In *Paradise*, Morrison depicts a group of women who establish a community in a former convent outside of the town of Ruby. The main action of the novel involves the men of Ruby attacking the community and killing all the women there.

17. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," trans. James Strachey, Anna Freud, and Angela Richards, in *The Standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 246.