

The Power of the Dog: A small world under the big sky

Erik Schreiber
3 January 2022

The Power of the Dog (2021), director Jane Campion's first feature film in 12 years, is a visually appealing film that focuses on things hidden and thoughts unspoken. Even during apparently mundane scenes, it maintains an uncomfortable tension. The film, which is based on a 1967 novel by Thomas Savage, is a testament to the abilities of the director and her four principal actors. Yet it reveals that Campion has not overcome limitations evident in previous films such as *Bright Star* (2009) and *The Piano* (1993).

Phil and George Burbank (Benedict Cumberbatch and Jesse Plemons, respectively) are successful ranchers in Montana. The two brothers are a study in contrasts. Phil is almost always in chaps, and his lean face and hands are usually smeared with dirt. He has a voice like sandpaper and evinces a calm, assured machismo. George, on the other hand, is clean and neatly dressed, even dapper. Speaking slowly, simply and politely, he often says exactly what must be said.

On a cattle drive, Phil mentions to George the many years they've been ranching and reminds him that they owe their skills and success to their late mentor Bronco Henry, who hovers as an unseen presence throughout the film. We quickly see Phil's capacity for meanness when he repeatedly calls George "fatso." George endures this and other insults without protest and, despite his mildness, holds his own against his brother.

The brothers and their men have dinner at an inn owned by Rose Gordon (Kirsten Dunst), a widow. Phil notices intricate paper flowers in vases on the table and begins mocking them. When he asks who made them, Rose's teenage son Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee) says that he did. Phil belittles the shy and delicate Peter, and the others (except for George) join in the laughter. Peter, and especially Rose, are hurt. After dinner, a somber George stays behind, ostensibly to pay the bill.

He hears Rose crying and enters the kitchen to comfort her.

Before long, George and Rose marry, and Phil's hostility toward Rose deepens. Peter has been sent to college to study medicine, and Phil believes that Rose is simply after the brothers' money. When Rose tries to establish friendly terms with Phil, he curtly rejects her overture and calls her a "cheap schemer." He takes every opportunity to observe Rose and identify her flaws, for which he cruelly taunts her. What is fueling his intense animosity?

Unable to bear Phil's unrelenting hostility, Rose begins drinking. When Peter comes home for summer break, he realizes that she has become an alcoholic and resolves to help her. He sequesters himself in his room, dissecting animals. Out for a walk one day, Peter inadvertently finds a place where Phil has hidden a few belongings. Moments later, he stumbles upon Phil himself while the latter is bathing in a pond. Phil angrily chases Peter away.

Unexpectedly, Phil later extends an olive branch to Peter, who is caught off guard. In front of his men, Phil offers to teach Peter to ride a horse and to make him a rope. Peter warily accepts. Phil's true intentions are unclear, and Peter may be holding back, as well. Rose, for her part, is convinced that Phil is out to get her son. Her fear intensifies, and her psychological state deteriorates.

Cumberbatch is magnetic as Phil. He shows us a subtle and active mind underneath Phil's aura of malice, but it is nearly impossible to read this mind. Even in Phil's interactions with the easygoing George, the atmosphere is charged. It seems like one misstep could cause Phil to snap.

Plemons ably portrays George's simplicity and sensitivity without turning the character into a patsy.

Dunst and Smit-McPhee also shine in their roles, gradually revealing new facets of their characters.

We have commented previously that Campion tends to focus on “the sensitive, misunderstood, middle-class female” in her films. *The Power of the Dog* instead examines various ideas of manhood, male relationships and jealousy. On the surface, these themes indicate a welcome broadening of the filmmaker’s horizons.

But what Campion may be interested in more specifically is “toxic masculinity,” a vague phenomenon said to be the cause of violence, sexual predation and other ills. The movie was filmed during the last year of Donald Trump’s term, and Campion and Cumberbatch have each referred to him when explaining the ideas behind the film. “It’s important to look under the bonnet and understand what makes this toxicity occur,” Cumberbatch told the *Irish Times*. “It’s really important to understand monsters in order to stop them.”

But what understanding of Phil (or Trump) does *The Power of the Dog* provide? It implies that we must examine him from a Freudian perspective to identify the roots of his cruelty and violence. But surely an approach focused on childhood and repressed libido is one-sided and offers, at best, a limited explanation. It leaves out of account the deeper social and historical influences on the personality. But social and historical questions have never interested Campion.

The film’s setting makes this apparent. The action takes place in 1925, and the period’s dress, technology and popular songs are faithfully reproduced. Yet the characters seem completely unaffected by their historical environment. The period might have been chosen on a whim; the movie could just as easily have been set in 1895 or 1955. This weakness is in keeping with Campion’s previous films.

The setting, in its turn, points to other problems. The film’s open skies and wide expanses (beautifully captured by director of photography Ari Wegner) contrast sharply with the small social world that the film examines. We get little sense of society at large, either in the United States or in Montana. Campion’s lack of interest in these questions detracts from the artistic truth of her work. She is much more attentive to personal matters of gender and sexuality, as is the middle-class layer for which she speaks.

But although we catch glimpses of the characters’

states of mind and motivations, much remains obscure. The film, which proceeds at a leisurely pace, gradually hints at fuller pictures of Phil and Peter (and, to a lesser extent, of George and Rose) as characters. But overall, it is a bit too tight-lipped, too withholding.

Moreover, the dénouement is disappointingly tidy, especially considering the tension that has been sustained (in no small part by Jonny Greenwood’s score). The plot is resolved without any intimation of deeper significance or call for reflection. The four main characters, finally, are accidental figures made interesting by excellent performances and skilled filmmaking. Considering the undeniable talent that went into it, it is a shame that the film does not offer more substance.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)