



FILM: **THE POWER OF THE DOG**

FDG RATING: 4.5 😊😊😊😊😊

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Jane Campion: *director/writer*
 Benedict Cumberbatch: *actor, Phil*
 Kodi Smit-McPhee: *actor, Peter*
 Kirsten Dunst: *actress, Rose*

DATE: January 23, 2022

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE POWER OF THE DOG**

The Power of the Dog, labeled a psycho-dramatic Western, turns a typical cowboy, saloon, gun slinger film, upside down. Phil, a swarthy, rugged, (he rarely bathes) antisocial, Benedict Cumberbatch and his antithesis, refined, soft-spoken, well-dressed, reserved, brother George, manage the sprawling Montana cattle ranch that their parents gave them. It's 1925. It's not a visual we expected when after a day corralling cattle on the dust swirling, sparse desolate terrain, they retreat to their large, dark but luxurious ranch house with carpets, filled bookcases, chess board, and menagerie of animal heads lining the dark, wood-paneled walls.

Director Jane Campion, is a master at creating emotional tension with sexual undertones as she did in her award winning film, The Piano. We feel the beginnings of blistering tension when the ranch hands visit the local tavern owned by Rose, a widow, who has her teenage son, Peter, helping wait the tables. Phil ridicules Peter's effeminate tendencies and the others join in. Phil and George have an uneasy sibling relationship that becomes more troubled and tense when George brings Rose home as his new wife along with her son.

Phil's taunting intimidation of Rose and Peter becomes increasingly cruel but we see a hint of a David and Goliath confrontation in formation. In an early scene Peter says that it is his job to protect his mother and her happiness. In an unexpected turn of events we see Phil's attitude toward Peter soften when Peter recognizes the shape of the distant hills as the profile of a dog barking when Phil asks him what he sees in the distance. No one else has ever seen this image, except for Bronco Henry, Phil's mentor, who died and Phil has practically made a shrine to him. We surmise they probably had an intimate relationship as well. It's interesting to watch this visual connection between Phil and Peter spark an evolving relationship and realize that Peter seems to be subtly manipulating their relationship. One published critic explained, "The unlikely camaraderie unlocks a number of secrets and hidden intentions, changing everyone's relationship to each other."

The film is gripping with outstanding performances and dramatic cinematography of broad remote landscapes in New Zealand to simulate rural Montana in 1925. One discussion participant noted that seeing the typical macho cowboy subverted into a very complex character is especially compelling and refreshing. Also, although George was soft-spoken, we liked that he was true to himself and stuck to his convictions despite taunting from Phil. The ending is a definite twist, a bit of poetic justice.

So what does the title mean? The phrase is biblical referring to Jesus' enemies coming together to attack him like a pack of dogs. "Save the soul from the sword, save the heart from the power of the dog." One reviewer explained, "The expression refers to the deepest and most irrepressible instincts of the human being." Another association, in addition to the hills looking like the profile of a dog barking: Peter is the under dog, Phil is the alpha dog. Maybe it's stretching it, but dogs are also loyal and Peter was fiercely loyal to and protective of his mother which was his incentive to overpower Phil.

Manliness, macho-ness, sexuality, and revenge are explored from a multitude of perspectives, with twists and turns making The Power of the Dog complex and thought provoking. We corralled a meaty score of 4.5 for this unique psycho-western film on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best).



See you at the movies!

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