

## A Dog with Too Much Power

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*The Power of the Dog* (2020), directed by Jane Campion, is a film which demonstrates the destructive tendency of unfair power dynamics through the lens of an American Western. It tells the story of the Burbank ranch, managed by brothers George (Jesse Plemons) and Phil (Benedict Cumberbatch), George handles the business transactions while Phil manages nearly everything else. Phil runs the ranch superbly, being skilled and precise in seemingly all departments. The status quo of the ranch is upset, however, when George marries widow Rose (Kirsten Dunst), and moves her and her teenage son, Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee), onto the property. Tensions arise, and Phil's hatred of weakness and vulnerability manifests in his cruel and brutal treatment towards Rose. This is demonstrated in the dialogue less scene where Rose attempts to practice piano (46:00 - 48:57), where through precise framing, sound, and *mise en scène*, Phil's skillful and exacting terror towards her is on full display, which goes on to fuel his ultimate demise.

The scene begins with Rose alone in the Burbank's large house (00:46:02). At this point in the film, Peter is still at school, so she is alone with her distant husband on the ranch. George is planning a dinner party with his parents, the governor and the governor's wife, and he insists on Rose playing the piano for the guests, despite Rose's protests and doubts. He has purchased an expensive and exquisite piano<sup>1</sup>, further increasing the pressure upon her. This is demonstrated in the wide framing of the opening shots, Rose appearing small amongst the affluent furnishings of the Burbank residence. Rose appears apprehensive, stopping before the piano, looking around the house before putting her sheet music down. Sound is instrumental in the effectiveness of this scene, featuring no dialogue and beginning quite quietly, it plays an important role in communicating character status and control. Her footsteps, putting the sheet music down, every sound she makes is accentuated and distinct against the silence of the scene, the audience can intuit her fear by this point in the film, and we share in her apprehension. The other audible sounds are a ticking clock and the howling wind creeping throughout the house. The ever-present clock ticks away, representing the approaching dinner party Rose dreads, and the shrinking time she must practice her rudimentary piano skills. The howling wind however represents her bigger concern, Phil Burbank. The wind hangs over the house heavily, a representation of the untamed wilderness which Phil is so closely symbolized with throughout the film. In conjunction with this, dozens of taxidermized animals are positioned over Rose, literal victims of Phil staring down upon her with dead eyes, these

lifeless decorations expressing Phil's terror always hanging over her. Rose moves to close the front door, blocking out the eerie wind, and then closes a few more doors to the room, her movement careful and quick, attempting to create a safe space for herself. As she closes the last door, we hear the asynchronous sound of her playing the piano before cutting to it, creating a feeling of somewhat ease; she has somewhat successfully barricaded herself from outside pressures (00:46:06). Her precautions flow into the next scene through this audio transition, the fluid camera dollying around her smoothly as she practices; she is in control of the scene, for just a moment.

As the camera dollies around Rose practicing the piano, unaware of anything else, we see Phil in just the corner of the screen, unfocused, creeping like a predator in the background, heading up the stairs (00:46:17). We only hear the slightest jingle from his signature cowboy boots, his movement like a careful predator sizing up its prey, a distinct contrast with the loud and revealing steps from Rose earlier. The editing during this scene is continuous, drawing little attention to itself, its biggest utility being the long takes of Rose playing and the quick cuts to Phil later in the scene, serving to draw out the suspension so crucial to this scene. During her playing, we hear a distinct sound from the piano, a quiet, easily missed second instrument softly mimicking her playing. As the camera stops when Rose takes a break, we hear the creaking of the front door and the piercing winds once again (00:46:39). A shot of the softly swinging door displays the unfocused landscape, Phil's domain, present and waiting. We cut to a close-up of Rose's face, seeing the fear wash over her face (00:46:47). The ticking clock and wind are back, and faint rustling noises can be heard from the top floor. A wide shot of Rose apprehensively looking towards the stairs places her back in smaller framing, any sense of comfort or ease quickly disappearing, Phil's presence like a specter in the old house. From this wide shot, Rose begins playing again, the camera taking up a fluid dolly-in as she does so. Faintly, we hear a second instrument chime into the same tune she is playing, Rose and the camera halting in their tracks as she hears it (00:47:07). She takes a deep breath and continues, the camera picking up again. The second instrument chimes in louder this time, taking over completely when Rose stops, her hands trembling. The sound mixing here plays an important role in demonstrating which character is in control, Rose's piano playing initially confident and drowning out Phil's banjo, eventually, the roles being swapped with Phil's playing becoming more distinct and louder as he takes control. We cut to an extreme close-up of Phil's boot prying open the door, a jingle of his boot ringing out (00:47:26). The next shot is a medium close-up of Phil staring down at Rose, the opening door framed to reveal Phil's menacing glare to us at the same time as Rose. The camera is handheld in this shot, mimicking the literal and metaphorical tremble Rose is experiencing, the low angle suggesting the unbalanced power dynamic between the two. Most of Phil's face is covered in shadow, displaying his sinister nature. Returning to the close-up of his cowboy boots in the next shot, Phil plants his right foot back in a steady stance, a motif we would see in a typical Western shootout when our

characters are ready to do battle. The next shot we see of Rose is from Phil's point of view, Rose framed tiny and surrounded by the geometry of the house, the banister, wall, and roof creating sharp angles which isolate her. This visually displays the cage Rose has found herself in on the Burbank ranch, literally being trapped in this frame by the home, but also represents her being Phil's next target, three taxidermized animal heads right beside her within the composition.

Despite Phil's challenging disposition, Rose continues to play when we cut back to the medium close-up of her, the camera once again continuing to dolly-in when she plays (00:47:43). Her attempts are overtaken by Phil's banjo playing, which after a moment of holding stationary on Rose's defeated face, continues the dolly-in, Phil now completely being in control of the scene. Rose's face is lit dimly, displaying her defeat and succumbing to Phil's malice. Cutting back to Phil, he is shot with an extreme low angle while he plays, displaying him in a grotesque manner. The low-key lighting on Phil's face presents him as sinister and lurking. In the next shot, we cut to a close-up of Phil's fingers masterfully playing the banjo, his fingers calloused and dirty, a point of pride with him, a very low depth of field isolating them and forcing us to watch him demonstrate his skills. As Phil completes the song with a heavy strum, we cut back to the previous low-angle shot, ending the scene on his villainous glare staring down on Rose, looking particularly cruel and evil (00:48:14). The scene is played out with Jonny Greenwood's forbidding and atonal soundtrack, the silence of the scene now being completely soaked in the crushing and sinister sounds of Greenwood's score. Rose's confidence in her piano playing is shattered, boding poorly for the approaching dinner party. In the next scene we see Rose running out of the house into Phil's realm of the wilderness, belittled and afraid, fighting back tears, her being the only thing within the focus of the shallow depth of field (00:48:18). She is alone and incapable in Phil's world.

Through the purposeful kineticism of the camera, the shifting sound mixing, isolating composition and menacing mise-en-scene, this three-minute scene effectively communicates the cruel power dynamic between Phil and Rose and sets in motion the plot and motivations of the film. This scene demonstrates through the film's form the extent and capacity of Phil's calculated cruelty without a word of dialogue. The consequences of Phil's actions in this scene directly lead to his downfall. Due to his mocking and belittling, Rose embarrasses herself deeply at the dinner party, being unable to play entirely, which directly leads to her developing alcoholism. His senseless malice towards Rose fuels Peter's quiet revenge. The unbalanced power dynamics of the Burbank ranch, displayed prominently in this scene, have destructive and lasting effects, the brutality deeply corrupting, the consequences severe.

"Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog." - Psalm 22

## References

Campion, J. (Director). (2021). *The Power of the dog*. [Film]. Netflix.

<https://www.netflix.com/search?q=The%20power%20of%20the%20dog&bv=81127997>.