

A Study of Self-awareness in the Power of the Dog with Lacan Theory

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Abstract: The movie "The Power of The Dog" is adapted from the novel of the same name by Thomas Savage, directed by New Zealand director Jane Campion, and tells a story about male consciousness - the farmer Phil and the boy Peter are both homosexuals. Phil has a fragile and sensitive heart under his arrogant and conceited masculinity, while Peter's soft, meek exterior hides a determined, strong ego. The two people's very different upbringings have created a different sense of self. Moreover, two people with opposite personalities have become entangled in fate because of their fatalistic encounters. The film is calm and restrained, and the director focuses on the different spiritual worlds built up by the two characters under the gaze of others.

Keywords: The Power of the Dog with Lacan theory, Thomas Savage

1. Introduction

For Lacan, identifying "self-consciousness" always uses the "other." Lacan asserts that "the unconscious is the other's discourse, people's thoughts, unconsciousness, are not their instincts at all, but the slavish outcome under other people's invisible coercion. The Other refers to anything that contributes to our subjectivity (i.e., what is commonly called the self). For example, because the mother demands the subject as an infant, the infant generates and creates a self under the mother's gaze. At this point, the subject creates his or her own "self-consciousness" (or "subjectivity") by recognizing the subjectivity of others [1-3].



Figure 1: The movie "The Power of The Dog".

2. Desire and Consciousness Building

It is believed that males must have a dominant personality with specific qualities such as masculinity and rationality. In contrast, females need to have a subordinate personality that includes specific qualities such as femininity and sensuality. According to Lacan, an infant will be in chaos before birth, at birth, after birth, and at six months. The act of "birth" itself is traumatic. Phil's mentor (invisible lover), Bronco, is more like a "mother" to Phil. Bronco teaches him everything about the West. Phil sees the masculinity everyone admires in Bronco Henry, and all of Phil's desires come from the thought of "being a man like Bronco Henry." Phil suppressed his own heart, voluntarily gave up the upper-class life, and tried to turn himself into a tough guy like Bronco. Through his efforts, Phil became the commander among all the cowboys and finally became part of the patriarchal society.

After he lost Bronco, he was in a state of lack of love, and he used a tough shell to disguise himself until he met Pete. When he finds the paper flowers folded by Pete for the first time in the restaurant, he rubs them with his fingers as if they were sexually suggestive movie symbols. He reveals his inner sensuality and softness to the audience and his desire for love. His disguise makes him unable to face his weakness, and he shows his masculinity by lighting a cigarette with a paper flower and verbally taunting Pete. To show his masculinity, he draws a line with a manless man like Pete. His extreme performance and concern are a sign that he is not solid and trustworthy. He is what people call "in the closet" nowadays. After Zoe marries her brother George, Phil, who has controlled George for years, feels betrayed and turns his anger against Zoe. He disturbs Zoe while she is practising, directly sarcastic her at the party that she did not play the piano, and mentally oppresses and destroys Zoe's feelings. All his actions indicate that Phil lacks love and security. He plans to pull in Zoe's son Pete, hoping to isolate Zoe further. Pete walked through the crowd calmly while Phil was braiding the rope. Somehow at this point, Phil was attracted to Pete. From then on, Phil unknowingly shifted his desire to Pete.

According to Lacan, the individual's desire is no longer its own after the mirror stage, especially after entering the symbolic domain. Under the chain of signifiers, my desire is always the desire of the other's desire [4-6]. Pete opens Phil's defences step by step, and finally, when they share a cigarette, Phil completely removes all his defences and reveals his vulnerable "self" to Pete, thus allowing Pete to get his hands on him.

In this film, Pete seems to be a whole different person than Phil. He has a thin, plain appearance. Paper cutting and flower folding is his hobby. He has nothing to do with the traditional aesthetics of heroic male qualities. The director is trying to create an image of a soft and delicate character image in the audience in the very beginning. As the film develops, the audience discovers the ruthlessness beneath a well-behaved exterior. The film begins with Pete's monologue, "for what kind of man would I be if I did not help my mother? If I did not save her." Including the scene in the beginning when Pete shows his collection of luxury house photos and tells his mother that she will live in a house like that in the future. It indicates that Pete's actions are towards his mother to ensure she will live a happy life. His mother is the "object." In Lacan's psychoanalysis, the subject is a split existence, an imaginary "illusion" constructed through the gaze of the "mother." In the next life, some people constantly make demands on the subject, and people constantly provide food for the subject. Here the "person who makes demands" becomes the structural "mother" of the subject, "food" is the metaphor for pleasure, and the subject still plays the role of "baby" in this structure. The subject still plays the role of "infant" in this structure. In the film, Phil and Pete have a conversation when Phil says that Bronco told him that "a man is made with patience and odds against him," and Pete says that his father told him about "obstacles."

The two men have followed the teachings of the two dead men all their lives. Later in the film, Rose is worried that Pete will get too close to Phil and alienate herself, so she tells Pete that the relationship between them is not unattainable by telling him the story that her teacher drew stars on the blackboard when she was a child, as if in response to Pete's Oedipus complex. Unlike Phil, Pete has always been mentally strong, and he has his own goals, he was able to face his personality and desires, and Phil was attracted by the qualities he did not have. When Pete walked through the laughs from the cowboys, he did not care about it at all, and that is when he was ready to "hunt" Phil. His approach to Phil showed docility like he soothed the rabbit before killing it. He would crouch down and comfort Phil by telling him that he wanted to be a man just like him. Moreover, he would do this to make sure that Phil would touch the dead cow's hide and get infected to die so that Rose could get rid of Phil's humiliation.

In Lacan's philosophical vision, human desire is always false. Your desire is the desire of the other. Human desire is an unconscious "pseudo-desire." [7-9] And in such a consciousness-building premise, how people should face their desires, the director gave different answers through the various choices of Phil and Pete.

3. Audiovisual Language Analysis - Character Transformation

"The Power of the Dog" is not a typical western film. By using steady and delicate camera language, the audience can feel the two protagonists of very different character traits and the transformation of the relationship between the characters. The two sides of male wildness and vulnerability are fully exposed to the audience. Human nature is constantly magnified and fermented in light and shadow.

Before the first appearance of the two main characters in the film, the director showed us the different personality traits of the two main characters through her camera language. For example, before Phil's appearance in the film's opening scene, the director focused on the cattle and the conflicts through the camera and the wide shot of the western ranch scene immediately after. The sound of his boots represents the violence and conflict part of his personality as a metaphor for his strength and masculinity, allowing the audience to feel the testosterone overflowing from the screen. Through the moving shot of Phil's first appearance across the large window frame, Phil strides across his land. He gets into his house, compared with the film's end when Phil walks out of the house before his death. The two similar compositions reflect the transformation of Phil's character before and after from dominant to weak and desolate. Then, in the scene at the bar, Phil's momentum has been

overwhelming George in front of many cowboys. Phil always shows his extreme masculinity. Phil is always dominant among many cowboys through low-angle shooting.

We can find their inner personality of Phil from two scenes. At the film's beginning, Phil plays with the paper flowers made by Pete; the director uses close-ups focused on his hand, which is a sexually suggestive movement, showing his desire to be loved inside of his heart. Then, in the middle of the film, when Phil masturbates in the woods with the picture of light tones of colour, Phil wipes his body with a scarf embroidered with the initials BH, surrounded by ethereal and distant music. The picture shows elegance, softness and the personality of women. Unlike the initial masculine display, in this section, the audience could find the deep inside Phil. We could see his love for Bronco and his feminine side. Moreover, that is when Pete breaks into Phil's secret garden, which indicates the film's later stages about how Pete opened Phil's psychological defences step by step.

Later in the film, as Phil and Pete get closer and closer, Phil's trust in Pete gradually grows, with his hidden right side released simultaneously. The "self-awareness" is also changing because of the change in the subject. The director's camera language also fully demonstrates this feature. In the scene of the two men talking in the field, the director shifts the position of the two men through a dolly shot (panning), echoing the panning shot of Pete "hunting" Phil later on. There is Pete as the foreground in the single shot of Phil, while in the shift to Pete, there is only a single shot without Phil as the foreground. Phil sees Bronco in Pete and transfers his desire for Bronco to Pete. In the film's climax, Phil was furious because Zoe had sold all her hides, and Pete, who saw everything behind the door, secretly made up his mind. He walked into Phil, took off his gloves and gently grabbed Phil's hand to comfort him and told him he had hidden. In this section, the director used a wrap-around shot, from a close-up of Pete's hand to a flat view of the two, then Phil reached out to touch Pete, symbolizing Phil's Mental defences have been opened step by step. With the music full of tension, the mutual affection between the two seems to be but Pete's "hunting" scheme. In the rope braiding scene, the dim light brought a painting-like texture to the picture.

In this ambiguous atmosphere, Pete rolled a cigarette, smoked it then passed it to Phil, a series of actions to show the meaning of teasing. In the close-up of Phil's face, the picture is extremely dark. His expression seems to be hidden in the shadow, only a backlight outline can be seen, and that is how the director shows his restraint of desire for Pete. The perspective of Pete is much higher, showing that he has taken control of the situation. Phil is already in Pete's pocket. In order to please Pete, Phil makes the rope regardless of everything; he needs Pete to be the next Bronco to fill his inner desire for the mother's absence. Phil's desire and subjectivity change in the film's second half. Moreover, in the end, Phil changes back to the suit because of Pete's gaze on him as the other, which affects his subjectivity. From pursuing the masculine male identity of Bronco to pursuing the elegant scholarly image of Pete, Phil's subjectivity is permanently established through the illusion that is constructed in the mirror.

However, Pitt's character differs from Phil's rigid exterior and interior softness. The director uses a more delicate way to build the character image. In the film, the director uses close-up shots three times to shoot Pete's hand, make paper flowers, dissect the rabbit and cut infected cowhide. In Pitt's first appearance, Pitt used scissors to cut paper flowers. The dust under the light with the piano sound of a single melody in the background shows a strange feeling of disharmony hidden in the calm scene. It shows that Pete is sensitive and feminine on the outside but cold-blooded and cruel on the inside. Pitt's character of being soft on the outside and firm on the inside is also determined by the "subject" in Lacan's theory. Pete was deeply influenced by his mother, Rose. Even his Oedipus complex made him set a principle for himself to protect his mother at all costs. It is precisely because of the desire of the other. Human desire is an unconscious "pseudo desire."

Phil has bullied Rose since the first day she married into the house. Rose worries that her situation will worsen as Pete and Phil get closer. In the conversation between her and her son, she told Pete,

with the story of her teacher drawing stars when she was a child, that she did not want their relationship to be estranged. After saying, "We are not out of reach," Rose sat on the ground. She got close to Pete and touched him intimately. Rose occupies a minor part in the picture, showing that she hopes please Pete by showing her weakness. Pete comforts his mother that their relationship does not have to be like this. Pete's actions from beginning to end were all to satisfy her mother. It was precise because he had a clear understanding of himself. After finally achieving his goal, he changed his boots and wore his white shoes again. The rope made is placed under the bed.

4. Conclusion

With the development of politics, economy, and social culture, LGBT films have gone from being silent and ambiguous to surfacing as an inevitable cultural development trend in modern society. With the successful development of the economy, people's material needs have been satisfied, so people have begun to re-examine their spiritual demands. From oppression to liberation, the diversified economic pattern and enlightened culture have made sexual minorities, a group of people on the margins in recent decades, receive more social attention and resonance.

The diverse economic landscape and enlightened culture have brought more attention and empathy to sexual minorities. Recently, people's lifestyles have changed radically due to the global epidemic. The online office model is no longer unfamiliar, and new labour patterns and social relations have blurred the definition of gender-specific labour productivity. In recent years, with the development of society, information technology, and cultural integration, people are paying more and more attention to self-identity, developing their "sense of self," and exploring their "pseudo-self" to have a more comprehensive understanding of themselves. Sexual minorities are challenging to be accepted by the mainstream because of their influence in the process of self-identification, which is contrary to the laws of biological reproduction, so the current situation of sexual minorities is challenging.

In Asia, people are more subtle and introverted for historical reasons, and the tolerance of sexual minorities is lower than that of European and American countries. However, as more and more filmmakers pay attention to this subject matter, it has more or less objectively promoted the development of sexual minority groups. Although the subject matter of homosexual society is still marginal, it still has value and can be developed. Moreover, the "self-identity" in Lacan's theory resonates with the audience and makes them think again.

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