

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest

(1975, Forman, USA)

Component 1: Varieties of Film & Filmmaking – Section A

Core Study Areas Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area Hollywood Comparison Auteur

Rationale for study

This is a film famous for winning the top five Oscars (Best film, actor, actress, director and screenplay) in 1976 – a rare feat. The film remains a hugely admired counter-culture classic from the New Hollywood era. Its stark realism, brilliantly performed by an ensemble cast, produces a gripping, often hilarious and harrowing drama that perfectly reflects the counter culture of the 60s and 70s.

The film concerns a protagonist anti-hero, McMurphy (Jack Nicholson), who is sent from an American work-farm prison for petty criminals to a locked psychiatric unit for assessment. He claims he is mentally ill but they feel he is shirking. Hoping for an easy ride the maverick and charismatic McMurphy ends up on a ward run by the imperious and icy, Nurse Ratched. Their inevitable conflict and McMurphy's inspirational effect on the other inmates of the ward provides a damning critique of mental health provision in America in the 1960s and 70s.

STARTING POINTS- Useful Sequences - beginning and ending

(01:16) **Imprisonment**: virtually the first shot in the film – an ELS, low key image, shot on location in a cold and dark mountainous

wilderness. The car delivering McMurphy to the psychiatric institution cuts the frame in two.

(02:05:31) **Freedom**: virtually the last shot of the film. Another ELS, low key image but this time of an individual, Chief, escaping into the Wilderness. Free at last.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

The cinematography is remarkable for its realism. Filmed on location in a real psychiatric institution the film is largely shot in a clinical, high key lit, environment. There are no shadows within which to hide from the stony, disapproving glare of Nurse Ratched.

01:44-2:07

Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) enters the film in a long take, deep focus shot, dressed in villainous black. She dominates the frame. A baleful red light hanging over her head creates unease. The sound is diegetic. Her face impassive. In her hand she jangles keys (an aural reminder of confinement) unlocking two doors enroute to the ward. She clearly is the boss.

McMurphy (04:15) enters the building and the film, in handcuffs, flanked by two guards. Despite his implied weakness he still dominates the frame. A parallel to Nurse Ratched's entrance. These two characters will clearly not get on.

Mise-en-Scène

Everyone wears some kind of uniform – orderlies, nurses, doctors, patients. Uniforms serve to identify and separate the sane from the insane – and the healthy from the sick. Few of the patients have their own identity although Harding occasionally dresses

differently as an attempt to separate himself from the other patients whom he considers himself superior to.

Images of locks, chains, keys, bars and fences are dominant. Early on in the film we see Mancini being woken for the morning. He is chained to his bed with bars on his windows and door. He seems vulnerable – a caged beast. (02:22)

The first exterior extreme long shot since McMurphy's admission reveals the nature of the locked down ward – it is a prison not a hospital (20:13). In the foreground is the locked-down recreation yard and the scene of one of McMurphy's many rebellious acts – getting the patients to work together, playing basketball and eventually beating the orderlies (01:04: 09).

Editing

The editing is largely continuity editing to maintain a high level of realism.

20:08-20:09 However the first group therapy session ends in disaster and chaos and we cut from a shallow focus, close-up, right of frame shot of McMurphy to a centrally framed CU of Nurse Ratched. They presumably are looking at each other: his gaze is one of disapproval as he realises her methods are unsound; she on the other hand is unrepentant and superior.

Sound

The non-diegetic music that accompanies the two scenes from the beginning and end of the film are interesting: for the former it is a peculiar, off-key, bow-saw and wine glass arrangement that perfectly reflects McMurphy's unusual character; for the latter, it is a tune where the underscoring of Native American drums adds further resonance to Chief's escape as if he is returning to his ancient and ancestral way of life.

Sound is literally a narrative device in the film – offering a point of conflict with Nurse Ratched and McMurphy. A key scene revolves around McMurphy's irritation with the ward music which is played at such a loud volume that he can't think. Music, often a liberating device in films of imprisonment such as *The Shawshank Redemption*, is here a tool of institutional oppression.

23:59 and 26:45 In an act of transgression (his first) McMurphy crosses the line and enters the nurse's station – forbidden territory and of course the source of the music and the medication that oppresses all the men.

McMurphy's second transgressive act of not taking his medication follows soon after. Not happy to rebel quietly he shows Harding that the ward regime will not control him. (29:12).

Later McMurphy attempts the impossible (the lifting of a sink unit) as a symbol of his refusal to be beaten. It is this very same act that Chief successfully appropriates as the means for his own escape at the end of the film.

The ever recurring sound of metallic keys and locks creates an aural landscape of oppression and confinement – anchored by the visuals of bars and fences.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations: Gender, Age, Ethnicity

Gender

The film is notable for having men existing in a passive relationship with at least one destructive and controlling woman – Nurse Ratched rules the henhouse! A number of the men (notably Harding and Billy) have psychological/sexual issues with women – their wife and mother respectively. However women are also presented as a means of sexual liberation and freedom – when Billy loses his virginity he also loses his stutter. That said the two girls McMurphy smuggles into the ward for a party are presented as morally lax and probably prostitutes. They are hardly models of their own empowerment and liberation.

Age

This is not a major feature of the film, as most people featured are in their 30s or 40s. Billy is supposedly still a teenager and it is Nurse Ratched's cruel mistreatment of him which eventually makes McMurphy tackle her. Billy's crime is that he hasn't felt the message of the counter-culture, his Mother and Nurse Ratched have too much of a malign influence on him – themselves representatives of a sexually repressed older generation.

Ethnicity

There are some interesting ethnic representations in the film. The ward orderlies and night watchman are all played by black men. They are pawns used by the oppressive regime of Nurse Ratched and although they have institutional power and outrank the patients they are still clearly oppressed in that their roles are non-professional. The civil rights

dream of social mobility has not impacted on ward politics which is a kind of ossified image of America with a black underclass emptying the trash. Another ideologically interesting representation is that of Chief – a representative of an ancient and indigenous culture (The Native American) demonised and destroyed by a militaristic white invader. It's worth remembering that the Vietnam War (the *bête noire* of the counter-culture) was reaching its infamous conclusion with the fall of Saigon in 1975. The Chief's eventual personal victory over the oppressive regime of the hospital can thus be read (at a push) as the Vietnamese triumph over the colonial might of the West.

Aesthetics

The colour palette of the film is clinical and washed out. Only the exotica of the girls at the end of the film adds some much needed colour to the environment. The decision to use the hospital referenced in the novel, Oregon State Hospital, is an attempt to focus the realism of the film.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

Social

The film is based on the 1962 eponymous bestseller by Ken Kesey. Kesey was part of the hippie movement and went to Woodstock. His novel perfectly captures the counter-culture zeitgeist and the anti-psychiatry movement which had been gaining ground throughout the 1960s and 1970s through such writers and thinkers as R.D. Laing and Foucault.

Extract from popular nursery rhyme:

“Three geese in a flock

One flew East

One flew West

And one flew over the cuckoo's nest”

A 'cuckoo's nest' is a metaphor for a confining mental institution; a bird is a symbol of freedom and 'the cuckoo' is a bird that doesn't belong in the nest it is reared in.

The representation of the mental health profession

Aside from Nurse Ratched who is absolutely presented as evil, and the ward nurses and orderlies who are complicit in her control of the ward's inmates, the only other medical character given major screen time is the ward doctor, Dr. Spivey (08:18). In a realist nod he is played by the real

Superintendent of the Oregon State Hospital (Dr. Dean Brooks); he was keen to play in the film as he had a desire to raise the issue of the 'criminalisation of the mentally ill'. McMurphy and the Dr. have a relaxed grownup chat like equals. McMurphy explains that the Penitentiary Work Farm want him assessed for mental illness because he fights and fucks too much. The Dr. feels he is faking mental illness to get out of work.

The failure of democracy (41:58)

Despite the nine relatively cogent patients all voting to watch a baseball game on TV, Nurse Ratched notes: 'There are eighteen patients on this ward Mr McMurphy and you have to have a majority to change ward policy.' McMurphy eventually gets the Chief to vote but the vote is ignored. Uncowed he stares at a vacant TV set and by using his imagination and personality, incites a minor rebellion by commentating on a pretend baseball game to the delight of the inmates. Nurse Ratched looks on furious, unable to silence the men (45:24 to 46:28). McMurphy's victory is followed immediately by a cut to a medical assessment where he tells Dr. Spivey she is a 'dishonest cunt'.

The representation of mental illness

McMurphy is not mentally ill – just a gremlin in the system. Chief is not mentally ill just afraid. Billy is not mentally ill just insecure about his relationship with his. The diagnosis of mental illness and its treatment is the issue.

McMurphy's electric shock therapy is disturbingly shot in a long-take big close-up (01:23:08). This is mirrored by two other shocking close-ups: Nurse Ratched being strangled by McMurphy (01:56:44) and finally Chief (and us) discovering the horrible fact that McMurphy has been lobotomised (02:01:16).

A great moment illustrating the plasticity of diagnosis is when the patients, who have escaped with McMurphy to go on an illegal fishing trip, literally transform from the mentally ill into the mentally gifted through the power of language alone when McMurphy introduces them to a bemused Harbour Master. Thus the labelling of mental illness is deemed as much a matter of perception as diagnosis. (54:01)

“We're from the state Mental institution... this is ... the famous Dr Scanlon ...” (54:09)

The success of the trip (01:02:31) shows that other forms of non-institutionalised, medically controlled therapy may clearly work for many

patients. The ship of fools is transformed.

Later in another therapy session McMurphy discovers that most of the patients are not committed but voluntary. McMurphy tells all the patients that they are no more crazy than the average asshole walking around on the street. (01:09:07) The meeting descends into chaos and then a fight leading to McMurphy, Chief and Cheswick having electric shock therapy (or punishment).

Political

Forman was an émigré from USSR controlled Czechoslovakia so the right to be free was something he felt personally. The film is on the surface apolitical but like all films with a coded subtext it can be read absolutely as a cautionary tale of societal oppression of individual expression and freedom. McMurphy on such a reading is a political messiah – a freedom fighter ready to die for the cause.

Technological

Location, low budget shooting, often with only one camera. Largely diegetic sound too adding to the constructed realism of the film.

Institutional

An independent film funded in part by old Hollywood money though Kirk Douglas who owned the rights to the film and his son, producer and actor Michael Douglas. The budget of \$3 million led to a massive box office worldwide of \$109 million.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Auteur - Starting Point

Forman was born in Czechoslovakia in 1932 and remained in the country until 1968 before immigrating to the USA. He witnessed the Second World War and the ravages of the Nazis not least in terms of his own family – his mother died in Auschwitz. From 1948 the USSR controlled his

country which then formed part of the soviet Eastern Bloc. Forman was instrumental in helping create the Czech New Wave – a liberal arts movement critical of despotic government and inspired by similar New Waves in other countries around the globe. In 1968 a relaxation in communist party rule called The Prague Spring (January to August 1968) led to swift military reprisals from the USSR and Forman went into exile. His famous cult movie *The Fireman's Ball* (1967) which was a coded critique of communism was banned in his own country once the Prague Spring was crushed. He remains therefore a man interested in maverick iconoclasts and individuals: see *Amadeus* (1984) as well as of course *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The People vs Larry Flint* (1996) and *Man on the Moon* (1999). Forman has won two Best Director Oscars for *Cuckoo's Nest* and *Amadeus* and remains a much admired auteur although not a prolific one.

Jack Nicholson too can be considered an auteur in this film. His career has been structured around his manic, dynamic screen persona and this film is in many ways his quintessential role: a maverick gremlin who disrupts the status quo. He has been a darling of the counter-culture since his cameo in *Easy Rider* (1968) where he played a small town lawyer who discovers pot. Other notable performances of a long career would be playing the devil in *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987); playing a corruption-busting detective in the neo-noir *Chinatown* (1974); giving us the Joker in *Batman* (1989) and more conventional but powerfully acted roles as in *The Shining* (1980), *A Few Good Men* (1992) and *The Departed* (2006). What is evident from this cursory list is that not only can Nicholson work in many genres but also that heavyweight director auteurs such as Scorsese, Burton, Kubrick and Polanski want to work with him.