

Section A: Hollywood 1930-1990 Comparative Study

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest and Forman as Auteur - Student Guide

This section aims to address these main questions:

- What qualifies Milos Forman to be classed as an auteur?
- What are his 'signature' themes, obsessions, and cinematic style?
- To what extent can ...*Cuckoo's Nest* be seen as an auteur film?

Forman as Auteur

Milos Forman's films display a number of elements that could be said to be typical of the director: **thematic, stylistic, and institutional.**

Background

- Milos Forman (born 1932) grew up in the former Czechoslovakia (today's Czech Republic) until 1968 when he moved to America to escape the Soviet invasion of Prague. In his own words, he said "I feel admiration for rebels because I lived twice in totalitarian societies."
- as a child, his parents were both arrested by the Gestapo and sent to a concentration camp, leaving the young Forman an orphan.
- Czechoslovakia became part of the Soviet bloc after World War II, but despite a corrupt and repressive government, Forman and a number of artists, filmmakers and intellectuals to form a liberal counterculture known as the Czech New Wave. Other filmmakers of this movement were Vera Chytilová (*Daisies*, 1968) and Jaromil Jires (*The Cry*.)

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Institutions

- films of the Czech New Wave were all markedly different in style and structure, but they all experimented with other forms (especially documentary and *verité*), and dealt with social conformity and political repression with absurdist humour
- in 1967, Forman made *The Fireman's Ball* that used the institution of a volunteer firefighting group to explore incompetence and corruption at a larger political level - and was banned by the authorities
- this encouraged Forman to look for filmmaking opportunities abroad, and he was in Paris when the liberalising Prague Spring movement was brought to an end by Russian tanks in 1968. It was at this point he moved to Hollywood.

Read some reviews of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* - Roger Ebert's original review is good

<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/one-flew-over-the-cuckoos-nest-1975> .

What are the themes of the film (e.g. individual vs society) and how could these be connected to Forman's earlier life?

- Forman struggled to find projects after his first US film *Taking Off* (1971) failed. The story of the parents of a hippie runaway, who decide they want to 'drop out' too, seemed too cynical about the counterculture to attract a young audience, and too controversial for a mainstream audience
- *Taking Off* did however catch the attention of Kirk and Michael Douglas (actors who were moving into producing). They asked Forman to direct *Cuckoo's Nest*
- *Cuckoo's Nest* went on to be a commercial success, winning the 'big five' Oscars (Best Director, Picture, Actor, Actress and Adapted Screenplay) in 1975

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- in 1984, Forman's *Amadeus* beat this winning the 'big five' again, as well as three more (for Production Design, Sound Mixing and Makeup)
- Forman has struggled to find finance for his projects, yet his view of Hollywood is of a cinema industry that "is more socialist than the Soviet system." He explains that commercial pressure in Hollywood, the need to make a film "the people" enjoy, is preferable to ideological pressure to send a particular political message.

Stylistic

- unlike some other 'auteur' directors like Coppola, Ridley Scott or Spike Lee, Forman doesn't have a 'signature' visual style. Nor does he use experimental or unsettling camera or editing styles like in other films of the New Hollywood. Instead he obeys many Classical Hollywood rules of continuity to create a naturalistic feeling
- in the script and performances of his actors, Forman does share style with other New Hollywood directors like John Schlesinger (*Midnight Cowboy*, 1970) - encouraging a 'Method' or naturalistic approach that reflects 'real life'
- Forman has commented that this was a result of growing up with Socialist cinema of the 1950s: "artificial movies where nothing was true, nothing was real, everything was exaggerated, showing life as it should be in an ideal socialist society, and life as it is"
- for the Czech New Wave, naturalism was an ideological decision that rebelled against the State-sanctioned cinema
- Forman has also said he wants to show "all the faces in the crowd," telling the stories of a whole group of characters not just the protagonist
- In terms of screenplay development, Forman does demonstrate an auteur-level of control over the material. He has said that writing the script is "half of directing" - he spent nearly five months, working five days a week with Peter Shaffer to write the screenplay for *Amadeus* (1982).

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Thematic

Auteurs often return to particular themes or issues and explore them using different characters and plots. This is where Forman could be more classed as an auteur. A consistent theme is the struggle of the Individual vs Society:

- *Valmont* (1986) and *The People vs Larry Flynt* (1996) featured protagonists whose permissive attitudes and sheer lust for life bring them into conflict with a repressed and conformist society.
- “Unappreciated iconoclasts” - *Man on the Moon* (1999) celebrated the life and work of unconventional comedian Andy Kaufman, whose work would often deliberately discomfort and shock the audience
- The struggle of a creative genius against conformity, such as *Amadeus* (1982)
- Authority figures who no longer believe in their own authority
- Capturing ‘eras’ of American underground culture, exploring both the rebellious nature of subcultures and the failure of these rebellions, in films like *Taking Off*, and *Hair* (1979).

Task: Watch the trailers for some of the above films. Where can you see some of Forman's themes being used?

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Main Task: To what extent is ...Cuckoo's Nest the work of an auteur?

Choose a focus scene from the film. You could use the two examples from Cuckoo's Nest factsheet, or the **Focus Sequence** section of this Study Guide. Where can you see Forman's 'signature' themes and style?

To identify signature thematic and narrative elements you should watch and refer to specific characters or scenes from across the whole film.

Signature style	Example from <i>Cuckoo's Nest</i>
Naturalistic acting styles - dialogue overlaps, characters talk to each other not perform for camera	
"Show all the faces in the crowd" - cutaways to minor characters' POV and reactions	
Continuity editing used to create <i>verité</i>	
Signature themes	
Rebellious characters who struggle against a repressive society	

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Creative, sensual, sexual characters who "live too loud"	
Authority figures who abuse their powerful positions	
Institutions become microcosms of wider society	
Rebellion / counterculture is also criticised	

Extension tasks:

Watch another of Forman's films. Where you can see similar film style and themes?

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Debate: Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1952) is more the work of an auteur than **Cuckoo's Nest**.

Agree	Disagree