

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (Forman, 1975)

This section of the Study Guide is designed to link the ideas and information in the institutional and auteur sections to a key scene and close textual analysis. There are also comparisons to other Hitchcock films to illustrate stylistic and thematic signatures.

MacMurphy's Arrival: (00:00 - 08:30):

Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography (including Lighting)

Opening shot is ELS of wild American landscape; establishes a sense of pioneer freedom (reinforced by the folk theme music) that is echoed in the final shot as the Chief escapes. Ironically the car that drives across it is the van bringing MacMurphy, the protagonist, to the mental institution. By comparison, all the following shots are interior, often with quite tight framing on the patients' faces. (This not only starts to build a sense of claustrophobia, but it also links to Forman's intention to show "all the faces in the crowd", actually introducing minor characters before the hero.)

As MacMurphy walks through the halls, the camera moves in front of him, keeping him (and Nicolson's effervescent performance) centre, but flanked by two guards who are ready to grab his arms at any second. This is symbolic of the institution itself: allowing a little freedom, but ready to clamp down at the slightest provocation. (This links to Forman's key themes of the irrepressible individual vs conformist society).

Mise-en-scène

Everything inside the hospital is a clinical white: the walls, floors and furniture; but also the costumes of both patients and staff. Colour, diversity, and individuality clearly have no place here. The guards/male nurses are dressed all in white with black bow ties, almost like waiters, giving the repressive administration the appearance of politeness and even servitude. The patients are dressed in shapeless smocks, emasculating them. When Murphy enters, dressed in darker 'civilian' clothes and with the prop of the dirty playing cards, he re-introduces a rough masculine sexuality that has been repressed by the hospital.

(One of Forman's signature narrative devices is the institution as microcosm for wider society. His 1967 Czech film, *The Fireman's Ball*, was a critique of ineptitude and corruption in government, but used the institution of a village fire station as its setting. Nonetheless, it was banned by the authorities.)

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Editing

The rituals, rules and rhythms of hospital life - the status quo - is introduced in a montage of the morning's activities. The other patients are introduced one by one, by each in a situation where they are dehumanised instead of displaying clear personality, the way characters are usually introduced. The tone of the institution - quiet, strict, ordered, clinical - is established.

This is undermined immediately by MacMurphy. His arrival is intercut with the placid ward. He hollers like an animal, banter with the nurses (who warily guard him) - and within seconds of stepping into the ward has disrupted the calm of the other patients. Cutaways to their responses, shows MacMurphy's impact through the actor's nuanced performances rather than unconventional editing. (One of Forman's 'quiet auteur' signatures).

Sound

The haunting opening theme by Jack Nitzsche (played on a saw) evokes an American rural tradition that is at odds with the clinical realm of the hospital, but does - along with the opening shot of the landscape - establish a sense of openness and freedom that the characters in the film aspire (and fear), and sets up the climax. It also creates an eerie and unsettling atmosphere.

The classical music played as the patients queue for their medication is the opposite. It is pacifying, structured, 'civilized' and encourages the conformity of the 'inmates'.