

*One Flew Over
The Cuckoo's Nest
(1975)*

COMPONENT 1
NEW HOLLYWOOD
SECTION A GROUP 2: (1961-1990)



What is the film about?



Narrative summary

It may be an American comedy/drama starring the A List Jack Nicholson but the image of Chief Bromden overpowering the control panel in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest leaves a much stronger impression. Whether this act symbolises his liberation, or is an extension of his confinement is open for debate – context is what the film is really about, within a narrative structure exploring confinement and notions of mental illness. The Vietnam war was drawing to a close in the same year and the Women's Liberation movement was a significant force for change. The film was a micro representation of an archaic, oppressive mental institution representing a macro counter culture movement that questioned the rule of law, totalitarian regimes and notions of absolute authority.

Areas of comparative study with Vertigo (40 marks)

- ◆ Auteur
- ◆ Gender
- ◆ Form and style – challenging and reinforcing Hollywood tradition (through micro analysis)
- ◆ Political/social/production context
- ◆ Spectatorship

Context 1

- ◆ Based on Ken Kesey's 1962 counter culture novel – the difference in time periods in terms of **political context** is important
- ◆ In 1975 America was recently post Watergate (**lack of trust in authority** mirrored by the film)
- ◆ The end of the Vietnam War also split, and 'exhausted' the American public – it was not a good time for institutions of government (**Foreman picked up on the zeitgeist**)
- ◆ Shifting perceptions of mental illness was also a core social context underpinning the film

So much metaphor – The Chief rails against the system (inside and outside)



Context 2

- ◆ This shifting perception of mental illness was illustrated by the smuggling in of the two girls (**macro picture of a society that fears and lacks an understanding of mental illness**)
- ◆ Notions of **‘deviancy amplification’** (Randle bucking the system) illustrates this
- ◆ Chief Bromden’s silence is a **metaphor for larger society**. It also explores ideas of multiculturalism and ‘difference’ within American society whereas as Randle is the strong individual but who also is ‘on the outside’ (see theoretical framework next slide)

Context 3

Randle champions the role of the individual within society:

Erving Goffman, The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life (1959), p234-235 uses a framework that can be used to analyse the character and role of McMurphy: “When an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part”.

Goffman is discussing here personality and interaction in society as a form of ‘performance’.

Randle's individuality is 'removed' by surgery – one of many emotive scenes in terms of spectatorship



Mental illness as key social and cultural context

- ◆ **Surgery (lobotomy) destroys Randle's individualism** – he now conforms against his will (Kesey in his book and Foreman in the film explore the archaic treatment of mental illness)
- ◆ Fear of the individual in society leads to lobotomy – **Foreman explores 'madness' inside and outside the institution**
- ◆ Early escape and boat scene useful **metaphor** for this – the light, wide, boundless seas reflects the impossibility of escaping from their own psyche
- ◆ Plays important role in American culture as reflecting and informing public attitudes toward mental illness and care

How can Milos Foreman be identified as an Auteur?



Auteur 1

- ◆ Cuckoo's Nest was one of Foreman's early American films (worked in Czechoslovakia until 1968) – many of his early films were a satire on communism
- ◆ Films explore the **adoration of rebels, social conformity, political repression and used black humour**
- ◆ Narrative **binary oppositions of individual v society**
- ◆ Filming style is more 'naturalistic' reflecting realism (associated with a cinema verite style)
- ◆ Well known for ensemble casts – narratives explore whole groups of characters

Auteur 2

- ◆ Although Forman did not write the screenplay for Cuckoo's Nest, his auteur status links more with his control and development of a script rather than his visual style (said once the script is "half of directing")
- ◆ Films often challenge the spectator – they are often an 'uncomfortable watch', use of **emotive narrative**
- ◆ Creative genius v conformity is another repeated theme
- ◆ Randle is an authority figure or opinion leader but who no longer believes in his own authority (runs through Foreman films)

Confident, even dominant but also fragile and vulnerable



Gender in Cuckoo's Nest 1

- ◆ Jack and Chief Bromden remain **strong alpha male representations** while Billy represents a weaker 'brand' of masculinity
- ◆ Cuckoo's Nest is often studied for its dominant male representations however, Nurse Ratched has a pivotal role as **metaphor for the system**
- ◆ Harding's wife, Billy's Mum and Chief Bromden's Mother are also representations that challenge and reinforce stereotypes
- ◆ The role of female characters is at times to emasculate men (see frequent scenes with Billy and Nurse Ratched)

Billy has brief moments of personal freedom



Gender in Cuckoo's Nest 2

- ◆ This emasculation could be read as a metaphor for being crushed, and repressed by the system although some **more radical critics have charged the film with misogyny**
- ◆ “Nurse Ratched’s soft, controlled voice and girlishly antiseptic manner always put you in the wrong; you can’t cut through the crap in her—it goes too deep. And she’s too smart for you; she’s got all the protocol in the world on her side.” – *Pauline Kael, The New Yorker*
- ◆ Interesting feminist context at the time – many actresses turned down the Ratched role as they were ‘uncomfortable being the villain’

Nurse Ratched represented the institution



Gender in Cuckoo's Nest 3

- ◆ Ratched's prim and angelic manner (see mise-en-scene and dress code, body language) was in binary opposition to her narrative role
- ◆ Jack Nicholson's more **rugged, hegemonic masculinity** is 'normalised' in the film compared to Max, Martini and Billy although in terms of narrative outcomes Randle is ultimately 'punished'
- ◆ The Chief is a 'big, strong man' but that is the point – his size and strength is only seen in terms of narrative closure which arguably is open ended

Dominant male representations



Clips

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBHN7aJGogY> - wife as metaphor

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XI_4HtIJYDM - Baseball scene

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7xaCbMqpJI> - Billy after party

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faeEnoYcT7w> - Cigarettes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3Dz6FOE_Gk - ending

Baseball scene micro analysis 1

- ◆ Randle and Ratched both framed centrally in medium close up – intercutting reflecting conflict
- ◆ Desaturated colour palette – browns and beiges reflecting time period but also verisimilitude of bleak institution
- ◆ Randle is physically active reflecting his individualism while most other patients are still and motionless
- ◆ Long take two shots reflecting emerging relationship between The Chief and Randle (raises his hand)
- ◆ Shot reverse shot used to show conflict between Randle and Ratched

Baseball scene micro analysis 2

- ◆ Emotive non diegetic music and long take of Randle watching TV (thinking of another way to beat the system)
- ◆ Fake baseball commentary is underscored by emotive music positioning the spectator into shared messages and values
- ◆ Juxtaposition/happy facial expressions anchor this as patients emerge/gather after being shepherded away from the meeting
- ◆ Star marketing of Nicholson is crucial - framed centrally and in long takes, patient reaction shots legitimise his actions
- ◆ Slow zoom on face of Nurse Ratched as metaphor for a challenge to the system, a temporary victory for the individual