



One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Film Review by Nicole Henson

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975) based on the novel by Ken Kesey



Rating: R (nudity, language, sexual/violent themes)

Director: Milos Forman

Writers: Lawrence Hauben, Bo Goldman

Genre: Drama

Runtime: 2 hours, 13 minutes

Major Cast Members: Jack Nicholson, Louise Fletcher, Danny DeVito, Christopher Lloyd

Awards: 5 Oscars (nominated for 4 more), 6 Golden Globes, 6 BAFTAs (nominated for 4 more)

Summary: After pleading insanity in court, criminal-turned-mental-patient Randolph McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) is sentenced to a stay at a mental institution until released by its doctors. There, he notices that all of the patients in the ward obey and greatly fear the head nurse, Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher). McMurphy becomes the main example of and inspiration for rebellion against Ratched's oppression of the mental patients. Under his influence, the patients become aware of their oppressed nature and begin to stick up for themselves.

With cinematography that can only have come out of the 70s, director Milos Forman's adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* both visually and emotionally engages audiences to the author Ken Kesey's characters and their actions. Forman, winner of more than 3 best director awards in 1976, creates tones of comradery, brotherhood, and rebellion that effortlessly flow within the scenes of the film. By using classic cinematographic techniques, Forman is able to create a truly resonating movie that really gets the themes of trust, betrayal, rebellion, and conformity across to his audience.

The usage of long takes (and its pairing with wide shots to establish the setting of the film and its intrusiveness within the character's lives) creates a sense of expectation and suspense when patients commit acts of rebellion against Nurse Ratched. This causes viewers to wonder at what specific moment the Nurse might snap and punish or berate the patients. These long takes also represent the relationships that characters have with one another. Each time that McMurphy interacts with Chief (usually in one long take), we see their relationship develop into one based

on respect and trust. The tense, synthesized relationship between the Nurse and the rest of the patients can also be analyzed through various long takes.

Another great technique that Forman repetitively uses is the slow zoom, particularly on Nurse Ratched. Each time she ruthlessly tears down and provokes a patient, a slow zoom on her emotionless face creates a sense of uneasiness and fear. As you become more uncomfortably close with the Nurse, the feelings of dread and unpleasantness increase as well.

One recurring example of Forman's cinematography that I enjoyed the most was the positioning of McMurphy in shots. He often enters a scene between two other characters, in a triangular shape that emphasizes his importance in the film. McMurphy initially enters the film with two cops on either side him. As soon as I saw his entrance, I knew he was the main character. McMurphy's importance is more subtly shown in scenes with his positioning.



Sound also plays an important role in film, as it is the binding function that cements the reality and comprehension into our minds. In *Cuckoo's Nest*, sound plays an important symbolic role. Nurse Ratched's classical music continuously fills our ears whenever we are shown the inside of the ward, and it begins to take a toll on us as it does McMurphy. When he throws a party without the Nurse's knowledge, he (thankfully) changes the music and the whole ward has fun with it! Once the Nurse has come back and gained control over the ward once more, the classical music also returns, sealing its representation of her control over the patients. However, at the end of the film, when Chief breaks free from the ward and runs off into the sunset, a distinctively Native American tune begins to play. This makes a little sense to the average viewer (Chief *is* Native American, after all), but the full meaning of this change in musical tone is best felt by audience members who have read the book from which the film was adapted.



As with any screen adaptation, there are bound to be differences between the film and the book. In this case, the most notable difference is the change in protagonist—although he was probably the character you would least likely suspect if you had just watched the movie—McMurphy instead of Chief.

In Kesey's original piece of literature, the main character is actually that giant Native American who seemed to live in terms of cogs and machines in the film. There are many questions left unanswered in relation to Chief in the movie. One might wonder, "What does he mean when he talks about his size? What is the combine he keeps talking about? Why did he pretend to be deaf and dumb that whole time? What's with the sweeping?" All of those questions can be fully answered within the book, alongside a deeper look at Chief's character as it develops throughout the story.

One of the most important elements I think was missing from the screen adaptation of the book was McMurphy's importance to Chief. Since we did not see him as much as we could have, our knowledge of what Chief was perceiving was extremely limited. The book is told from his point of view, so we get the full explanation of what certain experiences mean to him as they happen. In the movie, we don't get a real sense of how much McMurphy means to Chief—what he does, how he does it, and what Chief feels McMurphy represents as a whole—as we do in the book. It shapes each interaction they have with each other and gives another layer of depth to their relationship (although I did enjoy the added scenes in the film where the patients played basketball!).

In the final scene in which Chief ends McMurphy's life, the struggle that Chief originally had with his actions is not represented to the best of its ability. While the scene's long take without any music presents itself in the important manner that it is supposed to, the thoughts running through Chief's mind are just not there. They are essential to his character and his actions. Chief had to kill the symbol of everything he thought was freedom and rebellion and living and *bigness*—but we were just presented with a drawn-out smothering scene. I was hoping to see a physical representation of what Chief was thinking before he killed McMurphy. Overall, the film was beautiful and its atmosphere is one that is difficult to recreate. Although there were some major differences between it and the book itself, I think the film did a great job in telling the story from another perspective while still giving it the same tone and feeling of the original book.

References: <http://www.onstageottawa.com/oneflewoverthecuckoosnestreview/>