

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Kubrick's Films

GENDER: MASCULINITY

Introduction One of Kubrick's prominent themes, not unrelated to the theme of war, is masculinity, usually the toxic variety. Very often, men are pitted against each other, mostly in combat and romance, a competition that tends to define their masculinity. Boys are made into men through boot camp training (*Full Metal Jacket*) or their own aspiration for maturity (*Barry Lyndon*). Also, fully grown men fight each other, as in *Killer's Kiss*, to prove their manliness.

Barry Lyndon The importance of 'being a man' is emphasised in the early scenes when cousin Nora dismisses Barry as a 'mere boy' in front of his English rival John Quin. His pride wounded by such a remark, Barry tries to prove his manhood by challenging Quin to a duel (similar to the gladiator contests in *Spartacus* and the boxing match in *Killer's Kiss*). There are, in fact, two duels in the film, plus a boxing match and sword fighting, too. Barry also distinguishes himself on the battlefield, helping his friend (who later dies) and saving the life of a Prussian general. Barry acquits himself well in all these exhibitions of masculine qualities. In fact, he shows his real worth when he honourably fires into the ground instead of killing Bullingdon in the second duel. Bullingdon, by contrast, is shown to be a coward in their duel. Although Barry is no match for his rivals when the competition involves money or social status, he comes out on top when the competition is physical.

Full Metal Jacket The transformation of boys into men is the main focus of this later film, which is a bitter indictment of the Vietnam War. Throughout the first half of the story, in boot camp, drill instructor Hartman makes direct connections between male genitalia and war. In one scene, the men march about the barracks in their underwear, shouldering a rifle and grabbing their crotch while shouting: 'This is my rifle! This is my gun! This is for fighting! This is for fun!' Hartman consistently addresses the men as 'ladies' and insults them for being 'queers'. Later, he orders the men to name their rifle after a woman and to sleep with it at night. The purpose of boot camp is to turn the recruits into violent men, with a killer instinct, which means cutting off their 'girlish' hair and eliminating any softness in their personalities. Pyle is 'effeminate' and so Hartman picks on him. The second half of the film shows these boys-turned-men in combat. Again, the connection between masculinity and misogyny is clear, especially in the final scene, when Joker executes the dying female sniper. The scene is staged with hyper masculinity. As the men stand over the prone girl, one of them says, 'No more boom-boom time for her,' referring to the local English slang for sex. The one who shot her screams, 'I fucking blew her away' and gyrates his hips, simulating intercourse. The last image shows Joker, the soft-hearted man with a peace button on his jacket, staring into the distance in horror. He has become a man.

Killer's Kiss A similar twining of male violence and sexual arousal is present in *Killer's Kiss*. This link is brilliantly dramatized in the opening sequence, alternating shots of the boxing with those of dancing. Both the violent boxer (Davey) and the attractive dancing girl (Gloria) prepare themselves physically and put on a uniform. The display of male violence on TV excites Vincent sexually and prompts him to seek out Gloria on the dance floor, which nearly erupts into violence when Vincent cuts in on her dancing partner. As Vincent continues to watch the boxing match, he is further stimulated and makes sexual advances toward Gloria. In the ring as well as in the office, two bodies are in physical contact, one attacking the other. The close relation between violence and sex is also illustrated in perhaps the most famous scene of the film, when Vincent and Davey fight in a warehouse of female mannequins. They are motivated by jealousy, competing for Gloria, and they use barbaric weapons, such as an axe and long pike. But then they begin to hurl parts of the mannequins at each other, legs, arms and whole bodies. As many critics have pointed out, this is a sensational display of misogyny, men tearing apart female bodies in a primitive clash of male egos. All the key locations, the boxing arena, the dance hall, the office and the warehouse, are spaces where violence and sex are intertwined.