

Themes in Kubrick's Films

## War

**Introduction** If there is one theme to which Kubrick returned time and time again, it is war. Not just the physical reality of combat, the horrors of injuries and deaths, but the mentality that produces and reproduces armed combat among men. Before the term PTSD was invented, Kubrick explored and exposed the trauma of being part of a killing machine, the necessity of submerging individual personalities into a collective force that would batter the enemy. Both generals and enlisted men suffer. In addition, he was equally acute in satirising the absurdity of military planning and Cold War concepts.

**Fear and Desire** Today, we might call it PTSD, but in the 1950s it was simply the horror of death and killing. There are multiple killings in this short story—four or five of the 'enemy' are shot or stabbed; an innocent girl is killed; and Mac dies of gunshot wounds. But, in a foreshadowing of Kubrick's later films, the emphasis is on the psychological damage to the men who do the killing. The general, who is leader of the enemy, is morose as he waits to find out what happened to the soldiers in the downed plane. Staring at his map, he muses that his own grave is probably marked somewhere on it. Mac, the second in command to Corby, is a tough bird, but he becomes a victim of his own mission to kill the general. But the clearest case of war's horror is dramatised in the character of Sidney, the youngest, kindest and most timid of the four men. The boy who doesn't carry a gun, who pets the stray dog and who wants to protect the innocent young woman—he is the one who suffers the most. When his lust for the woman overwhelms him, he sets her free only to shoot her with a gun given to him by Corby. Then he begins a slow descent into madness. Prancing through the forest, he goes to the river, where he meets the wounded Mac on the raft. He climbs aboard and the two of them float downstream, with Mac dying and Sidney humming a lament. This is the final shot of the film, a madman and a dead man. The anti-war sentiment of the film is summed up a moment before this, when Fletcher says that he is 'not made for this [war]' and Corby replies, 'Nobody ever was.'

**Paths of Glory** The war presented in the film is driven by vanity, cruelty and utter lack of compassion. From the very beginning, when Mireau is persuaded to take on the hopeless mission, we see how human frailty drives the plot. Mireau knows it is suicidal to attack the Anthill. But, after two long years of stalemate and carnage, the public and the press demand some progress against the enemy, some indication that the French general staff is competent. The action chosen is to attack the Anthill. Mireau only accepts this insane task when Broulard appeals to his vanity when he asks, 'So, my dear general, you are incapable of performing this mission?' Dax also only accepts the mission when an appeal is made to his pride, though he is more interested in upholding his men's reputation than his own. This is the insidious logic of war: you accept foolish plans in order to prove you are not a coward. Another example of the insanity of war are the calculations made about deaths. Mireau coolly tots up the numbers when he announces that about 65% of Dax's men will die in the assault. Mireau, Broulard and Dax also negotiate the number of men who should face trial (and certain death): Mireau wants 100 men to stand trial, Broulard suggests 12, Dax (sarcastically) offers just one, himself. In the end, Mireau settles on three. It is like a game of cards, except the losers will die. Perhaps the most devastating example of the warped mind of the generals is Mireau's comment on the executions. 'The men died wonderfully,' he says, while relishing a piece of juicy chicken. That is pure Kubrick, who would sharpen his satirical attack on the military with *Dr Strangelove* and *Full Metal Jacket*.

**Dr Strangelove** This film depicted the Cold War, especially the paranoia, flawed logic and absurdity of nuclear war planning. The terror that gripped the world at the time is personified by Ripper, whose is paranoid about the Communist plot to contaminate his (and everyone else's) bodily fluids. Turgidson appears mentally in control, but his fear of the enemy pushes him to suspect and then fight with the Russian ambassador. Turgidson also opposes Dr Strangelove's post-war plan to use mineshafts as shelters to regenerate the human population. Turgidson believes that plan is vulnerable to Russian sabotage and (parodying the 'missile gap' obsession during the Cold War) argues that we cannot allow 'a mineshaft gap'. The absurdity of nuclear war planning is summed up

in the concept of 'mutual assured destruction' with the conveniently satirical acronym of MAD. As explained in the film (as in real life), the MAD doctrine is based on the idea that no one would start a nuclear war if they knew that they wouldn't survive. The flawed logic of MAD is illustrated by the secret Domsday Machine (again, something imagined by scientists at the time). It was built by the Russians to act as a safeguard against human error or a breakdown in communications or chain of command. But, as Dr Strangelove explains, it would work only if it were *not* kept secret. Another flaw in Plan R is that it calls for Ripper to cut off all communications with his base, thus making it impossible to countermand his order to attack. This necessitates an attack on the base, which results in Ripper's death and means that the secret code (to recall the bombers) is lost. And when Kong's communications are damaged, his bomber cannot be recalled. These flaws built into the MAD policy convinced Kubrick to make a comedy rather than a thriller.

**Full Metal Jacket** This film, the last of Kubrick's war films, has two halves. The first half dramatises the effect of training men for war (in this case, the Vietnam War), while the second half shows us how effective that transformation is. It all begins with shaving off the hair of US Marine recruits when they enter boot camp. Why hair? Because it is an idiosyncratic element in a person's identity, and all individualism must be eliminated in order to turn these ordinary men into killers. Once their bald, they are given new names, dressed in uniforms, made to march in step and to chant in unison. The men are taught to identify with their rifle and to submerge their personalities in the weapon of death. 'If you survive,' Hartman tells them at the beginning, 'you will become a weapon.' When they do push-ups, the men chant, 'One, two, three four, I love the Marine Corps.' Everything is designed to submerge the individual into a communal identity of the 'corps.' Any aberration in this masculine monolith must be destroyed. That is why Hartman does not punish Pyle individually for his mistakes and instead applies a communal punishment. That is why the men beat Pyle as a group while he sleeps. That is why Hartman goes ballistic when Pyle confuses his left and right shoulders. 'You want to be different,' Hartman yells and hits him hard in the face. Slowly, even the overweight Pyle is moulded into a machine that follows orders. The tragic irony of his transformation is displayed at the end of the first half. Having lost his sense of self, Pyle identifies with his rifle, which he talks to while assembling and disassembling it. When he uses it to kill Hartman, he is simply acting on the impulse that the victim has drilled into him, eliminating any guilt for murder. The same is true for Joker at the end of the second half of the story when he also kills the defenceless teenage sniper. The difference is that Pyle also kills himself, as if acting on orders to purge the Marines of any weak links. And so, more than just a criticism of war, the film dramatises the futility of resistance to the power of the military to change a person's identity.