

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Themes in Films

# Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999)

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### SOCIETY

**Overview** Although Kubrick's films are often perceived as highbrow, art-house productions with esoteric themes, many of them do, in fact, address fundamental social problems. The director kept abreast of current affairs and, while his storytelling was subtle and his cinematography was distinctive, he used cinema to critique social practices and political policies. He had a near-constant focus on the common man, with all his flaws and undesirable impulses, and was attuned to the ways that he was mistreated by authority and institutions. Social hierarchy and class divisions breed inequalities. Kubrick would accept that social institutions are necessary to curb man's violent and sexual impulses, but he wondered if the price we paid for social order was an equally undesirable suppression of individual freedom.

**Spartacus** Nowhere is social inequality more apparent than in *Spartacus*, the film set in ancient Rome. Based on an historical figure of the same name (and adapted from a similarly titled novel), the film tells the story of a slave who became a gladiator and led a slave rebellion against Rome. From the opening scene, we are made aware of the harsh conditions of slavery, when Spartacus is whipped for helping a fellow slave. Later, when he is training as a gladiator, but still a slave, his conditions improve, but he is still treated as a body to be bought and sold. Spartacus, however, dedicates his life to achieving freedom, not only for himself but for all the many slave of Rome. At one point, he says he would die fighting for freedom because 'when a free man dies, he loses the pleasure of life; a slave loses his pain. Death is the only freedom a slave knows. We remember this statement when we watch the final scene, with Spartacus tied to a cross, awaiting crucifixion. Inequality is the defining feature of slavery.

**Barry Lyndon** Social inequality is also the driving force behind the rambling plot of this film set in eighteenth-century Ireland. Now, however, the divisions are finer. Not slaves and masters, but the Irish peasantry up against upper class Englishmen, a conflict dramatised in the characters of Barry Redmond and John Quin. Quin has all the assets of status and wealth to win the hand of Nora, Barry's cousin who has previously flirted with him. Smarting from the humiliation of losing her hand to a 'foreigner,' Barry sets himself the goal of climbing the ladder up through the English class system. Lacking any of the factors that help to define a gentleman—ethnicity, money, land and ancestry—he buys his way into the system by marrying a wealthy widow (Lady Lyndon) and becomes Barry Lyndon. The upstart Irish lad almost achieves his aim of earning a title (becoming a peer, a status conferred by the government), but he is halted by his own profligacy and then his grief at the death of his young and only son. Now, his enemy and step-son, Lord Bullingdon steps in to bring him down. Bullingdon is less a man than poor Barry, but he uses his affluence and status to pension off his rival. IN the end, Barry Redmon/Lyndon strove hard but could not escape his class origins.

**A Clockwork Orange** The social issues in *A Clockwork Orange* are on a different plane altogether. Rather than inequality and social hierarchy, the film explores the debate between individual liberty and

social order. Alex and his gang represent the unrestrained freedom to act free of moral and social restraints. The case for individual freedom is articulated by the writer and by the prison chaplain. The chaplain explains his position to Alex, when the latter wants to participate in a new therapy to curb criminality. Rather than be programmed to avoid criminal activity, people should be allowed to choose virtue or evil. Ironically, Alex wants to undergo the treatment to gain his freedom from prison. At first, Alex appears to be cured and avoids violent and sexual impulses. At the end, however, he has slipped back to his old habits and imagines himself in sadistic sexual behavior. As with all Kubrick's work, the film does not take a side in the debate between freedom and social order. Instead, it presents the harm that can result from both arguments. Alex's depraved actions speak for themselves, but the discipline enforced by social institutions are equally undesirable. In the end, neither the libertine Alex nor the suppressed Alex appears desirable. This is the paradox hidden in the film's title, which refers to a person who is as lively as an orange yet as dull as a clock.

## **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.

## 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 Doomsday 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.

## DESIRE

**Introduction** Sexual desire, as depicted in Kubrick's films, is a powerful and natural impulse in men and women, although it is the men who exhibit the more extreme cases of lust. Sexual desire can be healthy, of course, but his films tend to explore the illicit variety with their dangerous sides. Like the violence that partly defines masculinity in his films, sexual desire is a force that men find difficult to control or even to steer into safe harbours. So deeply rooted is desire that it becomes intertwined with other potentially more benign desires, such as ambition.

**Fear and Desire** The title refers to two types of desires shown in the film: sexual desire (or lust) and personal desire (or ambition). And at times the two are intertwined in this story of four men lost in a forest behind enemy lines after their plane crashed. For example, one of the men, the burly Mac, is afraid that he will never amount to anything and desperately wants to achieve something. He becomes obsessed with killing the enemy general, believing this will make his life worthwhile, but it turns out to be a suicide mission. Sexual desire and fear are mixed up in Sidney, the feverish youth, who lusts after a young woman, whom the men have tied up and left him to look after. He begins to fantasise about her sexually and unties her. But when she runs away, he fears she will betray their location and shoots her dead. In both cases, the man wants something he can't have and that desire, accompanied by anxiety, leads to his destruction. Mac ends up dead, and Sidney goes mad.

**Lolita** This film presents a somewhat more conventional examples of sexual desire, but they are also attended by danger for the men who desire. Humbert, the middle-aged professor, is smitten by young Lolita and can't get her out of his mind and into his bed. He is relentless in his pursuit of her, emotionally stalking her, controlling her movements and writing about her in his journal. He even marries her mother in order to stay close to her. Humbert's pedophilic desire is his downfall. Some have called the film a 'sexual comedy' (and Peter Sellers is hilarious), but it is more properly a sexual tragedy. The flaw in Humbert's adventure is that his very desire to possess Lolita is what prevents him from achieving that desire. Lolita, for her part, is not innocent of sexual desire, though she is less obsessed than Humbert.

**A Clockwork Orange** Alex, the protagonist of this film, is about as far as one could get from Humbert. His sexual desire is also very different but equally lethal. Unfocused, transgressive and violent, Alex's sexual desire is part of a 'criminal' mindset that hits out at convention and normality. He rapes wives in front of their husbands; he fantasises about frolicking with nubile naked women; and he uses sexual objects to assault his victims. His desire makes Humbert's seem genteel.

**Eyes Wide Shut** Kubrick returned to the subject of untamed sexual desire in his last film. A happily married couple, Bill and Alice, are both afflicted by sexual desires for other partners, again not a particular person but rather a free-floating appetite that wants satisfaction. Satisfaction that will be enhanced by going beyond social norms. Alice confesses to having lusted after strangers, and Bill, in effect, wonders what it would be like to act like Alex. In fact, he wanders into an orgy that could be directly out of *A Clockwork Orange*, with its theatricality and bizarre sexual rituals. The film tests the argument that the reason for fidelity within marriage is not that one doesn't want to have other sexual partners; it is because you're not supposed to have them. The film shows both marital partners indulging their sexual fantasies, but only in thought and not in action. Sex with a stranger, it suggests, is thrilling, while sex with your spouse kills desire. Bill and Alice spend the whole film trying to negotiate an acceptable position between anonymity and intimacy, between the erotic and the mundane. In the closing scene, the film suggests that sexual love in marriage might be possible if we can imagine our spouse as the stranger, and thus rekindle our original desire for him/her.

## JEALOUSY

**Introduction** As a director interested in the darker side of humanity (mostly men, but also women), Kubrick's films often feature the powerful emotion of jealousy. In those films, jealousy appears as the dangerous alter-ego of love, a powerful impulse that is selfish and often masks a sense of male inferiority. One cannot be jealous without loving, it is often said, but Kubrick's films show us that a jealous lover is as dangerous as a vengeful man.

**Killer's Kiss** The love triangle in this early film pits gangster Vincent against boxer Davey for the affections of dance-hall girl Gloria, who is Vincent's employee and Davey's neighbour. After Vincent sees her with Davey, he becomes jealous—after all, he is her boss, and Davey is just a washed-up fighter. Vincent becomes even more possessive when she rejects him in favour of Davey. Angry and frustrated that she will not yield to his advances, Vincent sends his thugs to 'take care' of his rival. They end up murdering the wrong guy, which then sets up the showdown between the male competitors. It all began, with a casual glance, when Vincent saw 'his girl' talking to Davey.

**The Killing** As in *The Killing*, the jealous man in Kubrick's next film is a flawed man. Little George, the meekest member of the criminal gang assembled by Johnny for his perfect heist, is in thrall to his beautiful, sexy and unfaithful (who could blame her?) wife, Sherry. George's need to control Sherry proves to be the Achilles heel in the meticulously planned theft at a race track. Sherry uses his jealousy to get him to reveal the day of the theft, thereby allowing her lover to confront the gang. And when George realizes that she has a lover, he goes insane, starts shooting and everything unravels from there. Again, jealousy is shown to be a fatal weakness in a man.

**Lolita** *A more extended treatment of this problem is found in Lolita. The mild-mannered Humbert, middle-aged professor of something, is knocked off his feet when he sees young, lovely Lolita sunbathing in a bikini. From that point onward, he is consumed with his secret desire for her. He writes about her in*

*his journal, he gazes at her voyeuristically behind plants and he tries to control her every move. He does have sex with her and thinks he gains 'possession' of her when they go away and live in Ohio, but his jealousy never stops. When he finds out, at the end, that he has been made a fool by her secret love affair with Quilty, Humbert goes into a murderous rage. By trying to control her, he had done the opposite and driven her away. In this film, Kubrick suggests that jealousy is poisonous because it kills the very thing that the jealous person wants to possess.*

**Eyes Wide Shut** Bill, a successful doctor in New York, is happily married to Alice, an attractive young woman. Or so it seems. Soon, his jealousy is aroused when she confesses to having sexual fantasies with a near-stranger. As this marital-bed conversation develops, Alice becomes angry that he has never become jealous of men who might desire her. Now, in a twist of Alice's logic, jealousy has become a measure of her husband's true love for her. Next, Bill's jealousy of her stirs his own desire for sexual adventure and he nearly, but never actually, commits adultery. In this, Kubrick's last, film, the director explores the complexity of jealousy beyond the simple idea of possessiveness.

## MENTAL ILLNESS

**Introduction** Kubrick explored different shades of mental illness in his films. Some of his characters act in such an anti-social manner that they appear disturbed. Others are so obsessed with love, or with war, that they lose their grip on reality. A few are driven mad by social institutions or policies, while still others appear to fall victim to personal fragilities and unforeseen circumstances.

**A Clockwork Orange** Alex, the protagonist in this film, is already seriously disturbed when the story begins. A fantasist, sadist and rapist, he is close to psychotic. Then, he undergoes an experimental therapy designed to make him adverse to those anti-social impulses. He is taken to the treatment centre and settles into a comfortable room with good food. Later, he is injected with drugs, put in a straight jacket, strapped to a chair and forced to watch violent films with his eyes taped open. After the sixth film, he begins to feel ill and wants to stop. The next day, during the same treatment, he cracks when he hears his beloved Beethoven as background music. He says he realises that violence is wrong and that he is cured, but the doctors tell him he must undergo more treatment. Two weeks later, Alex is paraded in front of officials as proof of the efficacy of the experimental therapy. However, at the end, his impulses return, and we are left to wonder what kind of mental disorder now possesses him.

**Dr Strangelove** This film skewers the insanity of Cold War planning by explicitly referring to the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction, with its convenient abbreviation: MAD. Kubrick did not, however, have to invent that term, he simply borrowed from real life. He did invent the mentally disturbed character of General Ripper, whose full name (Jack D. Ripper) is a not-so-subtle hint of his madness. Ripper is a sick man, plagued by fears that his sexual prowess has been inhibited by a Russian plot to contaminate America's water supply. Although he looks the part, the frightening reality is that he is in charge of an airborne fleet of nuclear bombers. This air base commander becomes ever more deranged, as he steers the film toward its terrifying conclusion.

**Full Metal Jacket** This equally powerful and bleak satire of war focuses on the traumatic effects of boot camp training for US Marines during the Vietnam War. The training is led by a drill instructor who may technically be sane but displays obsessive and violent behaviour that borders on the mentally unstable. But it is his victim, private Pyle, who suffers the most. Pyle is a weak, overweight recruit whom the drill instructor signals out as a potential rotten apple that will spoil the whole barrel. The instructor then insults, mocks and degrades Pyle, in a misguided attempt to 'toughen' him up. The result is a seriously deranged Pyle, out of touch with reality, who ends up shooting the instructor and then turning the gun on himself.

**The Shining** Pyle would recognise a kindred spirit in Jack, the failed writer in this film. Burdened by his inability to write or hold down a good job and provide for his family, Jack slowly exhibits signs of derangement. Even at the beginning, he appears artificially optimistic, as if he is covering up his weaknesses. Added to his already fragile psyche are the severe isolation of the hotel, where he is caretaker, plus, and its murderous past. Jack pretends to write, but only repeats the same sentence over and over again on the typewritten page. His son and the hotel chef have a telepathic power (the 'shining')

that is used for good, but Jack is eventually driven mad and attempts to kill both his son and his wife.

**Lolita** Although this film is famous for its paedophilia, it also contains a deep streak of mental instability. Humbert, the professor, is seriously obsessed with young Lolita, but manages to keep his public behaviour within social conventions. His rival, Quilty, on the other hand, goes stark raving mad, as we see in the final scene (which is also used at the beginning). Quilty is covered by a sheet while sitting in his house, which is chaotic with debris and overturned furniture. Quilty is drunk and rambles on incoherently about poetry before engaging in a one-man game of ping-pong and then playing wildly on the piano. He has gone completely over the edge, and, looking back, we see that the seeds of insanity were apparent in the other characters he impersonated (a policeman and a psychologist). All of his lies and deceptions catch up with him at the end and gain the upper hand.