

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## FEAR AND DESIRE (1953)

Stanley Kubrick

**OVERVIEW** A debut film by the 24-year-old director (who was also the producer and photographer), *Fear and Desire* is far from Kubrick's finest, but it is still a powerful film that hints at the later auteur's talents. It is a short film, made in the context of the Korean War and McCarthyism in the US, casting a cold eye of the glamour of war, while at the same, using experimental techniques to express the inner reality of its psychological victims. It is a quietly sensational film, showing fear and barbarity, but also a thoughtful film, delving into the recesses of our most destructive instincts. *Fear and Desire* was not a box-office success and all prints seemed to have disappeared after the distributor died in a plane crash and his company folded. In 1993, however, a print in private hands was discovered and the film was shown again, for the first time in forty years. However, Kubrick himself distanced himself from it, calling it a 'bumbling amateur's film exercise.' Critics today consider the film an ambitious and well-shot film exercise, which enables us to see the early master at work.

**SYNOPSIS** In an unspecified country and unknown time, four soldiers have survived a plane crash behind enemy lines. Lost in a forest, they are fearful of being spotted, captured and shot. They plan to escape back to their army by building a raft and floating down a river, but two events delay their action. They come across a young woman, whom they capture and tie to a tree, leaving young Sidney to guard her. Through a brilliantly acted sequence of apprehension, confusion and dread, Sidney kills her and goes off his head. Then Mac announces that he wants to kill the general, whom they have spotted in a house across the river. Now, they adjust their plans. Mac will float down the river in the raft, draw the fire of the soldiers guarding the general and allow the other two to seize the plane and fly to safety. Mac will follow on the river. The general is killed, and two men escape via the plane. When Mac goes to the river, he sees Sydney on the raft and joins him. As they float down the river, apparently to safety, Mac dies from his wounds and Sidney becomes delirious.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Lt. Corby	Corby is the leader of the four-man group.
Sgt. Mac	Mac is a second in command to Corby.
The general	The unnamed general is the leader of the enemy.
Pvt. Sidney	Sidney is the youngest of the four soldiers.
Pvt. Fletcher	Fletcher is the other soldier in the group.
Woman	A young woman is captured by the men.

### STORY

**The forest** Four soldiers stand in a forest and try to figure out how they can get back to their own army. Their plane crashed some six miles inside enemy lines and they have no map or clear idea of where they are. They are afraid. Their leader, Corby, outlines his plan to build a raft and float down a nearby river. The other two accept this idea, but Sgt Mac is disdainful, saying his calculations have already landed them in a mess. They draw their guns when they hear a sound, but it is only a dog, which Sidney pets and cuddles.

**The road** As the four men trek through the forest, the soundtrack becomes a montage of their voices, expressing their worries. They see a road ahead and lay down flat as a truck rumbles by. Corby sends Mac ahead to see if the coast is clear. Mac goes out, his face creased with fear, while the others follow his progress with equal dread. He waves them on.

**The river** At the river's edge, while two of the men build a raft out of cut logs, Corby speaks sarcastically about how nice it is to spend a day outside in enemy territory. The others grimace at his poorly judged humour. Mac spots a small airstrip across the river and, using his binoculars, sees a group of soldiers with a general. The raft is ready and the men joke about not having a bottle to christen it with.

**Attack** They fling themselves down when a plane flies overhead. Again, they are afraid that they have been seen and take cover in the forest. At nightfall, they go toward the airstrip and find a cabin,

with enemy soldiers inside enjoying a meal. They attack and stab them to death with knives. As Mac and Corby slurp up the leftovers, the door opens and another soldier enters with firewood. He is shot and the men leave.

*The girl* The next day, they agree that their prospects for survival have diminished. The plane from yesterday must have spotted them, and someone must have heard the shots when they killed the soldiers in the cabin. Corby reiterates his idea that the raft is their only hope and they go back to the river, where they are seen by a young woman. They take her captive and tie her to a tree. She doesn't understand English and remains silent.

*Killing the girl* Corby, Mac and Fletcher go check on the raft, leaving Sidney behind, with a gun, to keep an eye on her. He tries, without success, to entertain her by impersonating the general. Sexually aroused, he throws himself on her, begging her to like him. When he gives her a handful of water and she smiles, he is encouraged and unties her. She runs away but he shoots her. Driven mad with guilt, he runs off with a lunatic laugh.

*Escape plan* At the river, the men hide the raft beneath cut branches and Mac spies again on the general and the airstrip. When they discover that Sidney has fled, they argue about what to do. Mac wants to kill the general and take off in the plane, but Corby hesitates. 'Do it for me,' Mac pleads and Corby finally agrees. The plan is that Mac will go down river on the raft, draw the soldiers from the house and allow the others to shoot the general and escape in the plane. Mac will continue on the raft and meet them back at their camp, in their own territory.

*Mac and the general* In the house, the general pets the dog and tells the others that the men from the crashed plane will die of starvation soon. As Mac paddles downstream, we hear his thoughts: he is ready to die, if necessary, trading his life for the general's, a grand end. Then we listen to the general, patiently waiting, while he, too, muses about death and war and his complicity in slaughter. 'I'm trapped,' he admits. 'When I look at these maps, I wonder if my own grave isn't being planned.'

*Gun fight* Mac starts shooting from the raft, drawing the soldiers from the general. They open fire and wound Mac. Corby and Fletcher rush the house and wound the general. Fletcher wants to flee, but Corby says they must 'finish him off.' They watch the wounded general crawl out the door and lie dead. They run to the plane and escape.

*Finale* The fatally wounded Mac floats down the river and meets Sidney, who climbs on the raft. Having escaped by plane and returned to their base, Corby and Fletcher are permitted by their commander to go down to the river and wait for the raft. As they both reflect on their personal traumas, they see the raft float into view. Mac is dead, and Sidney has gone mad.

## THEMES

*War* This film focuses on the trauma of war. 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. He's never done much in life, he says, so killing a general would be his crowning achievement and a measure of his own personal worth. 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. He does it because she is running away and might tell the enemy where they are. He is afraid, and does something that he doesn't understand. Then he begins a slow descent into madness, playacting the magician (Prospero) in *The Tempest*. 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.'

The movie also points to the loss of the civilization and its rules and the thin line that separates

barbarity from civility. The forest, where the conventions of society disappear, is the perfect setting in which to examine the pretence of civilisation. At one point, Mac laughingly suggests that they might get eaten by cannibals and grabs Sidney's small stomach. 'But don't worry,' he jokes, 'they won't want to eat you!' Corby then comments that 'we may be in the forest, but let's try to be civilised.' To which Mac replies, 'There aren't many more days to be civilised in, if we stick around here much longer.' Curiously, and unlike famous fictional examples of the thin veil of civilisation (*Lord of the Flies*, *The Heart of Darkness*), social hierarchy does not actually break down in the film. The military chain of command holds, the sergeant and the two privates follow the lieutenant's orders. But the glue that binds people together has dissolved. Corby makes this point in a voiceover when he scoffs at John Donne's famous line that 'No man is an island'. 'Perhaps that was true a long time ago,' he says. 'Before the Ice Age. Now the glaciers have melted away and we're all islands.' Kubrick's film exposes the lie that modern man is civilised.

**Fear** Despite the gritty reality of the story, Kubrick gives it a psychological, even philosophical, depth. His interest is not the physical acts of warfare but the emotions that direct people's lives. War, and by extension all violence, is an exaggeration of fear and desire, supplying the vocabulary with which the filmmaker can expose the inner demons that afflict many of us. For example, fear and desire drive Mac to his suicide mission: he is afraid that he will never amount to anything and desperately wants to achieve something. The same is true of Sidney, the feverish youth, who longs for love, from an animal or from a young woman. He desires her sexually, but when she runs, he fears for his own life and shoots her. The most unnerving image of terror, however, comes before her death. When the young woman is captured and tied up, her face expresses a fear that is unforgettable. It is powerful in part because it is silent. She doesn't scream or even speak because she shares no language with her captors. She is helpless, confused and afraid about what they might do. To repeat, Kubrick wants to show us the inner forces of our mind. The entire story is presented as a fantasy, an intention that is clearly stated at the beginning of the film with a voiceover: 'There is a war in this forest. Not a war that has been fought, nor one that will be, but any war. And the enemies who struggle here do not exist unless we call them into being. This forest then, and all that happens now, is outside history. Only the unchanging shapes of fear and doubt and death are from our world. These soldiers that you see keep our language and our time, but have no other country but the mind.'

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Lt. Corby** Lt Corby is the commanding officer of the little band of men lost in the forest after their plane crashes. He is a kind and introspective man who doesn't appear to have an ego, though he takes his role seriously. Philosophical, and apparently well-read, he reflects on their situation with sardonic humour and detachment. At the same time, he is practical and takes necessary decisions, including one to kill the general. Since the same actor (Kenneth Harp) also plays the general, it is often suggested that Corby and the general should be seen as alter egos.

**Practical** Early on in the film, Corby demonstrates his leadership by outlining an escape plan. The men are lost in a forest, behind enemy lines, with no map or rifles. Corby kneels down and uses a stick to draw a crude map in the dirt, indicating the dividing line between the armies, the river and their location in the forest. Looking up at the men, he says, 'Once you understand how a mousetrap works, if you're clever enough, you can use it as a springboard.' He tells them that the only way out is to build a raft and float down the river, which is their 'mousetrap.' This scene and Corby's speech are a little forced, but they illustrate his essential characteristic of being able to lead his men.

**Thoughtful** Corby is as thoughtful as he is pragmatic, as shown in later scenes. Although an army officer, he has no apparent desire for war or conflict of any kind. Instead, he functions a little like a narrator (or a spokesman for the director) in the several instances when he comments on the action. Perhaps the most telling of those moments occurs at the very end of the film, when Corby and Fletcher have made it across the enemy line and wait for a sighting of Mac on the raft. The fog in the forest is thick, concealing them and their thoughts. In a gesture of camaraderie, they light cigarettes from a single match. Fletcher draws on his and says (referring to Mac), 'Do you think he'll come back?' Corby hesitates for second and says, 'I'm not sure yet whether even we've come back. I think we've all travelled too far from our own private boundaries to be certain about these other things anymore, or come back to ourselves.' Corby's profound thoughts might reflect those of the direction: the inner struggle with fear and desire has disrupted their lives and estranged them from themselves.

**Mac** Sergeant Mac, who is second in command to Corby, is set up in contrast to his commander.

Mac is outwardly tough and hard bitten. He does not hesitate to criticise Corby, though, as a soldier, he follows orders. He appears to be untouched by the fears of the others and is scornful of their apparent weakness. But, in the end, we see that he has his own struggle, though it is more hidden inside.

**Obsessed** Mac is obsessed with the idea of killing the general. His deep desire is expressed, haltingly, in a scene in the middle of the story. He, Corby and Fletcher are resting under a tree. 'I want to talk to you about the general,' he says to Corby. 'I want to kill him.' Corby dismisses this as unpractical and unnecessary, but Mac persists. A minute later, he tries to explain what is driving him. 'I'm 34 and never done anything important. When this is over, I'll fix radios and washing machines. "Good boy, Mac" they'll say. I don't have the words to say it, but this means something to me.' For Mac, war provides him with the means for self-definition. If he can kill a general, he will have achieved something, horrible though it is.

**Self-loathing** Another demon in Mac's mind emerges in the final sequence when he paddles himself down the river toward the house with the general. We hear his anguished thoughts in a voiceover. 'Nobody else is me. I know that. Who else but me is buried under the chain of everything I ever did? I didn't mean any of it. It was all wrong. Good riddance!' We aren't told what Mac did in the past, but we can assume that he isn't proud of it. This self-loathing helps to explain his desire to take on the dangerous mission of opening fire on the house with the general, an act for which he pays the ultimate price.

**Sidney** Sidney is the youngest, the smallest, the kindest and the most timid of the four men. He is also the most exposed. While the others wear a cap or a helmet, he is bare-headed; the others have a gun, while he is unarmed. Tender and raw, he will bear the brunt of the horror that unfolds.

**Compassionate** In the opening sequence, the men draw their pistols when they hear a rustling in the bush. A dog emerges and goes straight to Sidney. He pets the animal, as the others, out of camera, are worried that it might be a watch dog belonging to the enemy. Sidney, uninterested in their discussion of the animal's identity, continues to nuzzle the dog. Corby then says that they 'can't use a mascot' and drive off with a stone. Sidney, though, is reluctant to let his companion go. In this brief, early scene we see the core of Sidney's character. He is lonely, aching for affection and compassionate. Later, when directed toward a potential female companion, these same qualities will later lead to his disaster.,

**Delusional** The defining moment of Sidney's character comes after he kills the young woman. Mac is sent back to see how Sidney is doing with her and hears a gun shot. As he approaches, Sidney is writhing on the ground, moaning and babbling something about blood. Mac demands to know what happened, and Sidney, his eyes wide in fright, points to the dead girl. Then he cries out, 'It wasn't my fault! The magician did it. Honest! Prospero, the Magician! First, we're a bird, and then we're an island. Before, I was a general, and now I'm a fish! Hoorah for the magicians!' These references to *The Tempest* underline the fantasy of the story and illustrate Sidney's delusion. Unable to accept that he has killed someone, he loses his mind, pushing the blame away from him, inventing identities and escaping responsibility through magic. With a maniacal laugh, he runs off toward the river, which he says is now only blood. He has been driven mad.



(Sidney and hostage girl)



(Corby speaking to his men)



(Mac in the jungle)