

Protect our Insane Heritage

Review: "Cuckoo's Nest"

Pat Halley

1976

"Madness cometh sometime of the passions of the soul."

– Bartholomew of England

"Zounds! Bethumped by words!"

– Richard II

The critics are raving about it. Sold out shows and long lines testify to a growing public obsession with it; indeed, everything having to do with the film version of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" is having mind-boggling repercussions.

What is it about "crazy" people that is so delicious that references to events and people we hold so dear are often termed crazy? "Hey, that was a CRAZY movie," or "Wow, man, you are a crazy motherfucker!" It is the same fascination that makes producer Mike Douglas believe that "Cuckoo's Nest" will make 40, 50 or possibly 60 million dollars.

Of course the bourgeois critics, who are weird enough but for opposite reasons, have failed right and left to point out that the film is a colossal rip-off financially and artistically of Ken Kesey's powerful novel.

Kesey has cried rape, though you hear little of it in the ad-mongering press. Douglas even tried to get Kesey to write the screenplay (for \$10,000 bucks) but Kesey evidently got pissed off over all the compromises they wanted to make with the script and the Hollywood boys ditched him.

A good indication of how fucked-up slick these tinsel company men are appears via *Playboy* magazine where Douglas tells the writer of that tinsel rag how he felt in Kesey's company.

"I get the jitters being around that guy. He's like a latent Charlie Manson or something," he said. This is the sensibility we have producing what is supposed to be a subtle, four dimensional critique of alleged sanity, rationalism, and the whole technocratic mentality that ravages the inscape of America.

What should have been alchemy, as the book marvelously achieves, comes across more like a lunatic version of Gunsmoke. The result is that you have the cowboys and the Indians, cloaked in various psychological costumes, and a bunch of "crazy" people who are ever so funny.

The gunmen meet at sundown; they gaze at each other across the deserted streets of Lysol; the hero draws his 45 caliber rabbit, or wait a minute, it's an asparagus, but the sheriff is quicker and decks our gibbering protagonist with six rounds of thorazine.

Rationalism as the Enemy of Creativity

To be more concrete, the Hollywood boys bungled the central image—virtually deleted it—that of the Combine. The combine is Kesey's metaphor for totalitarian control, and he uses it in "Cuckoo's Nest" like Orwell used "Big Brother" in 1984 to describe his society of industrial slavery. Combine is also a symbol of rationalism, which is the monolithic death ideology of our time.

The combine chops down the living fields, chews it up, and bundles it all up in neat little rows. The image represents the enforcement of order on a gigantic scale, in which all social elements are packaged in a monolithic sameness. He means us, obviously.

On another level, the book was a critique of the mental health establishment with its emphasis on promoting conformity and mere adjustment therapy. The Psychologists want to keep us functioning rationally so that we can be productive and responsible regardless of whether or not the society we are functioning in is worth living up to.

Of course applied psychology is trapped in the same theoretical bag as all other RATIONALISTIC institutions, and maintains an alleged OBJECTIVITY which doesn't allow for criticism of the system from within the system.

These ideas run rampant throughout the book, but are virtually ignored in the film. Kesey poses as a hero (McMurphy) who, as a part-time logger, gambler, hobo and misfit is on the margins of society and the "Combine never got to him." The other hero in the story, a giant Indian (Chief Broom), is also on the margin and the two of them are able to see and respond to the mechanistic therapy sessions with resistance.

Therapy as Control

McMurphy, who in the book was once captured during the Korean war, compares the therapy sessions with brainwashing sessions administered by the Chinese in prison camps. The therapist urges the patients to give up their individuality and to learn how to "fit in with the program."

The patients, however, can never seem to live up to the standards that society requires of them and never quite reach that illusive plateau that is considered to be reality.

McMurphy sees that you don't have to fit in; all you have to do is put up with the system, perhaps even turn it around. He does manage to turn on the authoritarian institutions quite often, and his "psychotic tendencies" (meaning rebelliousness) are what get him committed. Psychologists in this day and time believe that any rebellion that is not diverted into "legitimate channels" constitutes "pathological behavior." Needless to say the film glosses over all this.

It also shows the inmates given electro-shock—but not on a cross as in the book. Either the producers practiced censorship or incompetence; probably both.

It is interesting to point out that Freud (a cocaine addict who wrote his theory of the unconscious while in an illuminated condition) warned of the danger represented by psychology coming under the control of a medical clique. Unfortunately, his fears have come true, but the infant science has come under the domain of various competing cliques, not just one.

Consequently we have industrial psychologists trying to help employers devise more refined ways of extracting ever more labor from workers. We have behaviorists, gestaltists, transactional analysts; the trainers at Esalen, and Reichians ad nauseum.

For a price you can get your life dry-cleaned and your twitters adjusted. It doesn't matter that the truth is, as any wino could tell you, that the very fabric of society, its insistence on performance for its own sake, its basis in individual profit to the detriment of the whole is obscene and the furthest thing from what a normal society could expect to be.

I have no qualms about certain cannibalistic tribes or exotic cults in the past which may have practiced varieties of sun worship or ritual sacrifice—they made no pretense of being enlightened or methodically scientific. But we have the right to demand and expect absolute "utopian" results from a technically virile and supposedly rational society such as the one we pretend to live in. But the rigid demands of the work ethic, and the philistine ascetics of competitive "reality" all lead to the overproduction of things that fall apart and the barbaric incidence of artificial scarcities.

There can be little doubt that the majority of so-called crazy people are merely sensitive humans victimized by forces which are as inhuman as they are awesome. The lonely, unceremonious lives of vast millions who struggle to merely exist, the utter lack of authentic community, the rewarding of the successful to the detriment and downfall of the majority who don't "make it" who in fact put those on top who are there, all this is not the code of conduct nor the base of identity, which we can insist that people adjust to.

To the contrary, the Arthur Bremers and Sarah Jane Moores of the world may be infinitely more possessed of themselves than any of us.

Suicides, arsons and “mad bombings” should even be encouraged! Until the time we may straighten things out and grow beyond our straight-jacketed roles, we can expect plenty of such activities.

I urge everyone to read Kesey’s book, especially if they’ve seen the movie. It is tantalizing in its surreal descriptiveness and volatile in its social criticism. As for the slicksters who have ripped-off Kesey and ALL THE REST OF US BORDERLINE PSYCHOTICS, we can either wait until decrepitness catches up with their premature senility, or push with ever-expanding pressure until such philistines fall out the windows of their luxurious credulity. We need to protect our insane heritage.

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