Alex Pepe

Professor Sorrento

Kubrick & Polanski

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A Mental Exposé

Throughout the work of Stanley Kubrick, there is a pervading idea of the dangers of the mind upon itself and the world around it when pushed to a breaking point; indeed for Kubrick, there is a mental breaking point that is quite possible for one to reach, and when it is reached there is typically a lot of dead bodies in the denouement. In Kubrick's films *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *The Shining*, this trope of the mind losing control of itself is played out over and over again in varying degrees of plot necessity, each more bloody than the last. Kubrick's overuse of the mentally ill as a means to a bloody end is endemic of a basic misunderstanding of how mental illness works, and because of the popularity of Kubrick's films it can be conjectured that Kubrick had a hand in the crafting of the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the mentally ill population of the United States of America, and indeed the world.

2001: A Space Odyssey is concerned with greater things than mental issues for a greater portion of the film, but trouble arises when the character of Hal 9000 is introduced. As a computer, he is portrayed as a super-intelligent being “incapable of error,” and because of this presentation, tension arises quickly between the space travelers and himself. Indeed the audience is taught by the film to distrust Hal, the many closeups of Hal's unblinking red eye inspiring immediate distrust and even fear. Kubrick rewards the audience's distrust via Hal's borderline comments and actions in some scenes.

This suspicion spirals downward until Kubrick rewards the audience with Hal's

purposeful ejection of Gary Lockwood's character Dr. Frank Bowman from the pod bay doors into deep space, and systematic murder of all of the sleeping engineers and doctors on board the spacecraft. Dr. Dave Bowman (Keir Dullea)'s attempted rescue of Frank ends with one of cinema's most iconic scenes: the “I'm sorry Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that” scene, resulting in Hal's own death at the hands of Dave.

What is important to note is the fact that Kubrick is actively stacking the audience against Hal here for his embodiment as a computer. Despite his super-intelligent, “incapable of error” role, the astronauts did not give any sort of credence to his suspicions of what would be out near Jupiter. Instead, they talk about their suspicions in a rather obvious manner, and Hal reacts. While it has been argued that this display of cold-blooded murder is Hal's human qualities, I would hardly agree that violence is inherently what makes a human a human. The ability to reason would be a better conjecture to make as an inherently human quality, and in this area Hal is already showing human-like qualities and signs well before he reacts to the astronauts' plan to disable him. And indeed, if a human were to overhear two of his compatriots conspiring to kill him, he would have reacted in much the same way as Hal did.

With this in mind, if instead of suspicion the astronauts had reacted with compassion and empathy for Hal's own suspicions of what would be waiting at Jupiter, there would have been no need for a psychotic break from Hal. Kubrick's fetishistic use of the trope only served to create unnecessary tension and loss of life that ultimately has no effect on the plot or outcome of the film. The film is extremely humanist, and as a result of this Hal acquires human-like qualities including evidence of camaraderie and a mental equilibrium that is disrupted by conspiracy of who he thought were his comrades. Any right-minded human would lose their mind in roughly the same way, and Kubrick even resurrects that idea into a later character of one of his films. As for Hal, his reaction was not totally uncalled for; the astronauts spoke of dismantling him, thus

he struck first, but because of the violence's framing as a mental break it causes audiences to collude murder and mental illness.

In the first act of *Full Metal Jacket*, Vincent D'Onofrio's Private Pyle is made an example of from the very first scene of the film, where Lee Ermey's Gunnery Sergeant Hartman gives him his Pyle name in reference to his weight. He quite clearly has a mental disorder for he is incredibly slow to learn his place in the military, his weight being another detriment as he struggles to complete daily calisthenic activities. Both of these detriments to his success in the Marine Corps are combined into one in the scene where he hides a doughnut in his footlocker, to be discovered by Sergeant Hartman. If Hartman's constant bullying was not a lot before, this scene kicked it to the next level.

Indeed, after the doughnut incident the entire platoon turns on Pyle, but particularly poignant is the betrayal by Matthew Modine's Private Joker. Joker can be seen helping Pyle after Hartman orders him to take Pyle under his wing, and this he does. This is the one redeeming quality in Hartman, for he does recognize that Pyle has some sort of mental slowness in some manner by appointing someone to aide him one on one, but in his own actions he remains the same. Joker's betrayal of Pyle then in the soap-in-the-towels scene can be pinpointed directly as the scene where Pyle's mental illness takes over him. He starts to talk to his rifle, and Kubrick's camera finds him often with a thousand yard stare and a gaping mouth, creating in the audience a distrust and even fear very similar to how Kubrick approached the representation of Hal in *2001*.

The Marine Corps is both physically and mentally demanding. The process is not only meant to mold your body, but your mind as well. The harsh conditions of boot camp are there to teach cadets skills that will increase their longevity in whatever situation they may come across on the ground in a warzone. Because of the conditions that they must be exposed to in order to be prepared for any and all eventualities, there should be a mental health screening for those who

wish to enlist in the military. This film takes place during the Vietnam War however, and the Selective Service System was in place for it. Pyle's mental issues should have been documented and he should never have made it to basic training. However the fault of his mental degradation under the pressure falls squarely onto the shoulders of not only the Sergeant, but on Private Joker as well. Private Joker mentions that Pyle should receive a Section 8 out of the service, because Joker knows that Pyle has started talking to his rifle. Kubrick seeks to make the audience forget about this immediately after however via a crude joke.

Kubrick's framing of Pyle then becomes an inevitable one; the obviously slow-minded person becomes a killer as he is reprogrammed in boot camp, and snaps the night before being shipped out to the war. He kills the Sergeant and himself, and Kubrick has once again rewarded the audience for feeling those feelings of distrust and fear that he crafted leading up to this moment. Once again the audience is taught that those who show signs of a different mental mindset should be met with distrust and fear lest they murder and kill themselves. The kicker is that Pyle's death does not have a true impact on the outcome of the film; the film's main action takes place on the ground in Vietnam, thus the boot camp scenes are rather auxiliary to the main storyline. If Kubrick had wanted to show the conditions in bootcamp, he could have easily done so without the exploitation of the mentally ill.

The Shining is the prime example of Kubrick exploiting the mentally ill in order to inspire distrust and fear in the audience, as indeed the very genre of this film is a psychological horror film. Kubrick does this immediately with Jack Nicholson's character Jack Torrance, the very first scene utilizing Nicholson's unique eyebrows with a tight, pursed-lipped smile that causes the audience immediate unease. Torrance introduces himself as a writer, and writers like Torrance tend to have a dissociative disorder that they utilize to their benefit to get into the worlds of their novels. They dissociate themselves from their works and have a tendency to escape into those

worlds of their own creation.

This style of writing is a form of escapism, which Torrance's character is also known for through his sobriety, also introduced in the first scene of the film along with the fact that someone went crazy while in the hotel and killed his wife and son. As soon as this is said to Torrance his face lights up with a quality of the inspired; to be on site at a location with that sort of history is a writer's paradise, for inspiration of that sort is hard to find for obvious reasons. The entire plot of the story could have been avoided here if Torrance had not been told of these events however, for as soon as Torrance steps foot into the hotel, he is besieged with how similar his situation is to the story he is trying to write. As he attempts to dissociate himself from the story, he is found to be unable to do so, for the inspiration and impetus of the story is so close to the reality of things that his dissociation ends up bending backwards into the real world, essentially causing Torrance to be caught in a feedback loop where reality and the story become one.

As a result of this, what is going on in Torrance's story and what is going on in reality begin to blur, leaving it up to the audience to decide which events are actually taking place, such as the flood of blood out of the elevator and the strange ghosts that appear at the bar, and the iconic twins standing in the hallway. Kubrick does this admittedly masterfully, but the point revolving around all of this is Torrance. It was not necessary for Torrance to be told of the hotel's past misfortunes. If he had not been told, the hotel would have been spared a second bloodbath, for the writer and the written converged into one being, once more rewarding the audience for feeling their original feelings of distrust and fear. This however would have defeated the entire purpose of the movie; Kubrick depicts “some nutjob going crazy and killing people” once again, only this time it is the central plot device. Its' centrality is highly problematic to the depiction of the mentally ill, and through its sheer necessity makes it a problematic film in general.

Stanley Kubrick throughout his career has utilized the mentally ill as a means to create tension in his films, almost pornographically so as he teases the audience with a sense of distrust and fear upon the mentally ill character's introductions, only for those initial feelings to be rewarded in full as they proceed to kill others and then themselves in varying degrees of plot necessity. Playing the devil's advocate, one can make the argument that Kubrick is attempting to give the mentally ill some sort of representation on the silver screen by displaying them so obviously, but he goes about it in totally the wrong way. Because his films reward the audience for their feelings of distrust and fear, the conditions them to expect murderous behavior from the mentally ill in real life. Thus, he contributes his characters to the well known phrase “psycho killer,” mental illness and murderous tendencies being colluded neatly into one package. What Kubrick and Hollywood at large fails to understand is the multifaceted levels of what precisely mental illness is, and through this clear lack of knowledge they also indoctrinate that lack of knowledge into the minds of their viewership. Mental illness is grossly misrepresented in Kubrick's films, and as a result he is a direct cause of the lack of education regarding mental illness and a direct cause of the over-saturation of false rhetoric regarding it.