

A Tale of Spades, Hearts and Ill Minds

Milos Forman's film adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a classic tale of psychiatric emasculation, sexual expression, false insanity and unbridled rebellion from the eyes of the oppressed against the mechanised forces of their oppression. Through a variety of cinematic techniques and stylistic devices, including the exploitation of hyperbole and artistic licence, Foreman constructs purely metaphorical representations of mental healthcare. Whilst these constructions contribute to the overwhelming stigma that surrounds psychiatric carers and institutions, they also position audiences to empathise with the mentally-ill patients who feel victimised and disempowered by such systems. As a vehicle for this rare insight, the film demonises Nurse Ratched, denigrates the care available to mentally-ill patients and defames modern psychiatric institutions, including Liverpool State Hospital, which featured in the 2016 ABC documentary series *Changing Minds: The Inside Story*. Despite its surface-level collateral damage on societal perspectives towards psychiatric care, this film is inarguably a unifying force, promoting shared understanding and reconciliation between patients and their carers.

Beneath her blank, doll-like composure, facade of compassion and falsely therapeutic tactics, Foreman stigmatises Nurse Ratched as a cruel, vicious and tyrannical embodiment of oppression and authority. As an obvious foil for McMurphy's exuberant vitality and sexuality, her clinical white attire, calm, composed stoicism and domineering vocal tones subliminally position audiences to accept her as the malicious matriarch of Oregon State Hospital's psychiatric family. The juxtaposition of her stiff, patronising facade with that of the beautified Candy Starr, dressed in pink and flowers and exuding sexuality, highlights the harsh, mechanical and emasculating precision with which Ratched runs the ward. Meanwhile, repeated low-angle close-ups of Ratched's ruthless expressions in the group therapy scenes, combined with dull, sterile lighting and unnaturally loud diegetic ambience masks her femininity and backgrounds what could be sound psychiatric care-giving intentions in rejecting McMurphy's disruptive requests to "be good citizens" and "watch the ball game". This notion of masked humanity is shared by many of the patients in *Changing Minds*, some of whom perceive their carers as "cruel" and accuse them of using "twisted verbal" to imprison the mentally-ill in "a bloody hellhole" of "captivity". Thus, though counterintuitive, Foreman's negative stigmatisation of Nurse Ratched as a despotic, draconian matriarch of oppression and authority inarguably provides audiences with metaphorical insight into the typically marginalised perspectives of some mentally-ill patients.

Foreman's defamatory representation of Oregon State Hospital as an inhospitable prison is another crude metaphorical construction, embracing stigma to position audiences to empathise with a sense of persecution that some patients can experience at the hands of psychiatric institutions. The repeated symbolisms of barred windows, armed guards, barbed wire fences and rusting iron bars form a lexical chain of imprisonment that pervades the film, and permeates Chief Bromden's journey to freedom. The destruction of McMurphy's unbridled individuality and free expression through the lobotomy is revealed with confronting close-up imagery, conveying the hospital's insidious power over the patients. Subsequently,

McMurphy's dignified euthanasia beneath Bromden's weight is affirmed by triumphant Native American tribal music, symbolic of the freedom and emancipation that thrives beyond the walls of the hospital. This positions audiences to perceive the ward not as a place of promoting health and healing, but as a mechanised slaughterhouse of castration and inhumanity. The *mise en scène* of clinical polished floors, harsh, unnatural lighting and off-white prison fatigues worn by the patients breeds an atmosphere of isolation and incarceration that enthralls audiences in their plight. In the fishing trip escape, this atmosphere is juxtaposed by the sense of freedom and excitement that Foreman conveys in his slow, panning dolly shots of the open ocean, of the acute patients free and in awe of their environment, and of McMurphy centre-framed at the helm of their fishing boat accompanied by the cheers of his fellow "fishermen" and a joyous non-diegetic calypso melody. Foreman's construction of the ward as an oppressive microcosm of society exacerbates the stigma that surrounds today's psychiatric institutions. Although "today's care for patients is a world away from the asylums of the past," the sense of isolation and incarceration that Foreman privileges in his cinematography echoes Sandra's dream in *Changing Minds* to "fly" like a bird "over the f**king wall." Senior Psychiatrist Dr Mark Cross acknowledges the sentiment that "sometimes, the ward can feel like a prison." In this sense, the film's defamatory representation positions audiences to empathise with the sense of oppression and anxiety that many patients feel in psychiatric institutions.

Foreman's construction of carers as emasculating tyrants and of mental hospitals as mechanistic societies provides metaphorical insight into the hidden realities of patient perspectives and must not be overlooked simply because it bears no semblance to reality. Through a combination of directorial decisions, as well as a host of cinematic and stylistic devices, the film constructs a crude metaphor of experience that feeds the stigma surrounding mental health carers and institutions. Nonetheless, it positions audiences to empathise with the patients who feel victimised and disempowered by such systems. This newfound empathy has immense clinical value in combatting the stigma that paralyses the mentally-ill from seeking treatment. Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* tells the inside story that needs to be told.