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Politics of Horror

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“You’ve Always Been the Caretaker”: An Analysis of The Shining

Though my original thesis was just a rehashing of what McEntee said in his article “Paternal Responsibility and Bad Conscience in The Shining”; I think there is more to say on that topic that McEntee didn’t touch on. McEntee argued that Kubrick’s adaptation of The Shining was a parody of the patriarch, and I feel this is a well-argued claim. I do however feel he mostly compared the adaptations and King’s Jack Torrance versus Kubrick’s Jack Torrance. I hope to look into how Kubrick went about conveying the politics of the film and also made such a scary piece of cinema that fills you with overwhelming dread. Kubrick was a very meticulous filmmaker and always made deliberate choices even down to the finest details. Kubrick was always the fan of subliminal messages and used his perfectionism to service this interest. I bring this up simply to explain what kind of creator we are dealing with here. The choices made in the camera work, casting, music, and changes from the original source material were not simply made out of vanity, but with a specific intention in mind to convey what he wanted to the audience.

First of all, we need to talk about Jack. It’s very apparent Jack sees his marriage and fatherhood as a burden. His passive-aggressive aura in the scenes with Danny and Wendy in the car and with Wendy when she brings him breakfast show us that there is never a genuinely happy moment. Usually, in horror films, we are introduced to a happy family, but Kubrick made

it to where we meet Jack away from his family. Not only is not separated from the family initially, but it's in a setting where he is putting on a superficial act like we all do when we interview for a job. It's a forced grin as he tells the prospective employers what they want to hear. Jack is an aspiring writer as we know from him telling Ullman that he is working on a writing project. Not too long afterward do we learn that he use to be a teacher. This either means he quit to pursue his writing or he was fired for whatever reason. In either case, Jack isn't getting this job because he'll enjoy it. He's getting it because he needs money and time to work on his craft. I mean thinking back to the film, Kubrick doesn't show Jack doing any work on the place. No maintenance or cleaning. No actually the only person we doing any chores in service of the family or hotel is Wendy. Jack just writes, throws a ball, or stares out the window like he's on acid. We actually see Wendy working with the boiler which implies that she's actually the one who is doing caretaker duties while Jack writes the same sentences repeatedly and slowly loses his sanity. Yet in the scene where Wendy finds out Jack is a lunatic, he has the audacity to say, "Have you ever thought about my responsibilities to my employers?!" (Kubrick, 1980). This not only shows Jack's hypocrisy but also his misogyny. He simply expects Wendy to wait on him and be responsible without showing her any appreciation or acknowledging it. That's that meticulous nature that Kubrick has at work. This film is rich with subtext. Hidden beneath the service is this character study and deconstruction of the American family that is revered as a hallmark in our heteronormative society. Not that I necessarily think Kubrick was that progressive, but I do believe it was his intention to tear away at the thing that makes most people feel safe which is the family unit.

Not only does Kubrick instill fear and dread into the audience by tearing away at an idea that I think most people (especially back then) put so much faith and trust into, but he also uses the uncanny to subconsciously make us feel uncomfortable. Since we are on the subject Jack, the first uncanny attribute I will mention is Nicholson's performance. Now what I think many Nicholson fans (myself included) love about him is how off the rails he can be with his characters. I mean look at his performance as the Joker in *Batman* (1989) or in the film he did prior to this one; *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). The guy isn't a stranger to being over the top when the film calls for it. The difference between those films and this one is that in those other films Nicholson's performance has moments where the character is grounded. They aren't turned all the way up every second. In this film, there doesn't seem to be a point where Jack Torrance's character isn't being exaggerated just a bit. In an interview with Steven Spielberg, Spielberg recalls having dinner with Kubrick and Kubrick had asked Spielberg on the opinion on the film. "...I thought Jack Nicholson, who is a great actor...and I thought it was a great performance, but it was almost a great kabuki performance. It was almost like kabuki theatre." (Spielberg 1999). Now kabuki theatre is a performing art that is often acted with much exaggeration. Spielberg then goes on to say that Kubrick brought up James Cagney and how much he admired him as an actor. James Cagney being an actor who was for energetic, comedic roles. This seems to play into what McEntee mention in his article; "While Kubrick's *The Shining* was in production, King acknowledged having heard rumors that the director was 'planning a black comedy, a send-up of the whole horror genre' (Chute 1979: 35)." (McEntee 2016). Giving the context of the story and the actions that this comedic performance is involved with, we can't help but be uncomfortable by Nicholson's performance. If we laugh, we laugh

because what we are seeing on the screen is such a familiar behavior but done with no levity to it. It's done with violence, malice, and hatred barely hidden beneath the hokey acting. This is why the performance is so uncanny and services the film by maintaining the tension and dread of the audience. Other uncanny elements Kubrick uses to achieve the same effect is the impossible geography and layout of the hotel. The architecture of the Overlook makes no sense and deep down we realize this. It looks like a regular hotel, but's a maze of hallways and rooms that make no sense. Not to mention all of the small continuity inconsistencies that Kubrick sneaks in to mess with us. Stickers on the walls and disappearing furniture all add to the uncanny anxiety that the film casts on us. These are not mistakes, Kubrick is too much of a control freak to make these things slide without purposely keeping them in the film.

I think the last thing I can add is the camera work and music that Kubrick used. Both actually quite similar in how they build up the tension. I think it's fair to say they compliment each other quite well. Long shots as the dolly slowly push the camera in on Jack writing as the music swells keep the audience on the edge of their seats. You don't know what going to come when the shot finally cuts and the music finally reaches the peak of its crescendo, but you anxious to be released from the cage of tension it traps you in. Kubrick also used a Steadicam quite a bit on this production. He even hired the cinematographer who invented the camera rig to shoot the film. The shots achieved with the rig allowed Kubrick to get down real low with Danny's big wheel as he rides through the hotel halls. In the infamous scene where Danny comes in contact with the twins in one of the hallways, we actually don't really hear any music. We just hear the plastic wheels of Danny's vehicle as it rolls on through the hotel. It's a continuous shot, and as I said before anytime we see Danny in shots like this, we wait for something to jump out. Finally,

Dan rolls around the corner and the cymbals on the soundtrack make our bones jump out of our skin as we see the two creepy tween girls staring down the hall at Danny. They talk in unison to play into the uncanny that Kubrick used so well, and we are treated to quick cuts between the twins talking and their mangled corpses splattered all over the walls and floor. These tight shots of the horror flash on the screen and then the rhythm of the screeching strings speed up tickled down our spines. Another example of the music and camera work playing into each other would be the maze scene. We are back to that low angle and camera quickly chases after Danny as he runs for his life through the snowy hedge maze. He practically feels his deranged father's voice screaming for him on the back of his neck. The music to compliment the severity and fright of the scene is a fast pace and percussive drone with a frightening wail of a choir to further accent and break up the rhythm.

There is rich politics in this film, and I think Kubrick used his skills as a filmmaker to convey what he wanted to express while also accomplishing the mission to instill fear in audiences. He changed the character of Jack to tear apart the patriarch centered family unit. He used uncanny elements to keep the audience in a state of unease. He also used the cinematography and music to make the heart beats of the viewers dance up and down as they are treated to scenes horror. Kubrick was a master of his craft, and I think this film does more than proves that.

Work Cited

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