

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Kubrick's Films

Mental Illness

Introduction Kubrick explored different shades of mental illness in his films. Some of his characters act in such an anti-social manner that they appear disturbed. Others are so obsessed with love, or with war, that they lose their grip on reality. A few are driven mad by social institutions or policies, while still others appear to fall victim to personal fragilities and unforeseen circumstances.

A Clockwork Orange Alex, the protagonist in this film, is already seriously disturbed when the story begins. A fantasist, sadist and rapist, he is close to psychotic. Then, he undergoes an experimental therapy designed to make him adverse to those anti-social impulses. He is taken to the treatment centre and settles into a comfortable room with good food. Later, he is injected with drugs, put in a straight jacket, strapped to a chair and forced to watch violent films with his eyes taped open. After the sixth film, he begins to feel ill and wants to stop. The next day, during the same treatment, he cracks when he hears his beloved Beethoven as background music. He says he realises that violence is wrong and that he is cured, but the doctors tell him he must undergo more treatment. Two weeks later, Alex is paraded in front of officials as proof of the efficacy of the experimental therapy. However, at the end, his impulses return, and we are left to wonder what kind of mental disorder now possesses him.

Dr Strangelove This film skewers the insanity of Cold War planning by explicitly referring to the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction, with its convenient abbreviation: MAD. Kubrick did not, however, have to invent that term, he simply borrowed from real life. He did invent the mentally disturbed character of General Ripper, whose full name (Jack D. Ripper) is a not-so-subtle hint of his madness. Ripper is a sick man, plagued by fears that his sexual prowess has been inhibited by a Russian plot to contaminate America's water supply. Although he looks the part, the frightening reality is that he is in charge of an airborne fleet of nuclear bombers. This air base commander becomes ever more deranged, as he steers the film toward its terrifying conclusion.

Full Metal Jacket This equally powerful and bleak satire of war focuses on the traumatic effects of boot camp training for US Marines during the Vietnam War. The training is led by a drill instructor who may technically be sane but displays obsessive and violent behaviour that borders on the mentally unstable. But it is his victim, private Pyle, who suffers the most. Pyle is a weak, overweight recruit whom the drill instructor signals out as a potential rotten apple that will spoil the whole barrel. The instructor then insults, mocks and degrades Pyle, in a misguided attempt to 'toughen' him up. The result is a seriously deranged Pyle, out of touch with reality, who ends up shooting the instructor and then turning the gun on himself.

The Shining Pyle would recognise a kindred spirit in Jack, the failed writer in this film. Burdened by his inability to write or hold down a good job and provide for his family, Jack slowly exhibits signs of derangement. Even at the beginning, he appears artificially optimistic, as if he is covering up his weaknesses. Added to his already fragile psyche are the severe isolation of the hotel, where he is caretaker, plus, and its murderous past. Jack pretends to write, but only repeats the same sentence over and over again on the typewritten page. His son and the hotel chef have a telepathic power (the 'shining') that is used for good, but Jack is eventually driven mad and attempts to kill both his son and his wife.

Lolita Although this film is famous for its paedophilia, it also contains a deep streak of mental instability. Humbert, the professor, is seriously obsessed with young Lolita, but manages to keep his public behaviour within social conventions. His rival, Quilty, on the other hand, goes stark raving mad, as we see in the final scene (which is also used at the beginning). Quilty is covered by a sheet while sitting in his house, which is chaotic with debris and overturned furniture. Quilty is drunk and rambles on incoherently about poetry before engaging in a one-man game of ping-pong and then playing wildly on the piano. He has gone completely over the edge, and, looking back, we see that the seeds of insanity were apparent in the other characters he impersonated (a policeman and a psychologist). All of his lies and deceptions catch up with him at the end and gain the upper hand.