The Buffalo Film Seminars

Directed by Jules Dassin
Directed by Stanley Kubrick
Based on the novel by Stephen King
Original Music by Wendy Carlos and Rachel Elkind
Cinematography by John Alcott
Steadycam operator...Garrett Brown

Jack Nicholson...Jack Torrance
Shelley Duvall...Wendy Torrance
Danny Lloyd...Danny Torrance
Scatman Crothers...Dick Hallorann
Barry Nelson...Stuart Ullman
Joe Turkel...Lloyd the Bartender
Lia Beldam...young woman in bath
Billie Gibson...old woman in bath
Anne Jackson...doctor

STANLEY KUBRICK (26 July 1928, New York City, New York, USA—7 March 1999, Harpenden, Hertfordshire, England, UK, natural causes) directed 16, wrote 12, produced 11 and shot 5 films:

Won Oscar: Best Effects, Special Visual Effects - 2001: A Space Odyssey (1969); Nominated Oscar: Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium- Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1965); Nominated Oscar: Best Picture- Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1965); Nominated Oscar: Best Director- Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1965); Nominated Oscar: Best Picture: A Space Odyssey (1969); Nominated Oscar: Best Director- 2001: A Space Odyssey (1969); Nominated Oscar: Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium- A Clockwork Orange (1972); Nominated Oscar: Best Picture- A Clockwork Orange (1972); Nominated Oscar: Best Director- A Clockwork Orange (1972); Nominated Oscar: Best Writing, Screenplay Adapted From Other Material- Barry Lyndon (1976); Nominated Oscar: Best Picture- Barry Lyndon (1976); Nominated Oscar: Best Director- Barry Lyndon (1976); Nominated Oscar: Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium- Full Metal Jacket (1988).


GARRETT BROWN (from IMDb): Garrett Brown invented the Oscar-winning Steadicam camera stabilizer and used it to shoot over a hundred movies beginning with Rocky (1976). He holds 50 patents worldwide for camera devices including: Steadicam JR for camcorders; Skyacam, which flies on wires over sporting events; and Mobyacam, the underwater camera that chases the swimmers at the Olympics. These were recently joined by the vertiginous, Emmy-award-winning Divecam and the ultra-light aerial film camera called SuperFlyCam.


“He [Kubrick] has never made a bad picture. Each picture he trumps the trump.”

from World Film Directors V. II. Ed. John Wakeman. The H. H. Wilson Co. NY 1988 entry by Adrian Turner

American director, producer, and scenarist, was born the Bronx, New York, the son of Jacques and Gertrude Kubrick. His father was a physician, the son of Polish and Romanian Jews. Kubrick attended the William Howard Taft High School. He was not a successful student but an ardent chess payer and photographer. His father, also a photographer, had bought him a 35mm still camera, and Kubrick’s first break came in April 1945 when a
chance picture of a newsdealer on the day of Roosevelt’s death was bought by Look magazine. At the age of seventeen Kubrick was hired by Look as a staff photographer.

During his four years there, Kubrick received the higher education he wanted by enrolling as a nonmatriculating student at Columbia University. As Alexander Walker noted, “Dropping out of school made him into a lifelong student.” At the same time, Kubrick was attending screenings at the Museum of Modern Art: “I was aware that I didn’t know anything about making films, but I believed I couldn’t make them any worse than the majority of films I was seeing. Bad films gave me the courage to try making a movie.”

Kubrick’s first effort was Day of the Fight (1951), a documentary about the boxer Walter Cartier, whom Kubrick had photographed for Look. The 16-minute, 35mm film was sold to RKO for a tiny profit and an advance on another short, Flying Padre (1951), about a priest in New Mexico who tours his parish of 4,000 square miles by small plane. While Flying Padre is conventional program-filler material, Day of the Fight is a very striking piece of work, a profile couched in the style of film noir with a highly dramatic commentary (a device Kubrick would repeatedly use in his features) and a vivid, nightmarish sense of entrapment as Cartier waits in his dressing room for the evening’s fight, along with his identical twin Vincent, a lawyer who acts as his manager. Richard Combs, reassessing the film in 1980, wrote that “the timelock structure of course anticipates—and in a way bests—The Killing; the deserted, early morning streets are as haunted as the similarly used locations in Killer’s Kiss. But the film’s most extraordinary visual trouvaille is also its most mundane. The glum-faced Cartier twins, waking in the same bed in the morning, walking to communion, sharing the anxieties and (reputedly) the physical pain of the fight....”

After seeing his first films released, Kubrick resigned from Look. He made a third short, The Seafarers (1953), about the Seafarers’ International Union, then embarked on his first feature, Fear and Desire (1953). Kubrick told Joseph Gelmis, “I was the camera operator and director and just about everything else. The film was shot in 35mm without a soundtrack. The dubbing was a big mistake on my part; the actual shooting cost was $9000, but because I didn’t know what I was doing with the soundtrack it cost me another $30,000. Fear and Desire played the art house circuits, and some of the reviews were amazingly good, but it’s not a film I remember with any pride, except for the fact it was finished.”

The script was written by Kubrick’s friend Howard Sacker (who later wrote The Great White Hope) and resumed the theme of “twins” or doubles already adumbrated in Day of the Fight. Two American soldiers, lost in some wilderness, confront two enemy soldiers who are, however, played by the same actors. The intellectual Lieutenant Corby (Kenneth Harp) symbolically destroys himself by killing his double; the more primitive Mae (Frank Silvera), drifting downstream on a raft, manages to struggle through to psychic wholeness.

In a letter to the film’s distributor, Joseph Burstyn, Kubrick described the film thus: “Its structure: allegorical. Its conception: poetic. A drama of ‘man’ lost in a hostile world, seeking his way to an understanding of himself and life around him. He is further imperiled on his odyssey by an unseen but deadly enemy that surrounds him; but an enemy who, upon scrutiny, seems to be almost shaped from the same mold. It will, probably, mean many things to different people, and it ought to.” Kubrick might have been describing any one of his later films, especially 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) and The Shining, since the letter alludes to his fondness for ambiguity and metaphor, evoking the Kubrickian universe of entrapment and immortality: man does not progress but merely perpetuates ancient, instinctive evils....Fear and Desire was financed privately, as was Kubrick’s next feature, Killer’s Kiss (1955). Again, Kubrick was a virtual one-man crew and co-wrote the script with Sacker. The film was bought by United Artists, the most progressive Hollywood distributor of the 1950s....

Beginning his study of Kubrick, Alexander Walker wrote that “only a few directors possess a conceptual talent—that is, a talent to crystallize every film they make into a cinematic concept. It transcends the need to find a good story. An absorbing story... . It is the talent to construct a form that will exhibit the maker’s vision in an unexpected way. It is this conceptual talent that most distinguishes Stanley Kubrick.” Early signs of this talent in Killer’s Kiss did not go unnoticed by contemporary reviewers. “The story is conventional,” wrote Gavin Lambert, “but within this framework...[Kubrick] has done some interesting things....”

After this, Kubrick joined forces with James B. Harris to form Harris-Kubrick Productions. Their first film together was another genre movie, The Killing (1956), produced by Harris and distributed by United Artists. This time Kubrick had a viable budget of $320,000, which allowed him to hire Lucien Ballard as his cinematographer and a good cast of Hollywood actors. Kubrick’s wife served as art director, and the film was scored by Gerald Fried, who had supplied the music for Kubrick’s two earlier features as well....

There was nothing unassuming about Paths of Glory (1957), adapted by Kubrick, Calder Willingham, and Jim Thompson from Humphrey Cobb’s novel of World War I. As an indictment of war, it has been compared both with Lewis Milestone’s All’s Quiet on the Western Front and Jean Renoir’s La Grande Illusion. It shows how a suicidal assault on an impregnable German position, the Ant Hill, is ordered by two ruthlessly ambitious French generals (Adolph Menjou and George Macready). The attack is a lethal fiasco, and three scapegoats are tried and executed to save the generals’ careers. The film was only financed by United Artists after Kirk Douglas agreed to star as Colonel Dax, the humanitariam field commander appointed to defend the scapegoats at their rigged court martial. He cannot save his men but does manage to ruin one of the generals. ...

“In spite of the tremendous critical acclaim for Paths of Glory,” wrote Alexander Walker, “Kubrick found his career stalemated by nonevents.” In Hollywood, Kubrick and Harris developed several projects, none of them realized. Then Kubrick was hired by Marlon Brando to direct a Western, One-Eyed Jacks (1961). The script was by the then unknown Sam Peckinpah but Kubrick insisted on rewriting it with Calder Willingham, who had
worked on *Paths of Glory*. After six months Kubrick left the project, leaving Brando to direct himself.

Shortly afterward Kubrick was contacted by Kirk Douglas, whose production of *Spartacus* (1960) had run into trouble. Accounts differ widely as to how much—and precisely which—footage was shot by the original director, Anthony Mann, who had been hired by Universal against the wishes of Douglas, the executive producer. Mann was fired from *Spartacus*, and at the age of thirty-one Kubrick found himself directing what was then the most expensive film ever made in America.

*Spartacus*, about the gladiator who led a slaves’ rebellion against Roman power in 73 B.C., fits uncomfortably into Kubrick’s oeuvre. His most committed admirers have little to say about the film, reflecting Kubrick’s own disavowals of it, such as the one he gave Michel Ciment: “I tried with limited success to make the film as real as possible but I was up against a pretty dumb script which was rarely faithful to what was known about Spartacus. If I ever needed convincing of the limits of persuasion a director can have on a film where someone else is the producer and he is merely the highest paid member of the crew, *Spartacus* provided proof to last a lifetime.”

Critics did praise the visual aspects of the film: Kubrick’s fluid handling of the Super-Technirama-70 format and his depiction of Roman cruelty. Thomas Allen Nelson writes “the epic panorama of battle and armies is well done and reflects Kubrick’s skill at showing what he has referred to as the ‘weird disparity’ between the aesthetics of warfare and its human consequences.” This “disparity” is a consistent theme of Kubrick’s: the surreal dummies in *Killer’s Kiss*; the human cut-outs used for target practice in *The Killing*; the reduction of men to dying ants in *Paths of Glory*.

While *Spartacus* was in production, Kubrick and Harris were already at work on their next project, an adaptation by Vladimir Nabokov of his controversial 1955 novel Lolita, about a university professor who marries a widow because he is sexually obsessed by her barely adolescent daughter Lolita. Because of censorship problems and funds locked in Britain, Kubrick made the film in London, which has been his base ever since.

Kubrick’s next three films, made with ever increasing deliberation and secrecy, comprise a trilogy on humanity in the technological age. It begins with *Dr. Strangelove*, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1963), scripted by Kubrick, Terry Southern, and Peter George from the latter’s novel *Red Alert*. Originally conceived as a “serious treatment of the problem of accidental war,” like the novel, it modulated into satire when Kubrick found the theme too blackly absurd to be treated in any other way.

Nuclear catastrophe is unleashed by Air Force General Jack D. Ripper, who believes that his sexual impotence is due to a Communist conspiracy to pollute “his precious bodily fluids.” Despite the efforts of a decent but ineffectual President to placate the Russians, despite all the technical fail-safe procedures and mechanisms, lunacy triumphs and Major “King” Kong (Slim Pickens) gleefully rides his great phallic bomb to the apocalypse.

Slim Pickens, Sterling Hayden as the impotent Ripper, George C. Scott as the virile Pentagon hawk Turgidson: they are all mad, and the maddest of all is Dr. Strangelove himself, a former Nazi scientist now employed by the Pentagon, a paraplegic with dark glasses and a mechanical arm constantly snapping into uncontrollable *Sieg Heils*. He is marvelously realized by Peter Sellers, who also plays a clipped RAF group captain and the President of the United States....

In the Dawn of Man, the opening sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), an ape discovers that the bone he has learned to use as a tool can also kill, in a shot that, as Walker wrote, “vividly crystallizes Kubrick’s view of man as a risen ape, rather than Rousseau’s sentimental characterization of him as a fallen angel.” The ape man tosses his killing bone exultantly into the sky, and we follow its four million-year trajectory until, in one of the most famous match cuts in cinema, is becomes a spaceship of the twenty-first century. This vehicle is carrying scientists to the moon to investigate a strange slab of black stone discovered there—one that closely resembles the monolith which had presided over the ape man’s military breakthrough.

The third section of *2001* begins aboard another spaceship, *Discovery*, commanded by Dr. David Bowman (Keir Dullea). The only member of the *Discovery’s* crew who shows any real human quirkiness is the computer HAL9000, who alone knows the true purpose of their mission. HAL becomes increasingly rebellious and power-hungry and eventually “terminates” the entire crew apart from Bowman, who manages to dismantle the machine’s deranged intelligence.

Bowman discovers that the real purpose of the mission is to identify the extraterrestrial origin and purpose of the mysterious monolith. Traveling alone in a small pod into deep space, he is drawn to follow a similar monolith through a disorienting galaxy of dazzling special effects. It leads him to an elegant suite of rooms furnished like an earth dwelling of the eighteenth century. Bowman ages and dies, but is reborn as a “Star Child,” ready to journey back to earth to lead a further evolutionary phase. Michel Ciment called the film’s final shot “perhaps the only really peaceful image created by an artist more at ease in nightmare.”

*2001* was based on a short story, “The Sentinel,” by the scientist and science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, who labored with Kubrick through many versions of the script. If *Dr. Strangelove* used what Michel Ciment called “verbal delirium” to demonstrate the impotence of language, *2001* makes the same point with scarcely any dialogue at all, barring the exchange of banalities. During four years of preparation and production, much of the time taken up with the still unrivaled special effects, the film became, in Kubrick’s words, “a nonverbal experience.” As such it bewildered many reviewers who might have accommodated a nonlinear narrative from a Resnais or a Bergman, but not from MGM, nor in Cinerama. Many found the film too long and too slow. For once, however, incomprehending and condescending reviews did not deter audiences. *2001* became a slow but steady money-earner, and the pace quickened in the early 1970s when the film with its sustained bombardment of visual stimuli established itself as the ultimate drug-trip movie. By 1976 this “$10,500,000 underground
film” had grossed $90 million. The critics went back for another look and several, including Joseph Gelmis and Andrew Sarris, had the grace to revise their opinions.

Kubrick’s visual achievements in 2001 were matched by his use of existing music—“The Blue Danube to accompany the voyage to the moon, passages from Khachaturian and Ligeti and, above all of course, Richard Strauss’ Also Sprach Zarathustra for the “evolutionary” sequences. The soundtrack itself became a best-selling LP. Critics have continued to debate the film’s more potent riddles, like the monoliths which are present in all of its four symphonic movements, nudging men on to the next stage of evolution, and the provenance of the suite of period rooms at the end. Kubrick himself, in a Playboy interview (September 1968) said that he had tried to create a visual experience, one that bypasses verbalized pigeon-holing and directly penetrates the subconscious with an emotional and philosophic content…. just as music does….You’re free to speculate as you wish about the philosophical and allegorical meaning:"

The significance of 2001 goes beyond its own achievements as a film. It confirmed the temporary shift of power from the studios to the directors; it demonstrated how formally flexible the commercial film might be; and it showed how audiences could discover a film for themselves, in spite of reviewers. Some regard it as the most significant Hollywood breakthrough since Citizen Kane in 1941, and Kubrick has been compared with Orson Welles (who in 1964 remarked that “amongst the younger generation Kubrick is a giant”). Like The Graduate (1967), Bonnie and Clyde (1967) and Easy Rider (1969), the film owed its success primarily to the youth market, indicating a major shift in audience patterns.

Kubrick’s plans for an ambitious film about Napoleon fell victim to the cutbacks of the late 1960s. Instead he turned to a novel that had greatly excited him, Anthony Burgess’ A Clockwork Orange, and wrote his own adaptation….The debate about the film centered not so much on the question of free will as on Kubrick’s presentation of violence. His personal style is here at its most extreme with wide-angled photography and incongruous music—synthesized Beethoven, Rossini’s “The Thieving Magpie and Gene Kelly’s “Singin’ in the Rain” to accompany Alex’s night of rape and murder.…Walker argued that the film “never sets out to explore the moral issue of violence; this had been a misleading belief that has caused the film to be branded as ‘conscienceless’ by critics who fail to see where Kubrick’s first principal lies, namely, with the moral issue of eradicating free will.”

Barry Lyndon (1975), Kubrick’s only real commercial failure, was regarded by many critics as a deliberate retreat from controversy and as an alternative to his long-cherished Napoleon project….Another three years elapsed before Kubrick announced his next project. It was The Shining, based on a modern horror novel by Stephen King. Kubrick had become so reclusive that he decided to recreate the novel’s setting, a Rocky Mountain resort hotel called the Overlook, at Elstree Studios near London. Shooting on his magnificent Xanadu-like set (and in America for the exteriors) took a year, editing another, and then The Shining opened in America to poor reviews and erratic business. Kubrick cut the final sequence, then another twenty-five minutes, trying to find that ground between masterpiece and failure. To be sure, Kubrick had cut an epilogue from Dr. Strangelove days before its final preview and trimmed nineteen minutes from 2001 after it had opened, but this major surgery on The Shining, his tempering with its carefully engineered rhythms, was a bewildering contradiction of Kubrick’s legendary auteurism, showing perhaps how exclusion can rob an artist of objectivity and spontaneity.

On paper, The Shining is the ultimate Kubrick film: an American family becomes the caretakers of the Overlook when it closes for the icy winter. He (Jack Nicholson) is a frustrated writer; she (Shelley Duvall) is amiable neurotic; their son (Danny Lloyd) is psychic, as is his father. The Overlook is an “old dark house” full of ghosts from the past and future, and Jack, abandoning his novel, sets out to do their evil bidding by attempting to murder his family.

“In many respects,” wrote Michel Ciment, “The Shining is one of [Kubrick’s] most intimate works. Isolated, hemmed in, beset by siege mentality, an intellectual sees himself as an artist but cannot create. By choosing an artist for the first time as the protagonist and making him a failure, Kubrick exorcises his own demons and demonstrated—by default, as it were—the exalting supremacy of artistic creation.” …

Yet the coldness that is attributed to Kubrick was blamed for the film’s lack of tension, its lack of terror. Unlike other horror films made at the same time, The Shining is conspicuously bloodless, a track into a void or an intellectual’s concept of what a horror film should be. But the film’s themes are uniquely Kubrick’s own, as if he were deliberately contradicting 2001’s evolutionary optimism with a tale of regression. As Pauline Kael noted, “the bone that was high in the air has turned into Jack’s ax, held aloft, and Jack crouched over, making wild inarticulate sounds as he staggers in the maze, has become the ape.” Richard Combs has suggested that Kubrick has come full circle: “The Shining is an iceberg that may in time prove to be one of the great Kubricks (with Paths of Glory, Lolita and Barry Lyndon), or may be the start of a whole new Kubrick.”

Kubrick’s latest film, being edited as this article was written, is Full Metal Jacket (1987), based on a ferociously violent Vietnam novel The Short Timers by Gustav Hasford. Seven years separate it from The Shining. Instead of filming in Southeast Asia, Kubrick chose to work in Britain, using as locations a derelict part of London’s dockland and, according to rumor, the grounds of his own country estate.…

Kubrick lives very quietly and privately in rural England, avoiding personal publicity….He directs his own advertising campaigns, coordinates release patterns, and personally checks every first-run print and foreign-language version of each of his films. Since he also writes or coauthors his scripts, and in recent years has been his own producer, he retains a degree of control over his work that is almost unequalled for a Hollywood director. As Philip French wrote, “there’s something about his pictures that has
enabled him to combine the budgets of a DeMille with the quirky individuality of a Buñuel... Dick Ciment called him “one of the most demanding, most original and most visionary filmmakers of our time.”


V. Horrorshow

In 1975 Kubrick was among five directors that Warner approached for the upcoming production of Network (1976); he expressed interest, but screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky, who wanted to be the film’s auteur, rejected him....Perhaps because Barry Lyndon had encountered a lukewarm reception from the US press and was a relative disappointment at the box office, Kubrick next thought of something more commercial: a generic horror picture in the vein of The Exorcist (1973) and The Omen (1976), both of which had generated huge profits and contributed to a cycle of Hollywood pictures about grossout, supernatural terror. Given the noirish tenor of his previous work, horror was certainly not an unexpected theme for Kubrick to explore. He was unable to find a suitable property, however, until Warner’s production chief, John Calley, sent him the page proofs of Stephen King’s The Shining, which tells the story of a psychologically troubled family of three trapped in a huge, demonic hotel during a winter storm. King’s popularity was on the rise (when it was published in 1977, the novel quickly shot to number eight on the US best-seller list), and for the leading role in the film adaptation Kubrick was able to attract a major star—Jack Nicholson, whom Kubrick had at one point considered to play Napoleon.

Kubrick rejected a screenplay that King himself had written, choosing instead to develop a script in collaboration with Diane Johnson, the author of, among other books, The Shadow Knows (1974), a psychological mystery novel Kubrick had at one point been interested in adapting. The Shadow Knows is the alternately sad, wryly amusing and frightening story of a divorced mother of four who lives with her children and a nanny in a housing project and who fears that an unknown person wants to kill her. Like The Shining, it makes the reader wonder if the central character is mentally disturbed or truly in danger (ironically, ‘The Shadow Knows’ is a line of dialogue in an early chapter of The Shining). Given its female point of view, it would have been an unusual project for Kubrick; but as Diane Johnson herself once noted, her novel also has certain features in common with Arthur Schnitzler’s Traumnovella, which later provided the basis for Eyes Wide Shut.

The script Johnson and Kubrick ultimately wrote for The Shining differs from King’s novel in several respects. It dispenses with most of the family’s history before arriving at the hotel, it kills off the kindly hotel chef and it ends with the father freezing to death in a maze rather than dying in a fire that destroys the hotel. When the film was released, King publicly criticised it on the grounds that the tone was satiric and the depiction of the father almost completely unsympathetic. In an interview with Playboy magazine, he described Kubrick as ‘a very cold man’ who had ‘great difficulty conceiving, even academically, of a supernatural world,’ and who ‘couldn’t grasp the sheer inhuman evil of the Overlook Hotel’. He concluded that Kubrick had ‘looked for evil in the characters and made the film into a domestic tragedy with only a few supernatural overtones’. Leaving aside his remarks on Kubrick’s personality, his description of the film was essentially correct. The novel is, in fact, much more extravagantly supernatural and anistic, and certainly more forgiving of the doomed alcoholic father, whose last words to his son are “run away. Quick. And remember how much I love you.” (In 1996, King produced a bad adaptation of the novel in the form of a five-hour TV miniseries that featured King in a cameo role, wearing garish make-up and conducting a ghostly orchestra in the hotel; it ended in sentimental fashion, with the father’s benign ghost appearing at his son’s college graduation to declare paternal love.)

For all their differences, however, King and Kubrick were alike in thinking that The Shining provided what King described as ‘a chance to blur the line between the supernatural and the psychotic’. Kubrick said much the same thing in an interview with Michel Ciment, in which he emphasised the importance of King’s plot:

“It seemed to strike an extraordinary balance between the psychological and the supernatural....This allowed you to suspend your doubt of the supernatural until you were so thoroughly into the story that you could accept it almost without noticing....The novel is by no means a serious literary work, but for the most part the plot is extremely well worked out....I’ve never been able to decide whether the plot [in any film] is just a way of keeping people’s attention while you do everything else, or whether the plot is really more important than anything else, perhaps communicating with us on an unconscious level which affects us in the way myths once did.”

The film maintains a balance between the psychological and the supernatural chiefly in the way it treats two characters: Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson), an alcoholic, would-be writer who has recently sworn off drinking and is reduced to doing menial work; and Jack’s son, Danny (Danny Lloyd), a five-year-old who in the past has been the victim of a violent ‘accident’ at the hands of his drunken father. When Jack takes a job as the winter caretaker at the luxurious Overlook Hotel, he begins to experience what appear to be hallucinations and psychotic symptoms. By the end of the picture, however, we have no choice but to conclude that the ghosts who urge him to murder his wife and child are not simply in his mind. Danny, for his part, seems at first to be a disturbed little boy who suffers from horrific fantasies and a split personality; but early on, after he meets hotel chef Dick Halloran (Scatman Crothers), we suspect that he has a gift of ‘shining’ or ESP, which enables him to see directly into the hidden past and the traumatic future.

The is-this-happening-or-is-he-crazy quality that Kubrick tried to sustain for much of the film is precisely the quality that
Tzvetan Todorov and other literary theorists have described as the ‘fantastic’. According to Todorov, fantastic narrative isn’t simply a story containing supernatural occurrences, but one that challenges the reader’s ability to explain events as either imaginary or supernatural. He describes the form as follows (for the sake of readability I’ve refrained from entering ‘sic’ after the masculine pronouns):

“An inexplicable phenomenon occurs; to obey his determinist mentality, the reader finds himself obliged to choose between two solutions: either to reduce this phenomenon to known causes, to the natural order, describing the unwonted events as imaginary, or else to admit the existence of the supernatural and thereby effect a modification in all the representations which form his image of the world. The fantastic lasts as long as this uncertainty lasts; once the reader opts for one solution or the other, he is in the realm of the uncanny or of the marvelous.”

Todorov’s analysis suggests a continuum of effects involving three different ways of handling causal explanations in fiction: first is realism (‘known causes’), then what Todorov’s translator Richard Howard, terms the uncanny (psychological causes, though it should be emphasised that Todorov isn’t a Freudian and uses psychology in a more general sense) and, finally, the marvellous (supernatural causes). Two-thirds of the way down this range, at the point where the uncanny is on the verge of becoming the marvellous, we find what Todorov names the fantastic ‘genre’. His exemplary text is Henry James’ ‘The Turn of the Screw’, in which the uncertainty about how to explain events is never resolved—in other words, pace Edmund Wilson’s famous interpretation of James’ story, we never know whether the ghosts are real or figments of the governess-narrator’s sexually repressed imagination.

Kubrick was always interested in grotesque combinations of the commonplace and the wildly satirical or fanciful, and he was instinctively drawn to any kind of story—Burgess’s A Clockwork Orange and Schnitzler’s Traumnovella, for example—that blurs the line between reality and dream or fairy tale. One of the interesting aspects of his adaptation of The Shining, however, is that it runs the entire range of narrative possibilities described by Todorov. An aura of weirdness or outright derangement haunts the film from the very start, but everything is motivated by the typically realistic situation of a ‘nuclear’ American family undergoing economic and psychological stress. The early scenes show us Jack’s job interview with the corporate manager of the Overlook Hotel (Barry Nelson), lunch-table conversation between Wendy (Shelley Duvall) and Danny, and a visit to Danny from a paediatrician (Anne Jackson). These and a few later scenes are so firmly grounded in down-at-heels quotidian materials of domestic drama (the mother chain smokes, the son reads a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, a TV set plays in the background) and so inflected by touches of deadpan humour (the ash on the mother’s cigarette keeps getting longer as she talks with the paediatrician) that, in 2005, a clever group of film-makers was able to construct a mock trailer for The Shining, choosing clips that make the picture look like a slightly whimsical family comedy.

The early sequences also invoke the Freudian uncanny, which always depends upon a background of domestic realism: when Danny eats his sandwich, he speaks to ‘Mrs Torrance’ in the gravelly voice of his apparently imaginary friend Tony, who ‘lives’ somewhere in his mouth; and when he brushes his teeth, he has a terrifying vision and an apparent seizure. As the plot develops, bizarre events proliferate (for most of the film, only Wendy seems immune from ghostly visitations) until we reach a point where it becomes difficult to decide whether or not we should suspend disbelief in the supernatural. When Jack walks into the Gold Ballroom and orders a drink from the satanic bartender, Lloyd (Joe Turkel), we reach a crisis of interpretation and enter the zone of the pure fantastic. Somewhat later, when Jack is set free from a food locker by the ghost of the former caretaker, we encounter the film’s first unambiguously supernatural event (unless we want to assume on little evidence that Jack or somebody else is dreaming everything from here until the end) and we move into the zone of Todorov’s ‘marvellous’. The climactic scenes never entirely release their hold on realism or Freud, and some of the repeated images, such as the elevator of blood, retain an ambiguous status; but the film ends with a carnival of ghostly sadism and sexual decadence (chiefly homosexuality and a hint of bestiality), and with several allusions to myths and fairy tales.

Among the many commentators on The Shining, only Michel Ciment has noticed the degree to which the film can be understood in terms of what he, like Todorov, calls ‘the genre of the fantastic’, which for him constitutes a ‘shock between what is real and what is imaginary’ and a ‘breach in the recognized order of things’. Ciment argues that, for this reason, The Shining belong in the same genre category as 2001, and he points out a remarkable number of things that the two apparently unrelated films have in common: they both eschew off-screen narration in favour of intertitles (in The Shining the titles announce events or mark the passage of time in increasingly short intervals); they both use a mixture of modernist and romantic music (The Shining mingles Ligeti, Penderecki and Bartok with a ‘Dies Irae’ derived from Berlioz’s Symphonie Fantastique, which is orchestrated by Wendy Carlos and Rachel Elkind); they both take place inside large man-made structures controlled by non-human entities (the extremely large and fascinating sets for the two films were constructed at the same British studio); they both tell stories of characters who are trapped between a hostile outside world and a murderous figure on the inside who destroys their technical equipment; and, most significantly, ‘In either film, the spectator is incapable of supplying a rational explanation for what [she or he] has witnessed’.

Viewed in this light, a number of scenes in The Shining seem to echo 2001. For example, the aerial photography at the beginning of the film bears a certain resemblance to the famous ‘star gate’. Danny’s wide-angle journey into an impossible world, is not unlike Dave Bowman’s climactic journey aboard the Discovery (at
By the same token, the genre of gothic horror, which originated in Europe during the late eighteenth century, was developed in reaction against a dominant rationalism; for that reason, she believes the gothic, like the grotesque, with which it participates, has often functioned as ‘an art of estrangement’ and a critique of ‘capitalist and patriarchal orders’. Perhaps so, The Shining can certainly be read along those lines, and has been. But as Robin Wood and others have pointed out, a good many horror films are ideologically reactionary.

The Overlook is a thoroughly modernist building modelled partly on the Timberline Lodge in Oregon and partly on art director Roy Walker’s research into twentieth-century hotel architectures across America (the men’s room in the bar is based on Frank Lloyd Wright’s design for the Arizona Biltmore), but it’s also a kind of castle perched atop a mountain....

Nearly all the modern variants of gothic horror turn their haunted buildings into expressions of the characters’ mental states—outward manifestations of individual isolation and unconscious sexual fears. In the Stephen King novel, the Overlook is both a psychological space and an organism with its own mind, complete with topiary shrubs in the grounds that come alive to menace the characters. Kubrick takes a more realistic approach, strongly emphasising the ways in which the building’s luxury feeds Jack’s resentment of his family and his fantasies of becoming a playboy author in the mould of Scott Fitzgerald....

But the Overlook isn’t simply the physical manifestation of Jack’s desires for wealth and fame; it’s also an ironically domesticated space—a terrifying ‘home’ that makes the entire Torrance family feel what the novel calls ‘cabin fever’. At this level, the film invites Freudian interpretation; and, in fact, when The Shining was released, Diane Johnson told interviewers that, as a preparation for writing the screenplay, she and Kubrick had read Freud’s essay, ‘The Uncanny’ (1919), which attempts to explain the sources of what Freud calls the ‘common core of feeling...in certain things which lie within the field of what is frightening’. In his essay, Freud notes that the German word Unheimlich, meaning ‘unhomely’, is akin to the English word ‘uncanny’, which has an Anglo-Saxon etymology meaning ‘unknown’ or ‘unfamiliar’; he goes on, however, to argue that uncanny feelings, which we experience more strongly in art than in life, are stimulated not by strange or unearthly phenomena but by unconscious fears of a quite ‘homely’ kind, originating in the family and often expressing themselves as symbolic fantasies of castration at the hands of a father figure. Kubrick’s film makes darkly humorous allusions to
this theory. When the hotel manager shows the Torrance family their humble apartment in the staff quarters of the Overlook, Jack looks around the place with a slightly ironic grin and says, ‘It’s very homey.’ Near the climax of the story, Jack bashes in the door of the apartment with a fire axe and calls out, ‘Wendy? I’m home!’

Like King’s novel, the film shifts its point of view from one member of the family to another; but it distributes the greater part of the subjective shots almost equally between Jack and Danny, maintaining a balance between two apparently Freudian perspectives. On the one hand, we have the father’s narcissism, violent frustration and death wish; on the other, the son’s latent sexual desires and emotional conflicts. From the latter viewpoint, the plot seems flagrantly Oedipal, dealing with a male child’s struggle against a castrating father who, even though he is absent much of the time, inhabits full access to the mother….

In the interests of giving some of these events the atmosphere of a child’s imagination, Johnson and Kubrick supplemented their reading of Freud with Bruno Bettelheim’s The Uses of Enchantment (1973), a Freudian analysis of fairy tales, which argues that certain kinds of grisly stories provide children with therapeutic ways of dealing with primal anxieties. Thus, the film contains several references to fairy tales and violent cartoons such as ‘Road Runner’….

In one of the best commentaries on the film, William Paul discusses most of these details, but also makes the important point that The Shining uses Freud for revisionist ends. The most radical and disturbing aspect of the film is that Jack Torrance isn’t, as Freudian analysis would have it, an imaginary menace or a fairy-tale monster created by a child’s projected anxieties; he’s a realistic character who despises his wife, who feels ambivalence towards his son and who actually becomes a crazed axe murderer. This situation is quite rare. The villain in horror movies is usually a stepfather, as in Night of the Hunter (1955) and The Stepfather (1987); a mother, as in Psycho (1960) and Mommie Dearest (1981); or a demonic child, as in The Exorcist and The Omen. Significantly, Robin Wood’s influential psychoanalytic theory of the horror film, which argues that the monster or the demonic ‘other’ represents a return of the repressed and a key to any individual film’s ideological purpose, contains not a single example of a motion picture in which the monster is a white male patriarch.

One of the distinctive features of Stephen King’s fiction is that it contains several monstrous fathers or father figures. Kubrick’s film seizes on this quality and, to a greater degree than King, locates the propensity towards evil in a father’s psychology. Jack Torrance appears to be guided and assisted by ghosts but, at the ideological level, it hardly matters whether the ghosts are real or figments of his imagination; he’s urged to do what he already wants to do. Furthermore, nearly all the ghosts who have speaking roles or significant scenes, including the sexual revellers we see near the end, are white males. (The exceptions are the Grady sisters, who are the victims of their father, and the voiceless woman in the bath, who seems to have been a suicide.) Jack’s male rage and the mainsprings of his violence are vividly revealed in his speech to Lloyd in the Gold Room—a frightening scene, but also a parody of a bar-fly’s confession, played by Nicholson in a broad, squirming style. Tormented by writer’s block and guilt, Jack explains that he suffers from a ‘white man’s burden’ caused by ‘the old sperm bank upstairs’:

“Jack: I never laid a hand on him, goddamn it… I wouldn’t touch one hair on his god damned little head. I love the little sonofabitch. I’d do anything for him. Any fucking thing. That bitch! Long as I live she’ll never let me forget what happened. [Pause] I did hurt him once, okay? It was an accident! Completely unintentional. Coulda happened to anybody. It was three god damned years ago! The little fucker had thrown all my papers over the floor. All I tried to do was pull him up! A momentary loss of muscular coordination!”

...Freud seems to repress or conveniently ignore the incident of paternal abuse [in the Oedipus story], but Kubrick faces it squarely, dramatising ‘something so insistently repressed in Western culture, the hostility of the father toward his own son’…

In addition to Theseus and Jack the Giant Killer, the film (like the novel) alludes to Hansel and Gretel. All three stories involve cannibalism, a theme introduced early in The Shining by means of the Torrance family’s conversation about the Donner party. The three stories also concern children or younger men who clearly manoeuvre through unfamiliar surrounding to defeat monstrous antagonists, just as Danny, aided by his mother, uses analytical skills and exploration of the hotel and its hedge maze to defeat his murderous father….

In interviews when the film was released (one of which can be seen in the Vivian Kubrick documentary), Nicholson recalled a conversation with Kubrick in which the director told him that actors try too hard to make the performance ‘real’, when ‘real’ isn’t always interesting. This idea originates not with Kubrick but with Stanislavsky, the ultimate realist; nevertheless, it serves as an appropriate motto for the unusual effects Kubrick seems to be trying to achieve. In film after film, his performers veer back and forth between realism and caricature; often the starring actor (James Mason in Lolita, Ryan O’Neal in Barry Lyndon and Tom Cruise in Eyes Wide Shut) is a straight man who works alongside bizarre supporting players, but sometimes the star gives a comically stylised performance. …

At several points, Nicholson conveys a barely contained violence—when he throw a tennis ball against the walls of the
Overlook, for example—and his mouth and eyebrows work overtime when Jack enters his manic phases. The expressive extremes of his performance aren’t to everyone’s taste, and his dark portrait of fatherhood may be one of the reasons why The Shining, after a profitable opening, never achieved the ticket sales the studio expected… In the last analysis, however, his portrayal is well suited to Kubrick’s absurdist style. When the picture was released, Kubrick indicated he wanted to make one of the most frightening movies of all time. If that was the case, he didn’t succeed. What he made is an intellectualised, formally rigorous, genuinely disturbing satire of American paternity—a film that runs somewhat against the grain of King’s novel and the horror-film cycle of its day. The satire is all the more troubling when Jack Torrance’s misogyny, racism and bad-boy grin are enshrined in the hotel picture gallery, haunting the audience until the very end.

COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2010 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XX:

Apr 6  Wolfgang Petersen, Das Boot 1981
Apr 13  Federico Fellini, Ginger & Fred, 1985
Apr 20 Michael Mann, Collateral 2004

CONTACTS:

...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu
...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu
...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com
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