The Disparity of Point of View

in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

Ken Kesey’s novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is probably best known by its movie version, in which Jack Nicholson plays the rowdy, sexually bold outlaw who opposes at every chance the dispassionate, prudish, authoritarian nurse of a horrific mental ward where patients are reduced to passive, emasculated, invertebrate victims of an inhuman bureaucracy. Randle Patrick McMurphy, the ostensible hero, romps and rants through the film, making shambles of the nurse’s order and gaining the audience’s implicit approval. We cheer jubilantly as our lusty protagonist pokes and prods the sexless nurse, inspiring one inmate, Chief Bromden, to assert his masculine prerogative and independence by breaking out of the asylum in the final scene.

But text and film differ in the presentation of McMurphy’s heroism, for the novel employs the subtlety of an untrustworthy point of view, adding a complex dimension of irony not available in the film. Kesey’s novel is written from the unstable perspective of the paranoid schizophrenic Indian who is not much more than an auxiliary character in the movie. The novel’s unreliable narrative voice results in tangled verbal ambiguity, but in the film, McMurphy is protagonist and hero, and the viewer’s sympathy is engaged by the character’s roustabout charm and apparently sacrificial motive to “cure” the other patients of their respective ailments. In the novel, Mack offers only a tenuous salvation perceived dimly through Chief’s foggy paranoia and schizophrenic dementia. Ultimately, the reader ponders the reality of the entire narrative, the efficacy of McMurphy’s heroism, and the validity of Chief’s exuberant escape from the ward,
issues not at all raised by the movie. In 1992, Kesey’s novel celebrated its thirtieth anniversary, and the film is nearly two decades old, yet both have remained strong works of art and popular culture, compelling us to reexamine the unique relationship of text to film.

One key to the complex artistry of the novel is Kesey’s manipulation of Chief’s point of view. The author’s interest in experimental narrative perspective is suggested by a letter written to Ken Babbs during the early stages of the novel’s development: “I’ll discuss point of view for a time now. I am beginning to agree with Stegner, that it truely [sic] is the most important problem in writing. The book I have been doing . . . is a third person work, but something was lacking . . . so I tried something that will be extremely difficult to pull off. . . . Think of this: I, me ken kesey, is stepped back another step and am writing about a third person author [sic] writing about something. Fair makes the mind real, don’t it? (Pratt 338-39). Kesey evidently was dissatisfied with the direction his written work was taking, a course adopted successfully and lucratively by Milos Forman’s film a little over a decade later. As a strictly third-person work—the vantage point of the camera lens, for example—Cuckoo’s Nest the movie portrays the typical adventure of Joseph Campbell’s monomythic hero who is called to adventure, who engages the forces of darkness, who struggles with doubt and temptation, and who triumphs in the end either by personal victory or by transferring his virtues to others through sacrifice. In the book, however, Kesey adds another dimension of meaning that brings into play an irony that grows as the reader gradually understands the unreliability of the narrator’s rendering of events and rationalizing of his own text’s significance. The difference is between the literalness of a third-person account of a hero’s cycle and the ulterior messages of an ironic subtext. As Michael Wood writes, “The game being played [in the novel], our implication in the Chief’s vision and our resistance to it, our attempts to see it as just crazy or just literary, even our desire to believe in it, is a special, bookish form of hide-and-seek, which requires text and readers, can’t be played with images on a screen and an audience in a cinema” (3). Marsha McCreadie, on the other hand, consciously ignores the crucial disparity of point of view in her understandable enthusiasm for the film: “There are structural changes from novel to film (the most outstanding being the omission of Chief Bromden’s first-person point of view), and some alterations in the characters. But it doesn’t seem to matter—the momentum and the spirit of the original have been retained” (125).

In the film, McMurphy’s position as hero is uncontested. His call to adventure is the challenge offered by Nurse Ratched, whose strict authoritarianism and repressed womanhood represent what Robert Boyers has called “a tendency toward antiseptic desexualization which is abhorrent” (46). As the contest intensifies, the audience steadily sides with the psychopathic misfit as he provokes the inflexible, prudish Miss Ratched into a battle that takes on the proportions of myth: man versus woman, good versus evil, freedom versus confinement, individuality versus conformity, sex and death in perpetual antithesis. When Mack discovers that the other patients on the ward are voluntary, he wises up momentarily, backs off on his assaults, and undergoes a period of doubt during which he is tempted to follow the rules in order to speed his release from the asylum. But true heroes must complete their cycle of experience and return to the world of light with some redemptive boon, and McMurphy’s destiny as hero compels him to reenage the Nurse in combat on behalf of the patients. After Billy Bibbit, Mack’s fawning disciple in the sexual arts, commits suicide because he is shamed by Miss Ratched’s insinuations of the dirty, guilty nature of his promiscuous frolic with a squiggling tart, our hero attacks the monstrous nurse and is carted off to be lobotomized. The lobotomy, we are led to believe by action and symbol, is the nurse’s brutal castration of Randle’s randy masculinity. But Mack attains his final victory, for, as Joseph J. Waldmeir asserts, “with the sacrifice of his own manhood he buys back the manhood of most of the other inmates” (202). Chief, until now a secondary character in the film, assumes Mack’s role, lovingly suffocates the hero,
and bursts through the windows of the institution by hurling the very same washtub basin that McMurphy had tried earlier to lift unsuccessfully: the gesture signifies Mack’s transferral of power to Chief, who escapes to a more natural world and to the presumed wholesomeness of regained sanity while the cinema screen fills with the image of another loony crying out in jubilant, vicarious triumph.

Very neat, very tidy, and very popular among the counter-culture crowd of the sixties, grown up and subdued a bit by the film’s seventies milieu. Yet what audience—in the defiant sixties or the gilded, prudent nineties—wouldn’t cheer the rambunctious likes of Randle McMurphy, cavorting rebelliously through a celluloid landscape of sterile, white walls; inhuman, dictatorial nurses; insensitive, violent orderlies; and absurd, debilitating rules of order? But the novel is a different work altogether, narrated by an “obviously psychopathic ‘I,’” as Leslie A. Fiedler puts it, and composed more as if it is “dreamed or hallucinated rather than merely written” (179-80, 183). Chief Bromden—the paranoid schizophrenic通过 whose tenuous, disturbed reflections we judge the action and significance of the novel—admits that he has been on the ward “the longest . . . longer’n anybody. Longer’n any of the other patients” (16). Chief’s perceptions are grotesque and weird, propelling us into a phantasmagoric world of drug-induced visions and haunting images of a painful, repressed past of an emasculated Indian father, a treacherous white mother, and a humiliated native people. Bromden refers to “[h]um of black machinery” (the Negro orderlies); “[s]ound of matched cylinders” (patients breathing in mechanical unison); “miniature electronic elements . . . microscopic wires and girds and transistors . . . designed to dissolve on contact with air” (daily medication pills); and the strange, ubiquitous fog that permeates the ward and recurs in Chief’s paranoic descriptions with haunting frequency: “Before noontime they’re at the fog machine again but they haven’t got it turned up full; it’s not so thick but what we can see if I strain real hard” (3, 31, 33, 39).

The straining to see is the key to Chief’s narration: Bromden’s perspective is hallucinatory and hyperbolic, narrative qualities expressed best by his depiction of his salvational champion, McMurphy, and the hero’s nemesis, Miss Ratched. The oversize, mythical dimension of both Mack and Big Nurse as antipodal figures in a life-and-death contest of wills sets up the popular views of the novel represented by the “comic realism” of the film version (Kroll 113). Terry G. Sherwood, for instance, traces the novel’s connections to comic strip superhero fantasies and shoot-em-up Western Lone Ranger dramas, John A. Barsness to indigenous western American folk tales in which “the good guys always triumph over the bad guys” (Pratt 421), Raymond M. Olderman to romance legends of a “successful Grail Knight” (37), and both Richard B. Hauck and Bruce E. Wallis to the transformed figure of the comic but efficacious Christ in modern guise. Such criticism confirms the strong appeal of the literal plot. But Sherwood is right in adding that the superficial action of the story—the level of communication assumed in the film—leaves us with a “somewhat sentimentalized over-simplification of moral problems,” for the real genius of Kesey’s novel emerges from the ambiguity of Chief’s account, which is, according to Sherwood, “perhaps imaginary.” Sherwood argues that “all events in the book are hallucinations” and reminds us that Bromden “begins his narration in the asylum, recalling past events . . .” (108-09). Chief, himself, calls attention to his own unreliability as narrator: after describing a cast of eccentric characters in an admittedly “crazy, horrible . . . goofy and outlandish” scene perceived through the nightmarish, thick fog of his distorted view, Chief says, “But if they don’t exist, how can a man see them?” (87). Or, after observing the stain of Miss Ratched’s lipstick on her cup, Chief remarks, “[S]he couldn’t be wearing lipstick that color. That color on the rim of the cup must be from heat, touch of her lips set it smoldering” (149). Or, perhaps most convincing, Chief’s introduction ends with his confession, “I been silent so long now it’s gonna roar out of me like floodwaters and you think the guy telling this is ranting and raving my
God; you think this is too horrible to have really happened, this is too awful to be the truth! But, please. It’s still hard for me to have a clear mind thinking on it. But it’s the truth even if it didn’t happen” (8).

Ranting and raving, indeed. The syntactical ambiguity of the first line, “They’re out there. Black boys in white suits up before me to commit sex acts in the hall and get it mopped up before I can catch them” (3), suggests Chief’s residence in the ward at the present moment as he begins his retrospective narrative and therefore calls into question the reality of his supposed escape at the end of the novel. The ambiguity is reinforced after Chief receives shock treatment for helping his hero during a fight with the orderlies. The electrotherapy sends Bromden into a mental tailspin—a “foggy, jumbled blur which is a whole lot like the ragged edge of sleep, that gray zone between light and dark, or between sleeping and waking or living and dying”—and in the midst of his incoherent gibberish—“AIR RAID . . . man, Man, MAN, MAN . . . broad and big with a wink like a star. . . . Tingle, tingle, tremble toes . . . one flew east, one flew west, one flew over the cuckoo’s nest” (271-72)—Chief repeats the line in present tense, “They’re out there. Black boys in white suits peeing under the door on me . . .” (275). How much has really transpired by the time McMurphy completes his role as ostensible “cowboy saint” or Bromden as self-appointed “Indian poet” at the end of the novel (Pearson 91)?

Omitting the intricacy of an unreliable point of view offers the reader no alternative but to read the story literally, as a straightforward hero narrative: dramatically effective, entertaining, comic, and inspiring—precisely the level of meaning of what Michael Wood calls “the literalism of Forman’s rendering” in film (4). But such a reading lacks the complex effects of Chief’s hypnagogic drama in which the principal players are hyperbolized metaphors of Bromden’s desperate desire for freedom, self-worth, and humor. Wood argues that “Chief sees metaphors. When men are described as rabbits, the rabbits hop before his eyes” (3). Hence, Ratched is “Big Nurse” (3), with “[p]recise, automatic gesture” (5), enameled “doll’s face and . . . doll’s smile,” and huge breasts that are her anomalous “outsized badges of femininity” (151): “A mistake was made somehow in manufacturing, putting those big, womanly breasts on what would of otherwise been a perfect work, and you can see how bitter she is about it” (5-6). In contrast, McMurphy is the exaggerated, charismatic hero whose bravado, lustiness, and apparent concern for the humanity of the inmates make him Chief’s choice as Ratched’s match: “He sounds big. I hear him coming down the hall, and he sounds big in the way he walks, and he sure don’t slide; he’s got iron on his heels and he rings it on the floor like horseshoes. He shows up in the door and stops and hitchs his thumbs in his pockets, boots wide apart, and stands there with the guys looking at him. ‘Good mornin’, buddies.’ . . . He talks a little the way Papa used to, voice loud and full of hell . . .” (10-11). This is the classic myth of good guy versus bad guy, exploded by the schizophrenic imagination and transplanted to the repressive world of Ratched’s ward. Within the context of his madness, Chief’s narrative, in other words, may be the product of what he wants desperately to be true rather than what likely is true—an elaborate, hallucinated metaphor of his disturbed emotional, sexual, familial, and tribal history. The hero story, without the ironies and subtextual ambiguities of a mentally ill first-person narrator, makes good Oscar-winning cinema but encourages the discerning reader to join Michael Wood in his criticism of the film: “Can it be true that the insane are merely scared, that it’s all the Nurse’s fault, and that a good fuck would cure any pathology? Isn’t there something unfeeling about such optimism? Kesey’s novel doesn’t prompt such questions, because it is safe inside the Chief’s narration . . . but Forman’s movie does, and this reminds us how simplified it is, both psychologically and politically” (4). Jack Kroll agrees: “By opting for a style of comic realism, Forman loses much of the nightmare quality that made the book a capsized allegory of an increasingly mad reality” (113).

Kroll also argues that the film’s focus on the conflict between McMurphy and Ratched results in the creation of “thinned out” characters, a criticism applicable to a reading of the novel without irony and narrative ambiguity. Big Nurse, for example,
"seems much more of a sexist concept—Woman as Castrator" (Kroll 113). Her fitting counterpart is McMurphy, the rowdy, sexual maverick who in the novel swaggers in his iron-heeled cowboy boots while singing, "My wagons are loaded . . . my whip’s in my hand" (89) and who describes to the effeminate Harding Miss Ratched’s "genius for insinuation" (61) as not "peckin’ at your eyes. That’s not what she’s peckin’ at . . . Why, don’t you know, buddy? . . . At your balls, buddy, at your everlovin’ balls" (57). Mack also wears black satin underpants suggestively printed with "big white whales with red eyes," a literary allusion to Moby Dick turned obscene: "From a co-ed at Oregon State . . . a Literary major. . . . She gave them to me because she said I was a symbol" (81). When our hero’s unsatisfactory job of cleaning bathrooms causes Big Nurse to utter, "Why, this is an outrage . . . an outrage," McMurphy responds, "No; that’s a toilet bowl . . . a toilet bowl," later adding further provocation by scrawling lewd remarks backwards under the toilet bowl rims so that when Miss Ratched inspects with her compact mirror, "she gave a short gasp at what she read reflected and dropped her mirror in the toilet" (151).

This is the stuff of popular comedy and cinema, to be sure, but as Kroll observes, "Kesey’s many-leveled book had to be simplified by Forman, and he does this with clarity and shape. What’s lost is the powerful feeling at the center, the terror and the terrifying laughter" (113). Elaine B. Safer’s view is that "Forman—in the movie—has supplanted Bromden’s interior monologue with concrete detailed scenes. He has exchanged surreal description for realistic presentation of patients in an institutional setting. In this setting, Forman develops scenes which stress comic realism" (134).

The comic realism of the film produces a humor different from the unsettling, grotesque comedy of Chief’s psychosis, with its bizarre juxtaposition of the sanity of the outer world versus inner madness and, conversely, inner sanity versus the madness of the outer world. Chief’s external confinement within the walls of Ratched’s ward, the setting of McMurphy’s heroic struggle with Big Nurse as Chief sees it, is less disturbing than his imprisonment within his own mental instability because of the more limitless, more profoundly frightening dimensions of his own dementia. The black humor of the book becomes more of a “crazy comedy of manners” in the film (Kroll 113). As Safer indicates, “In the movie . . . the ability to perceive the dimensions of humor in pain and pain in humor . . . is forfeited for the one-dimensional level of slapstick humor . . . ”(136).

Yet, the movie is “a well-made film that flares at times into incandescence” (Kroll 113) with “extraordinary” performances and “brilliant” moments (Wood 3-4). We delight, after all, in McMurphy’s war, fought on our behalf, against the symbols of authoritarianism and conformity. We cheer him on because like Chief and the other inmates we crave a “giant come out of the sky to save us from the Combine” (255); like the loonies in the cuckoo’s nest we wouldn’t dare “stop him because we were the ones making him do it. It wasn’t the nurse that was forcing him, it was our need . . . ” (304). The film gives the cinema audience the kind of story that Chief creates for himself out of need, the kind of blown-up, irreverent, comic hero adventure in which we participate vicariously. In fact, many of the novel’s initial readers in the sixties wanted to see Kesey’s message in these terms. In 1970, for instance, one interviewer for The Whole Earth Catalogue tries adamantly to make of Kesey some sort of psychedelic guru spokesman for the subversive counter culture of his generation:

ARGUS: Who’s drawing the line? Who’s putting people in jail? Who’s killing people in the streets?

KESEY: What difference does it make?

ARGUS: Don’t you have any vision?

KESEY: You ask me if I’ve got any vision. I’ve got three kids. I mean I’m invested in this world. I prune my trees even though I’m not going to
have fruit for two years in a row. . . . The thing that you want is something that you’re going to have to go find somebody else to get it from, because I can’t give it to you. . . . No, listen, what this country needs is sanity. Individual sanity, and all the rest will come true.

ARGUS: Bullshit.

KESEY: You can’t do it any other way. You work from the heart out, you don’t work from the issue down. (Garage Sale 205)

Kesey understands the difficult ironies and ambiguities involved in taking on the Combine, a knowledge that Chief assumes only in his brief moments of clarity, the authenticity of which is ultimately uncertain because of the schizophrenic’s predictable unpredictability. For example, passages such as “McMurphy was teaching me. I was feeling better than I’d remembered feeling since I was a kid, when everything was good and the land was still singing kids’ poetry to me” (243) are balanced by admissions that Mack “worked so hard at pointing out the funny side of things that I was wondering a little if maybe he was blind to the other side, if maybe he wasn’t able to see what it was that parched laughter deep inside your stomach” (227); by discoveries such as “I’m just getting the full force of the dangers we let ourselves in for when we let McMurphy lure us out of the fog” (142); or by grim analogies between Mack and Old Rawler, a “guy up on Disturbed” who killed himself when he “[c]ut both nuts off and bled to death, sitting right on the can in the latrine, half a dozen people in there with him didn’t know it till he fell off the floor, dead. What makes people so impatient,” Chief adds, “is what I can’t figure; all the guy had to do was wait” (123-24). McMurphy, sadly, cannot wait; he works from the issues down, always in motion restlessly against the forces of confinement and conformity (his initials are R.P.M., the contemporary macho revved up for combat against the impassive, immovable Combine).

Chief’s method of protest is simply staying put and being “cagey”; he hides his chewed up pieces of Juicy Fruit gum under his bed,pretends to be deaf and dumb, and waits out his time within the terrifyingly boundless new frontier of his madness, a point aptly made by Fiedler: “It is only a step from thinking of the West as madness to regarding madness as the true West” (185). Cuckoo’s Nest, then, is truly a western in a double sense: on the one hand, as the film presents it and as Chief would like to believe, a traditional story of good guys and bad guys complete with Indians; and, on the other hand, as the complex literary product of an unstable narrator, a haunting and grotesquely comic acting out of Chief’s fragmented, schizophrenic mind: the “West of Madness,” the new frontier, the new reality (Fiedler 185).

Tom Wolfe, one of Kesey’s friends during the author’s experimentations with LSD, is one of the first readers to understand the ulterior significance of Bromden’s narration and the discomfitTING ironies and subtleties that accompany the unreliable first-person point of view. In The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, Wolfe recounts Kesey’s struggle with the composition of the novel:

From the point of view of craft, Chief Broom was his great inspiration. If he had told the story through McMurphy’s eyes, he would have had to end up with the big bruiser delivering a lot of homilies about his down-home theory of mental therapy. Instead, he told the story through the Indian. This way he could present a schizophrenic state the way the schizophrenic himself, Chief Broom, feels it and at the same time report the McMurphy Method more subtly. (50)

The homilies are, in fact, delivered in the film with popular, effective force. But the novel portrays a McMurphy whose bravado is undermined repeatedly by images of the futility of escape, resistance, and belligerent opposition: the factory girl who yearns for Chief to take her away from hopeless enslavement in a cotton mill (36-37); Old Rawler’s suicide in Disturbed (123-24); Cheswick’s suicide drowning after he feels betrayed because Mack will not back him up against the Big Nurse (165-66); Billy Bibbit’s gruesome suicide at the end of the book when he cuts his throat (304-05); or
Bancini’s limp rebellion, which earns him only a sedative that leaves him mumbling feebly, “I’m . . . tired . . . aw-ful tired” (49-53).

Kesey makes every attempt to counterbalance the wave of acclamation that he knows accompanies the appealing hero tale as presented by Chief and that later is intensified by the popular film. In an interview published in 1971, Kesey cautions against what Wolfe terms “the McMurphy Method.” The interviewer comments on the revolutionary message of the book; Kesey responds, “Ah. I see. Well, I think that either sticking a leg in a pair of bell-bottoms or loading a canister into an anti-aircraft weapon may or may not be a revolutionary act. This is only known at the center of the man doing the act. And there is where the revolution must lie, at the seat of the act’s impetus, so that finally every action, every thought and prayer, springs from this committed center” (Garage Sale 218). Undoubtedly, Milos Forman was attracted to the spirit of revolt in the novel when he was making the film, for McCready reports that in an interview Forman quips, “I have always liked stories which deal with individuals in conflict against the so-called Establishment. . . . It’s sort of a Czech film” (131). McMurphy, therefore, gets the laughs, but perhaps Chief is the actual revolutionary hero of the cuckoo’s nest, for despite the confusion, subversive irony, and unreliability of his narration, the text remains as testimony of the constructive power of imagination, even if that imagination is lost in an outer loony bin of chronic crazies or in an inner funhouse of schizophrenic madness: “Fair makes the mind real, don’t it?” (Pratt 339).

We wonder, finally, if Kesey doesn’t have Chief’s brawling idol in mind when he recounts in the 1970 interview an incident through which he exposes the limitations of expecting to change one’s outer world without suffering loss while, at the same time, gently expressing his fondness for the charming, foolish Quixotes who try:

KESEY: I’ll tell you a little story. Wolfe was there and this was towards the end of the time he was hanging around. We were up at my brother’s farm, Spaceheater House, and we were moving this statue up onto the wall, and he had painted it with pigment. He had not used the right stuff, so the paint had never dried. Tom Wolfe was out there, and he had his note pad, and me and Ramrod were trying to move this thing up on the wall, and obviously we needed help. And there was only the three of us, and Tom Wolfe was out there, and he was dressed the way he always dresses, in his blue suit, and we finally says, “Goddamnit, Tom, give us a hand.” So he put his note pad down, and he went to put it up there, and he got this huge swatch of red on the side of his coat, of oil pigment. We stood there, in this moment of realization, and I told him, “You just can’t expect to fool around with it without getting it on you.” And that’s the last time I ever saw Tom Wolfe. But I love him. (Garage Sale 207)

How or if the film portrays the complexity of Kesey’s view continues to fuel critical dialogue among writers such as Donald Palumbo, Thomas J. Slater, and George B. MacDonald, whose works address the various issues of transforming literature to film. The McMurphys of text and cinema may share external characteristics, winning our hurrabs as they walk tall against the debilitating, oppressive force of the Combine. But the renegade Irishman of the novel is perceived differently because of the complicated effects of Chief Bromden’s narrative perspective. In the opening scene of the novel, Chief retreats into the shadows of the broom closet where he tries to escape to the safety of what he remembers as a saner, happier past, but “like always when I try to place my thoughts in the past and hide there, the fear close at hand seeps in through the memory” (6). The closet is only one form of darkness and retreat; the real terror in the humor of the book is the unbounded territory of madness, the abysmal power of personal blackness, the fright of “my dark,” as Chief says (4, italics mine). Indeed, Chief’s private darkness is much greater than that which we experience in public cinema when we enjoy Cuckoo’s Nest the film.

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