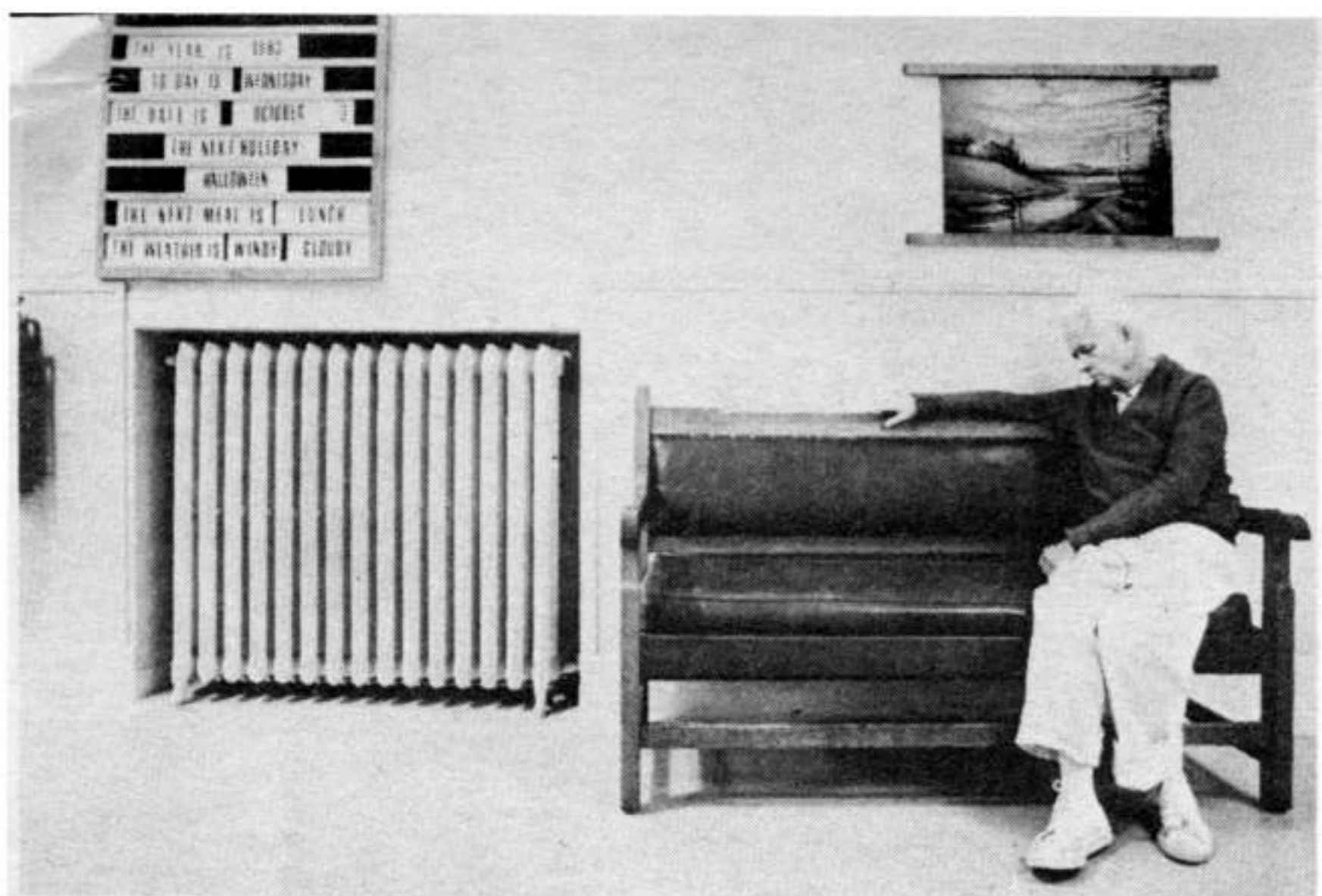


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ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST a cultural interpretation

Ian Hunter

"... the sense for tragedy increases and decreases with sensuality." — Nietzsche.

I

The emotions are rejected by scientists because they are a form of direct experience outside the dualist theory-facts method. They are sought after by artists and critics for more or less the same reason. Editorialists in mass dailies suspect the emotions because they want to be on the side of "reason" and because the emotions are a form of experience much closer to action than ideas are. One of the problems with this cultural isolation of the emotions from rationality is that, while it satisfies the mystical-oral need for direct union with the world and our bodies through action, it places such experience and action beyond the conscious will. This tends to make our emotional lives random and spontaneous (which we have learned to like), but also prone to co-option and domination by forms of experience which limit and distort the potentialities of the will and ideas. This aspect of our emotional lives I will call fantasy.

The rationalist version of "ideas" works hand in glove with this tendency, of course, by isolating our power to analyse experience from our ability to "feel" and enact it. Art is the only form of life open to us where ideas are grasped through transformation of the world and where emotions enter the conscious-moral realm by shedding fantasy. Clearly then, criticism and art, and the articulate emotions they form, should be part of the act of transforming experience. Here I am not talking about political change and revolutionary art. The sort of transformation art should be part of is of a more total sort, but one, nonetheless, with very concrete political implications. All fantasies are political. By looking at Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, I want to try and see why art and the emotions aren't generating the sort of actual transformation they go on promising.

II

We actively pursue some sorts of sadness and suffering during the enactment of certain emotional forms that put us at rest in the world in which we find ourselves. Another sort comes with understanding the gap between the concrete, historical form of the world (of which these emotional forms are a part) and the forms of its future. This is always mixed with rage.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is a saddening film, but we must question whether it is moving, because its sadness is the sort that leaves you ecstatically drained — painfully satisfied by the idea of life as a collection of lost possibilities, its only affirmations desperate and paradoxical. Our consciousness of experience as human action is cut away and lumbers off across the border into the ghostly exile of the emotions.

The film is a genuine attempt to confront reality, and shows us a horror at the centre of the way we have organized things; but in mustering the courage to confront this horror the film presents us with a dilemma. The nature of social reality is such that it takes the sum of human

possibilities residing in the culture and reduces them to the limited functions necessitated by the technological transformation of nature into commodities. The only desires we can actualize are those we allow to be taken up by forms of actuality provided by this organization of society. To this degree, as the film suggests, we are institutionalized; waiting for our lives to be ordered and made real by a set of social-relations which we look on as the form of aspiration, but which are, in fact, its negation. So we look for forms of life outside the present organization of society. Jack Nicholson's R. P. MacMurphy embodies the film's search for such a form.

Jack Nicholson's characterizations stand in that tradition crystallized by Brando, Kazan and James Dean in the 1950s. The popularity of the alienated, inarticulate loner has been commented on often enough. What hasn't been made plain is that the attraction and power of this character depends on the feeling that society has lost its capacity for conscious improvement and progress. The righteousness of the "beat" era springs from the Romantic-Christian feeling that those who get most kicked around, "know" most about oppression and have the highest moral worth. (A feeling also central to homosexual dignity and to old Marxist views of the working-class.)

The elevation of a character who is both anti-social and inarticulate reveals a popular belief that all intellectualized articulations of social reform are useless. This belief is part of the neo-Marxist idea that all desires expressed in the theoretical or sensory forms of contemporary reality are functionalized and neutered. So a kind of resistance is mounted by retreat to the instinctual level, that street-corner of the soul where hidden concepts of masculinity loiter in the company of "primitive" sexuality and aggression. Just as Marcuse himself resorts to the instinctual level, occasionally, in search of the ultimate source of social resistance.

Non-conformity in films like *On the Waterfront* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* is expressed through brute, male pride in the instincts, contrasted with the female embodiment of social virtue and wisdom. Those moments in these films when Brando forces women to submit to his violent sexuality are disguised moments of social rebellion. They also gratify that Victorian emotional form which sees men as the caretakers of the animal instincts and women as guardians of virtue and social convention. These luscious moments of conquest and surrender are the point at which inarticulate, powerless non-conformism is sublimated from the level of actual social resistance and is re-born as gratification of socio-sexual conquest fantasies.

The instinctual level is the level of our being where forms of life enacted in the historical culture appear as "natural". (So, Marcuse sees the will to freedom as "biological".) That is, we can no longer experience these forms as ideas or as moral imperatives, but simply as the unspoken nature of reality and our emotions — as "feelings". Fantasy is our main experience of the

instinctual. The particular form of man-woman relationship we are looking at here is a fantasy, even when it is being enacted by consenting adults. It is a fantasy because it caricatures the other possibilities for this relationship and because history has already functionally equalized men and women at the level of social actuality, even if the culture hasn't adequately responded to this change. By expressing the need for resistance and the disillusion with reform from within society in these instinctual forms, this tradition has channelled resistance away from action and into fantasy, into that area of being where the uncontrollable domination of social-relations is directly experienced in "personal" forms — an area we must immediately contrast with the *imagination* which names our efforts to know and transform the present in the light of its future possibilities.

The desire to confront the institutionalizing function of contemporary reality is very strong in *Cuckoo's Nest*. The film's need for resistance, as seen in MacMurphy's attempt to tear the marble plumbing fixtures off at the roots, is huge. But by mustering the courage to resist, and the tendency to action from the contemporary instinctualist tradition, the film continually transforms this will to resist into fantasy triumph and gratification. This is the film's dilemma, and the dilemma of much radical popular art — like Dylan's *Hurricane* and *Joey*, Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, and Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces*.

Acceptance of Nicholson's irrepressible male cockiness and gut individuality at face value (and Ashby's *Last Detail* shows it need not be accepted in this way) forces us into seeing the other main parts of the film from within the instinctualist cultural network. So the system becomes the abstract enemy of individuality, the other patients men who have lost their instinctual essence to the system, women mere objects for the release of instinctual energy, and Nurse Ratchet becomes that familiar fusion of woman and system which makes fucking or fighting a substitute for resistance.

This network works to undermine the film's major insight — that the patients are actively sustaining, almost conniving in their own institutionalization. It abstracts the institution from its inmates and embodies it in Nurse Ratchet and her assistant who are continually inviting us to murder or rape them to free everybody, including themselves. Our sense of Nurse Ratchet as the mediator of an imprisoning rationality that we all share in, is continually overwhelmed by the image of the frustrated, scientific witch who steals your manly essence and puts it in cold, sterilized bottles. Her destruction of Billie, just as MacMurphy is about to free him through the instincts, fixes her in this image. Finally, the film tells us nothing about how the social and theoretical structures we create become objectified and how they functionalize the lives of their creators. It leaves us with no way out but the unleashing of the instincts and an escape into uncontrollable and humiliating fantasy.

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Cuckoo's Nest*Continued from P.15*

Perhaps I can focus these remarks by looking at the film's central relationship, that between MacMurphy and the Chief. At the beginning of the film, the Chief, a gigantic cigar-store Indian figure, is deaf and dumb. Absolutely impassive, but mighty and, because Indian, filled with a kind of primitive menace. There is a sense, eventually made explicit, that he doesn't speak because he is a living monument to the history of conformist oppression in America. MacMurphy is linked to this history and his attempt to awaken the sleeping giant is the central metaphor for the film's desire for resistance through a return to the primitive and instinctual. This makes the Chief into something like MacMurphy's doppelganger, his Id, or his instinctual self personified, the same symbolic role as Frankenstein's monster. The Chief is both the promise of real resistance (the instincts are wild, gigantic, uncontrollable) and the certainty of its failure (the instincts are an escape into the past, into nature, across the border and into death).

Each step MacMurphy takes away from the institution and into the instincts of violence and sex is a step in the Chief's awakening. The Chief's compassionate murder of MacMurphy is really the fulfilment of their relationship and is not a premature end brought about by the system. The rebel's rational self is now lobotomized, his instinctual self fully embodied in another form, which picks him up like a doll and cuddles him to death. The giant is now awake and to underline his origins, tears off the marble tap-base at the roots and smashes it through the window to escape. There is a mighty upsurge from the broken plumbing, a sense of constricted life flowing free again, and enormous hope and fear as the giant lumbers into the dark

freedom of life across the instinctual border.

Death, love and freedom are metaphors for each other in the **Cuckoo's Nest** as they all fulfill the film's fundamental desire for the transcendence of consciousness. MacMurphy's death is pictured as an act of love and as a release. The net of institutionalization has been thrown so wide that conscious life itself has been snared up and rendered degrading. The lobotomy in this scheme of things is merely a step in the right direction.

Not all consciousness is controlled by society, as the filmmaker's intentions show; but that which is actualized in the forms of contemporary reality is, and the film as a product forces us to see this. The end result is the desperate nihilism and escapism of a decayed tradition fuelled by the desire to overcome that tradition.

III

The central strength of avant-garde art is its ability to cross cultural barriers and pick and choose from the entire spectrum. To freely use comics and philosophy, technology and imagination. It makes itself conscious of the cultural forms it draws on and so transcends them. "High" art and criticism are conservative in that they use traditional forms of experience and make us feel that these forms are natural and beyond will and action. Hence their focus on intense but static emotional states. Mass art and publicity achieve much the same end by stereotyping the forms of perception and feeling into fantasies and embodying them in objects of consumption. "High" art and mass art bear witness to a social organization in which human possibilities cannot be realized by the direct transformation of reality in action. Both hive off

the desire for actualization of the self into a rich, sickly private realm. Like most popular art, **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest** is a mixture of these two kinds of art that fails to transform its sources into a new way of knowing and acting. It is not avant-garde.

The high forms of tragedy and comedy often use the Christian idea of the scapegoat to reconcile the audience to a social order that is seen to be immoral or contradictory. The great religion tells us there are forms of morality and perception too intense for the earthly social order. They are like visitations from another realm that give the lie to the way we have organized things here. Because of this their goodness can be seen as evil and it is the paradoxical nature of this goodness that enables it to carry off our sense of guilt and failure. The death or comic-demise of the scapegoat gives both a sense of loss and release. The best among us has been taken, but the feeling that this is necessary (because, as Macbeth shows, the best is also the worst) reconciles us to the wrongs of the social order (because this "worst" creates our sense of the "best").

The mass art tradition of the instinctual which sublimates the **Cuckoo's Nest's** desire to change the system into gratification of sex-violence fantasies is part of the same artistic act that sets MacMurphy up as a scapegoat in the high tradition. His instinctual, comic detachment from the rationalized life of the institution provides us with an enormous sense of release into pure moral space. The worst is the best. This same detachment of the hero from the social order necessitates his death and our reconciliation to the order. The only change is that we've stopped struggling. We're crying with loss and release and embracing the doctor. This is the meaning of "catharsis". ★