Document Citation

Title	**Cuckoo's nest**
Author(s)	Beverly Walker
Source	*Sight and Sound*
Date	1975
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	216-217
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	One flew over the cuckoo's nest, Forman, Milos, 1975

Sands., Aut. '75, p. 216-217

Cuckoo's Nest

The question of what constitutes mental illness, how to depict it and the proper attitude towards it, was Milos Forman's biggest challenge on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the film adaptation of Ken Kesey's celebrated novel. Published in 1962, the book presaged the apocalyptic youth rebellion, capturing the imagination of a generation, and Kesey more than any other figure, including Allen Ginsberg and Timothy Leary, personifies the anti-authoritarian, acid-tripping counter-culture of yesteryear. The flower children are long gone, but Kesey continues to make news, and any major change in his book would evoke cries of betrayal from the very audience for whom the film was intended. Yet things *have* changed in the ensuing years, both in society at large and in certain psychiatric treatment modalities which play an important role in the story. All these things had to be dealt with, gingerly.

Briefly, *Cuckoo's* plot revolves around R. P. MacMurphy, a free-spirited rogue who feigns insanity at a penal work farm in order to force officials to transfer him to a local asylum. He thinks life will be easier there and, using a felicitous combination of cunning and effrontery, begins to take over the ward to which he's assigned. The patients love him, the authorities don't, and therein lies the tale, which encompasses forced electric shock treatment, lobotomy and death before winding to its tragic finale.

Since the *Cuckoo* project has been thirteen years in the making, a number of important decisions had been made prior to Forman's coming aboard. Jack Nicholson was signed to star as MacMurphy, the Oregon State Hospital would provide a suitable location, and a script existed—the second of two, actually. The first, by Kesey, had been rejected by the producers as simply reinforcing problematical areas of his book. Kesey refused to have anything to do with the production thereafter.

Forman quickly took the reins into his hands, getting himself to the hospital in Oregon with all due speed. He lived there for several weeks, collaborating on a third draft screenplay with Lawrence Hauben, a young writer who had already been through two drafts on his own. 'I had to do it to clear my head,' Forman said. 'When I agreed to direct the film, I was flooded with psychiatric magazines from well-meaning friends. Finally, I refused them all, because the more I looked into it, the more confused I became. One of the challenges of the story is that you are describing mentally ill people at a time when doctors don't know what mental illness really is.

'I resolved just to concentrate on the story of a man, and to see with my own eyes the behaviour of the patients. I was practically living with them, and I can tell you how they walk and how they talk, but I do not know what kind of disease they have. I can only define "mental illness" as an incapacity to adjust within normal measure to ever-changing, unspoken rules. If you are incapable of making these constant changes, you are called by your environment crazy. Which of course indicates that mental illness is a social disease. And that's what the book is about: it's a metaphor of society.'

Work on the screenplay continued for months, with Lawrence Hauben eventually superseded by a second writer, Bo Goldman. It's important to remember that Forman was trained at the Czech Film School as a *writer*, not a director. Though his films may look improvised, they are in fact carefully calibrated, and this insistence upon meticulous form has brought him into conflict with several American screenwriters. (There were four or five on *Taking Off* before he was satisfied.) Forman is the soul of discretion and never acknowledges differences with anybody, but Hauben was more candid. 'There was a definite division in our points of view,' he said. 'I created a warp and woof of time and space, like a trip in a nut house, using contrapuntal sound. Milos didn't want any of that. He was always asking, "But what happens next?" He goes from A to B to C; his main interest is how you get upstairs.'

Believability was the biggest hurdle. Kesey wrote the book under the influence of various drugs, primarily LSD and peyote, and it often spins out into paranoid fantasies that are hilarious or poignant or shattering; but the overall effect, in some instances, is that of a psychedelic cartoon—and not to be endured on film, according to Forman.

The major casualty, in a script which is finally a masterfully precise evocation of Kesey's book, is the giant Indian called Chief Bromden who narrates the story. He is the 'one' of the title who eventually escapes the asylum. If MacMurphy symbolises the rebellious, aggressive side of the American psyche, the Chief is the hurt, vulnerable, terrified aspect —the man who simply stops talking because nobody will listen. The film relegates him to a peripheral role. While that is a sound structural decision (something had to be surrendered to 'get upstairs'), the fate of the Indian remains America's most problematical social issue, and one can't help feeling that it was a mistake to excise virtually all details of the character's personal history.

Forman dismissed the subject impatiently: 'The history of the American Indian is notoriously known. I was bred on "Indianky" —books about Indians. The Chief has the same importance to the film as to the book. We know everything we need to know about this man without entering his brain cells.'

'. . . *Without entering his brain cells*,' is an important key to understanding Forman, who has a strong aversion to psychologising or anything that smacks of the confessional. He will not talk about his personal history, which is filled with tragedy. He is not a man who spends much time explaining himself. On the set, he stands away from the centre, quietly puffing a pipe—but watching everything like a cat. He brought the cast to Oregon in advance of filming for extensive improvisational sessions. 'When we first started rehearsing, everything they did was exaggerated. So I sent them upstairs to observe the real lunatics, and many of them selected the most subtle behavioural tics to incorporate into their characterisations. The most touching thing about mental patients is how badly they want to look normal.'

The hospital has only 600 patients (it used to have almost 3,000), so it had been possible to make an entire ward available to the company for both filming and administrative offices. For three months, everyone associated with the production, from co-producers Michael Douglas and Saul Zaentz to property masters and secretaries, literally lived in the hospital during long working hours. I had heard that patients, as well as doctors and aides, were working on the crew, but it never occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to tell them apart. However, within minutes of walking into the ward, I became totally disoriented.

Jack Nicholson was involved in a pool game with a group of unsavoury looking men, all dressed in sloppy white hospital garb. When I said hello, he said 'How's Billy?' and right there reality turned upside down. Later, I learned from Michael Douglas that I bore a striking resemblance to the wife of Billy Redfield, the leading supporting actor, who was ill, but we certainly didn't look like twins, and that was my first awareness of a kind of eerie insularity that pervaded the entire company. Cinematographer Haskell Wexler

'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest': Jack Nicholson as MacMurphy

seemed to be flying rather than walking around the corridors, but he did recognise me and asked, 'What are *you* doing here?' before taking off again. I found Milos Forman upstairs with his editor, Richard Chew, looking a little glazed. Early next morning, I learnt that Haskell Wexler had just been fired because of 'conceptual differences'. (Wexler, whose concern for the misbegotten has been demonstrated in the many political documentaries he has shot and in his feature *Medium Cool*, apparently disliked Forman's overtly comic approach to the material, and couldn't hide his feelings.) He had been Forman's personal choice, and the decision to let him go was clearly painful; he continued on the film until Bill Butler, who also replaced him on *The Conversation*, arrived.

Once the script was set, Forman put his primary energy into working with the actors. He spent a year selecting his supporting cast, finally culling twenty from more than 900 interviewed and 'tested' in make-believe group therapy sessions. 'Each and every one had to be instantaneously identifiable and unique,' he told me, 'but they also had to work as a unit.' I learned later that the ominous looking group surrounding Nicholson at the pool table were seasoned professionals, the lobotomy scars on their skulls put there by an adept make-up artist. But they might as well have been patients, because the *politics* of the situation was little different from that described in Kesey's novel or what I observed while touring the hospital and sitting in on a group therapy session. Jack Nicholson was crown prince of this particular kingdom, and just as his character commandeered the ward, Nicholson took over the film. He cajoled, joked, charmed; he was unfailingly polite and helpful to everyone—but he always got his way. When he would silently withdraw, even in the middle of the room, no one dared to approach him.

From the beginning, Forman had been subjected to certain pressures from the Oregon staff to cosmeticise the view of mental hospitals depicted by Kesey, and there was objection to a scene—which Forman has retained—of a patient being dragged into the EST room. In fact, Forman's views prevailed in almost all areas relating to the depiction of mental illness and its treatment, but he ran into an almost insurmountable obstacle with the character called 'Big Nurse', the only major female character and the tyrant supreme of the ward. She personifies the misogyny in Kesey's story, and six actresses, including Anne Bancroft and Angela Lansbury, turned the role down flat. The women's movement has effected profound changes in consciousness since Kesey created his monolithic monster, and they wanted no part of it.

Forman thought the actresses were 'misguided': 'I don't believe all the noble efforts of women's lib to put things on an equal basis will ever happen. Look at nature, there's always an inequality, sometimes in favour of one, sometimes the other. Only snails have equality . . . Look, if you have to take stupid orders, it's less humiliating to take them from a man than from a woman. However, there was an exaggeration in Kesey's book which I didn't like, which you can't put on film.' So, for aesthetic reasons, Forman softened the concept—by a hair.

The staff was both relieved and saddened when filming was finally completed, according to Forman. 'I have never experienced actors carrying their roles afterwards as they did on this film,' he said. 'Everyone feels a little lunacy in himself. We were all humbled in confronting these problems.'

BEVERLY WALKER