

**REPRESENTATIONS OF AMERICA'S FREE SPIRIT FROM NOVEL  
FICTION TO FILM:  
*ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST***

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**Abstract.** The focus of the present paper lies in exploring some of the alterations that Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* underwent in the screen adaptation by the same name of director Milos Forman.

"Tingle, tingle, tremble toes,  
She's a good fisherman,  
Catches hens, puts 'em inna pens  
Wire blier limber lock  
Three geese in a flock  
One flew east, one flew west  
One flew over the cuckoo's nest ...  
O-U-T spells out  
Goose swoops down and plucks you out." (Kesey, 1976: 272)

It may appear surprising how a nursery rhyme can be so appropriate an allegory for two different media representations, Ken Kesey's novel and Milos Forman's translation of it on screen, considering that they are bridged by more than a decade.

Written while a volunteer in an experimental program that tested the effects of newly discovered drugs, such as LSD, while he himself received electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and written in most parts while actually under the effect of psychedelic drugs, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* could be considered a product of Kesey's interest in insanity and in mind-influencing compounds, in this new mode of mind perception (beyond rational consciousness) which such hallucinogenic substances persuaded the human mind to. Published in an era when drugs were becoming increasingly popular, when LSD was extensively used as a medical treatment for mental disorders in psychiatry, in an age just before the boom of the psychedelic movement in America, Kesey's novel rapidly grew into a cult book and Kesey himself was regarded as one of the pioneers of the 1960s counter-culture movement. The novel's success was also due to the fact that, apart from being a manifesto against repression in its different social embodiments, it was symptomatic of the distortions of violence and repressive forces that were to torment the American social stage in the sixties: the open confrontation between the federal

troops and the militants for black civil rights, confrontations between the draft board and the pacifists, between the students demonstrating against the Vietnam War and the campus administration.

In point of structure the novel is divided into four parts, further subdivided into 49 scenes, which are neither numbered nor given any chronological order pointing to the randomness of the thoughts that nurtured them. Each of the four parts marks the changes that occur in Randle Patrick McMurphy and Chief Bromden, with the latter being the intradiegetic narrator of the novel.

Part I introduces the main characters and covers the first five days of RPM's conflict with the Big Nurse. McMurphy is not insane when he voluntarily commits himself into the ward to escape work at a prison farm. At first he is self-centered and does his best to rebel against authority embodied in the persona of the Big Nurse and the Combine. His freedom offers an example for the inmates, and he soon becomes responsible for them. As he acts on the others' behalf, he starts to lose his freedom and, by the end of the novel, he has been driven insane in his attempt to turn the others sane. Nurse Ratched is a real tyrant, hardly actually characterized, as she is a symbol, rather than a person. The Chief's perception of her is that she is part machine, part evil presence. A former Army nurse, which could explain her taste toward regimentation, she is depicted as huge, indomitable and white. Her only flaw is her femininity (made obvious in her big breasts), which she tries to conceal; in the end it proves that she will be defeated only when her sexuality is exposed: in a final, unrepressed act Randle will tear her uniform open in an impulse to physically annihilate her. Although this will bring about his doom, "justice is done", like in a classic restoration, and "the ball-cutter", the castrating woman, compulsively driven to destroy masculinity of men will be taught to submit herself. Certain key metaphors, such as the fog and the Combine, are also displayed in the first part, becoming metaphors for the Chief's paranoia that opens the novel: "They're out there" (Kesey 1976: 3).

Part II focuses further on the open conflict between the Nurse and RPM, with the latter becoming aware that the reward for rebellion against institutionalized order can be death. And yet he chooses to fight to the end as his personal code of honor required him "to hold up his end of the deal" (Kesey 1976: 263). Chief's evolution parallels that of McMurphy: his struggle for, and regain of, his sanity and manhood are achieved progressively and are marked by a gradual recession of his episodes of fog and schizophrenic fantasies.

Part III shows the ascendancy of RPM and his influence over the inmates; by bringing them back laughter and sexual awareness (two key motifs associated with McMurphy), he acquires the role of the savior. But this empowering of his disciples (the inmates) is done at the expense of his own power: towards the end of Part III Randle will come out seriously weakened and vulnerable.

Part IV sees a restoration of Big Nurse's power. By assaulting an attendant, RPM undergoes electroshock treatment which will turn him into a 'vegetable' and bring him a tragic end. With McMurphy's end the 'institution' of Nurse Ratched disintegrates, as the inmates, "victims of patriarchy" as Harding once puts it, choose to sign themselves out. McMurphy's sacrifice restores them as whole human beings able to face the world outside.

The title of the novel is taken from the game "Tingle, tingle, tremble toes" that Bromden used to play with his grandmother in his childhood, a nursery rhyme-game whose only nine lines embody the whole plot of the novel, and equally that of the film, surprisingly well. Mrs.'Tingle, tingle, tremble toes' is of course Nurse Ratched who makes abundant use of wires and locks throughout the novel to "catch" the inmates who, although mostly voluntary in the mental ward, unconsciously feel trapped from the very beginning. A reversal of roles in point of sexuality is clearly alluded to in the fable above: the Big Nurse is the fisherman (male), while the inmates are hence (female), which proves that the key to her power lies "in her power to emasculate" (Gato, in Sinyard 1986:14). 'Three geese inna flock' are Nurse Ratched, RP McMurphy and Chief Bromden whose destinies are intersected; that is why RPM calls himself repeatedly a 'bull goose looney'. 'East' and 'west' in the rhyme explore more than merely polar opposites: they are the different directions that the Big Nurse flew and McMurphy flew pull in, in what east and west stand for regarding the dominance of the political world stage. As for the ratio between individual and state, the east preaches the group over the individual, being a cruel and dehumanizing environment that encourages order, regimentation, confession, manipulation, control, betrayal and renunciation of ego, the very policy of the ward and the 'Combine' whose embodiment Nurse Ratched is. At the opposite pole is the 'laissez faire' west epitomized by RPM, where man is allowed to fight to write his own destiny. 'The cuckoo's nest' is the mental asylum, and the one who escapes it, is Chief Bromden, due to the power McMurphy has invested him with and due to the identity that he has been taught to gradually regain.

Published in 1962, the novel was a success both with the critics and the mass-reader from the beginning. As a cinematic counterpart of the novel, the film version won Academy awards for Best Picture, Best Actor (Jack Nicholson), Best Actress (Louise Fletcher), Best Director and Best Screenplay Adapted from another Source (Lawrence Hauben and Bo Golman), although it had also received nominations for Cinematography, Editing and Original Score. Therefore, one can indubitably state that it was *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* that made Milos Forman a director of mainstream cinema. After playing a significant part in developing the Czech New Wave - cinema movement characterized by psychological character studies and by social or political themes - and after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Forman immigrated to the United States. In 1975, when he directed the film, the American home stage was different: the Vietnam War and its related riots were over, the campuses were quiet. To adapt the film to the new social and political context, Forman had to "deemphasize all the political overtones the novel had acquired" in the sixties (Dick 1998:144). In the novel, the mental institution stands for a parable of Kesey's contemporary American society, in which the internal policies reflect the order (or rather lack of it) of the external world. The conflict that lies at the core of the novel's narrative is polarized - on the one hand- by the main (anti-)hero Randle Patrick McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) who embodies freedom, individualism, unrestrained sexuality, the 'natural man', "one flew west" in the nursery rhyme quoted above, and -on the other- by the emasculating Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) who is "mechanized civilization at its worst" (Holland, in Reynolds 1993: 19), social authority, mass conformity, sexual repression, "one flew east" in the same rhyme. She is also a representative of the "Combine " which is how Chief Bromden calls the repressive forces of civilization. The film's narrative enhanced the humanism and the comedy of Kesey's novel and the subtext of the film somehow diminished the conflict of the novel to female dominion /vs/ male freedom.

The novel's profound symbolism, the dream or nightmarish fantasies, the deeply mythological hints, and the in-depth focus on Chief Bromden's thoughts made the translation from literature into film quite challenging and difficult an undertaking. With Bromden describing a world in which the borderline between sanity and insanity is very blurred at the beginning, to acquire more and more clear a contour as he plunges less and less often into the fog, Forman chose to drop the Chief as a hypodiegetic first-person narrator that he is in the novel, and replaced him

by a dominant, more reliable objective camera in the film. The Chief inserts in the narration his hallucinatory dreams as flashbacks whose function is to provide background information and, even more importantly, to mark the Chief's regress in his illness. The non-chronological plot sequencing and focalization-related matters render an example why point of view can turn to be a difficulty when translating a novel into a screen version. The film chose to diminish the Chief's character to a rather minor character, which resulted in a "loss of much of the metaphoric quality of the novel" (Ferrell 2000: 77). Having a deeper focus on character construction and on the actors' performance to render the theme, and failing to rely on the rich symbolism that the novel conveyed, the film seems to have lost the novel's deep interplay of conscious-unconscious connection.

Apart from minimizing Bromden's insights into his inner consciousness, the film alters McMurphy's self-reflection; as a consequence, character motivation is much blurred, more difficult to capture in the movie. In placing Billy's need to reach manhood and to find his identity through Candy above his own need to escape the ward, the viewer will naturally wonder why McMurphy chooses to act as he does.

Another major difference between the novel and the film regards the use of religious allusion: in the novel Randle P. McMurphy is frequently alluded to as the figure of Jesus Christ –for instance, in the fishing trip he has twelve disciples and is referred to as the saint, martyr, savior. During electroshock therapy, whose table has previously been compared to a cross, when the nurse gets conductant on his head, the rebel says: "Anointest my head with conductant. Do I get a crown of thorns?" (Kesey 1976: 272). Milos Forman decided to eliminate the direct allusions to Christ and focused instead on characterization and on Nicholson's performance as method actor as a communicative device.

The four large categories of film techniques [mise en scene, cinematography, editing and sound] were effective tools to contribute to the film becoming a landmark of mainstream cinema. To illustrate this, the first three-scene sequence will be deconstructed in terms of the four elements mentioned above.

The film opening credits run against an Oregon wilderness scene at dawn in a classic long establishing shot as a car moves across the screen. Used to create a certain mood to the viewer, and to foreshadow the real protagonist, the Chief, who will eventually manage to flow over the mental ward which is the cuckoo's nest, sound is extremely suggestive in this opening sequence of the film: accumulating

tension is rendered by a few seconds of silence before a bird's cry is heard. The cry is scary, dissonant to the scene at dawn which is suffused in warm colors, and functions as the first warning element from the outside world as to the abnormality that will unfold in the indoor space of the mental asylum. Before the opening credits end, music starts off: there is an unusual assortment of drums, guitar, flute, Jewish harp, bells and other plain instruments playing in swiftly alternating minor and major keys; the tune is traditional Indian music reminding of some tribal ritual. This musical score is that of the Indian 'noble savage', the vanishing American, embodied by Chief Bromden who, at the end of the film, will be rehabilitated and will escape back to the world outside [neither east nor west but north to Canada]. His escape will be accomplished against a similar background, in a similar long establishing final shot and under the effect of the same unsophisticated music. The second sequence is connected to the first by a straight cut, the prevailing type of transition used in the film editing, and it introduces the dormant silent patients of the ward in medium close-ups: the camera is tilting and panning as if to throw overtones of the subjects' mental instability and insecurity; this scene ends with a close-up of a bizarre drawing of a distorted face and its grinning mouth in cubist style. In the film this drawing is the second signal, another dramatic appeal to the viewer who must be warned about the significance of what is about to take place. Another straight cut opens the third scene of this sequence with an introductory long shot of the black-coated Nurse Ratched arriving at the ward. Her position is overtly state: she creates a sense of unbalance and unease; in this scene sound, or rather the absence of it, comes to reinforce this feeling: music stops when she enters the room and the only sounds are that of the heavy door being slammed and of the bunch of tinkling keys in her hand. From now on the viewer will have no doubt as to whom the domineering figure in the hospital is. Jeopardy on Nurse Ratched's part is again signaled visually by a red light placed in the main room: one could hardly miss this new warning signal which spills out 'danger' against the destructive powers of the castrating woman, compulsively driven to destroy the masculinity of men. Moreover, the red bulb is a warning against the destructive powers of this Dantesque place that alters the individual into what society wants him to be. The fact that the scene is presented in desaturated colors, like all the indoor scenes, intensifies the feeling that the viewer has entered a world of mind constriction and of soul imprisonment. The last scene of this sequence familiarizes the viewer with the morning routine in the ward: Bancini untied from his night bed, followed by the ritual-like "medication time"

always accompanied by a soft melodic waltz repeatedly played and gradually becoming more irritating with each “medication time”; in this multiple non-verbal irony, music comes in deep disagreement with the significance of the absurd pill prescription session, which once again reveals an obsessive appeal to order, duty and rule conformity in the ward, where freedom of will or spontaneity are declined any form of manifestation.

The characters’ appearance, including physical features, posture and gestures, clothing, make-up, hairstyle, brings down much of their personality. Although the film is set in the 1960’s, Louise Fletcher’s hairstyle comes from the 1940’s, a time when popular comedies used to feature women as executive authority and men as their submissive subordinates. Thus, with her 1940’s hairstyle, the angelic but stone-cold Nurse Ratched is a fierce parody of such female executive. On the other hand, Jack Nicholson’s appearance as the defying lawful authority R.P. McMurphy is in open contradiction with Nurse Ratched as well as with all the other inmates in the ward: while his messy hair or his horn-like tuft of hair gives the impression of a satyr, his eyes darting from one direction to another show his being a free spirit and an impish character.

Clothing is another element that plays an important function in the mise-en-scene of the film: Nurse Ratched wears either black -her overcoat for the outside world speaks of her self-imposed extreme formality- or white in the hospital, which implies lifelessness, lack of or repressed emotions, as well as her being devoid of sexuality. In overt contrast with Nurse Ratched, Candy, the prostitute R.P. McMurphy brings on the fishing trip and on the ward to the party, wears red in both occasions, a visual element speaking of her intense, unrepressed sexuality.

The rhythm of editing, or the film’s pace, functions as a signifier skillfully mastered to render different signifieds. Thus, slow cutting is extensively used in the film, mostly during therapy meetings, to suggest the inmates’ draining of life, the void in, and the nothingness of, their egos. In opposition to slow cutting, alternating fast cutting -at times supported by tight framing- imparts energy to the subjects (the moment Tabes catches the big fish on the fishing trips all of them become unprecedentedly excited and act as one) or imparts dynamism to action (the scene of McMurphy’s commentaries on an imaginary baseball match of the World Series watched by the whole band in front of a blank TV screen). Sometimes fast cutting

comes to simply suggest a deep sense of confusion or loss of control which is often the case with the inmates during some of their therapy meetings.

In point of elements of cinematography, the building tension between Ratched and R.P. McMurphy is captured on screen through the use of disturbing close-ups which makes it perfectly clear to the audience that a battle of their different worlds is indeed bulging on. Louise Fletcher masterfully conveys a controlling authoritarian who, beneath the sweet face of an angel, cleverly hides her passionate frustrations with McMurphy's rebellions. Similarly, McMurphy's blunt laughter and devilish facial expressions convey his cunning intentions. The superb realism behind Nicholson and Fletcher's performances draw viewers into a suspenseful open conflict for ultimate power. Power that McMurphy seems to have failed in gaining. The movie ends with McMurphy lobotomized: his castration has thus been completed. Chief Bromden refuses to accept the 'vegetable' that is brought back into the room as McMurphy, and in a literal act of redemption he kills RPM by smothering him. He does this out of love for the memory of the giant, for the teachings which he fears would silence if Big Nurse were allowed to use it as example of what happens if one dares to defy authority. Chief Bromden regains his long-lost manhood in this ultimate gesture and McMurphy's promise has been kept. As the latter appeared to Bromden in the beginning, rising above the cuckoo's nest, so does the Chief feel now as if it were time for him to have his first and last flew.

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*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest..* Dir. Milos Forman, Perf. Jack Nicholson, Louise Fletcher, William Redfield, Dean R. Brooks, Scatman Crothers, 1975, DVD, United Artists Films. 2002.