



Cruelty, Mental illness, Characters in Stanley Kubrick's selected films: An essay

Srijani Dutta

A writer, independent researcher and an admin executive at Techno India University, Kolkata, West Bengal.

Modernism is a departure from the realistic representation of 19th century society. It experiments with form and style. During this time, body acts as a metaphoric site to reveal inner expressions. Antonin Artaud, Jean Genet, Eugene O' Neill and other Avant Garde artists execute their perspectives and philosophies onto the canvas depicting grotesque bodies. The main objective of Antonin Artaud was to create a new kind of theatre that could radically challenge the conventions of stage, audiences, and actors in order to present a truth to the world. He also wanted to create his new language as he believed that the realistic theatrical language could not produce meaning. Therefore, he sought for something brutally honest that could fathom the primal emotions and thoughts of the human beings and could get reflected through this new language. His philosophy tries to give a new understanding of 'cruelty', 'body' and 'expression'. Through the word of cruelty, he does not mean the utmost violence, destruction but this cruelty stands for the method in order to reveal emotions and to shock the audiences. The trope of cruelty is to revolutionize the thought procedures of the 'readers.' On the other hand, Stanley Kubrick is one of the critically acclaimed film directors experimenting with characters, sound, images and cinematography. In this essay, I will attempt to do a case study of the selected films of Stanley Kubrick.

Through the use of gestures, props, exuberant colours and violence, Kubrick has created his language in his films that somehow resonates with Artaud's philosophy of theater of cruelty. Violence appears as both of a physical and metaphysical act in their works. This case study tries to give answers to some of the following questions.

1. How does Kubrick use the convention of theatre of cruelty in his films? Does Kubrick represent the notion of Artaud's 'cruelty'?

2. Does Kubrick impart any message or knowledge by depicting violence and cruelty in his films?
3. Can a certain strain of existentialism be found in his films?

Films, theatres, novels or any kind of artworks, sometimes deal with taboos and myths. The artists try to demystify the orthodoxical ideas of the society and make his/her audiences aware of the problems of the society. Stanley Kubrick is a great instance who has portrayed psychotic characters and his bizarre world to reflect the other side of the human psychology.

Both Artaud and Stanley use the bodies as weapons. Therefore, my essay will be based on a textual, evaluative and a thematic study. Kubrick's characters are dominated by their negative individual traits. Alex, the protagonist of the film "A Clockwork Orange," creates his dystopic world that hampers the lives of the others. He is a symbol of excessive negative passion like anger, disgust, hatred and sarcasm. He represents toxic masculinity and vulgar sadism. In this regard, women along with the other male characters become the passive victims of his actions. He stands for death and destruction and primordial instincts. His gestures are mainly instinctual. His behaviours shock the audiences by making them forgetful of the division between 'reality' and 'fiction'. Like Artaud, he envisions a new kind film/theatrical language that promotes the alternative mood of romanticism and gaze. Kubrick being a true child of 'Modernism' debunks the traditional notion of space, time and linearity of narration.

Stanley Kubrick, one of the experimental filmmakers of America has been deeply influenced by Artaud's philosophy. His characters are transgressors and subversive as they try to demystify the socially culturally accepted laws and values.

They are cynic, rebellious and always driven by their unrestrained passion, instinct and aggression. Consequently, they have to face some gruesome circumstances in their life. His movies are the performances of insane cruelty and violence. A grim illusion of reality runs through his masterpieces. Ironically, the bodies become the site of execution and implementation of these grim violence, destruction and crimes. A sense of mysterious, sombre, illusionistic atmosphere runs throughout his films. Kubrick has created the insane characters in his bizarre cinematic world. Through his lenses, the audiences get to unearth the deepest, dark, unconscious of the human minds. His characters suffer from psychosis and severe mental illness. His characters cannot be considered as 'abnormal' although their behaviours justify themselves to be crazy. This trope of cruelty erases the myth of stability, peace from the surface of the films. Therefore, he can be easily termed as the hallmark of futuristic dystopia. By his theoretical conventions, he has tried to bypass the barriers between actors and audiences. He has created an intermingled vision of reality and illusion by formulating different kinds of spaces (dream space, institutional space, dystopic space, war space etc.) in his films. The movie "A Clockwork Orange" has shown the individual's evil actions against the institution. The Overlook hotel in "The Shining" acts as a panopticon. The juxtaposition of different spaces and time insinuates at the multiple personalities of his characters. Through this characterization, he has sketched and represented the Byronic heroes who are rebels and do 'rebellious' activities by attacking the societal construct and different modes of institutions. Consequently, his films become the satirical pieces criticizing the hollowness, superficiality and evils of the society. His films represent the lawlessness of the institutions. Institutions like marriage, society, prisons, hotels- all maintain rules and laws. The protagonist of the "The Shining" and 'hero' of the "A

Clockwork of Orange” both appear as the Byronic heroes who are victims of mental illness and psychosis. Whatever they do, they do out of passion and aggression. By creating ‘insane’ characters, Kubrick also satirizes the condition of law and defence of the society. The protagonist of “The Shining” is a struggling writer who suddenly falls victim of his disease. Through the metaphor of ‘struggling writer’ Kubrick depicts the struggles of the characters in a panoptical like society. His son, Danny also suffers from mental illness. The shrilling noise, background music, laughter and smirk of Jack Nicholson create the ambience of theatre of cruelty proposed by Antonin Artaud. Alex has been put into prison for rectification and recovery. But, he does not. It shows that it is their voices against societal-political-cultural oppression and subjugation.

Apart from cruelty and the mental illness of the characters, the readers can also find the strains of existentialism in the films. These films are the films of actions as well as of ideas. Multitudes of ideas contest with each other evoking out the echoes of nothingness. All the characters are searching for their purpose(s) of existence and being. While doing so, they project violence and it creates pleasure out of pain and suffering. They are the staunch believers of free will and freedom. But, the society as an institution tries to control them. They break free and try to break free from the confinements of ‘normalcy.’ Therefore, Kubrick’s crazy characters believe in their choices which destabilize the status quo and peace of the society.

Patrick Murray and Jeanne Schuler have written an essay on “Rebel Without a cause: Stanley Kubrick and the Banality of the Good.” Mark T. Conrad’s essay “Chaos, order and Morality: Nietzsche’s influence on *Full Metal Jacket*” depicts the influence of Nietzsche on Kubrick. Elizabeth F. Cooke has also dealt with the existentialist philosophy of *Dr.Strangelove*. From the absurdist study to the postmodern reading of his style, many well documented essays have already been written. But, locating Artaud in his films, reading mental illness and characters- all these issues have not been

touched upon. So, my essay will try to add a new insight in this area.

Works Cited

1. *A Clockwork Orange*, Stanley Kubrick, Performances by Malcolm McDowell, Polaris Productions Hawk Films, 1971.
2. Artaud, Antonin. *The Theatre and its double*, translated by Mary Caroline Richards, Grove Press, New York, 1958.
3. Conrad, Mark T. (2007) "Chaos, Order, and Morality: Nietzsche Influence on *Full Metal Jacket* in *The Philosophy of Stanley Kubrick*. Ed Jerold J. Abrams. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 33-47.
4. Falsetto, Mario. (2001) *Stanley Kubrick: A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
5. Kuberski, Philip. *Kubrick's Total cinema: Philosophical Themes and Formal Qualities*, Bloomsbury, 2012.
6. *The Stanley Kubrick Archives*, Ed. Alison castle: Taschen GmbH, 2005.
7. *The Shining*, Stanley Kubrick, Performances by Jack Nicholson, Producer Circle Company Peregrine Productions Hawk Films, 1980.

Srijani Dutta

Srijani, a writer, independent researcher and an admin executive at Techno India University hails from India. She has published her academic and creative writings in the journals like Cut to cinema, Yearly Shakespeare, Setu, Parcham, Contemporary Literary Review India, Story Mirror, EKL review journal, Plato's cave online journal, The Antonym, RIC, Atunis poetry, Das Literarisch, Saaranga magazine, literary cognizance, Borderless journal, Creative chromosomes, Rappahannock review, Fourth river journal, Synchronized Chaos, Beatnik Cowboy journal, Literary Yard, Langlit, Ritvi journal, SLC, Culture Matters, and New Literaria etc. She has worked as a resource person/ guest lecturer of English literature in a university.

Get Your Book Reviewed

If you have got any book published and are looking for a book review, contact us. We provide book review writing service for a fee. We (1) write book review (2) publish review in CLRI (3) conduct an interview with the author (4) publish interview in CLRI. [Know more here](#).

Authors & Books

We publish book releases, Press Release about books and authors, book reviews, blurbs, author interviews, and any news related to authors and books for free. We welcomes authors, publishers, and literary agents to send their press releases. Visit our website <https://page.co/Vw17Q>.