

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest

In spite of all the Academy Awards which garnish his latest, it could be claimed that every one of Milos Forman's film is in some particular way his best film - or perhaps the best ever made of that particular kind. *Peter and Pavla* had both innocence and exuberance beneath its delicate irony, making it the most convincing teenage lovestory ever filmed. In *A Blonde in Love*, the irony tightened while the scene expanded to include Czech industrial society, the army, and the mores of contiguous generations. In *The Fireman's Ball* the irony hardened off further, into more biting social satire: his precision, which previously seemed needle-sharp, now became razor-edged, scalpel-like. Then, as he widened his subject, to include middle-class America in *Taking Off*, his weapons strengthened and multiplied. A needle was enough to prick Central-European romanticism, but the complacent hypocrisy of those Abandoned Parents and their Meeting needed a bayonet. And Forman wielded it with lethal grace, and it was all funnier than ever.

In O.F.O.T.C.N. Forman made a film which, in terms of Dr. Thomas Szasz's theory, taken on contemporary society, socialist and/or capitalist, East or West. From *The Myth of Mental Illness* onwards, Dr. Szasz maintained that insanity can often be taken as a social definition for the extremes of nonconformity. 'Mental illness is a myth whose function is to disguise and thus render more palatable the bitter pill of moral conflicts in human relations. In asserting that there is no such thing as mental illness I do not deny that people have problems in coping with life and each other.' For the individual, insanity is the final dropping out, aeons further on than the vanishing children in *Taking Off*. From society's angle, committing someone to an asylum is one way of dealing with a rebellion against that society's values.

The story is a faithful-enough rendering of Ken Kesey's novel, (except that in style, the film is clear, precise and economical, whereas Kesey's prose is a prolix image of mental disturbance) but it is also an artist's formulation of Szasz's theory. Of course, Szasz does not have to be right in his theories for the film to be artistically valid. It is a peculiarity common to all art forms that a work may be based on an off-beat theory or philosophy (not that Szasz's could be called off-beat) and yet it can be a great imaginative work, no matter how far the philosophy can be demolished or discredited (cf. Wager and Nietzsche.) It is a quirk of the creative mind that it may be inspired by all sorts of things: by personal experiences like falling in or out of love, or by an intellectual challenge, like bits of Fraser's *The Golden Bough* leading Eliot to *The Wasteland*.

What Kesey's novel offered to Forman was a story-outline; a hero, The Chief; and a character, who was re-shaped and rounded out by Jack Nicholson into a rather different R.P. Murphy. But Forman's choice of this particular story, and his handling of it, could only have been prompted by his own sense of urgency in launching an attack. If Forman started with a needle and progressed to a rapier, he had now arrived at the peak of his artistic power, from where he attacks the lie at the heart of Established Society with a small atombomb. Whether he wants to question, or to destroy to rebuild, is open to debate: the fact that the bomb goes off is attested by everyone who saw the film, including the voting members of the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

For *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* made cinema history by winning five Academy Awards. The significance is not in the number, but in the staggering change that seems to have come over the Hollywood-oriented values of the Award. Looking back over its 49 years, it appears that the Oscar had been given for many reasons, sometimes even for quality. But the wining of the award for the best film, best direction, best leading man, best actress and best adapted screenplay by a film which *deserves* them, is frightening. If even the Oscar is overtaken by sensitivity, intelligence, artistic and moral values, surely the twilight of the West is upon us. Whatever happened to the fatuous confidence, the shining brash vulgarity of Hollywood in its great growing days?

And it is difficult to understand why Will Sampson as Chief Bromden missed out on an award; or Haskell Wexler, the cameraman. I have seldom seen interior shots so carefully composed: all those bars on doors and windows, and never any confused criss-crossing of shadows which would superimpose an arty-crafty pattern. People in one's dreams don't throw shadows, and it is probably the shadowlessness of the scenes which achieved the film's visual style with its dream-or-nightmare intensity.

And yet, the film only has the intensity of dreams, not their fantasy. It is realistic on a level which American films, in spite of their technical excellence, seldom achieve. Like other great Central European directors, for instance Wajda or Jancso, Forman is concerned with an ultimate reality: the reality of power, of dictatorship. Underneath its compassion, the film is not about suffering or maladjustment, not about the ball-game or the fishing-trip, but R.P. Murphy's original inchoate resistance to absolute power. This grows into open rebellion, and culminates in revolutionary ecstasy. Then in the morning, Nurse Ratched and her junta resume power: one could describe the procedure as the ascendancy of counter-revolution, with its predictable spate of executions - Billy driven to suicide, R.P. Murphy lobotomized . . . And, like Jancso, Forman finally offers us the comfort of a myth, the very myth that underlies all revolution: the myth that oppressed Man will gather all his strength to make a break, to escape into the future. There is no plausible reason, no intellectual ground for hope. There is only an artistic image, as the Chief runs towards the open hills, for the dream of Man's freedom.

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