“It’s the Truth Even If It Didn’t Happen”: Ken Kesey’s
One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest

Ken Kesey’s One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest (first published in 1962) has sold millions of paperback copies and been particularly popular with college students. The hero, Randle Patrick McMurphy, epitomizes, especially for the young, a nonconformist’s struggle against the oppressive social system. The mental ward’s patients—the Acutes, the Chronics, the Vegetables—have counterparts outside the hospital. The hospital’s hierarchical power structure—with the Big Nurse as castrator at its top—reflects the cold, calculating machinations of a repressive society that disregards civil rights and destroys individuality.

In 1963, David Merrick and Edward Lewis produced Dale Wasserman’s dramatized version of Cuckoo’s Nest at the Cort Theatre, and Kirk Douglas starred as Randle P. McMurphy. I did not see this early dramatization, but I did see the later production of Wasserman’s play when it opened off-Broadway in 1971 at the Mercer-Hansberry Theatre, where applauding young audiences rooted for McMurphy as he struggled against Nurse Ratched, agent of the Combine.¹ More recently, a film version of Cuckoo’s Nest was adapted by screen writers Lawrence Hauben and Bo Goldman and directed by Milos Forman, starring Jack Nicholson as McMurphy and Louise Fletcher as the Big Nurse. The film won five Oscars at the Academy Awards, including best screenplay adapted from another medium. This was the first time since 1934 that one film got all the major awards: best picture, best actor, best actress, and best director.

Most critics have praised the movie for its realism and comic sensibility, but also have criticized its absence of “the nightmare quality that made the book acapsulized allegory of an increasingly mad reality.”² The film audience stamped and cheered McMurphy as he battled the terrors of the mental hospital. But only the novel transforms the horrors of the mental ward into a microcosm of the complex suppression exercised by society upon its disdendent members.

Ken Kesey—in a 1970 interview in Rolling Stone—expressed his wish to make a film of the Cuckoo’s Nest: “I could do it weird. I could do it so that people, when they left there, they couldn’t find the exit. Direct it. Direct it and write it.”³ Kesey’s inclination to “do it weird” is at the opposite pole from the Milos Forman movie, which accentuates realism. The film is set in
Oregon State Hospital at Salem, a large, impersonal-looking group of buildings, with high fences, window-locked screens outside every room, stark locked wards, large sleeping rooms devoid of privacy, and limited activity areas. The camera's eye focuses on repeated lineups of patients for medication, therapeutic community sessions, strong aides restraining patients, and electric-shock treatment. Especially realistic is the administration of shock treatment with such particulars as the mouth gag, electrodes placed on each side of the head, the convulsions, and the facial discoloration of the patient. Forman details the sordid and also the comic aspects of a "cuckoo's nest," where physical aberrations reflect psychological ones. The stuttering Billy Bibbit becomes painful to watch. Other patients are comic representatives of a "loony bin": the huge zombi, Tabor; the short, fat Martini; the paraplegic colonel in the wheelchair hitting a punching bag with his cane; the catatonic who, during McMurphy's wild party, has liquor squirted into his mouth from an enema tube; and the patient who dances about endlessly. Casting was crucial for Milos Forman: "Since the patients in the mental ward have few lines to say, [the] audience must remember each simply by their look."4

Comic realism is the forte of Milos Forman. It was evident in his earlier films, *Loves of a Blonde*, *The Firemen's Ball*, and *Taking off*.5 *Cuckoo's Nest* under Forman's direction, focuses on the conflict between the Big Nurse and McMurphy; the agent of Society as opposed to its dissident member. Kesey's surreal prose is converted into concrete detailed scenes. Particularly detailed are the facial expressions of Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) and Randle P. McMurphy (Jack Nicholson).6 The camera's eye focuses on Louise Fletcher's controlled gradation of facial expressions: the closed-lipped smile of satisfaction; the firm set of the lower lip; the slight shade of impatience or anger or hatred; and the cold eyes. The camera also follows Jack Nicholson, the rebel who exchanges a prison work farm for a mental institution. The camera's eye catches his zany antics as he walks into the mental hospital and makes faces at the patients peering down at him. McMurphy is as uncontrolled as the Big Nurse is controlled. He Indian whoops upon meeting Chief Bromden; has a sparkle in his eye; an open smile for all; and an energetic, eager expression when possibilities for pranks arise. As the movie progresses, the smile often turns to surprise and outrage and strain, and also to the tight-lipped expression of calm acceptance, as McMurphy matches wits with Nurse Ratched in therapeutic community sessions. At the close, McMurphy's face is denuded of all expression; a graphic representation of the "open and undreaming [eyes]...like smudged fuses in a fuse box."7

Kesey, in writing the novel, exulted in the use of images which are conveyed by the narrator, a schizophrenic inpatient. Kesey saw Bromden's perspective as "extremely difficult to pull off"; a perspective that "fair makes the mind real."8 The nightmare quality of the novel grows out of Bromden's consciousness, where abstract concepts take on concrete manifestations, where the machine-like Big Nurse "blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor" (11). Bromden's story, we feel, is "the truth even if it didn't happen" (13).

Playwright Dale Wasserman preserved much of the narration of Bromden, the schizophrenic through whose eyes all details are filtered. The soundtrack was played at intervals throughout the drama, revealing Bromden's perspective. Bromden appeared on a darkened stage with a shaft of light on him:
Papa? They’re foggin’ it in again. Somethin’ bad is gonna happen, so they’re foggin’ it in . . . You hear it, Papa? The Black Machine . . . They’re puttin’ people in one end and out comes what they want . . . You think I’m ravin’ ‘cause it sounds too awful to be true, but, my God, there’s such a lot of things that’s true even if they never really happen!10

Forman—in the movie—has supplanted Bromden’s interior monologue with concrete detailed scenes. He has exchanged surreal description for realistic presentation of patients in an institutional setting. In this setting, Forman develops scenes which stress comic realism. It is for laughs that Forman expands and changes scenes in which the machismo hero, McMurphy, excels: the Monopoly game in which McMurphy squirts the men with water; the wild party with hard liquor and women; the basketball game in which McMurphy gets the slow six-foot-eight Bromden to drop the team’s ball into a basket and pop out the opponent’s ball; McMurphy’s escape over the hospital yard’s wire fence; his run into a Big Yellow Bus, which he drives away; and the patients’ commandeering of a boat for a rollicking good time at sea. McMurphy the rebellious saviour of Kesey’s novel becomes McMurphy the rabble rouser and prankster. Jack Nicholson plays McMurphy as an imaginative, attractive, sympathetic hustler, a clever guy who chooses the mental institution as a means to evade the work farm to which he had been sentenced, a man who easily gains control of incapacitated men in a cuckoo’s nest; he is a machismo hero, but not a mythic one.

It is from Bromden’s perspective (in the novel) that McMurphy gains mythic proportions as he heroically defies the dark terrors inherent in the institutional setting. For Bromden, the hospital system controls all behavior by means of hidden machinery, which accelerates or slows down time, fills the air with fog, and turns men into machines. The patients, from Bromden’s perspective, are fearful rabbits (“Billy Bibbit and Cheswick change into hunched-over white rabbits, right before my eyes” [61]) as well as lifeless machines, “machines with flaws inside that can’t be repaired, flaws born in, or flaws beat in over so many years . . . bleeding rust” (19). For Bromden, the domineering Miss Ratched is a creature sitting in the center of wires, controlling everything “with mechanical insect skill” (30). In turn, she is a Circcean creature, carrying a bag filled with magical devices to transform patients as she pleases: “tiny pills that gleam like porcelain, needles, forceps” (10); a Medusan figure with petrifying power to freeze all who disobey her, like Billy Bibbit, who looks “only straight ahead at her face, like there was a spiraling light there . . . a hypnotizing swirl” (264-65), a powerful beam, as well as a huge machine, “crooking . . . sectioned arms” (11) around patients.

From Bromden’s perspective, the action revolves around the struggle between the phantasmagorical destroyer, Nurse Ratched, and the redeemer, Randle P. McMurphy. McMurphy offers the oppressed the possibility of a rebirth. In Bromden’s eyes, he is a mythical hero: a boisterous gambler, fighter, lover of wine and women, a robust cowboy of the American West whose iron “boot heels cracked lightning out of the tile” (172), as well as a Christ figure whose strength raises the men from their fear and inertia. Shock treatment is given to McMurphy on a table shaped like a cross, emitting a “crown of electric sparks in place of thorns” (65). Bromden hopes McMurphy will diminish the power of evil: the malevolent Big Nurse, her three black aides who appear like apparitions in their white suits, and the callous hospital personnel who commit atrocities that even cause inanimate objects to weep—“table legs strained and contorted and the chairs knotted and the walls gritted against one another till you could of wrung sweat out of the room” (131). Bromden’s
Stills courtesy of Fantasy Films and United Artists Corporation.
Weird vision accumulates details that spiral upward to mythic proportions of good and evil, Christ and the Devil. Notice, for example, the significance Bromden attributes to the day’s outing arranged by McMurphy. From Bromden’s perspective, the outing provides psychological growth for the men. At sea, away from the restraints of the Big Nurse and the Combine, they follow the lead of McMurphy. They are gradually enabled to laugh at their predicament, at the whole human predicament. Bromden notes mishaps in steering the boat, cranking in the fish, and adjusting to the presence of McMurphy’s girl friend. He observes the mishaps and finds himself laughing: “laughing at the girl, at the guys, at George, at me sucking my bleeding thumb” (211-12). Bromden finally appreciates the complex nature of the humor encouraged by McMurphy: “Won’t let the pain blot out the humor no more’n he’ll let the humor blot out the pain” (212). From Bromden’s perspective, McMurphy’s twelve followers grow physically and spiritually as they appreciate the humor and pain of the human predicament:

It started slow and pumped itself full, swelling the men bigger and bigger. I watched, part of them, laughing with them—and somehow not with them. I was off the boat, blown up off the water and skating the wind with those black birds, high above myself, and I could look down and see myself and the rest of the guys, see the boat rocking there in the middle of those diving birds, see McMurphy surrounded by his dozen people, and watch them, us, swinging a laughter that rang out on the water in ever-widening circles, farther and farther, until it crashed up on beaches all over the coast, on beaches all over all coasts, in wave after wave after wave. (212)

In the movie, this psychological growth—the ability to perceive the dimensions of humor in pain and pain in humor—is forfeited for the one-dimensional level of slapstick humor, befitting a scene in which men from a “nut house” take over a stolen boat. Milos Forman emphasizes a fast moving pace, the tension involved in violating the law, the blundering on the boat, and the humorous pranks of the men. The camera’s eye moves quickly from the commandeered boat recklessly circling about without anyone at the helm, narrowly avoiding one mishap after another, to police helicopters above, and finally to the arrival at shore where police are waiting to receive the men.

The same technique of thinning down the pain and humor of a situation to the level of slapstick is evident in the scene in which Bromden finally breaks his twenty years of silence in order to communicate with McMurphy. In the novel, the hospital aide shows McMurphy Bromden’s hiding place for gum—the underside of his mattress: “You see, for years I been wondering where Chief Bromden got his chewin’ gum—never havin’ any money for the canteen, never havin’ anybody give him a stick that I saw . . . so I watched, and I waited” (184). When the aide leaves, McMurphy sings a hillbilly song: “Oh, does the Spearmint lose its flavor on the bedpost overnight?” And Bromden, gradually seeing the humor in the situation, laughs at his own predicament. Encouraged by McMurphy’s concern and kindness, Bromden breaks his twenty years of silence and thanks his hero:

It didn’t sound like much because my throat was rusty and my tongue creaked. He told me I sounded a little out of practice and laughed at that. I tried to laugh with him, but it was a squawking sound, like a pullet trying to crow. It sounded more like crying than laughing. (185)

Filtered through Bromden’s consciousness at this point are the painful reasons behind his twenty years of silence: his sense of inadequacy starting when his father, an Indian Chief, is reduced in stature by his white wife:
the fact that the Combine made the Chief sign away the tribe, the village, and the land, and gave him money for cars that he could not drive and alcohol which destroyed his moral fiber: “It sucks out of him until he’s shrunk so wrinkled and yellow even the dogs don’t know him” (188). Such negative experiences have caused Bromden to withdraw from people for twenty years. McMurphy’s sensitivity to Bromden’s need and also his appreciation of the comic elements in the Chief’s condition—and the human condition—encourage Bromden to rise out of his deaf-and-dumb silence.

In the movie, Milos Forman collapses the above scene to a swift interchange between McMurphy and Bromden as they await their turn to have electric shock treatment. McMurphy offers Bromden a stick of gum, is taken aback by Bromden’s “Thank you,” and the audience, in turn, delights in the Chief’s next words after twenty years of silence: “Juicy Fruit.”

An essential part of the novel is the focus on McMurphy as role model for Bromden and the other patients. It is through his faith in McMurphy—Bromden’s desire “to touch him because he’s who he is” (188)—that Bromden experiences a rebirth. As McMurphy’s effectiveness increases, Chief Bromden rises to fuller stature; the fog circulating around people and surroundings begins to recede, allowing him to look outside the hospital window at nature (142) instead of withdrawing into himself. He no longer views his fellow patients as machines without blood or innards, “just a shower of rust and ashes” (81), and he gains inner strength so that he eventually lifts the unliftable control panel and smashes it through the mesh wire outside the window, “baptizing the sleeping earth” (271-72). The relationship between Bromden and McMurphy is thus central to the novel, which is as much about Bromden’s gradual affirmation of life as it is about McMurphy’s conflict with the Big Nurse.

By transferring the point of view from Bromden’s imagistic ruminations to objective presentation, Milos Forman causes the audience to observe all action from the outside rather than from within. Bromden’s growing respect for McMurphy and his gradual loss of fear and new desire for life are only portrayed pictorially. In effect, the movie emphasizes only one major part of the book: McMurphy’s challenge of the establishment, represented by Nurse Ratched. We are appalled by the gruesome details of lobotomy and electric shock treatment—weapons of the Big Nurse; we cheer the hero on in his fight, laugh at his antics as he razzes the Big Nurse, parades through the mess hall in unusual dress, or squirts water at patients playing Monopoly; but without Bromden’s sensitive perspective, we also laugh at the weird patients. McMurphy represents “a man from the real world entering the looney bin.”11 We are the same observers of a “cuckoo’s nest”; we are outside, not inside, Bromden’s perspective.

In the novel, hyperbole is used to show how Bromden, the other patients, and the hospital staff fear the Big Nurse, agent of the Combine: “She’s swelling up, swells till her back’s splitting out the white uniform and she’s let her arms section out long enough to wrap around the three of them” (11). In the film, Nurse Ratched seems shorn of mythic associations. She is no longer a huge machine or a witch or a Circean figure but an authoritative nurse called Mildred, a woman who gives a strong professional appearance in her handling of the ward. In the film, Mildred exhibits controlled tone, gestures, and tight-lipped smile, excellent diction and clear sentences, and—above all—concern that the ward be run by her supreme guidance. Milos Forman perceives her as “not sadistical, only fanatical.”12 Louise Fletcher
has managed, as Charles Champlin recently observed, "to be monstrous but not a monster, hateful but not grotesque, the very model of the good citizen doing the job, disastrously." His coolness, deliberateness, and inflexible stance of professionalism are destructive, but she is not a mythic creation. Nurse Ratched, as played by Louise Fletcher, lacks mercy and compassion. Because of her fanaticism, she is "blind to her own anger and love of power, squelching her patients' manhood with the blandest of smiles." But Nurse Ratched lacks the complexities of Kesey's fantasy: she is no metaphoric demon come to life, and she does not represent the castrating female of archetypal proportions. Forman's realism has reduced her to "a handsome, hard-faced, flat-voiced, infinitely patient" nurse, whose controlling behavior has disastrous consequences.

This thinning of character is part of an over-all simplification of dimension in Forman's film script. At the conclusion of the film, Bromden crashes the control panel through the hospital's mesh wire screen and window. The act graphically shows that he has succeeded in overcoming the destructive power of the institution. He has broken away from the confines of the hospital. He is free. Through McMurphy's efforts, Bromden has attained a new life.

In the book, however, such exhilaration is more complex:

I ran across the grounds in the direction I remembered seeing the dog go, toward the highway. I remember I was taking huge strides as I ran, seeming to step and float a long ways before my next foot struck the earth. I felt like I was flying. Free. (272)

Bromden feels rejuvenated: "The glass splashed ... like a bright cold water baptizing the sleeping earth" (271-72). McMurphy, we believe, has died as saviour for Bromden and the men. Bromden seems to float through the window. He wishes to return to the pure land of his childhood before it was corrupted by the white man. He wants the excitement of living close to nature—spearing salmon as they go over the falls. Bromden's joy at the conclusion of the novel is similar to his sense of rejuvenation on the sea voyage with McMurphy, away from the restraints of the hospital and the Combine. It is similar to the joy he experienced in childhood.

This passage is most interesting for the reader of Cuckoo's Nest because it is the only time in the novel that we can see beyond Bromden's perspective. Bromden, in his exhilaration, recalls the dog he had seen loping in the breeze under a moonlit sky. The dog had been intoxicated with his freedom: "The night, the breeze full of smells so wild makes a young dog drunk" (142). Above the loping dog Canada honkers are flying. The dog runs in the direction of the Canada honkers, toward the highway. Bromden observes: "I watched the dog and the car making for the same spot of pavement" (143).

Bromden, at the close of the novel, recalls the loping dog but represses the fact that the dog was headed for destruction. In his optimism, he only remembers the movement toward freedom. Placement of the suggestive imagery of the dog gives the reader the advantage of recalling information Bromden has repressed:

The dog could still hear them a long time after me. He was still standing with his paw up; he hadn't moved or barked when they flew over. When he couldn't hear them any more either, he commenced to lope off in the direction they had gone, toward the highway, loping steady and solemn like he had an appointment. I held my breath and I could hear the flap of his big paws on the grass as he loped; then I could hear a car speed up out of a turn.
Still courtesy of Fantasy Films and United Artists Corporation.
The headlights loomed over the rise and peered ahead down the highway. I watched the dog and the car making for the same spot of pavement. (143)

The suggestive imagery of the dog presents the complexity of Kesey's thrust, the underlying pessimism which Bromden had once appreciated as he watched McMurphy—under strain—play out his role as hero for the men: "The thing he [McMurphy] was fighting, you couldn't whip it for good. All you could do was keep on whipping it, till you couldn't come out any more and somebody else had to take your place" (265). The underlying pessimism stresses the connection between the oppressiveness of the mental hospital and that of Society as a whole, the fact that "the ward is a factory for the Combine, . . . for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the churches" (40); the fact that the regimentation of the hospital is reflected in society, where people live in "five thousand houses punched out identical by a machine" (203).

Bromden leaps toward freedom, exulting in a joyous reassertion of his Indian past. The novel juxtaposes Bromden's ecstatic movement toward freedom (following in the footsteps of McMurphy) with our foreboding (caused by the suggestive cross reference) that he, like the dog loping in the breeze, will be destroyed. The ending leaves the reader frustrated, entangled in the polarities of rebirth and destruction, freedom and oppression, hope and despair. Had Milos Forman used Bromden as narrator instead of employing objective narration, and had he used surreal details instead of realistic ones—i.e., had he done it "weird," following Ken Kesey's lead—he might have caused the cinema audience to be so shocked and distraught "when they left there, they couldn't find the exit." 18

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NOTES


6Frank Kermode comments: "It is in the faces of Forman's actors that we observe the conflict," in The London Times Literary Supplement, March 19, 1976, p. 318.

7Ken Kesey, One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest (New York: Signet, 1962), p. 270. All textual references are to this edition.


11 Forman, interviewed by Burke, p. 15.

12 Ibid.


15 Leslie Fiedler points out that Kesey reformulates "that most fundamental of American legends ... [the] combat against white womanhood, portrayed as a frustrating and castrating power," in "Making It with a Little Shazam," Book Week, August 2, 1964, p. 10.


17 In the novel, as a consequence of McMurphy's martyrdom, the men sign out of the hospital. However, in the movie, only Bromden leaves the hospital.

18 Kesey, interviewed by Goodwin, p. 33.