

Class Film #8: The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980)

"Did you see The Shining? Did anyone see The Shining? Jack Nicholson plays a writer who agrees to become the caretaker at a lodge that's inaccessible all winter long. Unfortunately, he falls victim to cabin fever, becomes a stark raving loony. He wanders around with a hatchet and does a lot of jokes about The Tonight Show. You see everything, don't you? At one point in the film, he sits down to write. The camera slowly circles him as he types, and then we see it. All he's written is one line, over and over again.

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

Remington Steele (Pierce Brosnan)

Remington Steele Season 1 - Episode 7 "Etched in Steele"

Sadly, Remington Steele has two scenes confused - it's a slow upward pan on Shelley Duvall's face that precedes the "All work and no play" discovery - in my opinion one of the most powerful shots in the movie. But apart from that the rest of his description is close although, perhaps that's the first question that should be examined: what happened to Jack? Why did he become "a stark raving looney"? Was it cabin fever or something else?

Stanley Kubrick stated that the final scene of Jack in the ballroom, dated 1921 (apparently an actual photo from the period with Nicholson's face pasted over the top), suggests his reincarnation (Ciment, n.d.) and we are treated to that idea early in the film. When Jack returns to Boulder after meeting with Ullman he says that he felt like he had been there before, like the experience was much more powerful than simple *déjà vu*. But his behaviour, and the knowledge imparted by Ullman at the beginning, that the hotel was built on a Native American burial ground suggests something else. I'm reminded of the lyrics to the theme song of *Over the Hedge* (Tim Johnson & Karey Kirkpatrick, 2006)

Let me tell y'all what it's like

Watching Idol on a Friday night

In a house build safe and sound

On an Indian burial ground

Ben Folds

And then I started to think about the movie *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982). That was a Native American burial ground, wasn't it? No, it wasn't. It was just a cemetery. But it does raise a viable theory of what happened to Jack - possession. That's probably the theory that most viewers would run on, I

would imagine, especially as the idea of a spectral presence is introduced early - Doc's relationship with Tony is only a hint. The telepathy between Doc and Halloran also suggests the paranormal.

Of course, that is if one seeks a paranormal explanation. If one tries to stay grounded in science and logic then Remington Steele's explanation is as good as any - that it's just cabin fever. What of the picture? A doppelganger - everyone has someone who looks like them. Perhaps a distant relative.

But no, this is a horror film as shown by the scenes depicting great torrents of gushing blood emerging from the elevator, or the flash sequences of Doc seeing the mandarin orange commercial girls¹ chopped up in the hallway. A side note here: the description is that he chopped them up into little pieces, but in the flash sequences the actual bodies are intact. Also, if you look closely at Doc's sandwich in Boulder you'll see that in one shot he takes a huge bite out of the top, in the next shot there's only a nibble and in the final shot the sandwich is broken in half. I often wonder about continuity errors like this - it's obvious. How could they miss it? This glitch is only surpassed, in my opinion, by the 1981 Cold War military spoof *Stripes* (Ivan Reitman) where the configuration of money thrown on Bill Murray's chest changes in successive shots.

Whether through possession, reincarnation or cabin fever, there's definitely something abnormal going on, but in Kubrick's distinctive style - as demonstrated in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) - we know less than we need in order to understand. Indeed, *2001* is almost incomprehensible if one has not read the book which, apparently Arthur C. Clark wrote concurrently with Kubrick's production of the film (Kemp, 2014). *The Shining* is a little more comprehensible but, as I've just demonstrated, open to all sorts of interpretation.

The title cards shown in the movie are not unique or distinct - the same technique is used in several movies as establishing shots - the one that comes immediately to mind is *The Sting* (George Roy Hill, 1973) which has title cards that show short phrases to help to explain the plot. *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014) also uses title cards but, like *The Shining*, they are temporal - they show days. But *The Shining* is a little different in that each title card delineates ever decreasing periods of time, from "four months later" down to hourly (4pm) before the final sequence. Justin Morrow of *No Film School* suggests that this is to increase suspense "because the audience knows that *something* is coming" (Morrow, 2016) and I agree: it certainly has that effect.

There are other clues that bad things are going to happen that are less obvious. Simply the presence of Doc indicates terror as children are easy subjects. Their innocence makes them vulnerable. Furthermore, supernatural events are not unusual for children and this ignorance adds to their vulnerability. Having

¹ I mentioned this in class, but it bears repeating: the two girls who haunt Doc look like the inspiration for the creepy twins on the Cutie brand mandarin orange commercial.

never seen this film before (nor been told anything about it) I knew that Halloran was going to meet with an untidy end almost as soon as he was introduced. Why? Because he's a likeable character (and the choice of Scatman Cruthers - a very likable actor in my opinion - highlights this) and that's often a clue. "Don't get attached," I find myself telling my son when he says that he likes a particular character who I know is going to die. It's usually someone you hope doesn't.

A couple of comments about Doc: I already mentioned in class that it's incongruous that a boy that good looking (he is a very good-looking child) could be the product of parents that ugly (let's face it, neither Jack Nicholson nor Shelley Duvall are prime candidates for a beauty contest). But Danny Lloyd is also a surprisingly good actor. His looks of horror and incessant chanting of "redrum" is convincing. Sadly, it's a talent the world would never see fully developed as he decided, following one more stint in a telemovie following *The Shining* that he did not wish to pursue the craft (Clarke, 2017).

In the *Dreaded Batter Pudding Hurler* episode of *The Goon Show* (Milligan, 1954) that I referred to in my mid-term, there is a line:

"Then suddenly..."

[A sinister and dramatic fanfare]

"...Nothing happened."

This is apt for the scene in which Wendy and Doc are walking through the maze. There is absolutely nothing scary in this scene (except for the inherent potential for fright caused by a maze). It is only the sinister, atonal music which creates the suspense - we feel like we are being set up when suddenly...nothing happens.

Much of the movie is like this so when something does happen, like when Doc is assaulted by the ghost in Room 237 (in the book it's 217 but, apparently Kubrick changed it so as not to offend potential guests of room 217 at the Timberline Lodge where much of the movie was filmed - Ciment, n.d.) it happens at a time when the viewer has already been on the edge of their seat. Ironically, much of the drama comes from things that aren't there. The mandarin orange girls aren't really there (Tony reminds Doc of this - "Remember what Mr Halloran says"). When Jack is sitting in the Gold Room talking to Lloyd and Wendy comes in, the entire bar disappears or all parts of it - Lloyd, the glasses, the bottles, everything goes back to how it was when Jack entered: empty.

And then there is one of the most ironic lines in the movie². Wendy tells Jack that there's someone else in the hotel with them and that's who assaulted Doc (the spirit in Room 237). He turns around and asks

² Credit to my son for pointing this out.

her, "are you out of your fucking mind?" This coming from a man who was drinking non-existent alcohol and talking with a person who was never there. Who's out of their mind?

Finally, in the book Stephen King has Jack Torrence describing Ullman as (and I quote) an "officious little prick." But this particular officious little prick is a member of a very exclusive club - one of which Pierce Brosnan is also a member: Barry Nelson has the odd and not often recognized distinction of being the first actor ever to play Ian Fleming's James Bond in the *Climax!* teleplay of Casino Royale (William H. Brown, 1954). Perhaps his only true claim to fame and only to real Bond devotees.

The Shining hasn't, in my opinion, aged very well. Nicholson is an excellent actor but, despite his twenty odd years of experience at this time, his performance is still a little raw and I'm afraid I'll never be able to look at Shelley Duvall again without seeing Olive Oyl. However, it is still an entertaining movie and, like many Kubrick films, a feast of visual artistry.

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The Sting (George Roy Hill, 1973) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070735>

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