

KUBRICK'S APPROACH TO THE FANTASY-REALITY DICHOTOMY IN *THE SHINING*

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This paper starts with the premise that Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* represents a challenge to the idea that everything that goes beyond the regions of knowledge is unlikely to be real since there are some aspects of understanding, guided by incredulity, that prevent people from accepting certain phenomena as being possible. Accordingly, some of the cinematic strategies used in *The Shining* will be analysed with reference to the way in which they confront the idea of what is real and what is delusion by the insertion of a few incidents that cannot be explained using reason and, therefore, challenge logic. The uncanny sensations that the interactions between reality and fantasy create for the viewers implies that there are some forces beyond human control. Different scenes such as the Gold Room or the Slaughtered Sisters, as well as the Pantry Door and Room 237 will be discussed to illustrate the way in which Kubrick defies rationalism by creating a bi-dimensional world within the Overlook Hotel. The conclusion to this study suggests that these scenes cause a dramatic increase in the tension and these events are the reason for the dichotomy between fantasy and reality that is the essence of this paper.

Keywords: Stanley Kubrick, *The Shining*, the uncanny, anti-rationalism, fantasy.

In the third interview that Stanley Kubrick gave to Michael Ciment, the director makes a juxtaposition between realism and fantasy in which the former serves to “dramatize argument and ideas” and the latter to “deal ... with themes which lie ... in the unconscious” (in Ciment 2001: 181). Accordingly, fantasy is one of the first concepts which should be highlighted in reference to *The Shining* due to the fact that it is used to access the subconscious of the three main characters. Fantasy is, in this particular case, inherent to a reality which is connected with the materialistic idea of knowledge, that is to say, the character's knowledge has been extracted from objective and existing experiences. Indeed, most of the fantastic elements in *The Shining* are born from real facts that are told by secondary characters before the action starts. At the beginning of the film, the manager of the Overlook Hotel tells the new caretaker, Jack, what happened to Mr. Grady, a former caretaker who murdered his family some winters before. It is clear from Jack's demeanour that he is already psychologically unbalanced before he arrives at the hotel and so this comment from the manager probably serves to exacerbate his condition. All the visual images from that slaughter that flash throughout the film are also related to the murders in the Overlook Hotel and, therefore, should be considered as instances of reality. The immediate reaction of the viewer to this, as Kubrick said (in Ciment 2001), is to spend part of the film trying to explain fantastic elements by psychological means. This is easy in most of the scenes when Jack seems to be hallucinating. For example, the scenes in the Gold Room and especially the relationship with Lloyd, the barman, can be perfectly considered as visions. Fantasy at this level works by means of mental projections that come from Jack's subconscious

and are perceived as part of his reality. However, Grady's apparition has a different dimension because it is the director's challenge to the rational explanations of the fantastic elements in the film. As Jenkins points out, "Grady figuratively locates the source of Jack's inspiration" (1997: 276) for killing his family. Considering the way in which Grady appears on the screen, the viewers always have the impression that Jack is mentally recreating the image of the person whom he knows murdered his family. Additionally, the dialectic struggle that both characters maintain in the restroom of the Gold Room can be perfectly interpreted as a product of Jack's imagination but it is the pantry door scene which challenges the idea that everything that happens within the hotel is mental illusion.

In that sequence, we never see Grady on the screen, we just hear his voice that supposedly comes from the other side of the pantry door but that could also come from Jack's subconscious. Grady's speech represents what Freud considered as the main motivation for fantasy to appear, which is *dissatisfaction* (Rozet 2008). Every single reason that Grady gives Jack for him to kill his family is inspired by Jack's frustration with himself and therefore can also be considered as an affirmation of his own discontent. Broch (1987) identifies existential anguish as one of the main causes of severe aggression. Grady is the strategy that Jack's subconscious creates to validate his resentment towards his wife and his son. Therefore, that is what can be interpreted as the result of a repressed desire to express a resentful attitude towards a reality that manifests as exasperating.

The main success of this scene is in what is suggested rather than in what is shown on the screen, following the technique of *suggesting not showing*, a strategy that Kubrick uses successfully throughout the film. The camera is placed inside the pantry and, hence, we as viewers never see what is happening outside except when we hear the door being unlocked from the other side, we assume that it was Grady who unlocked it. The fact that the former caretaker, a fantasy figure, physically helps Jack to get out of the pantry challenges a rational explanation of what is happening. From the moment when we accept that Grady opens the door, we are also accepting the existence of incorporeal beings. But the truth is that we never see how Grady opens the door or how Jack gets out of the locked pantry. The director succeeds in suggesting without showing, and therefore this demands an active role from the viewer at a level necessary to interpret this scene logically or else accept fantasy as part of a world created within the film. As a matter of fact, this is not the only part of the film in which Kubrick challenges solipsistic theories that confront rationalism.

Danny has *the shining*, which is understood to be the capacity to communicate with ethereal existence through his visions. Here, rationalism is questioned once again by extrasensory perception. As Kubrick highlighted, Danny "has had a frightening and disturbing childhood" (in Ciment 2001: 192) which is implied throughout the film. These traumatic experiences early in life can, in many cases, lead to psychological attempts to release certain fears and complexes through the use of fantasy. Rozet (2008) stresses in his study about the connection between psychology and fantasy that a series of authors agree on saying that the motivation for fantasy to appear is the need to liberate the subconscious from childhood burdens. Children have, indeed, a great capacity to liberate energy through fantasy and imagination and in this case, Tony can be considered as Danny's mechanism to "rationalise his visions and survive" (Kubrick in Ciment 2001: 192). Notwithstanding, this imaginary friend is also, as Jenkins affirms, "the emotional filter through which [Danny's shining] must pass before it reaches Danny's conscious mind" (1997: 239). As a result, it is not surprising that Tony is represented by Danny in such a distressing way with deep insights and a guttural voice.

Danny's visions are one of the most blatant effects in the film. The two sisters who keep appearing to interact with the boy are probably the most characteristic examples of fantastic illusions. This effect has probably more emphasis because of the juxtaposition of images where they seem to be alive and where they are massacred. The way in which these apparitions are shown on the screen is made more dramatic by the fact that we immediately realise that they are the dead daughters of the former caretaker. But the most dreadful aspect is that they appear for the first time when Danny does not know anything about the slaughter in the Overlook Hotel. Their harmless and naïve façade immediately vanishes, as Jenkins points out, when we hear "the creepy, other-worldly tone" (1997: 256). Their invitation to Danny to play with them and the subsequently inserted pictures of the two girls cut into pieces creates an unexpected reaction in the viewers. The implicit violence that these two juxtaposed sequences offers, follows the technique of *suggesting not showing* that creates the horror in the scene. The disturbing element of the two sisters is not only created by showing opposing images, but also by the uncommon or unexpected aspect of their childlike nature. Adults usually feel empathy towards children that are suffering from an unfair situation but when these children cross the boundary between suffering and a tormented existence empathy turns into apprehension. The viewer knows that the two sisters are mental projections of Danny's *shining* but we never know up to what point these disturbing figures will be able to harm the boy and that is what creates the anxiety within the viewer. Our worst fears increase when the sisters invite Danny to play with them "forever and ever and ever", which can be compared to classic fairy tales when the story ends happily ever after. Here instead, the fable is prevented by the insertion of the girls' corpses and, therefore, as Jenkins considers, the "offer of companionship thus becomes an invitation to death" (1997: 256).

Another duality in the film is one which is connected with something I have mentioned before: the constant use of mirrors that support the duality between fantasy and reality. For instance, Jack sees his reflection in the mirror behind the Gold Room bar and it is then when his imagination gives form to Lloyd. There are also mirrors in the restroom of the Gold Room when Jack and Grady are talking. In these two cases, mirrors reflect the incorporeal being's image, adding realism to the scenes, and therefore, not following the classic precept that mirrors are the proof for discovering ghosts and vampires. This effect increases the viewer's confusion around the veracity of what is happening on the screen but, in my opinion, the fact that the mirrors reflect the vision's figures is simply a sign of the fact that Kubrick is trying to create a parallel world within the Hotel in which reality and fantasy constantly merge.

In contrast, there are not many cases in which we see the image of Danny reflected in a mirror apart from the beginning of the film where he is still in his house, again in a bathroom, and standing on a stool in front of the mirror to communicate with Tony. In this case, the duality between Danny and Tony is shown very clearly to be two characters that are synthesised into one person. Another scene where there is a mirror that has an important role occurs almost at the end of the film. Here, his mother Wendy is sleeping in the bedroom when Danny enters the room completely possessed by Tony and constantly repeating the infamous word *redrum* that becomes *murder* once Wendy sees its reflection in the bedroom mirror. Apparently, Tony is trying to warn Wendy about what is going to happen and the mirror facilitates this warning.

Despite the fact that the previously discussed phenomenon can be explained rationally using Danny's psychological disturbance, it is impossible to avoid turning ones attention to what happened in room 237. Danny is kneeling in one of the hotel corridors, playing with his toys on the carpet, when he sees a ball rolling towards him

and he innocently thinks that it was his sent by his mother. He then walks in the direction from which the ball came until he realises that the door to room 237 is open and has a key in its lock. Once again Kubrick uses the technique of *suggesting not showing* and, therefore, forces the viewers to imagine for themselves what is going to happen inside that room. Who unlocked room 237? Maybe it was Jack himself if we want to force a rational interpretation but, there is no doubt that the film suggests that an afterlife being which inhabits the hotel was the one that had opened it after haunting Danny with its presence. Once again the open door suggests an invitation for Danny to accompany the spirits of the Overlook Hotel in their eternal mourning. Furthermore, we do not even know if Danny really entered the room because all we see is the camera that adopts the boy's point of view from outside the door. Moreover, during the time when, it is implied, Danny was in room 237, Jack has a nightmare in which he dreams that he kills his son. Danny then appears in a completely shocked state, with bruises on his neck. It is interesting to note Wendy's reaction to those marks because she interprets them rationally and believes that it was Jack who injured his son as this had happened in the past. Jack, who appears to be absolutely out of his mind, is unable to react and deny that it was him who had just hit his son. I consider that it is at this moment when Jack realises that the Hotel and the ethereal forces within it are part of his reality and that is why he does not do anything other than stay in his chair unable to focus on the situation.

This scene, together with the pantry door scene, probably represents the definitive challenge to rationalism in *The Shining*. The viewer can force a rational explanation for them because the viewers never see who rolled the ball or who it was that opened the door. The truth is that these scenes seem to intend to represent the control that afterlife beings have over the Overlook Hotel and the three members of Jack's family. The epilogue to the film is the final thrust that Kubrick gives to emphasise the fact that Jack was always predestined to attempt to kill his family. The Overlook Hotel is the perfect scenario for fantasy to appear once it becomes isolated during winter and, therefore, it represents a place out of space and time, where the doorway to another world is opened by Danny's *shining*.

I have used most of this paper trying to give rational explanations to the phenomena that occur in the film, as Kubrick predicted in the interview he gave to Ciment. Are the visions real or are they just fantastic manifestations in the minds of the characters? I consider that the intention of the director was to make the viewers believe everything that they were shown during the film and that they would look for logic among Danny's and Jack's interactions with ethereal beings which is one of the effects that *The Shining* aims to achieve. Sceptically speaking, there is always a psychological reason behind every apparition in the film, even for the rolling ball and the pantry door scenes. We could think that it was Jack who opened room 237 and we can also think that it was also Jack who rolled the ball which he had continuously been playing with in previous scenes, and in the same way we can think that Jack escaped from the pantry after breaking down the door but this would not make any sense considering the aim of the film. Kubrick's intention seems to be the creation of a real place, the Overlook Hotel, in which the distinction between fantasy and reality becomes blurred and where it is implied that reason is not the unique force with which to filter certain phenomena.

In my opinion, and to conclude, I should emphasise that *The Shining* succeeds in suggesting rather than showing, and this is exactly what causes this uncanny feeling that the viewers experience throughout the film. The combination of Jack's complex psychological state together with Danny's capacity to interact with afterlife beings and the atmosphere that surrounds the Overlook Hotel and also the murders that we believe took place, causes a dramatic increase in the tension. *The Shining* creates built-up

anxiety in the viewers from the very beginning, even before the family arrives at the hotel through Danny and his visions. This energy is not released until the very end of the film when we see on the screen the Independence Day Ball picture and we finally understand that Jack was predestined to murder his family and, therefore, everything that had happened was unavoidable. Thus, scientific knowledge in *The Shining* is considered as being limited. It was Broch (1987) who commented that the mere fact of being part of a world ruled by a technical and scientific community does not mean that every single irrational thought must be avoided. The two episodes to which I have referred to as being the director's challenge to reason imply that our understanding of what is possible or what is delusion might be determined by our pre-acquired scientific knowledge. Kubrick offers a bi-dimensional world that meets within the walls of the Overlook Hotel and, in my opinion, his intention is to invite the viewers to leave aside their sceptical logic for the duration of the film in order to believe that what is happening on the screen did actually take place.

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