A Significant Issue with the Individuals Responsible for Managing the Location

Introduction

Thirty-four years after it was first released, The Shining remains, in many estimations, the greatest horror film ever made. Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece, released on May 23, 1980, remains a cornerstone in film study for its storytelling and technical cinematography. It delves deep into the psychological and supernatural horrors found at the remote Overlook Hotel in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Kubrick, known for his meticulous craftsmanship and profound use of symbolism, constructs a multi-layered narrative that weaves a complex web of themes, including history, family dynamics, and the human psyche. In fact, "...the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" in 2018." (Landrum Jr., "'Jurassic Park,' 'Shining'"). The film follows Jack Torrence (Jack Nicolson), a writer and former alcoholic who becomes the off-season caretaker of the Overlook Hotel. His son Danny (Danny Lloyd) has a psychic ability called "the shine," revealed to him by the hotel's chef, Dick Hallorann (Scatman Crothers). Before a snowstorm isolates them in the Colorado Rockies, Danny's imaginary friend Tony forewarns him of the hotel's haunted past. Jack's mental state deteriorates due to the hotel's influence and its otherworldly inhabitants, endangering both Danny and his mother, Wendy (Shelley Duvall).

When "The Shining" premiered in the United States, it garnered mixed reactions. The New York Times positively commended Jack Nicholson's performance and the setting of the Overlook Hotel yet criticized the film's supernatural elements for their lack of clarity. (Maslin, “The Shining”) Variety was particularly critical, arguing that Kubrick and a jumpy Jack Nicholson diminished the terror in Stephen King's novel (Variety, “The Shining”). A common critique among many reviewers was the film's slow pace, atypical for horror films at that time, leading to a perceived lack of thrills and difficulty connecting with the characters. "The Shining" also faced an unusual situation in terms of awards. It was one of only two films in Kubrick's later career, the other being "Eyes Wide Shut," to receive no BAFTA nominations. (O’Neil, “Quelle Horreur!”) More notably, it was the only one among his last nine films to be overlooked by the Oscars and Golden Globes. Contrarily, it was nominated for Razzie Awards, a distinction for poor cinematic achievements, including Worst Director and Worst Actress for Shelley Duvall. (Dorsh, “The Razzies”) Vincent Misiano summarized his disappointment in a review for Ares magazine, stating: "The Shining lays open to view all the devices of horror and suspense... The result is shallow, self-conscious, and dull. Read the book." (Misiano, 34) This sentiment reflected a broader view that despite its innovative techniques, the film failed to deliver the horror and engagement that audiences expected. While "The Shining" has faced criticism for its slow pace, perceived lack of terror, and deviation from conventional horror tropes, it is clear Stanley Kubrick was not creating a traditional horror film; his use of precise and innovative cinematographic techniques fosters an unsettling atmosphere that allows multiple interpretations.

Other Interpretations

In "The Shining," Stanley Kubrick's meticulous mise-en-scène transcends mere functionality and realism, employing every element within the frame—from the grandiose architecture of the Overlook Hotel to the carefully curated colour palette and lighting—to deepen the thematic undercurrents and psychological complexities of the narrative. Kubrick mentioned that he "found [it] very compulsive reading, and [he] thought the plot, ideas, and structure were much more imaginative than anything [he'd] ever read in the genre. It seemed to [him] one could make a wonderful movie out of it (Konda, “What Stanley Kubrick”)." Kubrick would go on to highlight aspects of the story that King glossed over and expanded minor elements that King did not focus on. Kubrick's thematic elements are subtle, and one does not necessarily see them if one is expecting a story like King's book (Padavona, “Stephen King vs Stanley Kubrick”). Jack's history of violence and the fact that Grady said, "You were always the caretaker (Kubrick, “The Shining”)," and Jack's appearance in the picture from the 1921 party show that this is a representation of the cycle of abuse and the hotel's evil encourages his pre-existing violent tendencies. The stress of isolation and writer's block that he faces causes him to relapse, highlighting the challenges that recovering addicts face. The immense pressure that Jack puts on himself to produce a literary work, his responsibilities to his wife, and his need for achievement can be seen as an existential crisis where his professional identity and self-worth are being challenged.

Isolation Through the Camera

Due to the film's ambiguity about the source of Jack's madness, we can explore the tendency of the human mind to get overwhelmed and break. "The Shining" is distinguished by its deliberate and unusual slow pacing, which contributes to a unique rhythm and an unsettling atmosphere for viewers. This pace mirrors the boredom and stasis experienced by the characters, immersing the audience in the film's eerie environment. The set design is pivotal beyond a mere backdrop; it establishes the film's mood. Stanley Kubrick's meticulous attention to detail, innovative Steadicam use, symmetrical framing, and specific music and pacing choices collaborate to create a sense of unease. The Overlook Hotel embodies a sense of timelessness and isolation with its expansive, echoing spaces and anachronistic décor. The long, empty corridors and large, desolate rooms contribute to feelings of loneliness and despair. The mis-en-scene is the hotel, seeping with history and horror, and it is a character embodying isolation, history, and entrapment.

Native American Presence

Kubrick's decision to set the film in a location with such a charged history can be seen as a metaphor for the human tendency to suppress the guilt of violent historical genocide and invites viewers to ponder deeper societal issues. The hotel's Colorado Lounge, with its high ceilings and strategically placed Native American motifs, hints at a troubled history, creating a subtext of underlying horror. Although seemingly innocuous, the motifs in the wall tapestries, paintings, and carpets are constant reminders of the human capacity for evil. This interpretation of set design and mise-en-scene elements adds a profound depth to the film, elevating it from a

tale of supernatural strain and mental breakdown to that of the dark past of genocide, historical guilt and unresolved trauma. The hotel's construction over a burial ground is a metaphor for the human tendency to suppress the guilt of a violent historical genocide.

Disorientation Through the Camera

A few years ago, a designer creating a 3D level for the computer game Duke Nukem based on the Overlook Hotel discovered spatial impossibilities in the hotel's design (Ager, "Spatial Awareness"), which made creating a continuous 3D level unfeasible. The designer found that the hotel's layout included impossible spaces, like the window in Ullman's office, which is spatially unfeasible given the surrounding hallways. Other flaws were noticed, such as contradictions in the Colorado Lounge scene, where people emerge from a hallway that seems impossible given the room's layout. The anomalies in the film's set design seem intentional, used to disorient the viewer and communicate the illusionary nature of the hotel. Certain scenes, like the kitchen tour, were crafted to disorient the viewer, with inconsistencies like door orientations and positions. The entrance to the hedge maze appears to change positions for the film's ending. Small print instructions on the map prop obscure the position of the new entrance. The exterior map is also placed at a distance from the entrance to the maze. The high-angle shot of the hedge maze can be seen as a convoluted symbol of the human mind, with no end or border in sight. The Kubrick archives confirmed suspicions about these spatial impossibilities. (Ager, "Spatial Awareness") The impossible architecture and shifting layouts contribute to confusion and disorientation. This aligns with the film's exploration of psychological horror, where the line between reality and illusion is blurred. The layout and spatial anomalies mirror the mental disintegration of Jack Torrance as he descends into madness.

Another example of disorientation is Jack's conversation with Grady (Philip Stone) in the bathroom. The 180-degree rule is broken to disrupt the viewer's spatial orientation. This approach reflects Kubrick's innovative style, using unconventional methods to intensify the psychological impact of the film.

Ambiguity Through the Lens

Stanley Kubrick skillfully incorporates supernatural elements that blur the lines between the real and the imagined. One of the most striking examples is the scene where Wendy witnesses a torrent of blood gushing from the hotel's elevator. This visually haunting and symbolically loaded moment defies clear explanation. Another significant instance is the debated involvement of Grady's ghost in unlocking the pantry door to free Jack, raising questions about the supernatural's tangible influence within the hotel. The Grady twins (Lisa and Louise Burns) and their cryptic dialogues remain ambiguous; it is unclear whether they are actual spirits or manifestations of the characters' psychological disturbances.

One particular consensus is Kubrick's intention to display the genocide of the Native Americans and the inherent evil that lies within us all. There are two instances where Jack is in the pantry. The first one is during the tour of the dry goods locker. Here, we see Calumet baking powder neatly arranged in the background, where all the labels are fully visible and cohesive. The second is when he is locked in the pantry by Wendy. Here, the Calumet baking powder is in a different location within the pantry; all the labels are obscured, and not one is fully legible. The name Calumet is derived from the Native American ceremonial peace pipe, and the symbolism here could refer to the dishonest treaties made. It is also poignant to note that Hallorann, a black

man, is the only character who is murdered in the film and the only one to die besides Jack (Kubrick, “The Shining”). Kubrick intentionally avoids clarifying whether these apparitions are real or imagined, maintaining constant unease and uncertainty.

Mirror Shots and Lighting

Kubrick's use of reflections creates a disorienting visual experience, mirroring the characters' descent into madness. Like Jack, the viewers question the truth of the events unfolding in the hotel. The mirror is a symbolic reflector of Jack's troubled psyche, blurring the lines between external horror and internal conflict. The presence of mirrors during Jack's ghostly encounters could suggest that these apparitions are, in some way, manifestations of his inner thoughts, fears, or desires. For example, when Jack converses with Lloyd, the bartender in the Gold Room, the large mirror behind the bar is prominently featured. This scene can be Jack confronting his own alcoholism and domestic failures, with Lloyd being a manifestation of Jack's desire to escape his responsibilities and guilt. The mirror amplifies this interpretation, suggesting that what Jack is truly facing is a version of himself. Similarly, in the infamous Room 237 scene, mirrors add an eerie dimension to the encounter. It is a pivotal moment where reality and fantasy, the tangible and the spectral, converge. This scene can be Jack confronting his own lust, guilt, and possibly his violent tendencies. Furthermore, mirrors in these ghostly encounters align with the film's theme of duality and the blurring of reality.

Kubrick's expertise in lighting techniques, which he honed over years and different projects, played a significant role in creating the unique atmospheres in his films. Unlike traditional horror films that often use darkness to create fear, Kubrick opted to illuminate his

scariest scenes, making the horror elements more stark and unsettling; shining, indeed. This approach, combined with other unique lighting techniques such as unnatural over-lighting of the hotel and lights that appear to switch on and off by themselves, added a layer of subliminal unease. For instance, in Hallorann's relatively tiny room, there are a total of four lamps. In Jack and Wendy's room, there are five lamps, often reflected in the mirrors, giving that space an excess of light. Kubrick also utilized lighting to create subliminal images, like skulls, adding another layer of creepiness to the film. Kubrick's use of lighting was not just technically impressive; it was integral to the storytelling and atmosphere of his films.

Conclusion

The film’s atmosphere invites deeper contemplation and realization concerning human nature's historical and intrinsically malevolent aspects. Through its masterful use of cinematography, set design, lighting and narrative ambiguity, the film invites viewers into a world where the boundaries between reality and illusion are as convoluted and mysterious as the corridors of the Overlook Hotel itself. The film's enduring legacy lies in its ability to leave audiences pondering long after the credits roll, a hallmark of cinematic greatness. It forces the audience to reflect on aspects of human history covered by a veneer of progress pointing towards the systematic suppression of guilt and responsibility. The nuanced portrayal of characters trapped within the oppressive atmosphere of the Overlook Hotel mirrors the struggles with personal and collective guilt and the often unacknowledged horrors of the past. In essence, "The Shining" warrants deeper contemplation and insight. It is more than a psychological horror film; it is a profound exploration of the human psyche, responsibility, dysfunction, societal guilt, and the cyclical nature of violence and repression. Kubrick's genius lies in his ability to use the

medium of film to tell a story, provoke thought, challenge perceptions, and expose the unsettling aspects of human nature and history that lurk beneath the surface of civilized society. If the audience merely sees this film as a horror story, they will be robbed of all that its subtlety has to offer. Kubrick was obsessive, demanding, and borderline abusive himself, undoubtedly demon-driven, but we are far richer for it. He inspired many current motion picture auteurs like Spielberg, Scorsese and Romero (Prisbylla, “Fear and Desire”). If he had been less of a perfectionist, filmmaking would have been much poorer.

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Circle of violence, Jack seen in Baphomet pose



Long isolating corridors, primarily shot with right angles like a maze



Native American motifs, veneer of progress and class



Exterior map outside of maze, partially covered with text



Mirror shots, addressing personal sin, history, desire



Jack and Grady in the Bathroom scene, 180 degree rule broken



Calumet Baking Powder, straightforward



Calumet Baking Powder, askew representing dishonest alliances