
Sex, Gender, and Stanley Kubrick: An Analysis of the Sexual Imagery in the Filmography of Stanley Kubrick

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Stanley Kubrick is considered one of the most revered filmmakers of our time. Kubrick is famous for his scrupulous composition, cinematography, and editing techniques. Additionally, all of Kubrick's films from *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) onward are united in that they contain both explicit and implicit depictions of sexuality. The sexual imagery present in Kubrick's filmography accomplishes several purposes: Firstly, it asserts the male gaze—or the camera perceiving and therefore portraying narrative events from the masculine perspective and as pertaining to male issues. Secondly, it represents Kubrick's ideas on sexuality and gender roles, and as Kubrick often displays sexuality in conjunction with violence, he intrinsically associates the two. Thirdly, this imagery establishes destructive and toxic masculinity as Kubrick's ideal performance of the male gender, and this representation may subsequently foster the social acceptance of misogyny, contributing to (and unconsciously condoning) its effects on society (such as domestic violence, assault, male chauvinism, etc.)

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Stanley Kubrick, often considered one of the most iconic filmmakers of our generation and renowned for his meticulous camerawork and perfectionism in the editing room, was the embodiment of an auteur. Most of his productions, despite varying wildly in terms of genre, narrative focus and formal technique, have at least one thing in common: they all demonstrate Freudian (or otherwise) depictions of sexuality. Freudian imagery, in this case, refers to imagery (often in the form of material objects) which represents sexual organs and the subsequent subconscious assertion of sexuality within a context that is not necessarily inherently sexual, often to illustrate power dynamics and relationships between individuals or to normalize certain gender expectations (Orrells, Freud's Phallic Symbol, 2). All of Kubrick's films—from *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) onward—contain sexual imagery, the inclusion of which accomplishes several purposes: Firstly, it asserts the male gaze, or the camera perceiving and thus portraying events from the male perspective and as pertaining to male issues. Secondly, it represents Kubrick's ideas on sexuality and gender roles—and as Kubrick often displays sexuality in conjunction with violence, he intrinsically associates the two. This establishes destructive and toxic masculinity as

Kubrick's ideal performance of the male gender, and this representation may foster the social acceptance of misogyny, subsequently contributing to (and unconsciously condoning) its effects on society (such as domestic violence, assault, male chauvinism, etc.)

Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb

Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb is one of Kubrick's first films found to contain both explicit as well as implicit visual expressions of sexuality. The film opens with a sequence of two planes refueling in mid-air—the planes are connected by an elongated device, which is captured from an overhead shot while it is inserted into the fuel tank. This sequence is meant to emulate sexual intercourse, and establishes an association between means of reproduction and technology, a theme which appears with some regularity in Kubrick's following production, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Further, there are many cylindrically-shaped items (i.e., missiles, bombs, and guns), which act as dual agents of destruction, as well as substitute phalluses. One example of this is the scene in which General Jack D. Ripper is using a large machine gun to defend his position within the base camp, while it is

under attack by U.S. military siege. Ripper is holding the gun at crotch level, and the effect is that the gun (which is large enough that Ripper must hold it lower in order to use it properly) is meant to emulate Ripper's penis, thus creating an association between masculinity and weapons of destruction. This relationship is shown once more towards the end of the film, when Major Kong literally rides an atomic bomb after it is released from his plane until it hits the ground and detonates, consequently resulting in his death. The bomb's detonation symbolizes ejaculation—given that the bomb is shaped like a phallus and that Kong is physically riding it immediately preceding its explosion—and reinforces the concept of the “deathgasm,” or a visual manifestation of the pre-established affiliation between sexuality (specifically male climax) with weapons of mass death and destruction. The imagery in *Dr. Strangelove* therefore effectively associates masculinity with destruction, and simultaneously asserts that men should have control in situations that impact whole countries and decide the fates of millions of people—whether or not the end result of their deliberation is effective.

2001: A Space Odyssey

In Kubrick's next film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, he diverges from his usual trend of juxtaposing images of violence and sexuality. Instead, Kubrick employs sexual imagery to establish a connection between masculinity and reproduction, defying cultural norms surrounding birth and child-rearing. Kubrick first nods towards the societal association between masculinity and technology, as well as femininity and nature (i.e., reproduction) in the initial space sequence, during which one of the ships is docking on the large circular space station. From one perspective, the physical process of docking may be representative of sexual intercourse, as the ship itself is shaped like a phallus. From another, the space station itself symbolizes an egg, to be fertilized by the spaceship upon its entrance, signifying procreation. Other reproductive imagery may be found later on in the film—for instance, the ship carrying protagonist Dr. Dave Bowman (the *Discovery*) resembles a sperm. The head of the ship is large and circular, and its protruding back half is long and narrow, resembling a tail. The fact that the *Discovery* so closely approximates the appearance of a sperm not only correlates masculinity and reproduction, but it also identifies male sexuality (and thus the male gender) as the primary force and initiator involved in the process of procreation, as opposed to female

sexuality. This is reinforced by the ending of the film, which features what appears to be a sizable fetus and/or baby floating in space, referring to cosmic conception and rebirth sparked by the *Discovery's* travels. Kubrick's utilization of said imagery, whether conscious or subconscious, does not have as negative an impact as his consistent juxtaposition of sexual and violent images. Rather, it hints at a societal gender discrepancy in attribution of responsibility for reproduction, as women are disproportionately associated with, and therefore more frequently charged with, the responsibilities that are intrinsic to both childbirth and child rearing. In this way, the sexual imagery in *2001*, and how it works in the film representationally, differs from that of Kubrick's other films.

A Clockwork Orange

Conversely, Kubrick's eighth film *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) is arguably his most disturbing work. *Clockwork* has perhaps the most explicit sexual imagery of all Kubrick's films, and draws the most comparisons between violence and sexuality, particularly male sexuality. The set design alone contains countless references to genitalia and or sexualized parts of the body (i.e., the clear plastic models of female bodies at the milk bar that Alex and the droogs visit, with the milk suggestively excreting from the nipples of each model.) Many of the props that Alex and the droogs interact with exist as phallic substitutes or symbols: for example, the large stick that Alex uses to beat dim and the other droogs with at the waterside (harkening back to *Dr. Strangelove*, this scene visually likens male sex organs with weaponry) or the hefty ceramic phallic statue that Alex uses to kill the cat lady earlier on in the film. Aside from *mise-en-scene*, the remaining visuals are more straightforward—there are three intensely brutal rape scenes, all of which obviously reassert the relationship between male sexuality and violence.

Additionally—in that incidents like assault and rape often indicate a perpetrator's need for sexual and mental-emotional control—the rape scenes in *Clockwork* establish that masculine sexuality requires some degree of power or dominance in order to be valid. Until Alex receives the Ludovico treatment, he is an utterly dominant figure, reinforcing Kubrick's idea of masculinity as necessitating a sense of inherent authority.

What's more, Alex does not receive the ultimate punishment (i.e., death), at the end of *Clockwork*—in fact, it's quite the opposite. After Alex's suicide attempt cures him of the effects of the Ludovico technique, a

government representative approaches him (under the guise of an apology) and offers financial compensation and legal pardoning if Alex is to continue behaving as he did before his imprisonment, in an effort to conceal the illegal testing from the concerned public. This ending then validates Alex's atrocities, thus also legitimizing the connections between acts of male sexuality, violence, and control. Shortly after the film's release, it was reported that various groups of teenagers had been cavorting around London and emulating Alex and the droogs. As described by John Baxter in *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography*, Kubrick initially staunchly defended his film, even going so far as to ask Warner Bros. to remove his film from release in certain parts of Florida, where several newspapers publicly refused to advertise X-rated films like *Clockwork* (Baxter 269). Eventually, Kubrick acknowledged that the representation of masculinity in *Clockwork* was dangerous, and he withdrew *A Clockwork Orange* from release in the U.K. in 1974 (*A Clockwork Orange* handout, 4). Further, although Kubrick likely did not intend for the imagery within *Clockwork* to assert said associations between sex and violence, it cannot be denied that the representation itself did not (or could not) have specific negative impacts.

Barry Lyndon

When considering Kubrick's filmography chronologically, the intensity of *Clockwork* is somewhat dampened by his next film, the elaborate period piece *Barry Lyndon* (1975). Although *Barry Lyndon* is arguably the least inherently sexual of Kubrick's films after *Dr. Strangelove*, there is still some (certifiably more implicit) sexual imagery present within. The most obvious example is at the beginning of the film, when Redmond Barry's cousin and lover Nora Brady agrees to marry Captain Quin. In a fit of rage, Barry returns Nora's ribbon to her in front of Quin, in an attempt to slight the captain and spoil their burgeoning relationship. The ribbon itself exists as a symbol of Nora's sexuality, which is likened to an object that may be traded and commodified by the men around her. Immediately following this interaction, when Nora explains to Barry that she is, essentially, choosing Captain Quin over him, he reacts by challenging Quin to a duel, the result of which causes him to flee Ireland. The majority of Barry's actions after Nora slights him are reactionary—once gaining footing in England, he attempts to garner wealth and influence in an effort to prove to himself (and subconsciously to Nora) that he is worthy of the company of aristocracy, and if not

honorable in personal character, honorable because of his achievements. For much of the film, Barry is insecure in his masculinity, and this is reflected in his constant desire to engage in male conquest, which he believes will repair and overshadow his fragile and fractured ego. In actuality, Barry is less than fit for a life of nobility, and this further contributes to his eventual fall from grace. As Kubrick himself explains: "With respect to Barry Lyndon, after his successful struggle to achieve wealth and social position, Barry proves to be badly unsuited to this role. He has clawed his way into a gilded cage, and once inside, his life goes really bad"—Michel Ciment, *Kubrick*. Holt Rinehart, Winston, 1980, 171. (*Barry Lyndon* handout, 8.) Admittedly, *Barry Lyndon* is less focused on direct comparisons between male sexuality and destruction, and more so on representation of issues which commonly affect the male population, primarily masculine insecurity and how that translates to our cultural norms surrounding male gender roles.

The Shining

Themes of masculine insecurity bleed over into Kubrick's tenth film, *The Shining* (1980), wherein Kubrick provides one of the first portrayals of the "incel" archetype in mass media. The sexual imagery within *The Shining* places distinct emphasis on misogyny, and its connection to sexual violence—in fact, the Overlook appeals to Jack's misogyny in order to manipulate him into doing its bidding. Professionally, Jack is a failure. He's been prohibited from teaching after brutally physically assaulting a student, and he is trying his hand at being a playwright, to no avail. Jack consistently wrestles with the pressure to have a fruitful career—which men are traditionally socialized to believe they need in order to be considered successful and validated in their masculinity. This stress is later augmented by Jack's alcohol addiction, making him vulnerable to the Overlook's manipulation. As Kubrick himself stated in a rare interview: "Jack comes to the hotel psychologically prepared to do its bidding. He doesn't have very much further to go for his anger and rage to become completely uncontrollable. He is bitter about his failure as a writer. He is married to a woman for whom he only has contempt. He hates his son. In the hotel, at the mercy of its powerful evil, he is quickly ready to fulfill his dark role" —"Stanley Kubrick: Interview by Michael Ciment" in *Stanley Kubrick's The Shining: Studies in the Horror Film* (*The Shining* handout, 6-7).

The hotel provides Jack with hallucinations, such

as Lloyd the bartender and Delbert Grady the butler, both of which urge him to take control of his wife and essentially affirm his masculinity. Another example of an illusion provided by the Overlook is the scene in which Jack enters room 237 to find a beautiful naked woman bathing in the ornately decorated bathroom. The woman exits the tub to embrace Jack, and while he kisses her, her body morphs into a mottled corpse. Although Jack is disturbed by this transformation, he still feels he has a right to kiss the woman, in spite of his existing marriage. Jack's motivation to engage with the woman sexually is rooted in an attempt to reclaim his masculinity, as he unconsciously perceives himself as a disappointment for being unable to sufficiently provide for his family. If Jack may engage with the sexual aspect of his masculinity, he feels empowered within it—this gives him a much-desired sense of dominance and control, and Jack quickly begins to feel entitled to his subjugation of Wendy, thus Jack's evolution from disempowered insecurity to being an incel.

Additionally, just as with Kubrick's other films, there are several prominent phallic substitutes—for instance, the ax that Jack uses while chasing Wendy and Danny throughout the Overlook hotel. The bat that Wendy utilizes to defend herself from Jack may also represent a phallus, or rather her reclamation of the vicious masculinity Jack consistently presents her with. This imagery, just as in *Dr. Strangelove* and *A Clockwork Orange*, acts to reinforce the sex and violence dichotomy discussed previously, and demonstrates how media representations of misogyny may normalize it, and any subsequent domestic violence it causes.

Full Metal Jacket

Kubrick delves even further into his ideas surrounding gender roles in his eleventh film, *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). The imagery present within this film is slightly more specific to sexual orientation, and it suggests that Kubrick's "ideal man" is heteronormative. In the first half of the film, Sergeant Hartman spends a great deal of time acquainting the men with their weaponry, and later instructs Joker and his comrades to sleep with their rifles. Hartman identifies the weapon of each recruit as their romantic (and decidedly female) partner. In doing this, Hartman is prescribing a specific gender identity to the rifles, setting a heteronormative precedent for the soldiers, and fostering homophobia—which the men surely internalize. Additionally, Hartman forcing the soldiers to sleep with their guns signifies his dis-

couraging Joker and the others from openly communicating their emotions, and in turn, stifling them. Hartman is instilling within the soldiers (among other things) that femininity may be objectified and dehumanized (each rifle as a "woman"), and that any expression of emotion (or homosexuality, which Hartman equates with femininity) may be interpreted as a sign of weakness—or rather the antithesis of the "cold-blooded killer" that Hartman is trying to mold each man into. As Hartman tells the men: "The deadliest weapon in the world is a marine and his rifle. It is your killer instinct that must be harnessed if you expect to survive combat. Your rifle is only a tool. It is a hard heart that kills"—*Full Metal Jacket: The Screenplay*, 42. (*Full Metal Jacket* handout, 3.)

Hartman also uses more direct tactics to cultivate subconscious homophobia amongst the recruits (even aside from the frequent and blatant use of homophobic slurs.) At the very beginning of the film, Hartman enacts disciplinary action on Gomer Pyle by commanding him to get on his knees and allow Hartman to choke him. This image, although not entirely sexual, is inherently homoerotic—Hartman isn't consensually choking Pyle, of course—he is making an example out of Pyle, and this is meant to humiliate him in front of his peers. What's more, Hartman is using negative reinforcement to teach the other recruits to associate the homoerotic imagery (as a stand-in for homosexual orientation) with punishment and failure, both of which the soldiers have been socialized to believe will not contribute to their success in the military. In essence, although the sexual imagery in *Full Metal Jacket* is less intentional than some of Kubrick's other films and it exists primarily as a device used to illustrate how the U.S. military conditions its soldiers, the imagery itself has a representational effect in that it reinforces heteronormativity, most notably in conjunction with masculinity.

Eyes Wide Shut

Finally, the sexual imagery within Kubrick's final film *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) is rather explicit, albeit in a different manner. Similarly to *The Shining* and *Barry Lyndon*, *Eyes Wide Shut* hints at, and places emphasis on, sources of masculine insecurity. In the case of *Eyes Wide Shut*, the insecurity in question is related to sexual performance—or rather, that men are socialized to believe that they must exhibit a sense of sexual prowess and ability in order to feel validated in their masculinity. Alice first instigates this self-doubt within Bill when she describes her desire

to engage in infidelity. After this point, the camera periodically cuts to shots of Alice having sexual intercourse with the attractive naval officer she describes to Bill, acting as a visual manifestation of his uncertainty. Following Alice's giggling fit, Bill begins to search for opportunities to reassert his masculinity sexually, and he is presented with many chances to do so. The opportunity containing the most sexual imagery is the masked orgy that he attends. Initially, the only fully naked people there are women (another example of the objectification and commodification of female bodies in Kubrick's films) and the masks reflect the lack of identity amongst all of the participants in the mansion. The orgy itself reflects the male fantasy—naked women without any identity or recourse, and mindless sex without consequences. Ironically, Bill doesn't end up touching a single one of his own accord (partly due to narrative circumstance, partly because of his own mental baggage.) In fact, Bill doesn't end up having sex with anyone other than his wife throughout the entirety of the film, indicating his sexual frustration and his lack of sexual agency (that which men are socialized to believe they must have in order to be validated in their masculinity.) In other words, the sexual imagery in *Eyes Wide Shut*, in conjunction with the narrative, establishes that Kubrick's ideal of masculinity necessitates constantly asserting one's sexual agency.

Conclusion

The sexual imagery within all of Kubrick's films (*Dr. Strangelove* and onward) achieves several significant representational effects. Firstly, in that each film focuses on one or more definitively male issues (i.e., male professional, sexual and performance-related insecurity) and highlights the male perspective from the camera's point of view, it asserts the male gaze. Secondly, it establishes Kubrick's ideas on gender roles, specifically the male gender—Kubrick's "ideal man" is heavily associated with procreation (it is primarily responsible for the process, in fact), violently sexual, dominant, heterosexual and emotionless. Lastly, it forms a connection between masculine sexuality and violence, upholding that the two are inextricably linked, the representation (in mass media) of which may normalize masculine sexuality as inherently savage and abusive. Although this representation of male sexuality is dangerous in that it may contribute to domestic violence or assault and rape, it's important to acknowledge that Kubrick's employment of imagery

to focus on male perspectives and issues (whether conscious or unconscious) is not inherently negative. In many ways, the depiction of aforementioned relationships and gender norms makes more obvious the clear faults in our social and cultural understandings of masculinity, and even femininity.

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