

## ESSAY ONE: Directing A Film Review

In Empire Magazine's December, 2003 review of Stanley Kubrick's 1980

masterpiece, *The Shining*, critic Ian Nathan succeeds in eloquently expressing all the nuances that form the film's riveting suspenseful hold on the audience. He analyzes the director's specific and effective choices of setting, texture, sound effects and clarity of cinematography, and succeeds in convincing the reader that these combine to create an unforgettably horrifying and beautifully crafted movie equipped with a deep psychological purpose at root.

Nathan's essay is structured by first beginning with his overall star rating (5 stars out of 5). He then offers a substantial one-sentence plot summary, a six-paragraph review, and concludes with a one-sentence verdict, of the same fullness of the plot summary. In his review, Nathan starts by giving some background info on Kubrick's coming to the decision to make a film out of Stephen King's book, *The Shining*. By beginning with this information, the reader from the get-go has a firmer idea of how the movie *The Shining* came to exist. The fact that it was based on a widely-renowned book by a popular author only serves to strengthen Nathan's argument that the film is a masterpiece and at least worthy of respect by all viewers based on artistic merit alone. Nathan then continues to chronicle the making of the movie in his second paragraph before he begins to critique it. He states, "Kubrick, the notorious obsessive, pestered the author with calls at unearthly hours to inquire whether he believed in God, or some other vital clue...Kubrick filleted the novel, ditching its more formulaic horror elements in favor of a study in madness and ambiguous evil." To offer two sides of the argument,

however, Nathan is quick to delve into King's hatred of the film, quoting him describing the film as, "a big and beautiful car. Ultimately a piece of machinery with neither heart nor soul." Though I can understand King's feelings that the film was very cold, I fail to see how King cannot appreciate the psychological depth Kubrick endowed his book with instead of going for a generically entertaining, thrilling, bloody horror movie. However, mentioning this quote helps round out Nathan's argument by offering an opposing opinion. Nathan concludes the first paragraph with this quote and then continues in the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph to discuss the process of making the movie, a process that took "meticulousness to staggering levels." By informing the reader of the dedication and precision with which Kubrick directed his film, the reader naturally comes to appreciate this dedication. Nathan, simply by presenting the facts (of precise number of scene takes to the grilled cheese sandwiches Jack Nicholson was repeatedly force fed), need not inject his own opinion; the facts speak for themselves and show the high regard and extreme importance all the cast members and Kubrick felt for the film.

Finally, in the 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph, Nathan begins to delve into the specific things that make the film bristle with suspense and horror, albeit artfully, without giving away any important key points of the plot to an oblivious reader. His thesis appears to be that the film soars because of Kubrick's dedication to his effective choices of setting, texture, sound effects, and clarity of cinematography. These elements combine to form, in Nathan's stance, a magnificent horror film, perhaps the best in the genre. He supports this argument by citing the psychological purpose each of Kubrick's choices serves in the film, stating "every frame of the film brims with Kubrick's genius for implying psychological purpose in setting: the hotel's tight, sinister labyrinth of corridors; its cold,

sterile bathrooms; the lavish, illusionary ballroom. This was horror of the mind transposed to place (or, indeed, vice versa)." Here, Nathan explains the effect of Kubrick's detail to setting; by simply stating the visceral places in the film, the audience gains a clear image of the film's ability to reflect insanity in environment. Nathan then goes on in the same paragraph to achieve the same effect by dissecting sound in the film, "Listen to the remarkable rhythm of silence then clatter set up by Danny pedaling his trike intermittently over carpet then wooden floor." Nathan continues to express the artistic depth of the film but avoids repeating himself and losing the reader's interest by stating real moments of the film, rather than ranting about his own experience of how the film affected him.

In the second to last paragraph, Nathan wraps up his analysis of the setting of the film by pointing out that "The Overlook, sacrilegiously built on an ancient Indian burial ground (a minor point for Kubrick and stolen by *Poltergeist*), is haunted by evil spirits." Nathan then explains how this setting contributed to the verity of the ending of the film because Nicholson enters the building's dark heart, "possibly even Hell itself," and has an insane conversation with Grady, the previous caretaker who too slaughtered his family and who creepily tells Nicholson that he has always been the caretaker. This helps show how the Overlook awakened the evil that may have always been lurking in Nicholson's heart.

Lastly, Nathan concludes his review by asking the reader to think. He connects his question of, "does the potential for evil reside in all men, just waiting to come to life?" with his conclusion in the previous paragraph that the Overlook awakened the evil Nicholson's character always possessed. By posing this question, Nathan helps to

accentuate the depth this horror film possesses, a depth far greater and more psychologically complex than other films of the genre. He then nicely wraps up with a final quote by H.P. Lovecraft, which serves to summarize Kubrick's mission to keep the answers to the mysteries of *The Shining* unlocked, "In all things that are mysterious-never explain." This ending quote leaves the reader with a thirst to watch the film, as no one can ever get enough of attempting to answer those questions that are truly impossible to answer.

I believe Nathan's article does a splendid job of going into depth about the specific techniques of the film that make it so extraordinary. He need only describe literal aspects of the cinematography to help the reader understand the grandness and depth of the movie. *The Shining* being my favorite horror film, I, of course agree with all of Nathan's points, especially those regarding Kubrick's use of sound and furniture texture, details I've never failed to notice and appreciate. Despite my possible biasness, however, Nathan is simply a very good writer who manages to concisely express to the reader the elements that make the film a standout. If I were to revise his review, I would've liked to get an understanding of the primary characters in the film, because the acting, personality and looks of the entire family are very crucial to the audience's viewing of Nicholson's disintegration into madness. Beyond this, however, the few elements of the film Nathan decides to leave out is all for the better, because it only helps the mysterious aura of the film, a trait Nathan alludes to throughout the review. Overall, the review is on point, thorough, well rounded and well written in a tone of excitement that helps to stir the reader into desiring to watch the film.

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< <http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=132700&> >

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