

Video Guide

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975) (PZ4.0536)

by Ray Jones and the PY 101 Faculty at HCC

Introduction:

What a battle! In one of the best American films ever *One Flew Over the Cuckoo 's Nest* (1975), which swept the top five Oscars in 1975, Randall P. McMurphy challenged Nurse Ratched. At first it seemed a mismatch with McMurphy being smarter, clever, and more interesting. Unfortunately for McMurphy the battle took place in a psychiatric hospital. The purpose of this video guide is to provide you with details about the video so that you can concentrate on it and not need to see it a second time to handle the written assignments.

The film opens with McMurphy arriving at the mental hospital after having been sent from the prison work farm. Dr. Spivey, the hospital's head psychiatrist, interviews McMurphy and points out that McMurphy has been belligerent, talked without authorization, seemed resentful, was lazy, and had been arrested five times for assault. His most recent crime was statutory rape. Dr. Spivey said: "Well, the real reason that you've been sent over here is because they wanted you to be evaluated.. . to determine whether or not you are mentally ill. This is the real reason." As you watch this video, note those behaviors which suggest McMurphy is mentally ill, an antisocial personality, and note those behaviors which suggest that McMurphy is not mentally ill.

The video *One Flew Over the Cuckoo 's Nest* (1975) based on the book (1962) by the same name by Ken Kesey focuses on the daily existence of people living in a mental hospital. The participants can be categorized into three main groups. (1) The staff, comprised of psychiatrist, nurses, ward orderlies, and other hospital staff, wear white that can be described as a uniform, or in the case of the psychiatrist, a coat and tie.

(2) The patients who wear pajama type clothing that is never quite white, or upon occasion work type clothing. There are two types of patients on the ward. The chronics are unable to function as members of the hospital society. Symptoms that appear among the chronics are dissociations, amnesia, hallucination, and catatonic states. The non-chronics are able to participate in ward life, but may not be able to function effectively outside of the hospital. Most are self admitted, seeking relief from the stresses of life that cause neurotic type symptoms, such as phobias and fixations, as well as anxiety. A few are committed, presumably by mental health authorities because of their inability to function absent order. McMurphy has been admitted from the penal system for determination of possible anti-social disorder.

(3) The other participants are all those who live outside of the hospital society. They provide a backdrop of otherworldness in which there is suspicion and unfriendliness toward the patients. However, the two girlfriends of McMurphy who are accepting and non-judgmental of the patients provide a tenuous link to the outside.

Main Characters:

Staff:

Dr. Spivey is the head psychiatrist who is responsible for the treatment of the patients. He is the authority figure behind Nurse Ratched's control over the ward. Spivey is suspicious of McMurphy's motivations from the beginning, but given to Nurse Ratched, the ultimate authority to deal with McMurphy.

Nurse Ratched is the chief nurse on the ward. She directs and controls the environment through subtle means, such as the type of music played in the background and the schedule of activities. Less subtly she exercises control by using the male orderlies to quell disturbances and organize the patients, through medication, and through the group therapy sessions.

Nurse Pilbow is the young, self-conscious assistant to Nurse Ratched who reflects the ward's systematic control through her fear of anything unexpected.

The four ward orderlies are in the position to exercise direct control, but only at the bidding of the chief nurse. Three orderlies are on duty during the day, one at night. The night orderly, Turkel, is older but less wary of McMurphy, and as a result permits a situation that shakes the ward's structure to its core.

Patients:

The **chronics** have a supplemental role; they are a frame of reference for the worst that can occur to the patients (or any person). Two have more significant roles. Mancini becomes a prop for McMurphy, who uses him to challenge the authority of the orderlies on the basketball court. Mancini's repeats the phrase "I'm tired," highlighting the lot of those who were unable to survive in the outside world.

The other, Big Chief, has a significant role. Big Chief has been pretending to be deaf and dumb since he was admitted to the ward. All are convinced that he is communicatively isolated from the world. He is a physically large Indian who suffers from a belief that he shrinks in physical size as the system manipulates him. He witnessed his father become less and less powerful as a chief because of mistreatment from the white community and resulting addiction to alcohol. Big Chief has internalized this view as a physical shrinking, believing that he is weak and can do little but slowly push a broom around the ward. He initially remains in the background until McMurphy causes a disruption involving the Big Chief and another patient Cheswick. All are sent for electro-convulsive therapy (ECT), and as they wait for treatment, McMurphy discovers Big Chief is able to speak and hear. Big Chief and McMurphy bond at this point and their fate becomes intertwined.

There are nine non-chronic patients. Only one is an involuntary admissions. Taber displays aggressive and inappropriate behaviors, and becomes a follower of McMurphy. But like the others, he is willing to be associated with McMurphy's schemes only until Nurse Ratched asserts her authority. Taber's negative attention is frequently directed at Harding, who may represent personal weakness that Taber fears most. The other non-chronics are all self-admitted. They have chosen the hospital as a refuge from the pressures of the outside world, using the excuse

that they are temporarily there only until they regain their composure. This, of course, is false. They will remain indefinitely, as Nurse Ratched knows only too well.

Martini displays childlike affect with general good humor. His background is never made clear. He appears to view McMurphy as an item of interest who breaks up the monotony of the ward. In his own way he becomes a McMurphy follower.

Fredrickson and Sefelt are comfortable with the ward as their social environment, preferring it to the stresses of the outside world. Nonetheless, they enjoy the ruckus that McMurphy creates, at least as a diversion.

Billy **Bibbet** is the youngest and most immature of the patients. He has a severe stutter which is increased by stress. His fear is of women, whom he seems to perceive as exotic and unattainable. He still desires the companionship of women and had attempted to break from his mother by proposing to a woman prior to his hospitalization. However, his mother disapproved of the woman and as a result he attempted suicide and then sought refuge in the hospital. Unfortunately for Billy, Nurse Ratched is a longtime friend of his mother and apparently shares many of her dominating techniques.

Cheswick becomes agitated when stressed. He fixates on issues, such as wanting his cigarettes. He becomes fond of McMurphy who may represent the freedom and self assurance he himself will never possess.

Scanlon is a bearded old gentleman whose past is never revealed. He seems to function fairly well, maintaining a distance from the patients and staff, while his self-imposed distance appears to be respected by the orderlies. He plays only a supporting role.

Harding finds it difficult to trust his wife, believing her to be continually involved in extra-marital affairs. Additionally, he believes her to be considerably less intelligent than himself. In the film, the problem Harding has with accepting potential infidelity is clearly brought out as due to his false sense of superiority. He believes himself to be sophisticated, witty, and intelligent. He affects an air of superiority, that is clearly not representative of his many self doubts. He resents **McMurphy's** immediate assumption of the patient leadership role, and McMurphy in turn does not resist any opportunity to humble Harding.

Randall P. McMurphy, played in the film by Jack Nicholson, is a complex personality. McMurphy has been raised on the streets with little or no parental care and continually has brushes with the law. He fights readily, freely boasts of sexual conquests, and appears to harbor no self doubts. Still, he has decided to fake illness so that he can spend the remainder of a jail sentence in the relative comfort of the mental hospital. His secondary goal is to fleece the patients in games of chance. He is surprised when he finds out that he may remain in the hospital beyond his sentence should he prove too convincing. His natural resistance to authority is sorely tested by Nurse Ratched's system of control. He makes a game of challenging her, but one senses his concern as to the effectiveness of this. The ultimate winner is the system, and McMurphy is finally diagnosed as dangerous, ending up lobotomized.

The Scenes in the Film:

There are two distinct themes in this film. One concerns the subtle dehumanizing and devaluing of patients in a mental hospital. The other addresses the effects of absolute power as a tool to control people in a social system. The themes appear evident in the two parts of the film, the first theme prior to the fishing trip and the second theme following the fishing trip. The fishing trip expresses the joys of freedom from the ward, yet makes it clear that the freedom is only a temporary diversion. The patients readily fall back into their old roles following the trip, and McMurphy realizes his battle against the hospital authority is his alone. This awareness becomes the defining moment in the film, resulting in McMurphy's decision to escape the hospital. Unknown to him, the power of Nurse **Ratched** is not so easily avoided. She convinces the psychiatric team to keep McMurphy on the ward for rehabilitative purposes, rather than return him to finish his jail sentence. She feels that a loss to McMurphy, even his return to prison, will undercut her control. She must beat McMurphy at the game he initiated.

McMurphy provides a stark contrast between freedom of expression and personal independence. The first part of the film displays this contrast in a humorous way. McMurphy establishes this contrast at the beginning when he is brought in handcuffs to the hospital. He dances around and laughs because he has manipulated his freedom from the **workfarm** where he was being kept. However, his laugh imitates that of an insane person. He is both recognizing the absurdity of the situation while stating his remoteness from it.

During the film credits, prior to McMurphy's appearance, the sights and sounds are those of peace and tranquility. The car carrying McMurphy crosses open marshes as the sun rises against soothing musical score to persuade the viewer that all is normal. After McMurphy is admitted, he is escorted by two orderlies to the ward. He attempts to joke with them, yet they remain in control of him through their physical actions. The ward returns the viewer to the sense of serenity and routine. The colors are all white or muted pale shades, relaxing music is being played on the ward sound system, and the patients move in a sleepy manner.

This hospital ward is routinized with a socially prescribed process that creates the appearance of normalcy which is due to the removal of personal choices. For brief moments, McMurphy breaks this routine, but the system is well established, and soon returns to its normal state. The overall sense is one of authority muted by absence of color and disrupting noise, a physical and mental prison.

The important scenes in part one are:

1. McMurphy's arrival and processing into the ward, described above.
2. Card game. McMurphy joins in a card game that is as ritualized as the ward itself. Harding is the leader. The others are Martini who copes as best he can with the rules, Taber who uses the opportunity to confront Harding, and Cheswick and **Bibbet** the willing followers of the routine. The game is more important for its normalcy than any social interactions which are highly stylized. McMurphy dislodges Harding as leader and begins to initiate betting for cigarettes which he believes he can use as currency on the ward. McMurphy operates from his experience in prisons, failing to understand that deprivation of cigarettes will be tolerated by these men without a fight. Later the issue of

cigarette rationing by Ratched becomes the catalyst for a temporary breaking out of the routine.

3. Interview with Dr. Spivey. The psychiatrist informs McMurphy that he is at the hospital for observation to detect any mental illness. While he states his concern about McMurphy's behaviors that have gotten him in trouble, he does not feel McMurphy is genuinely mentally ill. In this meeting McMurphy attempts to control the situation with raucous behavior. He feels successful, but does not understand that he did not alter the relationships that ultimately control him. Clearly McMurphy will receive no help from this quarter.
4. Group therapy session. The non-chronics are gathered for a scheduled daily therapy session with Nurse Ratched and Nurse Pilbow. The **chronics** remain in the background, a reminder of other more confining possibilities. Nurse Ratched concentrates on Harding, repeating that he had previously reported that men stare at his wife and that she has sought sexual attention elsewhere. None of the patients will enter the discussion. Cheswick complains that Harding is being unfairly singled out. Nurse Ratched condescendingly informs him that the purpose of the session is therapy. Taber challenges Harding to the amusement of McMurphy.
5. Basketball court. McMurphy tries to teach Big Chief to play basketball to no avail. He finally co-opts Mancini to ride him around on his shoulders to make baskets. Mancini, though none the worse for wear, never breaks free of stating that he is tired. The orderly sees McMurphy as a challenge to his authority. Meanwhile, Nurse Ratched watches from her second floor window.
6. Card game. Martini's dissociative behavior, the general demeanor of the patients, and the loud background music, which is intended to be soothing but McMurphy finds annoying, cause McMurphy to confront Nurse Ratched. However, she wins the confrontation.
7. Second group therapy session. McMurphy provides a diversion by requesting permission to watch the World Series on television. Ratched explains that change is disruptive to the patients. McMurphy persists and finally she agrees to take a vote. McMurphy assumes that the verbalizations by those in the therapy session means they will support him in the vote. He fails to realize that their behavior was within the acceptable bounds of the therapy session, but that the introduction of something new is not so easily accepted by the group. Only Cheswick and Taber support him on the vote and he becomes angry with the patients. Nurse Pilbow appears taken aback, but Nurse Ratched feels secure in her authority.
8. Tub room. The tub room is a place removed from the ward that the non-chronics use as a refuge from the main ward. They have come together at this time with the purpose of a monopoly game. During an argument between Harding and Taber, McMurphy uses the flexible sink faucet to shower the patients with water, resulting in much laughter. McMurphy has begun to lose perspective of the difference between these patients and people he knew in the outside world. He believes these men can function on the outside, if they are willing to do so. McMurphy tries to get the patients to react by offering to throw a large marble faucet stand through a window thereby providing the opportunity to

escape. McMurphy's escape goals are still modest; he plans a trip into town to watch the world series on a television in a bar. McMurphy tries but cannot lift the stand. As he leaves, he tells the patients that "At least I tried." In the background, Big Chief watches.

9. Third group therapy session. Nurse Ratched concentrates on Billy **Bibbet** by pressing him to reveal what led to his suicide attempt. She maintains a thinly veiled authority, using Billy's fear of his mother as a tool to gain his compliance. McMurphy may be beginning to be aware of the problems these patients have. The vote for a World Series is brought up by Cheswick, and again there is a vote. When McMurphy finally obtains the non-chronic vote, he is thwarted by Nurse Ratched, who informs him all patients including the **chronics** must vote. McMurphy's frustration mounts. After a desperate attempt to find a chronic who will vote, Big Chief is encouraged by McMurphy to raise his hand in support. However, Nurse Ratched has closed the meeting and there is no change. After venting his anger, McMurphy tries a different approach. He sits in front of the blank television and mimics a play-by-play of the game. The non-chronics gather around and soon join in the play acting. Nurse Ratched watches from her office, and for the first time may feel threatened.
10. Second meeting with Dr. Spivey and the mental health team (A team composed of different mental health skills used for both diagnosis and treatment). McMurphy appears depressed, certainly frustrated by Nurse Ratched. He observes that she is a manipulative person. Yet, Spivey remaining unconvinced of McMurphy's illness, suggests that he belongs in the **workfarm** instead of a hospital. McMurphy asks Spivey a defining question when he asks if behavior is enough to deem a person crazy. McMurphy may be having an insight into his own anti-social behavior while making a comment on the imperceptible difference between staff and patients.
11. The fishing trip. McMurphy feels confident that he can at least handle Nurse Ratched, that he will finish his sentence in the relative ease of the hospital, and that by creating diversions with the aid of the non-chronics, he can also enjoy himself. During outdoor recreation, McMurphy encourages Big Chief to help him climb the fence. He sneaks aboard a bus with non-chronics heading for a field trip, steals the bus and heads for town. When the patients express concern about stealing the bus, McMurphy notes that the authorities can do nothing because they are mental patients; the authorities must simply return them to the hospital.

Driving through town there is a sense of unreality as the patients view the outside world from their bus, seeming to not notice the unfriendliness of the townspeople. After picking up his friend Candy, they steal a charter fishing boat and proceed out to open water to enjoy a day of fishing. After getting the patients settled into routines, he and Candy go below. Cheswick who is left to steer the boat feels overwhelmed by the vast openness of the ocean. He sings a repetitious ditty to ease his fear, but ends up leaving the boat without control when he can no longer see the other patients. The others have moved off to peek in the window and watch McMurphy and Candy. The boat begins going in circles, a fish is hooked, and all is chaotic. Two telling incidents occur after the confusion is sorted out. Harding attempts to take the wheel from Cheswick who resists, the first time a fellow patient has resisted him, and Billy offers a stammering appreciatory

comment to Candy, and she does not reject him. Upon return to the dock they are apprehended and returned to the hospital.

In the second part of the video, the video takes on a darker quality in which McMurphy must finally have a showdown with Nurse Ratched. The important scenes in part two are:

1. Meeting of mental health committee. Following the fishing trip, Dr. Spivey conducts a meeting of the mental health team that is overseeing the diagnosis of McMurphy. Spivey encourages the removal of McMurphy from the ward. He believes McMurphy is feigning illness and wasting treatment resources, and suggests a return to the workfarm. Just when the team seems to agree, Nurse Ratched suggests that McMurphy be retained on her ward. Her argument is that she believes McMurphy will benefit from continued treatment, broadly hinting that a transfer would be a defeat for her, using the argument that it is unfair to pass on problems for others to solve. The team agrees, easily swayed to avoid a more difficult decision.
2. Basketball game. During outdoor recreation McMurphy attempts to organize the **non-chronics** into a basketball game. Eventually he gets Big Chief to stand under a basket, where his height allows him to easily dunk the ball, and in a game against the orderlies defeats them. The orderlies are angry, feeling they have been duped, but also fearing a loss of power. However, there has been no real shift in power, but there remains the threat of a shift.
3. Pool scene. While taking routine exercise in the hospital swimming pool, McMurphy confronts an orderly over a minor rule infraction. The orderly informs him that he is not in the hospital until the end of his sentence as he believes, but must remain until the hospital releases him.
4. Group therapy. In the next group therapy session, McMurphy asks Ratched to verify the information he has learned about self-admittance. She does, and he angrily confronts the members of the therapy group as to why they never told him he could be kept in the hospital until the staff releases him. He also finds out that some patients are voluntary admissions; that they can walk out whenever they desire. Harding speaks for them, but in a condescending tone, as if this is a personal victory for him as well as Ratched. Anger builds in McMurphy, he challenges the other patients as to their willpower to take control over their lives; he tells them they are no more crazy than the majority of people on the outside.

The meeting resumes and Scanlon asks why the dorm doors are locked during the day. McMurphy is incredulous that the patients seem to be concerned only with minor issues. Cheswick becomes fixated on the issue of how his cigarettes are rationed, becoming highly agitated, causing Nurse Ratched to become angry for the first time. The meeting becomes chaotic and McMurphy explodes in anger. He breaks the glass in the nurses' station and grabs the cigarettes. When the orderlies attempt to restrain him, he strikes one and in the melee Big Chief comes to his aid. As a result, McMurphy, Big Chief, and Cheswick are taken to the disturbed ward for ECT (a punishment). It is evident that Big Chief draws strength from McMurphy's refusal to bend to the system. This point becomes important later in the film.

5. ECT. While waiting for their turn in the ECT room, Big Chief reveals to McMurphy that he can both hear and speak. McMurphy takes this to mean that the Chief has been putting on the staff for personal gain. He does not comprehend the Chief's reasons for his behavior. In the novel, Big Chief is portrayed as a schizophrenic. He hallucinates and often becomes lost in a self-created fog in which he believes his power is drained by nefarious machines hidden in the hospital. As he draws strength from McMurphy, he begins to break free of these hallucinations, replacing them with memories of geese migrating in the fall.

The portrayal of the ECT can create strong emotions among watchers, especially those who have begun to identify McMurphy as an underdog who is trying to help the other patients. Following his recovery from the ECT, McMurphy enters the ward during a therapy session acting as if he was brain damaged. His act causes much relieved laughter when he reveals he is still himself. Even Harding seems pleased as McMurphy bonds with the patients, calling them "lunatics," "ding-a-lings," and "mental defectives." He assures Ratched that he will remain on his best behavior from this point on, although he addresses her as "Mildred" and makes sexual innuendoes. That night he discloses to Big Chief that he cannot take the ward's restrictions any longer and is planning an escape. He tries to encourage Chief to accompany him, but the Chief replies he is still too "small."

6. **McMurphy's escape.** McMurphy arranges for his friend Candy and another woman, Rose, to sneak into the ward after hours. They bring alcohol, and McMurphy convinces the night orderly, Turkel, to spend time alone with Rose and some vodka. Meanwhile, McMurphy and Candy wake up the ward and begin passing out alcohol and generating a party atmosphere with many representations of disrespect for the trappings of Nurse Ratched's authority. Turkel realizes what is happening and as he tries to break the party up, but a night supervisor is heard approaching. Turkel manages to convince the supervisor he is entertaining a woman, but that the rest of the ward is not involved. After she indignantly departs, Turkel realizes his job is in danger and drinks himself into a stupor. The party continues until McMurphy decides it is time to depart with the women. The patients are upset at his leaving, especially Billy who has renewed his attraction to Candy. McMurphy arranges for Billy and Candy to have sex in a private room, but while waiting McMurphy falls asleep, losing his opportunity to escape.

Morning dawns with the arrival of Nurse Ratched and the day shift orderlies. Nurse Ratched immediately attempts to establish order, but she realizes Billy is missing. Nurse Pilbow finds him asleep in a room with Candy. Nurse Ratched has Candy removed and begins to belittle Billy, using his mother as a tool to degrade him. Billy's relationship with Candy may be both a breaking out and a resentment of his mother. However, Nurse Ratched reestablishes the mother's dominance, reducing Billy to insecurity and inability to function on his own. He starts stuttering again. Billy is placed in the doctor's office while Ratched directs a clean-up of the ward. McMurphy still has Turkel's keys and attempts to open the window to escape. He is caught by an orderly and challenged to fight. He is deciding whether to fight or jump out the window when Nurse Pilbow screams. During this period alone Billy has committed suicide. All rush to the scene, McMurphy casting his lot with the other patients. McMurphy responds with anger and aggression, tries to strangle Nurse Ratched, and is knocked unconscious by an orderly.

7. Big Chiefs escape. The ward has returned to normal. Harding is acting as the patient leader, Nurse **Ratched**, although somewhat the worse for wear, is in control of the environment and people in it. Late one night orderlies bring McMurphy back to the ward. Big Chief slips out of his bed and goes to McMurphy. He tries to tell McMurphy that he has regained his size and is now ready to leave the hospital. As he looks at McMurphy, Big Chief realizes McMurphy has had a lobotomy and is in a vegetative state, absent personality and interest in his surroundings. Big Chief tells McMurphy that he can't leave him here like this. Big Chief smothers McMurphy with his bed pillow, goes to the tub room, lifts the marble faucet stand from the floor, carries it to a window, and then tosses it through to open his avenue of escape. The film ends with a shot of the Big Chief running into the distance towards the open fields and woods. The musical score is the same as used in the beginning when the car carrying McMurphy was driving towards the hospital in the early morning. The viewer may be left with the feeling that the only survivor of the ward is the Big Chief.

Concluding Comments

This film provides numerous opportunities for discussion of mental health treatment, the disorders of neurosis, phobias, dissociative illnesses, schizophrenia, dementia, and anti-social personality disorder. However, the microcosm of interpersonal and social dynamics provide the most abundant examples for discussion. In fact, there is far more content to the film than time to discuss it. The film could be shown early in PY 10 1, then used as a vehicle for discussion throughout the semester. It could also be used during discussions of mental illness and treatment or during discussions of social relationships. A guest speaker who has clinical experience, especially with the institutionalized, would be very helpful for student meaning-making.

The main criticism of the film is that it leads an unsophisticated viewer to believe McMurphy somehow represents freedom from oppression. While Kesey did deal with this theme, the novel was more balanced in the portrayal of McMurphy. Perhaps this is the draw back of the film media, or just a reflection of the Dirty Harry/Marlboro Man culture.