



The Shining

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away most of the plot.

A contemporary review

Jack Torrance applies for the job as caretaker at the Overlook Hotel high in the Colorado Rockies during the winter months. Jack is warned that a man can get very lonely up there. He laughs it off. He is also told, if not actually warned, of a murder by a previous winter caretaker, Mr Grady, who apparently went mad and killed his wife and daughters with an axe. Jack smiles and says that nothing like that will happen to him. What follows when Jack brings his wife, Wendy, and his small son, Danny, to The Overlook, is not the unfolding of a narrative so much as a series of glimpses into the real and imagined lives of Jack, Wendy and Danny. And also the lives of previous inhabitants of the hotel. A sequence of events suggests that Jack Torrance is going mad. But this is not quite true. Jack Torrance is crazy by the time he gets to the hotel. He is crazy for choosing the caretaker's job. Like an updated Henry James story, *The Shining* depicts a state of mind in which 'the story' is as much a figment of the character's imagination as it is of ours.

Events that seem to take place in the present may be re-enactments or simply memories of the past. To take *The Shining* at its face value is a mistake. It has no face, only masks, and it has no value, only implications. *The Shining* belongs firmly in the tradition of *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Beast in the Jungle*. If the setting of the film had been an hotel in Yorkshire or a deserted winter retreat in Maine, the nature of the piece would be even more apparent.

The film opens with an extraordinary shot. An island, apparently in the middle of a lake or a river, seems to be moving towards us, floating on the surface, perhaps driven by an unseen machinery. It is an optical effect. In fact the lake is so still that the camera moving towards the island makes it look as if the island itself is moving. This unsettling image sets the tone of the film. The following sequence of aerial shots, tracking Jack's car up into the snowy Rockies, is equally disorienting. At one point the camera sweeps away from the road, literally over the edge of the mountain. At precisely that moment the main title of the film appears, just when we are lost over the edge.

Over the edge, and over the top is Jack Nicholson's performance as Jack Torrance. But not really. Shelley Duvall's performance as Wendy Torrance, like Nicholson's, shows very little true development. This is not an oversight on the part of the director or actors. Jack and Wendy arrive at the Overlook Hotel with their personalities fully formed. They are like two characters picked off park benches. One look at them and you know they're nuts. Pinter's plays are peopled with similar caretakers.

The Shining is not about internal character development. It questions the extent to which a character shapes his environment or to which the environment shapes him. Does the place drive you crazy or are you crazy to live in the place? Are these people ghosts already dead, having been driven to crazy deaths? Or are they ordinary folk infected by the frightening past of the monster hotel?

Jack claims to be a writer. To be a writer is a way of escaping mundane reality. He wants to write a project, not a book. His life seems to have amounted to nothing. He's a modern man. People turn to writing as they turn to astrology when they don't know where they are going. Jack is deeply frustrated. He is obviously intelligent, some of his phrases are quite vivid, his silences are either empty or profound. When it comes to the act of writing he has no discipline. This is a reflection of his past; he clearly could never stick at any job. His writing project is vague, that is to say he has no idea what to write about.

In the past he has turned to drink. The hotel is dry. Jack's visits to the bar and his conversations with the ghostly barman are banal. Jack is a lost soul. When he orders the first drink of the day it's 'The hair of the dog that bit me.' He is doomed to repeat himself. 'I'd give my soul for a drink,' he says. And so he does. Then he confesses his life as drunks confess to their barmen. It seems that in a fit of drunken anger Jack has beaten his young son, Danny. It is obvious that he will do it again. The answer to a drink is another drink.

Jack Nicholson's performance is a splendidly Gothic reworking of Ray Milland's in *The Lost Weekend*. All alcoholics see things that aren't there. They say things they don't mean. They become people they are not. At least on the face of it. Perhaps, though, alcohol is a way of becoming the man you think you ought to have been.

In the loneliness of the Overlook Hotel Jack Torrance becomes an earlier inhabitant of the place. But not exactly. Grady, the earlier caretaker, killed his daughters and wife with an axe and shot himself. When Grady 'visits' Jack, 'accidentally' spilling a drink over the revenant, he takes him to the men's room, a blood red airport lounge. Grady goads Jack, as the new caretaker, to kill Wendy and Danny in the correct Overlook manner, that's to say with an axe. Jack reasons with himself that this must be the correct procedure. His contemporary frustration must be answered with tradition. Later, Jack, ever conventional, gets a fireman's axe and goes about his business. But Jack does not succeed and nor does he shoot himself as Grady did.

So the parallel with the past, real or imagined, is deliberately inexact. Why? Because the world has changed. This is the comment of *The Shining* on the facile convention of horror writing and filmmaking. In most films the present reproduces exactly the past. But not in *The Shining*. As in life, things turn out quite differently in this horror story.

Jack never 'sees' Grady's two doll-like daughters and no one ever 'sees' Grady's wife. The daughters are 'given' to Danny, the little boy who has the shining, as 'friends' of his own age. The little girls beckon him and tease Danny in his psychic state. Like Danny, Jack absorbs from the hotel what is appropriate to his own age and his own life. Wendy sees nothing. She does not even understand until very late just how dangerous Jack is, when he actively attacks her, or just how psychic her son is until he writes the word 'Redrum' on the door of her bedroom knowing that when she wakes she will see it in the mirror as 'murder'.

Everyone has certain psychic powers. The limitations are within our own personalities. Even in a psychic sphere we see only what refers to us in our own situation. Only with difficulty can we see what is beyond us. Danny sees an elevator door leaking and then flooding with blood. This staggering image has no relation to any scene in the film. But why should it? Danny has had a glimpse of the future. The flooding of blood has yet to come. As everyone

knows who has visited a clairvoyant, the past, the present and the future are often indistinguishable. We are impressed by observations about the past, but often mystified by portents of the future.

The Overlook Hotel will continue its life as a building after our characters have left. The floating furniture in a sea of blood is a scene from the never-to-be-made *The Shining 2*.

The psychic powers of young Danny and of Hallorann, the black cook, who leaves the hotel at the start to go to his home in Florida, are genuine. The two recognise each other from the first. The act of recognition, the act of one person seeing in another what he understands, is crucial to our understanding of the characters in *The Shining*.

Danny has an imaginary friend called Tony. Tony is represented by Danny's index finger wiggling, like a seductive come-on. Tony also has a voice, which seems to come through Danny's mouth. The joking reference to *The Exorcist* is one of many in a film that satirises horror movies. Tony is the ventriloquist's dummy who may eventually come to control his young master in the manner of *Dead of Night*. Tony warns Danny and also entices him. Is Tony out to destroy Danny? We cannot tell.

In one scene, after Danny has gone into the forbidden room 237 and he appears like a ghost before his parents during a terrible row, it is never certain how Danny acquired the bruises on his neck and arms. Wendy blames Jack because Jack has already attacked his son. We blame whoever it was in room 237. Danny won't speak about it. Jack says, 'Maybe he did it to himself.' That is the least credible explanation but it is possible that Tony did it. Or do we do it all to ourselves in the end?

As Danny stands watching the terrible argument between his parents it is as if he is watching their first encounter, not the primal sexual scene, but the primal psychic scene. In any case, Danny is silent about his visions and adventures. He cannot express himself in words, perhaps because he is too young, perhaps because his experiences are non-verbal. Apart from Tony, the only person who understands Danny is Hallorann, two thousand miles away in Florida. When Danny becomes most frightened that his father will attack and perhaps kill him, Hallorann, in his strange, long apartment in Florida, shines it. Hallorann then flies back to Colorado and drives through the blizzard to get to the Overlook Hotel. His shining costs him his life.

It seems that Hallorann is impelled by his relationship with Danny. But there is another level to Hallorann's perceptions. He is presented from the start as an asexual Negro. He lives alone, but in his Florida apartment he has a photograph of a naked black girl on the wall facing his bed, and another nude over his bed. It so happens that the scene which drives Hallorann finally back to Colorado is not what happens to Danny in room 237, but what happens to Jack in 237 when he visits the room afterwards.

Forced by Wendy, Jack fearfully goes alone into the room. Its colours are ridiculously garish, dominated by a sensual purple. Jack goes into the bathroom. He becomes aware that behind the shower curtain in the bath is a figure. The figure pulls back the opaque curtain and stands up. It is a naked woman. She steps out of the bath. Jack smiles, no terror here, as the woman walks towards him and puts her arms round him. They kiss. As he pulls back from the embrace he sees that he has been clutching an old woman covered in marks that are a cross between leprosy and tattoos. The old woman laughs at him. Jack is horrified. A trick with time: somehow the old woman is still in

the bath as Jack is embracing her across the room. When Wendy asks Jack about room 237, he replies that there was no one there.

This is the strangest scene in the film. It has no reference to earlier events, and it seems completely unconnected with any of the characters. Yet it serves as an important link between all the characters in this psychic drama. It would be wrong to insist on a single interpretation of this scene, but in looking at it it exposes the heart of Kubrick's method in the film.

First, it is a rewrite of the shower scene in *Psycho*. In *Psycho* it is the lady in the shower who is threatened by the monster outside. In *The Shining* this is reversed. Jack is the 'monster', scared by what might emerge from the shower behind the curtain. This reversal of well-known horror conventions is one of many in the film. Later there is a reference again to *Psycho* when Jack menaces Wendy by climbing up the stairs. It is Wendy who has the weapon in her hand, the baseball bat, but it is she who is backing away, frightened by the empty-handed Jack. Underlying many sequences in *The Shining* is a critique of the whole genre of horror movies. The character of Jack Torrance himself is presented as the innocent, not knowing what he is getting himself into, whereas he is in fact the threatening element.

Secondly, the woman turning from slim youth to grotesque age is perhaps symbolic of everyone's most feared destiny, growing old. To watch your own body over a period of years disintegrate before the mirror is an essential horror story for all of us. Fear of old age grips Jack Torrance by the throat as does fear of losing his mind. Growing old and losing your senses, time passing, is a frightening notion that is inescapable.

Thirdly, it is the only overtly sexual scene in the movie. *The Shining* is a strangely chaste horror story. Part of this comes from Jack's sexual indifference; he is always glancing at women, including his wife, but he never actually does anything to them. Lack of sexual drive is characteristic of a paranoid personality. The young naked woman also seems asexual. She looks like one of those models who pose in seedy lunchtime photographic clubs.

Fourthly, the marks on the old woman's body, which so repel Jack, are difficult to identify. When she rises out of the bath in a shot that seems to refer to Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques*, she seems diseased. Then the marks look as if they had been applied like paint. There is also a hint that this woman has come from another world or an earlier civilisation.

All these interpretations have a certain validity without getting near totally to describing the scene. It may come down to the simple fact that the scene in room 237 is no more nor less than a nightmare of its creator. But one of the extraordinary aspects of *The Shining* is the way the simplest events in bright light conjure dark fears, guesses and portents. The movie is constantly ironic, if not downright satirical. The humour of *The Shining* puts it close to *Lolita* and *Strangelove* in Kubrick's work. As in much of Hitchcock and Buñuel, and to some extent Polanski, there is an underlying crazy comedy which is also deadly serious.

The central horror of *The Shining* is family life. For a child there can be few characters more frightening than his angry father. Danny, despite his stoicism, is terrorised by his father. Wendy is terrorised by her violent husband. Jack is frustrated to the point of rejection and violent aggression towards his family. It is a nice picture of American home life.

The Shining, the least admired major American film in the past year, is an accidental but none the less effective reworking of *Kramer vs. Kramer*, one of the most admired films of the past year. Both treat the collapsing single child family. Kubrick makes no attempt to deal with this subject from the social point of view. The psychology is dealt with in broad strokes; the characters, with the exception of Danny, are grotesque masks. There are, of course, real people behind the masks, but who they are is like saying what will they become. The three people alone in the overlit Overlook Hotel are similar to the three characters in Sartre's play, *Huis Clos*. They are in the hell of each other. Danny sees his father as an eye-rolling lunatic. Jack sees Wendy as a weak, whining housewife, and Wendy sees nothing. Until the end of the story she seems completely devoid of psychic power. It is almost as if *The Shining* is showing that bright people are more capable of understanding telepathically than less bright people.

The family hierarchy, Dad, Mom and kid, is very strong. The equivalent hierarchy in the Overlook Hotel itself is the idea of the maze in which they are lost, both inside and out. The more intelligent you are the easier it is for you to solve the puzzle of the maze. The only character who can get out of the maze is Danny. Not because of his psychic ability but because of his high intelligence. They seem to go together in Kubrick's behaviourist view. The maze is not treated in the manner of *Marienbad*. In *Marienbad* the labyrinth of the hotel is a philosophical question. It cannot be solved. It can only be apprehended and interpreted. In *The Shining* the maze is a Sunday morning puzzle, and the most intelligent member of the family will always come up with the correct solution first.

There is a sense in the Overlook Hotel that it represents the world after the bombs have gone off; the loneliness, the incredible store of food, ways to survive.

The Shining may be the first film of the post-nuclear age to come. A bizarre follow-up to *Strangelove*. The music of Penderecki, the *Dies Irae* of the Auschwitz Cantata, creates an exactly post-Apocalyptic tone. The music of Ligeti and Bartok is music for the world that followed the Second Vienna School of Strauss and Mahler. The Ligeti has a mocking tone as if laughing at all past music and at people with notions of fixed values. The Bartok is wonderfully lyrical, but who, among ordinary filmgoers, would hear the strong music of Bela Bartok and think instinctively that it is lyrical and dance-like? But there was a time when Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* was considered unacceptable and esoteric by his own publisher.

The Shining has a lot in common with post-war music. It seems technically brilliant and yet fundamentally heartless. It seems deliberately clever and yet remains enigmatic. Kubrick has tried to bridge a gap which has occurred in the language of film. How can you express dissonance and fragmentation, the essential features of our present lives, in a manner which respects traditional harmonies? Can disorder ever be expressed in an orderly way? Kubrick has reached the limits of conservative film art in *The Shining*. It used to be thought that the antonym of art was nature. But this Shakespearian opposition is no longer true. Art and nature are both by definition devoted to order. The opposite of art is enigma.

The Shining is not an enigmatic film. It is actually about enigma. That is why Kubrick is instinctively drawn to technology in his work, camera technology in particular. The machine is better able to cope with enigma than the human

hand. Most enigmatic paintings from Cimabue's Crucifix to de Chirico's piazzas somehow suggest the presence of a machine. *The Shining* is about this machine that cannot be seen. It is, if you like, the machine in the ghost. Shining denotes the ability to communicate telepathically, to see backwards into the past and forwards into the future. *The Shining* is nothing more nor less than a metaphor for the cinema itself. Film has the shining. Danny is probably the director of the movie. He is certainly identified with the camera. The Steadicam tracking shots through the hotel corridors and then in the maze evoke the exhilaration of a small boy racing about on his tricycle. He imagines himself to be a machine.

In *The Shining*, Kubrick plays with the Steadicam like a toy. It is essentially childlike. He wants to find out all the things he can do with his latest acquisition. Danny's visions are represented in cuts, in montage, so the boy is not only the camera he is also the movieola. The director-child is seeing his own parents and the world around him. In a way the hotel becomes his doll's house, like the model in Albee's *Tiny Alice*, and his father and mother are turned into his neurotic children. If they go crazy from time to time he can still control them with his superior intelligence and visionary ability. Film, after all, is the art of seeing and showing from a fresh point of view. But the boy is not an artist. He is before art, and after it. Picasso said it took him ten years to draw like Raphael and a lifetime to draw like a child. There is the child in all of us. There is the artist in all of us, and to varying degrees we are all capable of shining.

If the cinema was born around 1900 then it is eighty years old today. *The Shining* reminds us how far the cinema has come and how much it has stayed the same. It shines bits of an enigmatic film future which in the last image turns out to be a still from the past. There is no immutable order of experience when the past becomes a picture of what might have been.

Paul Mayersberg, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1980-81

THE SHINING

Director: Stanley Kubrick
Production Companies: Warner Bros., Hawk Films, Peregrine Productions, Producer Circle Company
Executive Producer: Jan Harlan
Producer: Stanley Kubrick
Production Accountant: Jo Gregory
Assistant Production Accountant: Paul Cadiou *
Production Manager: Douglas Twiddy
Production Assistant: Emilio D'Alessandro
Assistant to the Producer: Andros Epaminondas
Production Secretaries: Pat Pennelegion, Marlene Butland
Producer's Secretary: Margaret Adams
Personal Assistant to the Director: Leon Vitali
Production Assistant: Ray Andrews *
Location Research: Jan Schlubach, Katharina Kubrick, Murray Close
Assistant Directors: Brian Cook, Terry Needham, Michael Stevenson
Continuity: June Randall
Casting: James Liggat
Screenplay: Stanley Kubrick, Diane Johnson
Based on the novel by: Stephen King
Director of Photography: John Alcott
2nd Unit Photographer: Douglas Milsome
2nd Unit Photography: MacGillivray-Freeman Films
Helicopter Photography: MacGillivray-Freeman Films
Camera Operators: Kelvin Pike, James Devis
Focus Assistants: Douglas Milsome, Maurice Arnold
Camera Assistants: Peter Robinson, Martin Kenzie, Danny Shelmerdine
Grips: Dennis Lewis
Steadicam Operator: Garrett Brown
Gaffers: Lou Bogue, Larry Smith
Video Operator: Dan Grimmel
Special Effects: Alan Whibley, Les Hillman, Dick Parker *
Editor: Ray Lovejoy
Assistant Editors: Gill Smith, Gordon Stainforth
2nd Assistant Editors: Adam Unger, Steve Pickard
Production Designer: Roy Walker
Art Director: Les Tomkins
Additional Art Director: Norman Dorme *
Décor Artist: Robert Walker
Set Dresser: Tessa Davies
Draughtsmen: John Fenner, Michael Lamont, Michael Boone
Property Master: Peter Hancock
Propmen: Barry Arnold, Philip McDonald, Peter Spencer
Prop Buyers: Edward Rodrigo, Karen Brookes
Construction Manager: Len Fury
Drapes: Barry Wilson
Master Plasterer: Tom Tarry

Head Rigger: Jim Kelly
Head Carpenter: Fred Gunning
Head Painter: Del Smith
Costume Designer: Milena Canonero
Wardrobe Supervisors: Ken Lawton, Ron Beck
Wardrobe Assistants: Ian Hickenbottom, Veronica McAuliffe
Make-up: Tom Smith
Make-up Artist: Barbara Daly
Title Design: Chapman Beauvais
Titles: National Screen Service Ltd.
Colour Grading: Eddie Gordon
Music: Bela Bartók, Krzysztof Penderecki, Wendy Carlos, Rachel Elkind, György Ligeti
20s Music Advisers: Brian Rust, John Wadley
Sound Recording: Ivan Sharrock, Richard Daniel
Boom Operators: Ken Weston, Michael Charman
Dubbing Mixers: Bill Rowe, Ray Merrin
Sound Editors: Wyn Ryder, Dino Di Campo, Jack Knight
Hotel Consultant: Tad Michel
Studio: EMI-Elstree Studios

Cast

Jack Nicholson (*Jack Torrance*)
Shelley Duvall (*Wendy Torrance*)
Danny Lloyd (*Danny Torrance*)
Scatman Crothers (*Dick Hallorann*)
Barry Nelson (*Stuart Ullman*)
Philip Stone (*Delbert Grady*)
Joe Turkel (*Lloyd*)
Anne Jackson (*doctor*)
Tony Burton (*Larry Durkin*)
Lia Beldam (*young woman in bath*)
Billie Gibson (*old woman in bath*)
Barry Dennen (*Bill Watson*)
David Baxt (*1st forest ranger*)
Manning Redwood (*2nd forest ranger*)
Lisa Burns, Louise Burns (*Grady daughters*)
Robin Pappas (*nurse*)
Alison Coleridge (*Susie, the secretary*)
Burnell Tucker (*policeman*)
Jana Sheldon (*stewardess*)
Kate Phelps (*receptionist*)
Norman Gay (*injured guest*)

USA/UK 1980©
144 mins

* Uncredited

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