

Unit 6203 Screen Analysis
Framing the Family

STANLEY'S FAMILIES

An examination of physical and meta-families
in the films of Stanley Kubrick

A paper

3000 words

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When I was seventeen years old, I went with my father to see the premiere of *Full Metal Jacket*. I was refused entry for being under eighteen. He went in anyway, and I walked home, all the way across town, filled with righteous indignation.

Stanley Kubrick films have always incited strong passions in my family; I can remember heated dinner table discussions, when I was little, about the significance of the monolith in *2001*, and whether or not *A Clockwork Orange* was exploitative of women. Nobody agreed, but everyone certainly had a point of view. I'm sure other families have been similarly divided over Stanley Kubrick's work.

In this paper I am going to examine the various families *inside* Kubrick's films. I will be looking particularly at the films of Kubrick's middle period, starting with *Lolita* (1962), the first major film over which Kubrick claims to have had full creative control, and going as far as *Barry Lyndon* (1975), the director's first financial flop. Although it might seem at first glance that Kubrick is little concerned with family relationships, a closer look at his films reveals a whole web of mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, as well as a few incestuous uncles in the wings. Although most of these characters had their origins in novels written by other people, Kubrick's painstaking choice of works to adapt, and his subsequent alterations and manipulations of those works, reveal certain ongoing and developing attitudes to the concept of family.

Of Kubrick's own family, little is known. He was born in the Bronx, New York, on 26 July 1928.¹ His father was a doctor, his mother a housewife. He had one sister and no brothers. Kubrick's father gave him his first camera for his thirteenth birthday. Delving further back, his paternal grandmother was from Rumania, and his paternal grandfather from the old Austro-Hungarian Empire.² Kubrick has also suggested there is some Jewish blood in there somewhere.

Since becoming a film-maker, Kubrick has created a situation for himself where life and work merge. For many years he has lived in a large house in a semi-rural area half an hour out of London. A film studio is nearby. His current wife is the painter Christiane Harlan, who he met when she was acting in *Paths of Glory*. They have three daughters. Kubrick's two previous wives, Toba Metz and Ruth Sobotka, were both closely involved with his film-making activities. Kubrick's regular executive producer, Jan Harlan, is his brother-in-law.³

One visitor to Kubrick's house described the director's residence as 'a casual collection of offices and living rooms in which family life and film-making overlap as though the one were unthinkable without the other.'⁴ If the families in *The Shining* and *A Clockwork Orange* are any guide, one can only hope that this overlap of life and art does not extend too far!

Kubrick's first dysfunctional screen family appears in the first film he made after moving to England, an adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov's book about a man who desires his pre-pubescent step-daughter.

LOLITA (1962)

In this film there is a clear family configuration which is disturbed, destroyed and then re-established in the next generation. There are four principal characters; Humbert Humbert, a professor of French literature; Charlotte Haze, a snobbish widow; Lolita, Charlotte's beautiful

teenage daughter, and Clare Quilty, a mysterious shape-changing figure who exists on the fringes of the story. Mr Haze is represented by a photo on the wall, an urn of ashes, and the 'sacred weapon' he has left behind (along with his contribution to another dangerous weapon of sorts, Lolita herself).

The problems begin when Humbert marries Charlotte to get closer to Lolita. Lost in the haze which her name suggests, Charlotte fails to see what's happening, despite a series of inadvertent insights which come out in her dialogue, such as when she is showing him the garden and Humbert encounters Lolita in her bikini: 'What made you decide Mr Humbert? Was it the view?' Later, when Humbert and Charlotte are playing chess, she protests: 'You took my queen!'⁵ But of course Lolita is not just Charlotte's queen, but her rival. By playing the strong mother with her daughter, Charlotte unknowingly strengthens the bond between Humbert and Lolita and weakens her own position.

The irony in all this is that to outside appearances the arrival of Humbert signifies a return to a 'normal' family of husband, wife and daughter. It is this concept of normality as it applies to family life that is one of the big themes of *Lolita*. When Lolita is confronted with the news of her mother's death she tearfully exclaims that 'Everything is changed all of a sudden. Everything was so *normal*...'⁶

The only outsider who suggests anything might be amiss is Humbert's 'walking paranoia',⁷ the demon-like figure of Clare Quilty, who appears in various guises of authority during the course of the film. But of course Quilty wants Lolita as well, and this is why he knows precisely which guilt buttons to press in Humbert. During his impersonation of an off-duty policeman, Quilty talks (at length) about normality: 'I couldn't help noticing when you checked in tonight... that's a guy with the most *normal* face... it'd be great for two normal guys like us to get together and talk about world events in a *normal* sort of way...'⁸

But in this twisted universe there is no such thing as normality. There is even a suggestion that Charlotte's straight-looking friends, the Farlows, are a little bizarre beneath the surface, when Mrs Farlow repeatedly tells Humbert how 'open-minded' they are. In the era of the Brady Bunch, Kubrick seems almost to be equating normality with perversion. Perhaps this contributed to the controversy over the film following its release in the USA.

Interestingly, the film ends with Lolita established in an extremely safe and normal suburban marriage, with a child on the way. Humbert and 'Uncle' Quilty cancel each other out, and there is a suggestion that Lolita, the cause of all their passion and problems, will live happily ever after.

DR STRANGELOVE (1964)

Subtitled 'Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb', this film precludes any possibility of living happily ever after. Despite the absurd names and farcical dialogue, *Dr Strangelove* in 1995 looks more like a piece of realist documentary than a comedy. An examination of the family configurations of the film reveals no physical representatives, but plenty of symbolic stand-ins. For a start, everyone in this film is a child. They behave like children, talk to each other like children, and are driven by the shortsighted goals of children.

(The original cut of the film ended with a custard pie fight).⁹ The supposed father figures of the film (President Merkin Muffley, Generals Ripper and Turgidson, Major Kong) collapse under examination. As with *Lolita*, the father (God, wisdom) is absent here. Humbert Humbert-style, he has been replaced with something evil disguised as a protector. The false father here is technology, particularly the Bomb. Apart from Turgidson's girlfriend, Miss Foreign Affairs, a human toy, there are no women in *Dr Strangelove*. The mother in this case is the mother country, the good old US of A. It is for her that everything in the film is done, and she has given birth to those who are doing it.

This is not to say there are no feminine elements in the film. The cabin of the B-52 is womb-like, with padded walls between the banks of instruments. The men inside seem closeted and unwilling to interact with the outside world. This also applies to the other two environments of the film; Burpleson Air Base and the War Room. Each environment is linked to the other by inadequate technology which fails when it is needed. When the President finally reaches Premier Kisseff, the 'man of the people' is drunk, and must also be treated as a child: 'Now then, Dimitri, you know how we always talked about something going wrong with the bomb. The bomb, Dimitri. The hydrogen bomb.'¹⁰

Technology and props continually substitute for sexuality for the immature, childlike characters of *Dr Strangelove*; Ripper's erect cigar, Turgidson's endless gum chewing, the guns of the men defending the air force base, the small spy camera of the Russian ambassador, the B-52, even the giant bomb that Kong straddles at the end. We even have props interacting in adult/human ways; the two interlinked planes at the start echoing coitus and breastfeeding, the bomb doors which refuse to open and launch destruction on the world, the phallic pistol which brings an end to General Ripper. The final familial vision put forward by mad *Dr Strangelove*, of an underground world with ten women to every man, is chilling in its depiction of the consequences of allowing men with the minds of children to rule the world.

2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (1968)

Human families are of little consequence in *2001*. Those that we do see, like the TV screens we see them on, are two dimensional copies of relationships which no longer exist in any meaningful way. (I am speaking here of Frank Poole's pre-recorded birthday greetings from his parents and Heywood Floyd's long distance videophone call to his daughter, where she seems more interested in playing with her toys).¹¹ The only other time where we see human-like characters interacting in human ways is at the start. In the scenes with the apes, the baby is protected by its parents from the predators and the terrifying spectacle of the monolith. But it is all to no avail, and a couple of million years later the apes' descendants are in space.

It is not until we are on board the *Discovery* spaceship that we are introduced to the central *2001* family; the children (Frank Poole and Dave Bowman), and their 'transistorized matriarch',¹² the HAL 9000 computer. Once again the father is absent, but I would argue that he is the wise alien entity who left the monoliths in the first place: the object of the *Discovery*'s search.

In the original scenario HAL was female and called Athena. In the finished film the name and voice have been changed but many female/maternal elements remain. When Dave is travelling through the corridor to the pod bay he's like a baby on the way to being born. The pod, egg-like,

hatches from the belly of the ship. Frank's body, cradled in the machine arms of the pod, is reminiscent of *La Pietà*, the famous Michelangelo statue of Mary holding the dead body of Jesus Christ.

The computer is responsible for every aspect of the men's lives. They can do nothing without HAL's help. After HAL goes mad (echoes of PMT and menopause?) and Dave is disconnecting the computer's higher brain functions, he/she/it reverts to childhood, like a person with Alzheimer's. Then we discover the reason for the madness: HAL has been programmed to lie to her 'children' about the purpose of the mission. It is only after the death of the mother figure, HAL, that Dave is able to progress (with the help of the mysterious God/father figure) through to old age and then rebirth as the Star Child, presumably a step higher on the evolutionary scale. Kubrick does not concern himself with the question of how this unique being will reproduce. As in *Dr Strangelove*, it is only the machines in *2001* that get to dance and have sex.

A CLOCKWORK ORANGE (1971)

For an R-rated film (X in some countries) *A Clockwork Orange* has a surprising number of families in it. First, there's Pee, Em and little Alex (with Deltoid the probation officer as a kind of lecherous uncle). Then we have the gang family of Alex (father), Georgie (mother: vying for authority), and Pete and Dim as the children. On top of that there's the prison chaplain (maternal figure) and guard (paternal figure) with their grown-up but powerless prisoner children, and finally the nurse (mother) and Dr Brodsky (father) at the Ludovico Treatment Centre, with Alex as their first and only child.

Alex passes through each of these groups, travelling on a circular route, from choice to lack of choice and back to choice again. Between each stage Alex is ceremonially re-born or baptised in some way involving water: each 'family' creates Alex anew before passing him on to the next stage. Ironically, his natural parents Pee and Em seem to have less influence upon Alex than any of the other groups. It's as though he's never really their son at all, but some kind of aberrant creation of society. This is reinforced when Pee and Em replace Alex with a surrogate son, Joe the boarder, and again when Alex is taken under the wing of the Minister of the Interior, at the end of the film.

Alex is endlessly referred to as 'son' by the parental figures described above. We, the audience, are also brought into the story as members of Alex's family. In voiceover he repeatedly refers to us as his 'brothers' and 'only friends'.¹³

The mother figures in *A Clockwork Orange* are all unsatisfactory in one way or another. Consequently Alex's hunger for female flesh often seems like the sublimated urges of an infant. Breast images reinforce this constantly; the milk from the nipples of the mannikins in the Korova Milk Bar, the slicing of the elastic cloth covering the breasts of the writer's wife before she is raped, the way Alex reaches for the erect nipples of the model on stage after his 'cure' before collapsing in retching sickness. Alex's own mother dresses almost obscenely, like a teenybopper. She has obviously never provided Alex with what he needs in terms of mothering, and this is probably part of the problem.

Although some people see worrying similarities between Alex's droogs and Charles Manson's 'family',¹⁴ I think the film makes more sense when seen as an endless search for Home and a satisfactory family model. Through the course of the story Alex seems to regress in age. After his beating by the police he is like an infant in the arms of the strong man who lives with the writer. Another echo of *La Pieta*. Except in this case it is the monster who is about to be reborn.

BARRY LYNDON (1975)

Stanley Kubrick's greatest historical epic is the story of an honourable man in a dishonourable world; a man who starts with everything, loses it, and then regains it again, at the cost of his soul. *Barry Lyndon* is a victim of the society he aspires to join. This is not so much the story of an individual as the story of a society in which the 'worth of an individual is measured by his birth and heritage rather than by his innate qualities or personal behaviour.'¹⁵ *Barry Lyndon* is a film about family.

Kubrick has often been criticised for being more interested in caricatures and machines than real human characters. *Barry Lyndon* represents the first time since *Lolita* that Kubrick has restricted himself to a simple study of family and human relationships. There are also other similarities between the two films. Both contain leading characters who take the place of a father. In the case of *Lolita*, Humbert sleeps with his stepdaughter. *Barry Lyndon*'s stepson symbolically castrates Barry by shooting him in the leg and causing it to be amputated. Like Charlotte Haze, Lady Lyndon is seduced as a means to another, quite separate end; in this case to satisfy a man's craving for a position in society. Once again, tragedy is the result.

It has been argued, with reference to *Barry Lyndon*, that what family life represents for Kubrick is 'the continuation of war in society by other means'.¹⁶ For instance, Barry birches his stepson Bullingdon in the same way that soldiers are birched in the army. Clearly Oedipal anxiety also plays a large part in the disintegration of Barry and Bullingdon's relationship. As in *Full Metal Jacket*, but with more of a domestic focus, the civil trials of one half of the film mirror the battlefields of the other.

Barry Lyndon is essentially a loveless story. The film begins with the death of Barry's father in a duel and ends with Barry's failure as a father in his own right. In between there are glimpses of benevolent fathers (Grogan and Baliberi), friendship between men (Jonathon and Freddy in the river) and the paternal love of a mentor (between Barry and the Chevalier), but balanced love between wife and husband, parents and children, is notably absent. As far as Barry is concerned, Lady Lyndon's only purpose is to mother and provide an inheritance for his biological son Bryan. Indeed the only hint of two-sided affection between Barry and Lady Lyndon occurs in the scene where he apologises for his behaviour while she is taking a bath. The moral of the story seems to be that the blind pursuit of wealth leads to moral bankruptcy and personal tragedy, a far more straightforward and acceptable conclusion, one would think, than the unsettling endings of Kubrick's previous films.

For whatever reason, *Barry Lyndon* was a critical and commercial disaster, but it did not mark the end of Kubrick's interest in portraying the family on screen. Nor was it his last absent father story. In his next film, *The Shining*, the father is psychologically rather than physically absent. In *Full Metal Jacket* the father figure, Hartman the drill instructor, is killed at the end of the first

half, leaving his soldier children to wander, leaderless, through a war-torn nightmare for the rest of the film. It will be interesting to see what sort of family makes an appearance in Kubrick's next project, *AI*.¹⁸

In closing, I should probably mention the final, and most important of Stanley Kubrick's screen families: the family of humankind. Beneath his cynicism, it is Kubrick's concern for the human race, and his hope that we will get our act together, that really powers this man's films. In Kubrick's own words: 'The destruction of this planet would have no significance on a cosmic scale, our extinction would be little more than a match flaring for a second in the heavens...'¹⁹ And yet, 'However vast the darkness, we must supply our own light...'²⁰

NOTES

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