



Reading Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* Against the Backdrop of His Cinematic Expression

Özge Onay, Loughborough University, o.onay@lboro.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper delves into the visionary filmmaking of Stanley Kubrick, aiming to evoke emotions in viewers similar to the impact of music through his films. Kubrick's perspective on cinema as a progression of moods and feelings, mirroring the qualities of music, becomes evident in *The Shining*. Based on the 'shot-by-shot analysis' as a method of film analysis, the paper explores the intricate visual and musical elements of the film, emphasising mise-en-scene aspects in three key scenes. The opening sequence establishes an ominous tone with sharp transitions, contrasting scenic beauty with eerie music. The exploration of Danny's tricycle scenes showcases the innovative use of Steadicam, heightening suspense. The hedge maze scenes, juxtaposed with the hotel's interior, culminate in a climactic chase marked by dynamic cinematography and a haunting score.

Keywords: Kubrick; *Shining*; Narrative; Analysis; Auteur



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Introduction

The Shining emerges as a predictably clichéd gothic horror film. Can this be taken seriously? A solitary mansion atop a hill, plagued by ancestral ghosts cursing subsequent generations and compelling them to reenact the initial horror. It lacks redemption even in terms of technical prowess—while Kubrick may have found enjoyment in deploying helicopter and Steadicam shots, they hardly stand out considering his previous technical feats. Additionally, numerous individual shots, at least in concept, align with conventional horror film tropes: Hallorann (Scatman Crothers) strolling down an empty hallway to his demise, back to the audience, anticipating the inevitable axe; Nicholson, armed and limping, traversing the mansion in search of victims; the eerie nocturnal shot of Duvall attempting to escape, halfway out the bathroom window ("Run, Danny, run"). The suspense follows a familiar and foreseeable pattern: Nicholson's actions are equally unsurprising (Leibowitz & Jeffress, 1981).

Stanley Kubrick, a visionary filmmaker, crafted *The Shining* as a cinematic symphony aimed at evoking emotions in viewers akin to the profound impact of music. This exploration navigates the intricate visual and musical elements of the film, employing the 'shot-by-shot' method to delve into three key scenes that accentuate the *mise-en-scène* (Sreekumar & Vidyapeetham, 2015). The

opening sequence, Danny's tricycle scenes, and the hedge maze episodes serve as lenses through which we decipher Kubrick's unique narrative language. The study adopts the 'shot-by-shot' method, a comprehensive analysis originating from Patricia Ferreira's complete filmography (Morán, 2015). This method meticulously dissects different of each shot, allowing for an in-depth exploration of cinematic elements. By isolating and interconnecting these elements, the researcher gains a nuanced understanding of the visual and auditory components of "The Shining." This method, previously applied to Ferreira's works, serves as a tested framework, offering a foundation for interdisciplinary approaches. The paper then explores the hedge maze, a physical manifestation of psychological mazes. The daylight introduction, shot from Jack's perspective, subtly foreshadows danger. In the climactic nine-minute sequence, the maze becomes a terrain of terror. The innovative use of Steadicam, diverse camera tools, and Penderecki's score in parallel editing intensify the chase between Jack and Danny, creating a visual and auditory crescendo. The shift in *mise-en-scène* with reddish hues reveals the supernatural layers of the narrative.

Shot-by-shot Analysis

This study employs the 'shot by shot' method, an intricate analysis of audio-visual works that involves a comprehensive dissection of the smallest units of meaning within a film (Morán, 2015). Originating from Patricia Ferreira's complete filmography, this method is distinctive for its meticulous examination of various aspects of each shot, considering them individually and

subsequently interconnecting them to reveal nuanced meanings and senses within the audio-visual work (Darley, 2002). Unlike other methods, the 'shot by shot' approach allows for an in-depth exploration of cinematic elements in a film, facilitating a hermeneutical approach to achieve organic knowledge. The analysis process begins by isolating each shot, considering elements such as framing, lighting, camera movement, and sound design (Aydin, 2007). These elements are systematically studied for a deep understanding of self-selected shots from Kubrick's 'The Shining', allowing for a granular examination of the visual and auditory components of the film. The comprehensive nature of the 'shot by shot' method enables the researcher to delve into the subtleties and nuances that may be overlooked by other analytical approaches. It allows for a seamless perception of film scenes built with meaningful units of film-story-telling (ibid).

Moreover, the 'shot by shot' method has been successfully applied to Patricia Ferreira's complete filmography, serving as a tested framework for understanding the cinematic elements employed by the director. The resultant database generated from these analyses not only contributes to a nuanced understanding of Ferreira's works but also establishes a foundation for future interdisciplinary approaches. This study builds upon the 'shot by shot' method, adapting it to the specific context of the selected film, *The Shining*. The aim is to apply this method to dissect the

visual and auditory components of the film, exploring how Stanley Kubrick employs various cinematic elements to evoke emotions and convey meaning.

Analysis

In an interview, Stanley Kubrick asserts that he intended the same emotional effect that music creates on people while making his films; hence, a film should be “ a progression of moods and feelings. (Sennett, 1986). This aspiration to music is typical of the kind of modern artist who thinks of music as the least imitative or “literary” of the arts and who aims for similar nonrepresentational aesthetic effects in a different medium (ibid). Speaking specifically of *2001*,

Kubrick states:

“I tried to create a visual experience, one that bypasses verbalised pigeonholing and directly penetrates the subconscious with an emotional and philosophical content... I intended the film to be an intensely subjective experience that reaches the viewer at an inner level of consciousness, just as music does”.¹

Even though there are a myriad of themes to single out for praise in *The Shining*, I will delve into the visual and musical content, which is precisely what Kubrick tries to establish for his viewers, particularly for his psychological horror movie called *The Shining*. I hoped to address and shed light on the fact that a film can be dissolved into its smaller units in a myriad of ways, and that is what the director broadly aims for with the varying choices of music, space, furniture, and lighting for specific scenes is multi-layered. Therefore, more specifically, this paper underscores the impact of visual and musical choices on the overall narrative and message of the movie. It is

mostly by laying bare some specific narration elements of the film. In this paper, I will be largely looking into three scenes in depth to reveal many aspects of the mise-en-scene, such as camera editing, lighting, music, set pieces and props. First, the opening three-minute sequence is analysed to reflect the ways in which the sharp transitions between the shots were used to give varying striking feelings and messages to the viewer. The first seven shots of the first sequence are twinned with a certain type of music, and in this way, the beautiful scenery is completely perceived from a different angle. The following sections will also shed light on the extent to which the completely different settings chosen for this movie make a reference to the upcoming scenes by the abrupt cuts. The second scene is from the middle of the film, in which an innovative type of camera named Steadicam is used. In this scene, we will focus on the low-to-the-ground Steadicam shots that follow Danny on his tricycle, which play a contributing role in giving a sense of unease and fear. In the last nine-minute sequence of the movie, interior and exterior space comparison will be addressed, and the crucial importance of the camera angles and editing styles will be emphasised.

Prologue

Setting is one of the most essential elements of a film. In the movie *The Shining*, there are two main settings: one is an exterior, and the other is an interior space. Space not only shows the audience where this film takes place, but it also sets the first impression about what's upcoming

before nothing happens. Even in some films, it almost always overpowers the importance of the characters. In the film *The Shining*, both interior and exterior settings play a complementary role. The first three-minute sequence, which is the film's opening landscape scene, explicitly shows that the film's visual and musical content is crucially significant and even surpasses the value of characters by subtly creating an upside-down feeling upon its viewers. These three-minute-long aerial shots show a combination of islands, forests, many colours and textures of the soil, and even rock formations (Trafton, 2023). Whilst this first three-minute sequence is supposed to leave a taste of excitement and admiration in the audience, the extreme-wide shot of the landscape creates a sense of unease by means of the camera's tilting angle and dreadful background music. The opening scene is combined with ominous background music that makes the peaceful landscape of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado seem very frightening and even dreadful. Immediately after the film starts, what is supposed to become admirable in the vastness of nature, full of natural daylight, turns into a threatening environment. This sharp contrast of the content of the music mostly generates a feeling of horror even though the photography shows the pure beauty of a vast landscape. This gives the audience the feeling that, sooner or later, "bad things" are going to happen.

A cut later, the camera tracks a tiny yellow car yet from far above by an aerial shot again. For quite a while, this yellow car keeps sneaking through the wilderness with the camera tracking

backwards. After a while, the camera zooms in until it comes close enough to the car, then slides away in another direction. Even though the camera comes close enough to the yellow car, the audience cannot see the driver, whom the viewer renders as the main character of this movie, as he/she is the first person till that moment of the movie. As the film proceeds, the movements of the camera in this first three-minute sequence become even more important. The unimportance of the characters themselves in the vastness of the exterior setting is highlighted, to some degree, in the eye of the overlooker, the director. Even after a zoom inside the car from backwards, the driver of the car is not seen up close. The camera pans downward and zooms inside the car, making us think that the car and the ones inside are of crucial importance, but we, the viewers, miss it at the first chance.

The *mise-en-scene*² of the opening scene only comprises the beautiful countryside, mountains, rivers, and, as already stated above, a car driving along this countryside. The wideness of the shots implies that there is nothing but the isolation of the landscape and a lonesome yellow car. The colour of the car, yellow, is mostly associated with fear, implying that this is a horror film and possibly the driver, who is allegedly the main character, is nervous or angry. The car looks so small, even like an insect, compared to the surroundings of the setting. The smallness of the car within the setting of the first three-minute sequence is undermined by the vastness of the landscape.

Although the director may focus on the car with the help of zooming, he prefers to overlook the car and the ones inside it. At the end of the opening sequence, the extremely wide shot of the landscape leads the audience towards the interior setting of the movie: the establishing shot of The Overlook Hotel with Rocky Mountains in the background. The audience is again introduced to another immense space, which is again set with a wide-angle shot that makes the characters of the movie look small and defenceless again. From the wide exterior terrain of the Rocky Mountains to the interior claustrophobic space- equally as isolated as the opening natural mountain scenes- means that as the film proceeds, the imposing element of space will keep on the narrative content. The opening scene is set in stark daylight, and there is no clue that this is a horror movie except for the insidiously going-on background music. Lighting is one of the crucial elements of horror films, and most of the time, the blind night is associated with horror movies. Not only the first scene but also the scenes set in Overlook Hotel are shot with lots of broad lighting, which again contrasts the evil nature of the movie.

Danny's Tricycle

The first sequence of the film, which I already analysed, is the turning point of *The Shining* since it generates tension and unease within the audience by combining the extreme-wide shots of the vastness of the area with threatening background music. Except for the first three and the last nine minutes, the film is set in the Overlook Hotel (Macklin, 1981). Thanks to the credits of diverse

camera angles and lighting, the inside of the hotel is built up with the impression that its corridors are full of danger or sadness. As much of the film is reflected from a child's (Danny's) point of view, most of the time, the camera tracks Danny's movements. These scenes are shot with a then-innovative Steadicam (Sunderland, 2013). This type of camera can stabilise the camera's movement, which mechanically separates the presence of the camera from the actor. To be able to track little Danny riding his tricycle through the corridors of the hotel, Steadicam is used to synchronise the positioning and the framing in each shot. One of the biggest advantages of using a Steadicam is that this kind of camera facilitates the disturbing feeling of eerie happenings. There are three scenes consisting of Danny's riding on his big wheel tricycle, and each of them is shot with long takes. From the very first scene, the audience feels that this film is pregnant with very bad happenings; the scenes of the tricycle are definitely the peak points of danger and fear, thanks to many different editing styles and framing. Thanks to the usage of Steadicam, the feeling of fear progresses to a greater extent, such that each unexpected turn of Danny around the corner-to-corner of the hotel offers further possibilities of horror and threat.

Indeed, the low-angle shot renders the position of the character vulnerable in the movie, and Danny wheeling his tricycle scenes are all shot with the low-angle frame (Yu & Lo), which helps viewers to conclude that Danny is in some sort of danger. As the name of the movie connotes, the lighting

plays a big part in manipulating the audience's perception of the space and the characters in connection. In contrast with the natural daylight of the first sequence, the scenes shot inside the hotel are over-illuminated, which makes 'The Shining' originally a horror film even more terrifying. In addition to that, the well-lit corridors of Overlook Hotel are always in stark contrast with the room allocated to the Torrance family (Jack, Wendy and Danny) in which they must live till their duty of taking care of the hotel during the harsh winter days ends (Hornbeck, 2016). The Torrance's living quarters are secluded from the lavishness of the rest of the Overlook Hotel, and the flat's lights are coming predominantly from the windows. This potentially spreads the feeling that no supernatural action is going to happen in the flat. Thanks to the different camera movements and angles in the shots of Danny's riding tricycle, the audience is introduced to the hotel's interior space. The idea of space that is comprised of both interiors and exteriors conveys some kind of enclosure or disclosure in the movie *The Shining* (López, 2021). Falsetto (2001) asserts his ideas about the space in the movie as such:

"The low-to-the-ground Steadicam shots that follow Danny on his tricycle might also be viewed as contributing to the sense of oppressive space, although they offer remarkably inventive views of the boy's movement. These close shots indicate that Danny is very much under observation and will have difficulty escaping the environment" (p.95) ³

In addition to the duality of open and closed spaces, it is important to add that the overall environment (walls, carpets, furniture, etc.) plays a huge role in the narrative of this movie. The variety of spaces, in addition to the diversity of lightning and style, represents how the film

articulates its mental landscape on its viewers. To illustrate, the narrow but well-lit corridors through which Danny wheels his tricycle play as if the walls will close on him to squeeze him in consequence. In sharp contrast with the opening wide landscape scene, the scenes set inside the hotel corridors give the feeling that the space will swallow Wendy (the mother figure) and Danny soon. The visual content of the big hall is different from the corridors. The audience is fully aware that nothing will happen in this wide hall but in narrow corridors. Having the camera tracking Danny around the hotel allows the audience to see every detail from his perspective of. The technique of seeing everything together with Danny, hence at the very last moment, is what makes everything more and more frightening. The scenes of tracking Danny backwards are not always shot from the same angle. The director uses a combination of cuts and long tracking shots for us to follow the feelings in case something extraordinary happens. When Danny takes the last turn around the corridors, Danny and the audience meet with the ghost bodies of two girls at the same time. To show the terror on Danny's face, the angle of the camera tilts upwards from the diagonal down. The director uses abrupt cuts to show Danny and the girls. The camera swiftly moves between the girls and their bloody dead bodies and then backs to the face of Danny with an extreme close-up shot (Mee, 2017). Close-ups of the faces of the characters show the level of fear and

anxiety. As soon as Danny rounds the last corner, the non-diegetic music starts to twin with the scene, increasing in volume and depth thanks to the French horns.

The Hedge Maze

The maze is not associated with a fun place for human beings in general; in contrast, it is a kind of trap in which it is easy to get lost. Similar to the Overlook Hotel's tight corridors, the maze is comprised of a labyrinth type of corridors surrounded by tall hedges. There are two significant maze scenes in the movie. The first maze scene is set in daylight, and just before, Jack turns into a soulless monster. This scene is crucial and plays a complementary role in a way that makes the viewer see how Jack foreshadows his malicious intentions towards his family while looking down in the maze (Aarseth, 2007). The second maze scene complements the main narrative in the last nine minutes of the movie, and this scene plays a core role. Even though the maze is outside of the hotel and signifies the exterior space, the idea of getting lost inside it implies the image that it is more of a claustrophobic interior space. The first time the maze is introduced to the audience is when Wendy and Danny go to the maze to take a stroll in it. Like in the hotel, the camera keeps on stalking Danny. However, in this instance, the camera takes on Jack's (father's) perspective. This occurs in daylight, and the maze is not immediately associated with danger until the subsequent cut, revealing the slowly frenzied father figure. Jack, however, unexpectedly looks confused; hence, the audience cannot fully figure out what he is thinking at that very moment as

opposed to the scenes up to that moment. The audience is so far on top of his malicious intentions. When the camera takes on Jack's point of view, the audience sees Wendy and Danny as very tiny and defenceless figures and as only significant an insect. In this scene, the audience gets the feeling that the slowly frenzied father figure has some malicious plans for his family, such as a murderous one.

In the last nine-minute sequence, the maze is shown in blind night, and it is now a place of terror thanks to the diverse camera tools and editing styles. It is not wrong to state that the interior features of the maze are not very different from the hotel's maze-like, tight corridors. Perhaps that's the reason why Wendy compares the hotel to "a maze" at the very first sight. The final nine-minute sequence of the hedge maze chase scene includes the most dynamic scenes of the movie. Jack's chasing Danny through the Maze is a kind of climax in terms of cinematic expression. Every frame in the giant hedge maze is shot with the Steadicam. Nelson argues that (2000) the audience was already informed about the maze's hugeness in the previous scene; this is particularly important since the frames related to the maze were shot in daylight for the audience to consider for the upcoming scenes. It is very easy to get lost in that giant maze. When it comes to the shots in the maze, the camera tracks both Danny and Jack from behind, which intercuts with the scenes

of Wendy witnessing the most horrific supernatural events of the hotel while looking for Danny everywhere.

The scene begins with Danny making out, running from the bathroom window towards the door of the hedge maze. Despite being injured, Jack follows Danny towards the door of the maze with an axe. The camera movement parallels the scenes of Danny running away from Jack and Jack chasing Danny thanks to his footprints in the snow. The camera focuses on Danny's feet as he leaves his footprints on the snow to reveal that this is the method Jack is using to catch Danny in the maze. The shots in the maze scene are eye-level shots for the audience to identify themselves with both Jack and Danny. It is also interesting that the camera follows Danny with a long shot to give the impression that Jack falls further behind. Throughout the scenes taking place in the hedge maze, "Kanon" by Penderecki plays non-diegetically again (Ale, 2021; Lionnet, 2003). The director primarily uses cacophony type of music to heighten the tension of the scene, which is obvious in the last nine-minute sequence. In the chasing scenes, the camera cutting from Danny running away from Jack and Jack chasing Danny are examples of parallel editing (Mee, 2017) The music suddenly stops when the camera cuts back to Wendy who is witnessing very horrific incidents in the hotel. The music returns when Wendy discovers the dead body of Mr Halloran at the centre of the hotel hall. As the scenes shot in the hotel are full of creepy images and ghosts, the music embodies the form of danger, and in each shocking shot, the volume of the music rises

again. When the shot cuts from Wendy to Jack chasing around Danny in the maze, eerie chanting voices return, and the music is from Penderecki's "Utrenja- Kanon Paschy"(Osorio, 2018).

Up until this scene, the interior spaces of the hotel, such as the walls of the corridors, were shown with warm colours and in daylight with some Native American artwork hung on the walls of the hall. Apart from the long shots in the corridors and the non-diegetic music escorting the camera's movements, there was no clue that this was a horror film. The claustrophobic corridors were full of warm colours and decorated with green paper hangings. Even though the hugeness of the hotel gives the impression of threat and sublime, the hotel was an escape from the extreme cold outside-in effect. The last nine minutes of the sequence is a complete departure from the previous mise-en-scene of the hotel and the hedge maze. More reddish colours are used to increase the expectancy of murder and blood at the end. In another shot, when Wendy suddenly runs up against the skeleton, the lighting is darkened toward a blue palette. Up until this moment, Jack had also come across the ghosts of the previous caretakers of the hotel, but in the presence of a mirror, there was no change in the lighting, maybe signifying that Jack is also one of the ghosts. So far, the audience was suspicious about the presence of supernatural incidents by thinking that maybe these were all happening in Jack's mind. Yet the switching of mise-en-scene towards more reddish and darkened colours lays bare what is natural and what is supernatural in the film analysed.

Conclusion

Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* emerges not merely as a cinematic masterpiece but as an intricate symphony of visual and auditory elements, meticulously orchestrated to transcend traditional horror storytelling (Kubrick, Interview). As the narrative unfolds against the expansive backdrop of the Overlook Hotel and the surrounding hedge maze, Kubrick's distinct cinematic expression becomes increasingly palpable, immersing the audience in a psychological horror experience. The film's opening sequence, a mesmerising aerial exploration of Colorado's Rocky Mountains, exemplifies Kubrick's unique approach to cinematic storytelling. By juxtaposing the breath-taking scenery with ominous music, the director masterfully cultivates an atmosphere of impending dread (Kubrick, Interview) (Phillips, 2013). The sharp transitions between shots, coupled with the disquieting soundtrack, underscore Kubrick's intent to evoke emotional responses akin to the power of music. This opening sets the stage for a visual and auditory journey that permeates the subconscious of the viewer.

Delving into the heart of the Overlook Hotel, Kubrick employs innovative Steadicam techniques in scenes featuring Danny's tricycle. These shots, low-angle and well-lit, mirror the vulnerability of the characters within the vast, foreboding corridors. The fusion of cinematography and lighting amplifies the feeling of entrapment, emphasising the film's exploration of both open and closed spaces. Through the lens of a child's perspective, the audience is intricately guided

through the eerie corridors, heightening the sense of fear and anticipation (Falsetto, 2001). The symbolic hedge maze becomes a focal point in the film's climactic moments, serving as a physical manifestation of the characters' psychological mazes. Scenes in maze therefore equally refer to the circumstances from which the innocent characters of Wendy and Danny cannot escape, almost trapped in the deceptive maze of the tyranny itself. (Conard, 2005, p. 235). Kubrick's mastery is evident as he employs diverse camera tools and editing styles in the final nine minutes, intensifying the chase between Jack and Danny (Falsetto, 2001). The parallel editing, accompanied by Penderecki's haunting score, creates a crescendo of suspense, culminating in a visual and auditory climax (Lionnet, 2003). The shift in mise-en-scene, marked by reddish hues and darkened tones, acts as a visual revelation, distinguishing the supernatural from the natural and unravelling the layers of the narrative.

In conclusion, *The Shining* is a testament to Kubrick's ability to transcend conventional genre boundaries (Kubrick, Interview). His emphasis on visual and musical elements as vehicles for emotional and psychological impact distinguishes the film as a ground-breaking work of art (Naremore, 2023). Each frame, infused with meticulous attention to detail, serves a dual purpose—invoking fear and inviting contemplation (Falsetto, 2001). The film invites audiences to navigate the labyrinthine corridors of the mind, mirroring the characters' experiences in the

Overlook Hotel. As the credits roll, Kubrick's cinematic expression lingers, leaving an indelible mark on the psyche of those who have ventured into the unsettling world of "The Shining" (Kubrick, Interview) (Falsetto, 2001).

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ENDNOTES:

- ¹ From a *Playboy* magazine interview reprinted in Jerome Agel, ed., *The Making of Kubrick's 2001* (New York: New American Library. Kagan, N. (2000). *Cinema of Stanley Kubrick*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 1970); cited in Norman Kagan, *The Cinema of Stanley Kubrick* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 145.
- ² In Cinematic terms, mise-en-scene can be referred to as all the elements of a film that we see in front of the camera and the way it is arranged (Bordwell and Thompson, 2003). Those elements, which include décor, lighting, space, costumes and acting, have an important role in imparting a mood to the story and delivering meaning to the visuals, thus playing a crucial role in signifying the director's narrative mastery. It involves visual composition, the movement and position of on-screen actors and the properties set as part of stage design (Barsam and Monahan, 2010). Sreekumar, J., & Vidyapeetham, A. V. (2015). Creating Meaning through Interpretations: A Mise-En-Scene Analysis of the Film 'The Song of Sparrows.'. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 5(September), 26-35.
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