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Confining Madness, Liberating Freedom: Power, Madness, and Freedom in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

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Abstract

This paper examines the 1975 film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* through the lens of Michel Foucault's seminal work, *Madness and Civilization*, to explore the intricate interplay of power, madness, and freedom within institutional settings. Foucault's analysis of how society historically constructs and confines madness provides a critical framework for understanding the oppressive dynamics of the mental institution portrayed in the film. Nurse Ratched embodies the disciplinary mechanisms Foucault describes, enforcing rigid control over patients through surveillance, normalization, and punishment. Conversely, Randle McMurphy's rebellion disrupts these structures, challenging the institutional narrative that equates compliance with sanity and freedom. This paper argues that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* critiques the systemic use of power to define and control deviance, illustrating how confinement operates not only physically but also psychologically and socially. It also highlights how moments of resistance, embodied in McMurphy's defiance and Chief Bromden's ultimate liberation, expose the fragility of institutional authority and the possibility of reclaiming autonomy. By situating the film within Foucault's theoretical framework, this analysis reveals how the narrative transcends its specific context to critique broader cultural practices of marginalization and control. The paper concludes that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a powerful cultural narrative that interrogates the boundaries between madness and reason, confinement and freedom, and power and resistance.

Keywords: *Surveillance Studies, Madness, Power, Freedom, Institutional Critique*

Introduction

The 1975 film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, directed by Miloš Forman and adapted from Ken Kesey's 1962 novel of the same name, stands as one of the most incisive cinematic interrogations of institutional power and the social production of madness. Set almost entirely within the claustrophobic space of a psychiatric hospital, the film exposes how institutions function not merely as sites of care, but as mechanisms that discipline, normalize, and control individuals who fall outside accepted social norms. Madness, in this context, is not presented as a purely medical condition but as a label imposed upon those whose behaviour threatens the smooth functioning of social order.

Central to this critique is the sustained power struggle between Nurse Ratched, the calm yet authoritarian embodiment of institutional control, and Randle Patrick McMurphy, whose unruly vitality and refusal to conform disrupt the rigid routines of the ward. Their conflict dramatizes the tension between authority and autonomy, obedience and resistance, revealing how power often operates through subtle forms of psychological regulation rather than overt violence. The film raises unsettling questions about who defines normality, who wields the right to confine, and at what cost order is maintained. This paper approaches *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* through the theoretical lens of Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, a foundational text that traces the historical construction of madness and its confinement within disciplinary institutions. Foucault's insights into surveillance, and medicalization of deviance provide a critical framework for understanding the psychiatric hospital in the film as a microcosm of modern disciplinary society, where power is exercised quietly, relentlessly, and often in the name of care itself.

Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* advances the argument that madness is not a fixed or purely medical reality, but a historically produced category shaped by shifting social, political, and epistemological discourses that determine who is considered normal and who must be excluded. For Foucault, madness is constructed through power relations that define deviance and justify its confinement. The emergence of asylums and psychiatric institutions, therefore, did not simply reflect humanitarian concern for the mentally ill; rather, these spaces functioned as instruments of social control that reinforced dominant moral, economic, and political structures. Foucault traces a crucial historical shift from pre-modern societies, in which madness often occupied an ambiguous yet visible place within cultural and social life, to the modern era, where it was increasingly isolated, classified, and subjected to medical authority.

In earlier periods, the mad were not entirely silenced but existed at the margins of society—sometimes feared and sometimes tolerated. With the rise of modern rationality, however, madness came to be understood as a pathology that threatened social order and therefore required regulation.

The psychiatric hospital emerged as a central site of this regulation, operating as an extension of disciplinary power where surveillance, normalization, and corrective practices replaced dialogue and understanding. Within these institutions, power is exercised through routines, hierarchical observation, and the internalization of authority, ensuring compliance without the constant need for physical force. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* vividly dramatizes these Foucauldian dynamics through the character of Nurse Ratched, who embodies the quiet yet pervasive mechanisms of discipline described by Foucault. Her control over the ward is maintained through rigid schedules, manipulative therapeutic practices, and the ever-present threat of punishment, revealing how institutional authority functions most effectively when it presents itself as rational, benevolent, and medically necessary.

At the centre of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* stands the figure of Randle Patrick McMurphy, a defiant nonconformist whose presence unsettles the rigid authority of the psychiatric institution and exposes the inherent fragility of its power. Unlike the other inmates, McMurphy refuses to internalize the logic of confinement; his laughter, irreverence, and physical vitality disrupt the atmosphere of fear and submission that governs the ward. Through seemingly minor acts of rebellion- organizing gambling sessions, questioning institutional routines, provoking laughter, and arranging unauthorized excursions- McMurphy challenges the legitimacy of Nurse Ratched's control and reintroduces the possibility of choice, pleasure, and agency into a space designed to suppress them. These acts, though trivial on the surface, carry profound political significance, as they undermine the institution's claim to moral and medical authority. McMurphy's resistance resonates strongly with Michel Foucault's assertion that power is never monolithic or absolute, but instead circulates within a dynamic field of struggle where it is constantly contested and renegotiated.

By refusing compliance, McMurphy reveals that institutional power depends on obedience for its survival. However, his defiance is met with escalating forms of punishment that expose the coercive foundations of the asylum. Electroconvulsive therapy and lobotomy function as technologies of discipline that transform resistance into pathology, silencing dissent under the guise of treatment. McMurphy's lobotomy marks the institution's ultimate assertion of dominance, reducing him to a passive body stripped of will and individuality. Yet his rebellion is not rendered meaningless. Its legacy persists through Chief Bromden, whose gradual awakening and final escape from the institution represent the enduring impact of McMurphy's challenge. Inspired by McMurphy's refusal to submit, Chief's escape becomes a powerful symbol of reclaimed agency, suggesting that even within systems designed to confine and neutralize, the possibility of liberation and resistance continues to flicker.

By examining *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* through Michel Foucault's theoretical framework, this paper contends that the film functions as a powerful critique of the ways in which modern societies define, classify, and manage deviance through institutional structures of power. The psychiatric hospital depicted in the film operates as a microcosm of disciplinary society, reflecting broader mechanisms through which individuals are monitored, regulated, and normalized in the name of social order. Rather than relying solely on overt force or physical violence, institutional authority in the film is exercised through subtle and pervasive forms of psychological regulation, including surveillance, routinization, and the internalization of fear. These techniques ensure obedience by shaping how individuals think about themselves and their place within the system. The film thus illustrates Foucault's assertion that modern power is most effective when it becomes invisible, functioning through seemingly rational and benevolent practices.

Moreover, the narrative destabilizes rigid binary oppositions that traditionally structure understandings of social life. The distinction between madness and reason is repeatedly blurred, as many of the inmates appear more lucid and emotionally aware than the institution that claims to treat them. Similarly, the opposition between compliance and freedom is complicated, revealing how submission often masquerades as safety, while resistance is punished as irrationality. The film also questions the assumed opposition between order and chaos, suggesting that institutional order itself may produce profound violence and psychological harm. By challenging these binaries, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* exposes the fragile and constructed nature of institutional authority. Ultimately, the film transcends a simple critique of psychiatric practice to become a broader meditation on power, autonomy, and resistance, affirming the resilience of human freedom even within systems specifically designed to suppress individuality and dissent.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Michel Foucault's seminal work *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, with particular emphasis on its opening chapter, "The Insane," which lays the historical and philosophical foundations for understanding madness as a socially constructed category. In this chapter, Foucault argues that hospitals and other institutions of confinement did not arise exclusively as spaces of medical care or humanitarian concern, but rather functioned as mechanisms for isolating individuals whose behaviour disrupted moral, social, or economic order. These institutions confined not only those labelled as mad, but also figures such as the dissolute, spendthrift fathers, prodigal sons, blasphemers, libertines, and other individuals whose conduct threatened prevailing norms of discipline and propriety.

Foucault's discussion of the establishment of the Hôpital Général in Paris is particularly significant, as it illustrates how confinement operated as a broad social practice rather than a narrowly medical response. Within this institution were housed the "insane," "demented" men, individuals described as having a "wandering mind," and those deemed to have become "completely mad," alongside other marginalized groups. Importantly, however, the individuals identified as insane occupied a distinct and specific position within the larger framework of confinement. Their condition was not simply equated with that of ordinary prisoners or detainees, but was understood through a unique lens that set them apart from other confined populations. This distinction applied to those variously referred to as insane, alienated, deranged, demented, or extravagant, whose behaviour was perceived as fundamentally irrational and threatening to the rational order of society. This mode of perception shaped how madness was conceptualized within the broader domain, assigning it specific meanings and functions in relation to social norms, morality, and authority. As a result, madness came to be defined not merely as individual pathology, but as a category through which society articulated its fears, reinforced its values, and justified the exclusion and regulation of those who failed to conform.

Confinement, as Michel Foucault observes, frequently emerges from a social impulse to avoid scandal and preserve the fragile structures of respectability upon which family and social identity depend. The reputation and dignity of the family are treated as values of such overriding importance that they justify the exclusion or removal of any individual whose behaviour is deemed disgraceful, immoral, or socially unacceptable. When a family member's actions threaten public honour- whether through perceived madness, sexual deviance, or moral transgression- society demands intervention in the form of concealment rather than understanding.

Confinement becomes a means of erasing visible disorder, allowing families to maintain an appearance of moral coherence and social legitimacy. In this context, the individual is sacrificed to protect the collective image of the family, and personal suffering is rendered secondary to public reputation. The act of isolating or institutionalizing such individuals is framed not as punishment but as necessity, a moral duty undertaken in the name of order and decency. By removing the source of shame from public view, society reassures itself that its values remain intact and uncontested. This process reveals how confinement functions as a social strategy that transforms private discomfort into institutional exclusion. Rather than addressing the underlying causes of deviant behaviour, society chooses to silence and hide those who disrupt its norms. As Foucault suggests, this mechanism of removal reinforces dominant moral codes while releasing families and institutions of responsibility, ensuring that social harmony is preserved at the cost of individual autonomy and dignity.

Foucault draws attention to a disturbing custom of the Middle Ages in which madness was transformed into a public spectacle, revealing the extent to which society objectified and commodified the suffering of the insane. He notes that certain institutions installed windows specifically designed to allow outsiders to observe the mad confined within, effectively turning asylums into sites of exhibition rather than care. One striking example is the hospital at Bethlehem, where inmates were displayed to the public every Sunday in exchange for a small fee of one penny. Over time, these exhibitions generated a remarkable annual income of nearly four hundred pounds, a figure that suggests the practice was not marginal but widely popular. From this revenue, it is possible to estimate that approximately 96,000 visits were made in a single year, indicating an extraordinary level of public engagement with these spectacles. Such numbers point to a cultural fascination with madness that went beyond fear or pity, transforming it into a form of entertainment and moral instruction. The public gaze positioned the mad as objects to be looked at, scrutinized, and judged, reinforcing a clear division between the rational observer and the irrational observed.

Madness, in this context, was no longer an inner disturbance or a shared human vulnerability but an externalized condition put on display for collective reassurance. Confinement thus served a dual purpose: it removed the mad from everyday social life while simultaneously drawing attention to them in a controlled and sanctioned manner. By framing madness as spectacle, society reaffirmed its own sense of normality and rational superiority. Foucault's analysis reveals that these practices did not simply reflect cruelty or curiosity but played a crucial role in shaping modern perceptions of madness. The act of exhibiting the mad fixed them within a visual economy of difference, where confinement made madness hyper-visible, sharply defined, and unmistakably separated from the domain of reason.

As Foucault powerfully observes, madness gradually came to be understood as something external and visible, "a thing to look at," no longer perceived as a potential disturbance within the self but as an alien condition marked by animality and irrational force. The mad were no longer regarded as human subjects capable of thought or reflection; instead, they were reduced to images of bestiality, beings governed by strange and incomprehensible mechanisms that separated them from the realm of reason. In this dehumanized framework, individuals labelled as mad were imagined as emptied of consciousness, distanced from their own thoughts, and described metaphorically as "stones" or "brutes." Such language stripped them of agency and justified their exclusion from moral and social consideration. Those who appeared calm and whose thoughts did not provoke fear were sometimes segregated into separate wards, isolated from others deemed more dangerous or unruly. However, individuals who retained fragments of thought yet refused to submit to institutional rules were treated with severity. Their partial resistance marked them as threats to order, making them subject to harsher forms of discipline and punishment. These punishments were often cruel and inhuman, designed not

to restore reason but to crush defiance and enforce obedience. Foucault's analysis reveals how the perception of madness as animality legitimized extreme forms of violence within institutions, allowing society to treat the mad as objects of control rather than as human beings in need of understanding or care.

Within the asylum, the inhabitants were increasingly reduced to the status of beasts, perceived as bodies driven by violent and uncontrollable animal instincts rather than as thinking human subjects. Mental institutions thus transformed into ensnaring cages, spaces defined by containment, coercion, and the constant threat of violence. As Michel Foucault notes, madness during this period was no longer meaningfully connected to medicine or genuine therapeutic care, nor was it treated within the moral framework of correction or rehabilitation. Instead, madness was understood as "unchained animality," a force that could only be subdued through strict discipline, physical restraint, and brutalizing practices. This shift reveals how institutions abandoned dialogue and treatment in favour of domination and control, reinforcing a vision of the mad as inherently dangerous and incapable of reason. Such conditions legitimized cruelty by presenting it as necessary for maintaining order. These Foucauldian insights are crucial for analysing *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, as the film exposes similar mechanisms of dehumanization within the psychiatric ward, where authority relies on discipline and coercion rather than care, and where institutional power reduces individuals to objects to be managed rather than subjects to be understood.

Film Analysis

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest features powerful performances by Jack Nicholson as Randle Patrick McMurphy, Louise Fletcher as Nurse Ratched, and Will Sampson as Chief Bromden, whose portrayals are central to the film's exploration of power, control, and marginalization. The film opens with a quietly unsettling scene of Nurse Ratched arriving early in the morning at her workplace, the Oregon State Mental Hospital. Her calm, orderly entrance immediately establishes her as the custodian of institutional authority, someone who embodies routine, regulation, and control. The narrative of power and surveillance is inaugurated almost ritualistically with the ringing of the morning bell, summoning patients to line up for their medication. This moment underscores the rigid structure of institutional life, where time, movement, and even bodily autonomy are governed by impersonal rules and schedules. The bell functions as an auditory symbol of discipline, reminding the inmates of their subjugation to an authority that tolerates no deviation.

Randle McMurphy is introduced within the first few minutes of the film, arriving as a disruptive presence in this carefully controlled environment. A repeat offender convicted of sexually assaulting a fifteen-year-old girl, McMurphy has deliberately feigned insanity to avoid the harsh labour camps of the prison system and secure a transfer to the psychiatric hospital, which he assumes

will be more lenient. His arrival immediately unsettles the ward, as his loud laughter, physical energy, and irreverent attitude sharply contrast with the subdued behaviour of the other inmates. Through *McMurphy*, the film exposes the blurred boundary between criminality and madness, suggesting that both function as categories used to manage deviance within institutional frameworks.

As *McMurphy* is introduced to the ward, the audience encounters the diverse group of inmates who inhabit the hospital, each representing different forms of vulnerability and social marginalization. Chief Bromden, believed to be deaf and mute, appears withdrawn and invisible, embodying the extreme silencing produced by institutional life. Billy Bibbit is young, anxious, and plagued by a severe stutter, his emotional fragility shaped by fear and repression. Charlie Cheswick is volatile and prone to emotional outbursts, while Martini exhibits childlike behaviour and persistent delusions. Dale Harding, intelligent and articulate, masks his inner turmoil with sarcasm and intellectual detachment. Max Taber's aggression and foul language mark him as combative, while Jim Sefelt and Bruce Fredrickson suffer from epileptic seizures, further complicating their institutionalization. Scanlon remains largely quiet, yet harbours violent thoughts beneath his silence. Together, these characters form a microcosm of individuals whose differences have been medicalized, confined, and rendered manageable within the institutional order, setting the stage for *McMurphy's* challenge to the system that governs them.

McMurphy's encounter with Dr. Spivey further exposes the arbitrary and bureaucratic nature of psychiatric diagnosis within the institutional system. When *McMurphy* asks about his illness, he is confronted not with a clear explanation but with a set of labels recorded in his files- descriptions that define his character rather than any identifiable mental disorder. The reports describe him as aggressive, disruptive, prone to speaking without authorization, and harbouring a resentful attitude toward figures of authority. In response, *McMurphy* mocks the process by sarcastically adding another offence to the list, jokingly accusing himself of "chewing gum in class." This moment highlights the absurdity of institutional classification, where everyday acts of defiance are transformed into symptoms of pathology.

The stated purpose of *McMurphy's* placement in the hospital is to determine whether he is mentally ill, yet the criteria for such judgment remain vague and deeply entangled with moral and behavioural expectations. *McMurphy's* history of five prior imprisonments for sexual assault further complicates his status, blurring the line between criminality and madness. The prison authorities' decision to label him "crazy" stems not from clinical observation but from his refusal to conform, as he does not sit quietly "like a vegetable." His vitality and resistance thus become evidence of madness, revealing how institutional power pathologizes noncompliance rather than addressing it as dissent.

He tries bringing certain changes in the ward such as suggesting to lower the volume of the music played continuously in the ward to which Nurse Ratched does not agree to. He does not comply to take the medicine by saying that he would not have something without knowing what it is. McMurphy suggests a change in the day's schedule so that the inmates could watch a football game series to which Nurse Ratched resists by saying that many of the inmates would be disturbed if the schedule is broken. She becomes a strong symbol of power and confinement who decides how the lives of the inmates of the hospital should go on. No one votes in favour of McMurphy on the issue of the series, afraid of Nurse Ratched. She suffocates Billy with some personal questions which he does not want to answer and Mr. Cheswick asks why she is pressing him to talk if he does not want to. Nurse Ratched replies that it is therapy. The football game series comes to discussion again in which McMurphy wins the majority vote including that of Chief Bromden. This is refuted by Nurse Ratched who says that Chief Bromden raised his hand only after the meeting was adjourned. McMurphy delivers an imaginary commentary of the football game in which the other inmates join.

McMurphy scorns off when he hears that Nurse Ratched has won the best nurse award last year. He manages to steal the institution bus and take all the inmates out for fishing along with his girlfriend Candy, introducing themselves as doctors of the institution. After an officer tells him that his sentence term does not apply in the mental institution, and can become indefinite, McMurphy questions why no one told him this before. He also learns that he, Chief, and Taber are the only patients who have been involuntarily committed; the others have committed themselves voluntarily but are too afraid to leave. The inmates start questioning about keeping the hospital doors locked during the daytime and weekends. Mr. Cheswick turns violent on not getting his cigarettes. Miss Ratched informs that their cigarettes have been kept away from them as they have played gambling games with McMurphy. Mr. Cheswick turns even more violent and says that he is not a kid whom she should control with her rules, and to get rid of those rules.

McMurphy starts a fight with the orderlies, and Chief intervenes to help him. McMurphy, Chief, and Cheswick are sent to the disturbed ward after the fight. Chief reveals to McMurphy that he can hear and talk. They make plans to escape to Canada. McMurphy is subjected to electroconvulsive therapy. McMurphy sneaks Candy and her friend Rose into the ward, each bringing bottles of alcohol, and bribes the night orderly Turkle to allow a Christmas party after Miss Ratched leaves. Billy asks for a date with Candy and they have a memorable night together. Ratched arrives in the morning to find the ward in disarray. She discovers Billy and Candy together and aims to embarrass Billy in front of everyone. Billy manages to overcome his stutter and stands up to Ratched. When she threatens to tell his mother, Billy cracks under the pressure and reverts to stuttering, before Ratched orders he be locked in a separate room as punishment. He commits suicide by slitting his throat with a piece of

broken glass. McMurphy tries to strangle Miss Ratched when she insists on going back to their daily routine even after Billy is lying there dead. The orderlies intervene, saving her.

After sometime, McMurphy is nowhere to be found and some of the inmates think that he has escaped. Chief Bromden is upset thinking that McMurphy has escaped without him. But at night, McMurphy is brought to his bed after a lobotomy, and now he has indeed become a “vegetable.” After tearfully embracing McMurphy, Chief smothers him with a pillow. He then rips the hydrotherapy fountain off its mountings and throws it through the window, as McMurphy had earlier attempted. He escapes with the other inmates awakening to cheer him on.

Conclusion

Through its portrayal of the power struggle between Nurse Ratched and Randle McMurphy, the film raises urgent questions about authority, conformity, and resistance within institutional settings. The psychiatric hospital becomes more than a backdrop; it emerges as a carefully controlled environment where power circulates quietly yet relentlessly. Surveillance, routine, and correction operate as everyday tools that shape behaviour, silence dissent, and manufacture obedience. In this sense, the institution mirrors a wider social order in which deviation from accepted norms is treated not as difference but as disorder requiring regulation. Nurse Ratched stands as the embodiment of disciplinary authority, exercising control not through overt violence but through psychological manipulation and rigid procedural order. Her authority lies in her ability to normalize control, making domination appear therapeutic and punishment appear necessary. The group therapy sessions, framed as spaces of healing, instead become rituals of confession and humiliation, compelling patients to internalize the institution’s judgment. Through this dynamic, the film reflects the mechanisms of disciplinary power described in *Madness and Civilization*, where institutions transform individuals into subjects who police themselves.

The hospital functions as a microcosm of disciplinary society, revealing how power extends beyond physical coercion into the subtle shaping of identity and behaviour. Order is maintained through medication, surveillance, and the constant threat of electroconvulsive therapy or lobotomy, demonstrating how control can be enacted through the language of care. The patients’ individuality is gradually eroded, replaced by conformity and compliance, illustrating how institutions can reshape the boundaries between sanity and deviance. Within this oppressive environment, McMurphy’s rebellion becomes a symbolic challenge to institutional authority. His defiance disrupts routines, rekindles individuality among the patients, and exposes the fragility of the system’s control. Yet the consequences of his resistance reveal the harsh limits imposed on those who challenge established power structures. The film ultimately becomes more than a critique of psychiatric institutions; it transforms into a meditation on the nature of power, the construction of normalcy, and the enduring

human impulse toward freedom. Through this lens, the narrative underscores how institutions can simultaneously promise care while perpetuating control, leaving audiences to question where authority ends and oppression begins.

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