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CINEMA HISTORY AND MYSTERY

Seeing *The Shining* from Every Angle in *Room 237*



PHOTO COURTESY WARNER BROS. ENTERTAINMENT

The daughters of the Overlook's former caretaker (Lisa and Louise Burns) in a scene from *The Shining*



PHOTO COURTESY WARNER BROS. ENTERTAINMENT

Director Stanley Kubrick and Jack Nicholson on the set of *The Shining*

A monument to complexity, Stanley Kubrick's 1980 masterpiece *The Shining* has so many layers and cultural points of reference that it practically invites the viewer to read his own subconscious directly into the film. In the decades since its release, a cult of devotees has emerged, fans who claim to have decoded the movie's secret messages addressing everything from the genocide of Native Americans to a range of government plots, including a cover-up of the purportedly faked 1969 Apollo Moon landing.

In a deconstruction of Kubrick's still-controversial Stephen King adaptation, director

Rodney Ascher's conspiracy documentary *Room 237* explores five of the most widely held theories via interviews with cultists and scholars alike. Interview voiceover is juxtaposed with footage from *The Shining* and other Kubrick films, along with maps, diagrams and floor plans. The results distinctly evoke the Kuleshov effect, a film editing effect famously demonstrated by Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov in the 1910s and 1920s by which he established montage as a basic tool of the art of cinema.

Following its debut at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival, *Room 237* made festival headlines at

Cannes, Toronto, New York, Chicago, AFI and Fantastic Fest, and received the IDA Documentary Award for Best Editing. The film began its limited theatrical release under the IFC Midnight banner in March, followed by a national rollout that included cable VOD, iTunes and other digital outlets.

The poster art, designed by CalArts graduate Carlos Ramos, who also created the animations in the film, echoes the eye-catching Saul Bass design for *The Shining's* film poster, a yellow sheet that remains a landmark of simple, effective design. The disclaimer on the *Room 237* poster alone is worth the price of admission.

Ascher went into the project unsure of what the final result would be. “We didn’t know if this would be a full-length feature, or a short film or a series of shorts, but over the course of about eight months of research and development of the project, we decided that we wanted to do this multiple-perspective thing that explored all the different symbolic metaphorical analyses of *The Shining* that we could find, and see what happens when we compared and contrasted them,” he says. “Would it be a demolition derby? Would they become mutually exclusive? Will they reinforce each other, or will one rise to the top?”

Working alongside *Room 237* producer Tim Kirk, Ascher made the decision early on to avoid the use of “talking heads,” just as he had done with his previous short film project, “The S from Hell.” “I liked the stripped-down aesthetic. There were no talking heads in the short, and I liked the way that worked, and the way that it made me work harder to



The *Room 237* film poster, designed by Carlos Ramos, echoes the work of Saul Bass in the original poster for *The Shining*.



PHOTO COURTESY WARNER BROS. ENTERTAINMENT



find visuals to complement things,” he explains. “Sometimes the visuals would illustrate things very literally, or sometimes in a more roundabout way, in a more subjective way, or from another point of view. Sometimes the film’s point of view might be entirely different from the speaker’s point of view.”

Ascher edited material converted to Apple ProRes 422 format at 1080p in Final Cut Pro 7. While doing so, he sought ways to overcome the challenges of creating the visuals for the film, which, in addition to Kubrick’s footage, include various diagrams and architectural plans. “It became a very interesting game for me, finding how far I could stretch the material and still get the

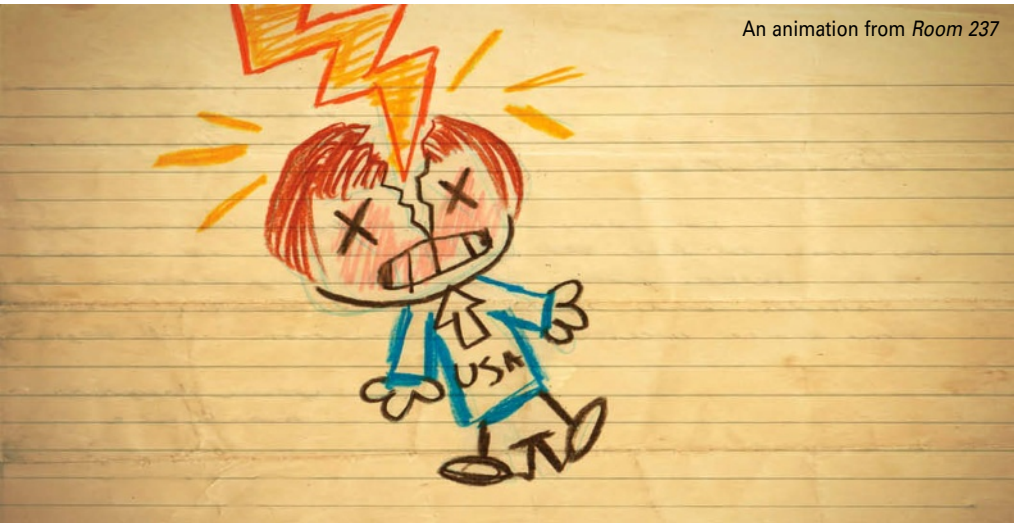


audience to go along,” he says. “It seems that the audience is already doing a lot of work for you—it’s helping you make connections. So if a narrator off-screen is saying something about himself, and there’s a character on the screen, and he’s not talking about that character, then the assumption is therefore that the character represents him.

“It’s like the Kuleshov effect, the Russian idea that the audience can see the same image differently in a different context, which is great, because in a way that’s exactly what we’re doing with *The Shining*,” Ascher continues. “Different people see *The Shining* differently, and then we’re able to get the audience to see scenes from *The Shining* or scenes from other movies differently because we’re putting them in a new context.”

Another significant challenge for Ascher was deciding how to weave together the various theories and competing explanations about Kubrick’s film. “For each interviewee, I put together 10 or 12 two- to three-minute sections,” he says. “We tried to organize these things in a way that added up to something bigger. Ultimately we were able to group these sequences into three acts divided into the nine chapters of the film.”

“Each of these people represents countless others who may have experienced the same thing,” Ascher concludes. “It’s less about these people being exceptional or unusual and more about them being representative.” **dv**



An animation from *Room 237*



Room 237 uses floor plans to illustrate features of *The Shining*'s production.