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## **‘Room 237’ Subject Bill Blakemore Writes About His ‘The Shining’ Theories**

**Is ‘The Shining’ about the genocide of Native Americans, the Holocaust, the (fake) moon landing? Bill Blakemore, of ‘Room 237,’ on his theories behind Kubrick’s horror classic.**

by [William Blakemore \(/contributors/william-blakemore.html\)](/contributors/william-blakemore.html) | March 29, 2013 4:45 AM EDT

“Nothing is ever unintentional in a Kubrick movie,” say scholars and co-workers of the great filmmaker Stanley Kubrick.

So rich was his imagination that no one person helping him make a movie could ever know everything Kubrick was thinking and planning when he put it all together. One must look not only at his statements but at his movies themselves.



(L-R) Jack Nicholson in "The Shining"; The poster for the documentary "Room 237".  
(Warner Brothers/Everett Collection)

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The first time I saw [The Shining \(/articles/2013/03/28/the-most-eccentric-conspiracy-theories-on-the-shining-in-room-237.html\)](/articles/2013/03/28/the-most-eccentric-conspiracy-theories-on-the-shining-in-room-237.html) was with three friends at a theater in Leicester Square in London's West End soon after its 1980 release there.

I was deeply engaged by it in a scary, unnerving way; found everything uncanny and frightening as the story unfolded in a continually unexpected way right up to the very last image: the calligraphy caption at the bottom of a black and white photo revealing a young Jack Nicholson (who'd played the lead in the movie, set in 1980) at the head of a group of smiling well-to-do partiers posing for that picture in what we learn, in the final close-up of that caption, to have been the "Overlook Hotel ... July 4<sup>th</sup> Ball ... 1921."

That last surprising and puzzling image sent everyone out into the lobby asking, "What was *that* about?" – Forcing viewers, each in his or her own way, to think about what else might have been going on in the movie that they might not have been consciously aware of while watching it; as Kubrick did with final images in his other movies such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (the startling star child) and *Clockwork Orange* (the sudden slo-mo naked couple tussling amorously on the sand amid applauding society types in top hats and gowns as Alex says "I was cured, alright.")

A few minutes after the film ended, as we drove out of an underground car park, I suddenly announced to my friends, "Oh my goodness! That movie was about the genocide of the American Indians!"—by which I did not mean that it was *only* about that, just that the genocide of the Indians was one of a number of elements which the filmmaker had placed, for some reason, in this very carefully crafted movie.

I remember telling them of four images (including one bit of dialogue) that backed the claim.

First, there was the bright red and white Calumet baking powder can (in the first storage lockers scene) with its Indian chief's head logo. I happened to know, having grown up in Chicago north of the Calumet River, that Calumet was the French explorer's word for Indian peace pipe.

Then I recounted the dialogue when the Overlook Hotel's manager, Stuart Ullman, is showing the Torrance family around their immense new winter home and, in response to Wendy's question, "When was The Overlook built?" replies:

"Ah... construction started in 1907. It was finished in 1909. The site is supposed to be located on an Indian burial ground, and I believe they actually had to repel a few Indian attacks as they were building it."

(I would later realize that the most frequent "shining" and ghostly vision in the film, seen at the start by Danny and finally by Wendy at the end—the elevator from behind whose initially shut doors, decorated around the edge with Indian motifs, gushes an onrushing flood of blood, is presumably rooted down in the basement in that very Indian burial ground. This is possibly coincidental, but it's not the sort of powerful resonance that the super-careful Kubrick would likely allow to remain in a film, especially involving such a central symbol or element as *that* elevator.)

"An interviewer once asked Kubrick what his film *The Shining* 'is about' and he answered simply 'It's about a man who tries to kill his family.'"

I told my friends that I'd noticed that Wendy was wearing a yellow top that has some simple Indian figures on it, and had her hair in braids.

And I mentioned to them how Jack in one scene was repeatedly hurling a ball, with no concern for what damage it might do, against the huge Indian painting above the fireplace in the "Colorado Lounge."

I also mentioned that the name of the Hotel—Overlook—clearly had two meanings and that the second fit neatly and ironically with what I was coming to realize was another element of this beautiful movie - the way in which the comfortable rich, and indeed most all levels of society, often *overlook* the horrors that may have been committed to gain a current comfortable situation.

I was soon back in Rome, where I was based at the time as Rome Bureau Chief and Correspondent for ABC news, and happened to meet an American studio executive who was the distributor for the film in Italy. After telling him of some of the apparently intentional references to possible larger meanings I had spotted in *The Shining*, he invited me to watch it again one afternoon in his office screening room.

There, I noticed a second clutch of Calumet cans in a later scene in that same dry goods locker, and various other elements that resonated with the interwoven theme – certainly not the only theme in the movie– of westward advancing British and American imperialism that was disdainful and destructive of other races it considered inferior...such as Grady's reference to Jack (in their conversation in the blood-red men's' room) to a "nigger cook," and the Colorado "Gold Room" that evokes the Colorado Gold Rush which had brought more misery on local indigenous Indian peoples. I also noted the precisely British accents of not only the very real ghost waiter Grady but also the solid-flesh-and-blood ghost bartender, Lloyd.

As for those Calumet baking powder cans, let's allow the Overlook's African American head chef, Dick Hallorann to explain it.

In an exceptionally beautiful scene in the hotel's kitchen, the charismatic Hallorann explains to Danny, over some promised chocolate ice cream, what the Shining that they've discovered they share is all about.

After a perceptive Danny asks, "Is there something bad here?" Hallorann responds:

"Well, you know Doc, when something happens it can leave a trace of itself behind... say like when someone burns toast."

And he goes on to say "maybe things that happened leave other kinds of traces behind"...and soon adds that he thinks "a lot of things happened right here in this particular hotel...over the years, and not all of them was good."

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Much has been written about how the film's Overlook Hotel seems to represent America itself... and the Calumet baking powder cans, with what may be a racially insensitive Indian logo (of a people so recently and brutally conquered here) are in fact a tiny commercial trace, common in 1980 American storerooms and reminiscent of those people - like, say, the lingering molecules of burnt toast, which is literally what that lingering smell is made of, that enter the nostrils the next day.

There are, of course, much bigger and more frightening ghostly traces that the hotel has to offer Jack, Danny and Wendy.

And I knew some Holocaust survivors back in the early 1980's who had special sensitivity about—and resisted riding in—Volkswagens, especially the famous Beetle—a car that is generally believed to have been designed personally by Adolf Hitler.

Kubrick's own family came at the turn of the century from Galicia in what was then southeast Poland, a region in what came to be called 'The Bloodlands' in which some of his own relatives were among the countless souls lost to the Nazi horrors.

So it is hard to imagine that the ever-thorough Kubrick, who had long studied many aspects of the

Holocaust, would have been unaware of the heavy symbolism—or simple emblematic resonance—of the magnificent opening sequences of *The Shining* in which we see a tiny yellow Volkswagen Beetle (and yellow is a color with especially horrific connotations for European Jews) threading its way up a winding road into the towering vast mountain wilderness of the American West.

*The Shining* may perhaps be said to be, in an ironic sense, Kubrick's "Western"—a genre with connotations of "cowboys and Indians"—and it starts with Hitler's beloved car, commonly seen in the US in 1980, making its way up into what might in a general sense be thought of also as Indian country...

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The sound track of Rodney Ascher's documentary *Room 237* is the continually interwoven voices of five very different people (I'm one of them) offering various thoughts and analyses – and in some cases full blown "theories" - about Kubrick's *The Shining*.

A number of the "theories" presented in *Room 237* about *The Shining*, however, are a real stretch, if not simply incredible including one that sees evidence in *The Shining* of Kubrick admitting to faking Apollo moon landing footage for NASA, and another that sees a Minotaur (resonating with *The Shining*'s Labyrinth maze) in a routine ski poster.

Yet *Room 237* has proved astonishing popular and respected at film festivals around the world. The reason, I suspect, is not only that Kubrick's artistry is so endlessly rewarding to behold and contemplate but also that Ascher's film has made the very idea of the *potential* richness of Kubrick's artistry remarkably accessible to almost anyone who sees *Room 237*. It achieves this by creating what some critics are calling a *new school of film criticism*, made possible by modern video technology—one that can examine and compare in detail how most any viewer responds to the film.

I do not think that *The Shining* "is really about" the genocide of the American Indians... nor of the Holocaust, nor of humanity's universal tendency throughout history to commit such unspeakable atrocities and then carry on as if nothing bad had happened. I do think, however, that Kubrick carefully placed some natural reminders – highly realistic and representative in the 1980 America in which the film is set – of such actual historical and unspeakable events in the not-too-distant past. Nor do I think there are any "hidden" or "secret" meanings in *The Shining*. They're all in plain sight just where he put them, he just didn't expect viewers to become conscious of them on the first viewing.

Like all great artists, Kubrick's purpose was "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature"—as Shakespeare has Hamlet tell his players. In all Kubrick's great movies he is holding the mirror up to our universal human nature. In *The Shining*, he is reflecting back to us—since it is a horror film—some of the essence of what is most horrible in all human nature, including our universal ability to kill our own.

An interviewer once asked Kubrick what his film *The Shining* "is about" and he answered simply "It's about a man who tries to kill his family."

Which of course it certainly is, if nothing else.

But there is a great deal of evidence, even from people who worked closely with Kubrick and including his co-writer on the script, novelist Diane Johnson, that he also meant us to contemplate in afterthought and

upon repeated viewings, such very real and recent “ghosts” in 1980 for Americans – and for people around the world – as the genocide of the American Indians, the Holocaust, and humanity’s repeated tendency to produce some groups who commit horrors on others, while others carry on almost as if nothing untoward had happened. Those who do so include the rich and privileged - “all the best people”, as the manager of *The Shining*’s Overlook Hotel, Stuart Ullman, says using a phrase you find also in Kubrick’s great film, *Barry Lyndon*.

One journalist, interviewing Diane Johnson about working with Kubrick on the film script, asked her about all the Indian elements that are woven throughout the film. She answered with words to the effect that “He had all of that worked out before he started working with me on the script.” (Not the exact words but very close; I’ve got the article stashed in some file I can’t find at the moment.)

I have learned a great deal about *The Shining* since *Room 237* came out – including an increased sensitivity to the obvious but often overlooked fact that every person starts in understanding with their own tool kit... and mine happened to include a lot of questions nurtured while covering many wars as a journalist involving the brutal displacement by one people of another.

But I bet there’s not much that I covered that the wondrous autodidact Stanley Kubrick had not noticed or studied or even sent research teams out to detail for him.

I can’t help but think of him not only as one of the greatest filmmakers – and artists – of our times – but also one of the greatest journalist -historians.

It is of course foolish to think we can know which artists of our own times – if any - will be looked back upon in future centuries a having been among the tiny handful of the very “greatest.”

Let me just say that, ever since I saw *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968, I have had a strong intermittent suspicion– you might call it a sort of working hypothesis – that Stanley Kubrick might just prove to be such.

And in any case, as a working hypothesis, it has so far proved delightfully ... fruitful.

For more of Bill Blakemore’s thoughts on *The Shining*, visit: [www.williamblakemore.com](http://www.williamblakemore.com)  
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