SHUGENDŌ AND THE SHINING: LIMINAL SPACE IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE WORK OF STANLEY KUBRICK

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The screen is a magic medium. It has such power that it can retain interest as it conveys emotions and moods that no other art form can hope to tackle.

Stanley Kubrick

Stanley Kubrick inspires a deep-seated feeling of being in front of a puzzle that needs to be assembled using the innumerable clues and visual hints that he, as a director famous for being a perfectionist with an obsession for details, disseminates in every scene and image. In puzzling viewers, and pushing them toward deep, inner reflection, it is no exaggeration to say that much of Kubrick’s production can rightly be described as spiritual. This paper will develop on three fronts, the first two providing the framework for the third. We will begin by arguing that the spiritual evolution of characters in Kubrick’s films is conveyed through the use of liminal spaces—“interstructural phase[s] in social dynamics,” areas of transformation, or transition, which lie between social realities while at once outside of them. Following William Parrill, we consider 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) as the milestone of Kubrick’s career as a director from a spiritual point of view. For one, it is the first film in which spirituality, however nondescript, is purposefully underlined, as Kubrick himself declared that “if the film stirs the emotions and penetrates the subconscious of the viewer, if it stimulates, however inchoately, his mythological and religious yearnings and impulses, then it has succeeded.” James Ford further includes 2001 among those films which might provide “the ideological content for a sacred form of behavior.” Secondly, Parrill points out that Kubrick’s films before 2001: A Space Odyssey “circle gingerly and ironically” around ideas such as rebirth while those following it focus squarely on the spiritual evolution of humankind. In these latter, the “main thrust is toward transcendence, that is, toward the desire to move away from the three dimensions in which we are trapped across space and time.

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3 For discussion of the multiple areas in which the concept of the liminal has been employed, see Bjørn Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” International Political Anthropology 2.1 (2009): 5-27.
toward a higher form of existence.\textsuperscript{8} The use of liminal space is evident in a number of Kubrick’s other films as well, with special emphasis on how significant change in the characters always happens in such spaces. The second part of the paper will discuss the importance of liminal space in the Japanese practice of Shugendō, a religious tradition that takes the journey through the liminal world of the mountain as the pivotal aspect on the path toward an enlightened rebirth. Finally, the ultimate goal of this paper will be to demonstrate how liminality as a conduit through which one can achieve spiritual transformation can be seen in Kubrick’s work as exemplified by The Shining, the movie in which liminal space presents the strongest connection with the other-than-human.

Liminal Spaces and the Numinous in Kubrick

Stanley Kubrick never fails to spark debate about the spiritual messages hidden in his films;\textsuperscript{9} this despite, or perhaps because of, his declared detachment from any religious affiliation.\textsuperscript{10} Not wanting to represent the values of any particular religion, many of his films nonetheless aim to stimulate in the audience deep reflection on the human condition,\textsuperscript{11} both as psychologically complicated beings and as infinitely small particles in the wide universe of human—and other-than-human—experiences. Kubrick encourages spiritual reflection through his evocation of Rudolf Otto’s \textit{numinous}—a “blank wonder, an astonishment that strikes us dumb”\textsuperscript{12}—through his use of unsettling episodes, scenes, dialogues, or characters themselves. Indeed, Kubrick often seems to want his viewers to experience some aspect of what Otto called the Wholly Other.

The concept that plays a key role in achieving such an effect in Kubrick’s films is that of liminality, what Victor Turner describes as “the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions.”\textsuperscript{13} Kubrick’s characters are invariably portrayed as going through a complex process of evolution and personal growth, and the most significant changes in their lives and attitudes tend to happen in a liminal space. In addition, the feeling of being in a liminal, unstable, in-between space is often conveyed to the audience by Kubrick’s use of photography and imagery as well as by the liminality of the characters themselves.

\textbf{Liminality as Transformation and Change}

The connection between liminality and transformation is presented explicitly in movies such as 2001: A Space Odyssey and A Clockwork Orange. In both cases, the male protagonist experiences a dramatic evolution presented as a transition between two states, from a familiar dimension into something “other.”

In 2001: A Space Odyssey, what one critic referred to as a “poem on the evolution of mankind,”\textsuperscript{14} a physical object—the mysterious monolith—serves to mediate the liminal, appearing as a constant in each of the four temporally distinct parts of the film. Clarke’s

\textit{8} Ibid., 189.


\textit{11} Kubrick in Gelmis, \textit{The Film Director as Superstar}, 300 and elsewhere.


novelization of the film\textsuperscript{15} describes the monolith as a “testing and teaching device used by higher intelligences,”\textsuperscript{16} but Kubrick felt that for his vision, the monolith ought not to be seen so explicitly, leading to what he hoped would be a “more powerful and magical effect.”\textsuperscript{17} The monolith is an object from a world that is “other,” but that for inexplicable reasons has established contact with the human world. Its mediating power pushes men beyond the normal realm of perception, so that contact with the monolith coincides with evolutionary leaps for humanity.

While no object comparable to the monolith exists in \textit{A Clockwork Orange}, Kubrick makes the transformational nature of Alex explicit by portraying him as a character in constant struggle between two opposites. His two irreconcilable loves are ultra-violence and classical music, and he is depicted as a character living in an evident black/white contrast: in the first scene of the film, Alex is dressed in white with a black hat and black boots, he is sitting in a white bar with black walls with white writing on them, and is drinking milk (that apart from being white, is also symbolic of infancy and innocence) effectively darkened by drugs. As in \textit{2001: A Space Odyssey}, the most significant transformation happens when the character interacts with the liminal: Alex’ becomes “other” when he is confined in a space that exists outside the normal rules of society, the experimental laboratory where he is subjected to the Ludovico Treatment.

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16 Gelmis, \textit{The Film Director as Superstar}, 308.
17 Kubrick in Gelmis, \textit{The Film Director as Superstar}, 308.

\textit{Traversing the Liminal in Going Beyond the Human}

Kubrick also seems to move beyond a mere underlining of the transformative powers of the liminal. Traversing the liminal is often paired juxtaposing child and adult and with human and non-human. Further, contact with liminal spaces or objects is, for Kubrick, not simply connected with transformation, but it is sometimes also paired to the abandon of everything human.

In \textit{2001}, for instance, humans become like machines and machines like humans. The effect is such that the only death that successfully shakes the audience is that of HAL: his slow disconnection, accompanied by his increasingly weakened pleas for mercy, terminates with the computer’s return to a stage of innocence as he slowly sings “Daisy Bell,” leaving the audience to deal with the disturbing feeling of being passive witnesses to the heartless murder of a child. This emotionally jarring sequence is in striking contrast with the computer’s slaughter of the hibernated crew, coolly presented without marker but for a simple flashing alarm signal on a screen.\textsuperscript{18} In the final, enigmatic sequence of \textit{2001}, in which a giant fetus floats through space approaching Earth, David Bowman, in the words of Kubrick himself, “is reborn, an enhanced being, a star child, an angel, a superman, if you like, and returns to Earth prepared for the next leap forward of man’s evolutionary destiny.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{19} Kubrick in Gelmis, \textit{The Film Director as Superstar}, 304.
Alex, in *A Clockwork Orange*, is likewise transformed as he forcibly undergoes the Ludovico Treatment, which deprives him of his free will, a characteristic often seen as central to differentiating humans from animals. In yet another example, the ironic and all-too-human character of Joker, in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), becomes “a killing machine” in the liminal environment of the war zone (where conventional rules of society cease to apply). Though transformed by the army, Joker maintains a semblance of his humanity in wearing a peace-sign pin on his helmet, next to the scrawled words “Born To Kill.” Like the other examples above, Kubrick destabilizes the viewer by suggesting both evolution and regression through the liminal; in *Full Metal Jacket*, the soldiers close the film singing “The Mickey Mouse March,” thereby underlining their liminal state in-between the horror of death and the innocence of childhood.

All the above examples indicate how Kubrick’s use of liminality makes it possible for him to achieve his stated goal of “stimulating thoughts about man’s destiny and role in the universe in the minds of people who in the normal course of their lives would never have considered such matters.” Kubrick shows his viewers that the life and experience they take for granted might be no more than a shadow play on the wall of Plato’s cave, and encourages a path towards transformation that does not necessarily reflect traditional Western models of evolution but, rather, circles back to a child-like innocence.

Much of Kubrick’s work embraces the divine through transition, and finds in the boundaries that separate the human realm from sacred space the potential for significant spiritual change. Though Kubrick’s spirituality is professedly non-denominational, we find Japanese Shugendō, which has made liminality the very pivot around which not only religious experience but also everyday life is organized, to be an especially suitable lens through which to understand his work.

**Liminal Space in Shugendō**

Examining the sacred space within a society involves more than the simple definition of the places in which a relationship with the divine is established. We agree with Massimo Raveri in accepting that sacred space “is not a cultural configuration detached from context [...] sacred and profane space are part of the same cultural logic,” and therefore an analysis of the spatial component of spirituality necessarily has to take into consideration the whole social and cultural background that shapes, and at the same time is shaped by, the ways in which spirituality is experienced.

We are presently interested in the particular approach to the divine world that has evolved from the interaction of Shinto (or pre-Shinto kami worship) and Esoteric Buddhism since the beginning of the ninth century, when the latter was introduced into Japan. The syncretic spiritual tradition that evolved from such an interaction “dominated popular religion during the medieval period [...] and laid the foundation for the acceptance of the later, official syncretism,” in what would then become, in Allan Grapard’s terms, “the substance of Japanese religiosity.” This particular spirituality is still recognizable in the present

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20 Gelmis, *The Film Director as Superstar*, 302-303.

21 Massimo Raveri, *Itinerari nel sacro. L'esperienza religiosa giapponese* (Venezia: Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, 2006), 11. All quotations from this source have been translated from the Italian by Caterina Fugazzola.


time even though the Shinto/Buddhist syncretism officially came to an end in 1868, when “the Meiji government demanded a classification of what was Shinto and what was Buddhist.”

One of the most important effects of the interaction between Shinto and Esoteric Buddhism is to be found in the transformation of the concept of “sacred space.” Specifically, the Shinto definition of “sacred site” as “a residence place for a divinity” is also seen as “a site where Buddhahood could be realized.”

The relevance of such an evolution lies in the fact that introducing the idea that Buddhahood can be achieved not only in this life, but also in this world, implies a connection between the human and the divine realm in which spatial limits are blurred suggesting that humans may themselves move between the two realms. One may move in, and be part of, the liminal space of the Other world of spirits, gods, and ghosts. It is important to note that the same liminal space, in Kubrick’s case, is the gate to personal evolution, transformation and, in some sense, rebirth.

Relating to the interaction of Shinto and Buddhism, and their notions of sacred space, is the Japanese ascetic practice of Shugendō. This form of mountain asceticism has made liminality and liminal space its driving forces, founding its beliefs on the spatial opposition of the two concepts of sato (the village) and yama (the mountain). Sato and yama are in turn concretizations of the broader notions of omote (the face/the outside) and ura (the inside), this last tightly connected to the concept of oku (innermost). Being difficult to neatly translate into English, we must now define these and other important concepts.

**Omote, Oku and Ma**

As observed at the beginning of this section, an analysis of the organization of sacred space goes hand in hand with an analysis of the cultural and social context that revolves around that space. Massimo Raveri takes as a starting point the dichotomy of cultivated space as opposed to the wild, uncultivated areas that lie outside of the cultural/social limits. It is on such a dichotomy that the notions of omote and ura come into being: “omote is the social face, the codified behavior [...] the part that can be manifested. In an object, it is the surface; in a place, it is the part that faces the sun; in a house, it is the side that faces outward [...]”

Omote, then, is all that is known, evident, and safely organized; it is the cultivated space that man can control. Taken as a single entity, then, the village, with its social rules and codified behaviour, is omote. The area outside the village, the “wilderness,” the mountain, is instead connected with the concept of ura, “the hidden part of things and men, the inside, what lies behind, in the shadow.” Ura is itself directly connected to the oku, which indicates “the heart of something, the dark recess, the most intimate thoughts, the ultimate limit [...] the spiritual power becomes manifest in the oku.” There is, as it were, an outer world of form, and inner one of essence—but then there is an even deeper level of meaning beyond this as well.

In between the two spatial concepts of outer and inner lies a void, called ma, “an emptiness that separates and at the same time unifies [...] a reading between the lines.” There is a barrier demarcating the distinction between the two, but the demarcation is fluid and itself

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26 Grapard, “Flying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness,” 196.
29 Ibid., 30.
marks an important point of passage from one to the other.

It is easy to see the connection between the concept of ma and the liminal space that separates the human world from the spiritual, sacred realm, as a space of progression where humans can achieve enlightenment. This becomes particularly important when the sacrality of mountains is taken into consideration: the “otherness” of yama as an entity separated and in some way opposed to the sato, the village, is not merely geographical. Irit Averbach describes how mountains are, in Japan, “sacred ground, the other world, the abode of kami,” just as, according to Mircea Eliade, “the cosmic mountain” is a common symbol for the axis mundi in cultures worldwide. Allan Grapard goes even further in his analysis of mountains in Japan as “areas of nonactivity […]” where “[c]orpses were abandoned or buried […] hence the mountain was seen as a space whose nature was Other.”

The peak of the mountain is the ultimate limit, the place where spirits dwell, the sacred world of other-than-human creatures, and the connection between humanity and the divine. As one moves from the outer, profane reality of the village into the wilds of the mountain one is moving within one’s self but also drawing closer to the sacred reality. The liminal space, ma, that separates the village from the top of the mountain lies in the spatial middle ground, literally called satoyama, and is the realm of beings in transformation: it is upon this concept that the ascetic practice of Shugendō is built.

Shugendō

The understudied (at least in the West) religious tradition of Shugendō—the way of gaining magical powers by ascetic practice—took shape as an organized religion in concomitance with the interaction between Shinto and Esoteric Buddhism around the ninth and tenth centuries. According to many scholars, it can be considered a “blend of at least three different religious streams:” the shamanistic practices and deities of Shinto or pre-Shinto indigenous tradition; the cosmological influences of Esoteric Buddhism; and Taoist influences (in its use of magic, a binary philosophy, and in the shared vision of the mountain as a space of enlightenment and immortality).

Shugendō takes as a starting point the idea of the mountain as a liminal space between this world and the otherworld. As Miyake Hitoshi notes, “[t]he religious worldview that underlies Shugendō rituals assumes there are at least two realms of existence, that of the daily lives of human beings, and a separate, supernatural spiritual realm behind (and controlling) that of the daily lives of human beings. The mountains are seen as a sacred space that either is part of both of these worlds or is a part of the spiritual world.”

By setting upon their journey to the top of the mountain, Shugendō practitioners aim to gain supernatural powers and to be reborn as Buddha in their human bodies; their goal, quite simply, is “to transform a profane man into a

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37 Hitoshi, Shugendō, 75-76.
sacred man by mystic training.” To do so, they become liminal beings—they abandon society and thus begin a progressive abandonment of their human side—in order to reach the spiritual world located at the mountain’s peak, the oku. Carmen Blacker notes that though the practice is “predominantly Buddhist in intentions, […]it produced power rather than holiness.” Practitioners aim to gain the power to control the spirits, to prevail over kami and demons, through their ascetic journey.

The period of mountain austerities traditionally lasts from fall until the beginning of spring and therefore includes the most difficult and challenging time of the year, the cold winter which the practitioner spent in the caves. When the yamabushi (the term referring to the mountain ascetics, meaning “to lie down in the mountains […] to make one’s home in the mountains according to the ideal of wandering asceticism […] to gain religious power”), begin their ascent, they have to be prepared for a long winter of solitude, austerities, and deprivation; they “enter a mental labyrinth, in a journey of internal suffering and knowledge, of obliteration of oneself on a path to uncover the absolute.” After reaching the top of the mountain “a fusion [occurs] between man and the sacred environment, with the practitioner becoming an ‘eternal human being’ dwelling in the divine.” Effectively, through ritual meditation, the initiate actually becomes the axis mundi, an embodiment usually associated with shamanic power over the cosmos.

Kubrick’s characters evolve, are actually “reborn,” in unstable areas of transformation in those same liminal spaces that are the foundational to much of Japanese religion. Of all Kubrick’s films, one in particular stands out, though, for its shared symbolism with the Japanese mountain austerities described above. In order to explore these connections further, the following section will provide an analysis of Kubrick’s *The Shining* through the lens of Shugendō.

**Aspects of Shugendō Asceticism in *The Shining***

*The Shining*, based on a novel by Stephen King, at the most immediate level, is a perfectly fitting choice for a comparison with Shugendō due to the shared fact that the liminal space in which the “Other” manifests is the mountain and the protagonist’s journey to its summit. A more thorough analysis, though, reveals that a far greater number of shared elements can be recognized throughout the film. In the next section, we will outline some of the specific symbolic connections.

**The Mountain and The Hotel**

The mountain is the most obvious element of connection between *The Shining* and Shugendō: the Overlook Hotel is the liminal space in which Jack (the protagonist, played by Jack Nicholson and filling the role of yamabushi in our analysis), moves on his path toward the acquisition of shaman-like abilities and an enlightened rebirth in the divine realm. The Hotel itself, even more than the actual Colorado Rockies where it is located, can be considered yama. it is an Other World that, just as Blacker describes the mountain top in Shugendō

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38 Ibid., 78; See also Averbuch, *The Gods Come Dancing*, 19.
40 Hitoshi, *Shugendō*, 81-85.
42 Raveri, *Itinerari nel sacro*, 81.
43 Grapard, “Flying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness,” 207.
44 Hitoshi, *Shugendō*, 96.
practice, “may either be inhabited by the dead, or by gods or fairies, but always it is ‘other,’ removed from the ordinary human world, mysterious and strange.”

Just like Shugendō practitioners at the year’s end, or winter peak (misoka), the Torrance family retires to the Hotel to face isolation from the rest of the world for the long winter months. Aside from his family, Jack will be left alone in a place where, we soon discover during the initial interview, a horrible murder has taken place; this fact establishes a relationship with the realm of the dead that mirrors the connection reserved to yama in Shugendō beliefs. In fact, once Jack enters the Hotel, he does not leave it throughout the film until his death at the very end.

The fact that the Hotel is no ordinary place is remarked upon through the words of the hotel’s in-season cook, Halloran, who, during a conversation with Jack’s son Danny, explains that “some places are like people, some shine and some don’t. I guess you could say the Overlook Hotel here has something about it that’s like shining.” This “shining” takes the form of various visions allowed to characters throughout the film. Halloran himself appears to have this psychic ability, but he has been spared the trials, and connected visions, of a long, hard winter at the Overlook. Other than Halloran, Danny is, at first, the main recipient of these visions, followed closely by his father, Jack. Wendy is the one character who remains oblivious to the visions until they are violently forced upon her towards the film’s conclusion.

On a more subtle level, Kubrick also underlines the “otherness” of the Overlook by showing it as a place where, again following Blacker’s description of the otherness of mountain spaces in Shugendō, “time […] is not human time. It moves either much more quickly or much more slowly.” For instance, after the first superimposed timeline message—“a month later”—moves the scene to the next month in a matter of seconds of screen-time, later onscreen texts slow down and dilate time, as they move from indicating days of the week to hours of the day. Time is manipulated for the viewer in much the same way.

Mirrors and Reflections
Mirror-image doubling effects are often employed by Kubrick in order to induce an uncanny, disorienting impression of being in a liminal space and to reinforce underlying themes through repetition. In The Shining, doubling appears as a strong point of connection with Shugendō, especially in those practices most influenced by Taoist beliefs. The Yin-Yang juxtaposition is reflected in traditional yamabushi attire, “every item of which is laden with double meaning.” For example, among the clothing worn by the yamabushi are an upper garment and trousers which symbolize the diamond and womb mandalas respectively. The symbolic combination of these images illustrate one’s fully realized Buddha-nature (diamond) and the fact of its being ever-present within one from birth (womb). In addition, a portable box (oi) containing ritual equipment symbolizing the womb mandala, and a companion (or “mate”) box (katabako), which symbolizes the diamond mandala or father, are worn on the back. The juxtaposition of the diamond and womb, with male and female associations, indicate, as expressed by Hitoshi, “intercourse between father and mother.”

It is worth noting that Freud explained the effect of the double in his famous essay on “The
Uncanny.” For Freud, the uneasy sense of the uncanny reflects an experience which causes the adult to return to a narcissistic and childish place in one’s psyche associated with the desire for personal immortality. Christopher Hoile argues that Freud’s delineation of the uncanny aligns closely with The Shining. Most interestingly for our present purposes, while doubling effects may be experienced as uncanny to the adult, Hoile argues, fairy tales are replete with the same kinds of phenomena to much different effect—“[t]hus, the doubling, uncanny to the adult who has surmounted the animistic stage is natural and therapeutic for the child.” Freud, of course, privileged a secular Judaeo-Christian perspective as that aligned with the sophisticated adult, depicting non-Western and pre-modern religious approaches as primitive, aligning instead with a naïve, child-like mind. Of course, Shugendō is an animistic religion, thereby aligned more closely with the enchantment felt by the child in the above instance. This is not to agree with Freud’s evolutionary view of religion, which would insist that the animistic represents a more primitive and less sophisticated form of spiritual expression. It is our perspective, in fact, that what Western thinkers have often seen as the child-like awe of the innocent is actually a relationship between sacred and profane that allows for a much more personal experience of the numinous.

While the vast majority of viewers and critics have taken The Shining as horror, and often as among the greatest horror films ever made, these all approach the film from the view of the adult who has supposedly “surmounted” the animistic stage. From a different angle, Larry Caldwell and Samuel Umland, in noting the emphasis on play in the film, open the door for the film to be seen as much closer to satire and dark comedy (along the lines of both Dr. Strangelove and A Clockwork Orange), an idea which will be explored more fully below. In this light, the uncanny doubling effects observed can be seen along the lines of the Zen koan—as riddles encouraging reflection and direct experience of the sacred rather than as horror causing fear.

The Shining is replete with doubling effects, often suggested through Kubrick’s particular use of mirrors in the film. The most significant “doubles” in the film are without doubt the ones that involve the main characters themselves. Tony, “the little boy that lives in Danny’s mouth,” is the “shining” double of Danny. The first time Tony tells Danny about the Overlook Hotel, we see Danny talking to Tony through a mirror, and toward the end of the movie Danny, now completely possessed by his double (“Danny’s not here, Mrs. Torrance […] Danny’s gone away, Mrs. Torrance”) talks to Wendy through mirror writing—Danny/Tony’s creepy cries of “RedRum” being the mirror image of Murder. Danny’s physical body contrasts with the immaterial Tony that inhabits him, suggesting the contrast of profane and sacred.

The other character to embody the most striking doubling characteristics is, of course, Jack, who finds not one but two mirror images in two other father figures. The first, and most obvious, mirror-image for Jack is the previous caretaker, Mr. Grady, whose tale of familial murder underlies Jack’s own fate from the outset. Jack is also doubled by Halloran, the cook who establishes a close personal relationship with Danny through his “shining,” thereby taking on a parental role for the boy. The father-son relationship between Jack and Danny, in fact, is underlined in the film as cold and distanced: Jack does not respond to his

55 Ibid., 6-7.
56 Ibid., 6.
child’s needs (“Dad, I’m hungry” “Well, you should have eaten your breakfast”) and Danny is scared and doubtful of his father (“You wouldn’t ever hurt mummy and me, would you?”). Halloran has instead a pure, psychic connection with Danny, representing the paternal side that the boy needs, and Halloran travels to Colorado from Florida through terrible weather and deep snow once Danny “calls” to him for help.

The Hedge Maze
The maze located in front of the Overlook is one of the most important places in the film: it is in the maze that the final scene takes place, and it is in its centre that Jack’s journey comes to an end. The symbolic importance of the maze, sometimes called the “Mandala of the West,” is made clear by Kubrick throughout the film. First of all, the maze itself takes on different forms, especially evident in the scene when Jack gazes down on a model of the hedge maze as Wendy and Danny run through the actual maze outside. In addition, the Overlook itself is intentionally presented as an intricate sequence of corridors, corners, and rooms. This is most apparent when the camera follows Danny on his tricycle as he meanders throughout the hotel, often over carpeted halls decorated in a maze-like honeycomb pattern. Danny is also shown playing with toy cars as he navigates them along the lines of the pattern as if traversing roads. The Hotel as maze is also made explicit through Wendy’s words during her initial tour of the kitchen: “This whole place is such an enormous maze, I feel I’ll have to leave a trail of breadcrumbs every time I come in.”

Penelope Reed Doob asserts that all labyrinths and mazes “are characteristically double. They are full of ambiguity, their circuitous design prescribes a constant doubling back.” Further, the maze inspires two distinctly different perspectives, both of which are emphasized in the film: “maze-treaders, whose vision ahead and behind is severely constricted and fragmented, suffer confusion, whereas maze-viewers who see the pattern whole, from above or in a diagram, are dazzled by its complex artistry.”59 Religiously, labyrinths and mazes have traditionally served the dual purpose of providing pilgrimage space while also acting as protection from demons and evil spirits. In Japanese temples, the garden lies at the centre between the sacred and the profane space, and its purposefully intricate pattern emphasizes the idea of progression through effort. Through the lens of Shugendō, the maze becomes in the eyes of the yamabushi a micro-universe, a representation of the mountain itself, a universal mandala.60 A progression toward the centre of the maze mirrors the ascent to the top of the mountain, a parallelism that will become of the utmost importance in the last part of the film, as we will explore momentarily.

Danny
First, however, it is impossible to proceed in an analysis of The Shining without acknowledging the importance of the character of Danny. Though it is well-known that Kubrick was inspired by his reading of Freud, Hoile reminds us that Kubrick had also studied Bruno Bettelheim’s book, The Uses of Enchantment61 as he created his version of The Shining.62 Hoile argues convincingly that the use of these two sources as inspiration must include not only the importance of the father figure (per Freud) but also the child (per Bettelheim). Freud argues that for fiction to induce the feeling of the uncanny, there must be an anchoring figure who


60 Hitoshi, Shugendō, 79.


acts as protagonist and through whose eyes the action is viewed—in *The Shining*, viewers alternate between Jack and Danny as anchors, further contributing to the doubling effect that might make viewers uneasy, but also reinforcing the need to recognize enchantment in contrast to the uncanny. While a number of characters (Jack, Halloran, and even Wendy in the very end) can be said to “shine,” Danny’s connection to the Overlook is significantly more pronounced. It is through Danny’s visions that the audience visually experiences the horrifying past of the Overlook Hotel. Danny, like Halloran, recognizes his “shining,” but unlike Halloran, Danny remains at the hotel through the harsh winter, encounters a number of horrifying visions, and survives at the end.

The privileged connection that Danny shares with the Overlook finds a logical explanation when the peculiarity of this character is analyzed through the lens of Japanese tradition. Regarded in Japanese folklore as beings in transition, as “incomplete persons,” Yoshiharu Iijima found that children are considered “closer to the gods and the Other World, [and] also play the role of intermediary between man and the gods.” The transitional phase is generally accepted to end at the age of seven years, but “up to that time children, being not completely of this world and close to the gods, were not bound by ordinary rules and could behave more or less as they liked.” The character played by Danny Lloyd, who was about 6 years old when *The Shining* was filmed, indeed experiences the Overlook outside of the realm of ordinary rules.

An important aspect of Danny’s interaction with the Overlook is the typically childlike behaviour of play. Caldwell and Umland point out:

The Overlook’s opportunities for play are enormous: it has a complete Games Room; its abstract geometric carpet patterns are well-suited as roadways and parking-spaces for the boy’s miniature cars and trucks; the hotel corridors are ideal for Danny’s endless tricycle riding. TV reception at the Hotel is never interrupted, even by the worst of storms, and outdoor play is also available: Danny explores the Hotel’s huge hedge maze, plays tag, and engages in snowball fights with his mother. As Iijima notes, “[f]rom the child’s point of view, games are not simply part of life; rather, all life is a game.” As activity existing between reality and fantasy, play is itself liminal; child’s play, and Danny’s in particular here, acts as a means by which one might move between this world and the Other. In the film, a pair of murdered twins appear to Danny more than once and ask him to play with them. Play, we must remember, is central to Japanese spiritual thought as witnessed in many of the paradoxes of Zen and the like. Further, as Lee Gilmore reminds us, play and ritual are closely bound together, especially in the context of pilgrimage, in what Victor Turner referred to as communitas. The playfulness of the hedge maze and Danny’s unique ability to navigate this and other mazes during his play indicate that he, in particular, is especially suited for the accomplishment of the spiritual tasks at hand. Danny’s playing as he mediates liminality in a number of ways must be central to our understanding of *The Shining*.

It must be noted that Danny is not the only character engaged in play in *The Shining*. Play is also central to Jack’s evolution in the Overlook. Jack’s work is book-ended with play as we find Jack early on tossing a ball against a wall in his over-sized study and taking breaks to

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64 Ibid., S42.
65 Caldwell and Umland, “‘Come and Play with Us,’” 106.
69 See Caldwell and Umland, “‘Come and Play with Us’,” for a full discussion.
fantasize over a model of the massive hedge maze that is outside. When Jack’s “madness” is revealed, it is through the discovery that all of his efforts at the typewriter have resulted in reams of the single sentence: “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” It is clear that Jack must also engage in play as he travels between this world and the Other.

Finally, an attitude of play appears throughout the film in the image of the Roadrunner: Danny is shown watching the cartoon twice in the film, and an episode airs in the background as Halloran rents the Snowcat on his way to “save” Danny. Obviously, the iconic battle between Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner can relate to Jack’s pursuit of his wife and son at the film’s end. Importantly, however, as a cartoon, the violence cannot be taken seriously, which further suggests Kubrick’s satiric tastes. Further, one must remember that the Roadrunner always escapes, while Coyote dies countless deaths in his eternal, and fruitless, pursuit to satisfy his own appetite—an analogue for a Buddhist view of samsara, trapping those who continually chase after ephemeral satisfactions in a perpetual cycle of death and rebirth.

Danny “has a very great talent” as Grady, the previous (and murderous) caretaker, puts it. Such a talent allows him to communicate with the spirit world and to function as an intermediary on two levels: on a “real world” level, he mediates for the viewers, who experience the Overlook and its wonders through his eyes; within the film, he is also shown as the primary cause for Jack’s interaction with the spirit world. It is only after Danny’s accident in room 237 that Jack sees Lloyd, the barman in the Golden Room. And it is because of Danny, once again, that Jack enters the same room. Danny tells Wendy of a “crazy woman” who tried to strangle him in the room, and when Jack goes there to check, he is seduced by a young woman who transforms into a rotting hag in his arms. Danny is thus portrayed as far more than a liminal being moving between realms, as he plays the role of gohō-dōji, or Divine Boy, a guide for the yamabushi, a “wayshower [sic] of holy men,” and “guardian spirit personally attached to priests and hermits who have acquired power and holiness through the practice of austerities.”\(^{71}\) Much like the monolith in 2001, Danny mediates the liminal space, allowing access to the Other world.

Because of his liminal characteristics, Danny is not only able to push his father toward establishing a connection between the human and the other-than-human, but he also succeeds in “awakening” his mother toward the end of the film. Acting as a medium for Tony, an entity which be read as a “goryō,” a kind of spirit whose taming is normally the purview of the yamabushi,\(^{72}\) he manages to shake Wendy from her stupor and makes her “see” the world hidden behind the Overlook Hotel.

Wendy

Jack’s wife is the only (living) female presence in the film, and her behaviour and relationship with space is of a completely different nature to that of the male components of the family. Wendy is the only character that does not respond to the “shining” of the Overlook, at least until the very end of the film. She is the only one whose interaction with the Hotel is primarily functional (she prepares the meals, uses the radio, checks the boilers, etc.), as opposed to Jack’s and Danny’s psychic and psychological ones. Wendy’s form of “play” is simply to adopt the role of housewife, thereby “playing house” for her male counterparts.\(^{73}\)


\(^{73}\) Caldwell and Umland, “‘Come and Play with Us’,” 107.
is only toward the end, in the fast-paced moments when Jack is chasing their son in the maze that she establishes a connection with the Other world, a world she fails to understand and accept and to which she responds with a hysterical crisis.

That Wendy’s play is, in fact, not play at all but rather perfectly pragmatic may be seen to limit her from liminal encounters. It is interesting to note that, in the tradition of Shugendō, women are usually forbidden to access the sacred mountains, as “it is often asserted that women who have come under the extraordinary and mysterious influence of the mountain develop quite unstable psychological and physical conditions.”

Robert Kilker argues that the feminine is seen to be repressed at every angle in The Shining: Jack is blatantly misogynistic, as are the spiritual entities with whom he speaks; explicit scenes of horror involve the only other female characters in the film (a lascivious nude who transforms into a rotting hag; the bloodied twin girls); even the womb-like hedge maze might represent “feminine nature disciplined by phallic trimmers.”

Women, in a misogynistic turn typical in many religions, are believed better suited to this world than the Other.

**Jack’s Journey through The Shining**

With an understanding of the symbolic roles of people and place as related to Shugendō, we can now move to a chronological analysis of the film that sees Jack not as a monster descending into madness, but rather as an ascetic on a journey through liminal space into contact with the sacred Other and the severing of all attachments to the profane.

**The Beginning**

The beginning of the movie gives a clear indication of the underlying ascetic motif with ominous music in the background as the long opening shot shows Jack’s car making its way up a tortuous road in the mountains, an infinitely small particle moving through the immensity of the surrounding nature. Kubrick’s disorienting intentions are made clear from the outset: the first shot opens with, in the words of one reviewer, “an island, apparently in the middle of a lake or a river, [that] seems to be moving towards us, floating on the surface [...] It is an optical effect. In fact the lake is so still that the camera moving towards the island makes it look as if the island itself is moving. This unsettling image sets the tone of the film.”

The reflected scenery in the perfectly still lake also sets the stage for the recurring double effects to come.

In accepting the job at the Overlook Hotel, Jack begins his ascension—he chooses to leave society behind, to live in complete isolation for the long winter months in a space outside the realm of order and control, where normal rules cease to exist. When Jack is told of one of the Overlook’s deepest and most horrifying secrets, the murderous fate of a previous caretaker and his family, he begins his initiation into the liminal world of the Hotel.

After the Torrance family has settled into the Hotel, a quick cut fast-forwards a whole month—everything seems to be going well in the Overlook as Wendy is preparing breakfast and Danny races around on his tricycle. Soon enough, though, Kubrick shows the audience that the situation is evolving into something well beyond the ordinary. In what may often be seen as the first sign of Jack’s madness, he is shown repeatedly throwing a tennis ball against the wall in the complete silence of the room where he is trying to write his book. Taken from the perspective of mountain asceticism, though, the meaning of this scene is far more important. At the beginning of the yamabushi training process described by Miyake Hitoshi, the

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74 Hitoshi, Shugendō, 155.
initiates are brought inside a temple deep within the mountain. Once inside “there is heard a loud pounding on the wooden doors (amado) around the temple. This frightening noise resounds three times. The purpose of this action—which is called shirabe—is to awaken the initiates from the slumber of illusion (and to awaken their Buddha nature).” The scene which immediately follows his ball-throwing is indeed the beginning of a process that will influence Jack’s behaviour and evolution in the movie—Jack’s meditation over the model of the hedge maze in which he sees the figures of Wendy and Danny playing marks his first awakening to the liminal realm of the Overlook.

The room in which he writes all day also assumes another layer of meanings when seen through the eyes of the Shugendō practitioner. Jack, mirroring the steps of the yamabushi during his winter retirement in the solitude of the mountain, closes himself in his symbolic cave—a room wherein no one else is allowed, intrusion inevitably breaking his concentration. Just as the yamabushi “spent almost all day in the caves […] pray[ing] to the deity-like rock formations in order to gain their power,” Jack lives as a recluse in the big room alone with his typewriter, where he incessantly types the same sentence over and over again (“All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”), a never-ending mantra emphasizing the value of “play” over “work.”

This same room/cave finds Jack meditating on the maze/mandala, concentrating on the centre, his final goal. Eyes fixed on the model, he distinguishes two figures moving in the middle: Wendy and Danny. In this scene, we empathize with Jack as the only character in the film who has an overhead view of the maze in its entirety. Danny and Wendy take the perspective of those lost within the confusing passages, but they do not both react the same way. Wendy, as we have already seen, complains of the labyrinthine quality of the hotel and in this scene she is being led by her son through the hedge maze. Danny, on the other hand, knows his way through the maze and later uses its confusing pattern to lure and trap Jack within it. Furthermore, Danny is also the only character who seems to move effortlessly throughout the hotel as he wheels over the labyrinth-patterned carpets along the long, winding corridors. As the Divine Boy, Danny acts as a guide not only for Wendy within the maze, though, but also foreshadows Jack’s ultimate destiny as he watches from above.

**Interaction with the Spiritual World**

At this point, time in the film begins to slow down as the following cut brings the viewers only days ahead. Danny, guiding his parents through the maze-mandala in the previous scene, is now riding his tricycle in the long and twisted corridors of the Overlook, guiding the audience through the Hotel maze. He comes to an abrupt stop in front of Room 237, the mysterious room that Halloran had previously warned him against, a gate to a world that is Other. The door is at first locked, but Danny’s interest in the door, which eventually draws Jack into that space, sets the scene for this second part of the film, characterized by Jack’s interaction with the spiritual world. The path of the yamabushi is a hard journey of sacrifice and deprivation, and Jack is about to face difficult challenges and frightening creatures: in front of him awaits an analogy for “progression through the ten realms of existence,” in which he will experience the pain and sufferings of the liminal creatures of the mountain.

In the tradition of Shugendō, once the yamabushi sets upon his journey, he wanders in the forest for days, isolated from society, without sleeping, eating, or washing. He has to experience the realm of the dead, concentrating on the horrors of those fearful worlds, experiencing their anguish. He has to see himself in the world of the Hungry Ghosts, of the spirits longing for a lost life—only after

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77 Hitoshi, *Shugendō*, 89.

78 Ibid., 85.

recognizing his weakness and confessing his sins is he allowed to proceed on his journey.\textsuperscript{80} Jack’s transformation mirrors this evolution: in a situation in which the Overlook’s isolation becomes virtually total, the snow has blocked the road and the phone lines are down, his concentration is intense, and no one is allowed to break it for any reason (when Wendy suggests she could enter to bring him food, he reacts violently). In his figurative wandering through the realms of Hell, Hungry Ghosts, and Beasts,\textsuperscript{81} Jack stops shaving, sleeping, and talking to his family. It is not until Danny opens the gate to the Other World that is Room 237, though, that his purification process can be completed. Jack’s first encounter with Lloyd is paired with his confession of sins—he admits the incident in which he dislocated Danny’s shoulder when the boy was little—after which he is granted access to Room 237. The room is without doubt a pivotal point to the development of the story: Jack encounters death and experiences the horrors of Hell linked to his own weakness and craving when the young girl he is kissing in the bathroom suddenly becomes a rotting corpse in his arms. It may be said that the horror of this scene resonates with a nearly universal fear of aging and death, and both Jack and the viewer is forced to bear witness to the process just as do those practicing the Buddhist meditation on a corpse.\textsuperscript{82} The shock he feels when he sees the hag’s reflection in the mirror represents, in Shugendō, “the complete purging of the neophyte from his ordinary mode of consciousness which must precede the realization of his Buddha nature [...] this process [...] can be facilitated by a sudden shock. The neophyte is deliberately put in positions of danger or terror.”\textsuperscript{83} Thereby forced to confront mortality and desire in one shocking moment, the initiate might be thrust into understanding.

After his experience in Room 237, Jack is now certain of his path. He understands the powers of the Hotel, and knows that in order to achieve his goal he has to obtain the ability to control the spirits and the ghosts that reside therein. It is in this situation that Wendy intervenes, as an opposing force that threatens to render the yamabushi’s effort vain: she does not understand the liminal world in which they are living, is scared of it, and wants to convince Jack to leave the Hotel, to abandon his quest, and, in a sense, to return to familial village. Jack is outraged, and leaves her, finding comfort in the Other World of the Golden Room where he seeks answers from a spirit-bartender. The ascetic is still not ready, though, and his questions are not going to be answered yet: “It’s not a matter that concerns you, Mr. Torrance—at least not at this point.” On his path to the conquest of shamanic powers, Jack is still unable to control the spirits—instead they are the ones who control him, telling him what he needs to do in order to succeed.

During the red bathroom scene, Grady points out the weakness that is still holding Jack back from an enlightened rebirth—his family. In order to complete his quest, Jack must get rid of all the remaining attachments that bind him to the human realm. He has to go through the realm of Titans and through that of men and wrestle his way out of them, as only a victorious fight will allow him to leave those two worlds behind and to enter the realm of Heaven. Of course, it is at this point that most viewers become convinced that the film is a horror, clinging to notions of family that must be overcome by the yamabushi.

\textbf{The Ending}

The ending scenes of the film represent the final success of the yamabushi in his quest. The first confrontation with Wendy seems to suggest Jack’s failure in his quest—she knocks him unconscious with a baseball bat—but this (only apparent) defeat assumes a new light when read through the eyes of Shugendō tradition. Jack

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\item[]\textsuperscript{80} For more details, see Raveri, \textit{Itinerari nel sacro}, 81.
\item[]\textsuperscript{81} Blacker, “Initiation in the Shugendō: the Passage through Ten States of Existence,” 100.
\item[]\textsuperscript{83} Blacker, “Initiation in the Shugendō: the Passage through Ten States of Existence,” 103.
\end{itemize}
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fails because he is still blinded by his desires and he does not realize he is just a puppet acting on behalf of the spirit, Grady. It is only through a realization of his own fallibility that he can be shaken out of his illusion of omnipotence.

After his “failure,” Jack is locked in the cellar. Halloran (summoned by Danny) is on his way to the Hotel to rescue Wendy and Danny with the Snowcat—everything seems to suggest an ending in which Jack is defeated, abandoned in the loneliness of the mountain, alone with his madness. It is at this point that the most important event, as far as the interconnection between the human and the spiritual world is concerned, takes place. Grady talks to Jack from the other side of the door, showing disappointment and even mocking Jack for his failure—and then Jack convinces the spirit to open the door. This event has been underlined as one of the most important ones by Kubrick himself, who explains: “It’s not until Grady […] slides open the bolt of the larder door, allowing Jack to escape, that you are left with no other explanation but the supernatural.”84 The yamabushi has accessed the Realm of Divinities, and has realized he has acquired powers that common men do not possess: he can now control the spirits, invoke them, and ask for their help. Of course, it is not a common spirit that Jack chooses to ask for help: Grady, as the previous caretaker, is Jack’s double, and Jack’s acquired power of controlling him is symbolic of “the identification of the shugenja [another name for the yamabushi] with the deity in order to realize a certain purpose […] the shugenja achieves identification with the deity and manipulates the power thus obtained in order to gain certain benefits.”85 Jack finally assumes control of his self in terms of its spiritual nature, a nature removed from the profane realities of village and family.

This is the most dangerous part of the yamabushi path: he could indulge in thinking that he has succeeded in his ultimate task, that these powers are the true goal of the religious experience. To think that he has become a god because of his newly acquired powers can be the ruin of the practitioner—he has to go further in his path, as, in the words of Eliade, “only a new renunciation and a victorious struggle against the temptation of magic bring the ascetic a new spiritual enrichment.”86 In the film, this is the moment in which Jack once again decides—this time by his own will—to break free of the last attachments that tie him to his human life. He collects an axe, one of the “magically potent tools, used to purify people or spaces and provide magical protection” in Japanese tradition,87 and sets off to complete his quest.

Danny once again functions as a spiritual guide for the yamabushi as he invokes the divine element that Jack will (successfully) combat, the “outsider” that is attracted back to the hotel by Danny’s shining. Halloran’s death marks the final victory for the ascetic since by killing him, Jack successfully “kills” his attachments to everything that is still human in him. As noted previously, Halloran doubles Jack in his parental relationship with Danny: by killing him, Jack kills the human/father part of his own self—that parental attachment that would convince a man to brave the elements and travel across the continent to save his son.

This final act completes the cycle of “the three elements of identification, manipulation and exorcism [that] are the three central motifs of the Shugendō ritual system.”88 Jack has ultimately overcome the spirits controlling him in the form of Grady, and defeated his earthly role in the form of Halloran, and can therefore proceed towards the final steps of his journey. Following Danny’s footprint in the snow, Jack

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85 Hitoshi, Shugendō, 68.
88 Hitoshi, Shugendō, 74.
enters the maze, the mandala, and in his tortuous route toward the centre he re-experiences the ascetic journey to the top of the mountain. He runs in the cold, screaming the name of the liminal being, the Divine Boy, Danny. As Jack loses every trace of humanity (his screams gradually becoming animal grunts) he re-lives the austerities of the mountain, the despair of being alone, lost and abandoned, and finally reaches the centre of the labyrinth, the essence of the mandala, the ultimate goal, where his human existence ends.

The last, unsettling scene closes the cycle. The successful yamabushi has reached the top of the mountain, has completed his path and obtained an enlightened rebirth—he is now part of the Overlook, of the yama; he is a god, a kami among other kami, an immortal being that dwells in the divine realm. He is not an individual person with a family and a home, or even an individual identity. Jack has returned to the place where he “had always been”—he has opened his eyes to the truth beyond the world of sensations, realizing that, just as the yamabushi, “[he] had always been there before entering the sacred space, that the transmutation is not really a change but merely a becoming what one already was.”89 Waving goodbye from an old photograph, Jack leaves the audience with a completely new, shiny look, eternally smiling in the Golden Room of the Overlook Hotel just as Stanley Kubrick gives the viewer a wink with a film that must be viewed with the “primitive” animistic eye of an enchanted child rather than the jaded rationalist view of uncanny horror.

**Conclusion**

From the above analysis, we can see that Kubrick uses liminality to encourage viewers to think about their place in the world and to experience the numinous. Transformation, enlightenment, are possible, but Kubrick reminds us that the path is not easy. In fact, change is quite unsettling. The Shining is most often received as a horror picture, but when brought into focus in the light of Shugendō, the film can not only be seen for its dark comedy, but more importantly reveals Kubrick’s desire to challenge the viewer towards overcoming the boundaries of social normativity that contains us. In terms outlined above, Kubrick challenges his audience to leave the safe confines of the village and to make the lonely trek up to the mountain’s peak within each of our hearts. In a Buddhist sense, this involves the overcoming of all attachments, to home, to family, and even to self. Jack accomplishes all of this in severing his ties first from the outside world, and then those to his family and to himself until nothing is left but a reminder of what was and is in the strange liminal space and time of the Overlook. Modern audiences react in horror when they see what they cherish and hold dear is threatened, but this is precisely the purpose of the ascetic practice of Shugendō, and, apparently, that of Kubrick himself.

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89 Grapard, “Flying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness,” 208.

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