

Ratched on Netflix: Rehabilitating a petty tyrant

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Created by Evan Romansky and developed by Ryan Murphy

There was a time when filmmakers, despite working within the confines of the Hollywood studio system, were still able to produce popular works with a certain democratic and anti-authoritarian content.

Whatever their limitations, films of the so-called American New Wave (or New Hollywood) such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969), *Klute* (1971), *Serpico* (1973), *The Longest Yard* (1974), *Thieves Like Us* (1974), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and numerous others, were marked by a genuine sympathy for those on the margins of society—outlaws, prisoners, the beaten-down and oppressed—and a healthy hostility toward those in positions of power. They drew much of their artistic energy from the mass civil rights and anti-war movements and general radicalism of the period.

Miloš Forman's 1975 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (based on Ken Kesey's 1962 novel of the same name) tells the story of a group patients in an Oregon psychiatric institution whose lives are upended by the arrival of the lively and rebellious R. P. McMurphy (memorably played by Jack Nicholson). McMurphy's unruly behavior puts him on a collision course with the veteran head nurse Mildred Ratched (Louise Fletcher), a cold and calculating authoritarian who runs the ward like a prison. No doubt audiences responded to Fletcher's quietly domineering portrayal of Ratched because she brought to mind countless other petty tyrants that rule over schools, prisons, and, of course, workplaces.

Over the years, "Nurse Ratched" became something of a byword for repression and official abuse.

In more recent decades, however, a wave of reaction brought with it cultural and artistic regression. The

rebellious spirit, however limited, of previous generations of filmmakers was replaced by conformism and careerism. Whereas a petty despot may once have drawn scorn from these layers of artists, now such an individual's "success" might be looked upon as something to aspire to; it might even be seen as a sign of social progress if the man or woman in question were from one or another "underrepresented" racial or sexual minority.

Remarkably, *Ratched*, the new Netflix series, aims to rehabilitate the character of Nurse Ratched, reimagining her as something of a feminist heroine. In the current anti-artistic, anti-realistic and, frankly, stupid climate, women are not allowed to be oppressors, only the oppressed! The series twists itself into knots to justify the character's behavior, and the story is a mess of absurd plotting, unconvincing and contrived relationships, and grisly violence.

Ratched opens in 1947 with a gruesome event in which four priests are murdered by the disturbed and violent Edmund Tolleson (Finn Wittrock), who claims to be exacting revenge on the priest who fathered and subsequently abandoned him.

Tolleson is sent to Lucia State Hospital in Northern California for psychiatric evaluation. The director of the hospital, Dr. Richard Hanover (Jon Jon Briones), hopes to uncover the source of Tolleson's mental illness and treat him. However, California Governor George Willburn (Vincent D'Onofrio), facing a difficult reelection campaign and eager not to seem "soft on crime," pressures Hanover to declare Tolleson fit to stand trial so he can be executed.

Nurse Mildred Ratched (Sarah Paulson) arrives at the hospital and manipulates her way onto the staff. She quickly sets into motion a plot to enter Hanover's inner circle, in the process poisoning one patient and

engineering the suicide of another. Her swift rise through the ranks arouses the suspicion of head nurse Betsy Bucket (Judy Davis), who correctly suspects *Ratched* of having ulterior motives.

We learn that both *Ratched* and Tolleson were orphans who grew up in foster care together as brother and sister. They faced constant abuse that eventually culminated in an act of violent revenge by Tolleson. Wracked by guilt over having “abandoned” her brother when they were children, *Ratched* is determined to rescue Tolleson from further suffering.

Gwendolyn Briggs (Cynthia Nixon), Willburn’s press secretary, hopes to make Dr. Hanover’s “progressive” psychiatric therapies the centerpiece of Willburn’s reelection campaign. Briggs, a lesbian forced to lead her private life in secret, becomes infatuated with *Ratched* and invites her to a women’s bar. *Ratched* is mortified at the suggestion, but comes to realize that she may indeed be reciprocating Briggs’ romantic feelings.

Various plot threads are introduced: a wealthy heiress seeking revenge against Hanover; a young nurse who develops an attraction to Tolleson. *Ratched*, a master manipulator, plays the various figures off each other, twisting every situation to her advantage. As the clock ticks down on Tolleson’s fate, she becomes more and more desperate; the corpses, in turn, pile higher.

This is a poorly conceived and executed series, made without any effort toward narrative or psychological consistency. Under the direction of developer Ryan Murphy (best known for mediocre horror shows like *American Horror Story*), the show is a shrill and gruesome carnival ride of murder and mutilation, punctuated by moments of cheap sentimentality.

The behaviors of the cartoonish characters shift more to fit the convoluted plot than out of any agreement with psychological necessity. The production design, with its garish, technicolor costumes and sets with every surface polished to a mirror finish, seems more designed to impress than to realize a living environment. The blaring, intrusive score adds to the feeling that one is watching a lurid and expensive soap opera.

It is unclear what, exactly, the show creators were trying to achieve by turning to the character of Nurse *Ratched*. The absurd and melodramatic events here seem to have little to do with the social realism of

Forman’s film. Even the Kesey novel, with all its stylistic excesses, was grounded in a recognizable reality that is miles away from anything on display in this series.

The show’s creators have a particular interest in depicting the pseudo-scientific and often barbaric psychotherapy practices that were shamefully used to treat such “illnesses” as lesbianism. A certain parallel is drawn with the barbarism of state executions. However, in fixating on the brutality of such practices, the artists have dulled their impact. The realistic and understated portrayal of electroshock therapy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* was more disturbing than the gruesome and extended scenes of torture that the artists linger on here, which only serve to crowd out any room for understanding the social roots of such practices.

As for Nurse *Ratched*, despite her murderous and criminal activities, she is presented as an essentially sympathetic character, who only kills those who “deserve” it or for whom death would be a mercy. An effort is made to “humanize” her through her relationship with Briggs-Nixon, but the scenes between them feel forced and unconvincing.

The ending of the season, which finds several key characters relaxing on a beach in Mexico, living in a feminist utopia where they are finally “rid of men,” is a typical petty-bourgeois fantasy.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest was far from a perfect work. Neither the book nor the film probed the source of oppressive social structures very deeply, and both leaned too heavily on eclectic, amorphous individualism as the antidote to repression. But *Ratched*’s conformist feminism is an artistic step backward. One senses a desire from well-heeled middle-class television artists to present a more “balanced” portrayal of the authority figures—or at least the female ones—who ultimately help prop up the system that defends their privileges.

Little of much value can come from such an approach.



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