

## Stanley Kubrick: A Retrospective. Introduction

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Published: 4th December 2017

This special issue of *Cinergie* on the American director Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999) was inspired by a three-day conference, *Stanley Kubrick: A Retrospective*, held at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK in May 2016. The conference, convened by I.Q. Hunter and James Fenwick, brought together some of the leading Kubrick scholars to reflect on the methodological approaches taken towards Kubrick since the opening in 2007 of the Stanley Kubrick Archive at the University of Arts London.

The keynote speakers at the conference, Jan Harlan (Kubrick's executive producer and brother-in-law), Robert Kolker, Nathan Abrams, and Peter Krämer, each discussed the various directions of study in the now vibrant field of Kubrick Studies. Harlan and Kolker took their audience on an aesthetic tour of Kubrick's films, locating his work firmly within the modernist tradition. Abrams, an expert in Jewish Studies as well as Kubrick, decoded the Jewish influences on Kubrick as a New York intellectual with a Central European background. Krämer meanwhile focused on the production and industrial contexts of Kubrick's career, explored a number of his unmade and abandoned projects, and situated his career as a director-producer working within and against the restrictions of the American film industry. These keynote addresses exemplified the major trends in Kubrick Studies. While Abrams and Krämer represented the turn to 'New Film History' methodologies that has been facilitated by access to the Kubrick Archive, Kolker and Harlan showed that there is still much to be understood about the aesthetic composition of Kubrick's films through close textual analysis.<sup>1</sup> Other papers at the conference revealed the continuing rewards of textual interpretation, whether through the more 'traditional' perspectives of Adaptation Studies, film philosophy, and cognitive film studies, or through new approaches such as fandom (Rod Munday's paper "Kubrick and Fan Scholarship" drew on his role as the key instigator of online Kubrick fan forums in the 1990s and 2000s) and curation studies (Dru Jeffries' paper explored issues of exhibition practice in the official travelling Stanley Kubrick Exhibition). Ian Roscow's paper, "The Overlooked Scrapbook", took a more conspiracy-minded approach and explored the textual coincidences in the scrapbook that Alex Walker created as a prop for *The Shining*, reflecting the passion nowadays

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<sup>1</sup> Recent works within Film Studies that take a more overt textual interpretation to Kubrick's career include Robert Kolker's *The Extraordinary Image: Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, and the Reimagining of Cinema* (2017a), as well as his reissued *A Cinema of Loneliness* (2011); see also Roger Luckhurst, *The Shining* (2013); Philip Kuberski, *Kubrick's Total Cinema: Philosophical Themes and Formal Qualities* (2012); Kate McQuiston, *We'll Meet Again: Musical Design in the Films of Stanley Kubrick* (2013); and a recent special issue of the journal *Adaptation*, guest edited by I.Q. Hunter, "Kubrick and Adaptation" (2015).

among both fans and scholars for decoding supposed secret messages in Kubrick's films. Some of these papers are included in this issue, along with specially commissioned ones that aim to give a varied and representative perspective of international scholarship in the field. A parallel 'Dossier' in a special issue of *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* collects papers, including ones by Abrams and Krämer's, that showcase the in depth empirical research inspired by the Archive (Fenwick et al. 2017). Taken together, the conference and journal issues attest to Kolker's claim in *The Extraordinary Image* that while Kubrick made only thirteen films, they contain "huge ideas" and seem inexhaustibly rich in meaning and significance.

It is not surprising that those thirteen films continue to attract this level of enthusiastic scholarship. Kubrick's position within film history is unique. As far back as 1972 Peter Wollen cited him as an *auteur* and indeed few directors achieved that status so completely. By the time *A Clockwork Orange* was released in 1971 he had built a powerbase unrivalled by his peers in the New Hollywood, which allowed him an unprecedented level of independence and creative control. Thereafter Kubrick's name would always be above the title of his films as a statement of personal ownership. Yet despite his status Kubrick was always controversial and none of his films received immediate universal acclaim. Some, like *Barry Lyndon* and *Eyes Wide Shut*, took years to arrive at any kind of reappraisal. Nevertheless Kubrick remains a touchstone of artistic integrity for directors, such as Christopher Nolan, who stretch the medium to its limit and aim to make films exactly as they want. His battles with powerful producers and studios in the 1950s and 1960s saw him strive towards ever greater autonomy, which he half-jokingly referred to as "complete total annihilating artistic control" (Krämer 2015: 50). In part, his power and independence were secured because he never lost sight of the commercial appeal and potential of his films, some of which, such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), were considerable box office hits.

Kubrick's career began as a staff photographer at *Look*, one of America's premier photojournalist magazines. He was self-taught after being gifted a camera by his father for his eleventh birthday. His talent was evident in the pieces he contributed to *Look*, which included 'Prizefighter', a photo-essay documenting a day in the life of boxer Walter Cartier, later the subject of Kubrick's first short documentary, *Day of the Fight* (1951). Co-written with Robert Rein, *Day of the Fight* was funded privately by Kubrick and his father, and released by RKO, which financed and distributed his subsequent short, *Flying Padre* (1952). In 1953 the Seafarers' International Union commissioned Kubrick to make the documentary short *The Seafarers*, written by Will Chasan. But Kubrick had eyes towards bigger things and in 1953 the twenty-five year old Kubrick shot his first feature-length film, *Fear and Desire* (1953), with financial aid from his uncle. An amateurish piece on which Kubrick performed many of the crew roles himself, it was released by the art house distributor Joseph Burstyn after the major studios turned it down. Kubrick later disowned *Fear and Desire* as juvenilia, but, like his next, also privately funded feature, *Killer's Kiss* (1955), it demonstrated his precocious talents as a director and a producer who could realise ambitious projects on extremely low-budgets. Recognising his potential, United Artists agreed to finance and release *The Killing* (1956), the film that would gain him critical and industry attention. It was the first production by the Harris-Kubrick Pictures Corporation, a partnership formed between Kubrick and producer James B. Harris that lasted into the preproduction of the apocalyptic black comedy, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Harris's main roles were to find funding – *The Killing* was partially financed by Harris and his father – and to buy rights for literary properties, though he was also Kubrick's creative partner and was closely involved in the development of the screenplay for *Lolita* (1962). *The Killing* was also the beginning of Kubrick's recourse to adaptation, and from 1956 onwards all his films were adaptations of one kind or another.

The anti-war film *Paths of Glory* (1957), arguably Kubrick's first significant artistic statement, marked the beginning of the collaboration between Kubrick and the actor-producer Kirk Douglas, who later hired Kubrick to direct *Spartacus* (1960). The experience of *Spartacus*, on which Kubrick, as a director for hire, was deprived of the total artistic control he thought essential to his role, proved fatal to any future collaboration between him and Douglas. The series of films that followed announced Kubrick's growing maverick status within the industry. *Lolita* saw Harris-Kubrick take a risk on Nabokov's bestselling story of transgressive love, cheekily referenced in the movie's tagline, 'How did they ever make a movie of *Lolita*?' The long takes (influenced by Max Ophüls), virtuoso camera movements and deep focus Wellesian compositions which in *The Killing* and *Paths of Glory* staged relationships of power and distrust, were used in *Lolita* subtly to convey the love triangle's deeper shades. Produced at a time that saw a trend in American productions moving abroad – so-

called 'runaway productions' – *Lolita* was Kubrick's first film made in the UK. Incentivised by state subsidies such as the British government's Eady Levy as well as by the technical excellence of British studios and crew, not to speak of the distance he could put between himself and Hollywood, Kubrick permanently relocated to Britain in the 1960s and produced the remainder of his films there.

*Dr. Strangelove*, which followed in 1964, tapped into the political climate of the Cold War and nuclear paranoia with its satirical take on M.A.D (Mutually Assured Destruction). The fear of madness, which stems from the absence of logic, open thought and dialogue among the characters (communication breakdown is a recurrent idea in the film), is conveyed through claustrophobic staging that frames and entraps the bickering warmongers in just a few interior sets. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a science fiction epic with pioneering special effects, spoke, as did *Dr. Strangelove*, to a growing youth audience which embraced it as a cult film and 'the ultimate trip' (a phrase used as a tagline on its rerelease poster in the early 1970s, one of many rereleases that kept *2001* in the box office top fifty chart throughout the decade). The abstraction and formal complexity of *2001* typified Kubrick's belief that, while his films were literary adaptations, "A film is – or should be – more like music than like fiction. It should be a progression of moods and feelings. The theme, what's behind the emotion, the meaning, all that comes later." (Kagan 1989: 231).

The low-budget and dystopian *A Clockwork Orange* also proved successful with the youth audience and was a huge box office success despite its controversial aestheticisation of violence and initial X-rating in the USA. This was the first Kubrick picture financed by Warner Bros., the studio he would stay with for the remainder of his career, most likely because of the control they gave him over his projects, including their publicity and distribution. *Barry Lyndon* (1975), one of Kubrick's most overlooked films, was immediately recognised for its innovative technical brilliance; an elegant, deliberately paced rethinking of the historical epic, it was filmed using only natural light sources and candlelight. With slow zooms, Kubrick creates space around his melancholy characters, laying bare their solitude and trapping them in their socially rigid world. *The Shining* (1980), a poorly received (at the time) adaptation of Stephen King's horror novel, was Kubrick's most obviously commercial film, but nevertheless radically different from conventional horror films in its long running time (142 minutes in the original US cut), deliberate pacing, minimal violence, and maze like structure. The Steadicam, first used in *Bound for Glory* (Hal Ashby, 1976), is put to unsettling effect as it glides around The Overlook Hotel to suggest an unknown and uncanny presence. *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Kubrick's contribution to the 1980s Vietnam War film cycle, was, as Prévost-Balga explores in this issue, his most overt statement yet on the theme of dehumanization. This would be Kubrick's last film for twelve years as he struggled to bring to life a variety of projects, despite extensive pre-production on the likes of *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* and the Holocaust drama, *Aryan Papers*.

Yet it was Arthur Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle* (1926), a book that had long fascinated him, which he finally adapted into his last film, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). Kubrick had shown interest in adapting the novel since at least the late 1950s, when he first met Schnitzler's grandson, Peter Schnitzler, on the set of *Spartacus*. The two corresponded, with Peter forwarding copies of his grandfather's diaries to Kubrick.<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s, Warner Bros. had announced that Kubrick was to adapt *Traumnovelle* following *A Clockwork Orange*, with Woody Allen rumoured to star, but it wasn't until the mid-1990s that he finally managed to realise what was clearly a book close to his heart (Anon. 1971). Released posthumously, *Eyes Wide Shut* was controversial for its explicit sexuality as well as for confounding audience expectations. Instead of a sexual thriller in the vein of *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), audiences were treated to a slow-moving and complex dream-like narrative about repression and the compromises of marriage. Reviews were generally negative; of the more than one hundred English, North American, and Italian reviews and articles published on the film's release, fifty-six percent criticised Tom Cruise's acting, the majority commenting that the fault was not with Cruise but rather with the director, who represented people as inhuman and considered them as an aesthetic mistake in the *mise-en-scène* (Pezzotta 2003).

Kubrick was in fact accused of being a misanthrope throughout his career on the basis that his characters seemed to lack depth and that he was more interested in intellectual conceits and formal structures than actual human beings. Kubrick himself answered this charge, distinguishing between life and art: "You don't have to make Frank Capra movies to like people" (Pipolo 2002: 5). But Kubrick was raised in the intellectual,

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Peter Schnitzler to Stanley Kubrick, 27 May 1959, Stanley Kubrick Archive, SK/9/4/1.

cultural and political climate of modernism and his chief fascination, as critics acknowledged after *2001*, was with cinematic form and the deconstruction of the Hollywood classical narrative. Robert Kolker has suggested that Kubrick was not only a modernist experimenting with the medium of film, but that he was “consumed with the modernist’s vision of a declining human agency in environments that elude human control” (2011: 107). Artificial intelligence and technology were themes that pervade not only the thematic and narrative content of his films, but also the way in which he made them. He exploited new innovations and techniques, such as the Steadicam and ultra-fast lenses, and collaborated with companies such as Cinema Products Corporation to develop new cameras. Academic writing on Kubrick in the 1970s remained focused on the formal qualities of his work, and this, allied to the dehumanised visions he was crafting, contributed significantly to the belief that he was a cold, intellectual and misanthropic filmmaker (Feldman 1976). An important academic intervention came in 1980 with “Tectonics of the Mechanical Man”, a chapter in *A Cinema of Loneliness*, Robert Kolker’s classic account of the New Hollywood. Exploring in detail the formal design and thematic intent of Kubrick’s films, Kolker claimed that, despite his ability to compete at the box office, Kubrick had “more in common with Mark Rothko than with Steven Spielberg” (2011: 107). The chapter proved hugely influential (a number of articles in this issue are indebted to it, especially its focus on spatial design and entrapment), but it also countered the notion that Kubrick was any kind of misanthrope, arguing that his films were carefully designed to distance the audience in order to provoke complex emotional and intellectual responses. After all, who cannot find themselves compelled by Alice’s devastating revelations of sexual fantasy in *Eyes Wide Shut*, or the hysterical breakdown of Barry at the loss of his child in *Barry Lyndon*. Like Rothko’s elusive and ambiguous paintings, Kubrick’s films combine formal precision with powerful, intense and mysterious images that have become iconic within our cultural consciousness. As Kolker says of his own experience of Kubrick’s films and in particular *Eyes Wide Shut*, “like so many Kubrick scholars, I want to write about it, explain it, explore it, perhaps as a means to find its heart. Sometimes I think I have found it – this puzzle about sexuality, privilege, and celebrity – but mostly I think that it will always exceed my grasp” (2011: 42). The opening of the Stanley Kubrick Archive has been the single most crucial development in recent scholarship and what Kolker has called a “spectacular turn” in academic research towards understanding the production of Kubrick’s films and the importance of his collaborators (2017b).<sup>3</sup> But new perspectives on Kubrick influenced by other developments in film studies are still being discovered. Kate Egan, for example, has explored fans’ consumption of Kubrick paratexts (2015), while David Church has unpacked his status as a cult director, particularly among white, twenty-something male cinephiles (2006). These approaches are not distractions from archival enquiry but in fact vital to understanding the current renaissance both of Kubrick appreciation in the academy and what has become almost a mini-industry of DVD re-releases, fan documentaries, and book publications.

This passion to understand Kubrick’s work has also seen a proliferation in exhibitions of artefacts from his films, such as the pop-up exhibition held at De Montfort University in May 2016, *Stanley Kubrick: Cult Auteur*, which displayed items loaned by the Stanley Kubrick Archive and Joy Cuff Archive (Cuff was a model-maker on *2001: A Space Odyssey*, who created the Moon Base set). That exhibition and the comprehensive official travelling Stanley Kubrick Exhibition fetishise the items and props from the Archive and turn them into both historical relics and clues to the films’ hidden meanings. Such cultish over investment continues apace outside of academia. Documentaries like *Room 237* (Rodney Ascher, 2012) and the amateur *Kubrick’s Odyssey II: Beyond the Infinite Secrets Hidden in the Films of Stanley Kubrick* (Jay Weidner, 2017) obsess over the conspiratorial potential of *The Shining* and *Eyes Wide Shut*, while fan books like Isaac Weishaupt’s *Kubrick’s Code* (2014) and Derek Taylor Kent’s *Kubrick’s Game* (2016) take a Dan Brown-esque narrative approach to uncover the esoteric secrets of Kubrick’s films.<sup>4</sup>

While the complementary Kubrick dossier in the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* focuses on issues of collaboration, authorial agency and the New Film History, the articles in this issue demonstrate a

<sup>3</sup> A select bibliography of key works from this empirical turn in Kubrick Studies includes Richard Daniels, Tatjana Ljujic, and Peter Krämer, *Stanley Kubrick: New Perspectives* (2015); Mick Broderick, *Reconstructing Strangelove: Inside Stanley Kubrick’s Nightmare Comedy* (2017); Maria Pramaggiore, *Making Time in Stanley Kubrick’s Barry Lyndon: Art, History, and Empire* (2015); Philippe Mather, *Stanley Kubrick at Look Magazine: Authorship and Genre in Photojournalism and Film* (2013); Peter Krämer’s various monographs, including *2001: A Space Odyssey* (2010); *A Clockwork Orange* (2011); and *Dr. Strangelove* (2014); while Mick Broderick has guest edited the special “Post-Kubrick Dossier”, *Screening the Past* (2017).

<sup>4</sup> See I.Q. Hunter’s *Cult Film As A Guide to Life: Fandom, Adaptation and Identity* (2016: 41-57), for an account of the “cult enthusiasm” of Kubrick fans.

wider range of approaches, not all of them reliant on archival research, and indicate possible future directions of research. Some articles do indeed draw extensively on the Stanley Kubrick Archive, such as those by Filippo Ulivieri, Matthew Melia, and Vincent Jaunas, but others show the continuing merits of textual interpretation and theoretical analysis when they are sensitive to the historical, industrial and socio-cultural contexts of Kubrick's films.

Filippo Ulivieri offers a detailed panoramic view of Kubrick's numerous unmade projects, from *Napoleon* to *Aryan Papers*, attesting to the breadth of Kubrick's interests and to his endless enthusiasm for the great themes of his realised films, such as artificial intelligence, masculine violence and war. As well as highlighting the challenges even Kubrick faced in getting projects off the ground, Ulivieri develops a dialogue between the unmade and realised films, noting Kubrick's tendency in the unmade ones to address the topics that preoccupied him throughout his career, from war and the Holocaust, to technology and science fiction. Graham Allen, by contrast, focuses on Kubrick the collaborator and tracks the complicated relation between *Dr. Strangelove* and its source novel, Peter George's *Two Hours to Doom* [*Red Alert*] (1958), in the context of their different historical moments. Whereas the novel was written and published immediately before the Cuban Missile Crisis ushered in a dangerous new period of nuclear standoff, the film was made and released when that era had already begun. Although Kubrick and his collaborators, especially his co-screenwriters Terry Southern and Peter George himself, adapted many features of *Two Hours to Doom*, the film and the novel constitute responses to different, subsequent moments of the Cold War.

Dominic Lash develops a compelling analysis of the use of music in *Barry Lyndon*. The film was adapted from William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq.* (1844), which like the film is set in the mid-eighteenth century. The overlapping timeframes of the three different centuries represented by the dates of the release of the film, the publication of the novel, and the setting of the film and the book, is echoed by the choice of music. The film includes eighteenth century music in both 'authentic' and anachronistic arrangements and performance styles, but also entirely anachronistic music. According to Lash, this variety deepens the film's mediation on the nature of history, and mirrors other contradictions, such as between immediacy and distance, performance and intimacy, completion and incompleteness, which emerge from the key theme of pretence, manifested in the endless series of masks worn by the characters and their performative behaviour which makes us wonder about the existence of a single, authentic core to their identities.

Drawing on the formal properties of almost all of Kubrick's feature-length films, Matt Melia discusses the hitherto unrecognised similarities in composition and iconography between Kubrick and another distinctive auteur, the maverick British director Ken Russell. Although the two never collaborated and hardly ever exchanged ideas, they were contemporaries in the British film industry who started out as photographic documentarians and whose films shared a similar approach to the construction of cinematic space. Both strived to expand the frame yet restrict movement within it, creating what Melia calls "altered states" and spaces. Elisa Pezzotta also discusses movement, but with reference to how Kubrick controls spectators' experience of time. Through a close analysis of long takes, Pezzotta shows that *Barry Lyndon*, *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Eyes Wide Shut* can be considered slow films. Since these films can be interpreted in light of European art-cinema, and their male protagonists as passive wanderers, these films can be understood in the context of the slow cinema of walking of the early de-dramatised European art-cinema. Although Kubrick's camera unlike, for example, Michelangelo Antonioni's in his trilogy of alienation, does not wait for an epiphany, it makes it possible, expanding time to lay bare the duration of our life experience as passive wanderers in a world that entraps as well as entertains us. Both Pezzotta's and Maarten Coëgnarts' articles draw on the theoretical framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. As Coëgnarts explains, in cognitive linguistics this theory explains that we understand abstract concepts, such as emotions, relationships and mental functions metaphorically, through concrete concepts of human bodily experiences such as movement in space. Coëgnarts shows how Kubrick creates meaning by imposing structural precision and formal cohesion on perception, expressing his abstract thematic concerns in a non-verbal but concrete manner by relying mostly on acting, framing, and editing.

Kubrick granted few interviews and always preferred not to explain the meaning of his films. Dru Jeffries discusses the Criterion editions of *Paths of Glory* and *Dr. Strangelove*, and the consequences of the home video producer's choices on viewers' expectations and judgments. Since Criterion has always been associated with an auteurist approach, Jeffries analyses how, in the absence of Kubrick's controlling voice, such an approach is

applied to their Kubrick re-releases. The paratextual framing of the DVDs is mostly constituted by interviews with critics and Kubrick's collaborators, who, instead of conveying univocal interpretations of the films, suggest a plurality of readings and ask spectators to think for themselves. Similarly, Marco Lovisato, discussing *Room 237*, underlines how each of the four interpretations of *The Shining* presented in the documentary represents a different path in the interpretative maze created by the film's complexity and openness. Moreover, the unsolvable enigmas that the film poses to the audience are proof of Kubrick's foresightedness: in *The Shining* he made a film that could be fully appreciated only after the development of home video technologies, which allow it to be watched and re-watched, and the Internet, when fans could remix it to unlock or appropriate some of its mysteries.

Antoine Prévost-Balga interprets the experiences of the male protagonists of *Dr. Strangelove*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Full Metal Jacket* through Gilbert Simondon's *Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* and considers the importance to Kubrick of the figure of 'the mechanical man'. Whereas Alex (Malcolm McDowell) in *A Clockwork Orange* can be read as a 'bugged' machine which, after the Ludovico Treatment, cannot function because of the interference of an external element, Private Pyle (Vincent D'Onofrio) in *Full Metal Jacket* is a machine that overheats and explodes after Drill Sergeant Hartmann (Lee Ermey)'s training effectively merges him with his rifle. Dr. Strangelove (Peter Sellers) meanwhile is a rusty machine, still controlled by the obsolete mechanism of Nazism. Taking another perspective on troubled masculinity, Vincent Jaunas focuses on the male protagonists of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Eyes Wide Shut*, and, in particular, on the actors' 'under-playing' of their performances. The difference between their closed down style of acting and other actor's expressiveness, between, for example Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman in *Eyes Wide Shut* or Keir Dullea and the mimes in ape costumes in *2001*, stresses the male characters' isolation from themselves, others, and reality itself. Cruise's and Dullea's change in acting style towards the end of the films, from blank and passive to active and emotional, suggests the possibility of their escape from the entrapment of isolation. Similarly, Dijana Metlic discusses how masks are used in *The Killing*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Eyes Wide Shut* to provide characters with the strength to surpass themselves. Their masks symbolise their instinct, which strives to win over reason, but as soon as they fail, they are debunked: they are condemned to abandon their instinct as much as they are doomed to remain unmasked. In *The Killing*, Johnny Clay (Sterling Hayden) uses a mask during the race track robbery that ends with his arrest; in *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex's mask is a symbol of his revolt against the adults' values, and he ends up in prison; in *Eyes Wide Shut*, the disguised orgy participants unmask the intruder Bill Harford, although their own masks become an instrument that unmasks their lowest instincts.

We hope that this sample of international perspectives on Kubrick not only indicates the range and vibrancy of Kubrick Studies but also encourages other scholars, in the academy and beyond, to contribute to further developments in the field as the Stanley Kubrick Archive enters its second decade.

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