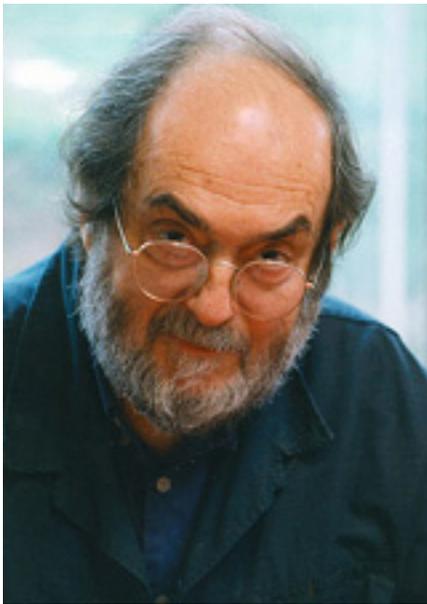


senses of cinema

Stanley Kubrick

👤 Keith Uhlich 🕒 May 2002 📁 Great Directors 📖 Issue 20 Issue 20



b. July 26, 1928, Manhattan, New York, USA.

d. March 7, 1999, Harpenden, Hertfordshire, England, UK.

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It may not be entirely correct to call Kubrick a child prodigy. Nonetheless one can picture the confidence and strength of the young artist when, at 16 years old, he managed to sell an unsolicited picture to the highly influential publication, *Look*. He'd been experimenting in the family darkroom for several years at the suggestion of his parents, and early home movies (1) reveal the seeds of their encouragement. In these movies the young Kubrick is obviously take-charge, as aware of his high stature in family and in life as his placement within the camera frame. Conscious of it or not, Kubrick is directing the action and, judging by his smile, he's having a grand old time doing it.



It's no surprise then that Kubrick could so easily spot those moments of time worth capturing in still frame. That unsolicited photograph (2) sold to *Look* shows a news vendor mourning the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt next to a newspaper headline relating it. It's fascinating for the insight that it provides into Kubrick's style – the image feels both spontaneous and posed, balancing as it does the personal act of mourning against the impersonal coldness of newsprint. Seen together these juxtaposed objects, both animate and inanimate, raise several questions. Is the vendor reacting to the news next to him, or to something or someone else? Is this an image of a man grieving for real, or is he aware of the photographer and 'acting' in a way he feels is appropriate? By that rationale, what control does the young Kubrick have over the scene? How spontaneous is it?

Rare is the artist who can suffuse his work with so much ambiguity and still intrigue. From this point onwards, the known career of Stanley Kubrick encompasses an acknowledged 13 movie features, one withdrawn movie feature, several short documentaries, and a myriad number of photo spreads. Controversy surrounded many of these projects. On a surface level, Kubrick seemed willing to alienate the audience for his desired effects. Yet the constant control and manipulation of all things surrounding his work also freed it up to interpretation. One knows, for the most part, that one is watching a Kubrick movie – its authorship is clear. Easy speculation and interpretation follow suit, but it is more of a challenge to dig beneath the popular veneer and debate the actual man and his deeper meanings. Our speculation is encouraged by Kubrick's secrecy surrounding both his life and his film projects – a state of control that remains fairly unparalleled among most popular artists. His is a career shrouded in myth and frustrating mystery. Yet we must persevere and try to understand what little we can of this particular artist's story, even though it may demand a precision and incisiveness that no single writing can attain.

Kubrick's first sold photograph led to a career at *Look* magazine. His numerous photo spreads (3) ranged from profiles of actors like Montgomery Clift to documentations of the New York jazz scene. Comparing the former category with the latter one reveals the opposite extremes of Kubrick's artistry. The actor profiles show Kubrick's liking for what I'll call the 'pose.' That's basically a blanket euphemism for the control Kubrick places on the image. In these photos, setting and subject bend to the artist's will and the sense of manipulation is readily apparent. This is especially of interest in the Clift profile: the actor was a manipulator in his own right, and there's a strong sense of a meeting of two very distinct and individual minds that adds a tension to the image. As much as Clift exudes his own sort of confidence, it's also evident that Kubrick has an equal control. It foreshadows Kubrick's later, conflicted dealings with high profile actors such as Kirk Douglas and Sterling Hayden, and may partly explain why he cast blander and more easily controlled leading men in many of his later films.

The jazz photos show a side of Kubrick that is less discussed, the spontaneous, musical side. Here Kubrick seems to succumb to the setting and subjects, capturing events as they happen with a dynamic sense of space. A photo of a trumpet player feels three-dimensional, as if the instrument and its master reach beyond the lens and into the very lives of the viewer. You can hear the music and feel the movement in this still frame, and the sense of life being lived (as opposed to the sense of life *having been* lived in the 'pose' photographs) is extraordinary. This image, and the many others like it, presuppose the musical interludes in Kubrick's films that recreate these feelings of presence. It is in these moments of musicality, of the physical and psychological dance of characters and setting, where Kubrick's movies come most alive.



I don't mean to suggest a preference for one or the other method here. In Kubrick's cinema I find it is often the alternation of these methods that provides the most satisfying experience. Skipping over the short documentaries and his withdrawn first feature *Fear and Desire* (1953), none of which I've located, these practices are first seen as early as Kubrick's second feature *Killer's Kiss* (1955).

In *Killer's Kiss* there is certainly a sense of control, but it is a much looser film than Kubrick's later work. It's a pulpy story – a love triangle between a down-and-out boxer, the prostitute he falls in love with, and her psychotic john – done in an arresting and unexpected style. At times, Kubrick seems to succumb to the New York setting – the actual location, no less – and it feels like he's making it up as he goes along, surprising to those who think of Kubrick solely as a meticulous control freak. The movie is much like a jazz riff that threatens to topple over into incoherence, yet the pounding jazz score of drums and trumpets is an able foundation that holds upright any shakiness of story. Kubrick's experiments in *Killer's Kiss* feed into his subsequent films more so than most acknowledge. The climatic sequence where the boxer and the john fight to the death in a mannequin factory is an essential sequence in Kubrick's career, balancing as it does between spontaneous movement and the 'pose.' At first the men use the stray mannequins, standing around as impassive spectators, for weapons. Then they move onto more masculine and phallic weaponry (in the form of an axe and a spear). Interesting to note that the mannequins are all female, and their use in the fight sequence is emblematic of the multiple readings that apply to the best Kubrick sequences. What the passive femininity and active masculinity on display means may be obvious to some and muddled to others. Yet Kubrick encourages us in this sequence, and in much of his work to follow, to look beyond one side or the other of the interpretive spectrum and into that much larger area known as the in-between in our search for answers and understanding.



The Killing (1956) was Kubrick's next project and, though more widely acknowledged, it is of lesser interest. Its fractured narrative works well, though dates radically when looked at in hindsight. And while boasting wonderful performances across the board, this is the first example of Kubrick and an actor negating each other. Sterling Hayden has such a strong presence as Johnny Clay, the ringleader of a gang of thieves, that Kubrick's manipulations of plot, character, and setting – mimicking, perhaps, his own love of chess – feel contrived and the film packs less punch because of it. Thus, *The Killing* seems more of a calling card to a Hollywood career than anything else.

“Look what I can do,” says Kubrick and they’ll come-a-knockin’. Indeed, the next few Kubrick movies, until *Lolita* (1962), mark a degradation of Kubrick's individuality, until his artistry becomes invisible in *Spartacus* (1960), and the label of ‘hack’ threatens to apply. Kirk Douglas is the negating actor/executive producer here and it's disheartening to see how plain, how middling, how dull this epic is. Nonetheless, the film in-between *The Killing* and *Spartacus*, *Paths of Glory* (1957), is one of the greats. Perhaps its story of bureaucratic France executing three of its soldiers on charges of cowardice doesn't need a full-fledged auteur. As is, it merely exists in its own space, and its universality of theme comes across all the more strongly for it.



Upon Kubrick's self-exile to England, his cinema becomes more and more hermetic, and also draws clear distinctions between its spontaneous and 'posed' parts. *Lolita*, based on Vladimir Nabokov's novel, remains most interesting for its fluency of style. The camera glides through this recreated suburbia with a purpose that Kubrick's earlier, rougher films do not have. Swooning and swaying with the Nelson Riddle score, and with the grand performances of James Mason and Shelley Winters, Kubrick's imagery conveys the danger and allure of lust with equal measure – the two major Mason-Winters *pas de deus* are perfectly choreographed to this end. And Kubrick finds the Dietrich to his Von Sternberg in Peter Sellers whose Clare Quilty is unsettling for the many human contradictions related on the surface and the emptiness at his core. This actor works from the outside in, and it complements Kubrick's own *mise en scène*, which stresses surface style as the key to human beings' inner space. If I have neglected Sue Lyon as Lolita it is because she fulfills the requirements of the role but does not distinguish herself, which is as it should be in this adaptation. Like the passive mannequins in *Killer's Kiss*, she watches, obliviously, as the people around her crumble at her feet, and damned if this aloof nymphet knows or cares why.

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964) is another Sellers tour-de-force, though his trio of characters lacks the fullness of his psychotic Quilty. Nonetheless the film seems to adapt to the times. At certain points in recent history this doomsday comedy seemed hysterical, at other times downright frightening in its prescience. The final song "We'll Meet Again" is a perfect musical bridge to Kubrick's next film.



2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) is Kubrick's masterwork. Crazy, yet exacting, in its ambition to address the full story of mankind from birth to death to transcendence, the film alternates Kubrick's obsessions with 'posing' and musicality, most notably in its soundscape. The sequences supported by *The Blue Danube* or the otherworldly compositions of György Ligeti or *Thus Spake Zarathustra* convey all sorts of emotions and mindsets. These are most often applied to all the non-human characters so, in essence, the machines are the most recognisable to a viewer. The lilting, hypnotic, musical voice of HAL (Douglas Rain) makes his disconnecting/death scene touching in ways that the bland monotones of Gary Lockwood and Keir Dullea's do not when their time comes. "Damn this Kubrick," say some, "for making us feel for a machine." But that's the point. As we evolve past machines, might we not, in the end, seem more mechanical to them than they are to themselves? One of many questions Kubrick leaves us to ponder as the hybrid Star Child stares out at us triumphantly.

The antithesis to *2001* is *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Visually stunning, and incisive in many ways about human behavior, yet the deck is stacked against us from the beginning. As Alex the delinquent (Malcolm McDowell) is a bastard psychotic, so are those of the bourgeoisie who ultimately take revenge on him, and it leaves a sour taste in one's mouth. Kubrick also expressed some reservations when copycat incidents in England forced the film's banning. Perhaps hindsight is always 20/20 and *A Clockwork Orange* does remain Kubrick's most immoral film. Then again, where is it written that the cinema be moral for always and ever?



By *Barry Lyndon* (1975) a pattern in Kubrick's later work emerges: his leading men are either blank slates or over-the-top psychotics. For *Barry Lyndon* Ryan O'Neal's blandness works perfectly as Kubrick shows the rise and fall of Thackeray's Irish rogue always from a distance, making Barry and the people around him as insignificant as the plush furniture – a sentiment the omniscient narrator expresses. The compositions have the beauty of period paintings, yet Kubrick uses this vast sense of space to simulate the claustrophobia and superficiality of the society. It's as if these paintings come to life are coffins out of which the characters cannot escape, and this distance from his subjects makes most of *Barry Lyndon* a cold experience. Yet the cumulative effect is moving and powerful. The final sequence brings me to tears each time I watch it – the final, silent tableau of the Lady Lyndon (Marisa Berenson) remembering Barry for a brief instant is the one moment when true emotion seems to come out and it is a welcome relief from what has come before. But Kubrick denies that this society and this movie will allow true emotion. The 'pose' must be maintained, and so the emotion is quickly stunted by properness. The quick juxtaposition of these two feelings sums up the feelings that have remained, for three hours, in subtext only and it is heart-breaking. Sadly, this is one of Kubrick's least known efforts. It's something that should be remedied by all in interest.



Kubrick made three movies after *Barry Lyndon* before his death in 1999. The first of these, *The Shining* (1980), is notable for its hypnotic use of Steadicam following the three inhabitants (Jack Nicholson, Shelley Duvall, and Danny Lloyd) through the snowed-in Overlook Hotel. It's an adaptation of a Stephen King bestseller, but it shows how Kubrick was more than willing to change an author's ideas around for adaptation to the screen. Here Jack Torrance, the tortured father and writer, has no metaphorical boiler bubbling beneath the hotel waiting to explode. He's pretty much ready to go insane from the beginning, and the hotel is the stimulus. In a sense, because he's experiencing writer's block, the Overlook Hotel and its ghostly inhabitants act as his inspiration to murder. If you can't create one way, create another. Perhaps this is Kubrick commenting on the pain inherent in the creative process, and how it can disconnect one from reality to the point of insanity. Overall, this is Kubrick doing a genre piece, but in a style wholly his own. It's a far cry from the anonymity of *Spartacus* and manages to solidify, at this point, his career as an individual auteur.

Full Metal Jacket (1987) has always gotten a bum rap for its clearly divided two sections. Most tend to prefer the showier first half, which details the training of Vietnam recruits at Parris Island by a crazed drill sergeant (R. Lee Ermey), as opposed to the second half, which is a more meditative reflection on Vietnam and the soul-smashing corruption of the film's narrator Private Joker (Matthew Modine). It's understandable in a sense. The first half's Private Gomer Pyle (Vincent D'Onofrio) is a much more rounded character – his girth and clumsiness are easily recognisable as traits easily singled out in a group setting – yet Modine's character, again a blank slate, makes for the perfect audience surrogate because Kubrick appears to want multiple interpretations to apply. In war, which from a mass viewpoint predicates success on the acknowledgement of dichotomies and sides, there can be no one answer. Kubrick brings individuality back to cinema viewers by destroying it onscreen. The final march, comprised of faceless silhouettes, is as democratic a gesture as an artist can give us. In that moment we are one and we are all.



Fitting that Kubrick ends his career with a dream. *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) completes a circle of sorts. As *Killer's Kiss* took place in the New York City of reality, *Eyes Wide Shut* takes place in a false one. Kubrick recreated whole streets and stores and props, down to the graffiti on a Village Voice mailbox. Here the hermetic quality of his later films reaches a state of brimming. Kubrick has recreated his birth home far from the actual one, and the sense of an artist making his dreams real is unprecedented. Kubrick's hero is Bill Harford (Tom Cruise) who embarks on an odyssey of voyeurism after learning his wife (Nicole Kidman) once thought of cheating on him. How powerful are thoughts and dreams in Kubrick's world, acting as stressors to murder, self-discovery, transcendence, etc. In the course of *Eyes Wide Shut*, Bill does not do anything physical. He watches sexual and violent events in which he does not participate and it still drives him into a temporary state of madness. The denial here of what the character most want – sexual satisfaction – is also implicitly what the audience desires. Playing on the iconography of Cruise and Kidman's personas, Kubrick refuses to give us, the star-struck obsessives, what we expect. Thus, the last spoken line of dialogue (as the characters stand in a toy store!) is a perverse joke, a cry of pain, and a fitting multifaceted coda to Kubrick's career: Kidman says, "But you know, there's one thing we need to do as soon as possible." Cruise replies, "What's that?" After a long pause she says, as if dying, "Fuck."

And then he's gone. Kubrick himself died just a few weeks after 'finishing' *Eyes Wide Shut*. A controversy revolving around the film's orgy sequence and the insertion of digital figures to block certain sexual thrusts for American audiences kept his essence in the spotlight. And upon the film's release, the voices of dissent and support raised themselves in full chorus, proving that, even from beyond the grave, an artist can challenge and rile the masses. Nor did the other moviemakers he influenced forget Kubrick. Steven Spielberg adapted a long-in-development Kubrick project called *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), which, true to the master, defied easy interpretation. And Kubrick's other unfinished projects (from a biopic of Napoleon to a WWII drama called *The Aryan Papers*) remain out there in some form, either to tantalise with their possibilities or to be finished by those who may dare to try. The legacy of Stanley Kubrick remains, as do the many stories surrounding his projects and his life, frustrating all attempts at complete synopsis.



Filmography

Day of the Fight (1951) – short documentary (also uncredited sound editor, uncredited editor, cinematographer, uncredited actor, producer)

Flying Padre (1951) – short documentary (also cinematographer, writer)

The Seafarers (1952) – short documentary (also sound, editor, cinematographer)

Fear and Desire (1953) (also editor, cinematographer, producer, writer)

Killer's Kiss (1955) (also editor, cinematographer, producer, story)

The Killing (1956) (also writer)



Paths of Glory (1957) (also additional cinematographer, writer)

Spartacus (1960)

Lolita (1962) (also uncredited writer)

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb also known as *Dr. Strangelove* (1964)
(also producer, writer)

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) (also special photographic effects designer and director, producer, writer)

A Clockwork Orange also known as *Stanley Kubrick's Clockwork Orange* (1971) (also producer, writer)

Barry Lyndon (1975) (also producer, writer)

The Shining also known as *Stanley Kubrick's The Shining* (1980) (also producer, writer)

Full Metal Jacket also known as *Stanley Kubrick's Full Metal Jacket* (1987) (also uncredited voice, producer, writer)

Eyes Wide Shut also known as *EWS* (1999) (also producer, writer)



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Lolita – From Nabokov’s Novel (1955) to Kubrick’s Film (1962) to Lyne’s (1997) [[HTTP://ARCHIVE.SENSESOFCINEMA.COM/CONTENTS/00/10/LOLITA.HTML](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/10/lolita.html)] by **Constantine Santas**

Total Eclipse of the Heart: [[HTTP://ARCHIVE.SENSESOFCINEMA.COM/CONTENTS/00/7/TECHNOLOGY.HTML](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/7/technology.html)] **Thinking through Technology** [[HTTP://ARCHIVE.SENSESOFCINEMA.COM/CONTENTS/00/7/TECHNOLOGY.HTML](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/7/technology.html)] by **Niall Lucy** (on *2001: A Space Odyssey*)

Kubrick’s Cinema Odyssey by Michael Chion (BFI Publishing: London, 2001) Trans. [[HTTP://ARCHIVE.SENSESOFCINEMA.COM/CONTENTS/BOOKS/01/19/KUBRICK.HTML](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/books/01/19/kubrick.html)] – **Review by Lee Hill of Claudia Gorbman’s translation of Michael Chion’s book *Kubrick’s Cinema Odyssey***



Web Resources

Compiled by the author and Michelle Carey

The Authorised Stanley Kubrick Website [[HTTP://WWW.KUBRICKFILMS.COM/](http://www.kubrickfilms.com/)]

The official Kubrick site with news, FAQs, messageboard, biography, filmography, store, audio, video and images

The Kubrick Site [[HTTP://WWW.VISUAL-MEMORY.CO.UK/AMK/](http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/AMK/)]

A huge amount of essays and articles, debate and discussion, reviews and press materials, scripts and transcripts, interviews and depositions and other sources of interest.

Stanley Kubrick: The Master Filmmaker [[HTTP://PAGES.PRODIGY.COM/KUBRICK/](http://pages.prodigy.com/kubrick/)]

A good fan site with lots of the regular features plus homage, trivia, quotes, TV listings, books.

Kubrick Multimedia Film Guide [[HTTP://WWW.INDELIBLEINC.COM/KUBRICK/](http://www.indelibleinc.com/kubrick/)]

A good source for the films, relying mostly on visual and audio images.

The Kubrick FAQ [[HTTP://WWW.VISUAL-MEMORY.CO.UK/FAQ/](http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/FAQ/)]

The page to answer all your questions.

Stanley and Us [[HTTP://UTENTI.LYCOS.IT/STANLEYANDUS/](http://utenti.lycos.it/stanleyandus/)]

Three Italians set out to make a film on their hero.

The Unknown Kubrick [[HTTP://WWW-PERSONAL.UMICH.EDU/~7EJBMORGAN/LOOK.HTML](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~7ejbmorgan/look.html)]

John Morgan discusses Kubrick's work as a photographer for *Look* magazine.

Stanley Kubrick 1928 – 1999 [[HTTP://WWW.VISUAL-MEMORY.CO.UK/SK/](http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/sk/)]

A nice picture of the young Kubrick and a myriad of web links.

Paths of Glory [[HTTP://WWW.FILMSITE.ORG/PATH.HTML](http://www.filmsite.org/path.html)] (1957) [[HTTP://WWW.FILMSITE.ORG/PATH.HTML](http://www.filmsite.org/path.html)]

Review by Tim Dirks

Strangelove Inc. [[HTTP://WWW.GEOCITIES.COM/SUNSETSTRIP/UNDERGROUND/9798/PIEFIGHT.HTM](http://www.geocities.com/sunsetstrip/underground/9798/piefight.htm)]

In late 1963 for the film's finale Stanley Kubrick spent almost two weeks shooting a War Room custard-pie fight at Stage B Shepperton but the result was later deleted from the final cut. This page features stills giving a glimpse of what this 'cut scene' may have looked like.

2001 and Beyond the Infinite [[HTTP://WWW.MODEMAC.COM/2001/](http://www.modemac.com/2001/)]

An essay on *2001: A Space Odyssey* by Modemac.

A Clockwork Orange [[HTTP://WWW.CS.WAIKATO.AC.NZ/~EBUTTING/KUBRICK/ACO.HTML](http://www.cs.waikato.ac.nz/~ebutting/kubrick/aco.html)]

Discussion notes on the film and novella.

House of Horrors presents *The Shining* [[HTTP://WWW.HOUSEOFHORRORS.COM/SHINING.HTM](http://www.houseofhorrors.com/shining.htm)]

Good page on the story and Kubrick's version of it.

Opening *Eyes Wide Shut* [[HTTP://MEMBERS.TRIPOD.COM/%7ELOVEPILE/EWSX.HTML](http://members.tripod.com/%7Elovepile/ewsx.html)]

A study of Kubrick's final film.

A Comprehensive List of Kubrick Websites on the Net [[HTTP://WWW.GEOCITIES.COM/SUNSETSTRIP/STUDIO/5139/KUBRICK.HTML](http://www.geocities.com/sunsetstrip/studio/5139/kubrick.html)]

Mammoth listing (focusing on individual films) to keep you occupied.

Discuss Kubrick [[HTTP://WWW.INDELIBLEINC.COM/KUBRICK/DISCUSS.HTML](http://www.inelibleinc.com/kubrick/discuss.html)]

The gateway to Kubrick discussion heaven.

Click **here** [[HTTP://WWW.AMAZON.COM/EXEC/OBIDOS/EXTERNAL-SEARCH?TAG=SENSESOFCINEM-20&KEYWORD=STANLEY+KUBRICK&MODE=BLENDED](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/external-search?tag=sensesofcinem-20&keyword=stanley+kubrick&mode=blended)] to search for Stanley Kubrick DVDs, videos and books at



[[HTTP://WWW.AMAZON.COM/EXEC/OBIDOS/REDIRECT-HOME/SENSESOFCINEM-20](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/redirect-home/sensesofcinem-20)]



Endnotes

1. Seen in *Stanley Kubrick: A Life In Pictures* (Jan Harlan, 2001).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

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