

Stanley Kubrick--an appreciation

Marty Jonas
27 March 1999

Stanley Kubrick, who died of a heart attack outside London on March 7 at the age of 70, was one of the outstanding film directors of his generation. A perfectionist, his output was very low compared with others in the industry--in 39 years he made only 13 films, 6 of those in the last 35 years. But what he made was influential, unique and uniformly excellent. Kubrick was independent-minded and un beholden to any studio or media conglomerate.

Born in New York City in 1928, the son of a doctor, Kubrick became interested in photography after his father gave him a Graflex for his birthday. Before he was out of high school he had sold his first picture to the now-defunct *Look* magazine. Soon afterward, he was hired onto the staff of the publication and was one of its leading photographers. He spent a good deal of his extra time playing chess (a lifelong passion) at the Marshall and Manhattan Chess Clubs and (because he was determined to become a filmmaker) seeing classic films at the Museum of Modern Art. Kubrick felt that he could make better films than the ones coming out of Hollywood, and he set out to do just that.

Making three short documentaries--which, at best, broke even--whetted Kubrick's appetite for directing features. In 1953 he quit his post at *Look*, enlisted the artistic and technical help of friends, and with \$9,000 borrowed from relatives and friends made his first film, *Fear and Desire*, an abstract piece about war. Though it was not seen widely, it received generally good reviews, encouraging Kubrick to go on to his next project. On a far grander budget of \$40,000, again gathered from family and friends, he directed a well-made thriller, *Killer's Kiss*, in 1955. It also got a respectable critical reception, and led to his first film with a professional cast and crew, *The Killing* (1956), a superior effort about a heist at a race track.

His next film, *Paths of Glory* (1957), ranks among the best antiwar films. Set in France in World War I, it shows the class gulf between the common fighting soldier and the military elite who come from the upper classes and dictate life-and-death orders far from the battlefield. The dandified, incompetent generals give orders from their splendid headquarters to take a hill--an impossible, suicidal task. When the maneuver fails, the brass decide to set an example by having several men selected for the firing squad. Kirk Douglas plays an army captain who tries unsuccessfully to intercede for his men. The film--adapted from a novel that was itself based on an actual World War I incident--is a gripping, concrete portrayal of the class system at work. Kubrick's concern for the doomed soldiers and the emotional range of the scenes leading up to the execution give the lie to those critics who have always carped about the director's "lack of humanity."

Kirk Douglas was impressed with Kubrick and brought him on as director of *Spartacus*, which Douglas starred in and produced. Kubrick replaced Anthony Mann, who had already shot the beginning and several scenes. Though a cut above the usual big-budget historical films, and with a worthy subject--the massive slave revolt in ancient Rome--it still suffered from the bloatedness and heroics of most Hollywood epics. Kubrick described himself as a "hired hand," and had major differences with Douglas. It was not a happy time creatively for him.

But *Spartacus* showed the studios that Kubrick could be a responsible

Hollywood director, and, conversely, demonstrated to Kubrick that his place was not in Hollywood. His disillusionment with the studio system brought him to England, where he made *Lolita* (1962) and settled for the rest of his life.

Taken from the great novel by Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* is the story of a cultivated European's pursuit of a seductive 14-year-old American girl (she was 12 in the novel). The movie features masterful performances by James Mason as Humbert Humbert, and Peter Sellers as his chameleon-like nemesis Claire Quilty. Sue Lyon, a newcomer, played Lolita, and Shelley Winters hilariously portrayed her pretentious mother. Nabokov wrote the screenplay, but Kubrick used only 20 percent of it. It was a film about obsession, about the American landscape, and about European culture being conquered by American vulgarity. *Lolita* introduced us to Kubrick's sly humor. It also began his fascination with language (a major concern of the novel and the film) and with sound.

Kubrick's next film was to have a great impact on the public perception of nuclear war. *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) remains one of the most effective satires ever produced--in any medium. In the tradition of Jonathan Swift and Voltaire, he shows, with the darkest humor, a world headed inexorably toward annihilation. Kubrick took a straightforward, non-satirical novel, *Red Alert*, and turned it upside down, making it his own (as he did all of his sources). Though an often heavy-handed black comedy peopled by characters with improbable names like General Jack D. Ripper and President Merkin Muffley in farcical situations, it made the prospect of nuclear war fearful and real--breaking through the complacency and untruths sown by the US government.

Kubrick then embarked on a project called *Journey Beyond the Stars*. Over a period of five years this turned into *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which I consider the centerpiece of his career. His collaborator was scientist and science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke. Public interest in space travel was at its height. With both the Soviet Union and the United States engaged in what was called the "space race," the planets seemed within reach. Kubrick, always the enthusiast, was excited by the science and technology of space exploration, becoming an expert on astronomy, computers, rocketry, and everything else that would figure in the film.

The importance of *2001* is that it was the first science-fiction film to be a film of ideas; it came from the sizable stream of science fiction (represented especially in England by writers such as H.G. Wells, Olaf Stapledon, and Clarke himself) that was a literature of ideas. Granted, the ideas in the film are idealist to the core, under a veneer of hard science, but they are serious ideas nonetheless. Kubrick and Clarke show the evolution of the human species being spurred and observed by an outside, alien force--represented by the inert, black, slab-like monoliths that appear at critical points. The final stage of this development of the species is pure energy and thought, represented by the embryonic space-child observing the Earth and the universe at the film's end. Perhaps the space-child itself will now be the agent of evolution. (This is a theme first put forward by Clarke in his earlier novel *Childhood's End*.)

Much of the film was deliberately left vague; Kubrick said at various times that *2001* was not made to be understood on a first or second

viewing, that the filmgoer was free to fill in the gaps of understanding. As he remarked in a 1968 *Playboy* magazine interview, "I tried to create a *visual* experience, one that bypasses verbalized pigeonholing and directly penetrates the subconscious with an emotional and philosophic content ... to 'explain' a Beethoven symphony would be to emasculate it by erecting an artificial barrier between conception and appreciation." So, in a way, this is an Anglo-American *Last Year at Marienbad*.

Kubrick poured whatever was then available in special effects into the film. State-of-the-art then meant optical and mechanical special effects, with miniature models, actors suspended from wires, and lots of painstaking work on animation stands and in film labs; there was no computerized animation. And even after 30 years, the effects in *2001* are flawless and totally convincing. Unfortunately, this high-water mark in science fiction films was attained afterward only in the area of special effects; the science fiction film of ideas--with a handful of exceptions--was replaced by empty films of action and violence with science fiction trappings and dazzling special effects.

Besides its visual beauty, *2001* is remarkable in its use of sound. Kubrick originally commissioned a score from film composer Alex North, then scrapped it for the classical works by Richard Strauss, Johann Strauss, Gyorgi Ligeti, and Aram Khachaturian. The blend of image and music is perfect. After seeing *2001*, who can hear *Thus Spake Zarathustra* without visualizing the Dawn of Man sequence, or listen to *The Blue Danube Waltz* and not see the space shuttle and the circular space platform do their waltz in space? Besides mastering the use of sound, Kubrick also mastered silence. The bulk of *2001* has no dialogue, and much of the film's soundtrack consists of breathing in spacesuits, dead silence, and silence broken by mysterious far-off voices and delicate sounds. Indeed, this film was perhaps the first and the last to show that in space there is absolute silence; every science fiction picture since has had vast explosions in the vacuum of space accompanied by ear-splitting sound--a scientific impossibility.

And finally, I must mention what is perhaps the finest feat of film editing since Eisenstein's *Potemkin*: when the man-ape having discovered tools, exuberantly throws the animal bone it has used as a weapon into the air and it seems (through an amazing cut) to turn into the space shuttle heading toward the space station. One tool is transformed, millions of years later, into another.

Kubrick next made *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), adapted from the Anthony Burgess novel. Alex, a teenager in near-future London, routinely commits acts of unspeakable "ultraviolence," but he finally goes too far, is imprisoned, and subjected to a brutal form of aversion therapy, the "Ludovico Treatment." He ends up completely pacified, but has become a passive citizen, unable to either attack anyone or defend himself. And along with losing his propensity for violence, he has also lost his ability to listen to Beethoven (his peculiar appreciation for the composer was tied in to his love for kicking in people's heads).

A Clockwork Orange is thoroughly nasty and mean-spirited. Every character is despicable--except for the horrible Alex. He is the only fully realized character, and we are made to feel sorry that he has lost his ability to feel along with his ability to hurt and feel pity for his emotionally crippled state. The film deliberately presents us with a moral dilemma, and we are uneasy.

But what the film has going for it are Kubrick's cinematic acuity, his choice of music, and his fascination with language. Music by Beethoven and the electronic music composer Wendy Carlos play against the director's powerful images. (And there is a nefarious use of Gene Kelly's "Singin' in the Rain.") For reasons unexplained, Alex and his "droogs" speak a patois comprising Cockney, Gypsy and Russian in a run-down welfare-state England--which surely appealed to Kubrick's interest in language.

In 1975 Kubrick released *Barry Lyndon*, probably his most underrated

film. Taken from a novel by Thackeray, it stars Ryan O'Neal in the best role of his spotty career. He plays a charming lower-class lout in eighteenth century England who marries into royalty, treats all around him miserably, then finally gets his comeuppance and lands at the bottom again. It is an exquisite film, for which Kubrick and his cinematographer John Alcott invented lenses and processes that would allow them to shoot by natural light indoors, often by candlelight. The pastoral outdoor scenes resemble the landscape painting of the British artist John Constable. Again Kubrick blended sound and picture perfectly, this time with music by Bach, Handel, Schubert and others.

For *The Shining* (1980), Kubrick based his screenplay on Stephen King's bestselling horror novel. Of course he made many changes, and the film ended up being more Kubrick than King. Where the book was mainly supernatural, the film was ambiguous: the disaster visiting the family at the snowed-in Overlook Hotel could be mental deterioration or it could be the hotel possessing its guests--as with *2001*, much is left to the viewer. (King, in fact was so dissatisfied with the film that in 1998 he finally produced his own TV miniseries based on the book; it was far more faithful to the source, but it was also much inferior to Kubrick's film.) Kubrick again used Wendy Carlos for the score, and Jack Nicholson, Shelley Duvall and young Danny Lloyd gave stunning performances as the imperiled family. The mundane phrase "Honey, I'm home!," put in the mouth of the ax-wielding husband, is as memorable as the line "You can't fight in here--this is the War Room!" in *Dr. Strangelove*.

Kubrick's next film, in 1987, *Full Metal Jacket*, was a disappointment. It is set during the Vietnam War (though it was shot entirely in England), and its first half has some of the most harrowing combat training scenes ever put on film. Much of this is due to the presence of R. Lee Ermey, a real-life Marine drill instructor discovered by Kubrick. But the second half of the film is diffuse, and the antiwar thrust is hardly as strong as it was in *Paths of Glory*.

When Kubrick died he had finished shooting his last film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, and (we are told by the producers) had edited it into shape for release. He worked in secret, so the little information that has been leaked out indicates that this is a film about sexual intrigue, starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman.

Stanley Kubrick's death removes one of the last maverick filmmakers, an artist who created on his own terms. Despite the tribute to him at this year's Academy Awards, his kind of filmmaking was the opposite of the mediocre, compromised products represented by the Oscars. He was one of the few to be in complete control of his works from beginning to end--and sometimes even after that, as when he (without any movie executive requesting it) cut 19 minutes from *2001* a couple of days after its release. Like Orson Welles and a few others, his filmmaking was total: he immersed himself in the process and was in charge of every detail, including advertising. Unlike most of today's filmmakers, who only know about other films and TV, and who only read those books that can become film properties, Kubrick was very well read in many areas of literature and the sciences, and his interest in music was wide-ranging. He was unique in that he did not come out of a film school, or from TV or the theater, or from the ranks of the movie industry--he was an independent artist who decided early on to make films.

Wendy Carlos, musical collaborator on two of his films, summed up the importance and uniqueness of Kubrick the day after his death: "After all, creative perfectionists have become nearly an anathema as the centuries increment. So much of what we are asked to read, to hear, to look at, even to eat, seems the result of expedience, a matter of pure commerce. Intelligence, even touches of genius (as he had ample times) have become quaint relics of an earlier age. Our loss, more than you might think."



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact