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Stanley Kubrick – Auteur

by Adriana Magda

(Motion Picture Television 1113)

Stanley Kubrick is considered one of the greatest and most influential filmmakers in history. Many important directors credit Kubrick as an important influence in their career and inspiration for their vision as filmmaker.

Kubrick’s artistry and cinematographic achievements are undeniable, his body of work being a must watch for anybody who loves and is interested in the art of film. However what piqued my interest even more was finding out about his origins, as “Kubrick’s paternal grandmother had come from Romania and his paternal grandfather from the old Austro-Hungarian Empire” (Walker, Taylor, & Ruchti, 1999).

Stanley Kubrick was born on July 26th 1928 in New York City to Jaques Kubrick, a doctor, and Sadie Kubrick. He grew up in the Bronx, New York, together with his younger sister, Barbara. Kubrick never did well in school, “seeking creative endeavors rather than to focus on his academic status” (Biography.com, 2014). While formal education didn’t seem to interest him, his two passions – chess and photography – were key in shaping the way his mind worked. His father was the one who exposed him from a young age to chess, in an attempt to find something that would interest his son. “Chess in particular offers a clue to the elements that constitute Kubrick and helps to explain why he made certain films and not others – and why he made them in certain ways and not in others” (Walker, Taylor, & Ruchti, 1999). Kubrick recognized later on the importance of chess in his attitude and approach to cinematography: “If chess has any relationship to filmmaking, it would be in the way it helps you develop patience and discipline in choosing between alternatives at a time when impulsive decision seems very attractive.” His father also introduced him to photography, when he bought him a camera for his thirteenth birthday. As it turns out, this was an even more inspired attempt as Kubrick had an eye for photography. He started taking pictures for the school paper and “at age 16, began selling his photos to *Look* magazine. A year later, he was hired for the staff of the magazine.” (Biography.com, 2014). Working for the magazine allowed him to travel and expand his photography skills, while also saving the money that financed his first filmmaking effort, the short movie called *Day of the Fight* (1951). His short was bought by RKO, one of the Big Five studios of Hollywood’s Golden Age, and played at the Paramount Theatre in New York. At only twenty-one, Kubrick’s success with his first attempt at filmmaking and his youth resulted in him quitting his job at the magazine and set in motion a new trajectory for his career. This change and his curiosity about the world turned him into a voracious reader and film watcher, especially at the Museum of Modern Art. “But his early curiosity was mainly about technique, not content” (Walker, Taylor, & Ruchti, 1999).

After another short movie commissioned by RKO, “Kubrick raised about \$10,000 from his father and an uncle to direct his first feature, *Fear and Desire* (1953)” (Walker, Taylor, & Ruchti, 1999), which he later referred to as “undramatic and embarrassingly pretentious.” His second attempt at a feature, *The Killer’s Kiss* (1955), was also financed by friends and relatives. This movie demonstrated he was an original new voice in the field of cinematography. Although he wasn’t particularly proud of these two films, they were important because they helped him develop his sensibilities and gain more real world experience. Nevertheless, maybe the most important consequence was that his second movie created the opportunity to meet James B. Harris and create the producer-director partnership that allowed Kubrick to start making professional films.

Kubrick's early work demonstrated that he was an original new talent, but it was his first film in partnership with Harris that put him on Hollywood's radar. *The Killing* (1956), a movie about a gang of petty criminals who plan and execute a daring race-track robbery, was well received and "critics praised it chiefly for the brilliance of its construction, the precise working out of the racetrack robbery in it, and the way in which events that overlap in time are integrated into the suspense by audacious and ingenious flashback techniques" (Walker, Taylor, & Ruchti, 1999). This movie was also the starting point for a unique voice and vision that would distinguish itself from all others and would become a heavy influence for so many other great filmmakers. Kubrick's "auteur" methods and critical status began to take shape starting with *The Killing*. From this point forward he would take more and more control over his films, from writing to directing, the only exception being *Spartacus*.

Stanley Kubrick is part of the New Hollywood film wave and he is frequently cited as a source of inspiration and one of the most influential directors by many contemporary filmmakers including Martin Scorsese¹, Christopher Nolan (Jensen, 2013) and Frank Darabont (Monahan, 2002). On the DVD of *Eyes Wide Shut*, Steven Spielberg comments that the way Kubrick "tells a story is antithetical to the way we are accustomed to receiving stories" and that "nobody could shoot a picture better in history." (Spielberg, 1999)

Kubrick's artistry stands out in the remarkable beauty of his pictures, their aesthetics and intensity that at the same time entice and unsettle the audience. The careful use of space, shape, line, tone, color, rhythm and movement convey emotions and has a lasting impact, as a magnetic force mysteriously lures the audience in the universe he creates. Think of the boy riding his little bike through the endless corridors of the hotel and his encounter with the twins in *The Shining*; the striking vastness and monumental silence of outer space in *2001: A Space Odyssey*; the magnificence of the War Room in *Dr. Strangelove*. The use of classical music as well as silence, the editing, the techniques used to show the outer space and the magnificent cinematography in *2001: A Space Odyssey* ensure that Stanley Kubrick will always have a special place reserved in the history of film. In addition, he also contributed from a technical perspective, being one of the pioneers of steadicam as *The Shining* was one of the first films to use the technology (Tiffen, 2016).

Trying to answer the question of what is it that made Kubrick the director that he was and what made his style recognizable is definitely not an easy task due to the complexity and diversity of his work. In an interview with French film critic Michael Ciment about *A Clockwork Orange*, Kubrick said: "There is no deliberate pattern to the stories that I have chosen to make into films. About the only factor at work each time is that I try not to repeat myself." While his films are always different, a recurring characteristic is that he was constantly trying to push boundaries, look for new concepts and explore possibilities.

Themes in Kubrick's work include the dehumanizing effects of violence and war, the human psyche, society and norms, evolution, man vs. machine. Although his movies are in essence thematically different, there are recurring elements that he seeks to explore from different angles.

Paths of Glory (1957), featuring Kirk Douglas, was his first studio film with a major star. It is a film about the dehumanizing effects of war and a criticism of military misconduct, themes he would also explore in his later movies. *Paths of Glory* confirmed his talent and further shaped his status of up-and-coming auteur. Douglas then brought in Kubrick as a last-minute replacement for director Anthony Mann on his epic *Spartacus* several years later. However, Kubrick was unhappy with the production process and the lack of control he had, making him take further steps into having autonomy and implicitly becoming an auteur.

¹ Martin Scorsese talks about Stanley Kubrick on "Charlie Rose" – June 15th, 2001

One memorable element is the chateau, a place of order and elegance, with mirrored walls, baroque furnishing and palatial staircases that somehow has an eerie vibe. Kubrick creates a striking contrast through its juxtaposition with the trench world, cutting from the elegance of the military establishment to the reality of war. Through the use of lighting and space he defines the physical reality of the world portrayed. An interesting approach is the use of the binoculars view to emphasize war as a sport for those high up the chain of command.

A particular characteristic of Kubrick's work is the way he uses the camera to increase dramatic tension and to draw the viewer in the middle of the action. He does so by taking advantage of the mobility of the camera and carefully planning shooting angles to increase visual intensity. The horizontal advance of the camera and the use of zooming on the battleground or the lateral movements in the court-martial are ways of visually dramatizing the action. This type of camera work is extensively used in *2001: A Space Odyssey* with the same purpose in mind. Through the use of space, light and shadows Kubrick creates an environment that reflects the characters' internal emotional state. For example the agony of the men awaiting execution is emphasized in their environment that suggests that they are trapped, there is no way out, creating a claustrophobic feeling. A similar approach is evident in Kubrick's subsequent films, *Dr. Strangelove* and *2001*. The sets have an important role as part of the total concept, creating an environment that contains, defines and dominates the protagonists, as exemplified by the chateau in *Paths of Glory*, the War Room in *Dr. Strangelove*, and the Wheel in *2001*. Similarly, in *The Shining* the hotel is a character in its own right, determining the fate of its inhabitants.

Kubrick moved to England to shoot his highly controversial *Lolita* (1962), the tragicomic story of a middle-aged professor who becomes infatuated with a fourteen-year-old nymphet. This was the film that further affirmed his status of auteur.

He went on to further explore the comedic territory with a humorous take on the Cold War in his satire *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). It was a success right away as it was striking a nerve for much of his audience, due to the very real threat of global nuclear annihilation. Again the story is Kubrick's basic ingredient in filmmaking that is brilliantly developed through the use of satire and elevated by the actors' performances. Time and space are central elements to the construction of the film, as the action is confined to a few hours and three settings, each being sealed off from the others. Kubrick emphasizes the feeling of helplessness that results from being locked in by certain physical circumstances or emotional situations. Kubrick's interest in the idea of man vs. machine becomes apparent, as the crew of the bomber plane are not aware of the machinery they have created, a theme Kubrick is to develop further in *2001*. The machinery takes over and the spinning counters, revolving numbers and clicking codes seal in the crew's fate and ultimately the world's as the bomber heads to Russia. This idea is reiterated in *2001*, as HAL 9000 turns against his masters.

Dr. Strangelove was followed by Kubrick's first science-fiction film, considered a very influential benchmark effort for the genre as well as cinema in general. It is worth mentioning that it was the first time he used color. Probably his most famous film and the one cited most frequently as being influential in many filmmakers' work is *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The film explores the theme of evolution, entertaining the idea of extraterrestrial intervention in each step of man's evolution from 'The Dawn of Man' to twenty-first century human to astral being. Kubrick wanted the audience to interpret the film their way and it is filled with metaphors, open to interpretation. However, Kubrick described it as "a mythological documentary" (Walker, Taylor, & Ruchti, 1999). He dared to break from the traditional telling of the story through words, and there is no dialogue in the first half hour of the film. He used a narrative structure different from most movies at the time, creating something that falls in between experimental non-narrative film and the traditional plot-driven film. The structure, thought-provoking imagery, and open-ended conclusion of *2001* invites us to actively interpret and question what we see as well as our senses and perceptions.

Stylistically, *2001* reasserts over and over Kubrick's fascination with visual symmetry, a trait apparent starting with his early work. Again, he uses depth and camera movement to allow the viewer to step into space, similar to the use of camera movement in *Paths of Glory*.

HAL 9000, the infallible machine designed to control the mission and built to reason logically, takes on a sinister higher purpose, following his own agenda, therefore dramatizing again the conflict between man and machine. A striking moment is when the two astronauts retreat into the pod to discuss HAL's irrational behavior, without him being able to overhear them. Kubrick uses symmetry to signal the crisis, framing the two astronauts facing each other inside the oval window of the space pod. We see their lips moving, from HAL's point of view and we realize that he is able to read lips. Another recurring theme is the dehumanization of death, as HAL shuts off the power maintaining the crew alive. Kubrick creates intensity and tension through the use of close ups and color of the crew's electronic charts that eventually flat line. Another element that stands out is the way Kubrick uses silence, sound and speed for their dramatic purposes. Probably the most obvious moment is when Bowman is trapped outside the ship, as there is no sound until he reaches the safety of breathable space.

The end sequence shows again his ability to create contrast through the use of space. As opposed to the spaceship, the bedroom suite at the end is elegant, with period mirrors, side tables, vases and a quilted bed. The carefully created sets are a trademark in all of Kubrick's movies.

A Clockwork Orange (1971) is another example of Kubrick pushing film boundaries, with its dark humor, disturbingly graphic imagery, visual style and synth-classical score. It is the story of a vicious teenage gang leader whose violent free will is stripped from him by an authoritarian society attempting his rehabilitation. Like in *2001*, Kubrick creates a complex relationship between music and emotion, as well as music and movement. He also pays close attention to the lighting in each scene, using only the illumination one would expect to find in the actual environment. An example would be the scene where Alex's brainwashing begins or the War Room in *Dr. Strangelove*.

The Shining (1980) opens with a wide shot conveying the impression of man dwarfed by the vastness of its environment. The importance of the set is evident again, the cursed Overlook Hotel having an ominous feel and dominating the protagonists. *The Shining* explores the decay of the human psyche, dealing "with a violent personal conflict in the life of its central character, a self-tortured, reclusive writer named Jack Torrance whose creative juices simply won't start flowing" (Walker, Taylor, & Ruchti, 1999). The Overlook Hotel provides the perfect setting to see Kubrick's favorite framing devices at work. The corridors in the hotel become passageways to another world and we see again and again his predilection towards symmetry which suggests impending doom. Wendy discovers Jack's secret, his mania being exposed in the repetition of an old-fashioned schoolbook's maxim. Danny, the son, encounters the former caretaker's murdered daughters, the identical twins at the end of the long hallway who stand very still but invite Danny to join them, creating a very creepy apparition. Kubrick also plays with angles, framing and points of view to increase the dramatic tension when Wendy confronts her husband. As the dramatic tension increases and despite her being higher on the staircase indicating she has the upper hand, as the framing gets tighter, Jack appears to gain control and dominate the situation.

Stanley Kubrick was a genius who shaped cinematography as an art form and had a lasting impact on many future generations of film makers. His legacy was concluded after a long search for a new subject by his thirteenth and final film, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999).

I believe nobody can describe Kubrick's work better than Martin Scorsese: "Watching a Kubrick film is like gazing up at a mountaintop. You look up and wonder, how could anyone have climbed that high?" (The Criterion Collection, 2013).

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