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The Mystery of Stanley Kubrick

Joel Bellman · Thursday, December 6th, 2012

In 1956, Henri Georges-Clouzot – “the French Hitchcock” revered for celebrated thrillers like *The Wages of Fear* and *Diabolique* – took a break from the genre filmmaking for which he was best known to explore a different kind of psychological terrain: the origin of artistic creativity, and more specifically, *The Mystery of Picasso*, an extraordinary documentary in which over the course of 78 minutes we witness Picasso creating some 20 original paintings and drawings, which were deliberately destroyed at the conclusion of the filming.

An austere limbo-lit opening reveals the artist, alone among his canvases and sketch boards, frowning in concentration as he mulls where to begin. “One would die to know what was on Rimbaud’s mind when he wrote ‘The Drunken Boat,’ or on Mozart’s, when he composed his symphony *Jupiter*,” the titles somberly reflect as Picasso moves silently through the shadows. “We’d love to know the secret process guiding the creator through his perilous adventures.” They continue, “Thankfully, what is impossible to know for poetry and music is not in the case of painting. To know what’s going through a painter’s mind, one just needs to look at his hand.”



But can we? In part, that’s the assumption that lies behind the new [Stanley Kubrick exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), a show that originated in Germany in 2004 and has since traveled through several European capitals and London on its way to Los Angeles. Having opened in November, the show is on view through June. It features a stunning array of original scripts, storyboards, personal correspondence, technical equipment, and numerous iconic costumes and props. Video presentations augment the exhibits with film excerpts, commentary and documentary exploration of Kubrick’s influences and inspirations.

An accompanying weekend [film series of Kubrick’s complete oeuvre](#) of three shorts and 13 features produced over the course of 48 years concludes in a few weeks with his final work, *Eyes Wide Shut*, completed, but for a little post-production polish, only weeks before Kubrick’s death in 1999 at the age of 70 from a heart attack. All features, as well as one of the shorts, happily are now readily available on DVD or Blu-Ray, though all benefit from, and several demand, proper theatrical presentations on the big screen. Kubrick occupies a unique place in the film canon.

Born in the Bronx in 1928, he developed an early fascination with and great aptitude for photography that landed him a position, at 17, as a staff photographer for *Look* magazine when he submitted a striking portrait in April 1945 of a grieving news dealer surrounded by publications announcing President Roosevelt’s death. His subsequent work over the next six years, superbly curated in [Stanley Kubrick: Drama & Shadows: Photographs 1945–1950](#) (Phaidon), is a virtual précis of the gritty tabloid style that would emerge in *Day of the Fight*, a short based on Kubrick’s

earlier photo essay for Look on the boxer Walter Cartier, later to be refined in his highly entertaining and skillfully made noir melodramas *Killer's Kiss* (1955) and *The Killing* (1956). His debut feature, *Fear and Desire* (1953), a flawed but fascinating anti-war allegory, had been suppressed for decades by Kubrick out of sheer embarrassment as an amateur effort (only one known print, held in the archives of Eastman House in Rochester, New York, had survived, a source for numerous inferior bootleg copies), but that, too, has finally become commercially available in a beautiful new restoration, offering fresh insights into the development of themes and visual tropes that would recur again and again in later more mature works.

With *Paths of Glory* (1957), his masterful adaptation of the 1935 Humphrey Cobb novel about a trio of French soldiers in World War I falsely executed for cowardice, Kubrick emerged as a formidable new talent. Kubrick's sinuous camerawork, showcased in stunning tracking shots on the battlefield, in the trenches, and gliding among the waltzing dancers in a splendid chateau, was complemented by the superb screenplay of Calder Wallingham and cult pulp-fiction master Jim Thompson (who had previously collaborated with Kubrick in adapting *The Killing* from Lionel White's novel *Clean Break*).

Spartacus (1960), however, proved something of an embarrassment for Kubrick, expertly made and a major commercial success, but also an impersonal and artistically unsatisfying work for hire when star Kirk Douglas, eager to work with Kubrick again after their critical triumph of *Paths of Glory*, tapped him to replace director Anthony Mann after shooting had already begun. Soured by the whole experience, it would be the last Hollywood movie Kubrick would make; the following year he decamped for England, never to return.

Of *Lolita* (1962), adapting Vladimir Nabokov's notorious novel of tragic pedophilic obsession, what fellow director William Friedkin has noted is certainly true: though it has been somewhat overlooked in the body of Kubrick's work, much of the film's dark humor, meticulous compositions, baroque characters and arch dialogue prefigures *Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb* (1964), certainly one of Kubrick's best known and justly celebrated films, the blackest imaginable satire on the quite real dangers and fears of nuclear annihilation. Through nearly 50 years, *Strangelove* remains a singular achievement, having lost none of its bite, wit or subversive political critique.

Three of Kubrick's subsequent works will probably be most familiar to today's viewers: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and *The Shining* (1980), a trio of film adaptations treating the familiar themes of space exploration and man's place in the cosmos, the perils of a dystopian future, and the evil permeating a haunted hotel, in radical new ways that wholly redefined their respective genres. Rounding out his filmography are *Barry Lyndon* (1975), a scrupulous translation, richly costumed and suffused in candlelight, of Thackeray's tale of the rise and fall of an ambitious but callow youth; *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), a chaotic and surrealistic tale of the Vietnam War; and finally *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), his widely misunderstood and unjustly overlooked adaptation (by novelist and screenwriter Frederic Raphael) of Arthur Schnitzler's erotic and deeply disturbing fever dream, *Dream Story*.

One can spend hours viewing his films, peruse volumes analyzing every aspect of their content from frame to philosophy, and scrutinize this exhibit's trove of primary source materials and learned commentary. But are we any closer to solving the mystery of Stanley Kubrick? The extraordinary classical formalism of his filmmaking technique, his overarching obsession with detail in every aspect from technical production and historical fidelity to the subtlest nuances of performance, the savage irony, the unflinching gaze into the depths of suffering and psychic distress, his preoccupations with war, his profoundly subversive commentary on society and its moral failings?

One must finally conclude that Georges-Clouzot got it wrong. As Picasso painted with oil and

watercolor, Kubrick painted with light, but while we may watch their hand, we still cannot know what was in their minds. Film has ensured that their work will be preserved for the ages, subject to the most exhaustive examination, but the nature of their artistry remains a magnificent, endlessly fascinating but ultimately unfathomable mystery.

Image from 2001: A Space Odyssey.

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