

KUBRICK: A TRUE ARTIST. AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIANE KUBRICK AND JAN HARLAN

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ABSTRACT

In May 2014 an exhibition opened in the National Museum in Krakow, Poland, devoted to one of the greatest filmmakers – Stanley Kubrick. Christiane, Kubrick's wife, and her brother, Jan Harlan, himself a long time collaborator of Kubrick's, have selected a few hundred items related to individual films and put them on display, so providing a once in a lifetime experience for anybody wanting to immerse themselves in the Kubrickian universe. In the interview, Christiane Kubrick and Jan Harlan discuss the idea behind the exhibition as well as their life and work with the late great director.

KEY WORDS: Kubrick, exhibition, Krakow, Christiane, Harlan, interview.

RESUMEN

«Kubrick: un verdadero artista. Entrevista con Christiane Kubrick y Jan Harlan». El Museo Nacional de Cracovia inauguró en mayo de 2014 una exposición sobre Stanley Kubrick, que supuso una oportunidad única para el visitante interesado en el universo del director. En ella se exhiben varios cientos de objetos y referencias coleccionados por su viuda, Christiane, y el hermano de ésta, Jan Harlan, quien a su vez fue un estrecho colaborador suyo. En la entrevista que sigue, ambos comentan la idea que dio origen a la exposición, así como sus experiencias personales y profesionales con el gran cineasta fallecido.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Kubrick, exposición, Cracovia, Christiane, Harlan, entrevista.

The untimely death of Stanley Kubrick 15 years ago was a terrible blow to anybody interested in cinema. A mythical figure, a passionate moralist, a visionary filmmaker whose films redefined film art – it would be quite easy to compile a lengthy list of similar descriptions. What, in my opinion, made Kubrick special was the fact that each and every film of his offers a complete, self-sustaining universe in its own unique way. Who would have thought of any other filmmaker capable of delivering, within one decade, such a diverse, and yet such a groundbreaking, string of films as *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Barry Lyndon* (1975) and *The Shining* (1980)? Stanley Kubrick may have made only 13 features, but nearly all of them crop up



in film anthologies or academic textbooks as examples of film art at its best. In the whole history of movies and film criticism, not too many entire books have been written to dissect and ponder over the mystery of just one movie: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) has nearly half a dozen of them. And counting.

A perfectionist at work, to some Kubrick was just an obsessive collector of everything connected with his subsequent film projects, whereas to others – a meticulous researcher on a quest for the ultimate filmic experience. His passion for information over the years resulted in his acquiring an enormous number of items related to his films: books, props, costumes, letters, records, items of furniture, etc. The director piled up all this stuff in his country house outside St. Albans where he lived with his family. His death only a few days after the completion of *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) meant that suddenly all these items acquired a historical value. Given such an opportunity, who would not have wanted to sneak into to the mind of the film genius and search through all the notes, clippings and props from his films?

Christiane, Stanley Kubrick's wife, and her brother, Jan Harlan, himself a long time collaborator of Kubrick's, have enabled us to experience just that. They have selected a few hundred items related to individual films and put them on display in museums, so providing a once in a lifetime experience for anybody wanting to immerse themselves in the Kubrickian universe. Therefore, one may read the production notes, see Jack Nicholson's typewriter from *The Shining*, admire the model of the Discovery spaceship used in *2001*, see Alex's original costume from *A Clockwork Orange*, or the Venetian masks from *Eyes Wide Shut*. Such unusual exhibits are accompanied by dozens of newspaper cuttings, letters, memos and other documents chronicling the production process of Kubrick's films starting with his first short *Day of the Fight* and ending with the last feature.

Artur Piskorz: Over the last decade the exhibition has toured the world, eventually arriving in Krakow. Here, it opened to great acclaim in early May 2014. Prior to the event, I went to talk to Christiane and Jan in St. Albans. Entering the house of Stanley Kubrick was a thrilling experience. After lunch at the huge table, stolen – in Christiane's words – from the set of *The Shining*, we settled for coffee in the library to talk all things Kubrick. I began by asking about the idea behind the exhibition.

Christiane Kubrick: When Stanley died we inherited all his things and didn't know what to do with them. There was an ocean of boxes and technical equipment and it was very painful to see all these boxes getting dusty, all the papers growing yellow. I was in despair and didn't know what to do. And then we went to an exhibition in the Frankfurt Film Museum and I realised how interesting it is to see how films are made. So, I thought there was something I could do with all these things. And I got an archivist from Frankfurt who lived with us for 8 months selecting the stuff that would be good for the exhibition.

Jan Harlan: It was about 10 years ago when Sir Ken Adam invited us to the opening of his exhibition in Frankfurt. We met Hans-Peter Reichmann who suggested working on the idea of a similar exhibition dedicated to the work of Stanley Kubrick. I contacted all the studios to get permission to include the films



and images, documents and designs owned by them in the exhibition, borrowing items we did not own ourselves, etc.

AP: Knowing the number of items collected by Stanley Kubrick over the years, how difficult was it to select the items and what criteria did you employ?

JH: We followed two criteria: they must not be private and they must not be boring or repetitive. What is left is what we think will be interesting either for the general public, or more specifically, for film students. An exhibition has to be suitable for people who just want to have a good time and for those who really want to delve into the details. The exhibition was a huge success. Berlin followed Frankfurt. Then Melbourne, Gent, Zurich, Rome, Paris, Amsterdam, Los Angeles, Sao Paulo and now Krakow.

AP: It has been fifteen years since Stanley Kubrick's death. I remember the day very well. It was a Sunday. I got a phone call from my friend who told me to turn on the television..

CK: I was very sad and devastated, because he died too young. And so suddenly. When he finished the last film he looked so pale. He didn't really look well at all. I thought he ought to go to a doctor, but he was a doctor's son, so he believed he was a doctor.

AP: And he used to wear this copper bracelet...

CK: Don't get me going! I told him this was witchcraft. He was totally exhausted. Stanley looked very much like his mother, had the same physique. She had a heart attack at 70 and did not die, but then died for years. Because her heart was so damaged. In a way I console myself – had he not died he would have been an invalid. It was so serious, so horrendous. He looked like he had died in his sleep. There was nothing in his face that looked like suffering.

AP: One of my immediate thoughts on that Sunday was: there is not going to be another Stanley Kubrick film. And then – what about *Eyes Wide Shut*?

CK: Luckily the film was finished. We had to do the music and deal with the advertising. We had one censorship thing – the orgy. We superimposed some images, blocking the objectionable fornication. Which was stupid, because it was meant to be shocking. Stanley wanted it to look like a cliché of a Roman orgy. And the only orgies that we are allowed to hear about are what the Romans did. Which was something to do with eating grapes, drinking wine and somehow having no furniture and lying on the floor. And that was the point, despite people complaining it was a cliché.

JH: He bought the rights to Arthur Schnitzler's *Dream Story* in 1970 and initially wanted to do it as a very low budget art house move. In black and white, in Dublin and London, dressing them up very simply as New York. He wanted to do it with Woody Allen, who would have been a Jewish doctor in New York. Later, Stanley realised Woody Allen would have been handicapped, because he would have very easily been labelled as being neurotic, not very attractive, not having been successful with women and, therefore, having excuses to behave badly. This is



why he chose two pretty people who have none of these hang-ups and make their own unhappiness themselves. But he was never happy with the script and never contacted Woody Allen.

CK: It was very important to cast people who are clearly very successful, balanced and are both good to look at. And suddenly, out of boredom, selfishness and emotional sloppiness they start biting each other. There are so many couples who do exactly that. So Stanley said there is an insight in this story and I thought he made a very good film about it. Unfortunately, in both the US and Britain the film was not a success. It was totally misunderstood in England. People were laughing at it. But in Japan, South America, the Latin countries and the whole of Southern Europe it was a huge success. We got a fax from the Japan office in Tokyo saying: it is amazing this film. Couples are leaving the cinema holding hands.

JH: What Stanley he feared most was to make a big statement in a mediocre way. He was always afraid of not getting it right. That's why it took him so long. Almost three years. What is so difficult about *Eyes Wide Shut* is that it is an internal story, it is very un-filmic. The novel itself is about processing thoughts. It is a film about sexual fantasy and jealousy. And everybody in an audience is an expert on these two topics. But this is something that is not easily put into words or on the screen. Since Stanley was colossally demanding on himself he struggled with the story.

AP: Maybe the marketing was a mistake?

CK: The marketing was very much at fault. I had no power over it at all. The press went on saying: Kubrick is finally making a sexy movie. It is going to be very sleazy. Very pornographic. I remember making dozens of phone calls asking them not to follow this form of advertising since it was leading people in the wrong direction, to expect a pornographic film. But they would not listen to a widow.

AP: The image of Stanley Kubrick we are getting right now seems to be in total contradiction to the one we remember from the past.

CK: After he died, I was asked so many times whether he was so horrible, a hater of women and all these things. So my whole family got together and decided that we have to speak up for him. It was quite difficult for us because we had led very protected lives and did not even realise that he was so well known. I wasn't used to speaking in public before and my husband would have been shocked to see me doing just that today. Stanley did not like to speak to journalists. He didn't think he would enjoy being on chat shows with them. So the media turned against him.

AP: But he must have been aware even then of all the legends surrounding his life – the fear of flying, driving a car at slow speeds, wearing a helmet, being a hermit, etc.

CK: He was not a hermit for a second. He could not shut up. He was a huge talker. Immensely intense, emotional. He was extremely gregarious. We always had guests, always had a house full of people. He just didn't like going to famous restaurants where all the showbiz people used to go, because he would be sitting at a table and they would come to him and ask 'how is it going, Stanley?' He hated



travelling and had no reason to leave the house, since he could work at home. His studio was there.

JH: The fact that he didn't fly was just that, a fact. It was a phobia he developed after having flown single-engine airplanes for many years himself. He was a licensed pilot. Most of the other stories are invented nonsense. Since he never contradicted anyone, these stories grew. Also he was not recognised. People did not know what he looked like because he never went on television.

AP: Hence the Alan Conway story – Stanley's impostor...

CK: Typical. That was nasty. We got letters from parents saying 'my son has been molested by Stanley Kubrick'. And the police tried to find the man and actually did, but he died. That story upset Stanley a lot. I am glad he did not have to live through the Internet days. I cannot imagine what they would write about him. It would have been horrendous.

AP: Was it difficult to run a house that also served as a production studio?

CK: I am a terrible housewife and we never managed. It was like a factory. But Stanley was always very tolerant of my being a messy painter. We both created a mess. But it functioned. Stanley worked from home and I did too. In spite of what outsiders must have seen, it was not so chaotic. But certainly our house was never tidy.

AP: Who shaped his personality?

CK: His mother, probably. She was a very lovely and very intelligent woman. His father too. I think Stanley was very much loved and admired as a child. It gave him the strength to have an enormous interest in life and be very creative. I also think he inherited from his mother the best sense of humour I have ever come across. He loved life. He lived for the moment and he certainly was not a misanthrope. I thought he was sometimes impossible. But he thought the same about me. We had fights but it was never serious. I never doubted that I was important to him. Also we both had been married before and had had the opposite experience.

AP: You met on the set of *Paths of Glory*. What made you choose Stanley as a man?

CK: I chose him instantly. On sight. I did not know what to think about some American film director before I met him. There is no woman in *Paths of Glory* and Stanley wanted to end the film on a lyrical note. So he wrote a scene in which a German girl is dragged onto the stage. Stanley simply saw me on television and called my agent and I thought it would be good to appear in an American film. That was it, nothing else. So we were very lucky. The rest is history.

AP: You are a successful painter yourself. How did your husband inspire you? And do you think you inspired him in any way?

CK: Your influence on someone you can never tell. You assume you have. Whether that assumption is true I do not know. We were certainly together all the time. We were never separate. He certainly influenced me. But that was easy



to understand because he was a very unique personality. I would not put myself on that pedestal at all. But I think he dragged me up there with him. Only in the sense that he loved me, did I have some influence. Otherwise I would not categorise myself as being influential.

AP: Was Stanley aware of the fact that he was not just making «a film», but that he was making «a Stanley Kubrick film»?

CK: He just hoped and prayed that people would like it. That it would be good. In order to ask oneself «is this going to be a SK film?» one has to be incredibly opinionated. And he was not. Stanley was incredibly self-critical and very aware of his position, so as not to disappoint Warner Brothers. To keep being their favourite child because it would allow him to make the next film. He knew that, since he was his own producer. That was solidly in place.

AP: How do you perceive the significance of Stanley Kubrick's films 15 years after his death? How are they being re-evaluated and reinterpreted?

JH: Kubrick's films have not disappeared. This is the mark of a true artist. It is not that the audiences immediately loved all his films, by no means. He usually split the audiences and critics. All true artists share this problem, whether they are Vincent van Gogh or Picasso, Wagner or Penderecki, Bergman or Kiesłowski. Beginning with *2001* you can say that nothing has aged. We are still as ignorant as ever about how evolution started and how will it end. We do not know and Stanley did not claim to know. *2001* is not a science-fiction film at all. This is just a vehicle, a shape. It is really a respectful expression of ignorance. *2001* changed the genre forever.

CK: *2001* is an expression of ignorance and frustration, of having a brain large enough to know it is so small. Unless you have a very definite religion which paints you a very definite picture: there is God, there is somebody watching you from up there and loving you and if you do not do this or that you are going to hell. You are being written a script of what you should do, or what you should think. If you do not have that, then every single person constantly thinks about that frustration. *2001* puts you in that mood. Stanley loved fantasising about that – he and Arthur C. Clarke went on forever about the things that might have been true.

AP: Kubrick's first feature, *Fear and Desire*, came out on Blu-ray in 2013. We know that he disowned it, but, even 60 years after its release, it does not appear such a bad film after all. I would personally claim the opposite.

CK: Stanley thought it was amateurish. If you are a writer and you wrote something when you were 19 or 20 and even if it was quite good, you are going to look at it with a very critical eye. He never let me see it.

JH: It is the artist alone who has to be the judge and nobody else. He did not like the film, put it on a shelf. Fair enough. As for the disc – this is a legal question. It was his fault, because it was his personal property, but he never registered the copyright which expires after 50 years. Therefore, somebody else could legally bring out the film. We did not support it, we did not want it, but there was nothing we



could do about it. They would say – he was such a master artist, we must honour him! Rubbish! They want to make money. You get property that costs you nothing. All you have to do is print the DVDs. It is a great temptation. End of story.

AP: There are a number of unfinished projects Kubrick worked on. One of them, *AI*, was eventually filmed by Steven Spielberg in 2001.

JH: Stanley loved Brian Aldiss' *Supertoys Last All Summer Long* that the film is based on. We did a lot of pre-production and then Stanley decided to give it to Spielberg. He thought Steven would be a better director for this film. He also knew it would be a bit too dark and thought that Steven would lighten it up. If you analyse *AI* it is a deadly serious story: we are gone. Humanity has disappeared. The only thing that is left are our robots. And in the script Stanley did not even explain why. It is a given. The way we live we have no chance of survival. We will destroy ourselves. Steven was very faithful to Stanley's script. And he did not want to alter it, unless he had to.

AP: The *Napoleon* project?

JH: There is a good chance it will be made as a TV series in six to eight episodes with Steven Spielberg as an executive producer. But nothing definite as yet.

Kubrick worked also on the Holocaust film – *Aryan Papers*. Was it because of his Jewish heritage and the fact that his family came from that part of Europe? He considered shooting on location in Poland. Why did it not work out?

CK: Like most Jewish families, Stanley's family came from all over that part of the continent. His mother came from Kiev, his father from today's Romania. There were also relatives from Poland. When Stanley was a young man he would very much have wanted to see all these countries, which was then impossible. The reason he did not do the Holocaust film was quite different. He wanted to be totally informed. Of course, he was informed, most Jews know the story. He had thought about it for a long time. Stanley had had many experiences of anti-Semitism as a journalist in America. He was beaten up as a child. All the typical things – Christian and Jewish gangs. And he feared anti-Semitism. Even professionally. And when he came to the Holocaust story, there was a moment when he realised he could not imagine it at all. He was too frightened, too horrified. And then you have to show it on the screen. And this is why he said he could not make it. He was too scared.

JH: Stanley was not interested in a documentary. He wanted a dramatic and artistic depiction of the lowest point in human history. He finally thought he had found it in Louis Begley's *Wartime Lies* – a story about a Jewish boy who managed to get out of the net of Nazi occupation in Poland. We were in touch with the studio in Warsaw and searched for locations in Poland and in what was then Czechoslovakia. The film was cancelled when Kubrick and Warner Bros. decided that it was a poor business decision to follow Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* with a similar topic.

AP: Could you explain Kubrick's approach to some technical aspects of filmmaking such as the sound, minimalist opening credits, image aspect ratio? I am intrigued by the fact that *2001*, made in 1968, has a stereo soundtrack, but *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) is in mono albeit with a Dolby sound.



JH: Generally speaking, technical aspects were only of secondary importance. They needed to serve the story and were never imperative as such. At the time of *A Clockwork Orange* we had a big discussion on sound with the Dolby men. Stanley said, «Look, I am not taking the risk. There are too many projectors out there that are not geared for optical stereo sound. Let's go for Dolby, because Dolby reduces the hiss of the soundtrack. Have it mono.» And we had an additional advantage because of that, as we could use the 9th Symphony from Deutsche Gramophone which they did not have on their catalogue anymore because it was a mono recording. It was first class and we got it for very little money. As for *2001* it was released in 70mm. The film was printed without sound. On a positive stock. Then the film used magnetic strips. It was recorded on magnetic strips. Because you cannot put the film into the bath with magnetic strips.

Starting with the preparations for *Napoleon*, and then especially during those for *Barry Lyndon*, the creation of the appropriate image and light for the period was of great concern to Stanley, since this had been so well documented by the great painters of the day. The light sources after sunset were candles, fires, the moon. He desperately tried to re-create this atmosphere on set for *Barry Lyndon* and came across a 50mm f 0.7 lens by Zeiss developed for NASA and for satellite photography. It was a very cumbersome and time-consuming effort to construct this camera/lens combination and to film with practically no depth of field. For *The Shining* he used for the first time the so called Steadicam, an invention by Garrett Brown, which allows the camera to float without using tracks, dollies or cranes. It was brilliant in creating the effect he wanted – a ghostly atmosphere in a snowbound hotel.

When it comes to the aspect ratio – TV screens today have been standardised. So everybody now would use a format that fits the 16:9 ratio. When Stanley was making his films he had to deal with the old format. When the film was on television they either had to stretch it or squeeze it. And he never liked video. He would have loved Blu-ray because now you can see the film properly.

As for the opening credits, they were minimalist when he was able to insist on them being minimalist. They were not on *Lolita* or *Spartacus*. It was a contractual thing with the actors that their credits were upfront. If you have key credits upfront, you also have a camera man upfront and what have you. So then there was a problem as to how to make it interesting. And he was a master in this. In *Lolita* you see the foot of a girl and these fantastic walls and the credits. *Dr Strangelove* has a very famous opening credit. Never mind the credits. You see the airplanes refuelling in midair. What is really boring for people is reading all these credits without having seen the film. To them it does not mean anything.

AP: There is a documentary made by Vivian Kubrick on the making of *The Shining*. She also shot 18 hours of footage on the set of *Full Metal Jacket*. Would you release a similar documentary about this film as well?

JH: Basically, these are business decisions that are mainly in the hands of Warner Bros. My role here is only to support and help where I can. There is a lot of stuff on FMJ. So there is the possibility that sometime in the future a documentary will be released. Unfortunately, there is not much on the other films in terms of 'the making of'.



AP: Screenplays? Soundtracks?

JH: I am working with Warner Bros. to produce a soundtrack album for *The Shining*. It has to do with the economics of today. Soundtracks are not doing very well these days on the market. Unless it is a brand new film. I do not know anything about the economics. I just want it to be out. My role is to make sure that the name of Stanley Kubrick does not disappear.

Well, somehow it is difficult to imagine this happening, I think to myself. The coffee is finished, it is time to pay tribute to the master and visit his grave. A huge stone with the engraving sits in the corner of the vast garden, not far from the kitchen window. It is a touching moment to see Kubrick's name just next to Anya's name, his second daughter, who died a few years ago. A short, chilly Tuesday in February is coming to an end. Time to catch the train back to London.

