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### Stanley Kubrick, Jewish Filmmaker: A Review Essay

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### Abstract

This is a review of two books: Nathan Abrams, *Stanley Kubrick: New York Jewish Intellectual* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), and David Mikics, *Stanley Kubrick: American Filmmaker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

### Keywords

Stanley Kubrick, cinema, film, Jewish, religion, modernity, Hollywood

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### Author Notes

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## **Stanley Kubrick, Jewish Filmmaker: A Review Essay**

Nathan Abrams, *Stanley Kubrick: New York Jewish Intellectual* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018)

David Mikics, *Stanley Kubrick: American Filmmaker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020)

American cinema has a rich history of Jewish filmmaking and expression. Contemporary cinema is resplendent with notable Jewish film directors who provide significant visual and narrative voice to Jewish themes, characters, and experience, from Darren Aronofsky, Noah Baumbach, David Cronenberg, David Mamet, and Steven Spielberg to Mel Brooks, Stanley Kramer, Sidney Lumet, Paul Mazursky, Mike Nichols, Sidney Pollack, and Carl and Rob Reiner. This is not a new phenomenon, of course, as the Hollywood industrial complex emerged largely as an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish émigré enterprise (e.g., the first moguls and studio chiefs were first- and second generation Jewish immigrants to America).<sup>1</sup> Also, the golden age of Hollywood picture making, from the silent and early sound era to postwar film production, was dominated by key Jewish filmmakers (many of whom fled Europe in the interwar period) such as Ernst Lubitsch, Erich von Stroheim, Fritz Lang, William Wyler, George Cukor, and Max Ophüls.<sup>2</sup>

The latter name is particularly salient here, as Ophüls not only had a storied career as a Jewish film director in Germany, France, and eventually the US (having fled Germany after the Reichstag fire in 1933), but also because Ophüls' visual style (notably his smooth roving dolly shots) was a key influence on one of America's important film directors: Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick is lauded as one of the greatest American filmmakers and is routinely cited by a wide array of directors as instrumental to their own craft. At the same time, despite the accolades for Kubrick, he is not often cited in discussions of Jewish cinema, even though he was a Jewish filmmaker (and

had family in Eastern Europe who perished in the Holocaust). His films also are overlooked or neglected as exemplars of Jewish cinematic texts.

However, two recent titles admirably ameliorate the lacuna in the scholarship around the Jewish dimensions of Kubrick's life and work: Nathan Abrams's *Stanley Kubrick: New York Jewish Intellectual* (Rutgers, 2018) and David Mikics's *Stanley Kubrick: American Filmmaker* (Yale, 2020), the latter volume a part of Yale's Jewish Lives series. That they should both appear now in close conjunction is not mere coincidence, but the result of a concurrent set of scholarly circumstances. Kubrick Studies is a flourishing area of scholarly focus on account of the recent completion of the Stanley Kubrick Archives housed at the University of the Arts London, which affords researchers access to a nearly unprecedented amount of Kubrick's papers and files. In addition, there is increased attention to the ethnographic, material, cultural, and industrial conditions under which film work is conducted, creating the impetus to revisit cinematic canons and previous lines of interpretation.

Both Abrams and Mikics are genealogically indebted to the prior foundational work of Geoffrey Cocks on the subject of Kubrick as Jewish filmmaker.<sup>3</sup> Cocks's study was one of the first to focus extensively on Kubrick's Jewish ethnicity and its impact on Kubrick's cinematic output. Although Kubrick was not a religious practitioner, Cocks argued that Kubrick's dual connection to Viennese and Eastern European Jewish culture (via his family roots) and postwar American Jewish culture profoundly shaped Kubrick's filmmaking sensibilities. The former is reflected in Kubrick's lifelong zeal for the work of Freud, Kafka, Schnitzler, and Zweig, and his repeated use of the music of Bartók, Ligeti, and Penderecki. The latter undergirded Kubrick's tendency to understand himself as an American film artist and to sublimate Jewish themes and references in his work. The crux of Cocks's study is an argument that these paradoxical dimensions converged

in Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), which Cocks argues is Kubrick's most Jewish film as a subtextual, layered, and enigmatic (if indirect) exploration of the Holocaust as horror. Kubrick was unable to make his own Holocaust film, but as Cocks meticulously unfolds, *The Shining* is defined by its legion of overt and indirect references and symbolics of the Holocaust.

The new titles by Abrams and Mikics take up and advance lines of inquiry tentatively established in Cocks's study. Each, in fact, forwards refined, substantive theses that develop particular aspects and angles from Cocks. Abrams's study drills down into the distinctly New York Jewish context and situates Kubrick within a cultural milieu of dissident American Jewish artists, comedians, intellectuals, and writers. In this, Abrams traces out and underscores a notable dialectical character in Kubrick: on the one hand, a thoroughgoing Jewish cultural context and shape to Kubrick's work, and on the other, a consistent indirection, even erasure, of overt Jewish characterization within his films. At the same time, for Abrams, a defining trait of Kubrick's work is the persistent investigation of the Jewish concept of *menschlikayt* — what it means to be an ethical human being, particularly in light of the dual shape of the human character and the forces of political power and class that subtend it (9, 14-19, 269-272). Mikics's volume, likewise, situates Kubrick within the context of postwar American Jewish intellectual culture, connecting the pattern of evasion and indirection around overt Jewish flavors to the prevalent disposition within American Jewish art, literature, and politics to subtend Jewish identity *within* Americanism. In this regard, for Mikics, Kubrick's work can be seen as an extension of midcentury American Jewish art that understood its Jewishness as constitutive of, if subordinate to or even hidden from, American cultural production. Mikics discerns in this a dynamic that resulted in a universalizing tendency in Kubrick: Kubrick's cinema is embedded within midcentury Jewish Americanism while at the same time engaging in a robust critique of the European Enlightenment heritage that

hangs over modern culture, placing him within a constellation of artists who express the alienated and discorded character of human nature within modernity (6-13). Despite a genealogical primogeniture — and some overlap between the volumes — both represent a breakthrough in biographical and analytic coverage through extensive, fresh research based on the newly accessible materials in the Kubrick Archive.

Between the two volumes, the overlap is both structural and material. Abrams and Mikics take a largely chronological approach to Kubrick's life and career, each clustering Kubrick's output in the 1950s and early 1960s into initial chapters covering multiple films and dedicating individual, expansive treatment to his films from the mid-1960s through to his last, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), in separate chapters (Abrams, starting with *Lolita* [1962] in standalone, and Mikics with *Dr. Strangelove* [1964]). As well, both volumes pursue a hybrid material approach in their accounts, combining biography with critical film, cultural, and religious studies. In this, both volumes constructively portray art, particularly cinema, as deeply contextual: a vocation and mode of expression inseparable from the imbricate networks of personal and cultural practices.

Of the two volumes, Abrams's book is closest in intention and material focus to Cocks's analysis of the Jewish shape of Kubrick's oeuvre. In this, Abrams offers fine-grained readings and interpretations of Kubrick's career as a photographer and director, including insights into Kubrick's process of development and production.<sup>4</sup> Abrams is particularly attuned to the paradoxical pattern of Kubrick's erasure of overt Jewish representation from source material while simultaneously interweaving Jewish themes, symbols, and cultural textures into his art. For Abrams, this pattern is evident from the early stages of Kubrick's cinematic efforts—such as his reduction or excision of Jewish characters from *The Killing* (1956), *Paths of Glory* (1957) and *Spartacus* (1960) while casting notable Jewish actors in pivotal roles (43, 54-57, 62-65)—and

continued through to the end of his career in his long anticipated adaptation of *fin de siècle* Austrian Jewish writer Arthur Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle* as his final film, *Eyes Wide Shut*. Here Kubrick stripped the main character of his Jewish identity and reset the film not in Europe but in Christmastide New York City, while layering the film with many subtle, cryptic Jewish qualities (such that Abrams characterizes it as Kubrick's *Shema* —an eyes-covered prayer before death— and his most Jewish film [263-4]).<sup>5</sup> Also, although Kubrick shaved Jewish representation from source material, Abrams demonstrates how Kubrick's cinema is thoroughly grounded in and suffused with Jewish humor, philosophy, ethics, psychology, and culture. Films like *Lolita* (1962) and *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), for example, though based on literary and popular fiction are inconceivable apart from the ribald, subversive, even scatological humor Kubrick injected into the writing and visual grammar, which Abrams traces to the influence of fellow American Jewish writers and comedians like Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, and Jules Feiffer. Likewise, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and *The Shining* (1980) are ineluctably defined by Kubrick's deep immersion in Jewish mysticism, satire, psychology, and Freud's work on the uncanny. In Abrams's view, these are anchored in Kubrick's formation in the postwar intellectual culture of New York, especially his time as a student auditor at Columbia University. Even as Kubrick was a constant, voracious reader and learner throughout his life, and left the United States permanently for England in 1966, he remained an artistic and intellectual product profoundly shaped by the Jewish milieu of midcentury New York.

Alongside locating Kubrick within a cultural genealogy, a key cornerstone of Abrams's volume is the identification of a moral theme that runs through Kubrick's work. Though Kubrick was not religious — he often professed himself to be agnostic —, his art, Abrams argues, is a persistent investigation of the human character in both its tragic and triumphant dimensions as it

is challenged by war, technology, social and class politics, addiction, the nuclear family structure, and its own propensity to violence, greed, domination, and libido. Here, Abrams provides quite interesting and insightful readings of Kubrick's films as Jewish quests for the ethical human life that run through the entirety of his work, but especially *2001* (122-126, 128-141), *A Clockwork Orange* (150-153, 157-164), *Barry Lyndon* (182-188), *The Shining* (201-212), and *Full Metal Jacket* (229-237). Where others have seen Kubrick as a clinical, even misanthropic filmmaker, Abrams perceives an inquisitive, humanistic, even optimistic Jewish artist. In this, despite Kubrick's own evasion of religiosity, his cinema is what one might classify as apophatic: an illumination of transcendence and absence, a haunting and a hope that hangs over the individual, human societies and institutions, and the universe itself.

Mikics, likewise, in his new volume argues cogently for understanding Kubrick as a humanist film director. There are two key dimensions to this. On the one hand, in Mikics's view, this is explanatory of Kubrick's tendency to elide overtly Jewish representation: Kubrick had a universalist view that sought to understand and depict humanity in grand scale through epic themes, wherein Kubrick perceived Jewishness in characterization to be a limiting or provincializing factor. Kubrick sought a universal cinema, in which humankind is tested and probed by the challenges of nuclear annihilation, social alienation and unrest, war, revolution, institutional and technological failure, and political and economic inequality (77, 136-141). In this, Mikics argues, Kubrick's work is an extension of both American Jewish emigre culture (which often sublimated its Jewishness to Americanism) and the cinematic culture of Kubrick's Hollywood predecessors (in which US and European Jewish emigre directors and producers eschewed overtly Jewish stories, themes, and characters, preferring instead generic 'American' pictures and oblique allusions). This aspect to Kubrick has intellectual and artistic ligaments that



locate Kubrick's work within ethnographic and cinematic sets of genealogies. As such, Kubrick's humanistic universalism is, according to Mikics, a form of expression of Jewishness consonantly shaped by multiple streams constitutive of early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century American Jewish culture.

On the other hand, Mikics adduces Kubrick's humanism as a paradoxical extension and critique of post-Enlightenment modern liberalism (13). Kubrick's films are themselves monuments to (and of) the modernist achievements in art, literature, music, and scientific and technological progress. The innovative use and juxtaposition of baroque, classical, and avant-garde music with crisp, precise visuals, and technical mastery and invention of camera, lens, and lighting technology by Kubrick are modernist instincts that he exercised matchlessly.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Mikics argues that Kubrick's oeuvre is a testament to the limitations and failures of the modernist project of human mastery and control of natural, social, and technological spaces. One of the great ironies, in fact, is Kubrick's own penchant for complete control of the artistic and technical process in dogged pursuit of cinema illuminative of the human subject's failure in just this regard: his own work, the product of obsessive technical mastery and control, highlights the horrors and absurdities unleashed under the guise of progress — from trench warfare, mechanized and industrial death, and nuclear holocaust to technological overreach and malfunction, social unrest, institutional malaise and collapse, and existential alienation. What some perceive as cold and detached in Kubrick's work is the irrationality and concealment inherent in the underside of modernity, which Kubrick obsessively and repeatedly exposes. Kubrick was, in a peculiar way, the ultimate modern subject and modernity's chief prophet-critic (204).

While neither book engages explicitly with theory in film or religious studies, that should not be considered a deficit, as neither title is positioned as a critical account of Kubrick's cinema *qua* cinema or of Kubrick and his work as in themselves religious. Both, however, are rich in detail

of production history, script and process notes, and cultural history. Abrams does layer his interpretation of Kubrick's films with ample readings from Jewish literature and history, including the Kabbalist and liberationist traditions (notably post-Holocaust Jewish theology). Though briefer and more conventionally biographical, Mikics provides significant snapshots of Kubrick's artistic process, including glimpses of several unproduced projects, such as *Aryan Papers*, Kubrick's abandoned Holocaust film. The fresh material and innovative readings of Kubrick as a product and producer of culture will make these essential volumes, not just for Kubrick studies, but also students, instructors, and researchers in art, culture, and American and Jewish modern history.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald L. Davis, *The Glamour Factory: Inside Hollywood's Big Studio System* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 15-36. Also, Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Davis, *The Glamour Factory*, 59-78.

<sup>3</sup> Cocks, *The Wolf at the Door: Stanley Kubrick, History, and the Holocaust* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Complemented now by the newly released volume on Kubrick as a producer: James Fenwick, *Stanley Kubrick Produces* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Abrams provides further elucidation of these elements in *Eyes Wide Shut* in his recently co-authored work with Robert Kolker on the production history of the film: Kolker and Abrams, *Eyes Wide Shut: Stanley Kubrick and the Making of His Final Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Kubrick's technical contribution around lenses and lighting is still under explored in the literature. Throughout his career, Kubrick was in continuous correspondence with lens and camera technicians and inventors, often providing extremely accurate measurements and suggestions for improvements and modifications. Kubrick handled all handheld camera shots himself and obsessively checked lighting levels on every film. As well, Kubrick oversaw the modification of Mitchell BNC cameras to accommodate use of special Zeiss lenses developed for NASA to be able to shoot the candlelit scenes in *Barry Lyndon* and commissioned Garrett Brown, inventor of the Steadicam, to work on *The Shining*.