

Memories of Stanley Kubrick

By Jeremy Bernstein

Stanley Kubrick's second film, an RKO short that he made when he was 23, was called "Flying Padre." It was about the Rev. Fred Stadtmueller, who flew around New Mexico tending his parishioners. Kubrick had taken flying lessons himself. I'm not sure when it happened, but by the mid-sixties he had decided never to fly anything again. He told me that he considered it too dangerous. This meant he didn't do much traveling, and all the long-distance journeys he made – such as relocating his family to England in 1965 – he made by boat. He explained to me that the best way to transport your possessions in this kind of move was in Boy Scout footlockers – small trunks. For his move to England he had purchased 140. Not flying posed a problem during the Cuban missile crisis. Kubrick had decided that there was a considerable chance of a nuclear exchange between the Soviet Union and the United States, and that his prospects would be better if he went to the Southern hemisphere. Australia seemed like a good choice, so he booked a passage on a boat with his family. However, before leaving he learned that he and his wife would have to share a bathroom with a neighbouring cabin. He cancelled his booking and decided to take his chances with the atomic bomb. Not long afterwards he began working on "Dr. Strangelove."

I met Kubrick soon after "Dr. Strangelove" opened in 1964. I had just started writing for the New Yorker when its editor William Shawn asked me if I would consider a piece about science fiction. I never much liked science fiction but said I would look into it. My friend and colleague Gerald Feinberg, a physics professor at Columbia and a great science fiction fan, recommended Arthur C. Clarke. Clarke was not very well known then, but I set about reading everything he had written and found that I liked it a great deal. I wrote an enthusiastic article, and soon after it appeared I got a note from Clarke saying he was coming to New York from Ceylon (as it then was), where he lived, and would like to have lunch. In the course of lunch I asked him what he was doing. He said he was working with Kubrick on a "son of Strangelove." I had no idea what he was talking about, but he said he would introduce me to Kubrick. So we went to Kubrick's large apartment on Central Park West. I had never met a film director and had no idea what to expect. When I first saw Kubrick and the apartment, I said to myself: "He is one of ours." What I meant was that he looked and acted like almost every eccentric physicist I had ever known. The apartment was in chaos. Children and dogs were running all over the place. Papers hid most of the furniture. He said that he and Clarke were doing a science fiction film, an odyssey, a space odyssey. It didn't have a title.

When I looked at my watch and saw that I had to go, Kubrick asked me why. I explained that I had a date to play chess for money in Washington Square Park, with a Haitian chess hustler named Duval who called himself "the master." I was absolutely floored when Kubrick said: "Duval is a potzer." It showed a level of real familiarity with the Washington Square Park chess scene. He and I ought to play, he said, and indeed we did – during the entire filming of "2001: A Space Odyssey."

I wrote a little "Talk of the Town" story about meeting Kubrick and Clarke, and on that basis I got the grandiose idea of doing a New Yorker profile of Kubrick and the filming of "2001." Shawn agreed and, remarkably, Kubrick who, as everyone knows was very secretive about the films he was making, agreed as well. The film was being made at Elstree. Kubrick himself was living at a suite at the Dorchester, and it was there that we had our first chess game. It was clear at once that he was a very good player. He later told me that he used to play for money in Washington Square Park, where on a good day he might win as much as twelve dollars. "Quite a lot," he said, "If all you are buying is food." He had all the manners of a chess hustler, which included looking frequently at his watch while I was trying to decide on a move and snapping his fingers. At one point his daughters came into the room and asked: "Why is your friend's face red?" "Because he is about to lose the game," was the helpful answer.

I did lose the game, but before we could set the pieces up for a second, Kubrick asked me what I knew about "Newton's rings". I told him and asked why he was interested. He had, he said, been filming the ending of "2001," the space voyage, which, in the way of films, he was shooting first. To get some of the effects, they had some liquid, as I recall, under a plate of glass that was on a table. These rings kept appearing, which while they had a certain aesthetic appeal, were not what was wanted. Kubrick

had looked into the "Encyclopedia Britannica" and came across Newton's rings and deduced that there must be a film of air between the plates somewhere. To be sure, when they lifted the stuff off the table, they found that it was a bit warped and that is where the air pockets were. He told me that physics was the only course in high school in which he had gotten a decent grade. He had graduated with a 67 average and no college would take him, so at the age of 17 he had gotten a job as a photographer on "Look" magazine.

Watching the shooting on any film is like watching grass grow, and watching the shooting of a Kubrick film is like watching grass grow in concrete. It did have its moments. In one scene, an astronaut played by Keir Dullea was supposed to have been asleep. He is woken by HAL, the omniscient computer. (Kubrick once told me that he had thought of casting Jackie Mason as the voice. I think this was a joke). He then had a morning conversation with HAL. By the time I got there, Dullea had already "woken" innumerable times. Finally Kubrick said: "Just do it naturally, like you would at home." Dullea "woke" for the nth time, but this time he let fly with a fart, which, because he was miked up, sounded like a stupendous burst of machine gun fire. I was hoping Kubrick would keep it in the film. He didn't. Nor did he keep the filmed interviews he did with a variety of experts who were supposed to say that everything in the film could in principle happen. He sent a crew to do me in New York, and they blew the fuses in half my apartment building. He showed me a telegram from Carl Sagan saying he would be willing to do it for a small percentage of the film's gross. Kubrick decided to let the film speak for itself.

Throughout the filming of "2001" our chess games continued. Once, in the studio, when we couldn't find a board, Kubrick drew one up on a piece of paper. I think it was a relief from the incredible complexity of making that film. In those days before computer animation, it was all done with models and special effects that he had invented. The studio looked to me like one of those high-energy physics laboratories with warrens of scientists working in different groups. He hired a man whose job it was to go from group to group all day asking, "What are you doing? What do you need?" and so on.

Once he said to me: "Let's go for a walk. I've got to get out of here." We started walking in the back lot of the studio. First we passed a western "village," then a French "chateau" and then we finally found ourselves in a swamp – a real swamp. I said: "Stanley, we are walking in a swamp." There was no answer. I said: "Stanley, the water is coming up to my ankles." There was still no answer. Finally in desperation I said: "Stanley, there are snakes in this swamp." This prompted the reply: "If you see one, step on its head."

My interviews were done before tape recorders were commonplace. I certainly didn't have one. Kubrick did. He did all his script writing by talking into it. He said that we should use it for the interviews. Later on, when I used a quote from the tape he didn't like, he said: "I know it's on the tape, but I will deny saying it anyway." I had sent him the galleys of the article before publication and they came back to me marked with numerous corrections in ink. This was followed by a phone call. He said the profile was terrible, and that if the ending came out in its present form he would never speak to me again.

By now the film was nearly done, and we had completed our series of chess games. The last game was played in the dead of winter in a baronial mansion outside London into which the Kubricks had moved. There were huge picture windows, which let in the raw, dank cold. It was freezing in the house, so Kubrick had ordered a number of giant warm bathrobes that guests could wear. We sat in them while we played. At a crucial point in the game I went for what I thought was the kill. Just before I put my fingers on the piece I was going to move, Kubrick clutched his brow in apparent pain. I bit. It was a trap. "You didn't know I could act," he said triumphantly. I had ended my profile with this story. I met him at the studio in Elstree to discuss the ending.

"Look at it," he said, "you get all the good adjectives. I get nothing but shitty adjectives." "OK," I said, "we'll take all the adjectives out and divide them up so we both get the same number of good and shitty adjectives." That is what we did. We put them on slips of paper and divided them up evenly. That is how they appear in the published profile.

When the film was done it was shown to the press and invited guests in a New York theatre with the required sound and projection systems. Kubrick told me that most neighbourhood movie theatres show films somewhat out of focus, so he ran the projector himself. The first part of the film, when the man apes discover murder, and the bone, thrown into the air turns onto a spaceship to the strains of the "Blue Danube", stunned me then as it does every time I see it. But in the version we saw at that screening there was a great deal of repetition, and the ending seemed incomprehensible. The audience reaction was not good. I had gone to the film with my New Yorker editor, Gardner Botsford. As we walked out of the theatre he said to me: "Whatever it was, it was a big one."

Later that evening I went to the Waldorf Astoria, where Kubrick was hosting a small party. It was more like a wake. He then cut around 17 minutes from the version we saw, eliminating some of the redundancy. How it recovered from its reception to become a classic is as astonishing as the film itself.

For several years after my profile came out I saw Kubrick whenever I visited London. Once I called him from my hotel, and he said: "Come on out to the house for dinner." He sent his chauffeur to pick me up in his Rolls Royce. On the way to the house we stopped off at a Tandoori restaurant. The chauffeur went in and reappeared with a large paper bag. When we reached the house he gave it to Kubrick. It was our dinner. After we'd finished, I complained that I wanted some dessert. He said to one of his daughters: "Is there a stale cookie around to give to Jeremy?" "A Clockwork Orange" had just opened in France, and there was a review Kubrick asked me to translate. Words like "genius" flowed through it. When I finished he remarked: "I could have used a few more superlatives."