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Review:

Stanley Kubrick: American Filmmaker

Nathan Abrams[1,*]

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*Correspondence: n.abrams@bangor.ac.uk
[1]Bangor University, UK

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Stanley Kubrick: American Filmmaker, David Mikics (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), ISBN 978-0-30022-440-5, pp. 248, £16.99, $26.

Stanley Kubrick has been the subject of a flurry of academic investigations recently. In addition to my own work, the last half-decade has seen a deluge of books, articles, chapters, and academic encounters. This is, in part, driven by the opening of his archives in London, a veritable treasure trove of information on the life, work, and working of the legendary director and his movies. Twenty years after his death, his popularity shows no sign of abating.

Yet, while there has been a serious amount of academic scholarship on Kubrick, a definitive and comprehensive account of his life and work remains elusive. The two existing biographies by Vincent LoBrutto and John Baxter were both penned back in the late 1990s and thus were written before he made his final film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, in 1999. Through no fault of their own, neither biographer had access to the Stanley Kubrick Archive at the University of the Arts in London. Given the thorough research that LoBrutto undertook for his book, in particular, one wonders what he would have made of all of this new material.

It is in this context that we must consider the arrival of David Mikics's new biography of Kubrick in the Yale Jewish Lives series. Mikics, the Moores Distinguished Professor in the Department of English at the University of Houston, has previously written about Ralph Waldo Emerson, Gilles Deleuze, and Saul Bellow. Since taking on this project, presumably in 2016, he has written about film and Kubrick for the American online magazine *Tablet*. My point is that Mikics was not previously known as a film scholar, which reflects Yale's apparent strategy of pairing up topics with not instantly obvious authors. It was therefore with some anticipation that I looked forward to reading this book, not least given the crossover between the Jewish imprimatur of the Yale Jewish Lives series and my own exploration of Kubrick's Jewishness (presented in the form of various articles and my 2018 book, *Stanley Kubrick: New York Jewish Intellectual*). At little more than two hundred pages and snappily written, *Stanley Kubrick: American Filmmaker* makes for a breezy read. It nonetheless covers the key elements of Kubrick's life and films, both made and unmade. It offers a fresh perspective, backed up with archival research and new interviews, as well as some intriguing insights.

Unlike my own work (as well as that of Geoffrey Cocks), Mikics's account does not focus primarily on Kubrick's Jewishness. He deals with it fairly early on, explaining that "Kubrick was a Jewish director, though he would never have said so. He read obsessively about the Holocaust, and came close to making a movie about it based on Louis Begley's haunting novel *Wartime Lies*" (p. 11). Kubrick would indeed never have described himself as a Jewish director – because he did not need to (it was clear that he was Jewish) and because he did not want to be pigeonholed, striving instead to be, as the subtitle of Mikics's book correctly states, an "American filmmaker". Yet, Kubrick's Jewishness, much as he may have wanted to leave it behind, always haunted him, as the repressed tends to do. As Mikics puts it, "as a Bronx Jew on his country estate in Hertfordshire, England, Kubrick may sometimes have felt just as out of place as that Irish upstart Barry Lyndon" (p. 12). Or, later on, when discussing how much Kubrick "enjoyed being something of a Jewish Santa Claus", he notes that, "like many New York Jews of his generation, Kubrick loved Christmas" (p. 163).

These brief references apart, Kubrick's Jewishness needs to be inferred from the material Mikics presents. One rich source of information on this front is Kubrick's marriages. He was married three times – to Toba Metz, Ruth Sobotka, and Christiane Harlan. Strangely, Mikics never mentions that Kubrick's first wife was Jewish, but he infers a great deal from Kubrick's second marriage to Sobotka, a Jewish woman from Vienna. They may have been together only briefly but, as Mikics puts it, "Sobotka, emissary from the *Mitteleuropäische* artistic world, left a lasting mark on Kubrick" (p. 25). She has also left a lasting mark on Mikics, and his analysis is punctuated with references to her and her marriage to Kubrick; he even grants her an appearance immediately before Kubrick's death (p. 204).

Sobotka served as the art director on, and appeared in, Kubrick's second feature film, *Killer's Kiss* (1955), in which, as the character Iris, she performs a crucial setpiece that she also choreographed (Sobotka was a ballet dancer). Mikics suggests that it is "hard not to see in Ruth's *Killer's Kiss* dance solo a premonition about the future of her relationship with Stanley. Iris gave up her dancing for her husband's sake. In 1955, the year after *Killer's Kiss*, Ruth left ballet so she could move to Los Angeles with Kubrick . . . The movie sidelines [Iris] as much as Ruth Sobotka . . . would find herself shunted aside by Kubrick's burgeoning career" (pp. 27–28). Sobotka also helped out on his third movie, *The Killing*, but, as Mikics

points out, she was marginalized in this instance. While she "dreamed of being Stanley's full artistic partner, such a collaboration was not to be" (p. 29).

Mikics strongly implies that Sobotka had a malign influence on Kubrick's view of Jewish women. Iris in *Killer's Kiss* aside, this was most clearly illustrated by Kubrick's portrait of Charlotte Haze, played by the Jewish actress Shelley Winters, in his 1962 adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov's controversial novel *Lolita* (1958). While Nabokov (and his wife) may have created Charlotte, Kubrick reinvented her as a "sodden hausfrau" whose "motherly intrusiveness saps any possible sex appeal" (for this and the following quotations, see p. 67). As Mikics puts it, "Kubrick, even more than Nabokov, makes Charlotte unbearably clingy". He then attributes this change to Kubrick's relationship with Sobotka: "He must have remembered Ruth the suction cup, the wife who fastened herself to him relentlessly in her effort to become essential to her husband's work. In *Lolita*, Humbert gets to discard the burdensome, too-present wife in favor of a young girl, the ideal of his romantic imagination."

Yet, Mikics to some extent undermines his own line of argument when he makes the potentially rather troubling suggestion that Charlotte also stands as a metaphor for Kubrick's relationship with his third wife, the non-Jewish Christiane Harlan, and their youngest daughter, Vivian:

> Christiane Kubrick turned out to be less of a creative partner for Kubrick than his youngest daughter, Vivian, his protégé. Vivian, who appeared briefly as a toddler in *2001*, became a director at seventeen, with a documentary about the making of *The Shining*, and her father urged her to film a novel by Colette, a writer he much admired. But by the mid-nineties Vivian had fled from the pressure of her father's ambitions for her. The *Lolita* story oddly foreshadows the relation between Kubrick and Vivian . . . Lolita finally escapes Humbert and transforms herself into a grown-up he could never have imagined, just as Vivian fled from her father's love in the 1990s and transplanted herself to Los Angeles and Scientology [pp. 67–8].

Mikics also construes a link between Sobotka and Kubrick's unflattering portrait of Wendy Torrance (played by Shelley Duvall) in *The Shining* (1980), who drives her husband Jack to seek solace in drink (or at least the fantasy of it) before deciding to "correct" (that is, murder) her. In this respect, Mikics avers, "We can't help but remember Kubrick's script ideas of the 1950s, when he fantasized about walking away from the clingy Ruth Sobotka" (p. 152). He adds that, "Like Sobotka, she is a 'suction cup' who

aggravatingly tries to help Jack with his work" (p. 154). Sobotka crops up again in Mikics's discussion of *Eyes Wide Shut* which he says is "Kubrick's tribute to his wife, Christiane, who played a cathartic role":

> Christiane stands behind Alice Harford's power to bring her spouse back from his obsessive, self-enclosed fantasy. Kubrick barely had time, at the end of his life, to complete this testament to the potential for a fuller relationship between a man and a woman, one built on conversation and self-questioning. His earlier movies had ignored that potential, and this was the missing piece of the puzzle. Kubrick answered the nightmare trap of the wrong marriage . . . with an appeal to the right one, just as his own marriage to Christiane superseded his previous one to Ruth Sobotka. Days later, he was dead, but he is giving his audience the solution to his most personal dilemma [pp. 203–4].

The solution to the enigma of Stanley Kubrick and his movies, then, according to Mikics, is marriage, and specifically his marriage first to a Jewish woman and then to a non-Jewish woman whose uncle was the notorious Nazi filmmaker, Veit Harlan. Mikics, to adopt a charge levelled at me by Frederic Raphael (the screenwriter of *Eyes Wide Shut*) no less, has made Ruth Sobotka the sole villain of the piece.

There are several errors. Mikics incorrectly states that the drill instructor in *Full Metal Jacket* (Hartman) is a lieutenant when, in fact, he is a gunnery sergeant (p. 11). He says that Kubrick met Ruth Sobotka in 1952 although he appeared as an extra in her 1947 film and photographed her for *Look* magazine before that. A "taxi dancer" is not a prostitute (p. 26); while some conservative reformers did believe, perhaps correctly, that some of New York's taxi dancers were also prostitutes, a claim like this is similar to saying that "stripper" is a euphemism for prostitute. He credits HAL, the onboard computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, with a "nervously pulsating red eye, beating softly like a heart" (p. 98), although the eye does neither. The title of the *Mad* magazine parody is "Borey Lyndon", not "Boring Lyndon" (p. 135). Frederic Raphael is as British as Kubrick was (p. 190).

Mikics writes well and he has an eye for a pithy sentence. Given its length and readability, the book acts as an excellent primer. Particularly valuable is the face-to-face interview he did with Christiane Kubrick in 2018. She has since stopped giving interviews, so this stands as a beneficial last testament from Kubrick's widow.

I suppose it is unfair to criticize a book of this kind for not being longer and more detailed. Those books in the Yale Jewish Lives series that I have

read are all fairly concise, suggesting that the authors are required to stay within a rather modest word limit. This is a shame because Mikics has done the digging, visited the archives, talked to people, and he has spent a great deal of time on this book. One can only wonder what he might have achieved had he been given more space. Presumably, lack of space also precluded him from acknowledging the voluminous scholarship on the topic that has helped him construct his biography more fully. Where on page 97 he points readers to Michael Benson's book on *2001: A Space Odyssey* for its detailed production history of the film, why not go all the way and acknowledge more of the superb work produced to date on which he clearly relies? As it stands, *Stanley Kubrick: American Filmmaker* reads more like a critical essay touching on specific biographical issues than a full-blown biography.

This book reminds us that a comprehensive and definitive biography of Stanley Kubrick has yet to be written – one that picks up where the two earlier works left off in the late 1990s, before *Eyes Wide Shut* was released, and that takes the full range of archival materials now available to us into account.

Nathan Abrams