

Fotografie und Film

Geoffrey Cocks: *The Wolf at the Door. Stanley Kubrick, History and the Holocaust*

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1), 2004, 338 S., ISBN 0-8204-7115-1, 26,80

I'm sure most of you have seen *The Shining* (1980) adapted by Stanley Kubrick from the novel by Stephen King. This modern haunted house story is about a failing writer who takes the job of a caretaker at the isolated Overlook Hotel and then either goes mad or is possessed by its evil spirits when he, his wife and son are snowed in. I was seventeen in 1980 and saw *The Shining* twice. The second time was because I had been too busy kissing my girlfriend during the first viewing and had missed salient plot points. However, even after the second, uninterrupted, viewing I came away once again feeling disappointed, short-changed. It seemed that Kubrick had excised all the scary moments from the original book and also removed most of the ambiguity of Jack Torrance's character, played by Jack Nicholson. It was clear from Nicholson's over-the-top performance, that Torrance was already completely mad from the very beginning. In addition, Kubrick changed the ending, killed the unlikely hero Hallorann before he could save the day and generally ruined the book.

Then in the middle 80s I watched it again as part of a seminar on postmodernism and what became very apparent was that although Kubrick had 'destroyed' the novel, *The Shining* was indeed a very frightening film, what a friend of mine would call a 'dread' movie: from the start you know something terrible is going to happen. The only question is when (*The Blair Witch Project*, 1999, is an excellent example of a dread movie). Kubrick's trademark tracking shots, Shelly Duval's hysterical performance and Krzysztof Penderecki's ominous *Dream of Jacob* used as part of the score make for a very unsettling cinematic experience. The image of Shelly Duval's terrified face as Jack Nicholson smashes through the bathroom door with an axe has become quite iconic.

What none of us realised then was that this was Kubrick's film about the Holocaust which he never had the guts to make in a more direct manner. According to Geoffrey Cocks, Professor of history at Albion College Michigan, the blood that gushes out of the elevator sweeping away all before it and eventually splashing onto the camera lens itself is the blood of six million Jews. Kubrick's own Adler typewriter which Jack Torrance uses to complete his unfinished play represents "in metonymic fashion the very many murderers of the . . . and . . . more specifically the bureaucracy of the Nazi Final Solution" (p.221). These are

only two examples from Cocks's thesis that Kubrick, unable to find an artistic solution to how one represents the holocaust in a two hour movie or to find funding for such an enterprise, deals with it consciously or unconsciously by the means of a horror film.

What is unique about Cocks's *The Wolf at the Door* is his approach as a historian to Kubrick's work as a Jewish film-maker who married into a German family with Nazi connections. This meticulously researched book provides considerable insight into Kubrick's family history, influences and methodology, as well as some fascinating incidental information about his life and work (Kubrick's uncle by marriage directed the notorious *Jew Süss*, 1940. It is Kubrick's own breathing we hear during the space walks in *2001*, 1968). Kubrick was famously reluctant to 'explain' his work about "how humans deal with the commingling of evil and good" (p.75) as "he believed that film must attempt to rouse the audience to reflection instead of reconfirming comfortable assumptions in service to entertainment and commerce" (p.6). It was the audience's job to come to some kind of conclusion, it was not his job to provide the answers. However, "the pattern Kubrick saw early in life of evil lurking behind the facades of security and diversion is a deeper one, for evil is within the facades themselves" (p.70). The wolf in the title refers to mankind's 'merciless violence'. According to Cocks, this attitude stems directly from growing up in a secular Jewish family which had migrated to America at the turn of the century from a part of Poland which would be particularly targeted as part of the Nazi Final Solution when Kubrick was a teenager during the war years. He became fascinated with the perpetrators of these horrendous crimes, and Germany and the military in general, but tended to write Jewish characters out of his films even if they were in the original source material. Cocks' thesis is that much of the myth about Kubrick as a polymath doing painstaking research on his projects but being a tyrant on the set demanding repeated takes and involving himself in every detail was true (one unrealised project was about Napoleon who Kubrick was fascinated by). Kubrick's cinematographer John Alcott says that Kubrick aimed for nothing less than perfection. Cocks maintains this was Kubrick's way of containing a dangerous world. On the set he could be in charge in a way he couldn't be in the real world, although as a director he had the freedom that many artists would envy.

Cocks has done an outstanding job researching the life and work of his subject. The bibliography is nine pages long and there are sixty pages of notes at the back! Kubrick's own words on his work are deliberately unrevealing but through dialogue with his collaborators, examination of the significance of Kubrick's knowledge of Thomas Mann, Stephen Crane, Arthur Schnitzler and classical music, plus an astute Freudian analysis Cocks has managed to decipher some of the possible hidden meanings "for which there is considerable evidence of authorial intent as well as cultural influence" (p.250). However, as to the question of *The Shining* being about the Holocaust, I found myself oscillating between two

completely opposing positions of belief and disbelief. It is well-documented that Kubrick had wanted to make a film about the holocaust but never did so. After *The Shining* he wrote the script for *Aryan Papers*, the story of a Polish Jew hiding as a catholic during the Nazi occupation. During this time he was depressed and he eventually moved onto *AI* which was eventually directed by Steven Spielberg in 2001 and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), thus revealing "his personal and artistic hesitations in directly addressing the subject" (p.158). So I believe that Cocks is right about this ambivalent fascination. In my opinion, his assertion that when Jack Torrance throws a ball against a wall decorated with Native American figures Kubrick forges "a thematic and symbolic link between the white male European decimation of Native Americans and the white male Nazi extermination of the Jews" (p.222) is a little weak. As is his very tenuous connection to the mechanics of organised mass-murder when we *hear* the roar of a train in a Roadrunner cartoon on television and we see a painting of a train on the Torrances' living room wall (p.224). On the other hand, Kubrick's perfectionism is well-known so can it simply be a coincidence that the whiskey Jack Torrance drinks before trying to kill his son Danny is Jack Daniels? And if this touch was premeditated was the serial number 01439 stamped on boxes in the larder in which Jack Torrance is locked also intentional? 1914 and 1939 were the years the World Wars started.

Cocks goes into great detail about the significance of the use of numbers in the film (the numbers 7 and 42 appear repeatedly as symbols of death. Clearly, he has not read *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams), the use of colours (the palette moves from cold blue to suffocating red and yellow, yellow being the colour by which the Nazis identified Jews) and music. He tries extremely hard to convince the reader about this Holocaust connection. And he could be right. It is definitely one possible interpretation, amongst many. In any case, this well-documented, well-researched book gives real insight into this mysterious twentieth-century cinematic genius.

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