FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Review: Jerold J. Abrams (ed.) (2007)
*The Philosophy of Stanley Kubrick*
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Stanley Kubrick's film oeuvre is widely admired for its emotional and intellectual power, as well as its formal beauty and coherence, confirming the director's status as an auteur with a specific worldview, generally described as misanthropic. However, the majority of academic monographs devoted to Kubrick's work have focused on narrative and stylistic analyses, eschewing to a certain extent the issue of the filmmaker's voice or ideology, i.e. his philosophy. The collection of essays under review thus provides a welcome addition to Kubrick scholarship, as it confronts Kubrick's worldview head-on, from the perspective of philosophers rather than film scholars.

This book is part of a new series from the University Press of Kentucky, edited by Mark T. Conrad and entitled *The Philosophy of Popular Culture*. Thus far, the series includes *The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese*, *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir* and *Basketball and Philosophy*. The series has a deliberate pedagogical aim, designed to make 'traditional philosophical ideas from important thinkers . . . accessible to the general reader through examples in popular culture' (ii). As a result, many of the contributions to this collection read like excerpts from introductory philosophy textbooks, illustrated with examples from Kubrick's films. On the other hand, they offer a unique perspective on the subject of Kubrick's authorship, which is enhanced by Jerold J. Abrams's strong editorial hand and by clearly written essays. It is

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refreshing to read classically structured articles, including catchy introductions and unambiguous thesis statements. The collection is divided into five parts: the subject at war, the subject in love, the subject and the meaning of life, the subject in history, and the subject of the future.

Abrams sets the tone in his introduction by cutting to the chase and informing us that Kubrick's opus offers a coherent philosophical system which is close to existentialism, with elements of Stoicism and pragmatism (Abrams 2007, 2). While perhaps not entirely surprising, it is useful to find this philosophical characterization made plainly, with subtle variations and additions contained in the articles themselves. To Abrams's credit, the essays also present a range of sometimes contradictory views on the significance of Kubrick's philosophical stance, if indeed it can even be identified as primarily existential. For instance, Elizabeth F. Cooke's essay, entitled 'Understanding the Enemy: The Dialogue of Fear in *Fear and Desire* and *Dr. Strangelove*,' argues that Kubrick is closest to Albert Camus's existentialism, specifically in his treatment of contingency and the absurd: 'Kubrick gives us nothing to hope for and nothing to escape into, but he helps us to recognize our condition and pushes us to be lucid about it' (Cooke 2007, 31). Cooke suggests that Kubrick's dramatization of the existential view that we are ultimately alone yet also very much responsible for our lives can be said to represent a contribution to absurdist thought (Cooke 2007, 30). In contrast, Patrick Murray and Jeanne Schuler's essay 'Rebel Without a Cause: Stanley Kubrick and the Banality of the Good' claims that 'Kubrick might be called the great film artist of false philosophy,' to the extent that his films adopt a trendy, skeptical outlook on life which offers nothing in return, philosophically (Murray and Schuler 2007, 136). The authors suggest that Kubrick's own views were likely shaped during the post-war era of 'Beat generation existentialism and *Mad* magazine,' also linked to the ideology of film noir as an expression of pop existentialism, at a time when Kubrick was in his twenties (Murray and Schuler 2007, 134).

Another disagreement concerns the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, considered one of the precursors of existentialism, on Kubrick's work. Mark T. Conrad's essay 'Chaos, Order, and Morality: Nietzsche's Influence on *Full Metal Jacket*' focuses on Kubrick's adoption of a Nietzschean flux metaphysics. Conrad argues that the killings which end the two halves of *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) are morally distinct, highlighting the chaotic nature of reality and the resulting moral ambiguity: while the drill sergeant's murder and private Pyle's suicide are senseless, Joker's mercy killing of the sniper is relatively compassionate (Conrad 2007, 44). In

contrast, editor Jerold J. Abrams's contribution, entitled 'Nietzsche's Overman as Posthuman Star Child in *2001: A Space Odyssey*,' argues that Kubrick diluted Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathoustra* to the point of denaturing its central insight regarding a hopeful future for humanity, free from God and religion (Abrams 2007, 255). Indeed, Kubrick's version of Nietzsche's Overman, the Star Child, is in fact created by omniscient and omnipotent aliens, 'replacement gods' who remain mysterious, unseen and associated with religious choral music (Abrams 2007, 261). It  should be no surprise that the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures presented its 1968 award for Best Film of Educational Value to *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

Moreover, Mark T. Conrad reminds us that Nietszche denied the existence of free will, problematizing the notion of the free subject who is responsible for his actions. Free will is a key feature of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist ethics which, ironically perhaps, is articulated by the prison chaplain in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), who appears to speak for Kubrick. Arguing that while Malcolm McDowell's character Alex may cease to be a wrongdoer as a result of his brainwashing, 'he ceases also to be a creature capable of moral choice.' These contradictory views may not simply be due to differences of emphases among philosophers, but to the fact that Kubrick himself, as a visual artist and story-teller, was never required to produce films with logically consistent philosophical theses. In his essay 'Nihilism and Freedom in the Films of Stanley Kubrick,' Daniel Shaw points out that 'one of the myriad reasons it is difficult to characterize Kubrick's vision is that so many of his films are intentionally ambivalent' (Shaw 2007, 228). In a 1961 interview, Kubrick himself declared his preference for ambiguity in art over plain, clear statements, on the grounds that it is more evocative and powerful (quoted in Crone 2005, 8).

This brings up an issue that is not addressed in the book, which may be disappointing to readers of *Film-Philosophy*, concerning the very possibility of doing philosophy through film, even though the focus remains ostensibly on Kubrick's work. This issue is still relevant to the extent that it forms one of the collection's relatively unexamined assumptions, namely that artists can be philosophers, or at least express philosophical ideas in their artistic work. When media production students ask me whether they can submit creative work rather than written essays, I always tell them that they need to demonstrate the ability to use rhetorical form in their studies courses, rather than poetic form. Kubrick may have agreed with this distinction, given how clear he was about not  spelling out his films' messages, particularly in the famous

*Playboy* magazine interview. He describes screening the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* as a non-verbal experience which provides philosophic content on an emotional level, adding that 'certain ideas found in *2001* would, if presented as abstractions, fall rather lifelessly and be automatically assigned to pat intellectual categories' (Schwam 2000, 273). One could argue that the best films tend to express simple ideas, and that their success is based on how evocative they are aesthetically, i.e. in terms of their handling of narrative form and audio-visual style, in order to resonate with audiences both emotionally and intellectually.

To state, as Murray and Schuler do, that Kubrick is a false philosopher is to make a categorial mistake, based on a misleading analogy between the artist and the philosopher, indeed between film and philosophy. This analogy may be fueled by another unexamined assumption regarding the nature of art, particularly as it relates to authorship. The majority of essays in this collection appear to take Kubrick's authorship for granted, most likely in keeping with traditional conceptions of romantic aesthetics, not to mention Kubrick's own self-marketing. Notwithstanding possible variations on a standard auteurist model, there is a tendency in the dominant romantic version to conflate the artist with his work, often at the expense of the films themselves. In other words, the films are used as pretexts to examine the director's world-view, as if the main text were the author's philosophy of life, not the films. Of course, this collection's title is not *The Films of Stanley Kubrick*, which becomes evident when one realizes the extent to which the contributors rely on published interviews with Kubrick rather than engage in thematic and stylistic analyses of the films. Nevertheless, the articles remain insightful, and at least one makes an argument concerning *Barry Lyndon* (Stanley Kubrick, 1975) based on categories of film form, namely painterly aesthetics, the reverse zoom and the anonymous voice-over narrator.

Thus Chris P. Pliatska's essay, entitled 'The Shape of Man: The Absurd and *Barry Lyndon*,' describes the manner in which the three aforementioned filmic elements articulate the philosophical theme of the absurd, and how it relates to Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Pliatska 2007, 185). Kubrick's deliberate imitation of eighteenth-century paintings highlights the ritualized nature of life during that period of history, giving rise to an ironic discrepancy between what the characters do and what they really want. Pliatska then describes the reverse zoom as 'a visual metaphor for the two perspectives we can take on our lives' (Pliatska 2007, 190). Kubrick is thus able to contrast, within the same take, a close-up view of characters involved in their daily routines, and a wide angle revealing the absurd context in which the

characters conduct their business. Similarly, voice-over narration provides contextual information in a detached and ironic manner that trivializes the characters' efforts, rendering them absurd (Pliatska 2007, 193).

In some cases it is also possible for the reader to provide the missing stylistic descriptions to the thematic and philosophical analyses. For instance, Steven M. Sanders's essay 'The Big Score: Fate, Morality, and Meaningful Life in *The Killing*' discusses the Stoic philosophy which characterizes Kubrick's early noir films, specifically in the way the protagonist from *The Killing* (1956) ultimately surrenders to the police, in spite of his best efforts to evade the Law. When Johnny Clay realizes at the end of the film that his luck has run out, he simply mumbles 'What's the difference?' in a fashion 'very much in the spirit of *apatheia*, the acceptance of one's fate, as recommended by the Stoics' (Sanders 2007, 153). What Sanders doesn't mention is that Kubrick uses his trademark symmetrical composition to convey a sense of the inevitability of fate, as the two detectives simultaneously approach Clay, creating an oppressive visual frame which expresses the end of the character's and the film's journey. This careful and deliberate composition appears regularly in Kubrick's films, as in the execution scene ending *Paths of Glory* (Stanley Kubrick, 1957). We are reminded of the Cahiers du Cinéma critics who argued that a filmmaker's worldview is best expressed through his or her style and mise-en-scène, rather than through any explicit philosophical statement.

Questioning Kubrick's authorship further might have led the collection's contributors to consider the extent to which Kubrick is not so much expressing canonical philosophy but rather reinterpreting someone else's worldview, particularly in view of the fact that he spent his career adapting novels. Elizabeth F. Cooke's analysis of *Fear and Desire* (1953), for example, begins by pointing out the literary dimension of the film, which relies on voice-over narration to reveal the characters' philosophical musings (Cooke 2007, 9). Although Kubrick officially co-wrote the script with his high school friend Howard Sackler, the poetic and philosophical aspects of the monologues can most likely be attributed to Sackler, with Kubrick handling the storytelling and overall narrative structure.

Editor Abrams is right to describe Cooke's article as "a significant contribution to the Kubrick literature," in view of the fact that Kubrick's first feature has rarely been seen (Abrams 2007, 2). However, he may be overlooking Jason Sperb's analysis of *Fear and Desire* published in *Film Criticism* (Sperb 2004, 23-37). Other minor mistakes include the observation that Tom Cruise's visions of his wife with the naval officer in *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) are in black-and-

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white, when in fact they are overlaid with a slightly bluish tint (Hoffman 2007, 66). This is not insignificant, given the careful color scheme developed by Kubrick for this film (Falsetto 2001, 137). Another article refers to Kubrick's use of the "Rotoscope camera" rather than the Steadicam during the orgy scene in *Eyes Wide Shut*, which is unfortunate since rotoscoping refers to an animation process, not camera movement (Decker 2007, 103). The same article includes an endnote incorrectly identifying *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) rather than *2001: A Space Odyssey* as one of only three Kubrick films not to use voice-over narration (Decker 2007, 103).

Despite some of the reservations noted above, the collective contributions to this book do constitute a very useful reference, particularly in view of the fact that many auteurist films scholars committed to the romantic notion of a coherent vision or ideology will finally have a convenient place to begin examining the philosophical underpinnings of Kubrick's themes. Although none of the contributors mentions this, there is a line from the film *Lolita* (1962), when James Mason's character Humbert Humbert reveals in voice-over that he lied about receiving a Hollywood engagement as 'chief consultant in the production of a film dealing with existentialism, still a hot thing at the time.' This can be read meta-discursively as a comment on Kubrick's own philosophy, one which may not only have embraced several aspects of existential thought, but also remained true to its tenets through the years.

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