

Bullets, Bombs, and Blastoffs: Kubrick's Twentieth Century

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Beyond all else, Stanley Kubrick was a twentieth-century man. Born in 1928, his lifetime spans the century, ending on the verge of the new millennium in 1999. He lived through the Great Depression; the New Deal; the Holocaust; the civil rights movement; the Great Society; a world war; the Cold War; multiple wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf; and the development and use of atomic energy for destruction as well as production. Charles Lindbergh flew solo to Paris the year before Kubrick was born, and Amelia Earhart did the same when he was nearly four. He saw the beginnings of intercontinental travel by airplane and, later, the creation of spaceships for interplanetary travel, with a trip to the moon in 1969.

When he was born, the first experiments in analog movie sound were being released in Hollywood, and filmmakers were just beginning to experiment with more sophisticated cameras and lenses; by his death, cameras could move and frame and photograph in nearly any light and situation, and it was rapidly becoming possible to produce any effect the filmmaker could imagine during the digital editing process.

For Stanley Kubrick, an avid film viewer in childhood and throughout his later life, film history and American history were intertwined, as they remain for many Americans today. This essay will examine several of Kubrick's films in the contexts of both contemporary American history and the history of the two genres they fall into. My intent will be to shed light on the often complicated relationship between an individual's life as lived in history and the life of the artist's imagining in his works. The genres in question are the combat film and the science fiction film, both subjects Kubrick kept returning to throughout his life and both, for him, genres partly concerned with technologies. In war films, we will consider *Fear and Desire*, *Paths of Glory*, *Dr. Strangelove*, and *Full Metal*

Jacket. Science fiction films include *Dr. Strangelove*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *A Clockwork Orange*, but our focus will be primarily on *2001*, which falls unambiguously within the sci-fi genre.

The history of the twentieth century is inseparable from the development of new technologies, for war, for production, and for entertainment. In his early years, Kubrick displayed a fascination with the technology of photography; one of his high school friends remembers his trick of taking his camera apart and putting it back together again as a talent well known to his classmates, and he learned to develop all his own pictures in the darkroom of another friend. More importantly, according to his biographer, John Baxter, “Surrounded since adolescence by cameras, television sets, and short-wave radios, he has aspired, not always successfully, to their precision. But at the same time, he knows that mechanisms malfunction. This realization is the key to his life and his work” (Baxter, *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography* 7). A concern with technologies that fail, as Baxter terms it, will be central to the majority of his films and to his life choices as well.

Though he was born ten years after World War I, Kubrick lived his early childhood in the uneasy period between the wars, witnessing the rise of Hitler, the start of the Holocaust, and increasing anxiety in Europe over the likelihood of renewed hostilities. In the United States, an isolationist spirit had followed the first war, both in terms of determination to leave European disputes to Europeans and in increased opposition to immigration, which was severely limited during the Depression by the Coolidge administration.

The casualty statistics for WWI suggest why it was called (hopefully) “the War to end all Wars.” According to records of the US Department of Justice, total casualties (dead, wounded, missing) for some Allied countries, notably France and Russia, were as high as 75 percent of the mobilized forces, while those for Austria and Germany were 90 percent and 65 percent, respectively. US losses were much smaller, mainly because of the country’s late entry into the war, with losses of 7.1 percent (US Department of Justice). The killing and maiming were made more frightening to the average citizen because of the amazing advances in battle technology between 1914 and

1918. Wars are always deadly, but the improvement of devices for destruction made the evidence more dramatic. As the war began, men were still firing rifles, marching behind officers on horseback; rapidly advancing technology made flamethrowers, grenades, machine guns, and trench mortars part of the arsenal. Tanks were invented in Britain and used to great advantage by both sides, and for the first time, the skies became battlefields as planes were used to do reconnaissance, providing aerial photos to guide increasingly sophisticated artillery weapons extremely accurately. For many who fought, however, the most modern of warfare techniques was the use of chemical gas as a weapon. Invented before this war began, it was first used by the German army, but subsequently adopted by the Allied forces. It was shocking to many people, since chemical gas was one of the first weapons that could kill without real contact and was remembered as changing warfare forever: “War has nothing to do with chivalry anymore,” wrote General Karl von Einem, commander of the German Third Army in France. “The higher civilization rises, the viler man becomes” (Pruszewicz). Though he would not be born for another ten years, this statement forms a bedrock in the life philosophy of Stanley Kubrick.

Growing up fascinated with technology and in the shadow of the coming war, Kubrick early developed what became a life-long interest in war and its impact on humans. In the course of his life, he would see the beginnings and ends of many American wars, beginning in 1941 with World War II, which would have had special significance for a secular Jewish family that traced its roots to Eastern Europe—primarily Austria. That war ended with massive loss of life and, later, slow deaths from radiation sickness, after the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By 1950, the Korean War had begun, and the roots of the Vietnam conflict were being planted as the US sent troops to help the French in what was then called French Indochina. The Cold War between the Soviet Union and its former allies, including the US, began in the late 1940s when the Soviets blockaded West Berlin, and the arms race to develop more and deadlier systems of destruction began as well. As the century

continued, movie newsreels and, later, television brought war and the increasing paranoia of the Cold War into American homes.

Because Kubrick was unwilling to share much personal information with his biographers, it's difficult to trace his response to these events exactly, but we do know that he was a regular filmgoer in his childhood and throughout the rest of his life, and Hollywood came early to the presentation of combat in the movies. Films about men in combat did not become a specific genre until the 1940s, when these films were widely employed, initially as a weapon to marshal support for the war among the drafted and enlisted men fighting the war and the civilians facing shortages and worry on the homefront.

After World War I, movies had been made about men at war; the Best Picture winner at the very first presentation of the Academy Awards was *Wings* (1927), a romantic drama about pilots and their role in the war. War movies made in that isolationist era, however, were more likely to embody the antiwar sentiment more prevalent at the time. Of these, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) is probably the best known.

With the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the subsequent entrance of the US into World War II, the genre of combat films took shape. Supervised by the US Office of War Information (OWI), studios began to produce films designed to support the war effort; the OWI had clear censorship power, beginning at the script phase of production, but in fact the studios were eager to cooperate in order to postpone ongoing investigations into their film distribution practices. The rigid conventions for this genre of films turned out to be popular with audiences and for the most part continued largely unchanged through the 1960s. Film historian Jeanine Basinger defines genre as:

a kind of Lego set. It is a bunch of pieces that stay the same, but out of them you can build different things. The combat film pieces can be put together as a propaganda machine or as an anti-propaganda machine, as an 'America is Beautiful' or 'America is an Imperialist dog' message. 'War is necessary' or 'war is never necessary.'" (Basinger 16)

Combat stories often focus on a small group, a mix of officers and enlisted men, within a fairly cohesive platoon. The makeup of the group was originally intended to reflect the diversity of America, usually interpreted in terms of ethnic group, but also (as time went by postwar) reflecting modest racial diversity as well. Officers are heroes who protect their men, and the men are loyal, usually devoted to the officers who command them. The plot often turns on internal conflict within the group as they pursue their mission, but this is generally resolved in time for a central combat sequence, sometimes a kind of last stand and sometimes a battle victory suggesting a final victory to come. Combat films might be fictionalized versions of real battles and events or completely fictional incidents within recognizable wars. Later, and this might have been of special interest to Kubrick, combat films began to reflect not just issues of wartime, but social issues of the postwar era. Predictably, as time passed, the stories often became more cynical and/or satirical. What we can assume at this point is that Kubrick, a fan of the combat genre, had an encyclopedic knowledge of the “pieces” making up the genre from his own film viewing; we can also assume from our knowledge of Kubrick’s visual imagination and exceptional skill as a filmmaker that the pieces in his combat films will be fit together in a way that they have never been assembled before.

Fear and Desire (1953) is Kubrick’s first attempt at the combat film. It begins with a small group of soldiers isolated from their unit when they are shot down behind enemy lines in an unidentified war. Initially, the plot follows a standard combat pattern: men on a mission, surrounded by enemies; they need to strike back at the enemy and return to base. Working with some of the stock combat “pieces,” Kubrick is able to transcend the genre to produce a story of a kind of Every War, a parable about men in crisis, perhaps one of the major reasons he was drawn to working in the combat genre in the first place. Extremity breeds not only bravery but volubility: each of Kubrick’s characters delivers existential meditations on the meaning of war and life, disquisitions enhanced by the fact that the same actors play the victorious soldiers as well as the soldiers they defeat, implying that, in war, winners and losers are the same. The