

Geoffrey Cocks: „The Wolf at the Door. Stanley Kubrick, History & the Holocaust“. - Peter Lang - New York/Washington, DC/Baltimore/Bern/Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Brussels/Vienna/Oxford 2004.

By Frank Noack

Approach and Avoidance

For all his thematic versatility, the late Stanley Kubrick (1929 – 1999) has never made a film dealing with the holocaust, not even with World War II, and his unrealized project „Aryan Papers“, based on Louis Begley’s novel „Wartime Lies“, didn’t materialize for reasons entirely attributable to Kubrick himself, not outward influences. Yet, as Geoffrey Cocks convincingly argues in his book, the holocaust was a recurrent theme in Kubrick’s work. Cocks even argues that the director never made a film about the holocaust because the subject was too personal for him. This is hardly an isolated case. When Roman Polanski made a film on the Warsaw ghetto he didn’t reconstruct his own experiences but those of pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman. Finally, Cocks argues that „The Shining“ (1980), Kubrick’s adaptation of an entertaining Stephen King novel and superficially the most escapist of his films, was his holocaust movie.

This thesis is so off-beat and daring, one might assume that nothing longer than an essay could deal with it. But the main text of „The Wolf at the Door. Stanley Kubrick, History & the Holocaust“ ends on page 256 only to be followed by footnotes that end on page 315. One recurrent motive of Kubrick’s films was, according to Cocks, approach/avoidance. Kubrick, born in New York, had a great-grandfather from eastern Galicia who had emigrated to the United States in 1899. The most startling informations contained in this book, startling because they must have involved the most painstaking and expensive research, deal with life of the Kubricks in Czarist Russia, their sorrows and even the meaning of the family name. While the young Stanley Kubrick didn’t and couldn’t correspond with his relatives still living in war-torn Europe, he must have been shocked by what he gradually learnt about the holocaust. Every film he has made, plus every film he wanted to make, is analyzed by Cocks for its relevance to the genocide.

Too often misunderstood as a cynic, Kubrick actually was a realist. He had no Utopia apart from his own estate in England, where he settled as a recluse in the 1960s. He has never been active in politics because he didn’t see an easy solution for any problem. And he preferred to deal with villains rather than victims because this was his way of controlling evil. In „Paths of Glory“ (1957), we get to know less about the innocent soldiers executed for alleged desertion than about the cowards and cynics who send them to their deaths. The villains are not directly judged, but „Paths of Glory“ is all the more shocking because it forces us to spend so much time with these unpleasant characters. If Kubrick had had his way, Kirk Douglas as „Spartacus“ (1960) would not have remained a hero right to the end, but would have degenerated into a dictator.

One recurrent theme in Kubrick's work is war. War between slaves and Romans („Spartacus“), the Seven Years War („Barry Lyndon“), World War I („Paths of Glory“), the Vietnam war („Full Metal Jacket“), nuclear war („Dr. Strangelove“), gang violence („A Clockwork Orange“), and less spectacularly the war between the sexes („The Shining“, „Eyes Wide Shut“). The subject of war is not identical with the subject of the holocaust. But there are countless symbols which refer to the crime. Being aware of readers' scepticism, Cocks himself admits that the mere mention of the year 1942, the year of the Wannsee conference, or the number 42 can't be interpreted as an allusion to the holocaust. And if Kubrick repeatedly uses music by East European composers – so what? But after a while, too many allusions to years, names, colours (yellow) and props which could be associated with the holocaust contradict assumptions that all this were accidental. Jack Nicholson at his typewriter in „The Shining“, turning into an impersonal bureaucrat, is an Adolf Eichmann figure. And the ghosts of the two slaughtered girls, also in „The Shining“, recall the twins abused, photographed and killed by Nazi doctor Josef Mengele. Several critics have complained that the tons of blood pouring out of the elevator could never have come out of the girls' bodies. But the blood is supposed to represent a whole people. Most importantly, Kubrick read and corresponded with Raul Hilberg during preproduction of „The Shining“.

In more detail than anyone having written on Kubrick before, Cocks deals with the filmmaker's German relatives. German actress Susanne Christian, the girl from „Paths of Glory“, became Kubrick's third and last wife, sharing more than forty years with him. Her real name was Christiane Susanne Harlan, and her uncle was Veit Harlan, director of the notorious propaganda film „Jud Sues“ (1940). This, so far, is nothing more than a biographical detail. But Kubrick's interest in Germany wasn't reduced to his wife or her relatives. His control of the German dubbing of his films was more intense than the dubbing of his films into any other language. He didn't necessarily love his enemy, the enemy that killed so many of his family. But he wanted to understand Germans. And he admired their technical innovations, all the way knowing to which horrible use their technical innovations could lead. In „The Shining“, he also alluded to the attempted extermination of blacks and Indians.

There is more to recommend this book than its intriguing theses. Cocks' book is academic yet readable. A professor of history at Albion College in Michigan, Cocks may occasionally cite Lacan or Foucault, but his style is completely unpretentious and jargon-free. A most admirable trait is his discreet use of personal information. No one who has contributed to this book has any reason to feel betrayed. Best of all, Cocks doesn't ignore or attack other writings on Kubrick, unlike Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, who in „Hitler's Willing Executioners“ (1996) cites poor unimportant Raul Hilberg and Hannah Arendt twice, respectively, and in both cases expresses disapproval. Cocks has much to add to previous work done on Kubrick, but he is aware of the pioneering work done by John Baxter and Vincent LoBrutto (both in 1997) and cites them full of respect. Similarly, Kubrick was far from arrogant or elitist when watching and judging films directed by

colleagues. He loved to be entertained. One of the more surprising affinities he had felt was an affinity for Woody Allen, an early contender for the Tom Cruise role in „Eyes Wide Shut“.

One minor reservation: Cocks takes Susan Sontag and her condemnation of „2001: A Space Odyssey“ as an example of fascist aesthetics too seriously. Considering Sontag’s opportunistic rejection of pop culture only a few years after championing it; considering her interest in gay camp followed by homophobia (analyzed in Linda Mizejewski’s 1992 book „Divine Decadence“); considering her shoddy research on Leni Riefenstahl and German films, stealing ideas from Siegfried Kracauer without acknowledging him; considering her descent, Samuel Beckett in hand, on Yugoslavia in the fall of 1993, not knowing that Sarajevo had by that time already become a tourist attraction for various soap opera actresses eager to get photographed walking through the rubble; considering her condemnation of Peter Handke’s pro-Serbian stance followed by her admittance that maybe Handke did know a little bit more about Serbia than she did – considering all that, one shouldn’t take every word uttered by Sontag too seriously, despite her occasionally stimulating theses.

Such minor objections have nothing to do with the main argument of Cocks’s intriguing and original book. Most importantly, Cocks explains a phenomenon that several Kubrick detractors have interpreted as Jewish self-hatred. If Kubrick has de-Jewed so many characters from his literary sources, including the couple from „Eyes Wide Shut“, he only did it because the subject was too close to him. Kubrick’s insistence on his privacy went so far that even his Jewishness was too precious for him to be dealt with in public.

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