

In "The Stanley Kubrick Archives" — a book one can only refer to, not read, since it weighs more than 10 pounds and measures almost 3 feet across when opened — he says: "The most important parts of a movie are the mysterious parts — beyond the reach of reason and language." That, very simply, is why he worked in such a maddening manner. (The search for the ineffable is never an easy one.) The same volume contains an invaluable collection of production photos as well as every significant interview Kubrick granted (more of these, and more intriguing, than you might imagine), although it is burdened by largely plodding essays on each film, many of them by Gene D. Phillips, a fan masquerading as a critic.

An account of "Full Metal Jacket" in "Archives" includes this note by Kubrick on his source novel: "I like the lack of a readily discernible moral attitude which is so familiar in a war story." His movie was not to be an "anti-war" movie, for as he says elsewhere in this book, that's a bore; even the generals are, when pressed, antiwar. He wanted it to be a Kubrick film, not a genre film — and so, if it is "about" anything, it is about whether Modine's character, Joker, who wears both a peace emblem and a T-shirt reading "Born to Kill," will or will not lose his humanity by actually offing someone. As Kubrick put it, "We're never going to get down to doing anything about the things that are really bad in the world until there is a recognition in us of the darker side of our natures, the shadow side."

Which is why there has never been a Kubrick film containing a character in whom, as the Hollywood hacks say, we can take a "rooting interest." Kubrick's much-mentioned "coldness," his inability to embrace the comforting humanism that is the motif of almost every "serious" American movie, was instinctive, an expression of a nature that preferred enigma to explanation: He may have understood that if he had allowed himself an open statement of his bleak beliefs, he would have turned off his audiences. He preferred to let his movies be (mis)understood as genre pieces (sci-fi, horror, comedic romps). On the other hand, the possibility of self-conscious aesthetic calculation cannot be dismissed.