

# PROJECTED GREATNESS

On 27 November 1966, Jeremy Bernstein interviewed the renowned film director Stanley Kubrick at his home in Elstree, about his early life and career to that point. This edited extract details Kubrick's brief stint as a photographer for *Look*, and the painstaking process by which he broke into filmmaking



**Above:** from The Stanley Kubrick Archive. *A Clockwork Orange*: This scene of Alex (Malcolm McDowell) and his droogs driving a stolen car was filmed using rear projection © The Stanley Kubrick Estate. **Left:** From *Drama and Shadows*. Stanley Kubrick, Self Portrait. Reproduced by kind permission of the Museum of the City of New York.

“I was taught to play chess at the age of 12”, says Stanley Kubrick, “but didn’t play seriously until about age 17, when I joined the Marshall Chess Club in New York on West 10th Street. I had few intellectual interests as a child. I was a school misfit and considered reading a book ... school work. I don’t think I read a book for pleasure until after I graduated high school.

“I had one thing that perhaps helped me get over being a misfit, and that is that I became interested in photography about the same time, 12 or 13. And I think that if you get involved in any kind of problem solving in depth on almost anything, it is surprisingly

similar to problem solving of anything else. I started out by just getting a camera and learning how to take pictures, print, build a darkroom, all the technical things, then finally trying to find out how you could sell pictures and become a professional photographer.

“It was a case of, over a period from the age of 13-17, going through step by step by myself, without anyone really helping me, the problem solving of becoming a photographer. And I found that, in looking back, this particular thing about problem solving is something that schools generally don’t teach you, and that if you can develop a kind of generalised approach to problem solving, it’s surprising how it helps you in anything. And that most of the deficiencies you see around you in people that, say, you don’t think particularly are doing their job right, I generally find it’s just that they don’t have a good approach to problem solving. They don’t consider all the possibilities. They don’t prepare themselves with the right information and so forth. So, I think that photography, though it seemed like a hobby and ultimately led to a professional job, might have been more valuable than doing the proper things in school.

“I graduated in 1945, when all the GIs were pouring back



on the GI Bill. And I had a 67 average, and it turned out there wasn't any college in the United States, even of the lowest calibre, which would take a student with less than a 75 average in that year. So, I couldn't get into college.

"In retrospect, it was tremendously fortunate that I didn't get into college, because what happened is that I developed myself as a photographer, and prior to graduating high school I sold two picture stories to *Look*. One was about a teacher at my high school, named Mr Traister, who taught English, and he used to dramatise Shakespeare. He would read the parts and act it out, and he made it very interesting. I also sold them a picture of a news dealer sitting in 170th Street on the Grand Concourse, two blocks away from Taft High School, where I went, with all the headlines saying *Roosevelt Dies* or *FDR Dead*. And he was sitting there looking depressed. And they liked this picture and used it in a whole series about Roosevelt, and it was sort of the final picture of the series.

"My father, who was an alumni at NYU uptown, took me to see the dean and said, 'This is my son and I was a student here', and so forth, and nothing worked. So I started going to city college at night under the hope that if I got a B average for so many credits, I could then get

**It was tremendously fortunate  
that I didn't get into college,  
because what happened is that I  
developed myself as a  
photographer**

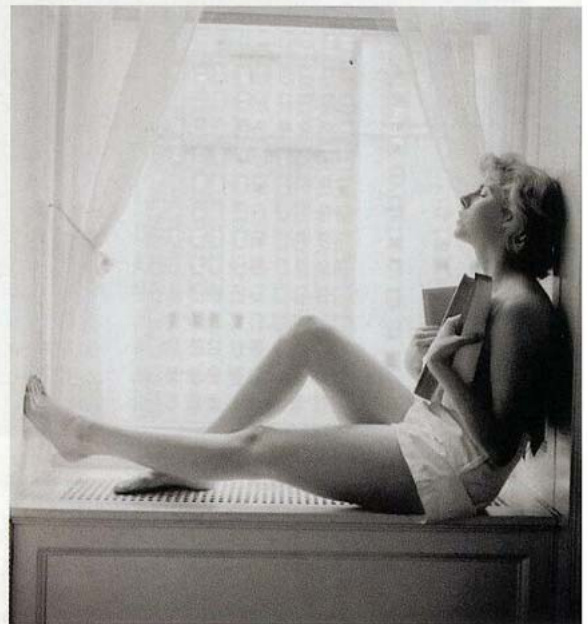
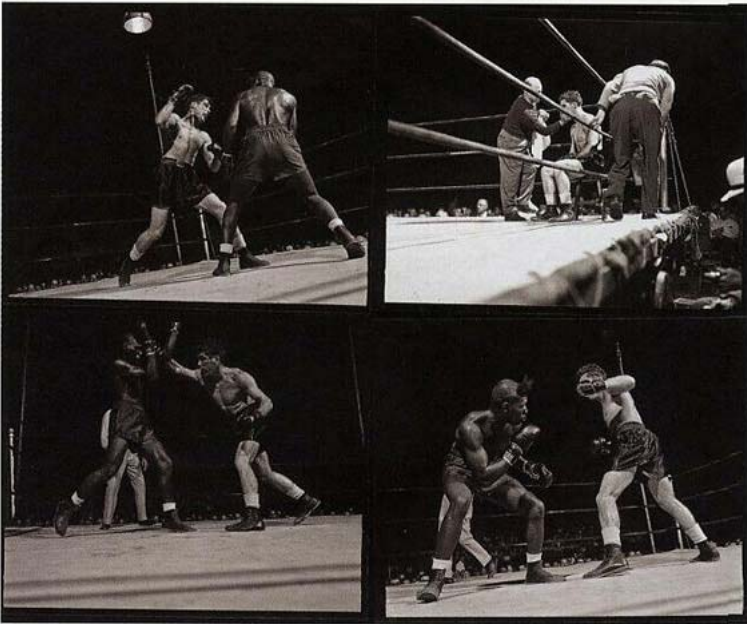
**STANLEY KUBRICK**

**Above: From Drama and Shadows. The World's Biggest Spectacle: A Circus Run by a Family, March 1948. Reproduced by kind permission of the Museum of the City of New York.**

into day school. But within about, I don't know, a few weeks of this, I was down at *Look* with some other pictures, and there was an extremely nice picture editor there. Her name was Helen O'Brien, and the managing editor at the time was Jack Gunther, who was later killed in the Bryce Canyon, Utah, plane crash, and she asked me what I was doing and I told her, you know, nothing, and she said she thought she might be able to get me a job as an apprentice photographer. So I went up to see Jack Gunther and I got a job.

"I was apprenticed at *Look* for six months, and then I became a staff photographer, and I was there for four

STANLEY KUBRICK



years until the age of 21. And, of course, that would have been the period I'd have spent in college, and I think that what I learned and the practical experience, in every respect, including photography, in that four-year period exceeded what I could have learned in school. And also, getting out of school, I can't remember what was the particular turning point, I began to read and, within a relatively short period of time, caught up with where I probably should have been had I had a modicum of interest in things in high school. Because, after all, before you're 12 or 13, how many serious books can you read? So, I only really blew four years of part-time reading. So, in retrospect,

I don't feel that I missed reading that many books, and I felt that I caught up pretty quickly when I became interested in things in general.

"Like everybody else, I was always very interested in movies, and I used to go to see practically all the films at the Museum of Modern Art and the Thalia. At that time, when I was a teenager, the so-called art house didn't really exist to the extent it does now. It was the postwar Italian, the Rossellini pictures, which brought the art houses into existence.

"A friend of mine Alex Singer, who subsequently has become a film director, was working as an office boy on (the film) *The March of Time*, and he told me

that it cost \$40,000 to make, and it was only a one-reeler. And I said to him, 'Gee, that's a lot of money. I can't believe it costs that much to make, you know, eight or nine minutes of film'. So, I called up Eastman Kodak and checked on the price of film. And then I called up the laboratory to find out how much it cost to develop it. Then I checked on how much it cost to rent 35mm movie cameras. And then I checked the cost of the other facilities, sound and editing and so forth. And I forget what it added up to, but it was something like ... that I could do a documentary film, with an original music score and everything, for about \$3500. So I thought, 'Gee, if they're making these pictures for \$40,000 and I can make them for \$3500, surely I must be able to sell them and at least get my money back, and probably make a profit'. In fact, we thought we could make a considerable profit.

"So I rented a 35mm Eyemo, a spring-wound camera which produces a professional picture, and I did a documentary film about a boxer named Walter Cartier, who I had previously done a picture story for *Look* about. It was called *Day of the Fight*. I did everything. Alex helped me, carried lights around and assisted, and another friend of mine, Gerald Fried, who subsequently has become a professional movie composer, did a film score. I got the whole thing finished for \$3900.

"And then we began to take it around to the various companies to sell it. They all liked it, but we were offered things like \$1500-2500. And at one point I said to them, 'Christ, why are you offering us so little for this? You know, one-reel shorts get more than \$40,000'. And they said, 'You must be crazy!' And I said, 'Why do you think that?' So I told them about *The March of Time*. And shortly after that, *The March of Time* went out of business. Anyway, I finally sold the film to RKO-Pathé, which is no longer in business either, for about \$100 less than it cost me to make.

"I know it was a small loss, but I had the pleasure of seeing it shown. I went to the Paramount Theater, where it was playing with some Ava Gardner, Robert Mitchum picture and, it was very exciting to see it on the screen, and it got a nationwide and worldwide distribution. Everybody liked it and they thought it was good, and I thought I'd get millions of offers - of which I got none to do anything.

"So, I made another documentary, this time about a flying priest, Father Stadtmueller or something, in New Mexico, who flew a Piper Cub around to Indian parishes, and RKO thought it was a colourful subject. And so I went there pretty much on my own again, made this short, and still nothing was happening.

"They gave me \$1500, out of which I had to pay for

**Far left: From The Stanley Kubrick Archive. Photographs of Walter Cartier for the *Look* magazine picture story, *Prizefighter* (1949). © The Stanley Kubrick Estate.**

**Left: From *Drama and Shadows. Intimate Scenes with Leonard Bernstein, August 1949*. Reproduced by kind permission of the Museum of the City of New York.**

**Far left, below: From *Drama and Shadows. Amusements in the Palisades Park, June 24 1946*. Reproduced by kind permission of the Museum of the City of New York.**

**Left, below: From *Drama and Shadows. Dailies of a Rising Star: Betsy von Furstenberg, May 1950*. Reproduced by kind permission of the Museum of the City of New York.**

the film, travel, and everything. I made nothing. I think I lost money on that too. But I had been making a reasonably good salary at *Look* for four years, so I had a certain amount of money and I was still working.

"Then I found out how much feature films were being made for ... you know, millions, and I calculated I could make a feature film for about \$10,000. I had no costs. I mean, at this point I was the whole crew, cameraman, assistant cameraman, director, everything. I could get actors to work for practically nothing, and a friend of mine in the Village did a script, which was terrible, sort of dull, undramatic but very, very serious - an allegorical story about four soldiers from an unnamed country lost behind enemy lines, trying to find their way home again.

"And, of course, I totally failed to recognise what I didn't know about making films. I just thought, 'Well, Christ, there really can't be very much more to making a feature film, and I certainly couldn't make one worse than the films that I keep seeing every week', and, 'Well, these other two things have turned out pretty well'. But they were documentaries, and I wasn't satisfied to just make an interesting film. I wanted it to be a very poetic and meaningful film.

"I got the film made but it was very, very dull, and it got an art house distribution. It was called *Fear and Desire*, distributed by Joseph Burstyn, who first brought in Rossellini's pictures. It got a few reasonably good reviews. Mark Van Doren was very kind about it. And it had a few good moments in it, but with the exception of one or two of the actors, they were all terrible, and I knew nothing about directing actors. It never, never returned a penny of its investment.

"It opened at the Guild Theater in New York and, while it was still playing, I decided I'd better get another script very fast and try to promote some more money on the strength of just the fact that the thing was playing, because it wasn't apparent to me how I was going to earn a living. Again, not one single offer ever to do anything, from anybody."

Kubrick's next film, *Killer's Kiss*, was bought by United Artists, which in turn commissioned *The Killing*, and the rest, as they say, is history. One of the most pivotal directors in the history of film, Kubrick's work is recognisable for its intelligence and dedication to craft over a range of genres, from science fiction (*2001: A Space Odyssey*), war (*Paths of Glory*, *Full Metal Jacket*), historical drama (*Barry Lyndon*), tragic-comedy (*Dr Strangelove*), to horror (*The Shining*) and dystopia (*A Clockwork Orange*).

Born 1928, Kubrick began shooting his last film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, in 1999, returning to filmmaking after a 10-year absence. He died in his sleep on March 7, 1999, soon after turning in his final cut of the film.

*The Stanley Kubrick Archives*, HB, Ed Alison Castle, 544 pp, Taschen 2005, [www.taschen.com](http://www.taschen.com), English, French, German, ISBN 3822822841. £100.00  
Jeremy Bernstein's interview with Kubrick, above, is taken from a CD accompanying this book. In part one of the book, Kubrick's complete films, from the opening sequence of *Killer's Kiss* to the final frames of *Eyes Wide Shut*, are presented chronologically and wordlessly via frame enlargements. The second part of the book presents a collection of material from Kubrick's archives (photographs, props, posters, artwork, set designs, sketches, correspondence, documents, screenplays, drafts, notes, shooting schedules, etc.) along with essays from Kubrick scholars Michel Ciment and Gene Phillips, interviews with dozens of Kubrick's collaborators, and a selection of Kubrick's best interviews.

*Stanley Kubrick Drama & Shadows: Photographs 1945-50*, Rainer Crone HB 240pp, Phaidon 2005, [www.phaidon.com](http://www.phaidon.com), English, ISBN 0714844381. £39.95. During the period 1945-50, while working for *Look* magazine, Kubrick completed dozens of photographic reportage assignments in New York City and abroad. The resulting thousands of negatives have remained in *Look's* archives ever since. Kubrick's photographs vary in subject, but people are the central focus of attention, as is his commitment to narration. This book explores how one of the most influential and successful film directors of our time used photography to master visual techniques and cultivate his signature style. It is introduced by an essay by Rainer Crone, who also edited the selection of photographs for this book.