

# The greatest movies never made

## Peter Aspden Culture

I spent last Tuesday evening in the extraordinary grounds of Childwickbury House, an 18th-century manor. The home in the Hertfordshire countryside achieved cultural significance when it was bought by Stanley Kubrick in the late 1970s. It is, to be frank, more of a village than a house: when it was sold it had 12 reception rooms, 18 bed and dressing rooms, 11 staff bedrooms and 10 bathrooms. Kubrick's artist widow, Christiane, still lives there, and her vibrant still lifes are hung compactly on every wall of the rooms that I saw, adding colour and sensuality to what would otherwise seem a forbidding space.

It was a strange evening, rich in irony and counterfactual riddles. A group of us, mostly film people, were there to celebrate the publication of a book, or set of books, that marked what was billed as the "greatest movie never made", Kubrick's *Napoleon*. The volume, published by **Taschen**, is huge, expensive (£450) and produced in a limited edition of 1,000. Open the leather-bound tome, and a series of smaller books tumble out, containing interviews with the director, production notes, a screenplay, and 15,000 location scouting photographs. If there is anyone out there who has considered filming the life of the French general, here is the good news: an awful lot of the groundwork has already been done.

Kubrick wanted to film *Napoleon* in the late 1960s, after he had made *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But the revolution he had helped nurture with his science-fiction masterpiece turned against him. Nothing seemed more out of fashion in those forward-looking days than a historical

epic and two studios, MGM and United Artists, decided the project was too risky. Kubrick took his frustration out by making one of the most disturbing works in cinema history, *A Clockwork Orange*. That's what you call a rebound.

But Kubrick shuttled back to the past with his next film, *Barry Lyndon*, using much of the research from the Napoleon project, and inventing a soft-lit cinematic palette that was, in its quiet way, as ground-breaking as his bleak visions of the future. I bumped into the film scholar and historian Ian Christie at the reception, and he thought the making of *Barry Lyndon* at the expense of *Napoleon* might just have been cinema's gain: "Perhaps he needed a less bombastic subject. Can you imagine Jack Nicholson as Napoleon Bonaparte?" (Kubrick considered the American actor for the part, though the film was never cast.)

Well, yes, actually, although my preference would have been for Al Pacino. This is precisely what is so engaging about works that are never made. We can imagine them for ourselves, snapping up the roles of casting director, writer, editor and marketing guru. More seriously, projects-that-got-away tell us much about their (almost) creator's fantasy lives. Kubrick, said Christie, was always something of a Messianic figure. Was the film project a symptom of his own form of Napoleon complex?

It turned out that Christie had just delivered a lecture on this very theme, the films that never made it, and we discussed some of them in Kubrick's well-stocked library. They make a fascinating roster. The most famous of all is Orson Welles's *Don Quixote*, a long-term passion that left just enough footage to tempt restorers to put together a version that was poorly received. (The hero of Cervantes's novel also inspired, and defeated, Terry Gilliam, prompting

talk of a curse, although he is reportedly determined to see the project through.)

Michael Powell, a towering talent of British cinema, wanted to make *The Tempest* towards the end of his career. What a piece of work that might have been, and just look at the proposed cast: James Mason, Malcolm McDowell, Mia Farrow and – imagine – Frankie Howerd. Designs were to be by Gerald Scarfe, music by André Previn. But Powell was scuppered by the furore created by his indisputably creepy *Peeping Tom*. Another British great, David Lean, enlisted the help of Christopher Hampton, Robert Bolt and Steven Spielberg to adapt Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*; but as the director's health declined, so did the film's prospects.

Filmmakers are to be pitied, in that their frustrated visions are there for all to see. Their research is visible to the public, as are their frequently frantic efforts to put the money together to realise their projects. There is no such scrutiny in the private art forms: painting, composing, the writing of novels. Dreams can remain secret, wild aspirations are allowed to grow at their own pace in the recesses of the mind.

I was unable to get a signal on my mobile phone at Childwickbury and had to ask to use a landline. I was generously ushered into the manor's kitchen, large as an apartment, and sat in the corner to make my call. One of my hosts pointed to a long table across the room. It was used in *The Shining*, she said: it was the table at which the Jack Nicholson character spent hour after hour typing his own literary masterpiece. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. It was a sharp reminder that Kubrick knew a thing or two about the dead ends of creativity.

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[peter.aspden@ft.com](mailto:peter.aspden@ft.com)  
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141508503 - HUWJON - 30531144

