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Not tonight, Stanley

Philip French takes delivery of a 22lb history of Napoleon, Kubrick's 'film that never was' and finds a fascinating exploration of historical film-making

A boxed book landed on my doorstep the other day, too big to go down a rubbish chute let alone through any conceivable letter box. The book's size (12x15x5in and weighing 22lb) made me think of the Rosetta Stone which is appropriate because its provenance is Napoleonic and it's in three languages (English, German, French). The outer, leather-bound volume is a facsimile of Raymond Guyot's gigantic *Napoléon* (Paris, 1921), but upon untying the leather cords, one discovers the inside has been carved out to contain the eight assorted volumes of *Stanley Kubrick: The Film that Never Was*, edited by the Paris-based American film scholar Alison Castle, designed by the French partnership M/M (Paris), and published by Taschen at a breathtaking £450. You feel the book should have been on wheels and accompanied by a steel-reinforced coffee table.

Its subject is *Napoleon*, the film Kubrick researched for two years after *2001: A Space Odyssey* but had to abandon in 1970 when the Hollywood studios withdrew in view of the immense budget and the appearance of Bondarchuk's *Waterloo*, which Kubrick considered "a silly film". All the material comes from Kubrick's archives, and at the centre is his draft screenplay that begins with an opening shot of the four-year-old Napoleon listening to a bedtime story while clutching a (possibly anachronistic) teddy bear. Then there are books of contemporary paintings, Napoleonic imagery (drawn from a database of 17,000 images), and a selection from the 15,000 photographs taken during location scouting. A book of production memos features a discussion about using "a special Dupont fire-proof paper" for the uniforms of the thousands of extras (they could be made for as little as a dollar), and there is a small book of letters. The most valuable of the latter are the exchanges with the film's chief adviser, historian Felix Markham, whose biography of Napoleon was Kubrick's key source; and of considerable fascination are the letters from his prospective Napoleons, Oskar Werner (who appears to have been offered "the title roll") and Ian Holm (who eventually got to play the part 30 years later in *The Emperor's New Clothes*). There is also a gracious handwritten letter from Audrey Hepburn turning down the role of Josephine but hoping Kubrick "will think of me again someday".

The biggest book – at 500 pages – features an interview and commentaries on aspects of the film by Castle, Kubrick's brother-in-law Jan Harlan, and others. The French cineaste Jean Tulard writes about the history of Napoleon in the cinema and suggests that Kubrick left out Napoleon's mistress Marie Walewska to avoid comparison with Greta Garbo, who played Napoleon's mistress in the 1937 film *Conquest*.

This book takes us into the mind of one of the most fascinating people ever to make a movie, introduces us to his obsessive preparatory process and throws light on the business of conceiving an intelligent, historically accurate epic. One wonders, however, whether his Napoleon would have been "the best film ever made" – although his subsequent historical movie *Barry Lyndon* has grown in stature over the years.

DOUGLAS SLOCOMBE

Read Philip French's tribute to the great British cinematographer, honoured last week by Bafta, at:

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