

The greatest war film never made

Stanley Kubrick's Napoleon biopic was set to conquer all war movies - only it failed to see the light of day. *ShortList* investigates why

It is impossible to tell you what I'm going to do except to say that I expect to make the best movie ever made." Say what you like about Stanley Kubrick, the man wasn't short on confidence. That was the memo that landed on the desk of his financial backers in the late Sixties. Having gone to infinity and beyond with *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968, Kubrick now wanted to go one better. His biopic of French warmonger Napoleon Bonaparte would be the biggest film of his career.

"Stanley's films all look critically at humanity and at how human brilliance and stupidity merge," Kubrick's producer and brother-in-law Jan Harlan tells *ShortList*. "So Napoleon was particularly relevant."

Kubrick hurled himself into researching the project and quickly emerged with a finished screenplay, packed with incredible details and gigantic battle sequences that would be filmed in the actual historical locations where they took place. By the end, the director had amassed more than 15,000 meticulously

researched index cards all pertaining to the life of the French emperor and the key people who surrounded him.

The film was to cost around \$6m (£3.7m), feature 50,000 extras playing soldiers and be shot in key locations around Europe, including villas and palaces where Napoleon himself resided.

Yet, despite securing Jack Nicholson to star and hurling himself into two years of life-consuming research, Kubrick never shot a single scene of *Napoleon*. His backer, MGM, pulled funding after two similar epics, Russian-monster *War and Peace* and Hollywood battle epic

Waterloo (also about Napoleon), starring Rod Steiger, both flopped.

"Later we had the development of big BBC films to be shown in many episodes, and this suggested a new form of telling 'big stories' over a number of evenings," remembers Harlan.

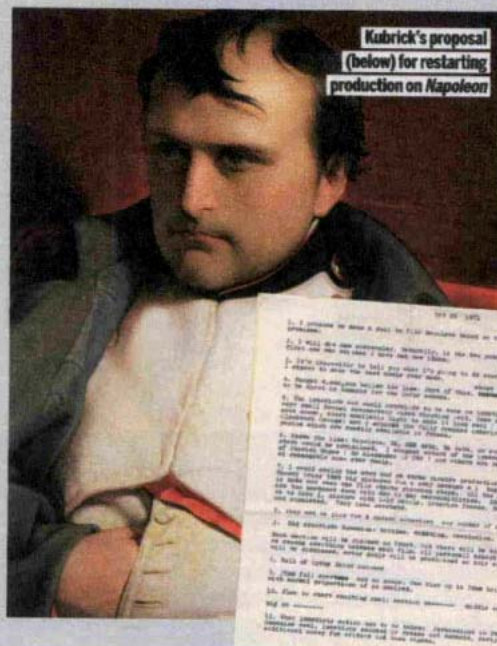
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It just never happened, although Kubrick never gave up hope. By the Eighties, Brit actor David Hemmings had replaced Nicholson as first-choice to play Napoleon, but the plug was pulled on the project.

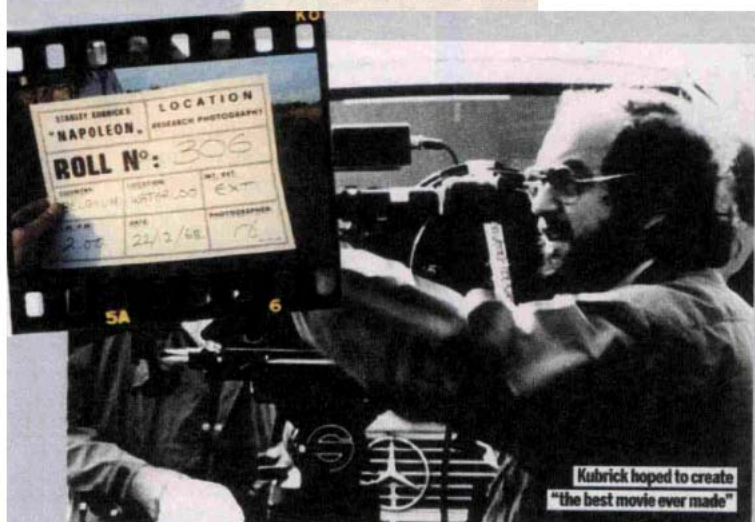
Such large-scale epics were not fashionable – or financially viable – any more. A fact that would remain until Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* showed it could be done with the magic of CGI. By the time of his death in 1999, shortly after he completed his final movie *Eyes Wide Shut* – which he considered his greatest achievement – Kubrick had read almost 500 books on Napoleon and was convinced a worthy film had not been made about him. What's more, a fully imagined script does exist.

As yet, there's been no word on whether Napoleon might one day get the same treatment as one of Kubrick's other great unfilmed projects, sci-fi saga *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, which did make it to the screen, thanks to Steven Spielberg. We can only hope...

Stanley Kubrick's *Napoleon: The Greatest Movie Never Made* by Taschen is out now, priced £650



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Kubrick hoped to create "the best movie ever made"