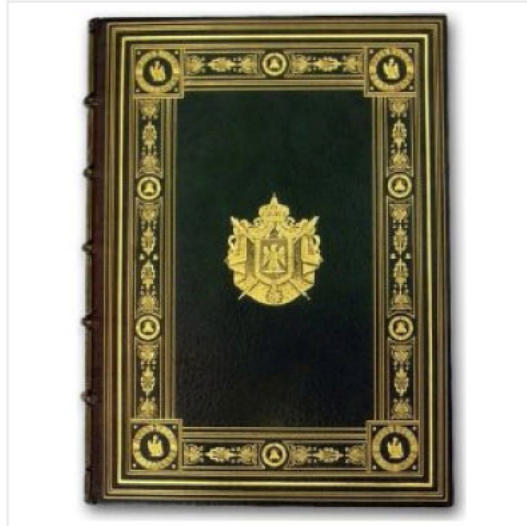


Stanley Kubrick's Napoleon



Some call Stanley Kubrick cinema's great intellectual, a director able to conjure up more discussion in a single shot than many can in an entire film. Others peg him as a cold, soulless filmmaker, a pseudo-philosopher with a penchant for long shots and terrible acting. But for anyone who ever doubted his meticulous method-in-his-madness approach, may we present Stanley Kubrick's Napoleon: The Greatest Movie Never Made.

In 1968, Kubrick released his masterpiece 2001: A Space Odyssey, giving him free rein to follow up with whatever he wanted. He chose Napoleon: three-hour epic that would chart the emperor's life from childhood to his last hours. For the next three years, Kubrick oversaw every aspect of the production. Unfortunately, a now-forgotten rival Napoleon film called Waterloo flopped at the box office in 1970 and his backers pulled out. The film was never resurrected, and all we have left is contained here in the 1,100-plus pages of Stanley Kubrick's Napoleon.

Taschen originally came out with this comprehensive collection last year as a limited edition - a US\$1,500 set with an imitation hardcover housing 10 smaller books. It quickly sold out, and no doubt to the chagrin of original purchasers, the company has rereleased the collection with all volumes in one gorgeous hardcover for US\$80. To say the book is a daunting read is an understatement - the pairing of Napoleon and Kubrick was a match made in ego heaven, and the filmmaker spent the better part of his life preparing for the big-screen monument. As such, the book details every aspect of the film, from casting choices through to location scouting, production notes, drawings, photographs, slides, transcripts, letters and random scraps of scribbled paper.

As a saga reaching for Citizen Kane heights, it falls flat: it was Kubrick's only original screenplay, and it shows. Opening with a four-year-old Napoleon ending with his death in exile, the moments in between are a messy collection of places, events, dates, names, and a voiceover narration to help us keep up along the way. The script is filled with clunky dialogue, poor transitions, weak descriptions ("EXT - DAY - Army on the march: about 5,000 men") and anachronisms, most notably a Rosebud-like teddy bear that bookends the film.

But with a filmmaker of Kubrick's stature, one weak script is never grounds for the destruction of a legacy. Optimists say the director was never reliant on his "draft", while pessimists point to Kubrick's dependence on material from great authors (Burgess, Clarke, Nabokov, King). Of course, the jarring contrast of extreme detail against a poor blueprint - not to mention the fact the film never was made - makes it impossible to say who's right.

As an academic record of "the greatest movie never made", Napoleon more than lives up to its title. And as a masterclass in filmmaking preparation, the book is without equal. However, fans with no interest in the minutiae of filmmaking might be a little puzzled: oversized, overweight and overlong, one wonders whether even Kubrick himself would be interested in this cross-referenced mess.

But for those looking for insight into cinema's most infatuated mind, Stanley Kubrick's Napoleon an intriguing irony: an obsessive man's failed attempt to document an obsessive man.

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