

Pessimism, visual flair marked films by Stanley Kubrick

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COMMENTARY

Two years before the year he died famous, Stanley Kubrick has died at 70.

Far more ironic, Kubrick has passed on four months before the world has its first glimpse of *Eyes Wide Shut*, the psychosexual drama with Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman that is officially Kubrick's last film.

If *Eyes Wide Shut* has any of the visual flair, emotional detachment, narrative indifference and prevailing pessimism that have marked Kubrick's work for 30 years — and it no doubt will — the film won't elevate or tarnish Kubrick's legacy; it will only extend the debate.

On several levels, Kubrick's status as major filmmaker and artist is unimpeachable. Though he made few films — 13 features in 46 years — contained within Kubrick's frames are some of cine-

ma's most provocative images: the nymphet peering through her heart-shaped sunglasses in *Lolita*; the bomber pilot riding the nuclear warhead to ground zero in *Dr. Strangelove*; HAL, the paranoid computer, sizing up his world through a glowing red light in *2001: A Space Odyssey*; the Droogs stalking the London night for "a bit of the old ultraviolet" in *A Clockwork Orange*; the deranged family man chopping through the door to slaughter his wife and son in *The Shining*.

2001 alone is a treasure of iconic images, from the graceful sweep of the space wheel against the black

sky to the blinking eye bombarded with color and light during the hallucinogenic approach to Jupiter.

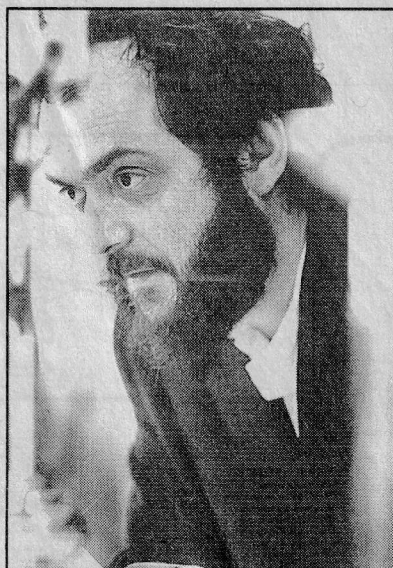
Yet every viewing of *2001* leaves knotty, unsettled questions. We lose ourselves in the comforting melodrama of HAL's rebellion and the astronauts' struggle to survive, yet we are left confounded — as perhaps we should be — by the strange Versailles bedroom and the surviving spaceman's regeneration into Star Child.

The early statement from Steven Spielberg's office about Kubrick's passing smacks of hypocrisy. Spielberg cited Kubrick's originality — true enough — "while all of us were scrambling to imitate him."

That's foolish. Spielberg, the optimist who could find a silver lining in the Holocaust and slavery, shared none of what film historian

Ephraim Katz called Kubrick's "bleak view of the essential nature of man and the inequities of the social order." Spielberg has thrived in the system that offended Kubrick and drove him to England and reclusion. (The only member of Spielberg's generation who bears traces of Kubrick is Martin Scorsese.)

Barry Lyndon, Kubrick's lavish but frosty period drama, is typical of many of his films: easy to compliment, difficult to embrace. Every work — with the exception of *Spartacus*, his least personal film — challenges the viewer with a nihilistic view that many find false, or at least dissatisfying. And that certainly was



File photo

Stanley Kubrick was described as having a "bleak view of the essential nature of man."

one of Kubrick's intentions.

I won't pretend that Kubrick was one of my favorite directors. I hold *Paths of Glory* and *Dr. Strangelove* in high regard, and moments from most of his other films are still as provocative as they were on first viewing, but each seems open to valid criticism in ways the work of a master should not.

Still, I always confronted a Kubrick film with grave anticipation, if only because I knew I was about to be taken somewhere — in locale, character, emotion, intellectual exploration — I had never been. That was true with every Kubrick film, and it will be with his last.