

Through a Different Lens: Stanley Kubrick Photographs

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Book review:

Through a Different Lens: Stanley Kubrick Photographs

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Through a Different Lens: Stanley Kubrick Photographs, ed. Donald Albrecht and Sean Corcoran (Cologne: Taschen, 2018), ISBN 978-3-836572-323, pp. 328, €50.

Not many people know that the film director Stanley Kubrick, who died in 1999, was Jewish or that he was a photographer. Thanks to a number of recent publications, my own included, this is beginning to change. One such publication is this handsome book by Taschen, which builds on their previous books about Kubrick: *The Stanley Kubrick Archives*, *Napoleon: The Greatest Film Never Made*, and *The Making of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey*; two more, on *Dr. Strangelove (1964)* and *The Shining (1980)*, are in the pipeline. This collection of original short essays and scores of photographs emerged from an exhibition of the same name at the Museum of the City of New York.

Although born Jewish, Kubrick was not in any way religious – either in observance or belief. In fact, he was bar-mitzvahed not in a synagogue but by being given a camera by his father, Jacques. Thereafter, he initially honed his craft as an amateur before earning himself a part-time job, while still at high school, as a photographer for *Look* magazine. On graduating, he worked for them full-time until 1951, when he decided to make motion pictures. During the five years he worked for *Look*, Kubrick snapped some 200,000 images, including negatives, contact sheets, transparencies, and prints (p. 6). This number does not include any images he took privately when not under assignment.

Through a Different Lens aims to shed light on Kubrick's *Look* photography and place it in the context of his film-making career. After some brief introductory essays, it provides a chronological overview of his photographic career from 1945 to 1950. However, what it does not do is shed any light on Kubrick's Jewishness or on the Jewish subjects he snapped. For example, in his essay "Stanley Kubrick: Learning to Look", Luc Sante states that Kubrick was part of a generation of American Jewish photographers, including Tod Croner, Diane Arbus, Saul Leiter, Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, and Weegee, all of whom are mentioned in the book (p. 17), but makes no reference to their ethnic background or ways in which this background inspired or motivated their work.

For that, one must scrutinize the photographs themselves and make inferences. In the heavily Jewish Bronx, the teenage Kubrick's first images were undoubtedly those of his (Jewish) family and childhood friends.

There is no record of that here, though. When he graduated to professional photography, clearly some of those he snapped were also Jewish, given that the majority of his pictures were taken in New York City. Again, this is never discussed or even alluded to. The *Look* photo essay “Life and Love on the New York Subway” (4 March 1947) does include an image of a *yeshiva bochur* with the caption, “Talmudic scholar reads his Yiddish newspaper aloud to an intent friend”. Yet, this is a rare exception, and there is no analysis of this image or what it might have meant to the young Kubrick. Perhaps, in another life, this could have been his chosen route.

Furthermore, Kubrick did take pictures of postwar American Jewish celebrities. This included Jules Dassin at work on his 1948 film *Naked City*. He also snapped the actor Zero Mostel, the conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein, and the composers Aaron Copland and Oscar Levant, among many others (I have mentioned only those featured in the book).

Again, when Nazism is mentioned, it is in connection with the Berlin painter George Grosz, who, ironically, was not Jewish (even if everyone thought he was). Yet, Kubrick provided twelve pictures out of thirteen for a three-page spread on a fifteen-year-old Polish war orphan, Jack Melnik, “*In Amerika Habe Ich Die Freiheit Gefunden*” (I Found Freedom in America), which ran in the 5 August 1947 issue. Melnik had been a slave labourer in a Nazi concentration camp and eventually emigrated to the United States. This photo essay, though, is neither included nor discussed in the book.

It is perhaps unfair to attack a book for what it does not set out to do: analyse Stanley Kubrick as a Jewish photographer (whatever that may mean in reality). But, given the Jewishness of many of the profession’s practitioners and of the milieu in which he worked, it seems a little remiss. At the same time, this conspicuous lack points to an opportunity for scholars in the emerging field of Kubrick studies. Apart from the work of one scholar, Kubrick’s photography has received comparatively little attention. It should be analysed not only in terms of his films but also with due attention to the Jewishness of this photography – both professional and personal (where available) – and the ways in which it relates to the director and his films.

Nathan Abrams