

The Secret Photographs of Stanley Kubrick

Before becoming a great filmmaker, the director of '2001: A Space Odyssey' and 'A Clockwork Orange' was a photographer for *Look* magazine. Now you can see his work on show.

By DANTE A. CIAMPAGLIA

Director Stanley Kubrick's science-fiction classic *2001: A Space Odyssey*, celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, is a challenging and technically dazzling piece of cinema.

From the enigmatic *Dawn of Man* opening to the climactic mindbending trip through the *Stargate*, the film still feels at the vanguard of genre, special effects, and cinematography. Yet while making *2001*, Kubrick utilized a relatively low-fi piece of gear: a clunky Polaroid camera.

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According to Michael Benson's authoritative *Space Odyssey*, Kubrick shot setups with the Polaroid then, based on the results, he and cameraman John Alcott adjusted lighting and the placement of his Super Panavision 70mm cameras.

“I think he saw things differently that way than he did looking through a camera,” Alcott told Benson. “When Kubrick looked at this Polaroid still, he would see a two-dimensional image — it was all one surface and closer to what he was going to see on the screen.”



STANLEY KUBRICK
Stanley Kubrick, from "Peter Arno...Sophisticated Cartoonist," 1949

It's estimated Kubrick shot some 10,000 insta-images on *2001*, and if you only know Kubrick as a reclusive eccentric that reliance on the Polaroid might seem a characteristic quirk.

But in fact it was an extension of the creative sensibility he developed as a teenager working for *Look*. From 1945 to 1950, Kubrick was a photographer for the picture magazine, evocatively and empathically documenting ordinary New Yorkers, celebrities, athletes, and post-war playgrounds like the amusement park.

He shot more than 135 assignments for *Look* while honing the skills, relationships, and chutzpah that led him to filmmaking.

Yet this vital strand of Kubrick's artistic DNA has been criminally underexplored. The Museum of the City of New York's new exhibition *Through a Different Lens: Stanley Kubrick Photographs*, on view through October 28, aims to change that.

Drawing on the museum's *Look* archive, curators Donald Albrecht and Sean Corcoran chart Kubrick's growth as a



COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK/ SK FILM ARCHIVE, LLC
Stanley Kubrick, from "Paddy Wagon," 1949

photographer — and next-generation member of New York's street photography tradition — through 130 photos (selected from some 15,000) and numerous copies of the magazine. (The accompanying catalogue, an elegant tome published by Taschen, goes even further with 300 total photos and critical essays.)

"He seems a perennially fascinating figure," Albrecht says, "and to see the formative years of this perennially fascinating figure is interesting."

The photos, adds museum director and president Whitney W. Donhauser, capture "the pathos of ordinary life with a sophistication that allied his young age."

Kubrick was introduced to photography growing up in the Bronx. Using father Jack's Graflex single-lens reflex camera, Stanley shot school activities, baseball games, and street life.

Then, in 1945, the 17-year-old Kubrick sold his first photograph: a forlorn newsstand attendant surrounded by headlines shouting the death of President Franklin Roosevelt.

He took the image to the *New York Daily News* first, then used the paper's offer as leverage with *Look*. The magazine paid \$25, \$10 better than the *Daily News*, and the photo ran in the June 26, 1945, issue. By January 1947, Kubrick was out of high school and on *Look's* masthead as a staffer.

He immediately proved he belonged. His 29 pictures for the six-page March 4, 1947, story "Life and Love on the Subway," for example, form a mature panoply of the New York underground. Riders navigate escalators stretching to infinity and pack into trains, where they canoodle, read, or wear thousand-yard leave-me-alone glares.

Many were candids shot with a hidden camera, but the standout photo was staged. A backlit couple at the 81st Street station is pressed against a column, the woman grips her man as they gaze longingly at each other, while behind them a man sleeps against a wall. In one extraordinary image, Kubrick captures the potent and illicit stew of love and danger and sex and desperation that burbles under the city.

"Beyond the quality of the individual pictures, you get that he can tell stories," Corcoran says. "These are assignments in which he has to use several photographs to get across an idea. It's not just about the visuals but storytelling, as well."

Kubrick deploys that talent in essays on pre-fame Montgomery Clift, boxers Walter Cartier and Rocky Graziano, and a feature documenting life under the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus bigtop.

But some of his best work appears in series that, for unknown reasons, went unpublished. For "Rosemary Williams—Showgirl,"

an intimate photo profile of an up-and-comer filed in March 1949, Kubrick shot approximately 700 images — one is a voyeuristic self-portrait in a mirror as Williams made herself up for a show; another a portrait of Williams as sultry femme fatale, sitting at a cafe counter drinking coffee and holding a cigarette — to tell one of those big-dreams stories of the '40s laced with melancholy and tinged with dread.

And then there's "Shoeshine Boy," filed in 1947. Kubrick shot around 250 photos documenting the day-to-day of Mickey, a young shoeshiner hustling for business, doing chores, and finishing his homework.

Neither optimistic nor cynical, merely pragmatic, the series captures the tension between youth and maturity, dreams and inevitability. It also includes perhaps the best image in the show: Mickey stands with one foot on his shine box, pointing at a potential customer's feet with a cocked head and world-weary gaze. More than 70 years later, the workaday futility is achingly potent and heartbreaking.

Published or not, Kubrick's work at *Look* proved a fertile training ground for his inevitable move into filmmaking. "It was tremendous fun for me at that age, but eventually it began to wear thin especially since my ultimate ambition had always been to make movies," Kubrick told Michel Ciment in 1980. "Photography certainly gave me the first step up to movies."

He left *Look* in 1950, and a year later RKO-Pathé released Kubrick's 16-minute documentary *The Day of the Fight*, based on his *Look* series on boxer Walter Cartier.

He shot two more shorts, *Flying Padre* (1951) and *The Seafarers* (1953), before making his first narrative feature, the war film *Fear and Desire* (1953).

In a mixed review for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Otis L. Guernsey Jr. nevertheless praised the film's photography as "excellent—the forest seen in *Rashomon* lights and shades and there are several eerie effects gained by silhouetting human beings in back-lighting."

Through a Different Lens is an extraordinary chronicle of Kubrick's evolving aesthetic, the photographs providing a unique insight into the education of one of the all-time great filmmakers. Experiencing this work, which for too long has been given short shrift, inspires a renewed exhilaration to watching his hard-nosed noirs *Killer's Kiss* (1955) and *The Killing* (1956).

These first true "Kubrick films" are where everything comes together, and unsurprisingly they lean on experiences from his days



Stanley Kubrick, from "Paddy Wagon," 1949



Stanley Kubrick, from "Faye Emerson: Young Lady in a Hurry," 1950

as a shooter for *Look* — boxing, the races, people on the margins — and the storytelling prowess he harnessed at the magazine.

"I think people should see the photography as a part of the overall work of his life, and as a source of where he came from," says John Cameron, president of the Stanley Kubrick Archive. "I always thought the movies were just a series of still photographs at high speed, put together."

Through a Different Lens: Stanley Kubrick Photographs is at the *Museum of The City of New York*, through October 28.