

**FALSETTO, Mario. *Stanley Kubrick. A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*. Westport / London : Praeger, 1994, 217 p.**

David A. Douglas

Volume 6, Number 2-3, Spring 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1000981ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1000981ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Cinémas

ISSN

1181-6945 (print)

1705-6500 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Douglas, D. A. (1996). Review of [FALSETTO, Mario. *Stanley Kubrick. A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*. Westport / London : Praeger, 1994, 217 p.] *Cinémas*, 6(2-3), 217–222. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1000981ar>

FALSETTO, Mario. *Stanley Kubrick. A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*. Westport / London : Praeger, 1994, 217 p.

Though he has not made a film since 1987 and only made four films in the last twenty-five years, Stanley Kubrick has maintained his stature in the pantheon of great American film directors. His films, critical and commercial events at the time of their release, continue to generate interest from a variety of perspectives. Over the years Kubrick's work has been subject matter for numerous critics and academics, and he is well represented in many university film curriculums. It is from such a background that Mario Falsetto adds to the volume of work on Kubrick with his new book, *Stanley Kubrick. A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*. As a professor of Cinema Studies at Concordia University, Falsetto has developed his analysis of Kubrick's career from both inside and outside the classroom. In his analysis of Kubrick's career, Falsetto attempts to highlight what he considers to be the quintessence of Kubrick, to bring focus to his numerous accomplishments, and ultimately, to validate these accomplishments as both those of an artist and as a commercially successful filmmaker. It is abundantly clear early into Falsetto's analysis that he approaches Kubrick both with the critical eye of the academic and the adoring eye of the longtime fan. The combination here provides a generally spirited discussion and displays great passion.

Noting that previous works on Kubrick have dealt extensively with thematic concerns present in his films, Professor Falsetto has devoted his analysis almost entirely to formal and narrative analysis. Following a generally chronological order of Kubrick's works, Falsetto breaks the director's films down to their bare essential elements (units), paying particular attention to Kubrick's

choice of framing and other camera strategies, to his predilection for longer than average shot lengths. Falsetto is keenly interested in both individual shots and the “gaps” or spaces between shots as the foundation for the construction of meaning in the director’s work. By employing such a rigorous descriptive dissection of Kubrick’s films, Falsetto is able to uncover what he considers to be the deep structures that transcend the director’s work. In this endeavour, Falsetto maps out Kubrick’s apparent increasing dissatisfaction with the traditional or dominant Hollywood narrative forms and his gradual transition towards the development of what he terms the “modernist narrative” form. In his detailed analysis of the films *The Killing* (1956), *Dr. Stangelove* (1964), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Barry Lyndon* (1975), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) Falsetto traces the evolution of a young director emerging from the twilight of the classical era of Hollywood cinema into a director increasingly interested in subverting the very narrative forms which were the bedrock of that era. In doing so, Kubrick became a director who has managed the notable feat of developing a cinematic signature worthy of the term “Kubrickean,” while nevertheless maintaining a commercial following for his work.

Of first and foremost interest for Falsetto is a discussion of Kubrick’s particular narrative structures in his films. Beginning with Kubrick’s third film, *The Killing*, Falsetto meticulously describes the non-linear temporal structure of the film. While noting that the film still employs narrative patterns consistent with late classical Hollywood cinema insofar as the film introduces the individual character’s plot motivations promptly, Falsetto sees a young director breaking out of the mould. The extreme precision of the film’s timing and lack of emotional attachment mark this divergence and indicate the genesis of the “Kubrickean” voice. As Falsetto explains, the director is careful to mix the familiar with the unfamiliar, to introduce dualities of meaning into the text. To offer us a film that is at once precise and scripted to the “nth” degree and yet contains, if Falsetto is correct in his observation, noticeable errors in the chronology of events. The introduction of discrepancies between the temporal sequencing of the

film which occur first in units 14 and 15 as Johnny is placed in two different locations at 7:00 AM on the last day of his life and second, in units 30 through 32 when Johnny arrives, too late, at the scene of the gang's murder, is indicative of Kubrick's interest in challenging the quality of omniscience in classical Hollywood cinema. Through the presentation of such errors or the "gaps" evident in Humbert's subjective voice-over in *Lolita*, Kubrick skilfully and gradually introduces a tension between the spectator and the subjects of his films, ultimately placing the veracity of character accounts into doubt.

Beginning with familiar genres, the melodrama, war film or science-fiction, Kubrick employs his talents towards the subversion of expectation. In this endeavour, Kubrick presents us with fallible narrators and narrations, fallible characters, such as Johnny Clay in *The Killing*, who professes to have everything planned only to be undone by a combination of chance and the greed of others. Planning and control recur frequently in Kubrick's work, the defense systems in *Dr. Strangelove*, the Ludovico treatment in *A Clockwork Orange*, marine training in *Full Metal Jacket*. Through his subsequent films, Kubrick offers us numerous instances where "perfectly" planned systems or ordered lives are destroyed by the random element, chance and the impossibility of total knowledge.

While these subjects are routinely the purview of thematic analysis, Falsetto argues that such meanings are generated at first at the level of the films' basic formal elements; editing, point-of-view, shot length as well as in the development of characterization within individual films. In his discussion of *Barry Lyndon*, Falsetto states that the film's formal strategies, which feature the long take, long shots, and elaborate constructions of *mise-en-scène* are evidence of the director's voice. By emphasizing the painterly and the surface beauty of the XVIIIth century world, Kubrick frames our understanding of the world of Thackeray's novel. As Falsetto states, the use of slow zoom to highlight detail in individual scenes simultaneously, foregrounds the artifice of this world, and prompts a sense of fatalism (p. 64). Quite often Kubrick has resorted to documentary styles, as he does in the attack on Burpelson Air Force Base, or the

interior of the B-52. Aided by hand-held camera shots, Kubrick injects a quality of realism into the drama, heightening our sense of dread over the actions being undertaken. In contrast, Kubrick resorts to distortions of the image in *A Clockwork Orange* to filter our comprehension of Alex's world and to make the subjective perspective of Alex as narrator manifest. Here the inhumanity of Alex's society is foregrounded by the camera's rendering of surreal sets such as the Korova Milk Bar. As Falsetto notes, the extreme stylization present here prepares us for the "aesthetization of violence" at the heart of the film.

In addition to his meticulous formal analysis, Falsetto includes a notable divergence from the norm with a chapter discussing the construction of character and the nature of performance in Kubrick's work. This addition is important as most analysis on Kubrick tends to underplay the value of this area. Given the visual *tour de force* the director typically supplies, combined with his overall refusal to involve us to any great extent in the emotional motivations of his characters and further, his penchant for using actors that are somewhat stolid and wooden (Dullea, Hayden, O'Neal, even Kirk Douglas at times) it is not surprising others have overlooked this area. In a comparison of acting styles in three different films, McDowell's Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, O'Neal's *Barry Lyndon*, and Nicholson's Jack Torrance in *The Shining* (1979), Falsetto sees further evidence of Kubrick moving away from the Hollywood mainstream. He notes in the case of Alex, all elements of the film foreground his actions as "performance." From the tone of Alex's narration, the fight with Billy Boy's gang in a ruined theatre to the disturbing rendition of Gene Kelly's "Singing in the Rain" Alex is the quintessential actor, viewing his creations, however violent they are, as creative acts. Where Alex is a performer, Barry Lyndon is nearly a mannequin. His de-dramatized performance ably compliments the sense of artifice and vacuity that Kubrick sees as his world. In *The Shining*, Kubrick relies on the *tour de force* performance of Jack Nicholson to construct what he terms a "metaphorical, mental landscape" (p. 164).

While Falsetto's analysis of Kubrick is quite comprehensive and compelling, it does have some drawbacks. Principle among

these is Falsetto's decision to de-emphasize discussion of sound, particularly music in the context of his analysis. He offers some explanation of this choice by arguing that "[...] above all else, Kubrick unquestionably views film as an image oriented medium. Language is not unimportant to Kubrick's aesthetic, but his work clearly privileges the image." (p. 84) The artificial cleavage between visual and aural is dissatisfying and perhaps heavyhanded. Sound in cinema is not simply language, as Kubrick ably demonstrates throughout *2001*, and its relationship to the construction of meaning is too complex to simply omit at will. At a later point, Falsetto offers a further explanation for the omission in a footnote which acknowledges Kubrick's elaborate use of music (p. 85) but, without elaborating as to why he feels discussion of music is outside the scope of his project, pronounces it to be so. This is most unfortunate as, in the instances where Falsetto does include discussion of the role of music, e.g. the "stargate" sequence of *2001*, his analysis shows great promise.

A second drawback is the continuation of the age-old problem of schematizing cinema into the dichotomy of art-cinema and commercial cinema, with the latter imbued with all manner of lesser importance. In numerous instances throughout his book, Falsetto points to examples which serve to demonstrate the superior overall quality of Kubrick's work, examples ranging from items as mundane as noting that the Average Shot length (ASL) of Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* "[...] places it firmly within the art-film category" (p. 39) to the notion that Kubrick's work does not render up all meaning at first viewing (p. 180). This demand for interior meaning, complexity and vision seems to return to values closely connected to auteur criticism. Underneath these statements there is a fairly traditional comprehension of what is and isn't art. But despite this, Falsetto repeatedly feels the need to validate Kubrick not only as a modern artist, but also as a filmmaker of commercial merit. This is attempting to have it both ways. One gets a better sense of what Falsetto intends with such distinctions when he compares the scope of Kubrick's *2001* to Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). On an individual level one can accept this, but not as a blanket categorization.

A final curiosity of Falsetto's analysis, somewhat related to the last point is his habit on occasion of writing at times with a defensive tone, as if anticipating criticism not yet voiced. References to how a "serious viewer" will comprehend a scene or the director's intention seem somewhat prescriptive. As Falsetto notes at other points in his analysis there are many other possible perspectives and categorizing viewers into the serious and not-serious seems detrimental to the overall goals of the book.

However, these drawbacks mentioned, it must be said that Professor Falsetto's analysis of the work of Stanley Kubrick is a major contribution to the scholarly work on the director's career to date. The positive approach that Professor Falsetto employs throughout his analysis adds a quality of vigour and excitement to the work. The straightforward manner of presentation culminates in a text that is equally well suited to both academic use and of interest for others interested in Kubrick's career to date.

David A. Douglas

Concordia University