

Filmworker

Any film fan going into this documentary on the work of the famed director Stanley Kubrick might assume that the title stands for the master himself, but they would be wrong, for “Filmworker” concerns Kubrick’s long-time shadow, factotum, and jack-of-all-trades Leon Vitali, an English actor who gave up his own career to serve all things Stanley for over 30 years—and continues to do so.

Vitali was an ambitious young film and television actor who became enamored of Kubrick after seeing “A Clockwork Orange” (1971), proclaiming: “I want to work with that man.” Then, in 1975, he landed the crucial role of Lord Bullingdon in Kubrick’s epic “Barry Lyndon,” based on the epic 19th C. novel by William Thackeray. Thrilled to get the part but even more fascinated by observing Kubrick’s work on that fraught production, Vitali then eschewed acting to pal around with and assist the director on other projects, starting with “The Shining” (1980), where he, among other things, became a kind of babysitter for the film’s child actor, Danny Lloyd.

Vitali’s commitment to Kubrick, and his general usefulness to the man, waylaid his career as a performer for a behind-the-scenes function—rarely precisely defined—but incorporating myriad roles as casting director, line reader, acting coach, general “assistant,” as well as stints as dogs body and go-fer. Whatever Kubrick needed, Leon was there to provide it. Working on “Full Metal Jacket” (1987), one commentator said that “every day was full of a lot of difficult jobs,” and Vitali sought ways to do them. The film’s lead, Matthew Modine, says in “Filmworker” he thought Vitali “was a slave to Kubrick” by making himself so useful.

To tell this one-off story, director Tony Zierra uses myriad interviews with miscellaneous production people, actors, and aides who worked with Kubrick, as well as sit-downs with two of the leads in his pictures, Ryan O’Neal (“Barry Lyndon”) and Modine. Still, the film finally depends on querying Vitali himself, looking like an aging hippy (gaunt, with head band and stippled chin) and making his quizzical case for his importance on the Kubrick sets. The commitment of Vitali to his muse is complicated, a mix, it appears, of both simpering dependence and overarching magnanimity.

Kubrick himself (who died in 1999) was always reluctant to do interviews, and there are none with him in the film; he appears in stills and in brief on-set sequences. Fans of the director’s oeuvre will get their kicks seeing some of the backstories of his elaborate productions from 1975 on, but the film is hardly a clip fest. However, one intriguing clip for Kubrick’s last film, “Eyes Wide Shut” (1999), has Vitali returning to acting, though masked. He appears as “Red Cloak” in a decadent party scene at the end of this strange film.

Vitali also performed another important role in assisting Kubrick: helping to store and archive all of Kubrick’s film prints and memorabilia. It is a role he continues to this day, seeing himself as a standard bearer for the man’s legacy, as he works as a consultant for the Kubrick estate on definitive versions of the Great Man’s works. (*The film is unrated and runs 94 minutes.*)

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