



I expect to make the best movie

THE BEST MOVIE (N)EVER MADE

Stanley Kubrick's Failed *Napoleon* Project

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"1969 – l'année de l'empereur" ran the title of a French magazine at the beginning of the 200th anniversary of Napoleon's birth.¹ The jubilee year was not only celebrated by new historical publications; it was also accompanied by a revamped version of the Napoleon cult, which had essentially never really faded. Whole series of articles in numerous popular magazines gave accounts of Napoleon's love life, his successes and his lonely end, conspiring to turn the French Emperor into a kind of pop star. 1969 was also Stanley Kubrick's "année de l'empereur". It came to be the focal point of his far-reaching studies of the historical figure of Napoleon. And it was the year in which what could have been his most important project failed, namely to make a film version of the life of Napoleon.

The script, written by Kubrick himself, was completed in September 1969. It basically gives a chronological account of the most important stages in Napoleon's life, partly commented on by a narrator's voice. Numerous inserted maps were intended to familiarize audiences with the changes in time and place in the course of the film. The script, albeit resourceful in its attempt to outline an entire life and even a whole epoch within a few hours, seems highly immobile and sterile. However, we cannot assume that this would have been the subsequent tone of the film. As with all his other projects, Kubrick would have made major changes in the process of shooting *Napoleon*. However, his ambitious plan, on which he worked so intensively during 1968-9, failed almost as magnifi-

Kubrick hired students of the Napoleon expert Felix Markham to organize a precise chronology of important events in Napoleon's life. The colored tabs represent different persons.



Oct 20 1971

1. I propose we make a deal to film Napoleon based on the following premises.
 2. I will do a new screenplay. Naturally, in the two years since the first one was written I have had new ideas.
 3. It's impossible to tell you what I'm going to do except to say that I expect to make the best movie ever made.
 4. Budget 4,000,000 below the line. Part of this, ~~between~~ ^{about} 1,000,000 to be spent in Romania for the large scenes.
 5. The interiors and small exteriors to be done on location with a very small French documentary sized shooting unit. Idea is to save money, shoot available light to make it look real (like Clockwork Orange) and exploit the fully dressed interiors of the period which are readily available in France.
 6. Above the line: Napoleon, SK, MGM debt, UA debt, no other big stars would be envisioned. I suggest actors of the impeccable calibre of Patrick Magee (Mr Alexander in CWO) and others are readily available at reasonable non- star deals.
 7. I would employ the stop and go three picture production approach. Theory being that big pictures run away because a 1 huge strip board is made and when the film starts planning stops. All the key people are too burdened down with day to day responsibilities. Idea would be to have 1. picture with 1-10 people, interiors France. Natural light and simulated. Very low overhead.
 2. Stop and re plan for 1 modest exteriors x-y number of crowd.
 3. Big exteriors Romania: battles, marching, revolution.
- Each section will be planned in front, but there will be time to reassess everything between each film. All personell except x y z will be dismissed. actor deals will be predicated on this approach .
8. Roll of Cyrus Eaton company
9. 35mm full aperture but no scope. Can blow up to 70mm height with normal proportions if so desired.
 10. Plan to start shooting small section on----- middle on-----
big on -----
 11. What immediate action has to be taken: Permissions in France, Romania deal, locations scouted in France and Romania, script, additional money for writers and book rights,

ever made.



cently as 'La Grande Armée' did during the Russian campaign. First of all, the project was abandoned – the plan had been to realize it with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. A further attempt to finally start shooting was made in spring 1969 in cooperation with United Artists, but in November 1969 the latter communicated that they were terminating the project.

Apparently, Kubrick had real hopes until well into the 1970s that he would finally get to do his *Napoleon*. The Kubrick Estate houses countless drafts of plans that show his efforts to find financial backers for his project, which he was scheduling for 1972-3. A draft dated October 20, 1971 presents a revised version of the original script. An undated note on his personal stationery, and he obviously penned it later, reveals that he changed his strategy and even wanted to draw on the services of an outside scriptwriter to make a realization of the project more likely, writing: "someone else ostensibly

Notes in a small ring binder where Kubrick recorded ideas and questions

Napoleon

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does screenplay".² Anthony Burgess, author of *A Clockwork Orange*, telegraphed Kubrick on December 20, 1970: "I've been persuaded to see in Napoleon a possible subject for a novel." A manuscript of his *Napoleon Symphony* is also to be found in the Kubrick Estate.

Napoleon fascinated Kubrick until the end of his life. And it was not only among the circles of enthusiastic fans who (going by their speculations posted on the Internet) have long since turned *Napoleon* into the stuff of myths, that there were hopes that their revered director would finally turn his efforts to realizing the project. A small find in the Estate shows that many supporters, and perhaps even the director himself, cherished the wish that Kubrick and only Kubrick should tackle preparing a film version of one of the most impressive biographies in world history. On May 14, 1992 Michael Blowen wrote a letter to Kubrick: "Dear Stanley, I don't know whether you're still planning to do Napoleon (I hope you are). In any case, this book might interest you for either professional or personal reasons." Blowen enclosed a preprint of Alan Scow's monograph *One Hundred Days. Napoleon's Road to Waterloo*—it was brought out by Atheneum in New York on September 14, 1992. The letter is still to be found between the covers of the book, which is part of Kubrick's collection of approximately 500 books about Napoleon.

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Kubrick prepared and produced his films with legendary meticulousness. His Estate includes countless crates, boxes, and files which contain documents attesting to the work spent preparing films, even if some never got beyond the planning stage. However, hardly any of the other preparatory projects are on the scale of *Napoleon*, which probably is one of the most ambitious efforts in the history of film. Kubrick's Napoleon collection, which includes a library covering everything from the *Mémorial de St. Hélène* through to scholarly historical monographs,

is no doubt one of the largest privately owned archives on the subject. It contains more than 18,000 illustrations, contemporary pictures of Napoleon, of his family, his entourage, his opponents, and his battles. The documents that testify to the preparatory work undertaken by almost two dozen assistants in 1968 and 1969 are just as impressive.

The 'Napoleon archive' not only showcases the detailed research and preparations, it also documents Kubrick's incredible power and patience in endeavoring to realize a project that repeatedly came up against financial, technical and organizational difficulties. In October 1969, the budget was estimated at about 4.5 million dollars, assuming that filming was done in Romania, where costs were extremely low. If necessary, Kubrick was not only prepared to forgo his own script, but was more willing to compromise than ever before solely for the sake of moving the *Napoleon* project forward. The calculations show that he envisaged hiring Romanian actors for most of the supporting roles in order to save costs. In other words, for the original version of his film Kubrick was prepared to tolerate lip-synching, although he was known for his critical attitude towards it.

However, his very detailed and partly handwritten preparations show that Kubrick was quite uncompromising when it came to presenting the figure of Napoleon and to ensuring he himself had the status of an omniscient narrator. The test of wills between Napoleon and Kubrick was a lengthy effort that had started long before 1968-9. Kubrick had approached the myth of Napoleon strategically, almost

like a general in the field. The director who explored the innovative possibilities the medium offered anew in with each of his films encountered the emperor who marched briskly from one victory to the next, but in the final analysis the director failed. Kubrick wished to learn everything about this man who had so many affinities with him – from the weather on each single day of battle through to Napoleon's eating habits, from studying his sense of humour to his love life, from the books he read to the real reasons for his failure in the Russian winter. Kubrick probably got to know Napoleon better than some of the emperor's own entourage. He spent many years studying Napoleon's inner development in the context of his day and worked on the cinematographic depiction of this inner and outer world with a team of highly committed assistants to whom he gave instructions on the basis of an ingenious system of "to do" and "done" notes, stacks of which are still to be found in the Kubrick Estate.

Today, there are still those who claim that, given how far preparations had progressed, all Kubrick had left to do was start shooting - when the project was shelved. His assistants had scouted suitable locations in Italy, France, Yugoslavia, and Romania and had collected photographs, postcards and maps. Kubrick's 'Napoleon archive' even contains table-top strategy games they had developed to reconstruct the Napoleonic Wars. Photographer Andrew Birkin had traveled to Italy and France in 1968 to scout potential locations and with the support of historical consultants he took several thousand photographs

**Notes from 18 November 1968.
Kubrick planned to attach his
comments to the treatment for
potential investors.**

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Very great savings of money together with an increase of quality can be achieved.

Palaces in France and Italy are available on a rental basis, fully furnished for between \$350-750 per day.

The savings here must sum into 2-3 million dollars.

Because of the new fast photographic lenses we intend to employ, very little lighting equipment will have to be used, depending instead on ordinary window light, which incidentally will look much more beautiful and realistic than artificial light.

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