



Archive Fever

Jane & Louise Wilson at play in Kubrick's attic

by CHRIS DARKE

Jon Ronson's 2008 documentary *Stanley Kubrick's Boxes* revealed that the director had amassed more than 1,000 boxes of material relating to his life's work. The film explored the obsessive research behind Kubrick's fabled perfectionism. The boxes were constructed to micron-precise specifications. For example, one contained nothing but photographs of gates, only one of which would be used for a single scene in *Eyes Wide Shut*.

In 2007, Kubrick's stash was moved from his home in Essex to a specially built London University archive to which the English installation artists Jane and Louise Wilson were granted access to glean ideas for a commission based on the collection. Rather than broach one of the director's iconic films, the twins smartly lit on research for a project that he had long nurtured but never made. Kubrick had considered making a film about the Holocaust since the early Seventies, but in the Nineties he decided to adapt Louis Begley's 1991 novel *Wartime Lies*. The

screenplay was written, locations scouted, and the lead roles cast for the story (re-titled *Aryan Papers*) of a young Jewish woman and her nephew who pretend to be Catholics in Nazi-occupied Poland.

A video installation based on an unmade film by one of cinema's master craftsmen sounds like the recipe for an overdose of pretension, but in *Unfolding the Aryan Papers* the Wilsons have fashioned an elegant, cerebral work that satisfies as much on its own terms as for its take on Kubrick's unfinished film. They have been making such work since the mid-Nineties, often focusing on architectural relics through which they send their cameras swooping like ghosts. (Their 1997 installation *Stasi City* inhabited another Library of Babel, the derelict East German Stasi archives.) *Unfolding the Aryan Papers* is the first work in which they touch on narrative, thanks to the presence of Johanna Ter Steege, the Dutch actress cast by Kubrick as his female lead. Intrigued by photographs of costume tests the director had shot, the artists

combine these archival elements with their own newly shot footage of Ter Steege in period costumes.

But it's their use of her voice that allows the actress to finally perform. The installation's combination of large-scale single-screen projection in a

Steege poses at numerous transitional spaces—doorways, staircases, lift entrances—and the looped film projection denies a narrative entrance and exit in terms of a clear beginning and end. The nicest touch is a pair of huge wall-mounted mirrors which, facing each other on either side of the screen, unfold the installation space into an illusorily infinite corridor. All of which lends a pleasing Borgesian quality that responds to the ceaseless ramifying possibilities of an archive.

We are now entering an interesting stage in what might be called the "archival afterlife" of cinema's first century. Certain greats have demonstrated an awareness of this and, in personally organizing their own records and files, have also produced new audiovisual forms. Think, for example, of Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, Marker's *Immémory*, and Varda's *Les Plages d'Agnès*. Kubrick didn't live long enough to take on this challenge, but *Unfolding the Aryan Papers* engages directly with this idea of a repository afterlife. Without any lugubrious tracking shots past stacks or shots of opening boxes, the artists succeed in creating a space suggestive of the mental recursiveness of archival storage and retrieval, which intelligently extends their focus on an unfinished film. Unmade, its possibilities are endless. □



darkened space combined with carefully balanced sound design creates an intimate atmosphere to what might otherwise have been a chilly piece. With the touching sibilance of her accented English, Ter Steege alternately reads from the source novel, recounts the experience of auditioning for Kubrick, and recites the archive captions under which he filed documentary photographs of occupied Warsaw. For some reason, I found the way she said the words "specific scenes" (over everyday images, inevitably horrific in their banality) intensely moving.

The film is obsessively concerned with thresholds. Ter