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## Current Shows

### Jane and Louise Wilson

BFI Southbank Gallery, London, UK



It's Stanley Kubrick season at the BFI, but alongside the iconic films being shown as part of the month-long celebration is an unfamiliar title: *Unfolding the Aryan*

*Papers* (2008). The short film is a new work by Jane and Louise Wilson that delves into The Stanley Kubrick Archives at University of the Arts London (UAL), bringing to the screen an abandoned project about the Holocaust.

In 1993, Kubrick began preparations for a film based on Louis Begley's 1991 novel *Wartime Lies*, that follows a Jewish woman and her nephew pretending to be Catholic in occupied Poland. Although the project never progressed beyond pre-production, a wealth of material remains as evidence of the director's vision: on-set photographs, research into war-time ghettos, screenplay drafts, and, crucially, wardrobe shots of Johanna ter Steege, the young actress due to play the lead.



Commissioned jointly by not-for-profit arts organisation Animate Projects and the BFI, the Wilsons' research-based project – made during a residency at UAL – splices this preserved material with newly shot footage of Steege reenacting the wardrobe shots and poses that she had performed for Kubrick 15 years before. We see a still frame of the fresh-faced young actress standing in costume, facing away from us, hands flared and crossed behind her back, every detail carefully posed and crystallized. Minutes later the same costume and pose reappear, but now the body breathes and quivers with the effort of holding still. The wrinkles and physical changes of 15 years assert themselves subtly yet insistently, proving that this footage is an imperfect imitation rather than a realization of the original pre-production shots.

The image of Steege never speaks; the recent footage, like the archived stills, is stalled at the point of preliminary shots – mute suggestions of what will come. However, Steege's disembodied voice narrates throughout the entire film: with the rambling rhythm of reminiscence, she tells nostalgically of her interview with Kubrick, of her excitement about working with him and her own devastation when the film failed to materialize. We learn of Kubrick's scrupulous attention to detail – dictating the exact slant of the actress's pose, adjusting a couple of hairs on her head, retaking each wardrobe shot until flawless. We also hear of the crippling effect that such perfectionism had on the director, who convinced himself that he could never do justice to a topic like the Holocaust. The horror and sheer scale of the subject depressed Kubrick, and, like so many artists and writers

before him, he grew painfully aware of the shortcomings of a straightforwardly mimetic approach.

Yearning pervades *Unfolding the Aryan Papers*. The young Steege longed to master the character of Tanya, and for eight months she waited to assume the role and for filming to begin. The older Steege, in turn, yearns to revisit that earlier moment and retrieve the role so devastatingly denied to her. For her, the Wilsons' project offers this chance: at the end of the film the actress's voice tells of a text message that she has recently sent to a friend stating that the dream had ended at last – that it had finally turned into reality. Yet this, of course, never really happens; Steege never gets the chance to play Tanya. Ultimately her yearning simply results in a reenactment of her younger self, full of anticipation yet poised for disappointment.

Kubrick's perfectionism becomes reformulated and replicated in the Wilson twins' project. Their research methods, which are often scrupulous, echo the detailed preparations conducted by Kubrick, while the repetition of certain images reflects the director's own tendency to retake. Rather than pressing forwards, *Unfolding the Aryan Papers* informs the viewer by retracing Kubrick's footsteps. Above all, the Wilsons preserve the unfinished – or rather, never begun – nature of the director's last project. What remain in the UAL archives are mere fractions of a film: lines of script; set ideas; detailed close-ups of an actress's upswept hair or sensually parted lips. Rather than piece these together, the disembodied voices and disjointed narrative of the Wilsons' project embrace and augment their fragmentary quality. In this fact perhaps lies a tacit agreement with Kubrick's decision never to finish this film about the Holocaust. Offering an absorbing and poignant glimpse into one undeveloped fraction of Kubrick's work, *Unfolding the Aryan Papers* leaves us with a richer yet even more enigmatic vision of the celebrated director.

**Katherine Holmgren**