

Scenes from a marriage

David Walsh reviews *Eyes Wide Shut*

Directed by Stanley Kubrick, written by Frederic Raphael and Kubrick, based on the novel *Dream Story* by Arthur Schnitzler

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Eyes Wide Shut is an intriguing failure, a fitting culmination to the career of American director Stanley Kubrick, who died in March at the age of 70. While Kubrick's attempts in his last film to make grand statements are unclear and inflated, in its most successful moments the work does convey something about the difficulties of sharing a life with another human being.

Eyes Wide Shut is based on the novella *Dream Story* (*Traumnovelle*) by Austrian writer Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931), perhaps best known today for his play *Reigen*, filmed as *La Ronde* by Max Ophuls in 1950 (and recently reinterpreted for the stage by David Hare).

The adaptation by Kubrick and Frederic Raphael (*Darling, Two For the Road*) places the story, vaguely, in contemporary New York City. Bill (Tom Cruise) and Alice Harford (Nicole Kidman) are an upper middle class couple, with one daughter. He is a doctor, she tried her hand at running an art gallery, but it went under. They have plenty of money; they are attractive and self-absorbed. They perhaps take each other for granted. Married life has become something of a formality.

At a lavish party a debonair Hungarian makes a pass at Alice; two women press themselves on Bill. He is called upstairs by Victor Ziegler, the wealthy host of the party, to attend to a naked woman who has taken a drug overdose.

The next day, under the influence of marijuana, Alice tells her husband about a near affair she had the previous summer. She had been willing, she says, to throw everything away for one night with a young naval officer. Bill is called away by the death of one of his patients. The thought of his wife and the naval officer eats at him. After the visit, he wanders the streets.

Encountering an old friend from medical school, who now plays piano in night clubs and far shadier venues, Bill learns of a house where all sorts of sexual goings-on take place. He prevails upon his friend for the password and takes himself, costumed, to the mansion where the orgies are held. Eventually exposed as an intruder, Bill faces some sort of humiliating (or worse) punishment when a woman—who has previously attempted to warn him of the dangers he faced—intervenes and offers to sacrifice herself for him.

Returning home, Bill wakes Alice in the middle of what she describes as a nightmare, although she is laughing in her sleep when he enters the bedroom. She has been dreaming about having sex with a number of men. This does nothing to calm Bill's nerves.

His efforts to track down his piano-playing friend come to naught. When he returns to the scene of the orgy, he receives a warning to drop his inquiries. Reading in the newspaper of an ex-beauty queen rushed to the hospital with an overdose, Bill attempts to visit her, only to discover that she has died. He views the body at the morgue and we assume that it is the

woman from the mansion. Victor Ziegler summons Bill and tells him that he was at the mansion and “saw everything.” The woman, the same one from Ziegler's party, was not killed by anyone, he insists, she simply overdosed.

At home Bill breaks down. “I'll tell you everything,” he says, and does. Later he asks, “What should we do?” Schnitzler's original, which Raphael and Kubrick follow closely, concludes with the following exchange: “I think we should be grateful to fate that we've emerged safely from these adventures—both from the real ones and from those we dreamed about.” “Are you quite sure of that?” he asked. “As sure as I am of my sense that neither the reality of a single night nor even of a person's entire life can be equated with the full truth about his innermost being.” “And no dream,” he sighed quietly, “is altogether a dream.” The last line of the film—a rather crude sexual invitation—is Kubrick's or Raphael's cynical contribution.

Eyes Wide Shut has numerous disagreeable aspects. Kubrick has always had a tendency to show off, and he does so here. Critic Robin Wood noted years ago that the praise of Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) for its “visual brilliance” demonstrated “that the majority of journalist-critics don't notice ‘technique’ unless they are hit over the head with it.” In *Eyes Wide Shut* décor, acting style, camera work, color—everything is arranged to call attention to itself, to suggest that this is a major cinematic enterprise. After all, we are informed, the film took years to make, Kubrick is a renowned perfectionist, etc.

None of this has ever impressed me. Nor do I see why making only 12 films in 44 years is necessarily a badge of honor. A one-sided concentration on technical perfection can be a means of avoiding complex intellectual and moral questions. Andrew Sarris once observed that Kubrick possessed “a naïve faith in the power of images to transcend fuzzy feelings and vague ideas.”

The central orgy sequence is something of a travesty. The sexual activity is both quaint and gratuitous. What in the world is the purpose of this scene? Who are these sinister masked people, or, rather, who cares? Kubrick and his ardent admirers have always made the very elementary error of imagining that his too often cold and dehumanizing treatment of his characters represented some kind of a critique of coldness and dehumanization. Unfortunately, in films like *2001* (1964) and *A Clockwork Orange* Kubrick merely contributed to the problem. The latter in particular is a truly repugnant film.

Wood was quite right, in my view, when he argued that the supposed technical virtuosity of *A Clockwork Orange* is “unremittingly self-conscious and self-assertive: it seems to say, ‘Humanity is debased and disgusting, but look at *this* for a piece of filmmaking.’” I had the same response to the orgy scene in *Eyes Wide Shut*. I find it disturbing that Kubrick, while ostensibly criticizing certain behavior, seems so drawn to

it. One is continually struck by the notion that the filmmaker was so much less conscious than he imagined.

Schnitzler was apparently a womanizer. *Dream Story* is an interesting work, but far from a flawless one. The author, a doctor like his protagonist, indulges in some of his own fantasies a little uncritically in the book. Kubrick has followed suit. All the women are striking; they all fall for our hero. The streetwalker is particularly unlikely, with nothing of the hardness of the real thing.

When he is not self-consciously obscure, Kubrick lacks subtlety. In the opening sequence, as the couple ready themselves for a party, Alice asks how she looks. Without looking at her, Bill tells her she looks perfect. A great deal about their relationship has already been handed to us on a platter. As well, the recurring black-and-white images of Alice and the naval officer rolling around on a bed, Bill's fantasy, are heavy-handed and irritating. We ought to be able to figure out a few things on our own.

Kubrick's lack of trust in the mental abilities of his audience is bound up with the question of his problematic attitude toward mankind as a whole. One might view his film career as a slow descent into the slough of misanthropy followed by, if not a climb out of it, at least a playing about on its far bank.

Paths of Glory (1957) and *Spartacus* (1960) indicated a humanitarian impulse. French filmmaker and critic Jean-Luc Godard didn't care for either of those films, "So," he wrote, "*Lolita* [1962] led one to expect the worst. Surprise: it is a simple, lucid film, precisely written" and highly revealing about "America and American sex." I would agree with that assessment. *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) is a mix: of cynicism, insight, satire and facetiousness. Numerous critics have noted that Hal the computer was the most sympathetic character in the chilly *2001*. (Peter Wollen, according to Wood, once commented that Kubrick, "after expressing his contempt for humanity in his early films, annihilated it in *Dr. Strangelove* and moved off into outer space in *2001*." The remark is too harsh, but there is something to it.) In *A Clockwork Orange* Kubrick seemed to touch bottom.

Then there is a certain revival. *Barry Lyndon*, based on an obscure Thackeray novel, was also a cold work, but it indicated an interest at least in the fate of humanity. *The Shining* represented a high point in Kubrick's career, in my opinion. The mental disintegration of the Jack Nicholson character is deeply-felt and moving. There are remarkable sequences of military brutalization in *Full Metal Jacket*.

And now the final work, *Eyes Wide Shut*.

As someone who has not been, in general, an admirer of Kubrick and who did not approach his last film with any particular expectation, I feel free to say that, despite all its serious flaws, I found certain moments of the film quite compelling. Indeed I find myself in the position of defending the film or aspects of it against its most determined critics. Those who are disappointed that Kubrick has not made the film they wanted him to make are perhaps throwing the baby out with the bath water.

As much as possible I think one should approach a film without schema in mind, without demands that the filmmaker must fulfill, but looking for its most human and humane elements, even if they are not present consistently or in fully worked-out form. I think one should relentlessly look for aesthetic and social points of departure in what's best in a film and a filmmaker, always taking into account the unfavorable historical-intellectual circumstances that account for so many of the problems in contemporary cinema.

I'm not that concerned, in other words, that Kubrick's version of New York City middle class life in 1999, as numerous critics have pointed out, is inaccurate, both physically and emotionally. Nor do the occasional inadequacies of the acting disturb me overmuch.

I think there is an unhappiness, a disquiet in the film that is genuine and communicates itself to the spectator. In part it manifests itself as social

critique. Kubrick did, it seems to me, intend to criticize the narcissism and self-involvement of certain social layers, their spiritual emptiness. Wedding rings, Christmas trees, various formal emblems are present, but moral life has been hollowed out. The film has an element of protest. Whatever one may say against it, *Eyes Wide Shut* is *not* a complacent work.

Schnitzler's work, of course, emerged from the last days of the Hapsburg empire (published in 1926, the novella was apparently written or at least set in pre-World War I Vienna). What image does that conjure up? Of a highly cultured, neurotic, self-conscious society, which produced or helped nurture many remarkable figures—Freud, Adler, Mahler, Klimt, Schiele, Schönberg, Berg and others. Then there was the trend known as Austro-Marxism, rich in analysis, a good deal poorer in considering its practical implications. It was also a society on its last legs, which Kubrick was well aware of. I have no way of knowing whether he meant to draw a parallel between the ultimate fate of the Austro-Hungarian empire and that of present-day America, but it is one that suggests itself.

Beyond all that, Kubrick touches on elementary problems in this film. It is very hard to be attached to someone over a long period of time. A variety of pressures, resentments, temptations emerge. One's partner has an independent mental life. One is not always the center of his or her universe. It is very frightening. Some of that comes across in the film. How does one survive, under any social conditions, the capacity of one's partner to think or dream or fantasize about someone else—or do more than that? Even if one rationally understands that such a process is inevitable, does that make it any more bearable? Is honesty the best policy? Is it possible or desirable to give free rein to appetite? Do relationships always survive? Should they? These seem to me to be legitimate questions.

I find the performances of Cruise and Kidman moving. I mean literally *the fact* of their performances. This is not something they had to do. Kubrick chose a wealthy married couple to play a wealthy married couple. As usual, he was being overly and self-consciously clever. Kubrick was never a great director of actors. Cruise has certainly been better in other films, but the very clumsiness of some of the moments reveals the effort that has been made. This is not, from that point of view, a cynical film.

In its own peculiar way I do believe the film makes a contribution to an understanding of the complexities of modern existence. It doesn't contain any specific social insight or easily discernible moral lessons, but there is a certain cumulative power in its concern about the fate of these inadequate, somewhat selfish people. Studies indicate that wealth has not made anyone happier in America. Oscar Wilde pointed out that the existing order prevented one part of society from leading real lives by impoverishing them. "It has debarred the other part of the community from being individual by putting them on the wrong road, and encumbering them." A sense of this wastefulness and its tragic side is present here. I think it would be a misguided radicalism to dismiss this.

If one subtracts from the film all its gratuitous elements, its coldness, the showing off, the murky sequences, the undeveloped themes, there remains a core of feeling that Kubrick has organized, semi-consciously or not, in the form of a plea for mutual tolerance and sympathy, rooted in the knowledge that it is very difficult to be a human being on this planet. *Eyes Wide Shut*, which is a failure, has left me with a higher opinion of Kubrick. There is no question but that his best work will endure for a long time to come.



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