

A reader comments on Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* and David Walsh replies

21 August 1999

Dear Editor,

I do not believe that Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* is an “intriguing failure” or that it is “unclear and inflated” as your 30 July 1999 review suggests. The movie is about a debased culture, ruined art (the wife's failed art business) and a wicked, infected (HIV and pedophilia) society whose password is “fidelio” (allegiance). The doctor and his wife have arrived at the American dream and it's a failure.

The wife, psychologically imperiled, can't stop redreaming the sex portion of the American dream. The doctor, disinterested in sex, sets out to determine what it is that so upsets their lives and threatens their marriage. His efforts at uncovering and identifying the root problem place him at risk. He is threatened with loss of dignity (being stripped naked in public) and loss of life. A piano player friend facilitates secret orgies wearing a blindfold (eyes wide shut) as many in society facilitate evil while keeping their eyes wide shut. When he reveals a society secret (forfeits allegiance), he is beaten and transported. The doctor is saved by a prostitute in the movie's rare moment of caring and sacrifice. She ends in a morgue where the doctor almost kisses her in the one sign of love or feeling in the movie. A high-ranking society member attempts to explain away the piano player's disappearance and the prostitute's death. He lets the doctor know that he has had him followed (something the doctor suspected) and makes light of the threat leveled at the doctor about ending his investigation.

The loveless, joyless orgies are conducted in a Gothic mansion reminiscent of *The Shining* where Jack Nicholson was driven mad by the ghosts of the wealthy dead who had been its occupants. The sex-driven madness is overseen here by a masked, ultra-wealthy, super-powerful elite who reject the successful doctor not only because he is beneath their class but because

they fear his objective, scientific approach to what they do—not merely here, inside the mansion, but in the larger society of which the goings-on here are but microcosm. The fearsome power and what they can do and get away with overwhelms the doctor. When he gets home, he breaks down and cries and tell his wife all that happened. She becomes quite clear and lucid, possibly “cured” of her illness. She recognizes that they are up against monumental forces that could overwhelm them. She feels needed. She suggests extreme closeness only with each other as a way of protection against the current society while they await a more fulfilling one.

DS

Bellmore, NY

Dear DS,

Thank you for your thoughtful comment. I am perfectly happy to accept your reading of the film's ideological structure, or at least elements of it. If Kubrick had written a political tract, then one could enter into a debate over the degree to which his concepts correspond to reality and leave it at that. (A good deal could be said on that score.) However, he made a film and a film has to be judged, first of all, as a work of art. As such, I consider it precisely an “intriguing failure.”

Some of the elements you refer to are experienced by the spectator, many are not. Too often in *Eyes Wide Shut*, as he has done in virtually all his films, Kubrick is more interested in demonstrating virtuosity (showing off) than in speaking to his audience. The orgiastic scene in the mansion, surely the sequence around which the film pivots, comes to mind. I think this is not at all dramatically effective. What one remembers is the director pulling at one's sleeve, saying, “Look at that! Look at what I've done there! Aren't you impressed?” I felt very little.

You seem to feel that the review was universally unsympathetic. It was not. I was moved by aspects and moments of the film. Some of the ideas and feelings you refer to were aesthetically realized. Many were not; they remained “on the page,” so to speak. I think Kubrick's own ambivalent feelings about humanity have a great deal to do with that. You make no mention of his other works, except *The Shining*. I stand by my comments (and Robin Wood's) about *Clockwork Orange*, *2001* and so forth. I find a portion of his work quite repellent.

I had a contradictory response to *Eyes Wide Shut* and I tried to be concrete in indicating that. Thank you again for your comment.

David Walsh



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