

# Another comment on *Eyes Wide Shut*

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I find it difficult writing about Stanley Kubrick's last film *Eyes Wide Shut* because, basically, nothing happens.

Briefly, leaving out many plot elements, after an upscale party at which he and his wife Alice are propositioned, and after a frank, freewheeling discussion (fueled and loosened by marijuana) with his wife on their sex life, Dr. Bill Harford wanders through a sexually charged New York night, facing temptation on all sides and eventually ending up at an ultrasecret orgy, from which he is threateningly expelled.

He goes home and, in great conflicted agony, confesses everything to Alice. She is greatly distressed, but later, in the toy store with their daughter, she says to Bill that these things do happen, and it will all pass, so let's just go home and have sex (here she uses an obscenity). End of film.

However (and this is the big problem with the film), Bill did nothing worthy of a confession. He was tempted over and over, but remained faithful to Alice. In his head, he obsessively replays images of Alice having sex with a soldier she confessed almost having an affair with, and he certainly means to have a sexual adventure, but he does nothing. And this is not a tale of sexual impotence or paralysis. So what is all the fuss, agonizing, and overwrought music for?

I think that Kubrick, despite his artistic daring in previous films, backed away on this one. I haven't read the Arthur Schnitzler novella, but I gather from its title ("Dream Story") and what I've heard about it, that the night walk through the city occurs as though in a dream. But Kubrick's New York City is mundane and literal, and his orgy is restrained, ritualistic, stylized, overlong, and somewhat dull. The participants mostly stand around fully clothed and masked, observing curiously the few who are cavorting on sofas and tables. It is almost quaint, and strangely asexual, despite the preponderance of attractive nude masked

women.

Everything seems flattened, especially the writing. In a revealing piece in a recent issue of the *New Yorker*, Frederic Raphael, who worked on the screenplay, says that Kubrick, despite the Jewishness that pervades the Schnitzler novella, wanted the protagonist and his wife to be white, Protestant Americans (Raphael, in fact, ventures that the name Harford, thought up by Kubrick, is a condensation of Harrison Ford). Kubrick also ordered that Raphael keep humor out of his screenplay.

Novelist John Updike, at the beginning of one of his books, says that a married couple speak a language known only to themselves, like a tribe of people that have lived for thousands of years on a remote, isolated island. This appeared for a while to be the premise of the film, and had Kubrick stayed with it we might have had a compelling, rewarding film—enhanced by stars Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman being a married couple off the screen.

Easily the best part of *Eyes Wide Shut* is when the couple are having their late-night talk about sex. These are strong scenes, owing a lot to what appears to be a good deal of improvisation (though tightly controlled, as this is a Kubrick film). But the film then goes astray, wandering off into the New York City night, the orgy, and then into a discussion with Bill's good friend (who was at the orgy) that reveals the whole film might be a shaggy dog story—there was no real threat to Bill, nobody was murdered, no one disappeared. Again, basically, nothing happened.

The ending, which ties things up and provides a wise look back at the troubling events of the previous evening, can I feel be taken in two ways:

1. Alice is saying, as *Candide* did in Voltaire's novel, let's just make our garden grow. Forget what happened, let's get on with our lives. This is anticlimactic, but in keeping with the blandness of what came before.

2. Kubrick is having the last laugh by having an

obscurity as the last word spoken in what he felt would be his last film. I, of course, cannot determine the motives of a dead filmmaker who wrote and said little about his craft, but such a signoff could be either life-affirming or the height of cynicism. In any case, I imagine that Kubrick took great delight in making that his very last word.

I find it difficult writing about this film, not only because Kubrick has been in my pantheon of admired directors (see my appreciation of his career on this Web site shortly after his death) and this film is such a disappointment, but because there is so little to comment on in such a flat, empty work. As I sat watching it with heightened expectations, I kept looking for fine moments, scenes that would grip me, underlying meanings that would snap into place; I tried my best to enjoy what I knew was Kubrick's last film. But little of it moved me.

Unfortunately, films that show a polished, attractive, enigmatic surface, but with little if anything underneath—especially if by a noted director—invite diverse, odd, and far-flung interpretation. This is, I feel, the case with the letter from DS. There is little of substance to tackle in *Eyes Wide Shut*, so DS has gone far afield in trying to find some meaning and excitement in the film. In his comments I find little that I noticed in the film. True, it can be seen as a critique of our "debased culture," though that is so generalized as to be meaningless, but the other parts of DS's reading of the film are a stretch, and seem to be an attempt to find some redeeming features in an essentially uninteresting film.



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