

Eyes Wide Shut

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EYES WIDE SHUT (1999)

DIRECTOR: Stanley Kubrick

SCREENPLAY: Stanley Kubrick and Frederic Raphael

CAST: Tom Cruise (Dr. Bill Harford), Nicole Kidman (Alice Harford), Sydney Pollack (Victor Ziegler), Todd Field (Nick Nightingale), Sky du Mont (Sandor), Leon Vitali (Red Cloak), Vinessa Shaw (Domino), Alan Cumming (Hotel desk clerk)

SPECS: 159 minutes; color

AVAILABILITY: DVD/Blu-Ray (Warner Bros.)

Eyes Wide Shut is the final film directed by Stanley Kubrick, released posthumously. It explores the relationship of “Dr. Bill Harford” and his wife “Alice” and the sexual jealousy that erupts in Bill following a confessional late night conversation between the pair [00:21:53]. This scene is crucial in understanding the film’s exploration of marriage and sexuality. Bill has been living with his “eyes wide shut”, either unaware or unable to realize the full extent of his wife’s sexual desires. Returning home from a party hosted by one of Bill’s patients, “Victor Ziegler”, Bill and Alice – smoking pot and wearing only their underwear – begin to discuss the fact that they had both been flirting with strangers. The scene attempts to destabilize notions of patriarchal sexuality as Alice challenges Bill’s thinking of female sexuality. He tells Alice that he trusts her and that he believes that she would never have had sex with “Sandor”, the man she was flirting with, because “women basically just don’t think like that” [00:28:32]. Alice’s retort shatters Bill’s worldview and presents a different perspective of female sexuality: “if you men only knew” [00:28:59]. With those words, Alice begins to open Bill’s eyes to her own desires for other people beyond him. She reveals one such fantasy she had for a naval officer she encountered during a family holiday the previous year, telling Bill, “If he wanted me, even if it was only for one night, I

was ready to give up everything. You, Helena, my whole fucking future” [00:32:40]. The confession places Alice within a position of power over Bill, who is at a loss at how to process what Alice has told him.

Repeatedly throughout the film, Alice’s fantasy of having sex with the naval officer is played out in black and white. But it is not seen from the perspective of Alice, but rather as Bill imagines her fantasy. It is filmed with a blue-tinted grainy quality, rendering it almost pornographic in nature. What Bill sees is an erotic, dangerous encounter between his wife and the naval officer, an act of infidelity perpetrated to humiliate him [00:35:58]. Following Alice’s confession he leaves the house after receiving a phone call from a patient, but he takes to wandering the streets of New York with the intention of committing his own revengeful act of infidelity, and to act out his own sexual fantasies and desires. The implication of Bill’s nighttime wanderings are that women merely live with their sexual fantasies, whilst men have to act them out, reinforcing stereotypes of both men and women. But Bill is unable to participate in any of the sexual encounters on his wanderings, and finds himself impotent in controlling the events in which he finds himself. His sexual desires remain unconsummated and instead he stumbles into a dangerous underworld of sex, drugs and death, all the while plagued by nightmarish visions of his wife and the naval officer.

But it is here where concerns about the depiction of women become pronounced. The film flirts with the ideas of the erotic thriller. In fact, as Linda Ruth Williams has suggested, the film plays with notions of eroticism and danger from its opening shot in which we see Alice step naked out of a black dress to change [00:00:32]. She is alone in her bedroom and believes no one is watching. But the audience is voyeuristically allowed to participate in the scene and gaze upon the naked Alice – the naked Nicole Kidman – before the shot cuts to black, like an eyelid closing. The shot teasingly promises the audience more of the same to come, that their expectations of sex, specifically sex between the star couple of Nicole

Kidman and Tom Cruise who were married at the time, will be satiated. The shot, and others like it in the first forty minutes of the film, such as seeing Alice on the toilet [00:01:14], or Alice naked in front of a mirror being kissed by a naked Bill [00:19:02], speak of the film's trash aesthetic and what Williams calls its Direct-to-Video (DTV) credentials (397). The film is filled with images of female full frontal nudity, but of very few men, aside from those present in the orgy sequence. The camera glides past these men however, who are masked and often framed from behind. The orgy itself, despite its allusion to pornographic imagery, is cold; Bill drifts through and merely watches the almost automated, mechanistic actions of sex. What the audience and Bill are witnessing are transactional encounters; money for sex between presumably powerful men and prostitutes.

Bill's impotent voyeuristic journey through the orgy remains as clinical as his other interactions with nude women. We see Bill with naked women in his surgery examining their breasts [00:20:17], or tending to comatose naked women in Victor Ziegler's apartment who have overdosed on drugs [00:13:02]. He hovers over the naked dead body of the prostitute "Domino" in a mortuary [02:03:18], who earlier had guided Bill around the orgy in the mansion wearing only a Venetian mask and shoes [01:14:55]. Women in the film are all explored through their bodies and their sexuality, in contrast to how Bill's character is presented psychologically. When Bill is discovered to have infiltrated the orgy, the ringleader – "Red Cloak" – orders him to remove his clothes [01:23:24]. But he doesn't get the chance as he is saved by the naked Domino, who (seemingly) redeems her life for his [01:24:02]. In this seedy world that Bill now inhabits, women are all prostitutes and escorts, selling their bodies for sex. Kubrick's camera lingers on these shots of passive nude women, who possess a male adolescent ideal of the female body. The overtly sexist shots undermine any attempts to intellectually explore themes of fantasy and desire and turn it very much into the DTV production Linda Ruth Williams suggests.

Kubrick's camera reduces women to their sexuality and, particularly – but not exclusively – during the orgy sequence, presents them as aesthetic objects part of a ritual performance for men to gaze upon. The ritual takes place in a country mansion. In a central hall, a number of women are gathered around in a circle at the centre of which sits a man, “Red Cloak”, his face hidden [01:09:57]. He is the master of ceremonies and controls the women who will do his bidding. The women undress and then give in to the demands of Red Cloak and allow themselves to be commanded by chosen male onlookers. The women in this sequence, and throughout the film, are portrayed as submissive and obedient, even going so far as to sacrifice their lives for men (as in the case of the woman who gives her life to save Bill) (Planka 61). The world that Kubrick has constructed in *Eyes Wide Shut*, similar to his other films, is male-dominated, with men possessing all the power and women rarely portrayed as anything other than subservient. In fact, women are reduced to their sexuality and, as Planka (53) points out, “presented as seductresses and – literally – as fair game.”

Bill does not partake in the orgy. Nor does he participate in any of the other sexual scenarios he comes across. He drifts through the streets of New York, and through corridors of the mansion where the orgy takes place, gazing upon the passive, often immobile bodies of nude women. What he witnesses is a male dominated system of control, wandering into an orgy filled with some of the most powerful men in the USA. As Victor Ziegler later tells him, “Those were not ordinary people. If I told you their names [...] I don't think you'd sleep so well” [02:11:20]. This final scene between Bill and Victor acts to normalize the ritual orgy at the mansion, with Victor explaining the events of the previous night and telling Bill that he was in serious trouble for being there. What it suggests is an almost conspiratorial network of powerful male elites that regularly participate in this sexual gathering. But there is no attempt by Bill or the film to criticize the orgy or the treatment of the women. In fact, the conversation between Victor and Bill furthers a sexist narrative about prostitutes in the way it

dismisses the death of the prostitute who had been present at the orgy. Victor tells Bill that she hadn't been murdered at the party and that "nothing happened to her that hadn't happened to her before. She had her brains fucked out. Period" [02:17:07]. The prostitute apparently overdosed on drugs shortly after the orgy and her death is dismissed as only being "a matter of time with her" [02:17:33]. Bill accepts Victor's narrative and that this world of male power and female submission exists and heeds Victor's call to carry on with his life like nothing had happened.

The film concludes with Bill and Alice discussing the events of the past forty-eight hours while out Christmas shopping with their daughter. The couple attempt to forge a new course in their relationship, one based on truth about their fantasies and desires. Yet the scene is more noted for its abrupt end, when Alice tells Bills there is something they both need to do as soon as possible, ending the film on the emphatic use of the word "fuck" [02:27:15]. But just as the audience are promised the long-anticipated sex scene between Cruise and Kidman, the film immediately cuts to the credits, denying those audience members the sex scenes they had been expecting. The scene also confirms the hetro-normative relationships that populate the film. The only scene that deviates from such hetronormativity is with the "Hotel Desk Clerk", played by the openly gay actor Alan Cumming. The Hotel Desk Clerk is overtly flirtatious with Bill Harford, who is enquiring as to the disappearance of his friend, "Nick Nightingale", a pianist who gave Bill the password to enter the masked orgy. Cumming's character is played for humorous effect; he is overly camp in his demeanor and hangs on Bill's every word, with the resulting portrayal contributes to an effete stereotype of homosexuality.

Eyes Wide Shut was marketed as an erotic thriller in the vein of *Basic Instinct*, with trailers playing up the prospect of sex in the movie and the relationship between Cruise and Kidman; Warner Bros. went so far as to label the film as the "sexiest movie ever"

(Rasmussen 333). Speculation was further fuelled by preview footage that Kubrick had personally selected prior to his death. Ninety seconds of footage set to the Chris Issak song *Baby Did A Bad, Bad Thing* showed images of Cruise and Kidman nude (Fenwick), while press conjecture about the content of the film suggested it contained explicit, almost pornographic scenes. The *New York Times* reported that “*Eyes Wide Shut* is known to be a psychosexual thriller” (Lyall). This speculation was combined with the tabloid frenzy around the married main co-stars and the anticipation of seeing them involved in a *ménage-a-trois* (Weinraub). The intellectual exploration of sexuality and marriage by Kubrick was not reflected in the marketing and therefore arguably impacted the reception of the film (Ransom 2010). Critics were ambivalent, with some, such as Richard Schickel proclaiming it a masterpiece, while Pauline Kael damned the film as a ‘piece of crap’. Certainly, the film eschewed genre traditional conventions of the erotic thriller, despite its marketing as such. Instead, the film is an ambiguous, psychological – and somewhat voyeuristic – exploration of fantasy, desire and relationships.

James Fenwick

See also: Body Double, Basic Instinct, The Male Gaze

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