

1999, A CLOSET ODYSSEY: SEXUAL DISCOURSES IN *EYES WIDE SHUT*

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Eyes Wide Shut offers at least three perspectives on sex: sex as death, sex as commerce, and sex and love. In this essay I explore the third of these perspectives, that is, the relation between sex as love, one that has so far been neglected in critical accounts of the film. The nature of this relationship, as articulated by the text, culminates in the final scene in which Alice (Nicole Kidman) takes the initiative in the reconciliation with her husband Bill (Tom Cruise). This dialogue works as a complex summary of twentieth-century discourses about sex, including concepts such as the sexualisation of love, confluent love, intimacy, or the tension between love and desire. This scene, less ironic than it may seem, celebrates the most positive dimensions of sex and its inextricable link with love in our culture.

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Sexual desire has always been one of the central driving forces in narrative films, especially in Hollywood cinema, but since the cultural changes brought about by the nineteen sixties, that is, since the approximate time when Stanley Kubrick became consolidated as a cinema artist, there has been a gradual yet unstoppable increase both of the visibility of sex in cinematic representations and of its discursive centrality in western societies. Aids or no Aids, backlash or no backlash, the cultural pull of sexual discourses reached the end of the century unscathed. Kubrick was aware of this and with *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) he aimed to make his ultimate statement (and, if possible, twentieth-century cinema's ultimate statement) on sex. As Janet Maslin (1999) writes, for what would turn out to be his last film, the director chose the bedroom as the last frontier. In this essay I would like to explore the sexual discourses activated by the film and, more specifically, the links between sex and love, their cultural reverberations, and their power to explain an important area of experience in twentieth-century culture.

For better or for worse, Kubrick always had a very keen sense of the cinematic and cultural importance of his own films. *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) was at the time the ultimate science fiction movie. Many filmmakers before had adapted classical English novels but *Barry Lyndon* (1975) presents itself as a monument to filmic adaptations of classical novels. In a period in which horror films were enjoying something of a commercial boom, *The Shining* (1980) was the horror movie to end all horror movies. *Full-Metal Jacket* (1987), from its formal and structural precision, was aimed at

surpassing the critical edge of earlier Vietnam movies, etc. We may admire the boldness or resent the gall but a humble cineaste Kubrick certainly was not. Perhaps because of this and because of the crucial role of sex in the formation of our cultural identity it was only to be expected that critics were not going to let him once again corner the field. The critical reaction when the film first came out was unprecedented in its hostility, but it was a critical reaction which said more about our lingering cultural nervousness and anxieties concerning sex than about the film itself, even though it may appear that we live in a time in which, as Michel Chion says, “social taboos and rules of behaviour no longer forbid what is called ‘living out your fantasies’” (2002: 88). It may well be that, as many of its commentators have said, *Eyes Wide Shut* does not say anything original, innovative or profound about sex, but if nothing else, it sparked a critical reaction that brought back to light preoccupations and anxieties which some believed had been long overcome.

Eyes Wide Shut is a film about sex appearing at a moment in which the representation of sex in non-pornographic films had started to be pushed to unprecedented limits both in Hollywood and, especially, in Europe, a trend which includes, among many others, such films as *Sitcom* (1997), *The Idiots* (*Idioterne*, 1998), *Romance X* (1999), *Pola X* (1999), *Baise-moi* (2000), *À ma soeur* (2001), *Intimacy* (2001), *Lucía y el sexo* (2001) or *Nine Songs* (2004). In this context, it is little wonder that the movie was accused of being tame and old-fashioned. The fact that Kubrick chose to adapt more or less faithfully a novella by Arthur Schnitzler (*Traumnovelle*) published in the nineteen twenties meant, at least partly, that the director gambled on the idea that very little had changed in the sexual arena in the last seventy years. This brought about the generalised critical opinion that Kubrick, a legendary recluse for the last few decades, no longer knew what was happening in the real world in matters sexual (Whitehouse 1999: 39; Dargis 1999). This was, however, not a very forceful argument: the changes from novella to film, although few in number, are indeed significant enough, and even those passages in which there are no apparent differences in the plot are important to understand the evolution of sexual discourses in our century. Rather than being cutting edge in sexual matters (at least if we compare it with some of the examples mentioned above), the movie attempts to summarise a whole century of sexual discourses, narrativizing and highlighting the most important cultural developments in the field in the twentieth century. For this purpose, the “modernisation” of a story originally written in the early decades of the century may be considered particularly apposite.

It is evident from the outset that Kubrick is not making a run-of-the-mill erotic movie. His by then almost conventional use of wide angle follow focus tracking shots, the for some exasperating slowness in the delivery of dialogues, the centrality and length of the sex party scene, the ritualistic proliferation of the female nude both in and outside this scene, or the very casting of the then-real-life couple of Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise as his protagonists are among the factors that immediately suggest that what is being said about the sexual mores of a contemporary affluent married New York couple is to be taken not just as one more narrative but as carrying wider significance. Michel Chion comes again to our help when he summarises the subject of the film: “The subject of *Eyes Wide Shut* is the everyday life of a couple of mortal human beings, from the point of view of the vastness of history and the infinity of the

world" (2002: 41), thus neatly conceptualising the film as *2001*, part two. I would qualify Chion's statement in one important way, though: the film is not just about a couple's everyday life but, more specifically, about their sexual life, about the partners' respective sexualities, and about the ways in which sexual discourses define not only their identities but also their anxieties, frustrations, and hopes. Beyond a few brief shots depicting the domesticity of the Harman household, there is no life for the characters beyond sex. The formal elements mentioned above and others deployed by the filmmakers turn the fictional world of *Eyes Wide Shut* into that of a sexual fantasy or, depending on the point of view, a sexual nightmare, but one which, in any case, asks important questions about the influence of sexual discourses on contemporary experiences of sex, especially about the sexuality of stable heterosexual couples.

What then does the film have to say about sex? In my view, it offers at least three perspectives on sex which may not be totally consistent with one another but make for a multilayered, complex exploration of the subject with more dimensions than can be covered in an academic article. The three perspectives are sex as death, sex as commerce, and sex as love. A cursory glance at the abundant criticism which has focused on the film's sexual discourses immediately shows the critics' preference for the first two of these perspectives, illustrated, respectively, by Amy Taubin's psychoanalytically-inspired critique of a masculinity ridden with anxiety about its own identity and expressed "through a confrontation with a woman who's dead or dying" (1999: 26), and by Tim Kreider's contention that the film is a powerful critique of a corrupt and decadent high culture on the brink of disaster, a culture based on prostitution as its defining transaction (2000: 41, 43). While these two perspectives underline important aspects of *Eyes Wide Shut* it is my contention that Kubrick's last film is not exhausted by these readings and that they, in fact, leave out a crucial part of the spectator's engagement with the story: the sexualised view of love that has increasingly dominated sexual and affective discourses in our culture. The film's plot is ridden with sexual obsession and sexual corruption but beyond endorsement or critique of retrograde patriarchal attitudes towards female sexuality, a more positive, albeit heavily qualified, counterdiscourse gradually emerges from the narrative culminating in the final scene, a counterdiscourse which activates not just the link between sex and love in Western culture, a link with a long although rather uneven tradition, but, specifically, the centrality of sex in the conceptualisation of twentieth-century love. In order to explore the presence of this discourse in the film, I propose to concentrate on its most maligned scene (or perhaps its second most maligned one, after that of the sexual party at the mansion), the final sequence, one which critics have so far not taken very seriously. Although this scene will remain the central focus of my discussion throughout, I will also refer to several significant moments in the rest of the narrative.

In general, Kubrick was attacked for striking a false note with an unconvincing happy ending in which the couple get back together for no apparent reason (Taubin 1999: 33; Ebert 1999; Howe 1999). Some, equally averse to the happy ending but more reluctant to admit that the filmmaker could possibly go wrong, speculated that parts of the film were not his responsibility (Hoberman 1999) or affirmed that, as in his earlier movies, this happy ending was an instance of his famous irony and was therefore not to be taken at face value but, rather, as an indictment of marriage and heterosexual love

(Kreider 2000: 48; Loyo 2004). The unpopularity of happy endings, especially those involving love, among critics and film scholars need hardly be elaborated. Unlike popular audiences, the critical institution much prefers a story with a tragic outcome or one in which love or any sort of emotional commitment is denounced, problematised, or looked at ironically rather than defended or celebrated, especially if it is heterosexual. Critical reaction in the case of *Eyes Wide Shut* was therefore hardly surprising: how could Kubrick do it, how could he give us such a bland and conservative ending as his final word on the matter of love and sex? If he was indeed responsible for it, he must have been deploying his ruthless irony. After all, *The Killing* (1956), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *Barry Lyndon*, and *Full Metal Jacket*, among others, had already featured famous ironic endings. Either that or he had finally lost his grip. As a consequence, few bothered to look closely at what actually happens in the scene.

The final scene takes place in a busy Manhattan toy shop, with Alice (Kidman) and William (Cruise) looking exhausted after their ordeal of the previous night, and their daughter Helena (Madison Eginton) gleefully running ahead and showing her excitement at various items. One of these is a toy pram of which her mother seems to approve even though it is old-fashioned. Here the text seems to anticipate criticism of its view of relationships and indirectly prepare us for the oncoming *dénouement*, in which that which is “old fashioned” will be chosen by the couple as the way ahead. The time is, as it has been throughout the narrative, the Christmas season and Christmas lights can be seen out of focus in the background, giving the *mise en scène* a red glow which is important for an understanding of its meanings and textual perspective in a film in which colours play a crucial part.

Three colours—a rich ochre or gold, a whole array of blues ranging from cold and metallic through dark and discolouring to bright, and a red of various intensities—constitute the film’s basic colour scheme. The meanings attached to them, however, are not immediately obvious. Gold, for example, tends to be associated with Alice and suggests the warmth of her surroundings, but it also presides over the first indication of the couple’s infidelities at Ziegler’s party, where it appears to be related to the sumptuousness that accompanies sexual indiscretion (although upstairs in Ziegler’s bathroom, the golden richness of the background is suddenly dropped in favour of much colder colours and of the red of the sofa and of the background of the female nude painting hanging on the wall). In spite of the careful crosscutting between the two protagonists, the sumptuous *mise en scène* of the party reminds us of earlier Kubrick films, particularly of a similar party in *The Shining* which, apparently taking place only in the male character’s imagination, contributes, within the conventions of the horror genre, to the representation of the crisis of the protagonist’s masculinity. In this case, the dreamlike lavishness of the background suggests a sexual fantasy which is more evenly shared by the two principals. Blue, on the other hand, is associated with jealousy, creeping in through the window to offset the golden glow of Alice and Bill’s bedroom when she relates her erotic fantasy and dominating the shots of Bill’s obsession with Alice’s sexuality, especially his imaginary reconstruction of her sexual encounter with the other man, what we could describe as the fantasy of a fantasy. It is also associated with death, particularly at the morgue, as is red, the colour of sex and passion. Red can, in fact, be seen as reinforcing the psychological and cultural link between sex and death: first seen in the rich hangings in the opening shot of Alice undressing with its early-

century peep-show overtones, and most spectacularly dominating the orgy scene through lights, carpets, and cloaks (emphasising the links of the young women with Alice as sex object), it is also associated with death in Mandy's (Julienne Davis) o.d.'ing, and in the scenes at Domino (Vinessa Shaw) and Sally's (Fay Masterson) apartment, where blue (or purple) are also prominent and were the connections between female sexuality and death, continue to run rampant. Interesting too is how the lush yellow tones of Alice's bedroom turn into blue when Bill comes home after his sexual escapade: blue had slowly crept in during their first scene together but it now dominates the *mise en scène*.

In general, both Alice and Bill seem to move between the three colours depending on the way in which their sexuality is approached at each particular moment. The association of red and passion is perhaps most problematic in an orgy scene in which, as most commentators have pointed out, passion is totally absent, but then we are dealing here with a ritualised view of sexuality which, almost as in a religious ceremony, acquires a sacrificial dimension with, once again, femininity almost automatically evoking death where it should perhaps conjure up the idea of life and, to borrow Dan Brown's words in his best-seller *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), the sacred feminine. As if to underscore the ironic use of the colour and its lack of passion, Ziegler's red pool table dominates a later scene in which the cold rationality of the host's explanations of sexual transgressions erases the possibility of any type of emotion — least of all sexual arousal. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that red had also been most prominent in the scenes (including the orgy scene) in which Bill had been on the verge of having sex with women other than Alice. It is for this reason that the return of the colour red in the final scene bears some analysis, especially since both characters, in an unequivocally Kubrickian move, remain totally composed throughout. What is relevant at this point is that for their reconciliation, however tentative and problematic it might be, the return to their relationship of a sexual passion not devoid of danger but frankly acknowledged by the characters becomes a necessary ingredient of what they have learned in the course of the narrative. Red also dominates Alice's declaration of love for her husband. In trying to salvage what is left of their relationship, she appears to be rescuing also the warmest and most passionate connotations of the colour red.

Alice, who has taken the initiative every time the two characters are together, spells out the terms of their reconciliation (formally, the film emphasises her dominance, the shots of Bill being little more than reaction shots in the shot/reverse shot sequence). As I have already mentioned, the Christmas lights are visible in the background evoking rebirth, a new life, a new cycle; the bustle of everyday life can be felt around them and we know that their daughter Helena is near although after the cut to the closer distance of the two principals we do not see her again. This is a private moment which takes place not in isolation from society but in its midst: for all their social and economic privilege, Alice and Bill are not particularly special people but one of the many couples no doubt present in the toy shop at that moment, couples which may well be going through crises not very different from theirs. What has happened /is happening to them is not exceptional but typical, and the way Alice understands the bond that exists between them is meant to carry resonance well beyond their particular predicament. The use of Cruise's and Kidman's star images here remind us of Richard Dyer's (1979: 111) account of the star's power as a blend of uniqueness and normativeness: through

the two actors that embody them, Alice and Bill are unique figures of identification while at the same time, and no less powerfully, representing relevant social types and, in this case, a relevant type of contemporary affective relationship.

In the first part of the dialogue, Alice brings together all their experiences of the previous hours under the label of dreams, from which they have now awoken. This is not just a metaphor since most of their experiences have indeed been dreams or, at least, daydreams, but the metaphor is a traditional one which takes us back to Renaissance drama both in England and Spain. More specifically, the film evokes the ending of the fourth act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the four young lovers awaken in the morning from the erotic adventures of the night, after the juice of the magic flower has finally paired them off "correctly," and Titania, the queen of the fairies, returns to the arms of Oberon, after having had sex with Bottom, magically turned into a donkey, the symbol of sexual potency. The different characters, human and not human, now come back to civilised society a little embarrassed by their nightly behaviour but strengthened and having learned and matured from the experience. What is more, their awakening is marked by a feeling of wonder to which, if they are wise, they will cling in their future daily routine. They are very different from another Shakespearean hero, the Prince Hal of the closing moments of *Henry IV Part II* who, having become king of England, rejects his old friend Falstaff: "being awaked, I do despise my dream." Bill's only useful contribution to the dialogue happens at this point reinforcing the idea that he is no Prince Hal: "no dream is ever just a dream." Metafictionally, the text is also suggesting that the spectator should not just discard this film, or indeed any film, as a mere fantasy, thus implicitly agreeing with those psychoanalytic critics who place the social value of films precisely in their being reconstructions of our individual fantasies (Cowie 1984). More specifically, sex and sexual desire are not just individual fantasies situated outside society and outside history but, on the contrary, are a crucial part of the construction of our social identity and define, to some extent, our place in history. Presumably, therefore, what these two characters have discovered is, in very broad strokes, not the benefits of infidelity but the importance of sexual fantasy. In Bill's case, if he has understood anything, it is precisely that a couple's sexuality is a matter of not just one but two people.

Bill alarms both the spectator and Alice when he suggests that now that their troubles are over, their love will last forever. Alice, showing a measure of compassion in her expression, as if to intimate her understanding that, but for her vigilance, her husband could easily revert to an uncomprehending childishness, immediately corrects him and asks him not to think in terms of "forever." In other words, she begs him not to think along the lines of the traditional discourse of romantic love, as a narrative of the couple based on the project of a life together, but, rather, in terms of what Anthony Giddens calls "confluent love," a type of love which is also based on commitment to one person, but which can also be terminated more or less at will by either partner at any particular point (1993: 137). It is Giddens's contention that this type of relationship predominates in contemporary affective protocols while traditional romantic love is on the retreat. More recently, David Shumway (2003: 24-27) has argued that the discourse of romance has been partially replaced by the discourse of intimacy, a discourse which promises deep communication, friendship, and sharing as opposed to passion, adventure, and intense emotion, a discourse which incorporates a variety of new

erotically invested bonds between individuals. It can be argued that when Alice says to Bill “But I do love you,” she is inviting him to understand and adapt to these contemporary views of love and expressing her reluctance to agreeing to a cultural norm which may be a thing of the past. Alice is therefore not only being cautious here, rearming herself against any possible (even probable) suffering that Bill’s sexual indiscretions may inflict on her in the future. She is also trying to put into practice what they both have learned about modern relationships. Like so many before her both in films and in society, she has learned to modify her expectations of love in order to adapt them to an ever-changing reality.

Finally, and most conspicuously, Alice establishes a link between love for her husband and sex, a link which is all the more striking because it constitutes the film’s final word. Within the text’s general fidelity to Schnitzler’s original, Kubrick departs from it in a crucial way here. Fridolin (the novella’s male protagonist) does utter the word “forever,” and his wife, Albertine, does contradict him with modern common sense, although she does not articulate her objection as eloquently as Alice does. But her rather enigmatic words—“Never enquire into the future”—are actually the final words of the dialogue. She does not say “I love you” nor does she propose sex as the ostensible solution to their problems. Conversely, there is a much clearer sense at the beginning of the novella that the couple love each other and that the very brief passage that narrates the equivalent episode to Ziegler’s party serves, before anything else, as a turn-on for the couple to have passionate sex when they return home. It could be argued that in the original there is a situation of marital bliss at the beginning to which the characters return at the end after having overcome their problems. In *Eyes Wide Shut*, on the other hand, there is never any clear indication of the couple’s love for one another, and sex between them, or the very brief glimpse we get of it, is far from passionate. Ziegler’s party is no turn-on but a detailed account of Alice’s and, especially, Bill’s tendencies towards extra-marital flirtation. In this sense, the road walked by the characters in the film has been longer and rockier than in the novella, and its provisional destination one which reflects part of what has happened in western relationships in the intervening decades between the two texts.

In any case, Alice singles out, in the final word of the film, one of the century’s most crucial cultural developments in the field of affective relationships. But can the single word “fuck” summarise, Rosebud-like, a whole century of thinking about love? Well, in a sense it can. For sociologist Steve Seidman (1991: 66-84), one of the most important developments in the formation of modern sensibility has been what he calls “the sexualization of love,” the process whereby sex changed from being a destructive to a beneficent power, bringing about good health, mental vigour, social success, and happy conjugal love. Not only did the antithesis between sensuality and love disappear, but also in the eyes of many cultural critics and psychologists love became no more than a product of the sex drive. For Giddens (1993: 62), as we have seen, traditional romantic love was replaced by confluent love, a love that for the first time introduced the *ars erotica* into the core of the conjugal relationship and made the achievement of reciprocal sexual pleasure a key element in whether the relationship was sustained or dissolved. Although, as Seidman argues, there are still limitations to this approximation between love and sex, by the nineteen sixties and seventies, the countercultural period with which Kubrick has often been associated, both concepts tend to become

indistinguishable, at least in certain contexts. For example, Woody Allen's films of the seventies and early eighties reflected, in their constant preoccupation with the boundaries between love and sex, the growing difficulty of the separation. The neo-conservative backlash of the eighties may have put a damper on this process of discursive fusion but, as most Hollywood films from the eighties and nineties have proved, in a sense there was no turning back. Whereas for Albertine sex was not culturally available as the solution to an affective problem, at the end of the century it had become the standard way of expressing our love for one another: I do love you, says Alice, so let's have sex to prove it.

Torben Grodal (2004: 28, 30) has recently challenged this perception, taking issue, from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, with the contemporary tendency to reduce all types of emotions, particularly, love and desire, to a single origin, namely sex. For him, love and desire are clearly differentiated emotions that have different historical origins and that may interact with each other in historically specific manners but must be kept apart in cultural analysis. Film genres reinforce this division, with romantic films being about "personalised bonding" and pornographic films about "anonymous desire" (2004: 26). That is, for him not only are the two emotions different in theory and in people's real experience but cultural discourses such as films also keep them separate, in spite of the insistence of ideological critics who tend to either collapse the two or categorise them according to fixed ideological apriorisms: that love is repressive (for women) and desire is liberating, or, in other words, that the only liberating way of conceiving love is by equating it with desire. In his view, the fashionable link of love with patriarchy and desire with emancipation, fluid gender roles, and the body does not stand up to serious historical investigation (Grodal 2004: 38).

Grodal's project is to distinguish between the representations of two different emotions in films. To the extent that he manages to free different expressions of love from ideological preconceptions, his views are refreshing and welcome. While no doubt encouraging and inspirational for people whose alternative sexual habits have previously been socially denigrated, the insistence of much of film theory on equating heterosexuality and/or romance with conservativeness and patriarchal oppression runs the risk of becoming just as oppressive and inhibiting for many other people. However, there are other aspects of his theory that are more questionable. The issue becomes cloudy, as Grodal himself has to admit, because "love often encompasses sexual desire and powerful emotions are often classified as sexual desire [...], even if the emotion in question has nonsexual roots" (2004: 33). It is significant that, in order to separate love and desire, the author needs to restrict his account of sexual desire to those cases in which it is anonymous, unrelated to a specific person. Although he aspires to isolate the two categories from one another, they are only two extreme instances of a continuum which in reality incorporates different combinations of the two. Even "recreational sex" –sex for its own sake– (Seidman 1991: 127) need not have the anonymous, mechanical aura which Grodal reserves for pornography.

Among many examples, this author uses *Eyes Wide Shut* to support his views, but his brief invocation of Kubrick's film does nothing but expose the gaps in his analysis. For him, the film is about the conflict between promiscuous and exclusive relations, and the ending suggests that Alice chooses her *loving relationship* with her husband over her promiscuous feelings as expressed in her sexual dream (Grodal 2004: 32-33). The

first problem with this is that neither Alice nor anybody else can choose what to dream and, if my reading above is accepted, she never actually rejects her dreams but, rather, learns from them and, like the characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, incorporates them into her waking life. Promiscuity is incompatible with the exclusive bond which she still aspires to re-establish with her husband. Yet sexual fantasy is never rejected. On the contrary, it is accepted and promoted as an important part of their sexual identity as a couple. Secondly, and more importantly, as we have seen, her love for her husband is not devoid of sexual desire even though this desire is evidently not promiscuous. Grodal does not refer to Alice's final word in the film because it would contradict his classification. Sex is for Alice the most immediate way in which to seal their reconciliation and to express their love for each other. Love may be different from sex, and the type of sexual desire which is celebrated in pornography may have little to do with love but, in the twentieth century, and, specifically, in cinematic discourses, a romantic love which is separated from sexual desire is, if not impossible, at least residual.

One of the historical developments that made this sexualised view of romantic love possible in the last century was a modified view of female sexuality, and the progressive weakening of century-long cultural associations of women with danger and corruption. In this respect, Bill has a long way to go. Alice's sexual fantasy at the beginning of the film provokes Bill's irrational jealousy and his desire for "revenge fucking" (Herr 2000: 109). Bill's sexual odyssey is one marked by anxiety, guilt, and revulsion and by the constant proximity of death in one way or another. Even before Alice's revelation, his flirtation with the two models at Ziegler's party is interrupted by Mandy's o.d.'ing upstairs, which, but by his quick intervention, might have ended up in her death. As soon as Alice finishes telling him her fantasy, he gets the phone call announcing the death of one his patients. In front of her father's corpse, Marion Nathanson (Marie Richardson) declares her impossible love for the doctor just before her fiancé arrives in the scene. Shortly afterwards, prostitute Domino invites him to her apartment and, although their imminent sexual encounter is ostensibly interrupted by Alice's phone call, Bill and the spectator find out later on that Domino is HIV-positive. At the fancy-dress shop, Milich's teenage daughter (Leelee Sobieski) insinuates herself to Bill as she hides behind him from her father's death threats. The protagonist has done his best to be present at the sexual party but once inside the mansion he just stands there before being chosen by the mysterious woman (Abigail Good), who may or may not be offering her life to redeem him for his trespassing. When, the next evening, he returns to Domino's apartment, he is greeted by Sally (Fay Masterson) who again openly flirts with him before revealing that her flatmate is HIV-positive thus putting a damper on the proceedings. The climax of this narrative pattern is his visit to Mandy's corpse at the morgue where the necrophilic dimension of his undertakings finally comes to the open. Although she does not offer herself to him literally, both the *mise en scène* and the high-angle shot of the woman's naked corpse suggest an invitation to which Bill is on the verge of succumbing. Death is never more than one step away from the protagonist's sexual undertakings.

Alice's story is the narration of a fantasy. Her sexual encounter with the naval officer is Bill's fantastic construction of an infidelity which never actually happened. The narrative rhetoric of the film clearly distinguishes between this fantasy and the

reality of Bill's nocturnal adventures. Yet, at the same time, the film's visual rhetoric severely undercuts the realism of the *reality* sections and turns the whole of the male character's escapades into a fantastic journey. Even if Dr. Harford is played by Tom Cruise, it is only as a male fantasy that we can understand the frequency and openness of the sexual insinuations he receives and, more importantly, the proximity of death in all of them. His failure to complete any of the sexual encounters made available to him may be related to his unconscious disgust towards a sexuality which he invariably relates to castration anxiety and death, even as he apparently seeks sexual fulfilment. Although not exactly a horror film, the male protagonist's tormented psyche turns the beautiful bodies of the women he meets into unexpected versions of the female monsters who, as Creed (1993: 88-121) argues in her study of horror movies, patriarchal society constructs as formidable creatures with the power and the unshakeable will to castrate and destroy men. Creed's theory is based on a feminist revision of Freudian theory according to which women are not feared because they are castrated—as Freud held—but because they are seen as all-powerful mothers whose early attachment to the male child constantly threatens to engulf men and make them disappear through sexual contact with them. The figure of the castrating woman is not the reality of women but the incarnation of male fantasised fears, a fantasy that can only appear in a patriarchal society that represses female sexuality by associating it with hostile, destructive drives (Lurie 1980). This theory seems particularly apt to explain a beleaguered contemporary masculinity which routinely blames women for its predicament. Bill, whose wanderings are ostensibly caused by "the discovery" of his wife's unruly sexuality, can be seen as a powerful filmic representation of this cultural phenomenon. Visually and even narratively these young women are not monsters but such is the power of deeply entrenched male anxieties that the protagonist cannot help constantly linking them with death. As in the patriarchal scenario depicted by Susan Lurie, this fear of death at the hands of the sexual woman is unconsciously turned into Mandy's beautiful but lifeless (or beautiful because lifeless) corpse at the morgue. In a twisted version of Lacan's *petit objet a* he transfers his own death impulse on to the woman and as a result his attraction towards her is an attraction towards his own death, an attraction that in the tense scene at the morgue threatens to engulf him, if only for a few seconds.

At the end of his nocturnal wanderings, Bill seems to be just as far as he was at the beginning from being able to incorporate a healthy view of sex into his idea of romantic love and, therefore, into his love for Alice. In fact, there is little in what we have discovered about the character's psyche that shows any interest in her love. Rather, as a result of her "confession," he would appear to want her dead. Critics have commented on the physical resemblance between Alice and all the women he meets in the New York night. This resemblance will cue us to see his relationship with women in a different light later on but, for the moment, it could be said that Mandy now occupies the position that, unconsciously, Bill would like his wife to occupy. This wish to punish Alice for her fantasised infidelity is a mark of his inability to understand her sexuality and of an immaturity which bodes ill for the future of their relationship. In other words, in his dealings with all these women, Bill remains enclosed, to misquote from Shakespeare, in the less than gorgeous palace of the self, and seems so far unequipped to reach out to the other.

On the other hand, not everything is fear and anxiety in Bill's encounters with women. He becomes clearly interested in, if not fascinated by Domino and, especially, by the anonymous woman who *saves* him at the sexual party (who may or may not have been Mandy: Victor confirms Bill's fear that she was, although the spectator may, of course, choose not to believe Victor—according to the credits, the two characters are played by two different actresses). He meets both of them in openly sexualised contexts. In both cases they are interrupted before having sex but his later attitude to them betrays that they meant more to him than just the prospect of anonymous sex, certainly not the kind of sex that he sees being performed at the party. He returns to Domino's apartment with a present the following evening, and later on is clearly very upset when he finds out that Mandy is dead, afraid obviously that she is the same woman who offered her life in exchange for his the previous night. His confrontation with her corpse at the morgue may be interpreted in terms of male pathology and castration anxiety but, from a different perspective, Bill feels both guilty because her death may have been his fault and upset about the fate of a woman in whom he had become interested the previous night. In neither case is this the attitude of someone who is only after anonymous sex. Alongside the macabre constructions of his tortured mind these women are also human beings who cross paths with him and in whom he becomes genuinely interested.

Richard Jameson offers an interesting reading of the young women's physical resemblance with Alice. For him, Bill's propensity to come across shadows of his wife suggests a deep ambivalence about "honouring his marriage vows" and sexual adventure (1999: 28). Bill is a man with a sexual identity crisis that may have been triggered by Alice's confession. This crisis, which is definitely relevant to explain end-of-the-century masculinity, and which Tom Cruise has embodied in various guises in his films, manifests itself in his fear of women and heterosex, yet it may simultaneously have other psychosexual roots: if we read his odyssey as dream or fantasy, what exactly is the function of the apparently unmotivated and vicious homophobic insults lashed out at him by the gang of young people in the street seconds before Domino reassuringly invites him to her house? And what of his encounter with the gay receptionist (Alan Cumming) at Nick's hotel? Although these are only fragmentary, otherwise unmotivated hints, it feels as if Bill has not completely discarded homoerotic desire as part of his identity, which would contribute to his general anxiety. Yet this sexual hesitancy is coupled in Cruise's character with a rather traditional view of marriage and heterosex. What apparently is undoubtedly a sexist, vengeful reaction to Alice's confession could also be seen as a fantasy in which the only way the protagonist can rival his quarrelsome wife's infidelity is by imagining himself being desired by a long series of Alice look-alikes. He can only be unfaithful by remaining faithful. In an admittedly perverse way, in his sexual escapades Bill is confirming his affection for his wife, an affection that his tormented mind and his unfixated sexual identity have so far not allowed him to express more directly or productively. When he goes out of the family home after their fight he spends the whole night looking for his wife, the wife he feared he had lost in the bedroom when, from his very limited patriarchal perspective, he discovered that she was also a desiring subject. In their rather inchoate manner, Bill's erotic fantasies reveal a desire to go beyond his sexual anxieties and find a more healthy

way to return to his wife. Whether or not his *sexual odyssey* has taught him a lesson, the spectator has certainly had the chance to learn from it.

As we have seen, the focus on Alice is much more fragmentary than on her husband throughout the narrative. Yet, the few scenes in which she appears are dominated by her presence. In the long *confession* scene she implacably exposes patriarchal misconceptions of female desire and her words in the final scene reveal that she is more mature than her husband and that there are no indications of a crisis of sexual identity comparable to his. She is, rather, a married woman who discovers the dangers of fantasy but also its inescapable power and its more positive aspects. She admits in the confession scene not only that she had a powerful erotic fantasy about being with the naval officer but that, at that time, she simultaneously felt closest to her husband, and her love for him “was most tender and sad.” She has not been unfaithful to her husband but she has come to understand that sexual infidelity may not be incompatible with love for her partner, that in contemporary society it may be, in fact, an essential ingredient of any relationship, even when it threatens to destroy it. As in Bill’s later various encounters with desiring mirror images of her, Alice, in her fantasy, turns her husband into the ideal lover he was far from being in *real life*. It is not only the young women Bill meets that look like Alice. The naval officer is also a stand-in for Bill. We may remember here that one of Tom Cruise’s most popular previous parts had been that of a marine in *A Few Good Men* (1992) (of course, we only see an image of the officer through Bill’s visualisation of an imagined sexual encounter between him and Alice and never directly from her perspective). In her fantasy Alice is constructing an ideal husband whom she can love and desire sexually (one that is different from the sexually indecisive *real* man she looks away from when he tries to initiate sex in front of the mirror at the beginning of the film). That is, Alice is not so much struggling between love and desire as imagining an ideal combination of the two. Bill is not the partner of her dreams but she would rather turn him into her affective and erotic ideal than look elsewhere.

Alice’s and Bill’s attitudes towards their relationship are, therefore, clearly different from one another, a difference which the spectator already notices in their alternate flirtations at Ziegler’s Christmas party, yet they have one thing in common: they both need to supplement their affection for each other with sexual fantasies. In this respect they resemble the married couple of Harold Pinter’s play *The Lover* (1963) in which a married woman receives a lover in the afternoons who in the end turns out to be her husband in disguise. Their fantasies torment them for different reasons but what they learn, or at least Alice learns, is that these fantasies are necessary to keep their relationship afloat. The acknowledgement of the importance and the inevitability of fantasy in the affective bond may also have the beneficial effect of ridding their sexuality of the feeling of guilt and fear that they, particularly Bill, had associated it with throughout the film. In a different register, a character in Woody Allen’s *A Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy* (1982), a film which in spite of its story’s temporal displacement is also centrally about the relationship between love and sex in contemporary society, a character finds her sexual inhibition magically lifted after she confesses to her husband that she had been unfaithful to him with his best friend the previous year and proceeds to engage in a session of wonderful, therapeutic sex with her husband in the barn. This is also the sense of Alice’s final proposition to Bill: so far, sex has been fraught with

danger and frustration for them and the measure of their reconciliation will depend on their ability to turn it once again into the joyous, healthy, and pleasurable affair that it has become in dominant twentieth-century cultural discourses. Alice's words constitute a frank acknowledgement of human limitations and, above all, a rejection of obsolete patriarchal views of marriage. Bill's potential for change remains highly doubtful and in this *Eyes Wide Shut* suggests that, by the end of the century, it is men that are finding it harder to adapt to the demands of the new sexual and affective scenario.

Still, critics have found the film's view of sex conservative and definitely not worthy of Kubrick's profound vision of the world. They would have preferred a wilder orgy, a more openly liberatory view of sex or the protagonists to have split up at the end: "The movie has denied them each the possibility of finding freedom in the flesh of others, and, in its odd way, it ends up representing a recommitment to the holiness of monogamy. It's really not about sex but the denial and avoidance of polymorphous sex" (Hunter 1999). That "polymorphous sex" may be seen at all as a positive expression of contemporary people's sexuality is a measure of how much things have changed in the sexual field in the course of the twentieth century, but why the characters would have found more freedom in the flesh of others than in each other's flesh is unclear to me. As Shumway (2003: 231) argues, while new paradigms better suited to the diversity of individual needs emerge, it may be time to recognise that it is as illegitimate to condemn marriage out of hand as it is to impose it on everyone. In any case, Hunter's review, like many others, is instructive because it confirms the film's general view that in our society as much is at stake in the field of love and sex as there is in nuclear holocaust, war, and destruction. In a much more sympathetic view, Michel Chion states:

As in life, the married man and woman meet with extramarital temptation and, as in life, those to which they give way are far less numerous or important than those to which they do not. Everyday life is made up of the hundreds of things that we dream of doing [...] but which remain no more than potentialities until life tells us, "it's too late." (2002: 43)

Eyes Wide Shut criticises, while visually reinforcing, men's limited vision of women as sexual objects, but it also explores in complex and convincing ways the links between love and sex, between affective relationships and sexual fantasy, between sex as a male construct signifying anxiety, guilt, and death, and sex as a crucial ingredient in a healthy relationship, between sex as commodity and sex as emotion.

Bill's attitude throughout the film may not make him the most obvious candidate for a last-minute change. Alice's "I love you" may be more a wish—a desperate attempt to restore something beyond repair—than a true expression of her feelings. Sex with her husband when they return home may indeed turn out to be as alienating as some viewers would like it to be. But Alice cannot be blamed for trying and the film should not be damned for allowing her to do so. In a very tentative fashion, in this final scene the film attempts to tip the balance in favour of the more positive dimensions of sex and its inextricable link with love in our culture. The colour red that suffuses the *mise en scène* acquires a new nuance, shedding its connotations of danger and death, and bringing back emotion and excitement into the characters' lives. It is as if Bill and Alice had recovered the warmth that they had lost through their crisis. After all, it is

Christmas, and this may be the first moment in the whole film that the spectator is aware that the festivities are not only about materialistic spending, but also about renewal, about the beginning of the new year, a time of change but also a time of hope that we will not fall prey again to the same mistakes we made in the previous year. In the end, more often than not, our hopes come to nothing, but for one brief moment we can still imagine that things will go differently, especially if we have learned something from the past. The function of art is also to emphasise those moments. This is the moment of epiphany, an epiphany that does not sanction the death of marriage at the hands of “polymorphous sex,” but one which, in one stroke, sexualises heterosexual love (confirming the most important development in the field of affective relationships in the century) and rescues sex from the devastating effects caused by centuries of social taboos and psychological anxieties. That this process can finally take place within the couple and that darkness and disintegration have been at least temporarily averted is an acknowledgement that, beyond cultural norms and beyond academic prejudice and posturing, life goes on and, in spite of the growing difficulties, a sizable percentage of contemporary couples still struggle on and keep trying to make sense of what compels them to do so.¹

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