

“Buñuel and Kubrick”

Excerpt from a letter to a friend

16 July 2003

That Obscure Object of Desire by Buñuel. 1977. You must see it right now. I laughed all the way through. Very well done, indicative of a strong cinematic consciousness. The film is absolutely brilliantly written. Themes relate to *Eyes Wide Shut*. Both films wonder about the enigma of human sexual intercourse. However, while TOOOD is concerned very much with WOMAN in all of her colors and ambiguity, *Eyes Wide Shut* is concerned with GENDER (men *and* women) and LOGIC. Both films portray desire as dangerous. Throughout TOOOD there is a lot of business about terrorist attacks which are causing havoc, and more than once the Main Guy in the film—“Matthew”—gets himself into a potentially dangerous situation as a result of his comings-and-goings with the object of his desire, “Conchita”; the thematic suggestion that can be made between the link of state terrorism and Matthew’s pursuit of Conchita is that choosing a mate may indeed be dangerous and moreover could ruin your life. (Think of, for example, the HIV-Positive Domino; or the sinister Gayle and Nuala; or this exchange between Bill and the Mysterious Woman: “Will you come with me?” “That’s impossible.” “Why?” “Because it would cost me my life, and possibly yours.”) Both TOOOD and EWS show how absurd a man can get when caught in the grip of lust. The character of Conchita in TOOOD is played by two different actresses, each one appearing depending on the attitude of the scene: which, generally speaking, reminds of the Mandy-Mysterious Woman connection. There are more correspondences between the two films. Such as the male money-female love connection. Also the sex-violence connection. (Think of *Punch Drunk Love*: “I want to scoop out your eyeballs . . . you’re so cute!”)

As a filmmaker Buñuel is no *better* than Kubrick. Buñuel's camerawork may be efficient and well-done, he has a good eye, but none of it is groundbreaking. Camerawork, lighting, film stock, sound: these are employed to get the job done and that's that. (There are a couple of *thematically* interesting sounds, such as, for example, the sound of a horse clopping through Seville reminding of centuries earlier, but nothing *technically* of note.) Kubrick is a man apart because in *The Shining*, for example, the camera not only *allows* the story to be told but also *contributes actively* to the complexity of the story.¹ *The technical aspects of Kubrick's films remain in the foreground.* Think of the zooms in *Barry Lyndon* . . .

But don't misunderstand me. Buñuel *is* a towering figure—because *TOOOD* is as INTELLIGENT a film as you can see in this world. Throughout the film there are virtuoso sheer shifts in tonality: at the beginning of a scene, in ten, twenty seconds one tone is established and you think things are going to go one way but then the thrust suddenly shifts into another tone. The story unfolds utterly expertly. Once you're caught up in the engine of the film you *must find out* how it ends. The ending is fantastic, dynamic, rich with signification. The ending is symbolic (having no less than three simultaneous meanings) but awesomely lucid. The ending has a visceral power—a mere knitting needle has an almost physical power! What an elegance! What a resonating magnitudinous profundity of amazing clarity! And at the final moments the film “blows up” as if it can't go any further—it has reached the limits of human investigation and understanding. (Reminding of the ending of that Python film when the film breaks—and the film also “breaks” in Bergman's *Persona* at a highly significant emotional moment.) Buñuel's last film. Amazing. I won't comment further because I don't feel like it. But if you love *Eyes Wide Shut* you better also see, along with a series of Buñuel films, Fellini's *Casanova*.

¹ [16 July 2006] For an extension of this, see my “*The Shining*: a pattern of camera direction with respect to the Gold Room”.