

Eyes Wide Shut Ten Years On

some remarks

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Eyes Wide Shut, in a nutshell, is overwhelmed with the twin themes of HUMILIATION and DEATH.

Dr. Bill smokes a relaxing joint and expects a warm, comfortable, amorous evening with his wife. Instead, he is faced with Alice's revelation of her feelings for the naval officer, a revelation which effectively, and disastrously, collapses his certainty and shatters his security (perhaps for all time). Bill anticipates a relaxing evening but is shunted into a discontented mind-space that sends him trudging into the edgy events that comprise the rest of the film.

Back at Ziegler's party, Dr. Bill was reticent, it seems, to go along with the (strange and questionable) sexual advances of Gayle and Nuala—but how is he repaid for his fidelity? First, Alice seems not to believe Bill when, in answer to her query, "Where did you go to for so long?", he responds that Ziegler wasn't feeling well; she still suspects, if the look she gives him is any evidence, that he had spent time with the two models. Second, Alice reveals that momentous secret of the naval officer.

Alice's revelation of the naval officer is HUMILIATING to Bill (Alice admits that, back in Cape Cod, she was thinking of the naval officer while Bill and she were making love) and spells the DEATH of the accustomed order of Bill's life up to that point.

[One of the humorous visual moments in that momentous bedroom scene: When Alice refers to “. . . what handsome Dr. Bill's dickie may be like”, Kubrick cuts to a specific framing of Dr. Bill which is seen only once in the entire scene: the “heart” or center of the shot is Bill's groin (he's wearing black shorts).]

DEATH: Bill visits the death room of Lou Nathanson. Bill touches the corpse by putting his hand on the dead man's forehead, and then, when he sits down, *he raises both of his hands to his mouth (so it is as if he “tastes” the death)*: an odd moment.

DEATH/LOVE/MADNESS: are fused together in the character of Marion. [Her hair is vaguely reminiscent of Alice's, and her fixation on Bill recalls Alice's fixation on the naval officer; hence the themes in this scene refer back to the business of Alice and the naval officer.] Is Marion truly in love with Bill? Or are her feelings actually, as Bill suspects, a crazed reaction to her father's death? Does this question actually matter, or is a fundamental point of the scene simply to join these three themes together: *can falling in love—a moment of decision—be itself a type of “madness”* (i.e., Alice and the naval officer)? *Might our urge for intimacy be allied to a (mute) inner hearkening to the inexorable fact of death? Do love and the consciousness of death spring from the same inner place, and act together as one mad phenomenon of the emotions or behaviour?*

DEATH: Domino, the HIV-positive prostitute (who might very well be a student putting herself through university): a cheerless story of an ordinary girl making ends meet

in the big impersonal city. It is DEPRESSING: Domino's plight, her grungy apartment and her anaemic Christmas tree.

DEATH: Hanging on the wall outside of Domino's door is an advertisement for something relating to Keith Haring, an artist who died young of AIDS.

LONELY, LUCKLESS MAN: Dr. Bill treads the streets and wanders into the Sonata Cafe. But just moments after he enters inside, Nick's last set ends for the night. Nothing seems to be going right for Bill—he can't even enjoy the music. (And "the band sucked tonight" anyway, as Nick says!)

SOMERTON: Bill is HUMILIATED insofar as he is the only one among the masked revellers who shows his real face. (And the Mysterious Woman saves him from a far worse humiliation, apparently.)

DEATH: "It could cost me my life, and possibly yours," so the Mysterious Woman warns Bill.

BILL RETURNS HOME: Alice sticks the knife into Bill a second time. "I wanted to laugh in your face . . . and so I did . . ." What overwhelming HUMILIATION!

GOING PLACES, BUT GETTING NOWHERE: The morning after the experience at Somerton, Bill, somewhat in the manner of a detective, attempts to follow up some loose ends—but does not gather much significant information.

LONELY MAN AT THE OFFICE: After nightfall, Bill telephones Marion—as if, sexually desperate as he is at the moment, perhaps he can capitalize on her mad attraction and sleep with her (he is *so* frustrated!). But when Carl answers the phone, Bill realizes just how IDIOTIC and DESPERATE this impromptu idea was. (And in the process *he gives Carl a “heavy-breathing” phone call!*)

DEATH: Sally’s revelation that Domino is HIV-positive. Just when the sexually frustrated and suddenly assertive Bill is getting it on with Sally, the terrible news of Domino’s DEADLY disease is revealed, and the mood curdles. Bill sits there, somewhat HUMILIATED.

DEATH: the STALKER: the sex-food-death plexus (as spelled out elsewhere on this website): lingerie store (sex), restaurant (no. 237), stalker (stop sign: death as the ultimate “stop”).

DEATH: Sharky’s (I think of Kubrick’s friend, Spielberg—*Jaws*). Mozart’s *Requiem*. Ex-beauty queen Amanda Curran’s death. LONELY MAN: Bill sits alone in Sharky’s.

DEATH: the morgue. A beautiful young woman: her lost, wasted life.

HUMILIATION: Ziegler’s pool room. Bill is “put in his place”, bitch-slapped around by Ziegler.

HUMILIATION: Bill goes home and, utterly defeated, tells Alice “everything”.

DRABNESS, HUMILIATION: toy store. Bill asks Alice what they should do about their present situation—Alice is the one in control, the thoughtful one. Bill refers, idiotically (and sentimentally), to “Forever.” (Alice is upset by that word—“forever”: the terror of infinity, of a death that lasts forever, an endless absence. Death means never returning—“forever and ever and ever”.) Last shot of the film: Bill is seen from behind (his stature is reduced), and his last line is “What’s that?” (always one step behind, is Bill!) Alice assumes the role of doctor, taking over his position, diagnosing his “cure”: “Fuck”. Alice “wears the pants” in their marriage. (Another way of putting it: She is the “mommy” and he is the “child”.)

Eyes Wide Shut concerns Dr. Bill, a character who is pretty much a schlub who, as a result of a lust-tinged brain funk following a major slap-down from his wife, puts himself into a series of ludicrous situations, the prevailing tenor of all of which being humiliation and death. When the film ends, he is no better off for his “adventures”. In fact, he is worse off, because Somerton’s “powers-that-be” know who he is. . . .

Postscript

While watching the widescreen DVD of *Eyes Wide Shut* for the first time, I was surprised to acknowledge that I preferred the full frame version of the film. I would much rather have back what was lost at the top and bottom of the frame than gain what is revealed on the extreme left and right sides of the frame. (For example, we lose Ziegler’s hand dropping softly onto his pool table when he is speaking of Nick going back to Seattle. I always loved the “soft” quality of that hand gesture.) In a perfect world we would have the fullest image of all—everything potentially visible on all four sides of the frame.