

EYES WIDE SHUT
THE DREAM-ODYSSEY OF STANLEY KUBRICK

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. . .Ma. . . Io mi domando. . .perchè realizzare un'opera,
quando è così bello sognarla soltanto? . . .

Pier Paolo Pasolini, as Giotto in *Il Decameron* (1972)

With the release of *Eyes Wide Shut* (July 1999), less than two months after Stanley Kubrick's death, a project that had haunted him for more than thirty years came to fruition. Kubrick had spoken of this project—an adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle* ("Dream Story")—as early as the 1960's, and he considered adapting it after completing *A Clockwork Orange*. In an interview with Michel Ciment conducted shortly after the release of *A Clockwork Orange*, Kubrick noted that *Traumnovelle* was a project he "intend[ed] to do" and called it "a difficult book to describe." He went on to explain that "it explores the sexual ambivalence of a *happy marriage*, and tries to equate the importance of sexual dreams and *might-have-beens* with reality" (Kubrick's italics).¹ By the time he finally came to make the project in the 90's, it had all the elements of a "dream story" for him personally, as it allowed him to revisit stages of his own life and raise questions that he had struggled with for many years. Unlike the novel, which takes place in turn-of-the-century Vienna, Kubrick's film is set in the New York of his youth. He recreates the apartment where he had grown up with his parents

in the home of the protagonists, Dr. William Harford (Tom Cruise) and his wife, Alice (Nicole Kidman), and then decorates that apartment with the paintings by his third wife, Christiane Kubrick, and his step-daughter, Katharina Hobbs. At one point, Alice Harford watches *Blume in Love* on television, a film directed by Paul Mazursky who had starred in Kubrick's first feature film. And, at the end of the film, as Bill Harford walks through the apartment before spotting the mask on the bed next to Alice, the viewer can see a pile of films on the long table under the painting. One critic has identified these as Kubrick's films, with *Full Metal Jacket* on the top of the pile.² *Eyes Wide Shut* proves to be an apt conclusion to that body of work.

Kubrick also recreated the Greenwich Village where he had spent his early years as a filmmaker—first married to Toba Kubrick and then to Ruth Subotka—on a sound stage in England, where he had spent his adult life. He unquestionably identified with Bill Harford, the hero of his work, who exerts a directorial-like control over his professional environment, and seems at a loss elsewhere—nowhere more than at the orgy where Harford wanders out of place, as Kubrick himself had at a masked ball where his third wife, Christiane, had performed shortly after they first met many years before. Kubrick not only identifies with Harford, but with a character who is new to the story—Victor Ziegler (Sydney Pollack)—and who clearly functions as a surrogate for Kubrick. Ziegler stage-manages two of the principal scenes in the film (the party at the beginning and the orgy in the middle) and offers fatherly advice to Harford at the end of the film. Finally, the film presents a question that must have haunted Kubrick throughout his career—a career that consisted of only thirteen feature films in forty years—and that is the question of the difference between a work that exists in the mind and one that actually comes to fruition. For Kubrick this was the central question posed by *Traumnovelle* and this question could be extended to filmmaking as well. Kubrick dreamed of many projects, including *Napoleon*, *AI*, *The Aryan Papers*, *Perfume*, to name but a few of

the many that were never filmed for one reason or another. *Traumnovelle* is both the analysis of several days of dream and trauma in the life of an apparently happily-married couple, and the study of affairs dreamed, imagined, and somehow never realized. Both of these threads had enormous personal appeal to Stanley Kubrick at the end of his career.

Password: Fidelio

Late on the second of the three plus days that comprise *Eyes Wide Shut*, Bill Harford seeks out an old medical school buddy, Nick Nightingale (Todd Field), at the Sonata Café in Greenwich Village, where he is playing piano in a quartet. They talk briefly at a table and Nick confides that he has another gig that night, a mysterious performance the location of which is as yet unknown. Bill is naturally curious and prods his friend. Nick admits that he has played for these gatherings before; he performs blindfolded (“eyes wide shut”) but has been able to observe some of the details of these evenings, including “such women!” Bill inquires further, but their conversation is interrupted by a call on Nick’s cell phone. Nick answers, mumbles into the phone, and writes one word on a napkin before him: FIDELIO. To Bill’s next question, Nick answers “It’s the name of a Beethoven opera, isn’t it?” Under further questioning, he admits that it is the password to the party at which he is going to perform. “Fidelio” is the word that will open up an unknown world to Bill—and to the viewer.

But why “Fidelio?” In Schnitzler’s novella, *Traumnovelle*, the password is “Denmark.” In the novella, the wife’s fantasy about having an affair with a stranger took place at a spot where the couple vacationed in Denmark, as did a fantasy of the husband’s that he shares with his wife after hearing her story. Thus, in the novella the password “Denmark” represents the convergence of the wife’s and husband’s two sexual fantasies. There is no such

connection in *Eyes Wide Shut*. Rather, film viewers must seek an explanation for the choice of password within Kubrick's other films.

The film where Ludwig Van is a presiding deity is, of course, *A Clockwork Orange*. The music of Beethoven plays a significant role in the life of Alex de Large (Malcolm McDowell), the "droog" whose young life the film (and novel by Anthony Burgess) chronicles. Alex is obsessed with Beethoven's music while he is free and inflicting his violence on everyone he comes in contact with; Beethoven plays an important role in the treatment he receives in prison (the name—Ludovico treatment—invoking Beethoven); and Beethoven is the stimulus for the attempted suicide in the third part of the film. The Ludovico treatment, in which Alex is strapped into a chair with his eyes wide open (and kept open with mechanical devices) is particularly apt to *Eyes Wide Shut*. The treatment involves watching works of violence—not different in kind from what the film viewers had watched (or had chosen not to watch, as the case may be) in the first part of *A Clockwork Orange*. Nadsat, the language created by Anthony Burgess that Alex uses to narrate the novel *A Clockwork Orange*, obscures—by virtue of its difficulty for the reader—the violence that is being described. Kubrick also seeks ways of aestheticizing and distancing the violence in his film. Violence is choreographed balletically to music (the fight between Alex and his droogs and Billyboy and his droogs, set to Rossini's "Thieving Magpie," or the use of "Singin' in the Rain" as a counterpoint to the violence at the writer's house), action is speeded-up (Alex's encounter with the two girls he meets at the music shop and takes home with him), or slowed down (Alex's attempt to reassert control over his own droogs), or filmed through distorted lenses. All of this is done so that the spectator can watch without turning away.

In Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, the Ludovico treatment becomes a metafictional moment that forces us to reflect on our own activity as film viewers. (This is not true of the novel, of course.) Alex too must become a film viewer, as part of his

treatment, without the aestheticizing effects that Kubrick provides for his viewers throughout the film. In the fascistic world Alex has entered, he is forced to watch films as a way of programming him to find sex and violence nauseating in the extreme. The Ludovico treatment deprives him of any choice. And it is precisely the conjunction of violence and Beethoven (specifically the fourth movement of the 9th Symphony) that makes Alex sick and then “cures” him.

Through his use of Beethoven in *Eyes Wide Shut*, Kubrick forges a connection with *A Clockwork Orange* that underscores some of the central themes of the film—the complex nature of vision, and of looking/seeing, of free-will, of directorial control (the two psychologists in *A Clockwork Orange* are surrogates for the director) and places *Eyes Wide Shut* within the larger context of his own work.

The full title of Beethoven’s opera is “Fidelio, or Married Love” (“Fidelio, oder Die eheliche Liebe”) and Kubrick’s film is a dissection of a “married love” that seems, on the surface, all too perfect. *Eyes Wide Shut* gradually peels away the protective layers and forces the characters to view the deceptions beneath the surface. The film forces us to do the same. The simple password “Fidelio” means literally “I who am faithful,” and this suggests a very different orientation for the speaker than the password of Schnitzler’s novella. One enters the inner sanctum not by drawing on past fantasies of sexual infidelity, but by reaffirming—however ironically—some notion of fidelity.

Not only is the meaning of the password important, but so is the bearer of that word and the context in which the transmission takes place. Bill seeks out Nick at the Sonata Café, a dive where he is playing in Greenwich Village. Bill enters and descends into the café by way of a narrow staircase that is illuminated with red lights. He sits at a table in the darkened room and when Nick later joins him, red holiday lights illuminate Nick from the rear, giving him a Mephistophelean air. What’s in a name? His Christian name, Nick,

implies a demonic temptation, and that is certainly what takes place. The nightingale is a migratory species of bird whose male sings beautiful songs during the mating season. In Keats's famous "Ode," it is the song of the nightingale . . .

. . . that oft-times hath

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn.

What could be a more apt description of the world Nightingale permits Bill access to?

The name of the café—the Sonata Café—also suggests a possible structural principal for *Eyes Wide Shut*. Music informs Kubrick's films in many ways—thematic and structural³. The sonata form consists of a three-part structure that is particularly appropriate to a work that spans three days. Moreover, each of the days has the structure of a sonata: exposition, development, and recapitulation, the recapitulation consisting of an emotional scene in the bedroom followed by a black screen. On the final day, the night never ends, as the passionate confessional scene becomes Bill and Alice's all-night discussion of Bill's peregrinations, followed by a coda in the light of day.

Let us return to the first of the points suggested by the meaning of the password, the emphasis on the visual and the related question of free will: who determines what we see and how we see it? Kubrick's interrogation of the visual begins with the opening shot of the film: A black screen is suddenly replaced by the shot of a beautiful woman (Alice Harford) slipping out of her dress, and turning her nude body slightly toward the viewer. In the blink of an eye, the figure is gone and the screen is suddenly black again. We are being told to watch carefully. By whom? By an extradiegetic force. We are also being put in the unsettling position of voyeurs.

Our momentary view of Alice is replaced by the title—EYES WIDE SHUT—on a black background. Following a brief establishing shot of the city streets on the Upper West Side of New York, the scene resumes in Alice's dressing room, but the object

of our gaze is now her husband, Dr. William Harford. He inspects his tuxedo and puts the final touches on his evening wear. The contrast between the first shots of Alice and Bill is significant: Alice is exposed, vulnerable and yet somehow open and free; Bill appears as a successful young professional, up-tight and totally self-absorbed. The camera follows Bill steadily as he prepares to go out, asks his wife the most apparently banal question (“Honey, have you seen my wallet?”), and then goes into the bathroom and studies his face in the mirror. Our own voyeuristic act is replicated in the narcissistic voyeurism of Bill Harford, as he examines himself in the mirror. Directly behind him, Alice is seated on the toilet. She asks him how she looks. Without turning, Bill answers “Perfect.” “Is my hair OK?” “It’s great,” he responds without looking away from his own reflection in the mirror. When she points out that he hasn’t even looked at *her*, he mutters a cliché, kisses her, and leaves the bathroom. She follows him through the bedroom as he turns off the radio, the light, and closes the door behind her. They walk down the corridor, say goodnight to their daughter and the baby-sitter, and leave their apartment.

Bill’s narcissicism is striking here. He’s more concerned with viewing his own face in the mirror than in responding to his wife. (Mirrors are ubiquitous in this apartment, adorning the walls of the bedroom, the dressing room, and the corridor that leads to the living room.) As he leaves the bathroom, his words and actions confirm that he is not in control of basic domestic details: he can’t find his wallet (which, as the film shows, is an important part of his identity) and he doesn’t know the baby-sitter’s name, even though Alice has just mentioned it to him. At the same time, Kubrick underscores Bill’s power. For one thing, the camera almost always remains on him; he dominates the scene physically. Moreover, as Bill pauses to turn off the radio, he crosses the line between the diegetic and the extradiegetic; what we thought was the soundtrack (since it began with the credit sequence) appears to be diegetic music. (This music—Shostakovich’s “Waltz 2 from Jazz Suite”—is reprised as

extradiegetic music throughout most of day two—at Bill’s office and at their home, until Alice joins Bill in front of the TV.) The alliance between Bill and the director is further underscored when Bill then extinguishes the light, closes the door, and leaves us for a brief instant in the dark. This room is the world where most of the significant encounters between Bill and Alice will take place. The fault lines are already visible to the audience. So is the strong presence of a director who will carefully manipulate what we see and what we don’t see.

This pattern continues in the objectification of Alice and the emphasis on Alice’s nudity. Alice studies her own reflection later that evening, as she moves her nude body in time to the music “Baby Did a Bad, Bad Thing” and removes her earrings before Bill begins to make love to her. Bill approaches her from behind and studies himself in the mirror, as Kubrick brings the camera past the couple and films their reflection. Rather than looking into the mirror, as Alice does when she’s alone, she will look outward, toward the camera and hence establish a contact with the audience that is rare in this movie. It is Alice and not Bill who—in a later shot—faces the camera directly. This sign of her openness and less self-centered behavior provides a striking contrast with Bill.

The next morning, we have several shots of the nude Alice getting dressed, juxtaposed with shots of Bill in his most professional persona at work as a doctor. After this, the objectification of Alice is shifted to Bill as he undresses her in a series of six black and white sequences that progressively show his imaginative recreation of Alice making love with the object of her own fantasies. Hence, the depiction of Alice’s fantasies is shifted to Bill. Bill is now invested with the power to visualize Alice’s fantasy with the naval officer and this fuels his sexual odyssey through the streets of Manhattan and Glen Cove, Long Island. By contrast, Alice is only able to narrate her fantasies verbally. She remains trapped within their apartment—although in her fantasies, she roams far and wide. The difference between Alice’s entrapment in the cloying domesticity of their upper-

west side apartment and Bill's freedom to roam is most sharply seen when Kubrick juxtaposes a shot of Alice watching TV alone in her kitchen at night with a shot of Bill sitting across from a prostitute in her Greenwich Village apartment.

For Alice, the trip begins when she goes behind the looking glass in search of the marijuana that will loosen her inhibitions further. Alice's confession of attraction for another man sends Bill into his nocturnal world of dreams, memories and desire. Although filmed for the most part realistically, Kubrick distorts the realism of the *mise-en-scène* and gives the scenes a nightmarish quality by the garish lighting (provided realistically by the holiday lights and Christmas trees in almost every scene), the unusual color patterns of the sets, and the hermetically sealed and dream-like Manhattan and Greenwich Village that he has created for his film.

The party at the ostentatious home of Victor Ziegler is an apt prologue for the parallel journeys taken by both Alice and Bill. At this party, Bill, who professes to know no one there, meets two figures from his past, a model he had once assisted in his role as physician, and a former classmate from medical school. The model, with another female friend in tow, promises to take Bill to "where the rainbow ends," while his former classmate later does in fact do just this. Nick Nightingale will offer Bill the entrance to a world of sexual fantasy; in the Ziegler's upstairs bathroom Bill also meets the woman who will open the door for him to leave this world. The bathroom scene at the Ziegler mansion reveals the seamy underside of this elegant party (as alluded to by Alice's dance partner as well) and establishes a connection between sex and death. Although Mandy, Zeigler's sexual partner, is not dead now, the next time Bill will examine her nude, supine body, she will be. This connection will be reinforced by every subsequent sexual encounter in the film. At the conclusion of his journey, Bill buys a copy of the N.Y. Post with the headline, "Lucky to Be Alive" on the front page. Indeed he is, although "luck" had little to do with it.

Ziegler functions as a surrogate for the director throughout the

party sequence. He choreographs two scenes simultaneously—his own lavish party in the public spaces, and the sexual encounters behind the scenes. He will apparently do the same at the orgy scene. On the dance floor, both Alice and Bill live out unfulfilled sexual fantasies; Alice with an older man who is a caricature of the suave European lover, and Bill with two nubile younger women. But there is a significant difference in the ways the two fantasies develop. Kubrick circles Alice and her partner with his camera as they stand and talk and later as they dance. They are enclosed within a space by a continually moving camera, unable to escape until Alice breaks out of the circle. (This camera movement is repeated during the interrogation scene at the orgy. The parallels between the two scenes in terms of camera work and grandiose mise-en-scène are striking.) Bill, by contrast, is steadily lead to “where the rainbow ends,” both by the camera tracking before him, and by the two sexual partners at his sides. But the forward movement is interrupted by a summons from one of Ziegler’s minions. This is the second time in the scene that the arc of an action has been broken by an external intervention (Nick’s summons earlier was the first) and it establishes a pattern that repeats itself over and over throughout the film. Do the characters have “free-will” (to reprise a term from *A Clockwork Orange*) or is a *deus ex machina* at work here? An external force repeatedly breaks off highly charged sexual scenes. This is true of the *coitus interruptus* of Bill and Alice back at their apartment after the party as well. In fact, *coitus interruptus* becomes a metaphor for the development of the film.⁴ Ziegler’s sexual act with Mandy is interrupted by her over-dose; Marion’s declaration of love for Bill and her outpouring of kisses is interrupted by the arrival of her fiancé; Bill’s encounter with Domino, the prostitute who takes him home, is interrupted by a phone call from Alice; Bill’s conversation with Nick at the Sonata Café is interrupted by a call from someone summoning Nick to the nocturnal orgy; at the Rainbow costume shop (where Bill prepares to go “where the rainbow ends”), Bill and Milich interrupt the two customers who are frolicking with

Milich's daughter; Bill's own possibility of sexual intrigue at the orgy is interrupted by Mandy's warnings and later by the arrival of one of the bouncers; Bill's attempt to proposition Marion is interrupted by her fiancé, who picks up the phone; and Bill's return to the prostitute's apartment and his attempt to sleep with Sally, her roommate, is interrupted by the roommate's declaration. The film thus presents a series of unfinished stories and incomplete projects. The opening shot of the film, which is a sort of sexual tease for the viewer, is but a prelude to a pattern that becomes a definitive structural feature of the film. Our gaze—whether it be of the nude body of Alice Harford or of a potential sexual encounter—is frustrated continuously.

Most of these interruptions allow Bill to pull back from actions that would challenge the "faithfulness" of the password. Yet this password both allows him entrance to the world of the orgy and, at the same time, exposes him as an intruder. At the orgy Bill indulges his voyeuristic tendencies most fully. When asked whether he has been "enjoying himself," Bill responds that he has "had a very interesting look around." One of the ironies of this scene is that the censors have made it impossible for the American viewer to "look around" as well. The American print has been optically altered by the addition of masked figures to obscure our vision and to insure a "R" rating for the film. Bill may be able to look around, but we aren't. This is one instance where our view is being blocked not by the director but by someone else. The punishment for Bill's passive voyeurism is the threat of total exposure—he is to remove his mask and is asked to remove his clothing—to be followed by whatever punishment our imaginations can conceive. Bill is spared by the intervention of someone whose life he had earlier saved, Mandy, the prostitute whom Victor Ziegler had taken upstairs at the party. Although saved from humiliation at the orgy, Bill will suffer a number of further challenges to his sexuality—from both men and women—before he exposes himself emotionally to Alice on the evening of the third day.

Bill takes an increasingly active role in his fantasies and on the last day he must revisit—by his own car (to the scene of the orgy), by taxi (to Greenwich village), or by phone (to the apartment of Marion, the daughter of his deceased patient)—the sites of his previous encounters. His journey ends at the place where it all began—at Victor Ziegler’s mansion. As Bill stands frozen by the billiard table with a disturbingly red felt surface—evoking the red light illuminating Nightingale at the Sonata Café and the carpet of the orgy’s interrogation scene—Victor prowls around the room, followed by the camera that keeps him in the center of the frame. Finally, Victor takes a seat in a large wingback while Bill begins to move physically in the room, followed by the camera. He finally drops his professional mask—and faces his deficiencies as a doctor, as he slowly starts to come to terms with his experiences. The camera work throughout this scene chronicles Bill’s gradual acquisition of self-knowledge, so that he is finally able to face Victor and question him forcefully about the evening. In his role as director, Victor pulls back the curtain and explains to Bill that his experiences at the orgy were “staged,” “that it was a kind of charade.” It is the penultimate moment of unmasking—like Prospero’s speech at the end of the *Tempest*. Kubrick cuts directly from a shot of Victor standing behind Bill as he pats Bill reassuringly on the shoulders to a shot of the carnival mask on a purple pillow next to the pillow of Bill’s sleeping wife. The music from the orgy (Ligeti’s “Musica Ricercata II”) resumes and once again a void opens up, as the continuity of the film is suddenly interrupted. The next shot reveals Bill entering the apartment. For the first time in the film the viewer is privileged to see something before a character within the diegesis observes it. The pattern of withholding information has been reversed. After Ziegler’s declaration, the mask reminds us—as it will remind Bill—that something *was* real and that he has been literally unmasked to his wife. However, before Bill sees the mask, he wanders through the apartment, pauses by the Christmas tree, and turns out the light. With the extinguishing of lights on a Christmas

tree (another first in the film) a second sign of explicit directorial control occurs (the first being the shot—out of sequence—of the mask on the pillow). The gesture suggests to us that Bill has regained a measure of control he had lost, a control that aligns him once again with the director of the film. He is about to exit from the dream world in which he has found himself. But we know that one final hurdle remains: the mask itself. He finds it, collapses, lies down on the bed between the mask and his wife, and promises to tell her everything that has happened.

The ending takes Alice and Bill out of the bedroom and into a world where Bill doesn't define himself by his professional role (doctor) but by his personal role (husband and father). Bill, Alice and their daughter shop for Christmas presents in a brightly-lit toy store. It is here that they look at each other as if for the first time and find the strength to continue their life together. The important thing, Alice notes, "is that we're awake now and hopefully for a long time to come." Bill proposes a new password: Not "Fidelio," but "forever." Alice demurs, and counters with another word, for "something very important that we need to do as soon as possible:" Not "Fidelio," but "Fuck." The directness of Alice's proposal (contrasting so markedly with the circumlocutious sexual propositions of others in the film) suggests that—with eyes wide open—she and Bill have the opportunity to see each other for what they are, and to build a life together in the present on that basis.

Eyes Wide Shut is Kubrick's most personal film, a fitting conclusion to an extraordinarily complex body of work. It's a film about how we see and about how what we see shapes who we are. It is also about who determines what we see—and the responsibility that power entails. It is a film about projects dreamed and projects shelved, about dreaming a film and about making a film. It is, in short, a film about the power of film—and one in which Kubrick displays his own fidelity to the art form that became his life.

Notes

1. Michel Ciment, *Kubrick: The Definitive Edition* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 156.
2. David Hughes, *The Complete Kubrick* (London: Virgin Publishing, 2000) p. 259.
3. Thomas Allen Nelson discusses the use of the sonata form in terms as the overall development of the film in *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 268-269.
4. Allen calls attention to this feature of the plot although he reaches a different conclusion about its role in the film (pp. 272-273).