

## Movie Review

***Eyes Wide Shut*, Director: Stanley Kubrick; Scenario: Stanley Kubrick, Frederic Raphael; Starring: Nicole Kidman (Alice Harford), Tom Cruise (Dr. William 'Bill' Harford), Madison Eginton (Helena Harford), Sydney Pollack (Victor Ziegler), 1999/USA, 159 min., adaptation from *Traumnovella* by Arthur Schnitzler.**

Reviewed by: Bora Erdagi<sup>1</sup>

Eleven years after its release, it is worth remembering Stanley Kubrick's last film *Eyes Wide Shut* for its critique of dehumanized (bourgeois) lifestyles of our times. Kubrick worked on the screenplay for quite a long time and could finish shooting only months before his death. The inspiration was the novel *Traumnovella* by Arthur Schnitzler who was a close friend of Sigmund Freud. The film is an attempt to question the notions of love, trust, and sexuality in order to unfold the taken-for-granted relations between these notions. It also reveals the role these notions play in constructing and reconstructing social bodies in a certain way. It tells the story of an upper-middle class New York couple (Bill Harford performed by Tom Cruise and Alice Harford performed by Nicole Kidman) who lose their way upon having a few existential crises in three consecutive days. The diverse routes Alice and Bill take to deal with their own traumas opens up the possibility to observe the conditions of different levels of (un)consciousness. Alice, as opposed to Bill, is neither attached in an unbounded way to the dream she was thrown into nor is she too heavily involved in the circumstances surrounding her way of life. Bill, on the other hand, is capable of easily justifying the conditions of his life through his instrumental rationality; nevertheless, he easily falls apart within the first crisis. This review attempts to unfold the ways in which the characters try to overcome

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these crises with respect to their class positions. In so doing, it also undertakes a broader search to speculate about the reified nature of current social relations. In other words, while the film reflects the psychoanalytic exploration of the characters, this review aims at a socio-political analysis of the characters.

Bill is a medical doctor working for upper-class people, and his wife Alice works as an art director. In the opening scene we see them in an extremely fancy Christmas ball where they find themselves separated and try to find each other for the rest of the evening. The next night, during a moment of drunkenness before having sex, Alice and Bill start talking about the previous night. Alice suddenly starts asking Bill questions about their relationship. Bill has a hard time answering Alice's simple questions such as "why do you love me?" As he tries to get out of the situation he is trapped in, he is faced with a confession from Alice. Alice tells him that she cannot avoid thinking about another man. More strikingly, she confesses that she was once ready to leave everything behind for the man she was thinking about. This confession shatters Bill's preconceived beliefs about his marriage as well as his own being. He is thus forced to open his eyes. However, he is not totally woken yet since opening one's eyes does not necessarily imply they have abandoned the dream. Bill, nevertheless, is now left scared and vulnerable, far from the stability of his security zone.

Upon receiving a phone call from a patient's family, Bill leaves home. But this trip will turn into a nightmare as he is now entirely defenseless. This nightmare will go on until Alice wakes him up. When he arrives at the patient's house, he is informed that his patient has died. Afterwards, the deceased patient's daughter confesses her love for Bill in the funeral room to which he does not respond and leaves the house. Walking on the street he encounters a prostitute, chats with her for a bit and goes to her place, something he would not have done before. These experiences greatly complicate things for Bill, especially after losing his footing on the taken-for-granted ground upon which he formally stood. The light of the real world now dazzles his eyes and yet he does not stop there. For him, the night turns into a search for a story through which he may obtain a counter-position to his wife's story so that he can reconstruct his lost self-esteem and strengthen his ego.

The audience is then brought to a pivotal moment in the story when Bill meets a friend in a pub. His friend mentions a private sex party for upper class New Yorkers. Bill obtains the secret password from his friend and attends by infiltrating the party house with a rented mask and costume. However, Bill's identity is revealed and a prostitute sacrifices herself in an effort to rescue him. After having to leave the party, he gets back home and finds Alice talking in her sleep. He wakes her up. Alice tells Bill that, in her dream, he and she were naked in a deserted place. She says that when he left her to find their clothes, she felt better. Then, the man she

had been constantly thinking about appeared and they began having sex in front of a crowd. Alice's dream brings forth an absolute possibility for Bill to be woken up from his own dream that is his reality. However, Bill denies that possibility and retains his calm position. The next day, he returns the rented costume and witnesses the store owner selling his teenage daughter to others for sex. In light of these, and other shocking events in two consecutive nights, he realizes that he has to face his own reality. That same night Bill, who finally has something of his own to confess, starts explaining to Alice what he had experienced over the last three days. This, for both of them, may denote the end of the sleep, but still not the dream. Their sleep ends and eyes are now wide open! With the first sunlight falling on the ground, the Harford family is metamorphosed.

While Christmas shopping the next day, we hear a short dialogue between our "exhausted warriors":

**Bill:** *What do you think we should do?*

**Alice:** *What do I think? I don't know. Maybe I think (...) we should be grateful that we've managed to survive through all of our adventures (...) whether they were real or only a dream.*

**Bill:** *A dream is never just a dream.*

**Alice:** *The important thing is we're awake now.*

Alice's open, questioning and repentant attitude throughout the film proves to be healing for their relationship. She helps, despite all the hardship, the lived experience arise to the level of consciousness rather than suppressing it. Throughout the film, Bill appears on the screen much more than Alice does. Alice however, appears only in critical moments, mimicking the relationship between the conscious and unconscious.

Bill, on the other hand, acts 'rationally' under almost all circumstances. But his rationality lacks content; it is completely instrumental, and he observes reality from a paradigmatically representational perspective. Questioning is rarely a feature of his rationality. He fears falling apart as he experiences something new and shocking. However, falling apart in Bill's case does not spring from the 'shock of experience', which Walter Benjamin defines in his miscellaneous writings as a norm of nineteenth-century intellectuals. According to Benjamin, shock disintegrates people's emotional world, but it also restructures their intellectual world. In Bill's case, it is hard to observe this restructuring of his reason because he does not utilize the shocking experiences to transform his reality. It is more as if Bill has had an accident and keeps chasing whatever has crashed into him rather than trying to understand what had happened. It is, therefore, obvious that Bill is not a typical inheritor of the nineteenth-century shock experience. In this sense, he indeed behaves in the exact opposite way to which Benjamin describes. Bill represents the instrumental reason

that Theodor W. Adorno radically criticizes. Moreover, Bill resembles a typical reconciliatory bourgeois of twentieth-century Keynesianism who declares himself as participative in social and political life, while completely ignoring the ongoing class struggles and yet wanting his 'heroism' to be acknowledged by others. His dreams and fantasies about the world—and about his heroic position in it—replace his real life experiences, and therefore it is difficult for him to be woken from his dreams (his constructed reality).

Alice, on the other hand, positions herself at the complete opposite pole. She thinks that it is foolish to hide behind masks, especially after the masks are uncovered. Thus, unlike Bill, she chooses to deal with reality, not through fantasy but through language. In that, she also tries to emancipate language from its given constraints. Emancipating language from its chains allows for slippages and enables consciousness to set itself free from tensions. This opens up room for spontaneity. Her use of story-telling, her first story occurring while her and Bill were smoking marijuana and the second after just waking up, represents this process. Alice's peaceful reconciliation with reality is therefore much easier than Bill's, which moves Alice to an advantageous position over Bill. However, it by no means puts her in a revolutionary position because Alice in a sense occupies the position of the bourgeoisie in the totality of the capitalist system, as Georg Lukacs would put it. For Lukacs, the bourgeoisie is aware of the reality of class struggles with respect to their position within the master-slave dialectic. However, for the sake of their very existence, 'the master' (the bourgeoisie) forces 'the slave' (the proletariat) to obey. What this contradictory mechanism of subordination generates for the bourgeoisie is twofold: the awareness of their dependence on the proletariat and possibility of manipulation. Yet this awareness does not put the bourgeoisie in a revolutionary position, which would allow them to overcome this contradiction. Broadly speaking, as long as the bourgeoisie can survive this contradiction, the system will continue to benefit them. In this context, Alice, unlike Bill, is well aware of her and Bill's own class position and behaves in the way this awareness requires. She knows that, as members of the upper-middle class, they are afforded the privilege of enjoying their life through the denial and manipulation of the shocking contradictions their material conditions may reinforce. It is this knowledge that makes her a healing agent in their relationship even during times of crisis. This knowledge provides her with the flexibility to easily adjust her reality to the changing circumstances and assume the different stances necessary in defense of both herself and her husband.

The two portraits drawn above help us to unpack two different modes of politics. The first, represented by Bill, depends entirely on traditional modalities; the functioning of which is dependent less on awareness than it is on repression techniques as a defense mechanism. As opposed to its rational outlook, it is never

reconciled with critical reasoning. This is a bourgeois politics. The second, represented by Alice, relies on awareness as well as manipulation; it also emanates from a bourgeois politics. Despite the differences, both modes of politics require masks to be performed. Because, as it is illustrated above for both Alice and Bill, family replaces free sex in their relationship, reality replaces fantasy, recognition by others replaces conflict, the conservation of lifestyle replaces alteration and finally, dream/masks replaces real life.

Then, it seems reasonable to claim the following: Waking up is not as difficult as imagined. It is however, more difficult to awaken from a dream that is thought to be limited by the sleep itself. Because dreaming is not something that consciousness can deal with easily, unpacking a dream is only possible through the denial of various masks. Abandoning the masks however, requires a realistic revolutionary position acknowledging the real life experiences and material conditions of today's world where dreaming is made tremendously charming through the fantasy, ideologies and ubiquitous reification that occupies almost every aspect of modern life.

In the last scene of the film, both Alice and Bill obtain awareness of their bourgeois lifestyles. In other words, both characters finally wake up from their sleep. Neither of them however, abandons their dreams because neither wants to lose their world of fetishized commodities. In this way, Lukacs's prophecy does not come true: totality is preserved for the sake of totality.

