

Kubrick's search

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [August 11, 1999](#) issue

Rarely does blatant commercial hypocrisy sit so close to artistic excellence as was the case at the Hollywood screening of Stanley Kubrick's final film, *Eyes Wide Shut*. Critics were invited to see two versions of a 65-second segment of an orgy sequence, one as originally shot by Kubrick, and another with some of the explicit material blocked by computer images so as to remove the film from the dreaded NC-17 (adults only) category. As Warner Bros., the film's distributors, must have known would happen, many of the more influential critics—Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun Times* and Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*, most notably—dutifully informed readers that they were being deprived of art and that the First Amendment had suffered a blow. Balderdash.

Kubrick was under contractual obligation to deliver an R-rated film (open to children under 17 if accompanied by parents or adult guardians), not an NC-17 film. But he also wanted to make his orgy as frightening and disgusting as he possibly could, which is, no doubt, why he hits the audience with so much nonerotic groping and sexual exertions. The orgy scene—which takes the form of a satanic ritual—is designed not to titillate, but to display the emptiness of hedonism. Kubrick was willing to cover up the explicit portions of the orgy because he knew full well that his point was just as easily made in the revised version. I suspect he actually enjoyed preparing the digital additions, a final joke on all those critics who have trashed his films when they were first released.

Eyes Wide Shut is an adult film not just because it is filled with implied and explicit sexuality, but because its theme is jealousy and fear in the lives of a married couple. The film involves fantasies, depicted in ways appropriate only for adults. There is a place for such films in commercial theaters, which is why the adults-only rating exists. Warner Bros. should have accepted an NC-17 rating, which would have avoided the need for any changes by Kubrick, but it didn't want to lose a single under-17 ticket sale. So it put on its charade of screening two versions for the critics, and then pretending to protest the rating, even as it embraced the more commercially viable R rating.

The ploy worked; the ensuing publicity helped make *Eyes Wide Shut* the top money-maker on the weekend it opened. But the worst part of this successful marketing strategy is that many people are seeing the film for the wrong reasons, and serious filmgoers may be discouraged from seeing what is a film of considerable insight and beauty.

Kubrick died just a few days after he completed *Eyes Wide Shut*, ending a career that included such works as *Dr. Strangelove*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Barry Lyndon*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Lolita*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *The Shining*. It will be some time before we are able to ascertain if Kubrick went out with his finest work or just one of the better ones, but in any event it is most certainly one of the two or three best films released in the past few years.

How good? Well, Kubrick doesn't make bad films. He does make imaginative, complicated and mysterious films which demand frequent viewing and considerable reflection.

Be aware, however, that when Kubrick takes his viewers on a journey into the hell of jealousy and fear experienced by a young married couple who are tormented by erotic longing and confusion, the material is quite adult. Future classes in psychology and human sexuality will make frequent use of the video version to ponder the mystery of Kubrick's search.

Kubrick, an American who lived in England, frequently relied on material by other authors, even though he is the final writer for his films. Arthur Clarke's *2001* was already a well-known science-fiction work before Kubrick turned it into an exploration of the human soul; *Lolita* was a controversial novel by Vladimir Nabokov before Kubrick's adaptation. *Eyes Wide Shut* is based on *Traumnovella* (Dreamworks), by Austrian writer Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931)—little known today, but a major European literary figure at the beginning of the 20th century.

Vienna at the turn of the century was a place of great cultural creativity—of intellectual, artistic and moral experimentation. But this culture did not have a place for God. Absolute freedom was embraced, especially in sexual matters. Vienna at this time was also, of course, the home of Sigmund Freud, who, believing that God was decidedly dead, turned the search for human meaning inward. (Freud was an admirer of Schnitzler's work, especially those plays and novels that addressed dreams and the subconscious.)

Eyes Wide Shut evokes this time of disintegrating morals. Indeed, in spite of yellow New York taxis, modern Christmas decorations, and the contemporary decor of a luxury apartment that belongs to a modern New York doctor and his wife (played by Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman), Kubrick's film has the feel of 1900 Vienna, especially late at night when the doctor begins a journey in search of erotic meaning, culminating in a ritualized orgy in an isolated mansion.

So effectively does Kubrick plunge the viewer into a unique physical and emotional space—as he did in the deserted mansion in *The Shining*, or the spaceship in *2001*, or the war room in *Dr. Strangelove*—that it comes as something of a shock to hear characters refer to late-20th-century realities such as HIV and AIDS. Much of the dialogue and description in the film comes from Schnitzler's novella (in the original story the reference is not to AIDS but to a "sexually transmitted disease").

By turning to Schnitzler's Vienna, could Kubrick be suggesting that after 100 years our society remains bogged down in its quest for sexual freedom without commitment, a futile quest that still offers no surcease from the fear and isolation that drives that search?

Since Kubrick was notoriously unwilling to explain the mysteries at the heart of his films, he would probably not have given us a straight answer to that question. But we do have his final film for those willing to continue the search.