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Vincent Jaunas

PLAN

A Romantic Comedy / A Comedy of Remarriage
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TEXTE

1 Upon its release in 1999, *Eyes Wide Shut* baffled and frustrated quite a few critics and scholars who expected Stanley Kubrick's last work to be a daring exploration of eroticism, only to discover a film they considered a disappointingly prudish and conservative Erotic Thriller[1]. Others noted how the film evades any easy generic affiliation, like Peter Bradshaw, who writes in his review published in *The Guardian* that the film cannot be considered an Erotic Thriller, as it is "*sui generis* in modern Anglophone cinema: in a genre, if not a League, of its own, this genre being best described as Manhattan Porn Gothic"[2] – Bradshaw nonetheless argues the film's exploration of eroticism is disappointing. Tellingly, even Roger Ebert, who praises the film, notes that it feels like a patchwork of various film genres bound together[3]. In other words, the problematic initial reception of the film owes much to its troubling departure from the codes of the Erotic Thriller.

2 In this article, I would like to argue that *Eyes Wide Shut* constantly alternates between genres, builds up several layers of generic conventions only to deconstruct them all, in order to foster a troubled viewing experience. This generic superimposition constantly frustrates the viewer's horizon of expectation, therefore inducing a spectatorial feeling of loss which parallels the emotional state of the protagonist, Bill Hasford, who, following an initial ques-

tioning of his marital bliss, is confronted to the disruption of the foundations of his entire existence. This generic instability thus enables *Eyes Wide Shut* to question the moral and philosophical need for clarity that most narrative films rest upon, and to ultimately advocate an ethics of trouble.

A Romantic Comedy / A Comedy of Remarriage

3 The first sequence of *Eyes Wide Shut* suggests the film to be a quintessential Romantic Comedy, one that harks back to the heyday of Classical Hollywood and unmistakably evokes the works of Howard Hawks, Preston Sturges or Ernst Lubitsch. Indeed, the title of the latter's 1922 comedy, *Trouble in Paradise*, seems exceptionally well fitted to evoke *Eyes Wide Shut*[4]. As in many such comedies, the film displays a highly glamorous couple – played by the equally glamorous real-life star couple, Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise – living in a lavish Manhattan apartment and enjoying a life of upper-class socialites. As they attend a party given by a millionaire, Victor Ziegler (Sidney Pollack), the Lubitschian dimension of the film becomes explicit through the narrative and the visuals. The music and the champagne imbue the scenes with a slightly intoxicating quality, magnified by the warm hues and the glittering of the numerous Christmas lights, and emphasized both by the filming – the camera spins around the dancers – and the editing, as various long dissolves suggest the dreamlike quality of a party whose magnificence evokes the sophistication of Lubitsch's world. The narrative itself even echoes the Lubitschian trope of the European playboy, through the character of Victor Szavost, a cliché seducer from Hungary who flirts with Alice, while two models simultaneously flirt with her husband.

4 This double flirtation specifically connects *Eyes Wide Shut* to the subgenre of the Romantic Comedy famously analysed by Stanley Cavell, the Comedy of Remarriage.[5] As the couple begins to drift apart in the party, the viewer may expect the film to adopt the genre's typical narrative structure, a couple splitting up and then getting reunited, their love for each other reignited. In many regards, this generic pattern is indeed respected throughout the film, to the point that Sam Azulys even ventures to describe *Eyes Wide Shut* as the "latest

instance of a Comedy of Remarriage"[6]. However, from the very beginning of the film, several elements suggest that this initial generic pattern is but a superficial layer of the film, one bound to break open and lead the narrative astray.

5 Indeed, the very opening shot breaks one of the main conventions of the Comedies of Remarriage, a genre shaped by the censorship of the Hayes Code, as Alice undresses and Kidman's naked body is fully revealed. This shot imbues the first sequence with a promise of explicit sexuality that troubles the light, casual erotic tension that came to be associated with Comedies of Remarriage. Moreover, the film was openly advertised as an Erotic Thriller which would explore the sex life of its main characters – and of their actors – in a highly provocative way[7] so that the initial scenes may be viewed as nothing more than a façade that should soon give way to a more troubling – and perhaps also to a more enticing – exploration of eroticism. Moreover, sexuality is also announced as a latent source of anxiety during Ziegler's party, as Dr Hasford is asked by Ziegler to go up to a bathroom and help a prostitute who passed out from an overdose. Several shots displaying the woman's naked body slouched on a chair associate sex with death.

6 This troubling amount of explicit nudity thus goes against the conventions of the Comedies of Remarriage, by showing what is generically expected to remain off screen. Beyond nudity, *Eyes Wide Shut* also emphasises another aspect of marital relationships usually left off screen in Romantic Comedies: the mundane. Indeed, instead of cutting right to the party after Alice's undressing, the opening scene of the film lingers on the characters getting ready. In Alice's second scene, the woman is seen urinating as her husband enters the bathroom, so that in her first two scenes, the character becomes associated with both sexuality and triviality, two subjects generically expected to be left out.

7 By explicitly associating her with two offscreen, latent elements of Comedies of Remarriage, the film suggests Alice to be ill fitted for this Lubitschian façade. This implication is reinforced during the party: as she flirts with Szavost, the playboy cliché, the character appears aware of the illusory quality of the world she evolves in, thanks to Kidman's subtle Brechtian acting. Dennis Bingham argues that in this

scene, "even Alice's emotional responses are presented as signs, not as experiences for the audience to 'share' unproblematically"[8]. Through such a distancing performance, Kidman suggests her character can see through the façade of a world shaped by the restricting generic patterns of the Comedies of Remarriage, and offers a theatrical, slightly ironic rendition of the role expected from her, as if aware that such an act may not hold for long.

8 Bill, on the other hand, is initially characterized by his blindness: whereas most of the film is seen through the character's eyes, Bill's point of view is conspicuously absent in Alice's initial nude scene, suggesting the husband fails to see his wife. As the couple is getting ready, the character then fails to find his wallet, and in the bathroom Alice, shortly after urinating next to her husband, blames him for not looking at her after she asked him about her hair. Bill's eyes remain shifty throughout the whole apartment scene. Once in Ziegler's party, on the other hand, he fixes his eyes and stares intensely at all the people he talks to. Cruise's performance thus suggests the character's eyes are only able to see in an environment as surreally magnificent as this one – the very environment Alice treats as fake and superficial. When alone with Alice in their apartment, Bill fails to see his wife precisely as she becomes associated with the coarse and realistic elements left offscreen in Romantic Comedies – nudity, bodily needs and triviality are not part of Bill's perceptive world.

9 As a result, the glamorous Lubitschian setting becomes associated with an idealised surface world, a world hiding more troublesome depths. The film's generic affiliation with the Romantic Comedy appears to translate Bill's idealised representation of himself, of his marriage and of his reality[9]; but while the character's tendency to blind himself by looking only at a Hollywood-like reality is firmly established, his viewpoint contrasts with the many jarring elements the viewers are invited to see.

10 Unsurprisingly, therefore, it is Alice who initiates the film's first generic shift that leads *Eyes Wide Shut* to lean towards the genre of the Erotic Thriller. As the couple is in bed discussing Ziegler's party, an argument breaks out while they evoke their parallel flirtations with other guests. Though its premises of jealousy may be expected from a Comedy of Remarriage, this argument then leads Alice to tell

Bill about a former fantasy of hers: years ago, Alice saw a Navy officer to whom she was so attracted that she fantasized about leaving her husband and her kid for him. This revelation leads Bill to a series of nocturnal flirtations with other women.

The Erotic Thriller

11 Although the Erotic Thriller represents the film's most explicit generic affiliation, it is a highly problematic one, notably due to a lack of sex scenes: Bill never ends up cheating on his wife. Sexuality is almost absent from a film which aims at exploring frustration rather than excitement. Whereas *Eyes Wide Shut* was advertised as a daring exploration of Cruise and Kidman's love life, the only time the couple has an intercourse occurs at the beginning of the film (between Ziegler's party and Alice's confession) and, following a teasing gaze of Alice breaking the fourth wall through a mirror shot, it is left off screen, as an abrupt cut to black invites the viewers to reflect on what they have been forbidden to see. In addition, Alice is shown naked in two brief scenes. The first one occurs when she undresses in the very first shot of the film, only to be abruptly hidden by a title card which prevents the viewer's scopophilia – especially the male viewer's scopophilia – from being satisfied. Soon after, Alice is briefly seen dressing up during a rapid montage comparing her day to day routine with Bill's: once again, the brevity of the shot, unannounced by any narrative clue, tends to take the viewers by surprise as one barely has time to notice Kidman's body. Alice dressing answers the first shot of her undressing, as a way to playfully signal the audience that from now on, they will not be allowed to see her naked anymore, thus frustrating their expectations. Ironically, therefore, erotic images only appear at the very beginning of the film and Bill's wanderings, though closely associated with the genre of the Erotic Thriller through the character's many flirtations and apparent quest for an extramarital affair – may be felt as a frustrating let-down.

12 In her study of the Erotic Thriller, Linda Williams views these frustrations as "generic failures":

> *Eyes Wide Shut* promises treats in its marketing which it fails to deliver through its diegesis [...] the film itself stops short in its

> presentation of sex [...] *Eyes Wide Shut*, as its title suggests, presents its voyeurism [and] its sexual quest [...] in a way that is indistinguishable from lower-end softcore, and marries them to a narrative of intrigue, murder and sexual power which has been more extensively handled in much cheaper films [10].

13 Whereas Williams tends to echo the film's early critics who blamed *Eyes Wide Shut* as a failed occurrence of the genre, one might argue that the film's relationship with the Erotic Thriller is best understood by comparing its plot to the prototypical generic narrative that the scholar herself summarizes in her study. According to her, "the classic opening narrative [of Erotic Thrillers] runs thus: a neglected wife, some years into her lousy marriage, is advised by her female friend to find satisfaction with some new blood. Early scenes in which wives fail to get their husbands to come to bed are legion". In many regards, *Eyes Wide Shut* echoes this prototypical narrative: Bill's lack of attention to his wife is suggested by his incapacity to truly look at her. If the couple does go to bed together, Alice's lingering look in the mirror suggests a lack of emotional investment, or at least a dissatisfaction, with her love life. However, this proximity only stresses the film's specificity: had it sought to be a traditional Erotic Thriller, it would have followed Alice's adventure with the Navy officer, with Bill's desire for revenge looming in the horizon. In *Eyes Wide Shut*, this plot is both virtual and belonging to the distant past. Instead of focusing on Alice's lustful desires, the film centres on the failing husband, Bill, now haunted by this Erotic-Thriller-that-could-have-been.

14 The haunting dimension of this virtual potentiality is expressed through a recurring mental image displaying Bill's way of imagining his wife having sex with an officer – an image which first appears right after Alice's confession and therefore initiates Bill's sexual quest and the film's shift towards the Erotic Thriller. With the *cliché* representation of the Navy man dressed in his white uniform, the blue hue of the image and its slight slow motion, these shots bear all the narrative and aesthetic characteristics of a cheap softcore Erotic Thriller, thus underlining the fact that the genre lies dormant in *Eyes Wide Shut*, as a troubling, underlying presence shaping Bill's imagination and destroying his paradisiacal self-representation of himself and of his marriage, thus triggering a highly disquieting sexual quest.

The generic conventions of the Erotic Thriller seem to emanate from Bill's mind[11] – the character can only understand his wife's story by invoking such generic tropes – but they end up shaping his reality (and, consequently, the film itself) as Bill now appears to perceive his surrounding as the setting of an Erotic Thriller and acts out accordingly. Bill's nightly wanderings depict the character's attempt to come to terms with the troubling incursion of a fantasy reminding him his life might have resembled that of the secondary character of some Erotic Thriller, an incursion that disrupts his previous self-representation as the star of a glamorous Comedy.

15 Unsurprisingly, therefore, his adventures betray a heightened anxiety regarding sex. All the women Bill encounters appear desperately eager to sleep with him, but each attempt is cut short by an exterior event – a phone call from Alice, the intervention of a third party – so that the narrative itself, through a mixture of enticement followed by repression, seems to reflect Bill's sexual anxiety. Whereas, as Williams explains, Erotic Thrillers all associate sex with some external danger, the first half of *Eyes Wide Shut* internalises such associations[12] as a sense of foreboding pervades the film while the protagonist faces no exterior threat, so that it is the possibility of an extramarital sexual encounter that becomes an ontologically violent element, an element that threatens Bill's entire worldview. Although the film leaves various interpretative paths open as to the reasons leading Bill to enter upon a sexual quest of his own, it may thus notably be understood as an attempt by the character to gain control over the existential threat posed by extramarital affairs. In addition, Bill's now anxious relation to sexuality opens up a subtext of gender troubles: his sexual orientations are questioned several times, notably when the character is harassed in the street by a group of young students calling him a 'faggot', so that Bill's previously assertive mode of phallic masculinity appears to have been threatened by the realisation that his wife had fantasies for another man. Tom Cruise's introverted, withdrawn interpretation evokes the anxieties of a character unaware of how to act now that his belief in his dominant position has been questioned; a fact all the more apparent as Bill constantly faces older, more assertive characters who embody a more powerful kind of phallic masculinity.[13] Both these aspects thus reveal how, by displacing the generic expectations of the Erotic Thriller onto the adven-

tures of a side character – the discarded husband – whose own evolving perception of reality seems to be at the core of the film's generic affiliation, the strategy of generic troubling developed in *Eyes Wide Shut* fosters a viewing experience which echoes the character's own troubled state.

16 As the film sets out to explore the impact of this fantasy perceived as an Erotic Thriller in Bill's psyche, the *mise en scène* becomes fully subjective. As Mario Falsetto points out, everything one sees and hears following Alice's revelation may be thought to be filtered by Bill's point of view, or may even translate a dream of the character[14]. The dreamlike quality of the filming and of the narrative, full of strange symbolisms, surprising twists and confusing coincidences, thus creates a state of uncertainty (is it a dream or objective reality?) which, in itself, reflects Bill's troubled state, as the virtuality represented by the Erotic Thriller narrative has collapsed upon his previously idealized perception of reality. Even though they have been spurred by jealousy, Bill's uncertainties therefore spill beyond the realms of sexual and gender identities, and lead the character to enter a world of absolute epistemological uncertainty, as underlined by the orgy scene.

17 In many regards, the orgy acts as the epitome of the film's problematic generic association with the Erotic Thriller. After several encounters with women which failed to lead to adultery, Bill goes to see Nick, an old friend of his whom he had chanced upon during Ziegler's party. Nick, a pianist, tells him about mysterious orgies full of secretive men in disguise and stunningly beautiful prostitutes, at which he plays the piano blindfolded. Bill manages to obtain the password for this night's orgy, rents a mask and a costume and blends in as one of the guests. He attends to a ritual ceremony during which prostitutes get undressed and pick a guest as their partner for the night. The protagonist eventually gets picked by a woman who advises him to flee as he has been recognised as an intruder. This woman is eventually taken away by another guest, and Bill freely explores the mansion, watching various sexual acts being performed for the benefits of the guests. Eventually, Bill is recognised as an intruder, cornered by the members of this mysterious group, and is only allowed to escape thanks to the intervention of the prostitute, apparently willing to sacrifice herself so he can live.

18 Even though Bill himself still does not manage to commit adultery, the two core elements of the Erotic Thriller previously missing are finally included. First, Bill now appears to face actual dangers, as he seems to risk his life by intruding upon this mysterious sect. In addition, the nudity and softcore pornography, so frustratingly absent until then, are now overabundant, and the viewers are free to gorge their eyes on a seemingly unlimited amount of naked body parts and sexual performances. However, such an overabundance of obviously staged acts destroys all the erotic potential of the scene, and turns the orgy into the nightmarish climax of an anxious relation to sexuality. The frightening masked watchers act as deeply unsettling mirror images of both Bill and the viewers, thus preventing "the denegation of the presence of the viewer's gaze" which Christian Metz argues to be essential for filmic scopophilia to function properly[15].

19 During the orgy, the excess of visibility of nude bodies goes hand in hand with a dissimulation of the characters' faces, which seems to turn Bill's focus away from sexuality and towards the desire to find out the identity of everyone involved: the character's stare rests as much on the mysterious masked watchers as on the naked women. The viewers' own hermeneutic curiosity may certainly be excited by the watchers' secret identities, all the more so as the expected eroticism fails to deliver any satisfaction, thus enabling our focus to shift elsewhere. The mysterious sect appears incredibly rich and powerful, yet the identity of its members remains unknown, while even the identity of the woman sacrificing herself for Bill is a mystery, so that one may wonder why this woman was so intent on helping the protagonist. Alongside these identity-related mysteries, the very meaning of each and everyone's action becomes excessively opaque: the sect's esoteric rituals and the characters' behaviours seem to withhold a mysterious signification that both Bill and the viewers cannot grasp. After Bill leaves the orgy, most of the narrative focuses on the character's attempt to shed light on these various mysteries, thus confirming that the orgy itself has marked a generic shift towards the Paranoid Thriller[16].

The Paranoid Thriller

20 In his book *Projecting Paranoia*, Ray Pratt argues that Paranoid Thrillers, films in which a protagonist believes that obscure forces are acting against him, reflect "the emergence of the postmodern situation, with its loss of sense of what is 'true' and 'real', as well as the erosion of traditional liberal notions of citizenship, individuality and agency. Conspiracy theory is often symptomatic of a more pervasive anxiety among individuals concerning their ability to control their lives".[17] In *Eyes Wide Shut*, the generic shift towards the Paranoid Thriller reflects two main anxieties which, although they may symbolically relate to Alice's revelation, are narratively distant from it, so that the story seems to have drifted far away from its starting point.

21 First, the world now seems to be controlled by mysterious forces out of the character's reach. After the orgy, Bill investigates on the sect. All along his way, however, the latter appears one step ahead of him, aware of all his actions and capable of stopping him at every turn. Not only does Bill appear spied on, the sect seems to be endowed with a superhuman capacity to predict his decisions: indeed, as soon as the character returns to the mansion where the orgy had taken place, a threatening messenger appears and gives him a letter demanding him to stop his investigation. Since the messenger brings the letter mere seconds after Bill's arrival, one may wonder how the sect managed to guess his coming. The reach of the sect seems beyond human limits, so that everything surrounding Bill potentially becomes part of a superhuman conspiracy to stop him. Bill's loss of agency is therefore absolute, the source of both a hermeneutic and a metaphysical anxiety, as the world now seems secretly ruled by forces that go not only beyond an individual's reach, but even beyond reason.

22 Such an anxiety is correlated to a second one, more closely centred on troubled intersubjectivity. Every character now seems potentially connected to the sect, so that one's true identity appears ontologically mysterious. Upon Bill's quest to discover the identity of the woman who saved him, the protagonist reads a press article relating the death of a model from a drug overdose. Suspecting she may be his saviour from the orgy, Bill goes to see her body at the morgue.

There, an attentive viewer may recognize the woman who initially overdosed in Ziegler's bathroom, but could not know whether this woman was indeed Bill's saviour. As Bill slowly bends towards the corpse, a slow zoom brings the viewer closer as well. This shot epitomizes how the Other's face has become an impenetrable mask, one whose opacity may, beyond the mere issue of recognition, initiate a deep metaphysical anxiety as to the insurmountable distance separating an individual from anyone else.

23 If the representation of such deep metaphysical doubt fits with the generic shift leading the narrative towards the Paranoid Thriller (similar anxieties are to be found in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* by Don Siegel (1953) for instance), the sequence weaves a strong symbolic connection with the troubles that originated with Alice's revelation, as it becomes apparent that due to this revelation, Bill cannot recognize his wife anymore – in the midst of his paranoid adventure, he comes home and sees Alice acting as an ideal mother, while the character's fantasy of adultery is played out in the soundtrack. This "audiovisual dissonance", to use Michel Chion's terminology [18], underlines the fact that Bill cannot recognize Alice as two different women now seem to coexist within the same body. In other words, the narrative arc connected to the Paranoid Thriller (Bill's confrontation to the sect) somehow echoes the film's other narrative arc initially developed as a Comedy of Remarriage and then turned into an Erotic Thriller (Bill's marital troubles), even though those two parts are narratively distant [19].

24 The generic confusion entailed by this conflation of two distinct narrative arcs is enhanced by the fact that the viewer is drawn to experience a metaphysical doubt similar to Bill's, as the protagonist himself appears more and more enigmatic, thus preventing any unproblematic identification: Cruise's underplayed performance underlines the opacity of a character who, even though he is the clear focaliser of the film, never reveals his own subjectivity. As Michel Chion summarizes, Bill wears a mask during the orgy, but once he takes it off, the viewer cannot see anything more. [20] The character's opacity adds an extra layer of generic instability, as some of his actions jar with the expected behaviour of a character fighting against an obscure conspiracy. For instance, whereas the protagonists of such archetypal Paranoid Thrillers as John Frankenheimer's

The Mandchurian Candidate (1962) or Alan Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1975) do not rest until they have either defeated the conspiracy or have been defeated by it, Bill, in the midst of his investigation, takes the time to visit Domino, a prostitute he had almost slept with during one of his early frustrated attempts, and even brings her cakes, as though utterly oblivious of the mystery he is facing. Upon finding out she is absent, he then flirts with her roommate in a surprisingly aggressive fashion for a man who had thus far been a very passive character.

25 Bill's unpredictability, combined with the permanence of a highly eroticized atmosphere – as though the Erotic Thriller subpart still permeated through Bill's paranoid investigation – breaks away from the conventions of the Paranoid Thriller by merging together unconnected narrative threads which further trouble the film's own identity. In the midst of these unstable grounds, the film reaches an abrupt ending, as all these various episodes are brought to an end within the space of about fifteen minutes. Let us now envision how this ending enables Kubrick to develop an ethics of trouble, while providing a metafilmic reflection on cinema's tendency for narrative and semantic clarity and closure.

An Ethics of Trouble

26 While still at the morgue, Bill is summoned by Ziegler, who then reveals he is part of the sect, and was asked by the other members to convince Bill to stop his investigation. Ziegler then provides Bill with a reassuring narrative which depicts the sect as a less frightening group than it may have seemed: he argues that the entire ritual was staged so as to scare Bill into a submissive silence. As for Bill's savior, she was not harmed. The dead prostitute Bill went to see was unconnected to these events, and just happened to overdose at the same time. Far from a superhuman evil society, the members of this group may, after all, be nothing more than powerful lewd men intent on protecting their anonymity. Ziegler's explanation thus acts as a *Deus Ex Machina* supposedly bringing the many mysteries of the plot to a close. Ziegler seems to self-consciously act the part when claiming the death of the overdosed prostitute was an accident, as he playfully quotes a stereotypical statement liable to provide closure in a

detective story: "Her door was locked from the inside. The police are happy. End of story". However, it is a highly unsatisfying closure. Bill himself clearly does not believe him. Even if one decides to trust Ziegler's version, this narrative does not explain the many mysterious coincidences, echoes and digressions that were part of the paranoid atmosphere.

27 Unsatisfying as it may be, this mock conclusion does put an end to the film's digression towards the Paranoid Thriller, as Bill then comes home and the conspiracy is utterly discarded. The narrative centers back on the couple's marriage. Bill sees his orgy mask lying by Alice's side on the bed, which leads him to burst into tears and to tell Alice the whole story. From then on, the threat of adultery which animated the Erotic Thriller narrative arc is completely left aside as well. [21] The last scene shows the couple Christmas shopping for their daughter, a familial setting which jars with the exploration of the shady New York night life that had encapsulated the film's flirtation with the Erotic Thriller. The well-lit department store, filled with warm colors and toys, unmistakably evokes the original setting of Ziegler's party, so that the viewer may expect the ending to echo the beginning and at least provide a closure adapted to the tropes of Comedies of Remarriage. Just as in George Cukor's *Philadelphia Story* (1940) for instance, the discarded husband does manage to patch things up with his wife. However, the circular structure of the film does not imply that the couple will now go back to a self-blinding retreat in an idealized façade world: as Bill promises to love Alice "forever", thus paving the way for a fairytale narrative closure, his wife stops him and argues she is afraid of that word. Instead, in the film's final line, she urges the couple to "fuck" as soon as possible.

28 In so doing, Alice points at the way *Eyes Wide Shut* offers a happy ending paradoxically devoid of all closure. Even though it ends with a situation typical of Comedies of Remarriage (the spouses are ready for a new start), the various layers of uncertainty opened up by the various generic shifts remain wide open. As Laura Mulvey suggests, "there are two grand conventions of narrative closure, devices that allow the drive of a story to return to a stasis: death or marriage" [22]. In *Eyes Wide Shut*, the expected Remarriage does not provide an "ever after" kind of stability, while the death of the prostitute, far from providing closure, looms large as a narrative opening, the kind of

deaths that would rather initiate an investigation than close a narrative.

29 The couple must find a way to remain united in spite of the epistemologically unstable world they now evolve in, and even thanks to it, as self-awareness may prevent them from falling back into a world of certainties they now know to be illusions. Likewise, the viewer must strive to find satisfaction in a happy ending that does not solve the film's generic troubles, and even provides an ultimate reminder of its attempt at generic disorientation, since Alice's word "fuck", just before the end credit, reminds us that the expected Erotic Thriller didn't take place, as the hope of seeing an explicit intercourse involving the two stars – a hope so actively fanned by the film's promotion – will now be frustrated forever. Three consecutive unsatisfying conclusions reflexively indicate that *Eyes Wide Shut* explicitly avoids wrapping up its narrative in a neat ending providing both narrative and semantic closure, in order for the film to point at the epistemological uncertainty which one is invited to consider as inherent to the human condition, in spite of one's tendency to blind oneself from this fact, as epitomized by Bill. By failing to provide closure to the three generic structures developed throughout the film, the ending thus points at the frustratingly limited scope of a worldview – Bill's – which, by seeing the world through the prism of generic patterns, fails to embrace its complexity[23]. Only by being kept away from the temptation to view his life through an artificially simplistic narrative prism, thanks to his wife's watchfulness, can Bill hope to save his marriage. Bill's situation therefore sheds light on the film's metafilmic reflection: by problematically merging together three distinct generic patterns, *Eyes Wide Shut* fosters a troubling viewing experience which reflexively indicates films' tendency to simplify a complex reality by subsuming it into an artificially coherent set of generic conventions.

30 The visuals of the last scene beautifully convey the film's reflection, as it introduces the first shallow focus of the entire film. Everything around the characters looks like a blurry shimmering of lights and colors, whereas the photography of *Eyes Wide Shut* is, in every other scene, characterized by constant depth of field and total image sharpness. As the characters attempt to reunite within a world that now appears blurry, *Eyes Wide Shut* suggests one should open one's

eyes to the troubled depths our existence rests upon, and that – consequently – films ought not to offer an illusory sense of clarity by inscribing life within a clear-cut narrative, ending in a reassuring closure. Therefore, the film's strategy of generic troubling, far from the playfulness which characterizes the mixing of film genres in the postmodern era, asks the audience to accept misdirection and even frustration as a necessary part of their cinematic experience – implying semantic closure to be just another attempt at using fiction to hide the ontologically troubled condition of mankind behind the veneer of an artificially ordered paradise.

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Dijana Metlić, "Stanley Kubrick and Hieronymus Bosch: *In the Garden of Earthly Delights*", *in* Jean-François Baillon and Vincent Jaunas (dir.), *Stanley Kubrick: Nouveaux Horizons*, Bordeaux, Essais, hors-série n° 4, 2018, pp. 105-123, https://journals.openedition.org/essais/633 (last accessed 01/01/2020).

Christian Metz, *Le Signifiant imaginaire : psychanalyse et cinéma*, Paris, 10/18, 1977, p. 82.

Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, London, Reaktion Books, 2006, p. 71.

Ray Pratt, *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film*, Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2001, p. 01.

Lucy Scholes and Richard Martin, "Archived Desires: *Eyes Wide Shut*", *in* Tatjana Ljujic, Peter Krämer and Richard Daniels (dir.), *Stanley Kubrick: New Perspectives*, London, Black Dog Publishing, 2015, pp. 342-355.

Paul Tatara, "*Eyes Wide Shut*: all undressed with no place to go", 15 July 2019, http://edition.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Movies/9907/15/review.eyeswideshut/ (last accessed 30 December 2019).

Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary America*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005, p. 398.

NOTES

1 For instance, Paul Tatara writes for CNN that "Kubrick took so long to make his films, and re-shot individual scenes so many times, that a spontaneous erection would seem beyond the realm of his imagination. Unfortunately for "Eyes Wide Shut" (and for the few critical audience members the film will actually draw), Kubrick never really loosened up." Paul Tatara, "*Eyes Wide Shut*: all undressed with no place to go". CNN, 15 July 2019. http://edition.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Movies/9907/15/review.eyeswideshut/ (last accessed 30 December 2019).

In his review for *Libération*, Philippe Garnier – who nonetheless recognizes the fact that Kubrick's films tend to be reevaluated over time – writes that "the issue [with *Eyes Wide Shut*] is that Kubrick's idea of debauchery and depravation evokes a softcore Andrew Blake flick". Garnier, Philippe. « Le dernier Kubrick. Le chef-d'oeuvre Hard attendu *Eyes Wide Shut* laisse un

on.fr/culture/1999/07/12/le-dernier-kubrick-a-premiere-vue-vu-a-los-angeles-avant-sa-sortie-americaine-le-16-juillet-le-chef-_277862 (last accessed 30 December 2019).

2 Peter Bradshaw, "*Eyes Wide Shut*". *The Guardian*, 10 September 1999. https://www.theguardian.com/film/1999/sep/10/3 (last accessed 31 December 2019).

3 Roger Ebert writes that the film is "like an erotic daydream [which also] has the structure of a thriller, with the possibility that conspiracies and murders have taken place. It also resembles a nightmare [...] The reconciliation at the end of the film is the one scene that doesn't work [...] its loose ends shouldn't try to tidy up". Ebert, Roger. "*Eyes Wide Shut*". *RogerEbert.com*, 16 July 1999. https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/eyes-wide-shut-1999 (last accessed 30 December 2019).

4 Various scholars have noted that Bill's exploration of the mysterious orgy evokes a journey through hell. In a 2018 article, Dijana Metlić elaborates on executive producer Jan Harlan's assertion that the orgy was meant to evoke a "Hieronymus Bosch type of Hell" and compares *Eyes Wide Shut* with Bosch's famous triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1510). She argues that the paradisiacal first sequence evokes Bosch's panel depicting the garden of Eden, while the other two panels (*Humankind Before the Flood* and *Hell*) echo the film's ulterior events. Therefore, the couple's troubles come to evoke the biblical Fall of Man. Dijana Metlić, "Stanley Kubrick and Hieronymus Bosch: *In the Garden of Earthly Delights*". *Stanley Kubrick : Nouveaux Horizons*, edited by Jean-François Baillon and Vincent Jaunas, *Essais*, hors-série n° 4, 2018, pp. 105-123. https://journals.openedition.org/essais/633 (last accessed 01/01/2020). In this article, I will argue that such an interpretation is pertinent insofar as one recognizes the initial heavenliness of the couple's situation to be illusory, since the disruption of this initial illusion is necessary for the film to develop an ethics of trouble.

5 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Harvard University Press, 1981.

6 Sam Azulys, *Stanley Kubrick: une Odyssée Philosophique*. Editions de la Transparence, 2011, pp. 321-322. Azulys argues that *Eyes Wide Shut* not only follows the genre's narrative structure, it is also in tune with its philosophical content, as analyzed by Stanley Cavell. Indeed, Kubrick's film may also be seen as fostering an "acknowledgement of the skeptical condition of mankind" (*Ibid.*).

7 For an analysis of the way the film's advertisement campaign led the viewers to expect a highly erotic film, see Lucy Scholes and Richard Martin, "Archived Desires: *Eyes Wide Shut*". *Stanley Kubrick: New Perspectives*, edited by Tatjana Ljujic, Peter Krämer and Richard Daniels. Black Dog Publishing, 2015, pp. 342-355. The authors argue that the film's publicity team misled the public, and is ultimately responsible for its poor reception, even though Warner Bros. stated its team followed the advertisement campaign that Kubrick himself had planned.

8 Dennis Bingham, "Kidman, Cruise and Kubrick". *More than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance*, edited by Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson and Frank Tomasulon. Wayne State University Press, 2004, p. 261.

9 Many of Kubrick's films similarly rely on generic conventions in order to depict the subjectivity of characters whose perception of reality appears to be shaped by Hollywood tropes. In *A Clockwork Orange*, the character of Alex is seen imagining biblical episodes in a mental image which shows his imagination to have been shaped by American biblical movies. "I thought Alex would have imagined it that way", Kubrick told Michel Ciment. Michel Ciment, "Kubrick on *A Clockwork Orange*", 1971. http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/interview.aco.html (last accessed 15/11/2020). In *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), the soldiers fighting in Vietnam turn the country into a Hollywood set as they project their Western-filled worldview onto their reality. Cf. Vincent Jaunas, "We'll let the Gooks Play the Indians: The Endurance of the Frontier Myth in the Hyperreality of *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987)", in *Miranda, vol.* 18, 2019. https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/18912 (last accessed 15/11/2020).

10 Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary America.* Indiana University Press, 2005, p. 398.

11 One should note that although the film's association with the Erotic Thriller stems from a mental image, the earlier presence of a passed-out prostitute in Ziegler's bathroom, as well as the two scenes showing Nicole Kidman undressing, prevent the film from easily dismissing the following Erotic Thriller-like events as mere figments of Bill's fantasies, disconnected from all diegetic reality. The prostitute was objectively at Ziegler's, thus implying that the world is indeed filled with sordid lustful affairs – but Bill did not see it that way then, as he still viewed himself as part of a Glamorous comedy; indeed, Bill only looked at the naked, overdosed character with a detached, oblivious medical stare. Likewise, the early representation

of Alice's nude body suffuses eroticism into the diegesis from the start, but such eroticism initially does not determine the filmic structure as it is disregarded by the protagonist, who fails to look at his wife. It takes Alice's revelation for Bill to start focusing on such elements and viewing the world through the prism of the Erotic Thriller, thus turning the film – shaped by the protagonist's viewpoint – into a problematic occurrence of this genre. Rather than a fully subjective fantasy, the film's shift towards the Erotic Thriller thus seems to translate an evolution in the protagonist's viewpoint. Such a use of generic tropes seemingly arising from the character's own viewpoint participates in the film's discourse on the way narratives may shape one's perception of reality, as analyzed further at the end of this article.

12 The second half of the film – following the orgy – does display an exterior element of danger which may seem to fit the generic expectations of the Erotic Thriller more faithfully. However, we shall see that at this point, the film strays away from this generic pattern to explore another one.

13 For an analysis of Tom Cruise's acting in *Eyes Wide Shut*, see Vincent Jaunas, "Acting Out of the World: The Distancing Underplaying of the Main Actors in 2001: A *Space Odyssey* and *Eyes Wide Shut*". *Cinergie: Il Cinema et le altre Arti*, n° 12, 2017, pp. 73-82. For an analysis of sexuality in *Eyes Wide Shut*, see Celestino Deleyto, "1999. A Closet Odyssey: Sexual Discourses in *Eyes Wide Shut*". *Atlantis vol.* 28, n° 01, 2006, pp. 29-43.

14 Mario Falsetto, *Stanley Kubrick: A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*. Praeger, 2001, pp. 130-141.

15 Christian Metz, *Le Signifiant imaginaire : psychanalyse et cinéma*. 10/18, 1977, p. 82 (my translation).

16 Once again, this new generic shift seems to emanate from a change in Bill's subjective perception, which reroutes the film's whole generic structure. The objectively enigmatic nature of the orgy is already established prior to Bill's visit – notably by Nick – but it is Bill's shifting interest, from sex to the resolution of this mystery, which connects the subsequent filmic events to the genre of the Paranoid Thriller. The fact that this new generic affiliation stems from Bill's new perception of reality is emphasized by the film's circular structure. Various scenes parallel earlier ones – Bill revisits the costume shop and Domino's apartment; he wanders through the streets and looks for Nick. These familiar settings, which in the first part were filled with the promise of sexual encounters, now exude a sense of dread and ontological uncertainty that translates Bill's altered viewpoint. Here, too,

one may wonder whether it is Bill who perceives his situation through the prism of filmic conventions, in this case through the tropes of Paranoid Thrillers, thus turning his life – and the film – into one.

17 Ray Pratt, *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film.* University Press of Kansas, 2001, p. 1.

18 Chion defines audiovisual dissonances as « an effect of diegetic contradiction between a specific sound and a specific image ». Michel Chion, *Un art sonore, le cinéma : histoire, esthétique, poétique*. Cahiers du cinéma, 2003, p. 419 (my translation).

19 One might argue that from this point onwards, *Eyes Wide Shut* explores the skeptical condition of mankind, in the sense developed by Stanley Cavell: Bill is indeed confronted to the distance separating two human beings. The philosophical foundations of the Comedy of Remarriage, according to Cavell, therefore become manifest in Kubrick's film, but only through the detour of the generic conventions of the Paranoid Thriller, following a previous detour towards the Erotic Thriller.

20 Michel Chion, *Stanley Kubrick : L'humain, ni plus ni moins.* Cahiers du cinéma, 2005, p. 506.

21 Celestino Deleyto notes how many critics felt dissatisfied with a "happy ending in which the couple get back together for no apparent reason". Celestino Deleyto, *Op. cit.*, 2006, p. 31.

22 Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image.* Reaktion Books, 2006, p. 71.

23 In so doing, *Eyes Wide Shut* sheds light on Stanley Kubrick's (known to inscribe all his films within specific generic traditions) relation to film genres: the aesthetic and narrative conventions provided by film genres risk fostering a simplistic framework through which to comprehend the world, but dialoging with such conventions enables films to effectively reflect upon mankind's difficulty to face the complexity of the human condition.

RÉSUMÉS

English

More than twenty-five years after its release, Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* remains one of the least acclaimed films of the director, despite his own assertion that it was his finest film ever. Advertised as an erotic thriller, *Eyes Wide Shut* has tended to be seen as a let-down, a

strangely puritan reflection on sexual anxiety from the director of the much more explicit A *Clockwork Orange*. I will argue that this dissatisfaction arises from the gap between some viewers' expectation of a highly provocative, sex-filled work, and the frustration of all viewers' expectations sought by Kubrick. Indeed, though Bill Harford's journey stems from a marital crisis which ignites psychosexual anxieties, such a premise leads him to experience a global state of unrest which evolves beyond marriage and sex: sexual and gender anxieties bring forth a cognitive and a metaphysical crisis. Given the highly subjective quality of the film, which brings the viewer to experience the world as filtered by the main character's consciousness, *Eyes Wide Shut* thus becomes a highly troubling viewing experience indeed. Whereas many expected erotic thrills, the film frustrates the spectator's scopophilia, as the expected pleasure derived from watching Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman's love life is thwarted, and instead seeks to produce hermeneutic and sensory bewilderment. I argue that the film explores the various modalities of trouble to ultimately develop an ethics of unrest.

Français

Plus de vingt-cinq ans après sa sortie, *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999) demeure l'un des films les moins acclamés du cinéaste, en dépit du fait que Kubrick lui-même le considérait comme son chef d'œuvre. Promu comme un thriller érotique, le film en a déçu plus d'un, qui y ont vu une réflexion sur l'anxiété sexuelle étonnamment puritaine de la part du réalisateur à l'origine du très explicite *Orange Mécanique* (1971). Cet article suggère que la médiocre réception du film résulte d'un décalage entre les attentes d'une part du public, et le projet filmique de troubler les spectateurs. En effet, bien que les tribulations du protagoniste Bill Harford résultent d'une crise maritale provoquant des troubles psycho-sexuels, le film développe, à partir de ces prémisses, une exploration plus radicale du trouble. Celui-ci dépasse le cadre des anxiétés sexuelles et se transforme en crise cognitive et métaphysique. Au vu de la qualité hautement subjective du film, qui montre le monde diégétique tel que perçu et déformé par les perceptions de Bill, *Eyes Wide Shut* devient, de fait, une expérience filmique troublante. Là où nombre de spectateurs et spectatrices souhaitaient se délecter d'un spectacle érotique, le film frustre toute satisfaction voyeuriste et cherche à susciter un état de confusion herméneutique et sensorielle. Cet article suggère qu'explorer les diverses modalités de cette confusion permet *in fine* à *Eyes Wide Shut* de développer une véritable éthique du trouble.

INDEX

Mots-clés

Eyes Wide Shut, Kubrick (Stanley), thriller érotique, comédie de remariage, thriller paranoïaque

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