

THE PORTRAYAL OF THE GAZE THROUGH *EYES WIDE SHUT*

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The film *Eyes Wide Shut*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, was released in 1999. Although the film received very mixed reviews, it has been widely recognised as a *cult* film. This paper explores the role of the gaze in the film. Masks and mirrors are recurring symbols throughout the film and their use is also analysed here because of their importance in the portrayal of all that is visually significant in *Eyes Wide Shut*. Laura Mulvey's theory on the gaze is based on psychoanalytic theory and was chosen because it has been very influential in the area of Film Studies. There are different perspectives and ways of looking and seeing that are defined and discussed in the context of *Eyes Wide Shut*. Also relevant is Jacques Lacan's description of the 'mirror stage' which explains self-identification in early development and this paper will attempt to apply this to the film.

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In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey brings together four principle elements: "Hollywood, psychoanalysis, feminism and the avant-garde" (2009: xi). Her discussion of the politics of the gaze draws from the Freudian concept of *scopophilia* which is the pleasure of seeing and of being seen. She takes up Freud's perspective of the perceived failure on the part of women based on the lack of a penis and on the effect of female 'castration'. Mulvey goes on to talk about "fetishistic scopophilia" (2009: 22), which builds the image of female beauty for an audience or spectator, thereby compensating for men's anxiety related to fear of castration. Scopophilia, taken to its extreme, results in narcissism. If this phenomenon is perverted, the result is voyeurism. Mulvey's work revolved around the cinema of the 1930s and 1950s in which one important focus was the female icon. The female figure became an object of gaze. The cinema puts the male spectator in the dark as the observer and the woman on the screen as the object. Mulvey's definition of scopophilia suggests that the cinema, in contrast with the theatre, perverts the spectator because now the observation is no longer mutual but rather one-sided.

In the opening scenes of *Eyes Wide Shut*, Alice Harford, the female lead, is undressing alone and is left wearing nothing but her black high-heels. These are powerful images for the spectator and provoke the pleasure of seeing, in this case, a beautiful woman in a position of suggestive vulnerability. As Mulvey says, in film the woman is seen as the 'other', as an object not a subject: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (2009: 19). The spectator is placed in the position of *voyeur*. Looking and seeing, gazing and observing are ways of taking on positions of power and of objectifying what is being looked at, gazed at, and observed. The art critic, John Berger writes: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only the relations of men to women, but the relation of women to

themselves" (1972: 53). He further says that "Women are depicted in a quite different way from men –not because the feminine is different from the masculine– but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him" (1972: 64). Additionally, Celestino Deleyto states that "*Eyes Wide Shut* criticises, while visually reinforcing, men's limited vision of women as sexual objects" (2006: 41).

In her work, Mulvey describes three kinds of gaze: the camera's viewpoint which involves the camera operators and the images they capture; the spectator's viewpoint, which, as mentioned, has added morbid curiosity because of its one-sided nature, and the character's viewpoint in which neither the camera nor the spectators exist. The first two types, according to Mulvey, are subordinated to the third in which the emphasis is on the visual connection among the characters themselves, thereby excluding the camera's and the spectator's gazes.

Early in the film, Alice and her husband Bill, attend a Christmas party in the mansion of their friend Victor Ziegler. There is a scene in which Mandy, a woman who is unconscious due to an overdose in a bathroom during the party, can be seen as an overlapping example of the spectator's gaze. It is almost as if the spectator gaze were framed within another spectator gaze. Mandy becomes objectified and she is duplicated by the framed painting on the wall behind her. Filmgoers see Mandy and her 'double' framed on the wall and Bill's attempts at waking her as a third person (Ziegler) watches. Within the scope of the scene itself, Bill and Ziegler are focused on Mandy and pay no attention to each other. The type of gaze changes the moment Bill succeeds at waking Mandy. Her eyes open, she looks at him, he looks at her, Bill and Ziegler look at each other with relief, and at once, the characters' gaze dominates. Suddenly, spectators of the film are no longer looking at the similarities between Mandy and the painting behind her. The nudity and eroticism provoked earlier are gone. Only the visual interaction among the characters remains.

Making reference to another scene, after reading a disturbing newspaper headline about a model admitted to the hospital for a drug overdose, Bill goes to the hospital and when he learns she is already dead, goes to the morgue to see her lifeless body. Here, in the following stage directions, is another example of the spectator's gaze as he stands there; looking at the woman he recognizes as Mandy, the woman who had overdosed at Ziegler's party and who he was able to revive:

BILL leans closer to study her face. He moves around to her head. He leans forward, bringing his face close to hers, and closes his eyes. It's as if he were going to kiss her. He stops short and slowly pulls back until he is looking down at her face (Kubrick and Raphael 1999: 86).

Complicating the politics of the gaze is the recurring theme of masks in *Eyes Wide Shut*. The origin of the word *mask* stems from the Etruscan word (*phersu*) for *person*. A person with a mask sees without being seen or recognised. The mask hides the person's identity. The symbol of the mask points to the introspection of the characters. The choice for the name of Domino, a prostitute who takes Bill home, has relevance here in that *domino* is a name anciently used for certain types of Venetian masks (see *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume III) which were predominant at the Somerton mansion, where the orgy in the film takes place. In addition to this, there are masks hanging in Domino's bedroom. Since masks were also used in previous centuries by doctors for protection from disease, it could be considered an omen since later in the film Bill discovers that Domino has been diagnosed with HIV.

At Ziegler's party, the Harfords greet the Zieglers with very superficial words and kisses; it is all highly ritualized. People mask their true selves by putting on their 'party faces'. At the Somerton mansion, though different, there is also a display which is ritualized. The fact that everyone is wearing a mask is certainly important but it is also significant that the ritual at the beginning of the ceremony involves women kneeling and giving each other ritualized kisses through their masks and engaging in movements which lack any real show of emotion. The idea here is that these women are merely sexual objects and not people who show their thoughts or desires in the interaction. A significant occurrence is that the mask from Bill's costume is discovered to be lost after the orgy, and then mysteriously reappears, without explanation, on the pillow beside the sleeping Alice. Alice wakes up and never looks at the mask, nor does either of them speak about it. This is because the mask may symbolise Bill's unconscious self. It is a wake-up call for him to remove the mask he has been hiding behind. Alice wakes up to find Bill crying. He says to her "I'll tell you everything. I'll tell you everything" (Kubrick and Raphael 1999: 95); then, he proceeds to bare his soul to her, just as the removal of a mask bares one's face.

Another example of mask is seen in Alice's glasses. Michael Chion points out that:

Kubrick chose to have Alice wear clear glasses and, from time to time, she takes them off, or does not wear them. These glasses, which we see her wearing at the beginning and which she then takes off before going out of the evening with Bill, draw our attention to what she sees, or sees in what she says (2002 48-49)

She wears them in parts of the film in which she is mostly herself (whatever this self might be) and she is affirming herself in different roles, as a woman of intellect, such as when helping her daughter with her homework, when reading, eating or dressing. The glasses come off when she is in the role of seductress or wife. In a strange sense, Alice dons her mask when she removes her glasses. In the last scene, when Alice and Bill are Christmas shopping with their daughter and are discussing the fate of their marriage, she is wearing them. Bill asks her what the next step is for them. The fact that she answers him with her glasses on (when she is *not* wearing her mask) can be seen as a sign of hope for their future. She answers that what they must do next is to "fuck" (Kubrick and Raphael 1999: 98). It could be the first time in their relationship in which they could make love without their masks on. That is to say, Bill with his new perspective based on his recent experiences, and Alice with her glasses on. Julian Rice explains how "In the end, Alice is strong enough to know that her clarity may be transient, and rightly so if growth is to continue: 'The important thing is we're awake now, and hopefully for a long time to come'" (2008: 233).

Related to the concept of gaze, is also the recurrent theme of mirrors in *Eyes Wide Shut*. The importance of the mirror image is reflected in the fact that the film's promotion poster is the framed reflection of Alice and Bill in the mirror. It is also useful to refer to Jacques Lacan's theories on language and subjectivity at this point, especially his concept of "The Mirror Stage" (1993) as a part of the development of self-identity in children. Lacan believed that between the ages of six and eighteen months, the child, in observing its mirror image, first identifies with self as independent of its mother. According to Lacan, this self-identification is the first step of the child in developing a relationship with its body and the people and things around it.

If indeed the mirror image can be used to identify one's adult self, then examples of this are seen in *Eyes Wide Shut*. The mirror image is emphasised in the film on several occasions. In the opening scene of the film as mentioned earlier, when Alice is

in her dressing room primping for Ziegler's party, she is not looking at herself, and the impression is that the spectator has the opportunity to peek, unseen "inside the married life of a couple, which is itself, a hall of mirrors" (Bentkowsky 2007). During the scene she dresses with her glasses on. She looks at herself in the mirror and then when she finishes, she removes her glasses and leaves with her husband. There are similar scenes in the film, when Alice gives herself meaningful looks in the mirror after returning from the party, as observed in the following stage directions:

ALICE stands naked in front of the bedroom mirror. She removes an ear-ring as she sways around. As she begins to take the other ear-ring off, BILL comes up behind her and starts to caress her. He puts his arms around her and lovingly touches her. She responds to his caresses by taking her glasses off and putting her arms around him. They kiss. ALICE looks at herself in the mirror as BILL kisses her neck and shoulder (Kubrick and Raphael 1999: 21, original italics)

In analyzing this scene, Alice is seen naked in front of the mirror, swaying seductively as she takes her jewellery off, and she removes her glasses when her husband joins her in the eroticism of the moment. As Bill kisses her, Alice gazes into the mirror. Alice is looking at herself while Bill is looking at her; they never look at each other in this sequence. The character's gaze shows what the characters see in and through each other. In addition to this, the couple is framed in the mirror. What is Alice thinking as she looks at herself in the mirror while her husband is kissing her neck? Why is she not looking at him or at their mirror embrace? Lacan might suggest that she is looking for her self-identity. Indeed Bill may be searching for the Alice he needs to reflect in himself; his wife acts as his mirror validating his self-image.

Another example is seen the night after the party. Alice goes to the bathroom, and sighing, looks at herself in the mirror before opening the medicine cabinet to remove a bag of marijuana. In these scenes, Alice appears reflective and resigned to her situation, as if to ask if there is more to life than what she sees. According to Sabine Melchior-Bonnet:

To see oneself in the mirror, to identify oneself, requires a mental operation by which the subject is capable of objectivising himself, of separating what is outside from what is inside. This operation can be successful if the subject recognizes the reflection as his own likeness and say, "I am the other of that other". The relationship of self to self and the familiarity of the self cannot be directly established in the reciprocity of seeing and being seen. (2002: 5)

Melchior-Bonnet further claims that "To see oneself and to be seen, to know oneself and to be known –these are interdependent acts" (2002: 156).

This essay has intended to demonstrate that the topic of the gaze, masks, and mirrors are closely related to each other and strongly emphasized in the imagery of *Eyes Wide Shut*. Kubrick was very thorough in his use of visual techniques such as light and colour in making his film the kind of visual experience he envisioned. There is a rich tradition of theories related to the gaze, masks, and mirrors, and their influence on civilization and culture both popular and ancient. This paper touches only a small part of the existing content on these subjects. The focus on the visual is also reflected in the title of the film which is a play on words from the expression 'eyes wide open' and also emphasises the dichotomies of looking versus seeing and seeing versus being seen. Karen D. Hoffman reminds us:

In marriage, the world, and our place in it, can be viewed with more than one pair of eyes. And even if we do not thereby gain the power to see clearly, even if our eyes remain closed to many of the mysteries of human desires, Kubrick's final film offers viewers the hope that our eyes might at least be *wide* shut (Hoffman 2007: 80)

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