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Stanley Kubrick's swan song: *Eyes wide shut*²

Director: Stanley Kubrick

As the basis of what was to be his last film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, the director Stanley Kubrick chose a work by Arthur Schnitzler, the author Freud considered his double (1966, p. 370). The novella he selected, *Traumnovelle*, deals with Freud's favourite subject: dreams. But the sexuality and affects that engage the husband and wife who are its protagonists are also Freudian subjects. In Schnitzler's version the story unfolds in a nebulous and ill-defined no-man's-land between fantasy and reality. In Kubrick the atmosphere is more specifically defined without, however, any consequent sacrifice of depth. For this American director "if there is no reality, there is no film" (Raphael 1999). With this aesthetic axiom as a foundation, he proceeds, in his characteristically dry and incisive style, to aim at an uncompromising impact on the viewers. But dream or reality, what counts for Kubrick is the viewer's gaze, the eye that reifies the film.

Like all works of art, this film can be read in a number of ways. In this piece I shall emphasize the fact that *Eyes wide shut* was the last film Kubrick made before he died,

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and hence I regard it as his unconscious spiritual testament, which meditates on such ontological questions as life and death, as well as on cinema viewed as a visual art at the crossroads between concreteness and abstraction. Charged as his last film is with symbolic references to death, we should not overlook the fact that in all of Kubrick's films fear of dying is a constant presence and an apparent mirror image of his obsession with control and with mechanical apparatuses (cf. Ghezzi, 1995, pp. 92 et seq.).

The eye and the creative function of the glance, as we shall see in the course of this article, are, in my view, central to Kubrick's cinematic discourse (see also Ciment, 1999). This personal interest of his is comparable to certain elements of the psychoanalytic experience, as when the visual function acts as a spur to the development of thought or, on the contrary, functions as a block, as we can see particularly clearly in the psychoanalysis of psychotic patients (e.g. Lombardi, 2003a, 2003b). In order to make explicit this aspect of the intertwining of perspectives that the cinema and psychoanalysis provide, I shall here briefly refer to a few elements of the psychoanalytic perspective that I intend to use in this context.

When Freud (1911) describes the birth of consciousness he emphasizes the role of the specialized sense organs of the body in activating the mental functions and the subsequent containment of motor discharge. The eye, thus considered, seems particularly relevant to the inner workings of the constitutional system, since it makes possible the first representative functions, a natural part of the construction of the visual image.

Later on, Klein (1923), in her description of some of the determining factors of intellectual and artistic fixations, underlined the involvement of the senses of sight and hearing. Klein (1925) also refers to an aversion to the cinema, connected with a repression of the pleasure of looking, in some pre-adolescents who suffer from physical restlessness and involuntary movements. From Klein's point of view the relation between the glance and the primal scene is decisive: this can be the source of neurotic inhibition or, on the contrary, of a creative impulse to the extent that the subject, while tolerating jealousy and envy of his/her copulating parents, becomes in his/her turn capable of a personal creative act.

After Klein, Bion also returned to Freud's perspective on the role of consciousness as attached to the sense organs; indeed he makes it the cornerstone of his concept of experience (1962), emphasizing, among other things, how *visual power* represents an important 'capacity for exploring the environment' (1967, p. 21), thus giving it the status of a prototype of what he proposes, in more general terms, as *alpha function*.

These contributions show us the possibility of a mental use of the physical function connected with the sense organs, but also how, on the contrary, this potential can be mired in a strictly bodily use if internal tension is trapped on the concrete level. According to this way of thinking, the glance is connected to the very essence of psychic functioning (but is not to be confused with the instinctual use of gazing as found in voyeurism). A perspective based on the function of the image as a point of contact between the concrete and the abstract seems to me to be consistent, both because of the

problems associated with representative gaps (Green, 1990; Lombardi, 2003b) and because of the divergence between sensations of a corporeal nature and their representations (Damasio, 1999; Lombardi, 2002a), with the growing interest evinced in so-called primitive mental states.

The possible conflict between the psychic function of seeing and the unrestrained physical act, or, more concisely, the conflict between mind and body, returns at various points in Kubrick's oeuvre. With an almost clinical attention he explores a range of vicissitudes and deformations of the glance, such as, in *Lolita* (1962), in the scene at the drive-in, where Humbert seems caught up exclusively in the physical pleasure of contact with Lolita and uninvolved in the movie. Meanwhile, what we can see on the drive-in screen is a black and white fragment of Fisher's *The curse of Frankenstein* (1957), in which the monster removes his bandages, allowing his body to be glimpsed. Damasio has written that 'consciousness is rooted in the representation of the body' (1999, p. 37), and this polyphonic sequence in *Lolita* is a telling instance of the excitatory use of the body in opposition to a conscious discovery of it. A contrasting example is 'the culmination and at the same time the traumatic instant of the adventure of the eye' (Ghezzi, 1995, p. 78) in the 10 minutes of uninterrupted visual effects before the final shot of *2001: A space odyssey* (1968) or, yet again the visionary gaze, focused on the past and the future, of little Danny Torrance in *The shining* (1980).

Lastly, in *Eyes wide shut*, the glance is linked to the face that engenders it: Alice's gazing at the mirror that witnesses her naked body encountering Bill's. This glance,

which is capable of bearing the impact of intense emotions, is poles apart from that of Vince (*Killer's kiss*, 1955), who, in a paroxysm of hatred and jealousy, breaks the mirror that reflects his image. While Alice's eye disquietingly encounters herself and the sexuality of the two bodies as they unite, Kubrick uses a dissolve that is powerfully evocative of the mystery that will evolve in the course of the film. When the picture is again in full focus we see Bill, elegantly attired, emerging from the lift and about to enter his medical office: a passage which transports us rapidly from the nether regions of bodily affects to the higher plains of consciousness and shared reality.

But let us consider Kubrick's final masterpiece in orderly detail. At the start of the film, the camera reveals the naked body of Alice (Nicole Kidman), a distinctly Botticellian image. The sound track, based on Shostakovich's Waltz II from his *Suite for Jazz No. 2*, superimposes an achingly nostalgic dimension: the music poetically evokes the fleetingness of time and a sense of loss. The jazz waltz is a reminder of the Central European origins of Kubrick's parents and, at the same time, of his American essence. The connection between the ephemerality of time and a sense of beauty is emphasized by Freud (1916) in his essay 'On transience', in which a flowering meadow is taken as a prototype of all beauty, which becomes even more precious precisely because it is short-lived: its very rarity makes it more valuable. In the last work of his life Kubrick chose to open his story with bodily beauty, while the background music underlines the relationship between its preciousness and its ephemerality. This delicate and nostalgic atmosphere in which the vision of female nudity is immersed is in distinct contrast to the

scene in Room 237 in *The shining*, in which the lovely young naked woman in the bath is quickly transformed into a sick old woman and then into a woman's corpse in the process of decomposing. Whereas in *The shining* the confrontation with temporal limits acts as a spur to Jack Torrance's homicidal mania, in *Eyes wide shut* it is a prelude to a very different poetic narrative atmosphere (for the role of time in the primitive mind cf. Lombardi, 2003c).

While the initial reference of the film is to the clear perspective view of the body typical of the Renaissance (a theme which comes up again in the ballroom scene with the mention of Renaissance bronzes), the psychological atmosphere of the characters transmits, on the contrary, an unseeing perspective. The first dialogue takes place in the bathroom, where Alice and Bill Harford (Tom Cruise) are getting ready to go to a party. Alice is sitting on the toilet.

Alice: How do I look?

Bill: Perfect.

Alice: Is my hair OK?

Bill: It's great.

Alice: You're not even looking at it.

Bill: You always look beautiful.

'You're *not* even *looking*'; 'You *always* look beautiful'. Vision is negated by the atemporal invariability of *always*: the mind is self-saturating and the mind's eye remains extraneous to any actual view of the body.

As I suggested above, the mutual extraneousness of the mental gaze and action is a regular source of conflict in Kubrick's work (Lombardi, 2000); indeed, his films are built up precisely out of the gap that this divergence creates, as in the dramatic and prototypical Ludovico treatment in *A clockwork orange* (1971), where images of primitive savagery are shown to an eye (wide open) whose gaze has been artificially widened by not being allowed to shut.

Shortly after this beginning in the bathroom of the Harfords' house, another scene takes us back into that favorite locus of corporality, the bathroom: this time it is the bathroom at Ziegler's (Sydney Pollack) during a Christmas celebration. Bill steps in as a doctor to attend a naked girl who has had a drug overdose. This time the body is seen, but the view is a medical one, which functions within the parameters of an impersonal science ('... to be a doctor. It's all very impersonal', Bill says later). In this scene the camera shifts between the naked figure of the unconscious girl on an armchair and the vaguely 'Jugendstil' pregnant nude in the picture on the wall. As a parallel to the scene in the bathroom, the unsettling power of the realm of instincts is revealed in Alice's dance with the Hungarian (Sky Dumont), a scene that takes place in elaborate visual surroundings in which the profuse reflections from myriad sparkling mirrors evoke the hallucinatory atmosphere of *The shining*.

The seduction of Alice does not run its course, and neither does the temptation of Bill by two models during the party, but both these events lead to further developments. During Bill and Alice's dialogue in their bedroom the contact with sensoriality

unleashes intense conflicts. In the transition from the concrete corporality of the bathroom to the shared corporality of the bedroom there is a significant passage from concreteness to abstraction, as a result of which sensations and emotions begin to be recognized and verbalized. Alice, with the help of some pot, confesses that she is possessed by overwhelming erotic feelings. ‘Sex, upstairs, then and there. That was all’; ‘When she is having her little titties squeezed do you think she ever has fantasies about what handsome Dr Bill’s dickie might be like?’; ‘Millions of years of evolution ... men have to stick it in every place they can ...’; ‘... even if it was only for one night I was ready to give up everything, you, Ellen, my whole fucking future.’ Her world of certainties is in a state of crisis. (‘Why can’t you ever give me a straight fucking answer?’ Alice complains): emotions laden with sensuality act like an ‘acid’ that corrodes the discriminating ability of the mind (Matte Blanco, 1975).

The discovery of the overwhelming force of corporeal affects does not, however, make Alice forget her ties to Bill: ‘At that moment my love for you was both tender and sad’. This touching moment, splendidly interpreted by an inspired Nicole Kidman, is really one of the emotional climaxes of the film: love troubled *by the awareness of a limit*, the limit of instability introduced by turbulent emotions. While he is telling us about the disruptive force of instinct, however, Kubrick seems to me to be hinting at something even bigger, the area in which man has an inkling that ‘he too is a part of nature and therefore subject to the immutable law of death’ (Freud, 1913, p. 299). The dialogue between Bill and Alice is, in any case, interrupted by a telephone call which

announces the death of a patient, Lou Nathanson: 'Just died'.

The importance of *limits* (with particular reference to those established by birth and death) could explain an important divergence in the script from the original story: whereas the latter takes place during Carnival, Kubrick's film takes place at Christmas. Indeed, Christmas trees are a significant presence throughout the film, providing curious and wonderful bursts of color within the brilliant cinematography. In *Eyes wide shut* Kubrick returns, 45 years after *Killer's kiss*, to New York, his native city. And, while Christmastime is the time of birth, birth is indistinguishable from death, according to the symmetrical logic (Matte Blanco, 1975) that is characteristic of the unconscious. And the shadow of death significantly marks the development of the film, with the visit to a patient's deathbed, the prostitute Domino who turns out to be HIV-positive and, later on, the death of the mysterious woman.

The sequences following Bill's taking leave of his wife to go to the bedside of his dying patient seem charged with meaning: these are black and white scenes in which Bill imagines Alice's sexual encounters with the officer she felt attracted to. These black and white interludes employ the artifice of *a film within a film* to give a visual tangibility to Bill's jealous frenzy in the face of an oedipal situation: the recurring appearance of their sexual embrace gradually approaches a vision of the carnal union from which he is excluded. The sudden absence of color here conveys the concrete effect of an essential deprivation brought on by grief caused by exclusion and by consequent depressive feelings. Each black and white sequence is followed by one of Bill's experiences on his

way, in which he plunges into *an actual situation inhabited by passion, sex and death*.

Bill's progress toward his 'embodiment' is laden with ambivalence³. After his first dreamlike fit of jealousy, Bill has a run-in with some adolescents who jostle him and keep calling him names, such as *faggot*, *dump* and *macho man*. This scene seems an expression of Bill's self-contempt when he approaches authentic emotions. At the same time we again find Kubrick's beloved theme of the re-emergence—particularly in relation to adolescence—of the savage instincts of a primitive animal, which reassert themselves despite *millions of years of evolution*.

Narrative sequences with a bedroom as their setting reappear with Marion Nathanson's erotic proposition in the presence of her father's dead body, and in the fleeting encounter, in which nothing happens, with the prostitute Domino (Vinessa Shaw).

By dint of living through these experiences, Bill depends for his identity decreasingly on appearances and increasingly on his inner experience of himself. The confrontation between authenticity and fiction is epitomized in the scene at *Rainbow Fashion*, where the mannequins, which '*look alive*', suggest the confusion of real people.

³ As Maurice says in *The killing* (1956), 'Individuality is a monster and it must be strangled in its cradle to make our friends feel comfortable'. For Kubrick, actually, individuality is threatened most of all from within, as is the case with the hero of *Barry Lyndon* (1975), who is perpetually prey to his primitive emotions: greed, hatred and deceit are initially the keys to his survival and subsequently the cause of his downfall; he is unable either to achieve the mediation of thought or to learn from experience.

This confrontation with the ‘fictional’ dimension should not be seen only as an aspect of Bill’s inauthenticity: it also has the important dialectic function that it performs in art. One is reminded that the mannequins, in one of the final scenes of *Killer’s kiss* (1955), are Davy the protagonist’s means of defending himself from Vince’s axe. Here the scene with the mannequins interrupts the realism of the narration to introduce a distinctly expressionistic atmosphere, which reveals an almost poetic purpose: the acknowledgment of the defining function of cinematic fiction as mediator and filter for the unrestrainable violence of the primitive emotions of human beings.

From this vantage point Bill, when he puts on a mask, is claiming his role as *persona* in quest of self-awareness. The Latin word *persona*—as Resnik points out—comes from the Etruscan *phersu*, which means theatrical mask, and, if ‘the mask is connected to the person like a shadow to a body’ (Resnik, 2001), Bill’s masquerade could be thought to correspond to the beginning of a search for a body which corresponds to his shadow-mask.

If, in fact, so far, Bill’s *earthly odyssey*—now that he is no longer in a symbiotic fusion with Alice—has demonstrated his inability to approach his own body or that of anyone else, this seems to be due to his paradoxical lack of an authentic corporeal dimension. We recall that the mind’s rejection of the body, expressed as a conflict between artificial intelligence and humanity, had already explicitly surfaced in *2001: A space odyssey*, when HAL refuses to open the spaceship to the spacecraft which is attempting to bring back the dead body.

At this point of the story Bill gets himself involved in an adventure that takes him to a house used for anonymous sexual encounters and orgies: this is reminiscent of the narrations of some analysts, for whom sexual experiences are the occasion for discovering a sense of existing, which is otherwise suffocated by a paralyzing vacuum (McDougall, 1995). We are taken back, here, to the oxymoron of the title, which also conjures up the opening (*wide*) of an emotional scenario and a contemporaneous closing (*shut*): the objects of desire are, in fact, disguised and their identities are unknowable; indeed, knowledge of them is said to be life-endangering. The couplings we witness in the house, in one room after another, are reminiscent of a sort of museum tour in which we see a representation of the primal scene as a genealogical revelation (how does one come to be born?). Indeed, the director's wife, Christiane Kubrick, speaking of *Eyes wide shut*, remarked, 'It has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with fear' (quoted in Hughes, 2000, p. 254). Incidentally, it should be noted that the password for admittance to the house of debauchery, which in Schnitzler is 'Denmark', becomes, in Kubrick, '*Fidelio*', an unambiguous reference to Beethoven's opera, as the pianist Nightingale states during the scene at the jazz club. And it does not seem just fortuitous that there should be a reference at this point to the very composer who, more than any other, was the poet of limits and of freedom from limits (Lombardi, 2002b): the beloved 'Ludwig van' from *A clockwork orange*.

At the same time *Fidelio*, because of its Latin root, calls to mind the fidelity or infidelity which brings Bill to the villa: if, at first glance, Bill's attending the orgy is, in

terms of Alice, a sign of infidelity, Bill is, however, in terms of his personal odyssey, faithful to himself. Furthermore, Bill is ‘faithfully’, if unconsciously, keeping step with Alice, since, as we later discover, she too, in the nebulous meandering of her dreams, is involved in the same search for identity as her husband.

Hence, I believe that the reference to ‘conjugal fidelity’, the conceptual core of Beethoven’s opera⁴, contributes to the revelation of the meaning of the *internal couple* which is here in the process of being formed: a couple that unites the original nakedness of the body with the ‘mental dimension’ of the mask with which a person must perforce clothe it. It is probably thanks to this load of meanings peculiar to the reuniting of the shadow-mask with the naked body that the brief isolated dialogue between Bill and the woman (who is at this point completely naked, since she is no longer even wearing her g-string) is so disquieting: it is an intense emotional climax, underlined by the tender notes of ‘Strangers in the night’ in the background. If we pause to consider the lyrics, we note that they feature both *glances* and *loneliness*, and hardly by chance: ‘Strangers in the night, exchanging glances ... Something in your eyes ... two lonely people were strangers in the night’.

When Bill is exposed as an interloper he is attacked, but a naked woman rescues

⁴ *Fidelio*, composed at the height of Beethoven’s heroic period, centres on themes that reflect the composer’s overcoming of his life-threatening depression by means of re-forming the Florestan–Leonore couple, which also symbolizes the internal couple of darkness and light, affect and representation, body and mind. I feel that we here have a glimpse of a possible depressive condition of Kubrick himself, who had, perhaps not altogether by chance, let 12 years elapse before embarking on *Eyes wide shut*.

him. The power to save that is attributed to her seems a symbolic revelation of the value of corporality when it is finally ‘seen’ and accepted as the primary organizing nucleus of the ego (Freud, 1923). Corporality is not simply narcissistic here, because the course of recognition of the bodily and sexual self proceeds in parallel to recognition of the object (Lombardi, 2002a). The same emotional atmosphere of awareness of solitude appears once again later on when Bill, who has come home from the orgy, finds his wife asleep and dreaming. When she awakes it emerges that her dream has exactly followed Bill’s experiences.

The link between Bill’s experience and Alice’s dream seems to me an example of the intersecting development of narrative elements which allows us to identify, with reference to the dream which fails to become film, a level that exists *beyond* filmic events. Alice’s dreams are not represented, but are only evoked by the silvery lunar light of the bedroom. Are we to think that, for Kubrick at the end of his life, dreams are the border zone where the visual experience of cinema comes to a halt? The border zone where the concrete eye of the camera is shuttered? It is certain, in any case, that cinema, ‘which is in so many ways reminiscent of dreams’ (Rank, 1914), is nevertheless, here in Kubrick, clearly distinguished from dreams, as a chosen space in which ‘non-sensuous phenomena form the totality of what is commonly regarded as mental or spiritual experience’ (Bion, 1970, p. 91). Alice’s recounting of her dream begins significantly: ‘*We were in a deserted land*’. This passage proclaims, by means of words, the same emotions that were evoked earlier by music: loneliness and melancholy. The theme of

nakedness is central to Alice's dream as well: her reaction of intolerance when she discovers she is alone is expressed, however, by copulating with everyone, rather than by a re-empowerment of a sadistic superego, as in Bill's case in the scene where he is tried after having been 'unmasked'. This superego-driven intolerance for the function of the glance had already been expressed by Kubrick during the trial in *Paths of glory* (1958), when the soldier tries to speak about *what he saw*, only to be met with the rejoinder: 'The court has no concern with your visual experiences'.

Bill will later have to pay for the favor of the naked woman's gift with the emotional ordeal caused by learning of her death. From a newspaper he reads in a bar he finds out about the discovery of the body of the woman who rescued him. The atmosphere is permeated with Mozart's *Requiem*—first the solemn and moving *Rex tremendae maestatis* and then the tender and compassionate *Salva me fons pietatis* when Bill at last gives way to his grief.

Bill's progressive discovery of limits comes about by means of his emotional working through. Repeatedly in the course of this film we witness an unavoidable confrontation with loss: in an explicit way at the morgue when he views the corpse of the person he identifies as the woman from the orgy. An example from the realm of feelings occurs when Alice helps her daughter to do her maths homework and, just when her off-stage voice says, 'It would be a subtraction', Bill hears in his mind his wife recounting her dream: '*I was fucking other men, so many ... I don't know how many I was with*'.

In the progressive construction of a meaningful narrative mosaic the scene of the dialogue between Bill and Ziegler plays a role that fully justifies its inclusion, although it does not exist in Schnitzler's text. The dialogue between two male figures standing at a pool table is reminiscent of the tragic opening scene of *Lolita*, with Quilty and Humbert at a ping-pong table. Here too comparing *Eyes wide shut* with the earlier film reveals a dilution of emotional violence and a greater integration of the two interlocutors, suggestive of the two categories of representation (Quilty and Ziegler) and emotion (Humbert and Bill). '*I was there in the house, I saw everything that went on*', Ziegler declares, referring to the orgy scene, and thereby bridging the gap between concrete physical presence ('*I was there*') and perception ('*I saw everything*') which had characterized the film from the start. In this dialogue, among others, we can see two interpretations of reality, which could also refer to two different ways of regarding film: cinema as fiction, because its stock in trade is unreal objects, objects that seem alive but are not, like the mannequins at the costumer's, and cinema as emotional involvement. These opposite poles incline inversely towards abstraction and concretisation. Thus they are complementary movements which, when taken together, make it possible for an 'experience' to be a convergence of concrete emotional participation and perceptual distance (Bion, 1962). Davy the boxer's confession in *Killer's kiss* of '*taking life too serious*' could, in fact, be applied to Kubrick himself, who discovers the need for distance provided by the camera and by fiction in order to make the intensity of his emotions representable.

Bill's encounter with Ziegler is then a confrontation between two positions, with each character defending his own. Ziegler starts by stating the justification for cinema-fiction '... that it was a kind of charade ... it was fake'. Bill, meanwhile, takes up the cudgels for emotional involvement: 'What kind of fucking charade ends with somebody turning up dead?' Ziegler again propounds his emotionally uninvolved view of the situation: 'Somebody died. It happens all the time. But life goes on. It always does until it doesn't'. Bill, on the contrary, feels involved, worried, pained, guilty: we hear a disquieting musical interval (a ninth) in the soundtrack.

Bill's emotional involvement and participatory humanity have taken shape thanks to an amalgam of experiences in which the emotional and perceptive link with the body has played a major role, as a result of which the death of the body is now not an indifferent matter for him, in contradistinction to Ziegler, for whom death 'happens all the time' without leaving any significant emotional consequences.

The generative role of bodily concreteness in affects and thoughts seems to come up again in the final lines of the film. Alice's last remark—'There is something very important that we need to do as soon as possible. Fuck'—refers to concreteness just as the 'representation' (the film) is about to finish. But, while this concreteness extends beyond the movie, thus connecting cinema to real life, it was nonetheless conceived and hatched *within* the framework of the representation. Thus the film offers an opening, a path which connects cinema to real life, representation to reality, providing the rationale for a cinema that does not fade away at the end of the film but sows a seed that

germinates in the life we actually lead.

‘Kubrick finally reconciled to life?’ Ciment (1999) wonders, apropos of this final passage of the film. In analytical terms there is unquestionably food for thought in the link between that final ‘Fuck’ and the lexical level of the unconscious, where abstract and concrete are interchangeable. Might it then be possible that the instantaneousness of this word, in pronouncing which the glottis opens wide only to shut immediately (wide shut), alludes, in both the concrete phonetic and the figurative senses, to the temporal value of the instant? A daring interpretation perhaps, but one which seems confirmed by the dialogue between Bill and Alice when Bill anxiously asks, ‘Forever?’ and Alice replies, ‘Let’s not use that word. You know, it frightens me’. Hence a terror which seems connected to an awareness of the danger of an unrealistic desire for eternity. In *The killing* Kubrick explicitly connects the expectation of eternal love with lying, when Sherry, who betrays her husband to the point where she arranges to have him killed, answers his question ‘You’ll always love me?’ with ‘Always and always’.

Kubrick seems personally to inhabit the end of this work of his. He is present as if he were the narrator of the fictional story, as if he were the protagonist of the events—as if they were his own actual experiences—and, inevitably, as if he were the eye that watches the film: a ‘*kind of fucking charade*’ made by a creative genius at one with his camera, who at a certain point discovers that he is inhabiting a reality in which you really die, but in which you also really love—with a ‘*tender and sad love*’ which was capable of producing the most profoundly intimate and moving film of his extraordinary

career.

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