

EYES WIDE SHUT: Image, impact and Psychoanalytic Iconography

A film's emotional impact is not always achieved through rapid cutting, montage, blurry fast action combined with incomprehensible sound tracks. Sometimes it can be done with iconography. I define an icon as a graphic representation, and/or the mental (subjective) representation of an image that evokes strong emotional feelings. Because Psychoanalyst are not easily stirred by images, having trained ourselves to listen, we can underestimate the power of images. Right now, two iconoclastic iconographic controversies come to mind. In South Carolina it is about an "old" flag, the flag of the Confederacy which has caused much conflict and an economic boycott, which is why the American Psychiatric, Psychological and Psychoanalytic Associations will not hold any conventions in Charleston for the foreseeable future. This morning, as I write this the Sinn Fein has refused to join the coalition government of Northern Ireland unless the flag of Eire flies alongside the flag of the United Kingdom.

I was taken with the extensive Iconography in Stanley Kubrick's last film EYES WIDE SHUT. Kubrick worked many years on this film so I assume every image and scene is carefully thought out and conveys meanings, both intellectual and emotional, through imagery. Unsurprising considering initial history of Cinema, 27 years of silent films. The supremacy of the 'talkies' was their ability to convey more emotion faster, more intensely and sometimes, with more subtlety. In this film I will show that

the iconography can be understood as effecting both preconscious and unconscious conflicts.

EYES WIDE SHUT opens with Alice, (Nicole Kidman) facing the audience, wearing a black almost transparent Peignoir. She turns away until her back faces the audience and lets the robe fall; she is completely naked and very white against a golden background, like a 19th Century painting by Degas. The audience is aroused and tantalized-what will she do next? There is an intended shock in the dramatic opening. On an unconscious level it evokes fantasies/memories of Primal Scenes, those dim childhood memories of naked parents before, during or after having sex. Besides stirring up erotic fantasies it evokes anxiety. To a child, seeing naked parents is connected to strange and dangerous physical activities and frightening sounds, as if a violent struggle is occurring. Alice's nakedness is also a metaphor, "I am going to completely bare myself to you." We next see her husband, Bill (Tom Cruise) is fully and formally dressed in black, conveying the message that he will remain covered up. There is a further dimension to her nudity. She is "mooning," the audience, teasing and provoking them, like a whore enticing customers, an embarrassing, a further discomforting experience for the audience but she is conveying how sexually aroused, to the point of randyness, she feels. This initial scene conveys many of the themes of the film as, in Psychoanalytic therapy, the first dream often touches many major themes that will be revealed in the ongoing therapy.

The next scene reassures the audience with its middle class familiarity. An upper middle class couple is dressing for a party. Bill asks Alice, who is off-screen, where his wallet is.

She tells him but he does not thank her. We then see that Alice is sitting on the toilet, peeing. Bill enters to check his appearance in the mirror though he has just done that in the bedroom, giving us some messages: he is either vain or unsure of himself, perhaps both. Alice asks him how she looks. He perfunctorily says, "Fine," without looking at her, which we see exasperates her, getting her both angry and sad. She unhappily remonstrates, that he said that without looking at her. The audience perceives that he is indifferent to her beauty and sexuality, that he takes her for granted. She is wearing a mid thigh garter, to enhance her beauty, something that she is wearing only for him to emphasize her sexuality, which he ignores. These two short scenes set the stage for the ensuing events where the character of each will confirm the audiences impressions of Bill and Alice. Bill is the major character in this film, which is a picaresque tale of his journey through a sexual hell as punishment for ignoring his beautiful wife. The audience has been given cues to stimulate the impression that Bill can not, on a deep level, deal with his sexual feelings. His wife's sexuality frightens him. His inexpressive face is an outward mask and when he does face sexuality he needs a mask Initially figuratively, later literally. In a subsequent scene he reveals that he is so emotionally repressed that he can't

admit to having sexual fantasies and is incapable of empathizing with his wife's. As they leave the apartment, bill reveals that he does not know the name of the babysitter. He leaves the, "Mundane," household chores to his wife. In two scenes Kubrick has evoked an marriage imperilled by an inhibited, indifferent husband. As in many films, we have to accept the character we are given, "No past history is available." We never understand what was behind a character's behavior.

Then we go to the party where we enter a different world, one of great wealth. Bill and Alice live in upper middle class comfort but their host, Victor Zeigler, who is Bill's patient, is very wealthy. Enormous rooms and many floors allow the host to have a tryst with a prostitute without his wife knowing. The ethics of accepting hospitality from a patient is not explored though Stanley Kubrick's father was a physician. When Alice asks Bill why the Ziegler's always invite them to their Christmas Party, Bill says that it is a reward for making house calls. As a side note I thought it interesting that Victor Ziegler, whose name could be Jewish, has a Christmas tree. Later in the film at another patient's home, the Nathanson's, there is also a Christmas tree. Attending a patient's Christmas Party where they don't know anyone reveals Bill's Oedipal scopophilia, which he continues to evidence throughout the film even though he is warned against it innumerable times.

At first they dance then Bill enthusiastically recognizes the piano player is Nightingale an old Medical School buddy.

Bill does not detect Alice's sarcasm when she says, "He sounds good for a doctor." Bill obtusely ignores her antagonism to excuse himself so he can talk to this former friend instead of continuing to dance with Alice, who obviously appreciates dancing with him. After a brief conversation with the Nightingale, Bill "allows" himself to be enticed into a sexually teasing conversation with two young women who say they are models but come across as high grade prostitutes, trying to entice Bill into group sex. Alice, angry at Bill for being more interested in an old friendship than her, quickly belts down two glasses of champagne to drown her hurt and angry feelings. She is suddenly slightly drunk when a suave, distinguished and handsome older man, pouring on his flirting charms, asks her to dance. He tells her that he is Hungarian, which is meant to convey to the audience an iconic significance, hypersexual, somewhat malevolent and desiring to sexually exploit attractive women. He seemed to be the stock Hungarian character, last resurrected from Central European Operettas as Zoltan Karpathy, from the ballroom scene in MY FAIR LADY. In George Bernard Shaw's words, "Who oiled his way around the dance floor." Alice fraternizes with him in these iconic terms but teasingly plays along with his attempted seduction, even after he propositions her because she can now see Bill animatedly talking to the two beautiful women. Her jealousy causes her to teasingly encourage him but she breaks off the, "Dance," being very emphatic about her marital fidelity. She seems to enjoy sexually frustrating him, not only expressing her

hostility to someone who wants only to have sex with her but also sexually hurting another man when she wants to hurt Bill. She obviously appreciates the complement to her beauty.

Unknown to Alice, Bill has been called away from the two women by Victor Ziegler's butler to attend a sick guest. He enters Victor's ornate bathroom-dressing room to find his host half dressed and nervous because there is a beautiful naked young woman unconscious on a large chair. Victor tells Bill that she has overdosed on a, "Speedball, Coke and Heroin." Bill can assume, following sex with Ziegler. Bill immediately does his doctor thing, talking to her but not doing a physical examination, not even feeling her pulse. Bill does not ask Victor any questions about what happened. The implication was that there was something so unpleasant about the sex that a prostitute (Mandy) would feel the need to escape the feelings by anaesthetizing herself, as Alice had done with Champagne when she was angry at Bill. Bill's not asking implies that he doesn't want to know anything bad about this "father" whom he has "caught" having almost killed a sexually desirable mother figure.

The audience is uncomfortable, it unconsciously perceives Bill's Oedipal situation. The audience identifies with Bill. they feel Bill's warded off wish to have sex with the naked woman because that's what they want to do. Behind Bill's professional demeanor he is upset because a child's worst primal scene fantasies have almost been realized. It has impaired his professional judgement, he behaves toward Victor as if he were his father who

has to be protected rather than protecting the real patient whom he has not hospitalized or even examined, afraid to touch Father's woman. He purposefully avoids asking Ziegler any questions, not wanting to know parental secrets. Although Bill succeeds in reviving Mandy, he proposes a course of action which protects Victor. He tells Mandy that she needs therapy but does nothing to insure that she gets it. Bill also feels guilty because he wants to have sex with Mandy, a desired Oedipal object. He is also frightened of the father's castrating him and must repress his sexual desires. Is this, Kubrick, the child, making art about his own Oedipal conflicts?

When Bill reappears downstairs he offers Alice no excuses or explanations until Alice angrily asks him about the two women with whom she saw him flirting. He brushes off her concerns, saying it was harmless and that he is totally faithful to her. In the next scene they are home and naked, getting ready for sex.

A loud, obtrusive song is on the sound track, "You did a Bad Bad Thing." This reflects on both their behaviors, his carnal desires toward Mandy and the two "models," his medical negligence, their flirting with sexual partners, their anger at each other, their jealousy and, in their hearts, lustfulness toward others. Bill has also put Alice in peril of yielding to her own Oedipal sexual desires with an attractive father figure.

As the naked couple embrace, Alice's eye looks away from Bill, even though she is kissing him. This brief image means her

mind is somewhere else, apprehensive and ambivalent. It upsets the audience who were hoping for a scene of unconflicted love.

The next scene, contrasting Bill's and Alice's next day, again reassures the audience. Bill, at his medical office, Alice with their young daughter. Bill examines a beautiful big breasted young woman and then a young boy. In today's New York, this is an unlikely event. Internists do not do Pediatrics. This represents either the state of Kubric's knowledge of Medical practice, or unconsciously constructing Bill's character out of his own father's. What this scene illustrates is each partners view of him/her self. Bill is as unemotional examining the child's submaxillary glands as listening to the woman's heart. Alice is the house wife doing uninteresting things. This scene is meant to resonate with the next one, which takes place the night after Victor Ziegler's unsettling Christmas Party.

The scene begins with Alice preparing a Marihuana cigarette, a 1960's icon for loosening inhibitions. This reverberates with Alice's first scene, implying that self exposure will occur. I think this is the key scene in the film because it shows the sexual orige of their marital discord and the sexual conflicts between them. Alice, behaving like an angry prosecutor, brings out the degree of Bill's sexual repressions. He does not even realize that he has sexual fantasies toward patients, he categorically denies that such things exist in his, or his patients' minds. This informs the audience that his professional

impassivity is a mask which he needs because not admitting to have sexual feelings, which the audience knows they had in the previous scenes when they were aroused by his bare breasted patients, assumes that he is frightened by sexual feelings. His inexpressive face is an outward, figuratively needed mask. Later he will wear an actual mask.

Under the influence of the Marijuana, Alice expresses her anger at Bill's obtuseness to her sexual feelings as well as to his patient's and his own sexual feelings. she begins, :Did you fuck those two girls you were hitting on and where did you disappear to for so long?" "Because I'm a beautiful woman, men only want to fuck me. So on that basis you wanted to fuck those two.us summer. He had previously told her that he had complete confidence in her chastity. To Alice this was a denigration for he was both oblivious to her as person and dismissing of her as a woman. This made her so angry that she gives him an example of her inner sexual life. She tells him of a fantasy she had about another man whom she only saw twice at a distance. This succeeds in penetrating the defenses that he has erected against sexual feelings. I wondered if this was a memory of some overheard parental argument during his childhood.

Alice devastates Bill by describing an intense infatuation that she had the previous summer at a Cape Cod hotel where they were guests. She saw a handsome naval officier and had an instntaneous and intense emotional storm. She wanted to run off

with him.

This scene is interrupted by a call from a patient. He must make a house call. The scene is significant because the dead patient's daughter, betrothed to another wants to run off with him. Exactly what Alice said she wanted to do. This further discombobulates Bill. His world is crashing down around him. He previously said that patient's do not have sexual fantasies about their doctors and now he can see how wrong he was. Instead of going home, he goes to Greenwich Village, to non-New Yorkers, an icon of BJJjohemkan sexuality, "Free love," a reputation it has had for more than a century in American literature and films.

The darkened Greenwich streets are lit by garrish and gaudy predominaently red neon lights, iconographically warning him that he is entering a sexual Walpurgsnacht. It also says he has started on a piqueresque journey into the sexual underside of last evenings Christmas Party which was all elegant in white. This is the party of the anti-Christ. Bill is roaming the streets looking for a Euridice with whom to commit adultery. It is carnal desire/ In Hollywood films. no one ever goes to Greenwich Village to browse the bookstores. While roaning the streets he is accused of being a cruising homosexual by a bunch of, "Bridge and tunnel boys," the New Yorkers perjorative appellation for adolescent and young adult tourists who visit the Village. "What

team is this switch hitter playing for," and push him into a parked car.