

Eyes Wide Shut: Sexuality and Dissociation

(presented to the C.T.P. alumni April 25, 2014)

In his book “**Hero With A Thousand Faces**” the mythologist Joseph Campbell demonstrates how a recurring narrative pattern structures the mythical journey of the hero figure throughout the history of world mythology. From ancient Sumerian and Mesopotamian myths, through classical Greek and Norse sagas and Biblical stories to more modern fairy tales, the pattern repeatedly emerges. A destabilizing event threatens the order of things calling the hero to adventure. He undertakes what is usually a long and life-threatening quest through a strange and chaotic realm of trials and tribulations, to eventually return home to establish a new and higher order stability and harmony. As a Jungian, Campbell argues that this recurring pattern is an archetypal representation of psychic transformation towards a higher order of organization and integration. As such, the perpetual telling of our stories and our participation in the rituals that arise from them serve to help us organize and make sense of our physical and psychological landscapes. We need them to make some sense of what it means to be human. In our secular age artists from a variety of disciplines create, tell and represent these essential stories, and our lives would be impoverished without them.

I begin by drawing your attention to this archetypal journey, not because I believe there is anything heroic about the central character in **Eyes Wide Shut**, nor do I see any evidence of significant psychic integration, but because the film uses this same structure to tell us a story about the ever-present modern threat of psychic **disintegration**.

In the case of our film the destabilizing event occurs within the domestic realm and it's the order of that world, along with the psychological stability it provides for Bill Harford that is under threat. His “call to adventure” is, as it usually is, sudden and unexpected. He and Alice share a joint the evening after having been at a party where they had both engaged in flirtatious behaviours with strangers. What begins as a somewhat playful and stoned conversation about the flirtations ends with Bill's world collapsing around him. What Alice experiences as Bill's

arrogant over-confidence in her devotion to him and their marriage stirs an aggressive response from her. She challenges it by presenting him with an impassioned and detailed description of a powerful sexual fantasy about another man that she claimed had her in its grips for an entire day during a holiday they'd taken the previous summer. She describes in rather dramatic detail how a mere glance from this unknown naval officer had overwhelmed her with desire and how she felt she would have walked away from her life with Bill and their daughter if the officer had simply asked her to. She speaks to him from a somewhat ecstatic and mercurial state that the marijuana has induced, shifting from pseudo-aggression, to enraptured sexual reverie to mischievous laughter. She recounts how she and Bill had made love in the afternoon following her brief visual contact with the officer and that during their lovemaking the officer was never out of her mind. She adds that despite her preoccupation with thoughts of this stranger, her love for Bill was more tender than it had ever been, though it was also mixed with sadness.

As she speaks, Alice seems quite oblivious to the fact that what she is saying has just caused her husband to plunge silently down the rabbit hole. Kubrick's close-ups of Cruise's face show us a man, who just moments ago was brimming with confidence, dropping into a state of disoriented devastation. Significantly, he says absolutely nothing, suggesting that the place he has just entered is a wordless one. Let's watch that scene.

If you have the opportunity and inclination to watch the film again I think that you'll see that much of what precedes this most important scene is aimed at setting this one up. Keeping in mind that absolutely every detail that Stanley Kubrick puts into any of his films is there for a specific reason, we can glean from some of the moments leading up to this scene, small hints about the nature of Bill and Alice's relationship. In the film's first spoken line Bill asks his wife if she has seen his wallet and she responds by directing him to the bedside table, where he finds it. He then tells her to hurry along so they won't be late for the party. When she asks him how she looks he tells her she looks beautiful without so much as glancing at her. As they are about to leave he asks her to remind him of the babysitter's name. All this within the first two or three minutes. In the montage of brief scenes depicting the day after the party we see Bill being a busy physician and Alice engaged

exclusively in domestic or parental activities. We do see indications of genuine affection residing within this tidy domestic arrangement and are also given a glimpse of Bill and Alice in a sexual embrace. Significantly, as they embrace his eyes are closed and she glances sideways into a mirror that is also the camera's position. That glance is a tiny portal into the complex, mysterious and mercurial workings of love and sexuality that the film explores.

In his book "**Can Love Survive?**" Stephen Mitchell says, "Love, by its very nature, is not secure; we keep wanting to make it so".(p.49) Regarding the possibility of stability in a love relationship he adds, "..I have invariably discovered that the sense of safety is not a given but a construction, the familiarity not based on deep mutual knowledge but on collusive contrivance, the predictability not an actuality but an elaborate fantasy". (p.43)

When Alice divulges her erotic fantasy it's as if she has, for Bill, suddenly become a person he doesn't know, a person who no longer fits within his construction. For reasons that are never made explicit, it appears that he has failed to develop the capacity to tolerate the inherent unruliness and fluidity of the other's sexual arousal. As with someone whose personality is predominantly shaped by borderline features, he experiences Alice's thoughts as actions of betrayal. In this relational sphere it would appear that he has no ability for what we call "mentalization". The thought and the deed are identical. It seems that his sense of security was resting upon the comforting illusion that we can know someone completely, even in the realm of her sexual yearnings. He goes as far as exasperatedly telling her that he is sure of her fidelity "because she is his wife". The fact that she can speak so readily of private desires from regions within herself that are beyond his "knowing" is too destabilizing for his constructed security. Alice, on the other hand, seems much more at home playing in this unstructured region without losing the distinction between thought and action and consequently seems somewhat oblivious to where her words are sending her husband. Just as she was able to "play" with the predatory Hungarian at the party without fear of actually crossing a line that would ultimately be ego alien to her, she is more capable of tolerating and even enjoying the unruly dimensions of her own sexual fantasies. She seems intuitively aware of its inherent vitality and of how Bill's "certainty" is a drain on it. Again to quote Stephen Mitchell;

“The unknown and unknowable dimension of sexual passion contributes to both its excitement and its risks. It is part of what makes sexuality potentially destabilizing. The kind of “knowing” that often kills passion in long-term love relationships, the certainty that the accessibility and depth of engagement of ones partner and oneself is a sure thing, entails the superimposition of an illusory transparency and stasis upon something that is, by its very nature, elusive and shifting” (p.79)

At the end of this scene Bill is called out of his fragmented silence and back to his life as a doctor by a phone call announcing the death of one of his elderly patients. He is able to become functional, but the rest of the film is about his dissociated attempts to recover from that fragmentation. As we soon learn, Doctor Harford may have dropped down the rabbit hole but he sure has lots of company down there. Like for a number of others he encounters on his dissociated quest, Bill's attempts to regain some sense of emotional stability and equilibrium are limited to various forms of enactment. Beginning with the visit to the young prostitute where he is again interrupted by the phone, this time from Alice, through his crashing the ritualized orgy, to the second attempt with the prostitute's roommate, possible action within the sexual sphere seems to be his only available resource.

Throughout it all he is haunted by what are clearly unbidden images of Alice in various forms of sexual embrace with her fantasy lover. We could see these obsessive reveries as masochistic ideation used as a form of compulsive self-punishment. They are this, and as such offer a degree of control in that at least he is the one who is making the worst happen over and over again. But more significantly their content is essentially Oedipal and in that they give us more clues about the historical origins of his psychological fragility in the area of relational intimacy.

In a paper entitled “**The Missing Link: Parental Sexuality in the Oedipus Complex**”, the British analyst Ronald Britton quotes Melanie Klein from a 1926 journal article. Regarding the young child's growing awareness of the reality of the love relationship between the parents Klein wrote, “at a very early age children become acquainted with the

reality through the deprivation it imposes on them. They defend themselves against it by repudiating it. The fundamental thing, however, and the criterion of all later capacity for adaptation to reality is the degree in which they are able to tolerate the deprivations that result from the oedipal situation" (1926) To this Britton adds, "The acknowledgement by the child of the parents' relationship with each other unites his psychic world, limiting it to one world shared with his two parents in which different object relationships can exist....The capacity to envisage a benign parental relationship influences the development of a space outside the self capable of being observed and thought about, which provides the basis for a belief in a secure and stable world." (2) Britton maintains that the capacity for mature object relations rests upon the establishment of what he calls "the third position". He says, "If the link between the parents perceived in love and hate can be tolerated by the child's mind, it provides him with a prototype for an object relationship of a third kind in which he is a witness and not a participant. A third position then comes into existence from which object relationships can be observed". (2) It's this capacity that is poorly developed in individuals who tend to be consumed by malignant jealousy and which, according to Britton, is non-existent in psychosis. And it's this capacity that appears to be quite underdeveloped in Bill Harford. He has no tolerance for Alice having anything like a romantic relationship with another, even if that other is only in her mind.

His obsessive ruminations about Alice and her imagined lover do not depict a "secure and stable world". What we see repeatedly is a rather nightmarish one in which he re-lives the torture of being the one who exists outside the love. It's a place where he has no voice and no purchase with the loved object. By revealing her fantasy Alice has dropped him into a state beneath the surface of the carefully guarded construction that is essential to his psychic stability. Alice's mere fantasy has dropped Bill into a place that is simply too reminiscent of a failed ability, in Ronald Britton's terms, to "envisage a benign parental relationship" that would engender "the development of a space outside the self capable of being observed and thought about". So thought is supplanted by obsessive rumination. Because his psychic world was only precariously "united", it now, at least temporarily, splits. Action, or more specifically enactment, now replaces thought.

This is why, in my opinion, the genius Stanley Kubrick director, slash, puppet-master casts Tom Cruise in what turned out to be Kubrick's final film. Cruise is essentially an action hero whose screen presence does not naturally give off much warmth or psychological complexity. (he has also, for much of his adult life been a very dedicated Scientologist, and as such would be continually ridding himself of errant feelings and emotions that tend to take one by surprise) So he's perfect for what the director has planned for him. The good doctor will, at least temporarily, become something of a hollowed out Mr. Hyde.

So as Bill heads off into the Manhattan night following his destabilizing encounter with Alice, all of his endeavors are desperate attempts to regain some sense of what Sandor Ferenczi referred to as a "primal unity". If Bill is the loving father of Helena, the dedicated and faithful husband of Alice, and the responsible and caring physician to his patients, who is the guy who so readily accepts the invitation to the young prostitute's apartment, and the guy who goes to such lengths to sneak into a private ritualistic orgy under a disguise? Because his grasp on that "primal unity" is so precarious his psyche gives rise to what Ferenczi called a "teratoma", a kind of second personality that operates in ways that are alien to the realistic or central ego. In Kohut's language what would be called a vertical split in the self. This "secondary being", according to Ferenczi, has its primary psychic origin in the unconscious demand for a denial of "parental copulation". In Bill's case, since this urge for its repudiation is nowhere near conscious awareness, it must manifest itself in the "dumb show" that is compulsive enactment. He will somehow magically reverse the devastation that resulted from his being witness to the copulation by he himself being the copulator. He will, for the time being, abandon whatever mature sexual intimacy he had achieved in his relationship with Alice for the pursuit of dissociated sex with part objects.

In the book she co-edited entitled **Attachment and Sexuality**, Diana Diamond states quite succinctly, "the relationship between attachment and sexuality is bidirectional" (p.120) In other words, these two primary motivational systems are highly interactive and mutually influential. The catastrophic dimension of Bill's decompensation arises from the fact that, as those first moments of the film allude to, his attachment to Alice is laced with unacknowledged maternal elements so

when she “betrays” him, if only in her mind, he faces the loss of much more than his sexual partner. Her revealing an intense sexual fantasy that has nothing to do with Bill activates his attachment system and when it is on high alert the exploratory system with its capacity for play, curiosity and fantasy goes into “lock down”. It’s simply not available. As is, unfortunately, so often the case with established married couples, what no-doubt began as a mutual exploration of each other’s internal world’s, seems to have become somewhat rigidified, at least for Bill, into a comfortable familiarity in which there’s little expectation of discovering something new about the other. This seems to be, at least in part, what Alice is challenging with the telling of her fantasy. Left unchallenged, this state of affairs can drain an intimate relationship of much of its vitality and, according to Donnel Stern, reduce it to an ongoing enactment that has us going through the familiar motions of being a couple. In **Partners in Thought** he says, “But what happens to that ongoing struggle, to involvement and change and engagement, as we come to depend on sameness, on the enactments that develop over time? Struggle dims. There is less and less change, life stays closer to the baseline. We assure ourselves that the other’s mind is completely mapped. We become locked into patterns of enactment”. (p.154)

So the realization that he did not, in fact, have Alice’s mind completely mapped, and that his lover is quite capable of feeling sexual desire for another, doesn’t trigger run-of-the-mill jealousy in Bill, but something closer to an existential crisis. Like a child facing abandonment by the parent, the dread and panic displace all other developing capacities. The attachment element that would have added depth and meaning to his sexual relationship with Alice suddenly becomes the source of unbearable anguish. The fact that his attachment system **is** involved in his relationship with Alice is, of course, not in itself the problem; we can’t be deeply romantically connected without it. The problem, as indicated by his need to place imagined limitations on even her fantasy life, has to do with his own unresolved oedipal situation. Therein lies his difficulty with the further development of a mature and evolving sexual intimacy with his partner, an intimacy that would have room for surprise, not knowing, and a certain degree of spontaneous aggression.

Citing the work of Target and Fonagy, Diana Diamond writes,

“..the full development of mentalization, which both catalyzes and grows out of oedipal resolution, enables the child not only to differentiate fantasy from reality, but to “play with reality.” The child’s retrospective re-creation and elaboration of infantile bodily sexual experiences in the imagination as sexual desire or longings in the oedipal phase is in part a “pretend mode” experience where fantasy may be elaborated without direct consequence in reality. If the child’s experience of his or her mental state in the mind of the parent is imprecise , overly embellished, or impoverished, then he or she may withdraw from an elaboration of minds and the capacity for mentalization is curtailed rather than catalyzed”. (208)

Bill’s reaction to Alice’s sexual fantasy is evidence of what Target and Fonagy refer to as the “equivalence mode” of psychic functioning in which thought and reality are undifferentiated. In that mode thought cannot be played with because it is too concrete. This would include the inability to elaborate on sexual fantasy. Again, citing Target and Fonagy, Diamond maintains that the child’s actual experiences within the oedipal situation have much to do with this as a possible outcome. She says,

“.. where the real experiences with the parent have been adequate, that is, neither too erotically stimulating nor too sensually impoverished, the child will be free to develop a rich fantasy life involving infantile sexual experiences without fear that these will be enacted or reciprocated in reality. If the child’s infantile sexual strivings and wishes are reciprocated with mature sexual desires and impulses on the part of the parent, as is often the case with more severely disturbed patients, they will be experienced as frighteningly real, rather than as imaginative constructions.”(209)

Alice’s “imaginative constructions” **are** experienced as so frightening real by Bill that they cannot be effectively metabolized and all he is left with is the escape “when there is no escape”, dissociation. His unconscious oedipal strivings have not been integrated and so remain un-relinquished. His desperate efforts at regulation and the regaining of some sense of control over his relational world will entail the expression of these strivings by his attempts at ritualized conquest through sadomasochistic enactments. This culminates with his aborted participation in the puerile quasi-mystical sex rituals at orgy central.

On a personal note, it was the film critics' almost universal response to these scenes that really surprised me and got me interested in saying something about this movie. Reactions from writers who were usually capable of some depth of thought, dismissed the film and Kubrick for what they regarded as his prudish and sexually conservative portrayal of open sexuality and exploration. They chided what they saw as his kind of implicit Puritanical celebration of monogamy and condemnation of sexual liberty. This was evident, more than one of them said, in how wooden, lifeless and unexciting sex was portrayed in each of the tableaux we're given. I remember thinking at the time, "hey you guys, this is Stanley Kubrick we're talking about here. Do you think there might be something else going on?"

Kubrick is of course saying that, to put it in psychoanalytic terms, dissociated sex with part objects is shallow, lifeless and ultimately pretty boring. Although these scenes depict a variety of sexual practices, positions and configurations they are not about sexual abandon but rather the control and contrivance at the heart of sadomasochistic activity. The participants are necessarily devoid of genuine subjectivity and the unruly spontaneity that accompanies it. What Kubrick is depicting is the fetishizing of the human body that typifies pornography and distinguishes it from the erotic. Depiction of the erotic on film would mean the presentation of developed characters with whom the audience has established some degree of identification. Without this it can only be the mechanical representations of pornography.

In his book **Love Relations** Otto Kernberg says, "The erotic gratification promised by the rhythmic stimulation of the body parts decreases or vanishes when the sexual act does not serve the broader unconscious function of fusion with the object" (p.23) He is, of course talking about the kind of emotional and psychological fusion that is made possible by the trustful inclusion of infantile sensuality, traces of what Freud called the "polymorphously perverse", into adult sexual coupling. The vulnerability that accompanies its inclusion is what, for many individuals, necessitates the separation of sexuality and actual tenderness. This is the risk-free gratification sought by the wounded Bill Hartford when he joins the dissociated romp at the mansion of sexual rituals. To avoid acknowledgment and the suffering of their early psychic wounds, the masked participants, through unconscious

identification with those who originally inflicted them, will now be the ones who are in complete control of things. Again, in **Love Relations** Kernberg discusses the origins of these behaviours in a way that could be a description of what Kubrick is depicting in these scenes.

“In men whose early relation to mother continues to color their relations to women throughout life, pathological hatred and envy of women may be a powerful unconscious force, intensifying their oedipal conflicts. They may experience mother as sexually teasing and withholding, owing to the transformation of early oral frustrations into a kind of (projected) sexual aggression. That teasing image of mother in turn intensifies the aggressive components of sexual excitement and fosters dissociation between erotic excitement and tenderness. These men experience sexual desire for a woman as a repetition of the early teasing by mother, and thus they unconsciously hate the desired woman.” (p.152)

I believe it is this unconscious hatred that Kubrick is addressing in **Eyes Wide Shut** and what makes the film so disturbing for some people. What he gives us in these scenes of the ritualized orgy is a brilliant visual statement about the deeply conservative and conventional nature of pornography and what D. H. Lawrence referred to as “cold-hearted fucking”. He depicts the act in many of its variations but frustrates any prurient interests the viewer might have by avoiding the close-ups that are central to pornography. He presents beautiful naked female bodies, but is careful to cast women with beautiful bodies that are virtually identical in their size and shape. They walk about in the same mechanically stylized manner and use their voices in same lifeless, carefully modulated fashion. These are “pleasure units”, stripped of all individuality and identity. Without resorting to representations of bondage, flagellation, or other blatantly sadomasochistic enactments, he depicts sexuality in the service of domination and control. The characters who orchestrate the ritual, disguise it as a kind of quasi-mystical ceremony, but it has subjugation and dehumanization as its underlying premise. The Bill Harford character is drawn to it because his underlying unconscious motivation is revenge. He won't take what he experienced as Alice's abandonment lying down. What we might safely assume by the extent to which Alice's fantasy affected him, is that it fell upon wounds with very early origins. As would be the case for the

other men drawn to this rather perverse pageant, dissociation in itself is not a sufficient defense, so it is augmented by enactment.

In her very interesting book **Prologue to Violence: *Child Abuse, Dissociation and Crime***, Abby Stein presents a comprehensive and in-depth psychoanalytic examination of violent crime that challenges many widely accepted presuppositions about the psychology of violent offenders. Although the population she is addressing, and with whom she has conducted extensive interviews, has a history of extreme violence against women, when regarded from her perspective of Relational Psychoanalysis and Attachment Theory, they could be placed on the far end of the tangent that would include the masked characters from our film. As Zeigler, the Sydney Pollack character, so unapologetically puts it to Bill when he implies that the woman who spoke on his behalf was killed, "Nothing happened. She got her brains fucked out; end of story!" What we're hearing is the unacknowledged, if not fully unconscious hatred that Kernberg refers to. In the extreme cases of this hatred that Abby Stein examines, there is invariably, she maintains, a history of horrendous attachment failure and severe early relational trauma. What is also invariable is that the criminals, like Bill and the masked characters in the film, are driven to action because dissociation alone is an inadequate defense. According to Stein,

"..in a significant number of these extreme cases, simple dissociation has failed. Mere inattention, and even more powerful forms of somnolent detachment that characterize traumatic dissociation in general, have not sufficiently protected the person from the perception that death is imminent. The resort is to full-fledged personifications of the self that can aggressively engage as well as deflect the trauma, while remaining too primitively organized for symbol making." (p.89)

By "symbol making" she is referring to the capacity for complex thought and reason. And this is what gets displaced by dissociation and compulsive action. Under normal circumstances a man like Bill would, of course, be quite capable of "symbol making", but because the episode with Alice has evoked a state in which relational trauma dominates his thinking, thinking itself needs to be temporarily obliterated by action. Alice gave voice to her erotic fantasy, and as true fantasy it "played with reality". But for the deeply traumatized reality is not something to be

played with, it is something to be carefully controlled. As Stein puts it, "For many trauma survivors, internal imagery stays pallid because it is always overshadowed by the specter of the real; they cannot make a conscious decision to ignore reality and liberate themselves from the domain of the flesh." (p.69) Quoting Masud Khan, she adds, "Just as the neurotic lives through his fantasies (conscious and unconscious), the pervert lives through his actions. The internal necessity *to act* makes the use of will and power imperative for the pervert.... The pervert knows himself only through his victim's actualization of his intentions. It is this which constitutes the essential poverty of the pervert's experience".

It's this poverty of experience that Kubrick has on display in **Eyes Wide Shut** and it's the destructive use of **will** and **power** that it so readily activates that held such interest for him as an artist. He's not everyone's favourite director because he tended to draw our attention to how truly nasty we can be. Many of his films depict the infliction of ruthless violence. In some cases, as in **Paths of Glory**, his 1957 film about the court martial and execution of French soldiers in the First World War, the brutality disguises itself as patriotism. In others it is systemic, just people doing the jobs they are paid to do, like the ranting maniacal drill sergeant in **Full Metal Jacket**, or the lunatics happily running the world then blowing it up in **Doctor Strangelove**. In others, like **A Clockwork Orange** with Alex and his band of roving thugs, or **The Shinning**, with the homicidally deranged Jack Torrance, it's not dressed up as anything other than an expression of what we're capable of, even in what would be regarded as ordinary circumstances. But what all of these varied scenarios have in common is that the violence is never an act of passion or a desperate gesture of self-defense. In each case it has its origins in the kind of unacknowledged hatred and deeply unconscious fear that Kernberg refers to in my earlier quote. It is the same unconscious fear of annihilation that suddenly creeps through Bill when he hears Alice's fantasy; the unformulated fear of death that underpins intense sexual jealousy. In that moment he is no longer the self assured doctor, but an infant who's been left at the roadside. In Bill's case we're looking at a temporary fragmentation and ensuing dissociative attempts at recovery through action. In the other films what Kubrick presents are characters for whom these dynamics have been more hardened into character formations and permanent ways of being in the world. But in every case

what we see is men who have adapted an unconscious strategy that enables them to avoid the chance of re-traumatization by becoming the victimizers.

What Kubrick illustrates so brilliantly is the fact that Bill's sexual jealousy has activated a torturous psychic scenario in which he is the abandoned victim. Unfortunately, the state it evokes robs him of any capacity for mentalization, so he's incapable of coming to the realization that he's being tortured by his own projections. This is what Harry Stack Sullivan is talking about when he describes dissociation as, "...a prolonged state of dreaming while awake". With the rare exception of lucid dreaming, dreams present themselves to us without the influence of our volition. Similarly, when Bill sets off into the night, the "dream" he's in will unfold, like the sexual ceremony at the orgy, according to its own unconscious principles, until something returns him to wakefulness. Until that happens there is not sufficient integrated self to pull him out the enactments. He is compelled to do what he must in order to somehow disown the re-experience of annihilation. Dumb action is all that's available. Again, drawing from her extensive experience with violent offenders, Abby Stein says, "...abused children, having disowned annihilative experiences, necessarily construct personality both in, and from, a phenomenal void. Under such circumstances, experience- and its linguistic extension, explicative narrative- is cadaverous, truly emptied of self".

The good news, in Bill's case, is that he eventually does have something of an awakening. Kubrick shows us difficult things to watch but, ultimately, he doesn't leave us incomplete hopelessness. He doesn't stoop to a crowd pleasing "happily ever after" but, to return to the archetypal hero myth that I began with, our little wooden Ulysses does make it home to Penelope, and he does undergo a slight transformation because he's able to do what he needed to do all along; truly acknowledge his pain and grieve. Let's watch that scene.

Ken Ludlow, April 2014.

