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Cognitive Value and Imaginative Identification: The Case of Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*

A decade after its release, Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) remains an enigmatic film, with respect to its meaning and, especially, its value. Undoubtedly, through the years, much of the disagreement on the film's overall quality has faded, and few would still subscribe to Andrew Sarris's "strong reservations about its alleged artistry."¹ Yet the precise source of the value of Kubrick's last film still remains mysterious, at least judging from the disparate interpretations it continues to receive. More importantly, it is certainly not an uncommon reaction—among my acquaintances for example—to experience a certain sense of puzzlement when viewing the film, one that none of the standard interpretations seems to dissipate fully.² In sum—certainly modified since the time of its inception, but also strengthened by the decade that has passed—some enigma regarding *Eyes Wide Shut* does persist, and it is one that is worth identifying and trying to answer.

These just seem to be questions for film criticism. Yet they are also of great philosophical interest, for *Eyes Wide Shut* may work well as a case study for claims on the possible contributions that cinema can give to knowledge and on the forms of imaginative engagement that filmic narratives can promote. Indeed, carefully examining *Eyes Wide Shut*, in the attempt to sort out what this film accomplishes, turns out to be an excellent opportunity to look at both of these issues at once. Much has been written recently on film's possible cognitive merits and on spectators' imaginative engagement.³ Here, my own approach to the former issue is somewhat novel, precisely because of the link it suggests—paradigmatically in *Eyes Wide Shut*—between a film's cognitive merits and

the experiences of imaginative engagement a film promotes. Indeed, in the course of my discussion, I also raise some general concerns with respect to a widespread tendency of locating a film's possible cognitive contributions just in what the work conveys, while disregarding the experience it invites the spectator to have.

I start by presenting a number of possible interpretations of this film and show how they all do not quite explain the film's enigma (Section I). Then I argue that those interpretations all fail, to an extent—and for reasons that are general and instructive—to fully account for the film's cognitive value (Section II). Hence I offer what seems to me the best explanation of what the enigma of *Eyes Wide Shut* amounts to, and of how, once properly identified, the source of viewers' persistent puzzlement coincides with one important source of the film's value (Sections III–IV). *Eyes Wide Shut*, I maintain, rather uniquely exemplifies a kind of imaginative engagement, roughly speaking, a form of identification, that cinema is capable of bringing about.

I. INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MOVIE

Eyes Wide Shut, which is a pretty close adaptation, for the most part, of Arthur Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle* (English translation: "Dream Story"), recounts the events affecting a married couple, Bill and Alice Harford (Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman), during the time span of what seems two and a half days.⁴ The story, which is mostly narrated from Bill's point of view, leaves the viewer wondering how to interpret what he or she

witnesses—what as actual events and what as dreamlike or hallucinatory representations within the protagonist's mind. Just think of the striking correspondences between characters and incidents that seem to be copies of each other: paradigmatically, the Christmas party at the beginning of the film and the ritualized, black masstype, masquerade orgy that we see later on.⁵ Lack of narrative coherence, numerous visual and textual internal references—linking some characters to other characters, and some scenes to others scenes—and, in general, a number of overarching visual themes leave no doubt that whatever it is that we are witnessing, it is not reality.⁶

The viewer's puzzlement, then, could be explained as following from the oneiric nature of most of the film's events (whether they are categorized as dream in the world of the fiction or rather presented in ways that make their reality status uncertain), enhanced, of course, by the film's construction as a thriller.⁷ After all, the film is an adaptation of a "dream story" strongly influenced by psychoanalysis.⁸ Indeed, the only coherent explanation of the events following the exposure of Bill as an intruder at the orgy—Victor Ziegler's (Sydney Pollack) claim that nothing harmful happened and it was all a "charade" conjured up to scare Bill into silence—is as unsatisfactory as a Freudian analysis that has been prematurely "terminated."⁹ On the other hand, if what confuses us about *Eyes Wide Shut* is just the blurring, in the fictional world of the film, between reality and dream or hallucination and its related open-ended mystery story, then there is not much of an enigma after all, or certainly not one deserving further investigation. The film rather overtly confuses levels of reality, to then suggest through the protagonists' final dialogue that the distinction between actual and imagined events is unimportant if either can have powerful effects on a person's life. The representation of a puzzling series of events seems to serve the purpose of conveying some message about the human psyche: delving into one's psychological reality may bring to the surface some rather surprising and unpalatable truths about oneself—about one's insecurities, desires, and emotions. Such a psychological interpretation combines well with looking at this movie for its most apparent focus of interest: love, erotic desire, and spousal relationships—call this the erotic interpretation. After all, in an early scene, Kubrick shows us a statue of Cupid and Psyche.¹⁰

These two interpretations could stand, with variations, for a number of readings that have been offered of the film. I will mention only a few. Roger Ebert calls the movie "an erotic daydream about chances missed and opportunities avoided."¹¹ Alexander Walker claims the film to be about "[e]xposure and denial, temptation and retreat," while for Peter Rainer it is "about the damning effects of carnal urges."¹² This cluster of readings is often accompanied by claims that this is an optimistic movie, if moderately so. Jonathan Rosenbaum sees it as having "a sunnier view of human possibility than any other Kubrick film, in spite of all its dark moments."¹³ And Judy Pockock, by reference to Alice's invitation that, as soon as possible, she and her husband "fuck" (famously the last word of this movie), says: "Kubrick here seems to be asserting that it is in the act of sexual union that the world of dreams and the world of day [that is, the world "of marriage and family"] with all their irreconcilable differences, can come together, however fleetingly."¹⁴

Of course, these interpretations could be supplemented by others, and enriched and nuanced in a number of ways. They combine well, for instance, to a reading of the film as being about issues of identity and one's roles in society—call it the *personatic* interpretation, in honor of the Latin word for mask, *persona*. Throughout the movie, Bill reminds others and is reminded by others of his identity as a doctor (which he often uses to obtain what he needs). Yet his certainty regarding who he is—"Once a doctor, always a doctor," he says in one of the early scenes—is shaken by the events he undergoes, real or imaginary as those may be. Indeed, his night of wandering around New York—from his dead patient's house, to the apartment of the prostitute Domino, to the Sonata Café, to Milich's costume shop, and finally to the Somerton estate where the orgy occurs—can be seen as a sort of descent into hell, perhaps the hell of one's psyche, from which it might be hoped that Bill emerges—if not stronger—at least more self-aware.¹⁵ The journey also exposes Bill's sexual insecurities: the youngsters who assault him call him a "faggot"; and, throughout the film, all of his extramarital sexual adventures are aborted; indeed, Bill relates to sex rather passively: he has no requests for Domino and prefers to ask her, "What do you recommend?" eliciting her laughter.

The questions about Bill's identity also suggest a socioeconomic interpretation. Bill, whose name coincides with what we put in wallets, is shown dealing with his wallet and money numerous times. He, after all, works for New York's richest people and seems to find security precisely when he takes out money to pay someone.¹⁶ Bill is placed on the socioeconomic ladder above babysitters, doormen, prostitutes, and the like, as well as above Milich—who ends up pimping his own daughter to Japanese businessmen—but below Ziegler and those from the masquerade orgy (whose names Ziegler does not tell Bill, for he would not “sleep so well” if he were to know them).¹⁷ Accordingly, Bill's ruinous attempt to participate in the masquerade event could be seen as his doomed-to-fail bid to enter a social class that is to remain closed to him. The words of the mysterious woman at the orgy are clear: “I'm not sure what you think you are doing. You don't belong here.”¹⁸ Also, women, including Alice and the daughter, Helena, seem to be placed in a position of dependence on men and of getting ready to serve them. Of Alice we soon learn that her art gallery “went broke.” As for Helena, the math homework she does with her mother involves calculating “how much more money” one boy has than another boy. Alice meticulously attends to her looks and those of Helena. Mother and daughter are both, disturbingly, connected to prostitution. Helena, like Domino, has masks in her bedroom (we notice that as she reads from a C. L. Stevenson poem, “before me when I jump into my bed”); at the toy store, she plays with a baby carriage (described by her mother as “old fashioned”—perhaps like the so-called “oldest job”?), which reminds us of the carriage twice seen outside Domino's apartment. Alice, too, is linked to Domino, most explicitly by her uttering her last speech while standing next to the FAO Schwartz stuffed tigers, one of which was on the prostitute's bed.¹⁹

Finally, no analysis of the film can fail to mention its continuity with the rest of Kubrick's oeuvre. In the relationship between Bill and Alice, and even more significantly within Bill's psychology, we witness a system that goes awry, like throughout Kubrick's filmography—just think of *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) or *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) or *The Shining* (1980), but also of *Lolita* (1962) or *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). There is also a multitude of

more specific links to Kubrick's films. The social and identity themes, of course, remind us of *Barry Lyndon* (1975), which incidentally also includes an orgy scene. And references to some of the previous works are rather explicit in some scenes. For instance, at Milich's shop there are elements that are mindful of *Lolita*, *Barry Lyndon*, *The Shining*, and maybe *2001*. Indeed, below, I will refer to a broader, reflexive dimension in the film (Section IV).

Of course, a film's admitting multiple interpretations does not justify considering it enigmatic. The work is *designed* to bear multiple, complex meanings. Indeed, such meanings could be combined, if loosely, into an overall, global interpretation: as a film that is about an inner journey into one's psyche and life, facing previously unrecognized fears and insecurities, looking at aspects of one's private, romantic life, but also at some not very uplifting truths about the world we live in, and so on.²⁰ As for its value, *Eyes Wide Shut* should simply be considered a better film because of the multiple interpretations or meaning dimensions it admits, for we should value art more when—other things being equal—it engages our interpretative abilities.²¹

Nor is there much of a puzzle under the interpretations themselves. According to any one of them, or combination thereof, what might have first puzzled the viewer can be explained away by calling attention to an admittedly intricate but ultimately sortable set of references to psychological, erotic, personatic, and social themes (and so on), all conveyed by a very dense—textually and visually—film. Of course, we may debate about the precise assessment of the above-mentioned aspects and about the relative weight each deserves within a global interpretation of the work. Yet in any event, there would seem to be nothing especially mysterious about this film. In contrast, I shall argue that *Eyes Wide Shut* remains an enigmatic film even at the net of all the above interpretations, hence inviting further investigation into what might have been left out. The remainder here is one that has to do with the sort of experience, specifically with the sort of imaginative project, this film invites.

II. PROBLEMS FOR CONTENT-BASED INTERPRETATIONS

The above interpretations all concentrate on *content* in a sense: on what *Eyes Wide Shut* “says”

or “suggests,” in sum, on the movie’s “message”—regarding human psychology, the perils of romantic love, the masks we wear, the world we live in, and so on. This is hardly surprising, given how central it is to the full understanding of a narrative that the complete set of meanings and implications it conveys be determined. Such an approach is also continuous with a widespread tendency of looking at films for their, broadly construed, cognitive contents: the insights they may embody and the light they may shed on a number of issues. In a nutshell, it is the approach behind many attempts to figure out the “philosophy” of this or that film. If such an approach can bear any fruit, certainly Kubrick’s films, and *Eyes Wide Shut* among them, make for good candidates. Without denying that films, and artworks in general, can embody and convey cognitively relevant insights, it is nonetheless important to point out how the practice of looking at a film for its possible cognitive contributions may in fact lead critics astray, toward interpretations that fail to account for the full cognitive merit of a film. Indeed, *Eyes Wide Shut* can serve as a magnifying lens for what such a practice—of generating what for simplicity I am going to call *content-based interpretations*—may fail to see.

I begin with a cluster of well-known challenges, as they apply to this film, to the possibility for art to contribute to knowledge, for doing so will quite naturally lead us to address some of the crucial pitfalls of the content-based interpretations. Let us group such challenges under one label, that of the *authority* of the film’s messages. Consider that what *Eyes Wide Shut* conveys may simply fail to rise to the level of an insight. To begin with, what the movie apparently suggests—on the human psyche or erotic love, or whatever else—may be false. Indeed, it is worth noting that, at least as summarized in some of the above interpretations, the movie’s messages seem at times overly moralistic and exaggerated.²² Further, one could claim that the very way in which the movie conveys its messages weakens their authority, for they are conveyed through the dream or hallucination of someone whose responses may be, for all we know, largely idiosyncratic, and hence not a good base from which to generalize over human psychology. More generally and bluntly put, one could legitimately be skeptical about giving too much credit to a filmmaker’s philosophy. On the other hand, recall what Noël Carroll has helpfully dubbed the “triviality objection”: to the extent that *Eyes Wide*

Shut tells us something true, what it tells us seems trivial—things we already knew, indeed things we needed to know to follow the narrative with understanding.²³ Indeed, with *Eyes Wide Shut*, it seems that having certain beliefs is essential to making the process of closely and repeatedly watching the movie bear some fruit in increased understanding.

Carroll himself suggests a response to the triviality objection: a narrative may provide us with opportunities to improve our understanding of knowledge we already have.²⁴ Further, a film can convey new knowledge by means of a “clear example,” which we can then apply to real-life cases.²⁵ Yet, properly focusing on the movie’s capacity to offer spectators such opportunities reveals a second major issue regarding content-based interpretations, one that current debate has so far failed to identify sharply. Let us dub it the *distinctness* issue: when an interpretation attributes a work a cognitive merit for some cognitive contribution, we should ask whether the interpretation in question shows that the work distinctively gives such a contribution. More precisely, is the work—the film, for example—in a relevant sense responsible for conveying such a cognitive contribution in a way that importantly differentiates its contribution from that of the narrative that the work, as I shall say, *realizes*? This certainly needs some elaboration, to which I now move, once again by reference to our case study.

Suppose that, *pace* questions of authority, the messages conveyed by *Eyes Wide Shut* are endorsable and insightful. The content-based interpretations would still fail, I submit, to attribute *the movie* any distinctive value in that respect. Consider, for example, how virtually everything that the interpretations ascribe to the film could be ascribed to Schnitzler’s *Traumnovelle*, or in any event to some suitable correspondent.²⁶ Said roughly, the above interpretations seem to concentrate just on *the story* of *Eyes Wide Shut*—in other words on *Eyes Wide Shut*, the narrative—and not on *Eyes Wide Shut* as a work of film art—or *Eyes Wide Shut*, the *specific, cinematic* narrative. Of course, insofar as the narrative that a film realizes is an integral part of the film, whichever cognitive contribution the narrative conveys, the film conveys it, and should be praised or blamed for it as the case may be. Nor am I suggesting that the content a film conveys ought to be separated from the film itself. We can endorse Jerrold Levinson’s claim that “with art we appreciate the

unique way in which the artwork embodies and carries its message.”²⁷ Indeed, the distinctness issue I am highlighting here may be considered one possible development of the intuition contained in Levinson’s remark: namely, that when formulating a content-based interpretation of an artwork, the relationship between the content conveyed and the form of the work used to convey it ought to be carefully evaluated. In this respect, again, *Eyes Wide Shut* does serve as an excellent case study, for the elaborate set of references and symbols inserted in the dialogue and images cries for a justification in light of what the film allegedly aims at conveying. And the above interpretations, with their emphasis on what the story of Bill and Alice can tell us, fail to flesh out precisely what is unique and so remarkable about the way the movie embodies its message.

The distinctness issue as it applies to narratives can be elucidated by reference to a notion of replaceability. When an interpretation attributes to a narrative work a cognitive contribution that one could easily envisage, within an art-critical context, to be equally conveyed by a different work—another movie or a novel, for example—embodying and realizing the same narrative with no cognitive loss, then the interpretation fails to attribute to the work a cognitive value that is distinctive in the proposed sense.²⁸ This characterization involves reference to notions—such as that of a narrative considered independently of its realizations, or across realizations, and of what can easily be envisaged—that might seem too vague, if not confused, to be of use. Yet, though the issue in itself would deserve a separate, more extended analysis, for the purpose of my reasoning here, a few remarks are in fact sufficient. First, the notions of a narrative and of its realization are only relevant in the relatively unproblematic sense in which a narrative can be conceived of as realized by different artworks—a notion that is clear enough to enter, for example, talk of adaptation. Hence, questions on, say, whether a narrative can be conceived of independently of a work that realizes it need not worry us here—the distinctness test requires a comparison between realized (if hypothetically) narratives. Second, the apparently perilous reference to what can easily be envisaged need not carry with it here any of the consequences of referring, in a philosophical context, to what can *possibly be imagined*. Rather, what matters is a reasonably commonsensical no-

tion of what someone could be expected to conclude within an art-critical context, hence on the grounds of minimal but relevant knowledge of artistic practice. Accordingly, suggestions to the effect that, say, it is always possible to imagine, of any work, that the same narrative it realizes be realized by another, different work with no cognitive loss should not worry us here. Once a bit of reasoning appeals to a practice, such as the practice of art criticism, it does submit to—and in this case enjoys—the reasonable limits and criteria established by that practice. Hence, what can be “easily envisaged in an art-critical context” does not encompass, say, imagining another film just like *Eyes Wide Shut* but two seconds shorter. It is not on these grounds that an interpretation can be criticized, nor that I intend to criticize the above interpretations.

In sum, although more could be said about the matter, that is really not required by the suggestion that the content-based interpretations I presented above fail to attribute to *Eyes Wide Shut* a cognitive value that is distinctive. The issue is obviously relevant to an attempt to fully account for the cognitive value of this film, since all of those interpretations, and combinations thereof, now seem to be at best incomplete, and all for the same general reasons.

III. IMAGINATIVE ENGAGEMENT IN *EYES WIDE SHUT*

We could conclude that *Eyes Wide Shut*, whatever its other merits, does not have noteworthy cognitive value. If so, we should also conclude that the movie fails in an important way. It aims at conveying a number of claims about a broad range of important issues, yet those claims may fail to be true, new, or distinctive of the work. Accordingly, the film’s complex visual and textual apparatus, though not void of aesthetic value and certainly remarkable for the artistic skills it exemplifies, would ultimately be unjustified by the film’s content. Indeed, the plethora of details that the content-based interpretations call attention to, if just aimed at conveying the movie’s messages, would make *Eyes Wide Shut* appear didactic and fastidiously explicit, despite its ambiguities. And the spectator’s experience would seem excessively dominated by an effort to decipher the large number of internal references, to find a meaning that seems too ready to disclose itself. Related,

the enigmatic nature of this film would then be reduced to the need to decode meanings that, though somewhat encrypted, appear all too obvious. In sum, perhaps we should conclude that the content-based interpretations have in fact spelled out everything there is to be said about the film's cognitive merits, though failing to see that it does not, after all, amount to much. If so, the only remaining enigma would then be how Kubrick could possibly think of this as his best film, if he indeed thought so.²⁹

I do not believe that we should draw these conclusions. Once analyzed for the sort of imaginative engagement the film promotes—something to which the content-based interpretations seem to be blind—*Eyes Wide Shut* can finally be recognized for its very notable filmic achievements. The complex structure of the film, which would be ill justified and even self-defeating if aimed just at conveying the film's messages, can be shown to bring about a distinctive kind of imaginative engagement for the spectator. Analyzing such an engagement will allow us, finally, to explain what puzzles the spectator, while also vindicating the film's construction and its cognitive contributions. The resulting interpretation calls attention to the film's capacity to promote in the viewer a form of *experiential identification*. It will also highlight the film's reflexive dimension, as one that celebrates the power that cinema can have on us.

'Identification' has not enjoyed much popularity in recent philosophy of art, and not without some reason.³⁰ Undoubtedly, much pretheoretical talk of identification with characters can be explained away as referring to other forms of engagement, most notably: empathy—in brief, occupying the character's perspective and, from it, imaginatively having the character's experience—and sympathy—feeling for the character, adopting in the imagination the character's relevant goals.³¹ Nonetheless, *Eyes Wide Shut* offers us an opportunity to isolate a mode of engagement that cannot be explained away as a variation of either empathetic or sympathetic engagement. Indeed, such a mode, I shall argue, is one that arises partly thanks to the *suppression* of those better-known modes of engagement.

Let us begin by noticing how, for a film that aims at getting us involved in important psychological and moral concerns that are perhaps relevant to all of us, *Eyes Wide Shut* relies very little on engaging the spectator with the protagonists, and

with Bill in particular. With the exception of some notable moments, in which we quite naturally empathize or sympathize with Alice or Bill, the film does not much promote those forms of character engagement. Of course, seeing Alice's face transfigured by crying moves us to share in her pain.³² And Bill's courageous protest to Ziegler for his reconstruction of the events (Ziegler repays him with what sounds like a death threat) grounds feeling for him as much as with him. These moments notwithstanding, however, Alice and Bill are not characters with whom we are much moved to empathize or sympathize. Of Alice we simply do not get to know much. She is overall honest and caring, as is evident from her few exchanges with Bill, although not missing a dark and self-centered side. She is also rather privileged, and the bases of her crisis remain unexplained. In any event, the character with whom the viewer shares most of what happens, Bill, does not sustain any prolonged sympathy either. His responses are often shallow and simplistic. Nor is he unused to lying, as he does several times. For the most part, he also seems all too comfortable being a servant to the higher and not-so-moral classes. Further, his reaction to Alice's confession is, to say the least, excessive (and betrays an unappealing desire for revenge). He after all survives the events rather unscathed, while the same cannot be said of Mandy (who dies, maybe of murder) or Nick (who too might have been murdered) or Domino (who is discovered to be HIV positive). To a viewer mindful of those characters, the film's ending—focused on the protagonists' marital relationship and indeed capped by a sexual proposal that sounds escapist—may prompt more questions than sympathetic responses. On the other hand, Bill's way of reacting to many of his experiences, even ones that are very sexually charged, is so sedated and catatonic—no doubt because of the oneiric flavor of those scenes—that it seems to invite the viewer to experience alienation from him rather than empathetic engagement. In sum, sympathetic responses fail to be sustained in any prolonged way, and indeed even empathetic responses tend to be suppressed by the distance the oneiric nature of the events creates between viewer and protagonist.

While not relying much on empathetic or sympathetic responses, the film seems nonetheless to involve us in a fairly intimate, personal filmic experience. That is largely due to its engaging the viewers in what we can dub "perspective taking,"

that is, taking on Bill's perspective: perceptually, cognitively, and conatively.³³ *Perceptual* perspective taking—imaginatively perceiving things as Bill does—happens partly thanks to the several long point-of-view shots (most of which occur during the orgy sequence).³⁴ Yet, insofar as what Bill “perceives” is often what he *imagines* perceiving, what *we* imaginatively perceive corresponds to what *he* imaginatively perceives, whether or not it is from his perceptual point of view. Accordingly, the film pervasively aligns our perceptual imaginings with those of the protagonist: our imaginative perceptual project to a large extent coincides with Bill's.

Compare imaginatively perceiving what Bill perceives to having an event memory or quasi-memory (that is, the representation of a past event as if I were its protagonist and yet with the awareness that the event is not one that *I* lived). Memories and quasi-memories may represent an event from either the perceptual point of view from which it was experienced or from some other, constructed point of view or—perhaps more often—from a combination of authentic, propiocentric points of view and constructed, hetero-centric ones. Indeed, memory is a pervading theme in the movie, and not just for the film's visual quality, which contributes the feeling of watching something from the past.³⁵ Consider how Bill tries to reconnect with what he experienced during his night out: he goes back to the Sonata Café, to the costume shop, to the Somerton estate where the orgy took place, to Domino's apartment; and he tries to call Marion. This follow-up to his night odyssey can be compared to an attempt to reconstruct what happened, what he experienced. Reality turns out being unreachable, opaque, and untrustworthy: Bill cannot reconnect with Nick or Domino or Marion; what he witnesses at Milich's shop is bizarre and surreal; Somerton's gate is closed, to access as much as understanding. Precisely because of the unreliability of what we, with Bill, experience, the film also invites *cognitive* and *conative* perspective taking. That is, we imagine Bill's questions, beliefs, doubts, as well as desires and evaluations. Like Bill, we try to find a coherent thread capable of making sense of the events, and experience our own sense of frustration. Our following the narrative is pervaded by questions and desires for understanding. Indeed, we are naturally prompted to rethink (and rewatch) what we have seen, just as presumably Bill is rethinking

what he has witnessed. Hence, again, our imaginative project—what we imaginatively ask, believe, desire, and so on, regarding the fictional events—coincides, in a sense, with Bill's mental states, with the beliefs, questions, and so on that he has in the fiction.

Imagining another's mental states certainly has something in common with empathy, so much so that one may think empathy to be some form of perspective taking. Perspective taking also seems to have something to do with sympathy, since adopting the other's perspective on his or her situation may be integral at least to paradigmatic cases of sympathy.³⁶ So, how is the engagement that *Eyes Wide Shut* promotes, with respect to the fictional events and Bill's mental states especially, *not* just a case of empathy, perhaps mixed with some sort of sympathy? The answer points to an aspect of empathy and sympathy that has received little to no attention in recent debates, namely, that, no matter the differences between these two modes of engagement, they both are mechanisms of engagement with someone, hereafter the “target” of the response. Hence, an essential ingredient of both empathy and sympathy is what I call the “assigning” of the imagined perspective to the target.³⁷ It is because the perceptions or beliefs or desires are assigned to the target that we can be said to empathize, for example, *with John* as he learns of receiving his tenure or to sympathize *with Sue* as she recovers from her surgery. Of course, the target to whom the perspective is assigned may be oneself: for example, with an event memory, as when I remember my flying an airplane or, with anticipation, as I foresee my going to the gym; likewise for sympathy, say, in instances of self-pity with respect to something past or future. The stage of oneself constituting the target of certain instances of empathetic or sympathetic responses can also be rather indeterminate, as when I fantasize, say, of winning the lottery. Indeed, the target of instances of perspective taking can be as indeterminate as when we imagine *one* winning the lottery. Whichever the case, all instances of empathetic and sympathetic engagement have a target to which the imagined mental states are assigned. Accordingly, assigning a perspective—perceptual, cognitive, or conative—to a target is really what makes an imaginative project to be about that target.

The assigning of a perspective, so crucial to empathy and sympathy, is precisely what, I submit,

Eyes Wide Shut de-emphasizes, with the result of making us have an imaginative project that is rather different from one of empathy or sympathy. To better understand this type of imaginative engagement, let us look a little further into what assigning a perspective to a target brings about and hence what may result from de-emphasizing such an assignment. Some progress can be made by a quick reference to, and a brief elaboration on, a notion found in the writings of John Locke, that of the *appropriation* of a mental act.³⁸ The notion is relevant to Locke's psychology of personal identity.³⁹ I am going to take inspiration from what Locke says and use it for my purposes here, though with some substantial changes.

According to Locke, when remembering something, we appropriate the past experience, implicitly declaring, "That was mine." Yet, there is for Locke an element of appropriation even in having the experience in the first place (probably a consequence of a Cartesian view of consciousness as reflexive, as awareness of one's thinking): the experience is had as one's own; we implicitly declare, "This is mine." Hence, according to Locke, when we remember something, we appropriate the corresponding experience *twice*, twice declaring, "That is mine."⁴⁰ Fortunately, we do not need to bother with any of the controversial aspects of Locke's theory here in order to shed light on the dynamics of perspective taking in relation to empathy and sympathy. Rather, we can say that, whenever I engage in perspective taking, I am always the protagonist of my imaginative project. The imaginative project is *my* project: that is the core of Locke's thinking on that first, initial appropriation—the one that for him always happens when having a mental act—applied to perspective taking. On the other hand, what, regarding memory, Locke called, again, "appropriation"—when an experience is remembered and hence declared *mine*—can be better explained, according to the framework I proposed above, as the assigning of the experience to oneself in the past. (Likewise, with the anticipation of an experience: the imagined experience is assigned to oneself in the future.) Applied to imagining a perspective, paradigmatically as it happens with empathetic engagement, the notion of assigning the perspective has the advantage, *pace* Locke and his admittedly different aims, of marking the difference between this act and the element of appropriation that is implicit in every act of perspective taking.

When I imagine a perspective, as I suggested, I am the protagonist of the imaginative project—as Locke would say, I appropriate it. When I *assign* the imagined perspective to a target, however, in a sense I *separate* myself from it, as my imaginative project becomes *about* the target. Of course, when the target is me, as with first-person memories and anticipations, again, I implicitly declare the imagined perspective to be *mine*—the imagined perspective is *about* me; when I empathize with someone else, the imagined perspective is about that person.

Hence, in summary, we can claim that when empathizing, I am engaged in an imaginative project, that of imagining a perspective, about which three things are true: (i) the imaginative project is *mine*, (ii) the perspective is assigned to a target, hence the imaginative project is *about* the target, and either (iii)' I am the target, hence the perspective is *mine*, the imaginative project is about *me* or (iii)' the target is *someone else*, hence the perspective is *someone else's*, the imaginative project is about that *other* subject. We now have all the ingredients to finally analyze the sort of imaginative engagement that is so distinctive of *Eyes Wide Shut*.

As I argued, while the film promotes various forms of perspective taking, it also de-emphasizes the assigning of such imagined perspectives to the protagonist. If so, then when I engage with the film, (i) above applies but neither (ii), nor (iii)' or (iii)' do: the imaginative project is mine, but it is left unassigned, targetless. The imagined perspective, then, so to speak, stays with me. It is in this sense that I think we should name the sort of imaginative engagement this movie promotes *experiential identification*. *Eyes Wide Shut* brings us to imagine experiences and have mental states that, though not about ourselves, enjoy the intimacy of something not so distant from a fantasy of ours. In this sense, I would suggest, the film powerfully makes us the protagonists of the attempt of finding one's way through the oneiric reality it represents. Hence, the enigma I have been trying to identify and explain turns out being all in the experience of the film, in the special and hard-to-pinpoint power that this film can exercise on the viewer. The experience that it brings about is as intimate as the experience of a film can be, and yet is also accompanied by a sense of estrangement from the characters—hence the puzzling experience.

To some, my suggestion might seem flat-out wrong, as one that ultimately treats the

experience of engaging with *Eyes Wide Shut* as an illusory one. Yet, an important point that subtends the above analysis of perspective taking is precisely the necessity of individuating (a) in the imagining of a perspective, an *imaginative* act and (b) in the assigning of the perspective to a target, an act that differentiates between different imaginative projects: empathy, sympathy, fantasy, and so on, with respect to oneself or others, and as variously determined as those targets may be.⁴¹ Hence, as the viewer knows well that he or she is engaging with a fiction, the imaginative, not illusory, status of his or her mental states is not in question. Rather, discussing *Eyes Wide Shut* has made apparent how the range of modes of engagement that narratives can bring about is broad and variegated. The engagement mode this film promotes may be especially baffling and phenomenologically unique. It is also conceptually intriguing, as the above analysis has shown.

IV. CONCLUSION

It may just be a fact that we value narrative art more when, other things being equal, it engages us in intimate ways—in ways that are in the same neighborhood, so to speak, of how we engage with ourselves (in memories, anticipations, or fantasies) and with others to whom we have become close. We also value narrative art that engages us wholeheartedly, making what is narrated in some way our own. The interpretation that I have sketched—of *Eyes Wide Shut* as experiential identification—is not in competition with other interpretations, including the content-based ones. Rather, it helpfully supplements them. Perhaps, often a film's cognitive contributions are brought home thanks to the experiences it prompts. With *Eyes Wide Shut*, one of the ways in which we take to heart what the film has to tell us—on human psychology, on love, and the like—is the intense and personal way in which the film engages our attention. That this film engages our imagination in a powerful way also turns it into evidence for at least one of its own claims: on the powers that the imagination can have on us. That the spectator may have already known that does not take away from its relevance as a clear example. Finally, the interpretation I am advocating certainly points to a cognitive contribution that is distinctive of this work, for it is not easy to envisage a different re-

alization of the same narrative accomplishing the same experiential, cognitive results.

Through this film, Kubrick exploits powers that narratives in any medium have, but also powers that *visual* narratives can have, of making us imagine perceptions, beliefs, and the like from the perspective of the characters. It is then all too natural that the film would also celebrate the powers of cinema and hence include a reflexive element—as of a film that is partly about cinema and its powers—that goes well beyond the self-referential connections to Kubrick's oeuvre. After having given a central role to the perceiving eye in many of his films (just think of the computer's eye in *2001* and of Alex's eyes in *A Clockwork Orange*), Kubrick mentions the eye in the very title of this film. Hence, *Eyes Wide Shut* can also be seen as a statement, by Kubrick, on the powers of filmmaking. In this respect, certain possible references to another movie that is largely about looking, appearances, and the powers of filmmaking—Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959)—may be more than a tribute.⁴² Notice that the Somerton estate is in Glen Cove, just as the house where *North by Northwest's* protagonist is brought when kidnapped; indeed, the entrance to the two houses is remarkably similar between the two films.

Eyes Wide Shut is a film that requires careful viewing, for the meaning of what we experience is continuously slipping our grasp. Yet, it is also one in which the filmmaker exercises, right from the very first shots of the film, the right of shutting our eyes, of making us see and not see what *he* wants.⁴³

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1. Andrew Sarris, "Eyes Don't Have It: Kubrick's Turgid Finale," *New York Observer*, July 26, 1999, <http://www.observer.com/node/41785>, accessed on September 1, 2010. Time vindicated Jonathan Rosenbaum's claim that Kubrick's films "improve with age and repeated viewings" ("In Dreams Begin Responsibilities: Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*," reprinted in his *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons* [Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004], pp. 262–270, at p. 262). On the biases that initially led critics to overlook the film's artistic qualities, see Lee Siegel, "Eyes

Wide Shut: What Critics Failed to See in Kubrick's Last Film," *Harper's Magazine*, October 1999, pp. 76–82.

2. Some reviewers make note of the power of experiencing the movie. Peter Rainer, though mostly critical of the film, refers to it as "a hammerlock of an experience . . . a powerful movie ("Strangelove," *New York Magazine*, July 26, 1999, pp. 49–50, at p. 49).

3. On film's cognitive contributions, see, for example, Thomas Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2007), and Paisley Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman: On Film as Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2009), as well as the essays collected in *Thinking Through Cinema: Film as Philosophy*, ed. Murray Smith and Thomas Wartenberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006). On the forms of imaginative engagement film promotes, see, for example, Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (University of California Press, 2009); or the essays collected in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

4. Stanley Kubrick and Frederic Raphael, *Eyes Wide Shut: A Screenplay and Its Inspiration "Dream Story"* by Arthur Schnitzler (London: Penguin, 1999). For a comparative analysis of Schnitzler's novella and Kubrick and Raphael's screenplay, see Charles Helmetag, "Dream Odysseys: Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle* and Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 31 (2003): 276–286.

5. The two parties share several characters and last exactly the same on-screen time: seventeen minutes.

6. Throughout the movie, similarities and correspondences can be noticed between scenes—even individual frames—characters, parts of dialogue, and decorations and props. How Alice and Bill walk next to each other, for example, is paralleled in scenes showing Bill with other characters. Again, Bill's movements in his dead patient's apartment are literally mirrored in later shots, when Carl (Thomas Gibson), the fiancé of the patient's daughter, Marion (Marie Richardson), arrives. As for the characters themselves, the already strange occurrence of Marion passionately kissing Bill and declaring her love for him is made much stranger by Marion and Carl being, in their looks and roles, doppelgängers of Alice and Bill. Less evident but perhaps significant is the similarity in hair color between so many of the film's women: from Bill's daughter, Helena (Madison Eginton), to the prostitutes Mandy (Julienne Davis) and Domino (Vinessa Shaw). As for dialogue, it is noticeable, for instance, how the costume shop owner, Mr. Milich (Rade Serbedzija), would offer Bill an "officer" costume, as if he knew of Bill's struggle with his wife's confessed sexual fantasy for a naval officer. Curtains, carpets, wallpapers, or Christmas decorations in different locales are often duplicates of each other; even dresses and bedsheets look alike. Of course, masks abound; they are found in the costume shop, at the orgy, as well as in the bedrooms of at least three characters: Marion's father, Helena, and Domino. Kubrick's notorious perfectionism authorizes interpreting most visual oddities as intentional: for example, that the same mailbox—showing the same graffiti—should be seen in two different places or that the furniture in the costume shop be rearranged during Bill's subsequent visits.

7. The film's structure suggests a divide between actual, external reality and dreamlike, internal reality that roughly corresponds to the divide between what occurs early in the movie, up to the argument between Bill and Alice, and what occurs once Bill begins his night around New York, with actual reality presumably resuming at some point (the morning after, or, at the latest, the morning of Bill's "confession" to Alice). Upon reflection, however, we are left increasingly doubtful of the reality of almost *everything* we see throughout the film.

8. For the mutual respect and influence between Freud and Schnitzler, see *Psychoanalysis and Old Vienna: Freud, Schnitzler, Kraus, Reik*, ed. Murray Sherman (New York: Human Sciences, 1979). There is no lack of references to dream and sleep in the film itself, some direct, some oblique. Helena wants to watch *The Nutcracker*—a typical Christmas story, in accordance with the time setting chosen by Kubrick, but also one that typically includes a dream. Of course, much turns around beds and people in a sleep or sleep-like state: several scenes take place in bedrooms; Mandy seems sleeping, and then waking, when she overdoses, and her body eventually lies in a morgue's bed. Another, less apparent reference to sleep is the name of one of the models flirting with Bill at the Christmas party, 'Nuala,' the same as that of a character in the comic *The Sandman*—a fairy offered as a gift to the Lord Morpheus. There are also a few references to shadows, both in the C. L. Stevenson poem Helena reads with her parents ("My Shadow") and in the title of one of the books in Domino's bedroom (titled *Shadows in a Mirror*).

9. Compare Freud's doubts on analysis ever reaching a "natural end" ("Analysis Terminable and Interminable," trans. Joan Riviere, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 18 (1937): 373–405).

10. At 2:52." Kubrick himself summarizes Schnitzler's novella thus: "It explores the sexual ambivalence of a happy marriage, and tries to equate the importance of sexual dreams and might-have-beens with reality" (quoted in James Howard, *The Stanley Kubrick Companion* [London: B. T. Batsford, 2000], p. 185).

11. Roger Ebert, "Eyes Wide Shut," in *Roger Ebert's Movie Yearbook 2002* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel), pp. 202–203. Quite aptly, Ebert also suggests that the lack of narrative unity gives each individual scene "the intensity of a dream in which this moment is clear but it is hard to remember where we've come from or guess what comes next" (p. 203).

12. Alexander Walker, *Stanley Kubrick, Director* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), p. 344; Rainer, "Strangelove," p. 49.

13. Rosenbaum, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," p. 264.

14. Judy Pocock, "Collaborative Dreaming: Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle* and Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* and the 'Paradox of the Ordinary,'" *Arachnae* 7 (2000): 76–93, at pp. 90–91.

15. There might be several infernal references in the film. Bill's journey starts with his taxi driving over a fire lane (at 37' 19"); at the Sonata Café, a sign on a red wall at the bottom of the stairs reads "ALL EXITS ARE FINAL" (at 55' 39"), which may remind one of Dante's *Inferno*'s "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here," placed on the door of Hell. Throughout the movie, red is one of the dominant colors, often eerily associated with danger and evil: it is found, for example, in

the carpet on which Nick Nightingale (Todd Field) plays the piano, on the door to Domino's apartment building, in the carpet at the orgy ritual, even in Ziegler's pool table. During the last scene at the FAO Schwartz toy store, in the area where a "Magic Circle" game is advertised (at 2h 28'59"), a red sign reads "Stairs to all floors" (of course, Dante's Hell had many circles), although the New York store has in fact just two floors. Devilish, satanic characters and symbols abound throughout the movie: the Christmas decorations at Ziegler's party (and in fact one that is spotted in Milich's store) look very similar to pentagrams; other decorations (at Ziegler's and at the pub where Bill stops) look like horns. The Hungarian, Sandor Szavost (Sky Dumont), who dances and flirts with Alice, carries a name that is reminiscent of Anton Szandor LaVey, who founded the so-called Church of Satan; the model Gayle, who flirts with Bill, arranges her fingers in what appears to be the "devil's hand" (at 11' 42" and the following); and, of course, the orgy is introduced by a sort of black mass ritual.

16. See his dealings with Domino, Milich, and the taxi driver.

17. Class differences are well signaled by the different Christmas decorations and trees—monumental and decadently rich at Ziegler's, while meager and shabby in Domino's apartment, for example. Interestingly, most of the male figures who seem to be at the service of the higher social ranks appear to be bald or balding; and Milich, who is about to give his daughter to the rich Japanese men, complains with Bill for having "lost, in two weeks, a lot of hair." Rosenbaum aptly emphasizes the theme of "social exclusion" as central to the film ("In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," p. 266). Compare also Tim Kreider, "Review of *Eyes Wide Shut*," *Film Quarterly* 53 (2000): 41–48.

18. The conversation between the two is interrupted by a man wearing a Napoleon mask: perhaps a reference to the movie Kubrick was working on, but also, we could think, to political power. (Notice that the orgy estate is right off Interstate 495, which, in the Washington, DC, area constitutes the U.S. capital's "Beltway.") Bill is questioned for being out of line and in the wrong place a few times: Ziegler protests, "What the hell did you think you were doing?" and one of the youngsters who attack Bill on the street shouts, "Go back where you belong!"

19. See 2h 30' 25" and the following, and 53' 24", respectively. In the film, women are often a source of danger—of temptation and death (think of Domino's being HIV positive). Yet, confirming the duality that pervades virtually every element of this film, they are also shown as caring, understanding, and above all brave and ready to save Bill—whether by a phone call or by actually sacrificing their lives for him.

20. For the possibility that even very divergent interpretations of a work of art may always become part of a global, hierarchically organized interpretation, see Jerrold Levinson, "Hypothetical Intentionalism: Statement, Objections, and Replies," in *Is There a Single Right Interpretation?* ed. Michael Krausz (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), pp. 309–318.

21. Compare Robert Stecker, who names this sort of value "interpretation-centered value" in "Art Interpretation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994): 193–206.

22. Think of what prompts Bill's crisis: the confession of a fantasy that, however powerful, seems not to justify his

reaction. Think also of the many ways in which, in Freudian fashion, sex is associated with death: if the movie really wants to refer to the dangers of sexual desire, it seems to overstate its case.

23. See Noël Carroll, "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 126–160. For a version of the objection, see Jerome Stolnitz, "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (1992): 191–200.

24. Carroll, "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding."

25. Noël Carroll, "Introduction to Part VIII," in *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures: An Anthology*, ed. Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 381–386, at p. 385.

26. As the following analysis should make clear, I am not addressing the interesting and challenging issue of adaptation, but a more general one having to do with a film's realization of a narrative, whether or not the latter preceded the former in some other medium or art form. See also note 28 below.

27. Jerrold Levinson, "Messages in Art," in *Art and Its Messages*, ed. Stephen Davies (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 70–83, at p. 82.

28. Notice how the issue at stake here is not the same as that of originality, since the alternative narrative—that an art critic may easily envisage—need not preexist the artwork under evaluation.

29. Julian Senior of Warner Brothers reported a telephone conversation with Kubrick the afternoon before his death: "It's my best film ever, Julian," an excited Kubrick apparently said (see Bernard Weinraub, "All Eyes for a Peek at Kubrick's Final Film," *The New York Times*, Wednesday, March 10, 1999, pp. E1, E3, at p. E3).

30. See, for example, Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 89ff.

31. For analyses of empathy and of sympathy, see my "In and Out: The Dynamics of Imagination in the Engagement with Narratives," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2008): 11–24, and "In Sympathy with Narrative Characters," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009): 83–95.

32. Most vividly, at 2h 27' 39". In fact, even in that scene, the grounds for unconditional, deep sympathy might be missing. Alice's distressed face follows her husband's confession ("I'll tell you everything . . . I'll tell you everything," he had promised). Yet, we do not witness such confession, and, given the unreality of the events, we cannot know exactly what it entails; hence we are left in the dark on some of the relevant basis for sympathizing with Alice.

33. Compare my "In and Out," p. 18, and "In Sympathy with Narrative Characters," p. 88.

34. When Bill is at the orgy, we also hear his and others' voices as they would be heard through the mask he is wearing.

35. Kubrick very carefully selected the film stock (opting for an out-of-production Kodak stock). He used almost no other light than what the set's "practicals" (Christmas lights, street lampposts, table lamps, and so on) provided and then had the whole film "force-developed" (see Stephen Pizzello, "A Sword in a Bed," *American Cinematographer* 80 [1999]: 28–34, and *The Stanley Kubrick Archives*, ed. Alison Castle [Hong Kong: Taschen, 2008], p. 487). Larry Smith, the film's

director of photography, explains how the “very unusual” process of force-developing on “this picture . . . was a deliberate strategy that was designed to get a special look” and “obtain a particular mood”; at the Christmas party, he says, the technique makes “the lights glow and [gives] everything a slightly surreal edge” (see Pizzello, “A Sword in a Bed,” p. 32).

36. For the relevance of perspective taking, not just to empathy but to sympathy as well, see my “In Sympathy with Narrative Characters.”

37. Compare my “In Sympathy with Narrative Characters,” p. 88.

38. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Fraser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894); see, for example, Book II, Chap. 27, Section 26.

39. See Raymond Martin, “Locke’s Psychology of Personal Identity,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38 (2000): 41–61.

40. Martin, “Locke’s Psychology of Personal Identity,” p. 41.

41. Gregory Currie, who appeals to mental simulation in his investigations of the imagination, makes a claim that is similar to one of mine here, namely, that the simulation of mental states need not always be the simulation of *someone*

(“Anne Brontë and the Uses of the Imagination,” in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran [Oxford: Blackwell, 2006], pp. 209–221). Within simulation theory, Currie states, two separable components are helpfully distinguished, one more general and one more specific: “that human beings have the capacity to generate and manipulate simulative states such as simulative beliefs and desires” and “that this capacity is employed for understanding people’s inner lives and the decisions that spring from them” (p. 212).

42. On the reflexive nature of *North by Northwest*, see George Wilson, *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), chap. 4, pp. 62–81.

43. Versions of this article were presented to the Society for the Philosophic Study of the Contemporary Visual Arts at the Eastern Meetings of the American Philosophical Association (New York, December 29, 2009) and at the annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, Eastern Division (Philadelphia, April 17, 2010). For comments and suggestions on content and style, many thanks to Jerrold Levinson, George Panichas, Erik Schmidt, and especially Cara Cordeaux. Research for this article was supported by a grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation.