

Squalid Infidelities: Worshiping Surface with Eyes Wide Shut

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In his second installment, Randolph Jordan disusses the issue of marital and audio fidelity, this time as exemplified in the film *Eyes Wide Shut*.

When I went to see EYES WIDE SHUT for the first time it left me empty. I wasn't drained from having been through an intense experience. I was simply empty, as though my innards had been beamed to some distant planet leaving behind a hollow shell, a perfect transference of Tom Cruise's "performance" onto my very being. I became Tom Cruise, mentally wandering the streets of a cardboard New York, desperately trying to connect with all that I was presented with on (and off) screen. Like poor Tom, however, I was thwarted by another distancing interruption each time an interpersonal connection loomed. Interestingly enough, each of his interruptions can be tied to the diegetic presence of sound reproduction technology. In this way, the film places its overarching concern for the issue of marital fidelity alongside fidelity issues that arise in film sound theory. But as we saw in this column's inaugural edition (<http://www.synoptique.ca/core/en/articles/squalid>), the concepts and ideologies at work when thinking about fidelity are far reaching and diverse to say the least. So what is the major fidelity issue that can be pinned down in Kubrick's last film?

Eyes Wide Shut deals with the question of whether thinking about cheating on one's partner has the same effect on a relationship as doing it. The film problematizes the idea of mental infidelity in interesting ways. Nicole Kidman admits to Tom that she was once

so tempted by another man that she was ready to give up her marriage and family for one night of passion. This suggests that Tom's reaction to her cheating would have been to break up with her immediately. So the fact that they don't break up over Nicole's temptation of years past suggests that there IS a difference between the desires that lurk in her mind and the actions she takes in the world outside. But wait...if this is so, then why does Tom respond to her inaction by trying to get laid? Is that even what he is doing?

The film ends with an interchange between the two in which it is decided that the events of a single night, or even a lifetime, can never be understood as the whole reality of their relationship. And, similarly, that a dream is never just a dream. There is a deliberate conflation here between thinking and acting, between dream and reality, which revolves around the basic question of where one draws the line of marital fidelity that cannot be crossed. If the line between the binaries of dream and reality is unclear, there emerges the potential for other possibilities outside of this binary construct. With this in mind, where is the line of fidelity to one's partner for Tom and Nicole in this film? Does the blurring of this line result in them breaking free of their established notions of monogamy? And how is the blurring of boundaries represented in the film's formal and aesthetic strategies?

I suggest that the film's exploration of the location of this line is mirrored by its distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music, a distinction blurred by the presence of sound reproduction technology within the narrative. Each time Tom gets further separated

from Nicole through potential sexual interaction with someone else there is sound technology close at hand. The relationship between the idea of separation and the technological reproduction of sound has a long history, but has been perhaps most clearly stated by R. Murray Schafer, the founder of acoustic ecology ^[1] and the World Soundscape Project ^[2]. Before fleshing out these connections in the film, it will be useful to understand Schafer's line of thinking.

Schafer coined the term schizophonia which he describes as "the split between an original sound and its electroacoustical transmission or reproduction" (90). In *The Tuning of the World*, Schafer discusses the role of reproduction technologies in creating a disjunction between original sounds and their propagation through space, and the effect this disjunction has on humans within their sonic environments. One of Schafer's main concerns is that with the creation of sonic environments through technologies of sound reproduction, any environment can stand in for any other thus removing the natural context for the sound's original propagation.

Schafer's anguish over loss of context in highly reproduced sonic environments is echoed by Frederic Jameson's description of the negative connotations of schizophrenic symptoms in *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson argues that the fragmentation, isolation, and surface re-assembly of experience characteristic of postmodernism amounts to a loss of historical context (21). This idea of surface re-assembly without historical context, or surface without depth, is exactly what Schafer decries. For Schafer, the negative connotations of the prefix "schizo" are used intentionally to describe a world which he feels has been drastically altered by the invention of technologies capable of pushing a sound well beyond the limits of its original source. This is an unstable world in which what one hears is not often a reflection of what one sees, a world in which sounds are not contextualized in terms of their sources.

The thinking of Schafer and Jameson has interesting implications when considering sound/image relationships in film. The audiovisual contract inherent to the cinema is an agreement we make to understand the relationships between sound and image based on the rules to which they abide (Chion 222). When our expectations for these rules are played with, our faith in the contract breaks down, and we experience the world through the schizophonic mind. One of the best ways to reflect such an experience on screen is to make use of "on-the-air" sound, described by Michel Chion

as "sounds in a scene that are supposedly transmitted electronically...by radio, telephone, amplification, and so on—sounds that consequently are not subject to 'natural' mechanical laws of sound propagation" (76). Chion feels that on-the-air sound, especially in the case of music, is interesting because it "can transcend or blur the zones of onscreen, offscreen, and nondiegetic" (77). By presenting the technologies that make this blurring possible within the very narrative of a film, such blurring can then be used to support similar states of confusion exhibited by the characters in the film, or even by the film itself. And this is exactly what Kubrick does in *Eyes Wide Shut*.

The film begins with what seems to be a standard non-diegetic use of a Shostakovich waltz. There is no on-the-air quality to the sound that would suggest it is coming from a source in their apartment. Yet a diegetic source is revealed when Tom shuts down their home stereo unit and the music stops. This is a trick such as we'd find on the *Simpsons* or their grand-parents, the *Looney Toons*. It also sets up a basic distrust in the film's audiovisual contract alerting us to the fact that things may not always be what they seem. The film may not always be faithful to our expectations unless we are to expect the unexpected.

Expecting the unexpected is just what Kubrick would have us do, and what we come to expect is for Tom's interactions with other people to be interrupted by the ringing of a phone. The telephone offers one of the most commonly shared experiences of mediated sound. It is a technology based on a schizophonic principal: the separation of the human voice from its grounding in the context of the body and the location of this body in space. Fittingly, Kubrick's use of telephonic interruptions is always in furtherance of Tom becoming increasingly distanced from whoever he happens to be with when the phone call occurs: first during his stoned conversation with Nicole, then as he is about to engage with a hooker, and again during his conversation with old friend Nick Nightingale, the piano player who provides access to the party at the mansion. Each of these calls not only breaks up Tom's interactions with these people, but also serves to remind him, and us, of his increasing emotional distance from his wife.

The telephone thus becomes symbolic of the fidelity issues Tom struggles with throughout the film. This symbolic power is heightened by the presence of Kubrick's manipulation of music between the realms of diegetic and non-diegetic space. This connection is made particularly clear in the scene with the hooker.

As Tom gets up to take the call that interrupts the beginning stages of his sexual encounter, he stops the music on her stereo, another instance in which the potentially non-diegetic music we hear is revealed to be the opposite. After the earlier instance in which Tom revealed an unexpected musical source within the diegesis, and the earlier occurrence of an unexpected phone call, Kubrick here gives us a second instance of each within the same scene. In this way he makes it clear that his play on distinctions between diegetic and nondiegetic music is to be understood in the context of the distancing potential of sound reproduction technology illustrated by his use telephones.

So, after the third phone interruption we arrive at the mansion, by now well primed for expecting confrontations with the separation of sounds from their sources. And we are not disappointed. Tom enters and finds the ritual in progress, backed by Nick seen on stage clearly playing a rig of synthesizers and samplers. The voices of the chanting that we hear are played back in reverse, a feat achievable only through sound reproduction technology like that which is visible on screen. The superficiality of the music accompanying this scene is mirrored by the presence of all the masked guests which serve to prevent any voices heard from being grounded in corporeality. The result is a space in which no sound is attributable to a tangible source. We may well understand that the spoken voices come from the bodies and that the chanting voices come from the keyboards, but this is a faith in the audiovisual contract not substantiated by the film itself: we are not offered the sense of material grounding that we would get from seeing people's lips move in conjunction with the sound of their voices.

Sound mediation has reached its peak at this point in the film. So we must ask ourselves: why has Kubrick placed such emphasis on mediation? Instead of keyboards and samplers he could have had, for example, a giant pipe organ and choir. Instead of full face masks he could have had half-masks that keep the mouth visible. There are a couple of possibilities about his decision that are worth considering. First is the obvious one: full face masks ensure protection of identity, a simple function of the idea that this is nothing more than a private party for people whose identities must be kept secret. In a similar way, the keyboards and samplers call attention to the modernity of the ritual, adding a surface sheen obscuring the ancient depths that the ritual suggests. This lends credence to the idea that this is really just a bunch of super rich white men getting their yayas on with little interest in the historical context or

implications of their actions.

In its combination of sound technology and dissociation of sounds from their sources, the scene at the mansion is an exemplary schizophrenic space. It is also a scene in which surface is celebrated within the narrative, and perhaps by Kubrick himself. I say perhaps because of the ambiguity surrounding whether or not the orgy scene holds a critical or sympathetic stance in relation to that which it represents. Fittingly, this is an ambiguity that is reflected in the blurring of the line between diegetic and non-diegetic music that takes place here.

When Tom begins to wander through the various rooms of the house, the music slips into a mode ordinarily reserved for the non-diegetic: we hear it with equal intensity and no change in spatial signature (Altman 16) no matter where the camera is situated in the space. Yet given the electronic nature of the musical apparatus we have seen, it is reasonable to expect the entire space to be wired for sound reproduction, and that Nick is still playing away downstairs with his music being piped in all over the house. The fact that we can't be sure is the surest sign of all that this space is fundamentally schizophrenic, and that this schizophrenia is a reflection of the separation that Tom is experiencing from his life with Nicole.

Tom is losing his contextualization in relation to his wife. At the same time, the film suggests a decontextualization of sound from source through the presence of sound technology and a potential slippage between states of diegetic and non-diegetic music. Schafer's concepts of schizophrenia and the Lo-Fi soundscape, each of which is premised upon the idea of a loss of context, are made manifest in the context of Tom's potential Lo-Fi situation with regards to his marriage.

The crucial moment comes when Tom is about to be unmasked. As he is brought into the room where he will be questioned, we see Nick being ushered promptly out. The music has stopped and the piano player has left the building, never to be seen again. Yet it is just after Nick leaves that we hear the introduction of the piano theme that will haunt the rest of the film in a decidedly non-diegetic fashion. This is the film's climactic auditory moment. The removal of Nick's presence from the narrative in conjunction with a removal of musical accompaniment from the space of the diegesis has major implications for the issues that I've been suggesting here.

The introduction of the piano theme recalls the only

instance of pure non-diegetic music in the first section of the film: that which accompanies Nicole's confession. The music isn't the same but its relationship to the narrative is. After Nicole's revelation, Tom is plunged into a world plagued by his paranoia surrounding the possibility of her infidelity. When Tom's identity is revealed at the mansion, his paranoia suddenly shifts from the consequences of Nicole's potential infidelity to the consequences of his own. In both cases the paranoia surrounding potential infidelity is marked by the fundamental infidelity that non-diegetic music always presents towards a film's diegesis. The music is a constant reminder that it is separate from the space that the characters occupy yet strangely reflective of that space, just as it calls constant attention to the absence of the piano player who Tom desperately tries to track down to no avail. It might be said that after he leaves the mansion he goes in search of the source of the non-diegetic music and cannot find it. This is a schizophrenic breakdown of the highest order.

Now what if we consider the idea that the very notion of non-diegetic music is a concept designed to add credence to diegetic events? By calling attention to the idea that musical accompaniment comes from outside of the space that the characters occupy, we come to understand that diegetic space as being all the more tangible. In other words, the diegesis is defined by its relationship to its opposite: non-diegetic space. This is a binary construct that draws attention away from the idea of film as a surface without depth, a single plane of expression without an inside and an outside.

The importance of the idea of surface without depth is laid out within the narrative when Ziegler calls Tom to his home to have a frank discussion. He tells Tom that he's making a big deal out of nothing, that there is no depth beneath the surface about which he is inquiring. It was just a bunch of guys having a party, and nothing bad happened to Nick, or to Amanda, the woman who turned up dead from a drug overdose the following day. Ziegler suggests that Nick was reprimanded for allowing Tom to crash a private party, and Amanda's death was a coincidence, not to be read as having anything to do with what Tom suspects took place. The scene at the mansion was a celebration of surface without depth, Schafer and Jameson's nightmare alike. We might take this to be a metaphor for Tom's struggles with Nicole's confession, for that is also something that took place within the space of the mind and found no context in real world action. Her fantasy was separated from grounding in reality, just as Ziegler suggests of Tom's own fantasy about the events of that night at the

mansion.

So perhaps the moral of *Eyes Wide Shut* is not the revelation of the fluid boundary between thinking and doing, or the realization that there is more to any relationship than can be summed up by individual thoughts or actions. Perhaps, in the end, it is about the value in celebrating surface without depth. This celebration would include an understanding that perhaps surface and depth are one and the same, just as thought and action could be. To break down the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music is to acknowledge film as surface: there can be no escape from the grounding in the materiality of the medium.

The shifts from non-diegetic music to diegetic (and vice-versa) that Kubrick employs are ruses suggesting the ultimate impossibility of such a shift. Similarly, his use of Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman suggests the impossibility that we can forget who they are. While Nicole may have given a better technical performance than Tom, there is no escape from their identity as Hollywood's most celebrated couple (at the time). As such, the film is about stripping surface away from context just as Tom and Nicole constantly divert attention away from the context of the diegesis to their status as surface icons outside of that diegesis. We might understand this as a similar process to non-diegetic music exposing itself as outside the space of the characters, only to point us back to the diegesis by highlighting the fact that they are each a part of the same surface. To differentiate between the two is to imagine a depth that is really just a function of juxtapositions upon a single plane. Tom and Nicole do not exist without their films, and *Eyes Wide Shut* does not exist without Tom and Nicole: they are all part of the same plane.

I suggested in the first edition of this column that perhaps marital infidelity was a desire to have one's cake and eat it too, to have the best of two possible worlds within a single plane of existence. *Eyes Wide Shut* examines this possibility. However, instead of employing a narrative directly concerning multiple partner relationships, Kubrick uses the film's concern for the effects of mental infidelity on a monogamous relationship as its guiding principal. In turn, this principal underlies a formal and aesthetic exploration of surface worship and the problems this worship raises for common distinctions made between diegetic and non-diegetic music. So, what value judgments can be made about this idea of surface worship? History has made many, and they vary in tone across different

eras. Next time we will begin with a discussion of pre-Romantic ideals of vocal abstraction and surface texture in the art of singing, and see how these ideas bear out against Schafer, Jameson, and relevant examples from the wonderful world of cinema. Stay tuned...

Randolph Jordan interviewed Richard Kerr in Synoptique 5.

NOTES

- 1 <http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/wfae/home/>
- 2 <http://www.sfu.ca/~truax/wsp.html>

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