

# AMERICANA - E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary

## Volume IV, Number 2, Fall 2008

### "Michel Chion's *Eyes Wide Shut*" review by Zsolt Kelemen

Zsolt Kelemen is an undergraduate student at the Institute of English and American Studies, University of Szeged, Hungary. Email: [kelemenzsolt@gmail.com](mailto:kelemenzsolt@gmail.com)

Michel Chion  
*Eyes Wide Shut*  
British Film Institute (2002)  
ISBN 0-85170-932-X  
88 pages + 7 pages for Notes and Credits

Michel Chion's *Eyes Wide Shut* is fun to read. Not just because the author provides innovative thoughts on the controversial Stanley Kubrick feature, *Eyes Wide Shut*, but also he attempts to contextualize this movie in the Kubrick oeuvre by including comparisons with other movies by the same director. The series editor of British Film Institute Modern Classics, Rob White emphasizes that the series deals with films from the last 30 years that were dominant in contemporary culture and it [the series] "gathers together snapshots of our passion for and understanding of recent movies" (Chion, 1). One of the gathered movies from the last decade was *Eyes Wide Shut* from 1999, which was Kubrick's last and one of the highly criticized movies.

Chion's passion for *Eyes Wide Shut* is an enjoyable and readable book that tackles the issues from the importance of dialogues to the interplays of scenes and music. A composer of experimental music, Chion teaches at various universities in France and in his books he deals with audio-visual relationship, mainly in movies in general (such as *L'Audio-Vision (Son et Image Au Cinema)*, Armand Collin, 1991). His research topics in movies also involved the films of David Lynch (*David Lynch*, BFI Publishing, 2006) and Andreï Tarkovski (*Andreï Tarkovski*, Cahiers du Cinéma/Le Monde, Grands Cinéastes, 2008), but Chion has already written books on Stanley Kubrick, too: *Kubrick's Cinema Odyssey* (BFI Publishing, 2001), *Stanley Kubrick : L'humain, ni plus ni moins* (In Collection "Auteurs", 2005. ISBN 2866423925), and music in films "The Amplification of Sound" (In *Film Theories*, London: Routledge, 2002).

The textual proofs of the author's exquisite and coherent understanding on the last Kubrick movie are concerned with the circumstances of the production of the movie. They also inform us about what other movies were influential to Kubrick when writing the script with Frederic Raphael about the recurring Kubrickian themes (as in *2001, Full Metal Jacket* or *The Shining*). The book cites excerpts from Arthur Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle* (S. Fischer, 1926.) (14), from which the movie was adapted.

The book is divided into 34 mini-chapters, the titles of which all come from the screenplay.<sup>1</sup> The beginning of each section, like the ones dealing with *adaptation* (14) or *parrotting* (70), is related to some issues that Chion thought are of some importance, such as response to what critiques have said about the film or the analysis of excerpts from *Traumnovelle* compared to the movie's screenplay. They intelligently serve as links to Chion's train of thoughts both about the movie and its "external life." For example, in a part, entitled 'Lou Nathason just died' (34) he refers to Kubrick's death and a character's death in the movie and how *Eyes Wide Shut* was modified, as a posthumous film, in its postproduction phase.

Moreover, this unconventional division sets out a textual collage of thoughts that gives us possible interpretations of this particular movie, with the help of movies of directors, like David Lynch or David Fincher. Unconventional in a sense that Chion didn't center the book around distinguishable parts, such as a chronological analysis of the movie, but rather his continuous train of thoughts what governs the book thoroughly.

Michel Chion is quite aware of his own research field when it comes to the sound and music of this film. He meticulously digs out and successfully points out the underlying pattern of the soundtrack. Concerning aural research, Chion tells us that Ligeti's *Musica Ricercata* (performed by Dominic Harlan) is heard five times throughout the movie. This enlightening analysis of the movie does not stop here, as Chion studies the film in great details, he even dismantles the intermittent dialogues to sentences, defining them as examples of what he calls *parroting* (71). As for the play of the words, Chion does not fear of supporting the idea why coarse language is authorized for Sydney Pollack's character in the movie.

His audio-visual inquiry continues with the examination of the nude female body, the codes of the colors of certain scenes, faithful echoing of coarse language of the movie or why certain lines and phrases back up the author's notion of *parroting*.

Chion uses the filmic terminology, like the *shot/reverse shot*, *wide angle tracking shot* or *Steadicam* to describe scenes, suggesting ideas for a scene and to approach Kubrick's technical style in his films. He makes further investigations of a particular scene, dissecting it step by step, drawing gripping analogy between characters as well as other Kubrick movies. To make his comparisons and inquiries more fun, Chion demonstrates his standpoints with photos and stills from the movie.

The book is highly illustrated with photos all from different movies: from *Eyes Wide Shut*, but the reader can see how Heywood Flood talks to his daughter in *2001: A Space Odyssey* or the ending still of *Full Metal Jacket*. These photos serve not just the visual part of Chion's study; they also illustrate the key-scenes (e.g when Alice confesses Bill that she would give up everything just to be with the Naval Officer (70)).

The unconventional division of the book, however, bears two-foldedness. While it is easy to read the book with a good glass of wine, it gets worse if one wants to find a certain part in the book. The sections that are – seemingly – in random order make our search relatively challenging. Then, why seemingly? Because for a continuous reading, one can easily catch up the author's train of thoughts, associations or referents.

But, with no fully satisfying Table of Contents containing at least buzzwords or key-concepts around which the book would be centered, this study leaves the readers go through the book again and again to find what they are looking for.

Michel Chion's *Eyes Wide Shut* is a notable example of how a highly criticized movie can be studied from the point of views of verbalization, symbolism or the ellipses of behaviour. Furthermore it clarifies how this movie is a Kubrickian collage that tackles the issues of adaptation, musical score, seemingly redundant, but feasible filmic properties (such as colors, speeches or technical details) and of a subject of possible and imaginative interpretations.

What we only have to is read it with our eyes *really* wide shut.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The screenplay was written by Stanley Kubrick and Frederic Raphael in 1999. ↵