

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Themes in Kubrick's Films

## APPEARANCE vs REALITY

**INTRODUCTION** As a consummate film director, Kubrick was interested in the complexities of appearance and the allied topics of secrecy, dreams, delusion and dishonesty. Several characters in his film suffer from fantasy, obsession and a tendency to dissemble. Sometimes, lies are told deliberately, to protect oneself; sometimes, the characters fool themselves. And sometimes, characters are forced into pretending or covering up.

**EYES WIDE SHUT** Although the conflict between desire and love is reconciled at the end, the film makes clear the power and potential danger of dreams. Here, it is Alice's experiences that take central stage. Her confession of fantasizing about running away with a naval officer is the trigger to Bill's jealousy and inspires his fantasies. It only took one look, 'a mere glance,' as Alice explains, for her to become obsessed with him. But Bill has been blind all this life, never seeing that his wife has sexual desires just like him. Alice has to rip away his blinders about sexual fantasies. 'If you men only knew,' she says during their argument about gender and fidelity. Bill, by contrast, has to wear a mask in order to witness untrammelled sexual desire at the orgy. He is then unmasked and wants to expose the reality of the orgy but is warned not to do so. He doesn't actually believe Ziegler's story that it was all a dream, but finds it convenient to do so. Again, the concluding scene is significant in expressing the validity of both dreams and reality. Bill asks if Alice is sure that they can keep their marriage together, and she says, '*Only as sure as I am that the reality of one night, let alone that of a lifetime, can ever be the whole truth.*' In other words, reality is limited. Bill replies to this by saying, '*And not a dream is ever just a dream.*' In other words, dreams are partly true.

**FULL METAL JACKET** An important theme in this film is the representation of war, an emphasis that owes a great deal to Michael Herr, who co-wrote the screenplay. After passing out of basic training, Joker, the nominal protagonist, is a journalist, and his friend, Rafterman, is a photographer. Both work for the *Stars and Stripes*, the official US military newspaper, with a history going back to 1861. They attend briefings at which their editor tells them what to write and what he will print, all of which should emphasize the moral cause of the American presence in Vietnam. This includes minor changes in vocabulary, for example, changing 'North Vietnamese army regular' to 'North Vietnamese soldier'. Similarly, 'search and destroy' missions should be 'sweep and clear' missions. The editor also criticizes Joker's report about an assault for its failure to include a 'kill' or 'blood.' 'We run two basic stories,' the editor reminds him. 'Grunts [GIs] who give half their pay to buy geeks [Vietnamese] toothpaste and deodorants...And combat action that results in a kill.' When Joker makes fun of this policy, the editor points out that it is 'not a popular war' and 'it's our job to report the stories that these "why are we here?" civilian reporters ignore.' This picture of official army propaganda about the war stands in contrast with the later scene, when civilian reporters interview the soldiers. Now we hear uncensored voices. 'Think we waste geeks for freedom? This is a slaughter,' says Animal Mother. 'Do I think America belongs in Vietnam?' another soldier says, repeating the reporter's question. 'I don't know. I belong in Vietnam.' One mimics President Johnson's words about not sending American boys to Asia, while another points out the Vietnamese people would rather 'be alive than free.' Joker tops it all off with a parody of the US Army recruiting propaganda when he says, 'I wanted to come and meet interesting people in an ancient culture and...kill them.' Neither the official newspaper nor these vox populi seem able to capture the true nature of the war. The lived experience defies representation.

**PATHS OF GLORY** The overriding theme of the story is the dishonesty and corrupt nature of the military. The power of the generals, especially the privileges of the general staff, insulates them from scrutiny and encourages deception, bad decision-making and cover-ups. There are numerous examples, but two stand out. First, there is the immoral decision by Mireau to fire on his own troops because they have not moved from the trenches. Fortunately, a resolute battery commander refuses

to carry out the order, for which he is punished. But Mireau manages to hush up his error until Dax reveals it to General Broulard. Mireau's power, and his belief in his immunity as a member of the general staff, encouraged him to make such a cruel decision. The other cover-up concerns Lt. Roget's actions on the reconnaissance patrol, when (against regulations) he sent a man ahead, killed him (accidentally) with a hand grenade and then fled back to the trenches. His behaviour is kept secret because the only witness is a lower-ranking man who would not be believed. What the film shows us is that hierarchy encourages deceit and lies. Put simply, power corrupts.