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The Appearance of Knowledge: Oedipus and *Eyes Wide Shut*

This paper considers Stanley Kubrick's final film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, in the context of ancient Greek thought, and specifically of ideas most famously and strikingly exemplified by Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. It argues that beneath the film's evident concern with sex, desire, and human relationships lie two interrelated themes of a more abstract and philosophical kind: that the film can be seen essentially as an exploration of appearance and reality and the problem of knowledge.

These themes are fundamental to Sophocles' play. Oedipus appears to be a great king, reckoned close to a god; but the truth revealed during the action shows his greatness to be nothing - he is in fact an incestuous parricide, the most unfortunate of men. The reversals of the tragedy contain further instances of such paradox: the king seems to be a stranger from Corinth who has come to Thebes, but turns out to be Theban-born; he seems to be the saviour of Thebes, the solver of riddles, but is revealed to be the bringer of plague, incapable of solving Teiresias' riddle about himself; and so on. The contrast between the apparently blind prophet and the apparently sighted king, and Oedipus' later putting-out of his eyes, are obvious metaphors for knowledge and ignorance - and this theme is reflected in Oedipus' name, 'Swollen-foot' but also 'Know-foot', *oida-pous*, an ambiguity which generates a great deal of wordplay.

Early in *Eyes Wide Shut* the model Gayle says to the central character, Bill Harford, 'Do you know what's so nice about doctors? Ö They always seem so knowledgeable.' Bill replies, 'Oh, they are very knowledgeable about all sorts of things.' Soon after, in the middle of a domestic quarrel, Bill declares to his wife, Alice, 'I know you would never be unfaithful to me' - only to learn immediately that Alice had seriously contemplated risking their marriage out of desire for a young naval officer, a disclosure which gives the impetus to the subsequent action. Bill's fantasy about Alice making love with another man is presented cinematically in a way which suggests doubt whether the event was real or imaginary; and the shattering of his claim to knowledge (in itself evocative of Oedipus) introduces a sequence of events which reinforce the idea that nothing can be known for certain. The end of the film emphasizes the impossibility of certain knowledge and the difficulty of separating appearance and reality. The scene is set in a toy store, where truth and illusion are indistinguishable; and this confusion is underscored by the final conversation between Bill and Alice, in which Alice rejects Bill's attempts to pin down the future, effectively accepting uncertainty and surrendering control - which, as the case of Oedipus shows, is always deluded.

Reading *Eyes Wide Shut* through the lens of *Oedipus the King*, then, suggests an interpretation of the film that both demonstrates a coherent underlying thematic and, as the paper also argues, links the work at a fundamental level with other items in Kubrick's variegated oeuvre.