

Desire

Introduction Sexual desire, as depicted in Kubrick's films, is a powerful and natural impulse in men and women, although it is the men who exhibit the more extreme cases of lust. Sexual desire can be healthy, of course, but his films tend to explore the illicit variety with their dangerous sides. Like the violence that partly defines masculinity in his films, sexual desire is a force that men find difficult to control or even to steer into safe harbours. So deeply rooted is desire that it becomes intertwined with other potentially more benign desires, such as ambition.

Fear and Desire The title refers to two types of desires shown in the film: sexual desire (or lust) and personal desire (or ambition). And at times the two are intertwined in this story of four men lost in a forest behind enemy lines after their plane crashed. For example, one of the men, the burly Mac, is afraid that he will never amount to anything and desperately wants to achieve something. He becomes obsessed with killing the enemy general, believing this will make his life worthwhile, but it turns out to be a suicide mission. Sexual desire and fear are mixed up in Sidney, the feverish youth, who lusts after a young woman, whom the men have tied up and left him to look after. He begins to fantasise about her sexually and unties her. But when she runs away, he fears she will betray their location and shoots her dead. In both cases, the man wants something he can't have and that desire, accompanied by anxiety, leads to his destruction. Mac ends up dead, and Sidney goes mad.

Lolita This film presents a somewhat more conventional examples of sexual desire, but they are also attended by danger for the men who desire. Humbert, the middle-aged professor, is smitten by young Lolita and can't get her out of his mind and into his bed. He is relentless in his pursuit of her, emotionally stalking her, controlling her movements and writing about her in his journal. He even marries her mother in order to stay close to her. Humbert's pedophilic desire is his downfall. Some have called the film a 'sexual comedy' (and Peter Sellers is hilarious), but it is more properly a sexual tragedy. The flaw in Humbert's adventure is that his very desire to possess Lolita is what prevents him from achieving that desire. Lolita, for her part, is not innocent of sexual desire, though she is less obsessed than Humbert.

A Clockwork Orange Alex, the protagonist of this film, is about as far as one could get from Humbert. His sexual desire is also very different but equally lethal. Unfocused, transgressive and violent, Alex's sexual desire is part of a 'criminal' mindset that hits out at convention and normality. He rapes wives in front of their husbands; he fantasises about frolicking with nubile naked women; and he uses sexual objects to assault his victims. His desire makes Humbert's seem genteel.

Eyes Wide Shut Kubrick returned to the subject of untamed sexual desire in his last film. A happily married couple, Bill and Alice, are both afflicted by sexual desires for other partners, again not a particular person but rather a free-floating appetite that wants satisfaction. Satisfaction that will be enhanced by going beyond social norms. Alice confesses to having lusted after strangers, and Bill, in effect, wonders what it would be like to act like Alex. In fact, he wanders into an orgy that could be directly out of *A Clockwork Orange*, with its theatricality and bizarre sexual rituals. The film tests the argument that the reason for fidelity within marriage is not that one doesn't want to have other sexual partners; it is because you're not supposed to have them. The film shows both marital partners indulging their sexual fantasies, but only in thought and not in action. Sex with a stranger, it suggests, is thrilling, while sex with your spouse kills desire. Bill and Alice spend the whole film trying to negotiate an acceptable position between anonymity and intimacy, between the erotic and the mundane. In the closing scene, the film suggests that sexual love in marriage might be possible if we can imagine our spouse as the stranger, and thus rekindle our original desire for him/her.