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J. Zimmerman, MA

Sexuality in Cinema

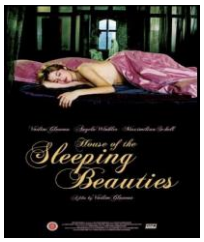
House of the Sleeping Beauties (2006)

Vadim Glowna (1941-2012)

OVERVIEW



Director Born in Eutin, Germany amid the Second World War, the director had his first acting role as a baby in the 1943 melodrama *Immensee: ein deutsches Volkslied*. He was frequently featured in German television up until his death, and he would occasionally seek out roles in British for TV films. Glowna's directorial career didn't begin until 1981 with the release of the drama film *Desperado City* for which he was awarded a golden camera at Cannes. He earned some additional acclaim when he submitted the film *Dies rigorose Leben* to the Berlin International Film Festival in 1983, earning an honorable mention. Before finding his calling as an actor, Glowna served as a merchant sailor, drove a taxi, and worked as a bellhop. Rarely a leading man, he was known for his soft, gravely voice and was a frequently sought out supporting actor.



Film *House of the Sleeping Beauties* is the third adaptation of Yasunari Kawabata's 1961 novella (眠れる美女Nemureru Bijo) which has a translated title of the same name. Glowna's adaptation remains very true to the source material, though (perhaps because of that) it has not been well received. Noted critic Roger Ebert published a review in the Chicago Sun-Times in 2009 that read, "Do you find this premise anything but repugnant? It offends not only civilized members of both sexes, but even dirty old men, dramatizing as it does their dirtiness and oldness." At the time of writing, *House of the Sleeping Beauties* has a 28% approval rating on the film review aggregation site Rotten Tomatoes and a 5.3-star rating on IMDB.

Background As seen above, *House of the Sleeping Beauties* isn't a particularly popular film. Audiences and critics alike react with disgust about the subject matter and the handling of the events in the film. It made only $4,500 in US box offices. Because of this, it is difficult to find any information about the making of the film. In spite of widespread disgust and poor reception, *House of the Sleeping Beauties* remains a visually stunning work that explores often-omitted ideas surrounding morality, eroticism, loneliness, and sexuality in old age.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Edmond – A lonely old man who lost his wife and daughter to a car accident fifteen years ago
Kogi – A mysterious rich friend of Edmond's who introduces him to the house
Madame – The woman who operates the House of the Sleeping Beauties
Mr. Gold – Edmond's driver
Secretary – Edmond's secretary who nurses an unspoken attraction to him

SYNOPSIS

Edmond is a wealthy businessman in his 60s. He lives a repetitive life after the death of his wife and daughter in a car accident fifteen years before. Sometimes, he even sleeps in his office in an attempt to avoid memories of them because he blames himself for their death, thinking his lack of tenderness or care led his wife to commit suicide. His old friend Kogi tries to get him out of this rut, recommending a

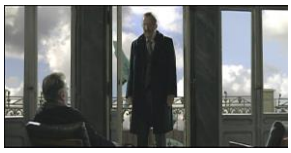
strange brothel he's familiar with: The House of the Sleeping Beauties. Edmond makes his way there and introduces himself to the madame who informs him of the rules. Should he want to sleep beside the beauties, Edmond must agree to no penetrative contact, no questions, and no following the women in the waking world. While he finds the first night strange and off-putting, he soon comes back with greater frequency.

As he returns again and again, he breaks more and more rules and even starts to come on to the madame. Kogi warns Edmond about his behavior, saying he should stay away, but Edmond can't help himself and returns. The madame offers him a special treat, two girls. However, one passes in the night. In spite of this and the subsequent cover-up Edmond observes, he returns once more. Unbeknownst to him, the madame poisons his tea, an action ordered by Kogi to "ease his pain." His dreams and reality collide as he suffers a heart attack and passes away. His body is unceremoniously taken from the house and disposed of.

PLOT



Edmond's punishment – An older man walks through the graffiti-laden streets of a German city puffing on a cigarette. A thoughtful voiceover speaks about the man, Edmond, and his life leading up until now. His past fifteen years have been fraught with self-flagellation based in the belief that the car accident that killed his wife and daughter was a suicide attempt by his wife caused by his lack of care and tenderness. "Edmond continues to run his business," the voiceover concludes, "but as evening settles in, so does the desperation. He rarely goes home anymore… What's there for him?"



Words of an old Chinese poet – The voiceover's voice continues, but now we see the speaker, an older man with gray hair and beard. "In old age," he recites, "when one has lived his life, he is entitled to embrace death in silence. He doesn't need people anymore, he's seen enough of them. He has only need of silence." Edmond stands in front of him, slack-jawed, staring. "It's not appropriate to visit such a person. To address him, to torment him with prattle. Rather, it is fitting to pass the door of his dwelling as if it were the house of no one." Edmond sits in the chair beside the speaker, revealing a statue of a Pegasus behind him as the speaker explains that he was quoting an old Chinese poet, Meng Xie. He then commiserates with Edmond about his occupation with death and loneliness. The conversation is rather one-sided and ends with the speaker telling Edmond of a strange brothel he should visit.



House of the Sleeping Beauties – "No wish, no words could ever bring you back," Edmond says in a voice-over as the camera glances around the city from a rooftop. "Fare well then! Torn from you, alone, forsaken, and filled with pain—no death could be more bitter." We see Edmond smoking in his office: the view of the city is his. Crows caw as they fly past his window. A long car ride takes Edmond to the house his friend mentioned. The madame meets him at the door and leads him up to the room he will be using, explaining some of the rules and the strange service they offer: Their girls will not wake no matter what is done to them, but the men who sleep beside them must not harm or abuse the girls in any way. With all the introductory speeches out of the way, the madame hands Edmond a robe and wishes him good night.



Half-remembered poem – A storm brews outside as Edmond putters around the room, acclimating to his surroundings. He partially quotes a line from a poem about the terrors waiting in the night, but he's unable to remember the poet who wrote it. Thinking of another poem by the same writer, he lists off the ways narcotics can render the body ugly and horrifying as he begins to undress.



“**Women as women”**—Edmond finally examines the young woman in the bed. He grasps her hand gently, kissing and rubbing it against his face. Lifting the blanket, he finds her to be naked as he is, and he begins examining her body as she rolls over in her sleep. As he pushes his body close to hers. “My old friend Kogi told me of this place,” he confides to the sleeping girl. “He said…” Kogi’s voiceover takes over, saying, “It seems to me that I gave up on women as women years ago. But there are people there who prepare a young woman for you in such a way that she doesn’t wake up.” In his mind, Edmond expresses his surprise that such a place actually exists and that he is there. Kogi’s voice interjects again, “I only feel really alive when lying beside a sleeping young woman.” Rolling the young woman over, Edmond runs his hands up and down her again, repeating Kogi’s words about “women as women,” but stating emphatically that he is “not yet so old.” Kissing and licking her nipples, he is reminded of the scent of his mother, shocked that a memory from infancy can remain with him.



Testing the somnolent – Edmond suddenly jumps up, asking if it’s possible that the girl can’t be awoken at all. He begins to shake her violently before dropping her to the mattress again, but she remains totally asleep. Giving up, Edmond settles down to sleep beside her. Outside, crows fly by, cawing in the rising sunlight.



Weeks later – A title card reads, “Two weeks later.” In his office, Edmond makes a phone call to the House of the Sleeping Beauties. He says he’d like to make another visit tonight, and the madame says they can accommodate him, but later than he would like. Still, he agrees, hanging up the phone to smoke a cigarette. The car ride from before plays out again. “Thank you, Gold,” Edmond says, stepping out of his car. Inside, the madame tells him to keep himself and the girl covered up, as it’s unseasonably cold that evening. She also tells him there is a new girl waiting for him, warning him not to act like a lecher or he’ll never be allowed to return. The madame leaves him, wishing him a pleasant sleep as before, but as he undresses, a sound from outside catches Edmond’s ear. He looks out the window to see the madame and several men load a heavy object into the back of a car, which drives away.



“**So young” –** Edmond turns his attention to the new woman the madame has prepared. “More experienced,” he says. “Does that mean better?” In the bed, he inspects the young girl, opening one of her eyes to see the color. They’re blue, and they remind him of someone he can’t recall. Almost immediately after, as he does each time he comes, Edmond breaks another of the madame’s rules, placing a finger in her mouth, which she gently kisses and sucks. Like last time, he tries to jostle the girl awake, but she simply rolls over. This allows him to realize the girl is still a virgin, wondering why she’s here and why the madame called her "experienced." “She’s just a prostitute, but still… so young,” he says, puffing on a cigarette away from the bed. As Edmond slides into the bed, now naked, the girl murmurs in her sleep, dreaming of her mother. As he begins to drift to sleep, Edmond remembers how he and his wife used to make love. This causes him to sit up and begin kissing the girl’s nipples, sliding his hand below the blanket. She rolls away, as if throwing him off.



Breakfast – The madam enters with a tray of tea and pastries. The early morning light glistens on the glass tube of a nearby television. “Good morning!” she shouts through the closed door, rousing Edmond. Sleepily, he kisses the girl’s chest and chin before the madame shouts that he must get up now. Gently, he tucks the young woman in and dresses. The madame asks how he liked the girl the moment he exits the room, and he says she was a lovely girl. He asks if he can meet her after she wakes up, and the madame emphatically denies him the privilege: “We don’t even allow our most senior guests to do that.” Handing him a cup of tea, she suggests that he try not to get attached to any of the girls so that he’s less likely to break their rules. He curiously asks what would happen if he and the girl met on the street, and the madame tells him it’s “against the laws of our establishment.” Edmond tries to ask another question, but the madame tells him to leave.

Mr. Gold's troubles – The madame watches Edmond walk down the stairs and toward his car, thinking to herself about his behavior, pathologizing him as one who fears oncoming death and regrets not returning the love of his loved ones. As he rides home, Edmond listens to his driver, Mr. Gold speak about some lady troubles he's having. "The children are never a problem," says Mr. Gold. "Maybe I'm the problem. My wife says, 'why do you drive for him? There are better, more important things to do. Kill him! Take his money!' 'Sure thing,' I say. 'Kill him, and then what?'" When he steps out of the car, Edmond asks if Mr. Gold needs money, and the driver insists it's just his wife's greed and other marital troubles.



Injection – At the House of the Sleeping Beauties, the young woman still lies in bed. A person approaches and sits near her, a needle in their hand. It's the madame, and she hums quietly as she administers an injection. Edmond speaks to Kogi at his house, who tells him about a man who followed one of the women from the House: "He went after her, and she became afraid. By the river, he was so close that he grabbed for her, thinking she wanted to jump in, and she dragged him in..." Edmond's mouth hangs open as he listens. Back at his office, Edmond looks out the window over the city. Behind him, his secretary approaches silently, watching him in the same manner he watches the city. In her mind, she wishes he would pay attention to her and return her attraction.



Wrong house – Sometime later, Edmond's car appears outside of the House of the Sleeping Beauties again. Mr. Gold opens Edmond's door, and Edmond steps out, telling him his duty is done for the night. At the door of the house, Edmond presses the buzzer, and the madame answers the door only a heartbeat later. "May I help you?" she asks, looking confused. "Aren't you going to let me in?" Edmond asks, equally confused. "I think you have the wrong house," the madame says before closing and locking the door. Wandering the cold streets—having dismissed Mr. Gold—Edmond encounters a child pushing a cart full of discarded and disrepaired items. Edmond stares in horror before reaching into his billfold and pulling out some money, offering it to the child. At first, the child walks on, but they change their mind and take the bill before running after the still-rolling cart.

Strange dream – Early that morning, sleeping with his head on his desk in his office, Edmond has a strange dream. A nude, gray-skinned woman appears behind him and crosses to the desk where she leans, stroking his hair. A yelling man makes comments about the place of women; a blind man of short stature makes rude comments about the state of the city as he clicks by with his cane; The child rolls their cart toward him. Groggily, Edmond reaches for his glasses, rousing himself. His secretary enters the office, surprised to find him already there and casting a lingering glance at the empty bottle of wine on his desk. He asks her for a cup of tea and begins winding his watch, turning it over in his hands to reveal a little clockwork scene of a man and a woman having sex. He makes a quick mental decision and picks up the phone. The madame answers, saying he's welcome to visit, but they have no openings when he asks to visit today.



Complaint to Kogi – "She wouldn't receive me," Edmond says to Kogi, standing in his house. "What does it mean?" "I don't know," Kogi says dismissively. "Women!" Edmond goes on to complain about the call earlier today. "Maybe she has a pain," Kogi says before suggesting, "Maybe she doesn't like you constantly asking questions. I wouldn't go back there." Edmond is confused: Kogi recommended the house. Kogi repeats that he thinks it's best for Edmond to stay away.



Curious madame – One week later, Edmond climbs up the stairs of the house beside the madame. As they reach the parlor, the madame explains that the girl tonight is new and may displease Edmond. Edmond asks what she means by "trainee." The madame responds cryptically, "She's new. A young thing. It's unfamiliar, so she's afraid." The conversation turns to how to train such employees, and Edmond suggests as a joke that having two girls at once "wouldn't be unpleasant for the man." The madame begins to leave, but Edmond grabs her and confronts her about the refusal to let him in last

time. She responds cryptically again, saying she had no choice but knowing Edmond would call again. Suddenly, Edmond begins noticing the madame, how desirable she still is despite her age. She catches on to his gaze and leaves after asking him to help her into her coat.



New girl – In the bedroom, Edmond lights a cigarette as is his habit. Looking at the girl, he's startled when the madame barges in and asks if he'll be returning soon, quickly realizing she's intruding and leaving again. As he undresses, Edmond walks around the room, pontificating about the difference between him and the other old men who "suck the youth" from the sleeping beauties as they sleep. We get the impression this is as much for him as it is for the viewer. He examines the young woman like a piece of meat, commenting that his daughter wouldn't be any older if she were alive. He eyes the sleeping pills left for him before climbing into the bed and kissing the girl. Her lips remind him of a woman he'd slept with many years before, and after retelling the story, he stands and admires the erotic artwork around the room. Finally, he strips and slides under the blanket with the girl.



Morning – The next morning, a car drops off the madame. She quickly enters the building and heads upstairs, rousing Edmond, who is reticent to get out of the bed. Almost lovingly, Edmond covers the young woman, murmuring, "You'll catch cold." He dresses and exits the bedroom, making a strange demand of the madame: "I'd like to be given the sleeping drug so I may sleep the same as they do." The madame quips that it's forbidden, and on top of that it would likely kill an old man like him. Edmond says he doesn't care, that death would be a release. "It's only your third visit here," scolds the madame, "and you're saying such capricious things."



Strange warning – Mr. Gold drives Edmond to a destination. A woman greets him at a door, wiping away tears with a kerchief. "Mr. Kogmann is not here," she says. Edmond begins to argue, but the woman (a servant of Kogi's) closes the door and sends him away, simply saying, "Be careful." Night falls on the city, and once again Edmond makes his way toward the House of the Sleeping Beauties.



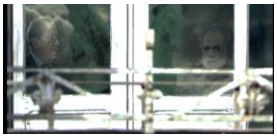
"**There is no evil here"** – The Madame lets him in and follows him up the stairs, offering to help him as he staggers, but he brushes her off. As he did the morning before, Edmond continues to badger her with questions he shouldn't be asking, such as how they'd deal with a dead body if one of their older clients died here. She brushes him off before complaining about how he always calls so suddenly. Again, he asks about the other guests, "Tell me, what is the most evil thing an old man can expect here?" "There is no evil here," the madame says, a hint of anger in her voice. She continues that he could try to strangle a girl and it wouldn't harm her. Edmond goes darker, suggesting that these girls would be a fantastic choice for a lonely old man to kill himself and take a beautiful young woman with him to the afterlife. The madame simply comments that "tonight's woman is hot-blooded" and should keep him warm before quickly leaving.

Hot-blooded woman – A young woman lies in the bed, this one partially dressed with a nightgown around her belly. Edmond examines her, giving her a cursory spank to make sure she's asleep. She begins to murmur in her sleep, and Edmond notices she's speaking French. Edmond undresses and lights a cigarette. As he paces around the room, he looks at the woman before crossing the room and lifting her legs, commenting he could get her pregnant and she wouldn't even notice. He quickly decides against this, putting her legs down and throwing the blanket over her like a cat covering its waste. "For the old there is death," Edmond says. "For the young there is love." For the first time, Edmond takes the sleeping pills before crawling into bed.



Stories of mother – As he starts to drift off to sleep, Edmond tells the sleeping girl stories of his childhood and his mother. When he was very little, he was so sick with pneumonia that the doctors said he would die. He credits his mother holding him all through the night with saving his life. He then recounts a story where his mother ate hair while she was suffering from typhoid just after "The

Great War" (it's not clear if he means the First or Second World War), desperately following the advice of an old woman when no doctor would use medical supplies to help her. She started eating his hair too, leaving them both bald. In spite of everything, she survived and raised Edmond. In his memory, Edmond sees himself as a child and his mother standing in front of a bathroom mirror, laughing at their bald heads. Edmond fondles and kisses the woman before falling asleep with his head on her chest.



"**Sudden death"** – The madame enters the next morning, surprised to find the bedroom door open. She peeks inside at the sleeping Edmond before closing the door and rousing him as usual. Edmond, as always, doesn't want to leave the bed, but the madame enters and drags him away from the girl. Later that morning, Edmond and Kogi talk at his house about someone who also frequented the house who died a "sudden death." Kogi warns Edmond to be careful, but Edmond doesn't want to listen.



Talk of the dead – A few days later, the madame welcomes Edmond back to the house, commenting on the chill of the night. As they make their way upstairs, the madame comments that to die suddenly on such a night holding a beautiful young woman would be a blessing for a man. Edmond takes issue with her comments, though he has made similar ones before. "An old man is the neighbor of death," she says dismissively. In the parlor, Edmond interrogates the madame about the death of their patron, dropping Kogi's name. The madame makes no insinuation that she understands what he's talking about until he says he saw them putting the body in the car. In vague terms, she explains what happens in such circumstances: they dump the body in a cheap hotel and let investigators connect the dots. After far too many questions, the madame reminds Edmond of the girl waiting for him and ushers him inside.



Two women – In the bedroom, Edmond is surprised to find two women lying in the bed. After turning off the light, he begins his routine, speaking aloud about the memory of his "first time with two women." It was his first time at all, he says, and the girl he was having sex with was in bed with another girl. The other girl woke up and realized what was going on, causing a comic calamity. As he retells the story, he examines and gropes the two women in the bed.



"**Why did you leave me?" –** Suddenly struck with sadness about his wife and daughter, he moves into the storage room near the bedroom, smoking a cigarette and wondering, "Why did you leave me? Why?" As if speaking to the matronly statute stored there, he sits and smokes, saying he doesn't believe it was an accident. He sees his wife's image projected beside the face of the statue. He remembers his daughter, how he used to call her 'Kiki,' how he used to protect her from bullies. With one last look at the statue, Edmond finishes his cigarette and moves back into the bedroom.



Farewell kisses – Edmond lowers himself to the bed, wondering what the womens' voices sound like. A bit later, now undressed and beneath the covers, Edmond realizes one of the women is wearing lipstick and decides to "steal a kiss" from her. While he leans in for a kiss, he remembers kissing his mother's corpse in her coffin. He's overwhelmed that he never got a chance to do such a thing, to say farewell to his wife and daughter. As he settles back in, the other girl rolls over to face him, and he "accepts" her "invitation," holding himself over her as if about to penetrate her. Despite his desires, he either can't achieve an erection or decides against the action.

"**True fulfillment" –** From across the room, Edmond speaks to the women in the bed. "The death of an old fart is an ugly affair. How did the madame put it? 'it must be like a passage into paradise for him.' It would be nice if so…" Edmond again takes the sleeping pills, saying he should try to go to sleep. In between the girls again, he thinks about what separates a living person from a dead one. Unseen and unheard, the madame creeps through the storage room, spying on him. As he drifts off, he wonders if the girls would feel disgust, knowing that they lay next to such an old man in the night. He gathers the girls

closer, holding them on either side of him, saying, “If I should die during the night, lying here between these two girls, would it not be the last true fulfillment?” After thinking about how easy it would be to cover up his death, he scoffs, and his thoughts turn back to his mother. He remembers a time when he was very young and he tried to breastfeed after weaning; his mother scolded him, saying he wasn’t her husband.



Dead girl – In his sleep, Edmond’s mother speaks to him, beckoning him to come closer, asking, “Why are you two just standing there?” From the storage room, the madame watches. In the street below, the car appears again. Suddenly, one of the women rolls from the bed and hits the floor, Edmond still dreaming of a visit with his mother. The dream takes a dark tone as blood and death become frequent thoughts. The car backs into the alleyway beside the house, a man closing the big double doors behind it. Being unable to find the second woman causes Edmond to stir in his sleep, rousing him. He finds the woman on the floor, unresponsive and cold. “Oh, God…” he murmurs before calling for the madame. He attempts CPR, but it’s no use. The madame appears and says the woman isn’t dead and that she’ll take care of it. She carries the dead girl away, telling Edmond to go back to bed. Edmond watches the two men stuff the body into the car from the window, the madame looking up at him.



Stalking – The next morning, Edmond watches the barges in the canal, contemplating the inevitability of death. In the bedroom, the madame hums to herself as she changes the sheets: it’s just another day at work to her. Stopping to buy a newspaper, Edmond runs into a young woman, recognizing her as one of the women he’s slept beside. He follows her, but not stealthily, sending her running. She runs all the way to the House of the Sleeping Beauties, the madame letting her in quickly. Before closing the door, the madame looks from where the young woman ran and sees Edmond, shooting him a dangerous look. Speaking to someone off-screen, we hear her say that Edmond must be punished.



Call to Kogi – Kogi stands in his house before the Pegasus statue, a storm brewing in the distance. He speaks on the phone with the madame, saying she must forgive Edmond’s special flavor of loneliness, insisting his friend doesn’t mean any harm. “He has no pleasure in life,” he continues. “I would so much like to release him. You do understand what I mean?” “I understand,” the matron replies over the phone. At his office, Edmond’s secretary brings in his tea, giving him a worried look before bending to collect some folders from a shelf nearby. Edmond stares at her rear for a moment, but dismisses her only a moment later. In the hall outside, the secretary pauses for a moment, wishing Edmond would notice her and return her feelings. Edmond makes a call. The madame answers, telling him to not come before eleven. The secretary overhears this, inferring that Edmond is using a brothel.



The next evening – A title card lets us know it’s the following evening before we see Edmond in a cafe, watching the bustling city outside. Unlike everyone else in the shot, he is alone. His eyes focus on an advertisement for an exhibition of 19th century art featuring a nude woman sprawled on a bed. Later still, Mr. Gold drives him to the House of the Sleeping Beauties. He has to wake Edmond up. Before entering the brothel, Edmond thanks Mr. Gold with a strange finality. The madame meets him at the door, and Mr. Gold rolls away.



Empty bed – The madame makes Edmond’s tea in the background as he undresses, smoking a cigarette. Slowly, he plods toward the bed. When Edmond throws aside the covers, he is shocked to find the bed empty. Groaning and slumping over, the crows flying outside flash across the screen as Edmond seems to begin suffering a heart attack. Other moments from the film and his memory flash across his vision as he tumbles into the bed: The madame pouring his tea with a strange smile, the woman he stalked, his father yelling, his mother’s face, a breast, the

Pegasus statue, crows flying, his secretary bending over, and more. Suddenly, the madame appears as a holy figure in white shrouded in gold light. “An angel escorts me to eternal rest,” Edmond thinks, his eyes closing. Again, the car backs into the alleyway beside the House of the Sleeping Beauties. The madame stands over Edmond, and the golden light around her fades. The two men in the car drive away, and the madame locks up the house, walking home along the empty streets. “It is done,” her voice says. “I knew that I could rely on you,” Kogi replies, “my dear.”

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Edmond – Edmond is a successful businessman in Germany. In spite of his success, he is deeply unhappy because of the death of his wife and daughter in a car accident fifteen years before. This loss and a suggestion by his friend, Kogi, lead him to become a patron of the House of the Sleeping Beauties.

Coward While he tries to hide it, this is Edmond’s main personality trait. He is afraid of everything, be it rejection, loss, or even real intimacy. This cowardice to let go of loss and live leads him to be talked into using the House of the Sleeping Beauties. If he were brave enough to live with his grief instead of seeking to let it devour him, he would have a fast and loyal companion in his secretary who claims to have been attracted to him for the past nearly fifteen years.

Unhappy Edmond wields his unhappiness like a flail, flagellating himself with the loss of his family. He blames himself, though it’s impossible to really know if that is the case. Repeatedly, he claims that it was his lack of intimacy with his wife that led her to take her life and kill her daughter, but, frankly, these are likely a narrative Edmond uses to keep himself unhappy and not actual reality. If she were simply unhappy, there would be countless other ways to deal with it that would keep her daughter alive, but Edmond refuses to see them, blaming himself for what is very likely simply a tragic auto accident.

Talkative We learn very quickly that Edmond is a talkative man in the right circumstances. While he is told not to ask questions by both Kogi and the madame, he refuses to back down, asking question after question after question about the house’s operations and demanding the use of the sleeping drug. He also speaks endlessly to the sleeping girls, finding a captive audience who will neither ignore nor judge him. Through his talkativeness, Edmond often seeks to justify his most immoral and disgusting desires.

The Madame – The only thing we really learn about the madame is that she runs the brothel and she reports to Kogi. Beyond that, she exists only to tend to the house and its guests. We don’t even learn her name.

Orderly The Madame is incredibly orderly. She is always seen straightening and tending to things around the house. When a death occurs, she deals with it as if it were a messy bed or an empty pot of tea. This devotion to order and her skillset allow her to keep the house running no matter what has happened, even if a guest or girl should perish.

Secretive Part of the reason we learn so little about the madame is her ability to keep tight-lipped. She doesn’t often drop information, and when she does, it often spurs more questions than gives answers. We see her sneaking around the storage room when Edmond thinks he is alone, and she is obviously in kahoots with Kogi even though she doesn’t let Edmond know this.

THEMES

<u>Society</u>

Class A minor yet repeating theme in *House of the Sleeping Beauties* is that of class. Edmond is quite wealthy. He has fancy clothes and furniture, a driver, and can afford to own a home he never visits. It is he and Kogi’s wealth that allows them to access the House of the Sleeping Beauties, mirroring issues we see in real life. In many ways, this film is an exploration of upper-class woes: Edmond could afford

therapists, psychiatric drugs, matchmaking services, or even full-service sex workers, but instead he drowns in sorrow and abuses sleeping women who can't even feign intimacy with him.

Illustrative moment The moment that best highlights class comes just after Edmond is kicked out of the brothel. He wanders the streets, encountering a young homeless person. They're so dirty and their clothes are so oversized and mismatched that it's impossible to tell if they're a boy or a girl. Shocked and horrified, Edmond pulls a bill out of his wallet and hands it to the child who ignores him at first. Changing their mind, the child turns around and rips the bill from his hand before chasing after their cart.



Religion Religion represents a very minor theme in *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, but it ties into themes of death and regret. Edmond's old age means he cannot escape thoughts of and the fear of death. In many ways, he uses the sleeping women as confessionals as much as he does for personal comfort, lending a spiritual essence to his rambling speeches to them. Religious imagery begins to appear as the film ends and Edmond dies.

Illustrative moment In Edmond's final moments, the madame appears to him as a Madonna, a white-robed woman bathed in dazzling golden light. In his final breath, he calls her an angel meant to shepherd him to the afterlife. She stands over him as his life fades, the golden glow around her fading as well.

Psychology



Loneliness This theme is almost always present throughout the film. Edmond is incredibly lonely after the death of his wife and daughter, unable to move on fifteen years later. His friend Kogi tries to help him in a perverse way, recommending the House of the Sleeping Beauties. If anything, this recommendation leads Edmond deeper into the depths of dispair as he becomes less connected with his employees, even discussing suicide as a blessing.

Illustrative moment While most moments in the film feature this theme, one of the more interesting is a dream Edmond has a third of the way through the film. After being sent away from the brothel and spending the night on the street, Edmond makes his way back to his office and falls asleep at his desk after drinking wine. Suddenly, a gray-skinned woman appears and sits beside him, stroking his hair. His lack of intimacy created by his inability to let the death of his wife and daughter go manifests in this moment.



Loss We see many moments highlighting or driven by loss. It is at the core of Edmond's hangups and character traits. From the first scene of the film, his wife and daughter haunt the narrative, and their images appear later almost as ghosts haunting Edmond as he tries to drift off to sleep. It's the loss of the women he loves that drives him to take advantage of the House of the Sleeping Beauties.

Illustrative moment The very first scene clearly states the theme of loss and how it will push the story forward. Edmond is drowning in guilt and loss, unable to move on from the death of his wife and daughter fifteen years before. He walks around the dark underbelly of the city while smoking a cigarette, Kogi's voiceover describing his life and suffering.

Sexuality

Old Age Edmond's age is never specified, but he is at least in his late sixties by appearance and his ability to remember the years after the 'Great War,' as he calls it. It's not clear which World War he means, making his age all the hazier. He is frustrated by his lack of sexual intimacy, shown in the way he treats the sleeping women. He often is tempted to have sex with the women, but even when he wants to go through with it, he fails to achieve an erection because of his advanced age. He often speaks on how

he feels young, but as the film goes on, we see just how old and frail he is, such as when he falls asleep in the back of the car or struggles to climb the brothel stairs.



Illustrative moment A special moment discussing old age comes just after Edmond is unable to achieve an erection. He sits in a chair, speaking at length as he smokes a cigarette, trying to escape his feelings of elderly enfeeblement after experiencing impotence. He begins with the words, “The death of an old fart is an ugly affair. How did the madame put it? ‘it must be like a passage into paradise for him.’” Here Edmond is using humor to try and avoid his fear of death, which permeates every moment toward the end of the film. It’s clear being old and being perceived as old are major sources of stress for Edmond, seen in the way he talks with the unconscious women.

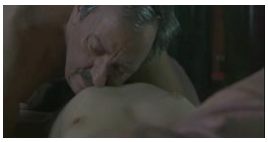
Desire We see an odd, almost clinical approach to desire in this film. Unlike other films where it is hard to define and understand, there is a sickeningly transactional approach to desire in this film. The women Edmond desires are very young (implyed perhaps illegally so), have larger breasts, and are completely helpless. They are no longer—as the film puts it—“women as women”; they are essentially pillows that Edmond can kiss and fondle. He desires to suck a woman dry of her emotional intimacy, but he lacks the courage to put himself out there or move on from his wife after her death. He desires ease and a lack of rejection only made possible by the strange sleeping drug used on the women.

Illustrative moment None is more revealing than the others, so for this illustrative moment, we will examine the first time Edmond examines a sleeping woman. The way he touches and manipulates the woman less resembles a man touching his lover and more appears to be a man evaluating the quality of wares he was just sold. His touches, while trailing into intimate areas, are more out of curiosity about the woman’s appearance than anything else, especially since he isn’t allowed to have sex with them. In these moments, we see Edmond desiring women as possessions, objects.



Sexual assault We’re shown many drug-facilitated sexual assaults throughout the film. While it tries to dance around this unsavory subject both textually and meta-textually, *House of the Sleeping Beauties* is a story about the cowardice that leads men to enact such brutalities on unsuspecting women. Despite having at least one younger woman who is interested in him, Edmond seeks the ease of access the House of the Sleeping Beauties allows him: risk-free (if by design meaningless and unfulfilling) intimacy with beautiful young women. While he is never seen to do anything penetrative, and the plot attempts to suggest this is the appropriate line at which one should stop, Edmond forces himself onto these girls in other ways, including incidents that clearly go against the stated rules of the strange brothel.

Illustrative moment While this film and its themes are notably repugnant to many, one of the more spectacular moments showing this theme sees Edmond trying to justify sexual assault to himself. On one of the nights, he realizes the woman sleeping in the bed is not a virgin, and he tries to justify to himself that no one would no if he “simply made her pregnant.” While he does talk himself out of this course of action, it shows one of his core moral weaknesses and how he views these women less as individuals (or ‘women as women’ as the film puts it) and more as toys for his pleasure.



Impotence This theme appears only once in the film, and vaguely at that. When Edmond is given two girls by the madame, he sleeps between them. In the night, one rolls over to face him. He takes this as an “invitation” and rolls her over to mount her. Moments later, however, he apologizes, blaming his age for something. Reading between the lines, we can easily infer that Edmond was going to go through with raping the girl but was only stopped because he couldn’t achieve an erection.

Shame We see many examples of and reactions to shame throughout the film. Edmond knows that he is doing something wrong and shameful. It's his fear of rejection and the attention of others in his sexual affairs that drives him to partake in the services offered by the House of the Sleeping Beauties. While it is

a source of embarassment and sexual frustration, Edmond desires young women instead of women his own age. He knows such desires would be mocked and reviled by society, so he uses the secretive brothel to get a taste of lechery, but even there he is not allowed to fully indulge in his taboo desires. Edmond often deflects his shame and embarrassment, accusing other men of being the real perverts or being worse than him while enacting the same fantasies in the same place. He develops as the film continues, going from worrying about what the madame thinks of him to stalking the girls he sees out in public in direct violation of both law and the brothel's rules. The shame we see is not very sympathetic, but it is somewhat realistic.



Illustrative moment One of the clearest moments directly addressing Edmond's shame comes early on. During his first conversation with the madame, Edmond asks a series of questions, obviously nervous. Several times in their conversation, he visibly cringes at the madame's asumptions or answers. It's clear this is an embarrassing situation for him, but the way he treats it is a bit dark: He seems more like he's asking a doctor for erectile dysfunction pills or setting up a colonoscopy, not seeking to essentially secretly date rape women. While his shame is visible and changes form several times throughout the film, Edmond shows himself to be someone with lower-than-average shame and embarrassment.



Beauty We see a very surface-level view of beauty in this film. As Edmond pilots the story, his views of beauty are what is on display. He places value on feminine beauty, specifically that of youthful appearance. The way Edmond covets young, beautiful women leads him to become a regular at the House of the Sleeping Beatuties. Knowing that he is old and getting older, he jumps at the chance to have access to young bodies without the chance of being exposed as a lecher or rejected by the young women. He very much enjoys touching and kissing their bodies, especially their breasts. Each night at the brothel, the first thing Edmond does is pull the sheet back and examine the woman in the bed. He often follows this with an almost clinical examination of their bodies, commenting on the softness of their skin or their lack of sexual experience as if he were sizing up a racing horse. These girls' beauty triggers memories in Edmond, reminding him of his own youth, his wife, and even his mother.

Illustrative moment Early on, we see Edmond's strange relationship with beauty. During his first night at the brothel, he strokes and examines the woman's face, commenting on her youth and beauty as he examines her from tip to toe. While he mocks the "old men" who "suck the youth" from these girls, he also goes through the same process.



Youth We see moments of youth almost entirely through the lens of Edmond's sexual desires and avoidance of death. Youth represents the opposite of his existence and his fears. Tight, soft skin and nearly pubescent sexual traits seem to excite him the most. He is always curious to see more of these young women, but he isn't seen sharing a similar curiosity for anyone else besides a few lecherous glances at the madame, likely because of her occupation more than anything. It's because of his fixation on young women that Edmond misses out on the obvious signs his secretary is sending him. If she's to be believed, she's been interested in him since first starting at the company shortly after the deaths of Edmond's wife and daughter. Edmond is very aware of how society views old men who go after young women, and seeking to insulate himself from judgment is a big part of why he patronizes the House of the Sleeping Beauties.

Illustrative moment A moment where youth is on full display comes when the madam prepares the new girl for Edmond. She describes her as "inexperienced" and "scared" even though the girl is doing nothing more than sleeping on drugs, though this is likely to excite Edmond by cluing him in on the girl's youth. When examining the young woman, Edmond comments that his daughter wouldn't be much older than her if she were still alive, revealing that part of his fixation with youth comes from not being able to watch his daughter grow up.



Sexuality In *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, we see sexuality removed from the typical societal norms that usually surround it. Edmond has no current partner, and he is a patron of the strange brothel specifically because he doesn't want to be observed while exploring specific sexual fantasies. The madame's insistence that the women aren't meant to be penetrated makes Edmond's self-enforced celibacy with the sleeping girls seem to be more of a paraphilia than typical sexuality. He enjoys touching and kissing them, and while several times he wishes they could have sex with them or know them while awake, he ultimately submits to the simple pleasure of feeling the women next to him while he sleeps. Edmond's sexuality at this point in his life is totally self-centered: the women are completely interchangeable to him.

<u>Past</u>

Memory Memory is one of the most important themes in the entire film. It comes up in many different ways. Sometimes sporadic memories come to Edmond. In other moments we hear him relive moments from his past in his dreams. He often tells the unconcious women about his past, and we're given glimpses into his childhood. Most frequently, he sees the faces of his mother, his wife, and his daughter. We also learn how grief and loss twist Edmond's memory. He blames himself for what is fairly clearly an accident because of this interaction of emotion and memory.



Illustrative moment One of the clearer moments of this theme comes toward the end of the movie when Edmond begins to drift off to sleep between the two drugged women. He thinks about all the women he's had in his life, wondering who will be the last and who was the first. After some consideration, he thinks about his mother, the woman who birthed him, fed him her milk, and raised him. In many ways, she was the first sexual encounter he had, as he shows by retelling a moment in which he tried to breastfeed after being weaned.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does sexuality in old age play into this story?

2. In what ways does Edmond justify his use of the House of the Sleeping Beauties? Explain.

3. What does this film have to say about women? List at least two examples.

4. Do you sympathize with Edmond or find him monstrous? Explain.