
Vanilla Sky – The Narcissist’s Tale

Graham St. John Stott

Modern Languages Department, Arab American University, Jenin (Palestine).

Correspondence: Graham St John Stott. Modern Languages Department, Arab American University, PO Box 240, Jenin (Palestine).

e-mail: graham@wickedmoon.com

Received 17 April 2012; accepted 29 April 2012.

Summary

Cameron Crowe’s *Vanilla Sky* (2001) is usually approached as a mind game, but its theme is much darker than such a label suggests. As it traces the stages of David Aames’ dream—a dream in which he moves from a pretense of love to murder—we can recognize that David’s self-esteem is pathological. Drawing on Adrian Lyne’s *Fatal Attraction* (1987) to demonstrate an inability to take the needs of others into account, Crowe’s movie provides a case study in Narcissistic Personality Disorder. David kills because he cannot accept the demands of another (doing so would make him less than self-sufficient); not surprisingly, therefore, at the end of the movie, when he wakes to discover that his lover is still alive, he is shocked.

Keywords: Narcissistic personality dis, Mental disorders, Dreams.

Resumen

Vanilla Sky (2001), de Cameron Crowe, normalmente se aprecia como un juego intelectual; no obstante, su temática es mucho más oscura que lo que dicha etiqueta podría sugerir. Mientras recorre las diferentes fases del sueño de David Aames (un sueño en el que se mueve de una pretensión de amor a una de homicidio), nos damos cuenta de que David padece un trastorno de la autoestima. Utilizando como referencia *Atracción Fatal* (1987), de Adrian Lyne, para demostrar la incapacidad de tener en cuenta las necesidades de otros, la película de Crowe nos muestra un caso práctico de trastorno narcisista de la personalidad. David mata porque no es capaz de aceptar las exigencias de otros, ya que supondría para él ponerse en una condición inferior a la autosuficiencia. No resulta sorprendente, por lo tanto, su horror cuando al final de la película se despierta y descubre que su amante sigue viva.

Palabras clave: trastorno narcisista de la personalidad, trastornos mentales, sueños.

The author states that this article is original and that it has not been previously published.

Technical details

Title: *Vanilla Sky*.

Country: USA, Spain.

Year: 2001.

Director: Cameron Crowe.

Music: Nancy Wilson.

Photography: John Toll.

Film editor: Joe Hutshing and Mark Livolsi.

Screenwriter: Cameron Crowe based upon the film *Abre Los Ojos* written by Alejandro Amenábar and Mateo Gil.

Cast: Tom Cruise (David Aames), Penélope Cruz (Sofia Serrano), Cameron Diaz (Julie Gianni), Kurt Russell (McCabe), Jason Lee (Brian Shelby), Noah Taylor (Edmund Ventura), Timothy Spall (Thomas Tipp), Tilda Swinton (Rebecca Dearborn), Michael Shannon (Aaron), Delaina Mitchell (David's Assistant), Shalom Harlow (Colleen), Oona Hart (Lynette), Ivana Milicevic (Emma), Johnny Galecki (Peter Brown), Jhaemi Willens (Jamie Berliner)...

Color: Color.

Runtime: 136 minutes.

Genre: Mystery, Romance, Sci-Fi and Thriller.

Production Companies: Paramount Pictures, Cruise/Wagner Productions (as Cruise/Wagner), Vinyl Films, Sociedad General de Cine (SOGECINE) S.A., Summit Entertainment and Artisan Entertainment.

Synopsis: A successful publisher finds his life taking a turn for the surreal after a car accident with a jaded lover.

Awards: Nominated for Oscar for Best Original Song (Paul McCartney) (2002).

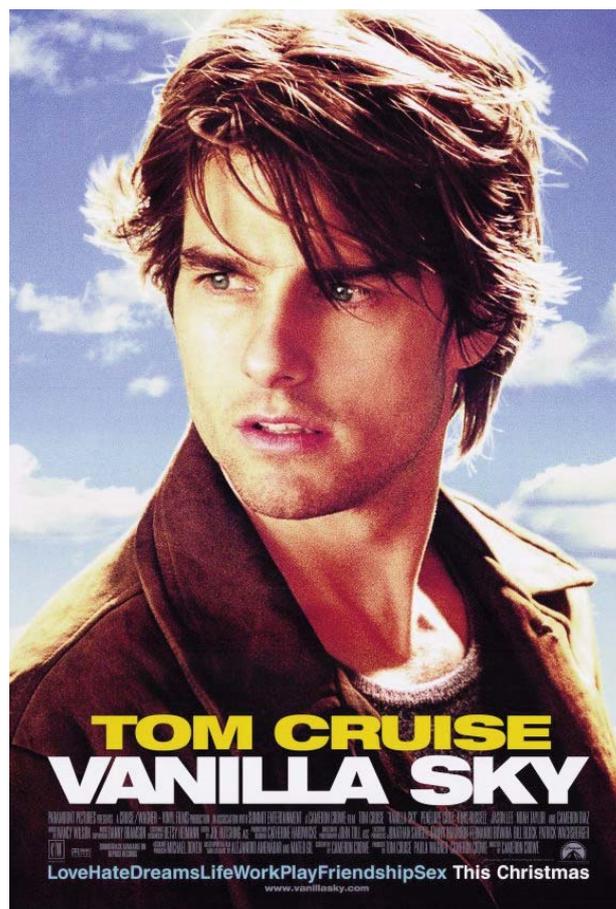
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0259711>

What is happening? he asked himself. What day is this? If I knew what day i'd know everything else; itd seep back bit by bit.

Charles Freck's question, in Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), is the one facing David Aames in the final seconds of *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001). As the film ends, he (and we) need to decide whether (a) it has been 150 years since David killed himself, so that everything that happened in the film after he collapsed on a sidewalk was part of a lucid dream induced by Life Extension (LE)—a dream from which he has now just woken—or (b) there was no suicide, just one night has passed since David fell asleep, and, as Indick¹ suggests,

a. This assumption is based on David's hearing Sofia's voice on the talking alarm as he awakes; although Crowe used the voice of Laura Fraser for these words, not that of Penélope Cruz (who played Sofia), most people who see the film think that it is Sofia's voice, and that is what Crowe's script² specifies.

b. Most obviously, as I show, as a study of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), but as that might have genetic or social causes the case has broad interest.



the movie “takes place completely within a dream.” What day is this?

Arguably the question is easily answered. The final shot of the film is of David's eye in a healthy face (Figure 1, 2:03:48), and so we know that the LE story cannot be true. If it were, David would be waking in an LE facility severely disfigured from a car crash (as in Figure 2, 48:52). Although he is promised by LE that the damage to his face and body can be repaired, there is no suggestion that the work has already been done and that when he wakes he will be his former handsome self. (The part is played by Tom Cruise.) If this is granted there is no reason to doubt that what we have in *Vanilla Sky* is just an ordinary dream. As the movie ends David is awake and back in a relationship with Sofia Serrano^a, and what should concern us is not the question of time (how many hours, days, or years have passed) but that of emotion—why, to judge from the shock in his eyes, he is not happy. Once this is realized then the film's importance as a piece of medical literature becomes clear^b.

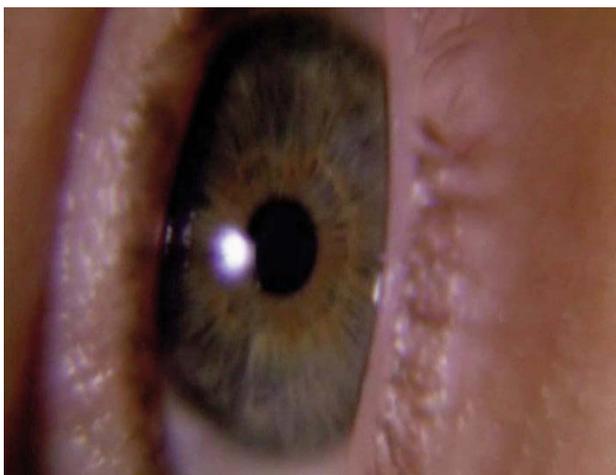


Figure 1



Figure 2

In Crowe’s original, Alejandro Amenábar’s *Abre los ojos* (1997) the ambiguity of the very similar ending cannot be so easily resolved, and indeed is compounded by the possibility that César, Amenábar’s protagonist, is in a nightmare that is beginning again. “Relax . . . open your eyes,” a voice says (just as it does in the remake), but this time the screen is black and we cannot be sure that César ever comes to himself or indeed ever has been awake (1:50:28). Not surprisingly, therefore, critics have stressed the similarities between Amenábar’s film and Paul Verhoeven’s *Total Recall* (1990). In that movie too we are challenged to distinguish between dream, memory and reality. When Douglas Quaid seems to save Mars with the help of Melina, a lieutenant in the rebellion which he had elected to join, it remains a strong possibility that he is just dreaming, or perhaps enjoying the false

memories of a vacation on Mars that he had intended to purchase from ReCall Incorporated—a vacation in which he would “get the girl, kill the bad guys and save the entire planet.” (14:14)

Of course, as Knollmueller³ points out, although such comparisons are inevitable, *Abre los ojos* is more an exploration of the uncanny than a mind game. Crowe’s film is neither. Its focus is the dark world of narcissistic violence. Consider what happens when David hallucinates that one sexual partner, Sofia, has been replaced by another, Julianna Gianni (Julie)—the young woman who had died in the car crash that had left his face disfigured. The first time this happens he beats Sofia up (thinking that she is Julie); when it happens a second time he kills her.

These scenes have not received much critical attention, and this is possibly because the same violence occurs in *Abre los ojos*, where César hallucinates that Sofía has been replaced by Nuria^c, and first attacks and then murders her. But there are important differences between Amenábar’s and Crowe’s treatment of the murder. César is the victim of circumstances beyond his control. David is not. (Although he rationalizes his actions by blaming his victim for everything that has gone wrong, he brings on himself what happens.) César acts impulsively; David does so with deliberation. And most importantly, César reacts with alarm to what he sees, David reacts with hate^d. In *Abre los ojos* Nuria’s attempted murder-suicide was motivated by resentment and jealousy: César had taken up with a new woman before he got to know anything about Nuria herself. Julie’s complaint is more substantial and more troubling. It too starts from a sense of injured pride—the discovery that David had told his friend Brian (or Brian had just decided for himself) that she was his (David’s) “fuck-buddy”—but it goes on to embrace a sense of entitlement that David, totally focused on himself, does not understand but nevertheless fears.

Surprisingly, in his commentary track for the *Vanilla Sky* DVD Crowe is rather dismissive of Julie’s demands, calling her final scene with David (as herself) a “*Carnal Knowledge* tribute,” referring by these words to Bobbie’s suicide attempt in the 1971 Mike Nichols movie (the sequence begins at 1:06:29). However, another suicide, that of Alexandra Forrest (Alex) in Adrian Lyne’s *Fatal Attraction* (1987), provides a better parallel. Alex, it will be remembered, flirts and then sleeps with Dan

c. Other reasons for this neglect are suggested in my final paragraph. Amenábar’s probable source was Dick’s *A Scanner Darkly*⁴ where Bob Arctor, in love with the unresponsive Donna Hawthorne, brings home “a cute little needle-freak named Connie,” only to see the one (Connie) morph into the other (Donna). Dick drew loosely on Sperry’s work⁵ in “hemisphere deconnection” to explain this.

d. McCabe, the psychiatrist who is interviewing David in prison after the murder, suggests that the hallucinations follow from David’s guilt over Julie’s suicide, but there is no evidence that David ever feels guilt or regret—and we should not believe McCabe in any case: he is David’s creation (as an element in his dream), and a way of hiding the truth about himself behind false explanations.

Gallagher while his family is away in Maine. Dan thinks of what happens as a fling, but she doesn't and begins to phone him at his office and at home asking for time with him. When he refuses to give her the attention she demands she damages his car, kills the pet rabbit of his daughter Ellen (famously putting it on the Gallagher stove to boil), kidnaps Ellen from school and takes her to an amusement park, and then tries to kill Dan's wife, Beth.

The Alex who does this is out of control, of course, but as both Leonard⁶ and Conlon⁷ note, although Alex is clearly unbalanced by the end of the movie, she begins her descent into madness with a grievance that should be taken seriously. "I don't think I like this," she complains at a time when an ongoing relationship with Dan still seems possible. "The way you run away after every time we make love." (32:17) When Dan tells her that she is sick, she rejects the idea. "Why," she retorts— "because I won't allow you to treat me like some slut you can just bang a couple of times and throw in the garbage?" (1:07:04) Why, indeed. It is hardly a sign of neuroticism for a man or woman to want more than sex from their sexual partner, and if this granted Alex's objections are justified and Julie has every right to complain. She should not be thought foolish for wanting her love-making with David to count for something, or for holding David responsible for "the promises" he had made (40:16). "Don't you know, David?" she tells him. "Every time you sleep with someone . . . your body makes a promise whether you do or not?" (41:19) Unfortunately, David has no idea what she might mean. To his mind sex entails no commitment, and signifies nothing.

Perhaps David is right and the sexual act does not promise anything; yet, even if he is, it is hardly unreasonable that Julie might think otherwise^e. Unfortunately, David cannot allow for this. Fatally trapped in his narcissism, all that he notices—and it scares him—is that Julie thinks that she has a claim on him and that if she does he would have an obligation towards her. My characterization is not casually made. As Westen⁹ defines the term, narcissism is "a cognitive-affective preoccupation with the self, where 'cognitive preoccupation' refers to a focus of attention on the self; 'affective preoccupation' refers to a preoccupation with one's own need, wishes, goals, ambitions, glory, superiority, or perfection; and 'self' refers to the whole person, including one's subjective experience, actions, and body." To be sure, such a definition might seem extreme, in that it could be argued that

all love is narcissistic. (Greer¹⁰, for example, suggested that it is merely "an assertion of confidence in the self, an extension of narcissism to include one's own kind, variously considered.") But David is more selfish than Greer's formula would lead us to expect. Even when he is most concerned to explain why he could not have killed Sofia, he can go further than admitting to needing her like oxygen. He feeds his ego on Sofia's love for him, but he does not really love her.

At one point, to be sure, David almost recognizes the imbalance in his relationship with Sofia. "We created our own world together," he reflects, thinking of his time with her. "Us versus Them. And we were quite a pair. Her believing in me. Me believing that I deserved it." (1:10:02) But there is no breakthrough; no recognition that Sofia had needs of her own, nothing but an amused awareness of the irony in his words. It is therefore not surprising that he sees Sofia as Julie. She threatens his self-image as Julie had (indeed more than Julie had: she maintains her independence, only accepts him as a lover out of pity, and even knocks him down when she discovers him in her apartment and thinks that he is an intruder), and threatening him in this way makes her the earlier woman's double. They are not doppelgängers, of course (no one could mistake Penelope Cruz for Cameron Diaz), but "alters" that David refuses to acknowledge, others who are equivalent in their object-relationship to him. (I take the terms from Parsons and Shills¹¹.) Successful interaction between people requires anticipation of (and accommodation to) the other's needs. David is not interested in anticipating any wishes but his own and, in his dreams at least, is willing to eliminate anything that might force him to do so.

"To certain individuals and in certain situations," Baumeister and Boden¹² explain, "aggression may seem a perfectly appropriate response to threats to one's view of self." David, faced with the demands of intimacy, is just such a person, and— what is particularly troubling—by the end of the film he is taking pleasure from the fact. When he begins to hallucinate that he is making love to Julie (even though he had gone to bed with Sofia), he does not pull back in shock but continues to orgasm and murder. Indick¹ assumes that David acts as he does because he still wants Julie, and his desire for her, "meshed with his desire for Sofia," leads him to continue with the one what he had begun with the other. But there is no reason to believe this. David had grown bored with Julie before he met Sofia, and when he turns

e. Consider the less controversial act of inviting someone to dinner: it does not take two to eat, and something other than the desire to ingest is intended by the gesture. Something is signified, so that an invitation to share a meal can be an expression of solidarity, a bid for status, an act of compassion, an attempt to conceal loneliness, or a sign of love. As a result the invitation to eat is often more important than what is eaten ("Meals are for family, close friends, honored guests," Douglas⁸ explained. "The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance"). Rightly or wrongly, but quite reasonably, Julie assumes that we could say the same about sex— that the sharing is more important than the menu, and making love *can* be a sign of love.

to homicide his coordinating murder and intercourse has less innocent origins^f.

Those familiar with Freudian theory will find this admixture of love and hate, and the way in which David makes murder part of the sexual act, something familiar. For Freud¹⁵, hate (“as a relation to objects”) was a deeper-rooted emotion than love: “It derives from narcissistic ego’s primordial repudiation of the external world with its outpouring stimuli.” However, we do not need to approach *Vanilla Sky* as Freudians to make sense of what is happening. When David hallucinates that Julie had taken Sofia’s place, the hallucination embodies his fear that Julie and her demands have returned in the other woman and therefore (he thinks) legitimates his use of violence against her. At this point some might argue that all of this theorizing is by the way, as David only killed in a dream. However, we only learn that this is the case at the end of the movie. Prior to then we need some way of making sense of what he is doing, for as we watch it becomes clear that though David (like Amenâbar’s César) mistook his victim, he (unlike his original) knew what he was doing. Although César can be considered a tragic figure (he acts out of confusion and terror, after all), David cannot. He acts to protect his self-image and sustain his pleasure, and this is something that we need to explain however the movie ends. Besides, as noted, David is not happy when the dream over, he is back with Sofia. Although it is unwise to predict future actions from what a person dreams, we can hardly imagine David, awake, reacting to the problems of others with empathy. His unhappiness in waking up to find that Sofia is not dead does not augur well for the future of their relationship.

A longer study would need to consider why so few critics or viewers have paused to reflect on David’s futures^g. Perhaps, given that western society has seen “the fall of social rules and the rise of the individual” (Twenge¹⁶), it is perhaps only to be expected that an audience that sees less extreme forms of narcissism as normal would fail to recognize that David is running without brakes. Biology, as Good¹⁷ notes, “is not external to

but very much within culture,” and perhaps what is thought pathological is culturally determined as well. But be that as it may, here it is enough to note is that Crowe’s film explores the extremes of narcissism with chilling clarity, and that this achievement merits attention and respect^h.

References

1. Indick W. *Movies and the Mind: Theories of the Great Psychoanalysts Applied to Film*. Jefferson (NC): McFarland; 2004.
2. Crowe C. *Vanilla Sky*. London: Faber and Faber; 2001.
3. Knollmueller M. Death is a Dream: Placing Abre los ojos in a Spanish Tradition. *Studies in European Cinema*. 2009;6:203-214.
4. Dick, PK. *A Scanner Darkly*. London: Gollancz; 1999.
5. Sperry RW. Hemisphere Deconnection and Unity in Conscious Awareness. *Am Psychol*. 1968;23:723-33.
6. Leonard S. *Fatal Attraction*. Chichester (UK): Wiley-Blackwell; 2009.
7. Conlon J. The Place of Passion: Reflections on Fatal Attraction. In: BK Grant, editor. *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Austin: University of Texas Press; 1996. p. 401-11.
8. Douglas, M. Deciphering a Meal. In: C Geertz, editor. *Myth, Symbol and Culture*. New York: W. W. Norton; 1971. p. 61-81.
9. Westen D. The Relations Among Narcissism, Egocentrism, Self Concept, and Self-Esteem: Experimental, Clinical, and Theoretical Considerations. *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*. 1990;13:183-239.
10. Greer G. *The Female Eunuch*. London: Paladin; 1971.
11. Parsons T, Shils EA. Categories of the Orientation and Organization of Action. In: T Parsons, EA Shils, editors. *Toward a General Theory of Action*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press; 1951. p. 53-109.
12. Baumeister RF, Boden JM. Aggression and the Self: High Self-Esteem, Low Self-Control, and Ego Threat. In: RG Geen, El Donnerstein, editors. *Human Aggression: Theories, Research, and Implications for Social Policy*. San Diego: Academic Press; 1998. p. 111-37.
13. Krafft-Ebing Rv. *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Special Reference to the Antipathetic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study*; trans. FJ Redman. New York: Redman, 1886.
14. Shakespeare, W. *Othello*. N Sanders, editor. *New Cambridge Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2003.
15. Freud S. Instincts and their Vicissitudes. On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement: Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works; trans. J Strachey. London: Vintage; 2001. Standard Edition 14:109-46.
16. Twenge JM. *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled - and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. New York: Free Press; 2006.
17. Good BJ. *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*. The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1990. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1994.

f. We might remember Vincenz Verzeni (a nineteenth-century Italian serial killer), as quoted by Krafft-Ebing¹³: “I had an unspeakable delight in strangling women, experiencing during the act erections and real sexual pleasure.” Unlike Shakespeare’s Othello¹⁴, who also smothers a woman thinking her other than she is, David enjoys the deed.

g. I base this observation on reviews of *Vanilla Sky* found online at IMDb (<http://www.imdb.com>) and Rotten Tomatoes (<http://www.rottentomatoes.com>).

h. Crowe’s implicit explanation for David’s actions (given in the cut-away montage seen as David kills Sofia) is too simplistic: it takes more than humiliation by a lover to produce a murderer; however, the NPD itself is presented very effectively.