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Tanks but No Tanks

ALTERED STATES. Directed by Ken Russell. Written by Sidney Aaron, based on the novel by Paddy Chayefsky. Special visual effects by Bran Ferren. With William Hurt, Blair Brown, Bob Balaban, Charles Haid.

By Naomi Wise

One hardly knows where to begin.

Opening Number One: OH GOD (literally)! *Altered States*!

Opening Number Two: The usual story. Boy loves isolation tank. Boy loses isolation tank. Boy gets isolation tank (and explodes it with heavy vibes).

Take Three: The experience of consciousness expansion, whether attained through ingestion of controlled substances, through sensory deprivation, or through such traditional methods as solitude, fasting, meditation, or total boredom, is primarily non-verbal and imagistic remphgrub bla blaahgraa wertzglyph etaoim shmrdlu, with the danger, of course, of "flashbacks" gruh gruh. This may be wah wah why acid use has diminished so precipitipitously, and also gives *Altered States* an excuse for its inco, inco, inka dinka doo, herence. (*Gezundheit!*)

Four: A man with a PhD in physiology is mounted by a woman with a PhD in physical anthropology. Abruptly, he stops moving and stares into space.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks.

"God. And Christ," he answers.

She does not get up and leave.

Altered States seems to be a hit, at least in Hollywood, and at least among those blissfully unaware of the notoriety of its director, Ken Russell, whose past credits include *The Music Lovers*, *The Devils*, and *Tommy*, among many (far too many) others. Russell seems to have built his reputation on public, wide-screen hysteria—not, mind you, the tight-reigned, inner hysteria of a Sam Fuller or Nick Ray, but an externalized, hystrionic hysteria, like a child deliberately faking a tantrum. Sometimes, Russell's films can be fun to watch, just to see what he'll do next to

grab some attention. *Altered States* might have been one of those "sometimeses" ten years ago. Then, it would have been new.

The film's received a number of "respectful" reviews, as some sort of exciting experiment in the portrayal of psychedelic hallucinations, but one suspects that the "respectful" reviewers may have avoided all the unrespectable psychedelic films made during the "acid era," because the images of *Altered States* are hardly mind-blowing. Not only were they presaged over a decade ago in Roger Corman's horror film, *The Tomb of Ligeia*, and expanded in Corman's "cheapie" psychedelic film, *The Trip* (although many of the hallucinations therein looked more like Romilar than LSD), but more importantly, numerous independent filmmakers were (and are) seriously exploring the mystical terrain, using genuinely experimental techniques and personal, poetic images. Among these independents is Bay Area filmmaker Scott Bartlett, who served as "Technical Consultant" on *Altered States* with an obvious salutary effect on the range of techniques available for Russell's use. In the late '60s, Bartlett was using multiple images, solarization, synthetic color, and electronic patterns to create absorbing, short abstract films that evoked the best inward aspects of an "altered state," and these works (*Serpent*, *Moon 1969*, *Metanomen*, etc.) include absolutely everything that's praiseworthy in Russell's film (except the quadrophonic Dolby soundtrack)—but better. Bartlett's films, along with those of Brakhage, Broughton, Emshwiller and (more currently) Dennis Pies, among many others, head straight for the revelation without stopping for plot.

But it's the plot—a narrative of pseudo-scientific pretensions—that (along with several million dollars) makes *Altered States* a respectable Hollywood feature instead of an obscure short, and also makes the film so inconsequential. Far from being original, it's merely a retreat of the old "mad scientist

drinks own formula" formula. The unlikely screenwriter, slice-of-lifer Paddy Chayevsky (on whose novel the script was based) has sued to have his name removed from the credits, but I can't say how much of the blame he bears for the final product since I'm not masochistic enough to read his book.

Here, the mad scientist (William Hurt, who looks like nothing so much as a bland, blonde surfer) decides that schizophrenia is a "religious experience" and decides to get himself some. Succumbing to a compulsion to use himself as his experimental subject (like Leary, Lilly, and Huxley before him) he falls madly (of course) in love with an isolation tank that looks like nothing so much as a rusted hot-water heater. Meanwhile, a presumably bright woman (Blair Brown) falls madly in love with him at first sight. This may be because, at first sight, he's framed in dramatic silhouette against the incandescent, saintly white light of an open doorway, which surely must indicate a Heavy Dude.

After he tugs and flicks at her dress until she's delirious with adoration, they go off to Harvard together, jilting the hot water heater in New York. Seven years later, he's divorcing her so that he can return to his first love. On a visit to Mexico, he discovers an arcane potion which makes him fling himself around and eat lizards, although the *brujo*s who've imbibed the same stuff manage to sit through *their* trips with impassive dignity (but then, they're Indians, what else would you expect?). Combining his new goo with the effects of the sensory deprivation tank, his trips turn *really* trippy now.

Up to here, the film is merely boring, with the exception of a few very flashy hallucinations. The problem is that the role of the "hero" is so dimly and dully written that I couldn't remember his name (it's Jessup—JESSUP) from one scene to the next. (The casting of William Hurt hurts, too, since he seems to lack even a modicum of screen presence). The surrounding characters are equally ill-

defined, so that their little conflicts with Jessup over his self-inflicted experiments have all the dramatic excitement of watching several peas vying for elbow-room in the pod. And the dialogue, such as it is, is a plague of five-syllable science words when it's not flailing about in such mystic aphorisms as, "If we dispense with God, we've got nothing but ourselves to explain," and similar observations on the divine.

The reason that God is chatted up with such frequency is that the film's view of consciousness expansion is stuck on Christianity. Now, I'm not knocking anybody's religion, but the great thrust of psychedelia traditionally has been in the direction of non-Western mysticism, whether Buddhist, Hindu, or non-specific Heathen. *Altered States*, however, swings constantly into fire-and-brimstone imagery of possibly questionable sincerity. One suspects that somebody (Russell? Chayevsky?) has either been born again rather recently, or more likely, has simply made a cynical decision that Christian hallucinations may be easier to sell to the great unwashed than any more exotic image system. Besides, the convenient spookiness of the crucifixion imagery does facilitate the film's final transformation into a ridiculously literalistic horror film that might be called, "Dr. Jessup and Mr. Hyde."

(I am now forced to give away the ending, so read no further if you intend to see *Altered States* and think you'll be able to take it seriously.)

Hidden away inside his tank, his hallucinations temporarily invis-

ble to the audience, Jessup tells his microphone that the combination of sensory deprivation and Mexican *brujo*-soup has revealed to him the birth of man in the prehistoric era, and when he emerges from the tank, he can speak only in grunts. Then, the X-rays reveal that he's not just *seeing* apes, he *am* one. Next trip, the film drops its scientific pretensions and turns to plain old corny horror. You can tell something bad is going to happen when the laboratory caretaker falls asleep, leaving a bottle of mustard open. Now, whenever you see an open bottle of mustard, and sleepy caretaker—well, the hairy hand emerges from the tank and... that's what happens to people who leave the caps off the mustard.

Fortunately, Jessup continues further regressions on subsequent trips, enabling him to see God, screw God, and decide that he prefers his ever-loving ex-wife (who still doesn't have the sense to say "Tanks but no tanks"). He also wrecks his favorite hot-water heater, along with the rest of the lab, by exploding it from inside with his unleashed cosmic powers, which may account for his decision in favor of his second-favorite immersion system. Yes, like any good bourgeois husband at the end of a heavy trip, Jessup decides that human love is what really counts, and at this moment reveals definitively that Paddy Chayevsky really *did* have something to do with the script.

The happy re-united couple do face one unique problem, however: Jessup is the only guy I ever saw who turns into the Incredible Hulk when he gets an acid flashback.