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Like "Mon Oncle d'Amerique," "Altered States" too has been inspired by the work of behaviorist scientists—chiefly that of Dr. John Lilly—though in this case, very loosely. As directed by Ken Russell and adapted by Paddy Chayefsky from his own novel (through Chayefsky insisted that his name be removed from the credits after a falling out with Russell), the film concerns one Eddie Jessup (William Hurt), a Harvard psychophysiology professor who uses himself as a subject for some dangerous psychic experiments. These involve sealing himself in an immersion tank (as did Dr. Lilly) and then ingesting various hallucinogens (brought back to Cambridge after a literally mind-blowing trip to Mexico).

What Jessup is after via his hallucinatory experiences is nothing less than direct contact with primitive stages of evolution he believes stored in the human brain. No wonder that his anthropologist wife (Blair Brown) considers him a "Faust freak," and worries that he may be losing his mind and affecting his genetic structure. So far, so plausible. Until, that is, the night that Jessup emerges from his tank a hairy ape-man who rushes off to the zoo to gobble up a gazelle and until he threatens an even more extreme metamorphosis—into, of all things, "primal matter."

Clearly, Jekyll and Hyde have taken over from Dr. Lilly. And to the extent that the film can be taken on this horror movie level, it's a good deal of scary, silly fun. Chayefsky evidently has a good ear for academic jargon, Russell a good feel for the academic milieu. The flair for melodrama and psychedelic effects that the director has revealed in his other films ("Tommy," for example) here finds the perfect arena, with Jessup's hallucinations taking truly hallucinatory form.

In "Mon Oncle d'Amerique" a grave point of view keeps asserting itself within the human comedy. In "Altered States" there lurk some discomfitingly serious intentions within the wild horror show (all those references to Final Truths) and the religious overtones and weighty artistic echoes of much of the imagery.

And so, hampered by pretensions and puerilities, both these psychic voyages reach disappointing destinations. Still, even if getting there has been not only half the fun but just about all of it, it's been quite a trip—and in its own crazy way worth taking.