

Psychoanalysts Through Their Traumas

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Summary

The figure of the psychoanalyst occasionally appeared in the cinema in the thirties and more frequently in the forties. Their strictly therapeutic and beneficial function has led them to be cast in the role of helpers. When psychoanalysis began to occupy a more relevant position in the cinema, the logic of dramatic fiction began to question their “heroic condition”, one in which in which they must seek answers to the contradictions in their own lives, and where they become subject to inner conflicts in which the Hippocratic oath that separates their professional careers and private lives is somehow violated.

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Parodic and melodramatic psychoanalysts

It was the secondary actor Gustav Von Seyffertitz who had the doubtful honour of having been cast in the prototypical image of the equivocal and fraudulent psychoanalyst in the first significant approach to this figure made by the cinema. Of Germanic origin and having been settled in Hollywood since 1917, the actor used his undeniably Central European bearing in innumerable roles linked to the medical and scientific worlds. With an already considerably career as a secondary actor, it is not strange that he was chosen to represent a European psychiatrist in two emblematic productions of the American cinema between the Wars. In *The front Page* (1931) by Lewis Milestone –the first of the different cinema versions of the play by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur *The Front Page* – Seyffertitz is a Viennese therapist (Max J. Engelhofer) who visits a prisoner on death row to certify that he is not insane. With a view to recreating the crime scene, in the middle of the interview he inexplicably gives a gun to the prisoner and of course the prisoner shoots him and escapes, leaving our eminent psychiatrist wounded and in ridicule. In *Mr. Deeds goes to Town* (1936) by Frank Capra, Seyffertitz is again used to parody the farcical character of a Central European psychiatrist in a trial scene in which the mental health of a generous mil-

lionaire played by Gary Cooper is in doubt. It is to these humoristic uses of the psychoanalyst that we must turn (from these two representative examples) if we wish to explore the initial castings of the profession in the movies¹.

The humoristic use of psychoanalysts continues to be a veritable gold mine for contemporary cinema, not necessarily from the point of mockery, although definitely from an appraisal of the degree of eccentricity that their presence may inject into a comedy. In this sense, one could mention the comedy *Beyond Therapy* (1987), by Robert Altman, where the amorous intrigues of the characters cross with their visits to their psychiatrists. Another example is *Analyse This* (1999), by Harold Ramis, a film that addresses the relationship between a gangster (Robert de Niro) and his therapist (Billy Crystal) (a). Nevertheless, the true cinematographic interest of how the psychiatric profession is dealt with lies in the melodramatic sphere, often linked, as we shall see, to crime movies.

This turn of events began in Hollywood after the Second World War when America had to undergo the collective trauma of the call to arms and then somehow integrate the psychic traumas of ex-combatants and of those awaiting their return alike into a more adult and sensible view of the new thera-



pies of the mind. In the very middle of the conflict, during a period marked by the need to engage the attention of a female public awaiting its loved ones at home, one film -*Now, Voyager* (1942), by Irving Rapper, depicted the model of the *nice* psychoanalyst (Claude Rains), who gave the timid spinster played by Bette Davies a chance to reinvent herself. However, in this film, although in a positive fashion, the role of the psychoanalyst is only one of *helper*, since the romance actually emerges between the spinster and the married man she meets on a cruise (Paul Henreid).

Psychoanalysis and suspense: therapists' interior crises

The real turning point in the consideration of the world of psychoanalysis as a universe with its own driving life force undoubtedly occurred in 1945, when Alfred Hitchcock began -with *Spellbound*- a long series of films in Hollywood films addressing the issue. In the America under construction during the

immediate post-war period -dominated by a lot of ill feeling brought about the unleashing of the A-bomb, overarching anticommunist paranoia and the crisis of family values- the images of a cinema that highlighted its expressionist dimension through the apotheosis of a very stylised black and white production coincided with the constant gush of news about the misery of ex-combatants and traumatised soldiers, and it was from that pessimistic context that the *boom* of psychoanalysis as a subgenre for thrillers really emerged.

Like most of the films of the British director, *Spellbound* focuses on a criminal plot, although in this case linked to psychoanalysis. This link between psychoanalytical and “detectivesque” investigation has always been present in human mental activity since both types are retrospective in nature, based on interviews, clues and deductions drawn from a semiotic constellation that finally becomes coherent when the truth emerges². A recent novel by Jed Rubenfeld *The Interpretation of Murder*, which traces a hypothetical criminal investigation carried out by Freud himself in New York at the beginnings of the last century, again unveils this homology between both figures (therapist and detective), although it is by no means the first case in which fiction has explored the topic. The novel of Nicholas Meyer, taken to the big screen by Herbert Ross in *The Seven-per-Cent Solution* (1976), tells of an imaginary collaboration between Freud and Sherlock Holmes to solve a murder case. Returning to more domestic climes, the literary figure of the psychoanalyst dedicated to research gave post-war Spain a charismatic, although now all but forgotten, character in the person of the Dutch psychiatrist Ludwig van Zigman, fruit of the imagination of the Catalan writer Jaume Ministral (b).

Notwithstanding, many centuries before the historical period in which both professions -the therapist and the detective- became popularized, the homology between psychoanalysis and criminal investigation was already implicitly present in classic culture. When Freud traces the very bases of his theory of sexuality to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, he is analysing a drama that is no more than the first police investigation in history. In his search for someone to blame (*Who killed Laius?*) the new king of Thebes -Oedipus- ends up revisiting an unknown childhood, peppered with traumatic secrets that are finally revealed. In Sophocles' drama, the equivalence between the seeker

a.- Curiously, this film was first shown in the same year as the HBO TV channel released the cult series *The Sopranos*, in which the gangster also visits a psychiatrist. In this case, there is no fun-poking at all at psychiatrists, who are certainly treated with the dignity they merit.

b.- Under the pen name of J. Lartssinim, and using the famous *Biblioteca Oro de Edsitorial Molino*, Ministral published a series of six suggestive novels in which this psychiatrist was portrayed as being involved in police investigations.

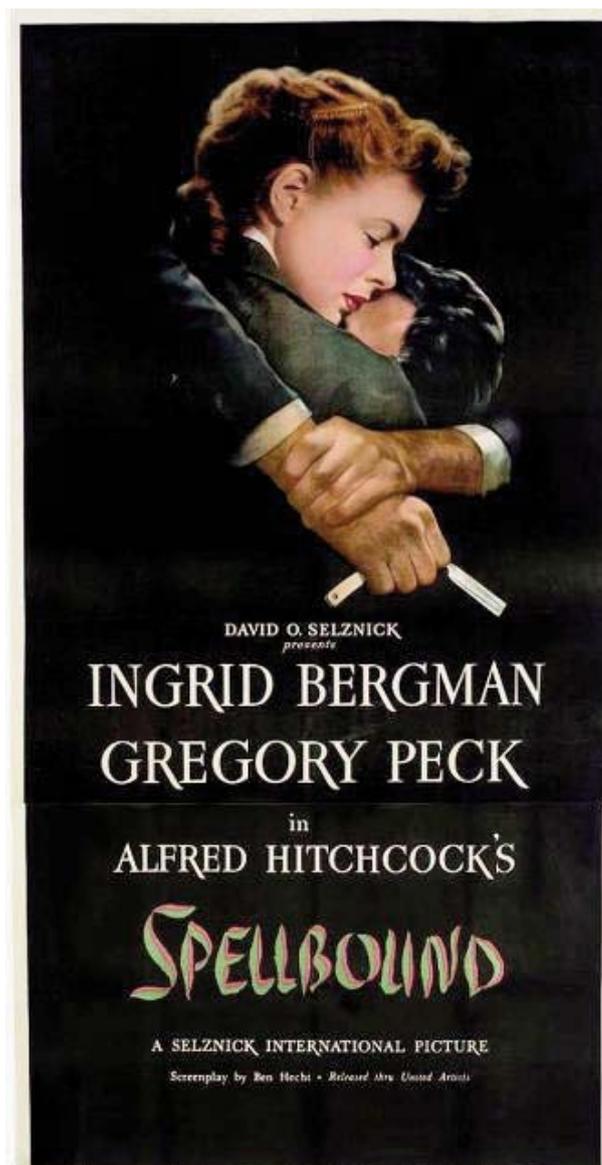
and the sought (that paradoxical protocol of the *hunter hunted*) elicits a tragic solution that informs us of the vulnerable nature of someone who before starting the quest believed himself to be in possession of all the knowledge and certainty conferred by his supreme position of power. This dismantling of the certainties of the seeker is also featured in many of the movie stories starring psychoanalysts that were to follow *Spellbound*.

What first draws our attention in Hitchcock's film is the fact that the main character in the film is played by a woman; i.e., very different from the classic heroes. It is she, the psychoanalyst, who becomes not only the investigator of a hypothetical crime but also the subject of unexpected romance instilled in her by the amnesic patient who arrives at her hospital (and who in the end turns out to be another traumatised psychoanalyst) (c). The ordered and scientific world that seems to surround Freudian theory breaks down and leads to inner crises that entangle psychiatrists themselves: this is the dramatic interest insinuated by the magnificent script of Ben Hetch in *Spellbound*, which was to become one of the best played portrayed ploys in films in which psychiatrists are the main characters.

We say *main characters* because although psychiatrists often appear in films from different periods as being involved in secondary assistance work, their dramatic interest as the actual heroes can only exist if they are subject to some kind of crisis and if they do not merely serve as investigators of what is happening outside their own lives. When psychoanalysis became popular in the movies after *Spellbound*, the codes of classic heroic cinema (normally associated with adventure, westerns, and in general the epics of wide open spaces) were being transformed by the emergence of the *film noir*, brought to the big screen in the post war period, with a subjugating array of images and stories alluding to moral decline, the loss of values, disenchantment with city life, and the psychological damage engendered by armed conflict. The melancholic passiveness and tragic romanticism of the heroes of the *film noir* (Humphrey Bogart, Allan Ladd, Robert Mitchum) preside an *actantial* model in which the Manichaeic and simplifying contours of the optimistic period lost all meaning.

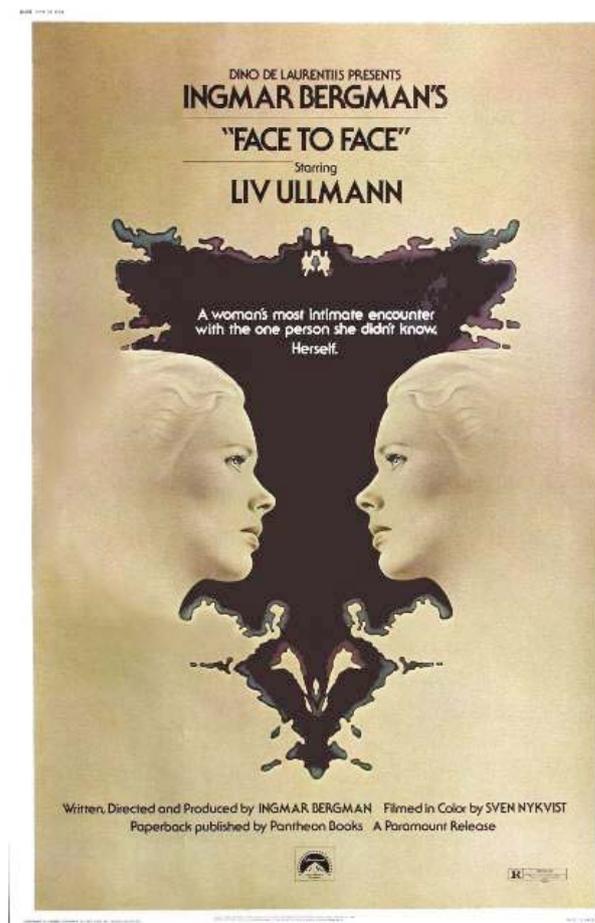
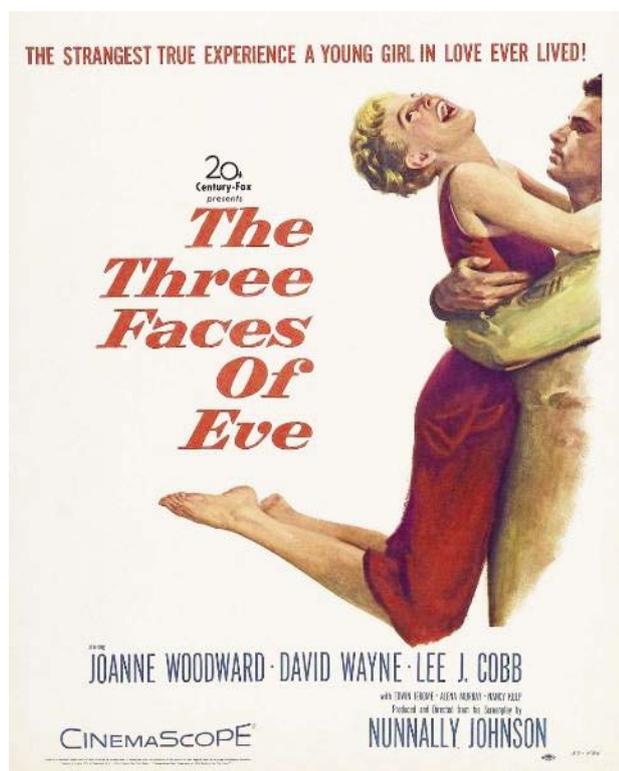
So we are a long way away from an imaginary world of respectable psychoanalysts devoted to tack-

c.- In *Spellbound*, we also see a psychoanalyst of European extraction as a secondary character – Dr. Alexander Brulov (Michael Chekhov)-, although in this instance he is not only treated with the maximum respect but also becomes the wise, protective, paternal and conciliatory figure needed by the two main characters to overcome their problems. The fact that the couple is formed by another two psychiatrists adds a very valuable element for later movies.



ling social problems with infallible methods in which the investigator always remains to one side. And it is in this way that *Spellbound* – even though, as is usual in Hitchcock, it is a film apparently devoid of from explicit socio-historical dimension- places the idea of trauma at the epicentre of the psyche of its heroes. In this vein, some films addressing psychiatric issues have used a criminal subplot to heighten interest, as is the case of *The Snake Pit* (1948) by Anatole Litvak, although in this case the psychoanalyst (Leo Genn) continues to have a secondary role. Nevertheless, in general from *Spellbound* onwards whenever a psychoanalyst is in the front line of the cast of a police film we shall find a person with inner problems.

It is true that the psychiatrist playing the part of the invulnerable hero/saviour may exceptionally appear in films - Dr. Luther (Lee J. Cobb) in *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957), by Nunnally Johnson, or Dr. Berger in *Ordinary People* (1980), by Robert Redford-but even in these cases the true stars of the films are their respective patients and the family members involved in each case. Accordingly, cinema revolving around psychoanalysts always ends up focusing on characters who appear as exceptional; not as routine practitioners of their profession. (d).



tion to show him/herself as invulnerable and the tragic experiences of life that she/he must live through. This is the diaphanous case of *La stanza del figlio* (2001), by Nani Moretti, where the accidental death of a child leads the psychoanalyst, the star of the film, to a moral reappraisal (not exempt of feelings of guilt) of the whole of his prior existence.

Genre cinema and its pessimistic view of psychoanalysts

The crisis of the psychiatrist can be addressed as a drama outside the notion of genre, along the line opened by Ingmar Bergman in *Anskite mot Anskite* (1976), a story of the moral breakdown of a marriage formed by two therapists, which Woody Allen undoubtedly took as a reference in his own approaches (humoristic or not, depending on the film) to psychiatrists. We may even see stories outside the sphere of psychoanalysis that, on exploring the crevasses in the emotional lives of therapists, examines the contrast between the psychiatrist's moral obliga-

But the true gold mine for the obliteration of therapists' certainties is seen in Hollywood films linked to the logic and conventions of the genre. A well trodden pathway in films based on crime is, for example, that of the psychiatrist who is in love with his/her patient, who is often suspect. *Still of the Night* (1983), by Robert Benton, is a model whose relatively gentle formal format has given rise to films increasingly based on the psychological imbalances present in the lives of therapists and on the possibility of discrediting them as supra-natural heroes through to their tendency to succumb to passion. Thus, Richard Gere portrays a vulnerable psychoanalyst -Dr. Isaac Barr- in *Final Analysis* (1992), by Phil Joanou,

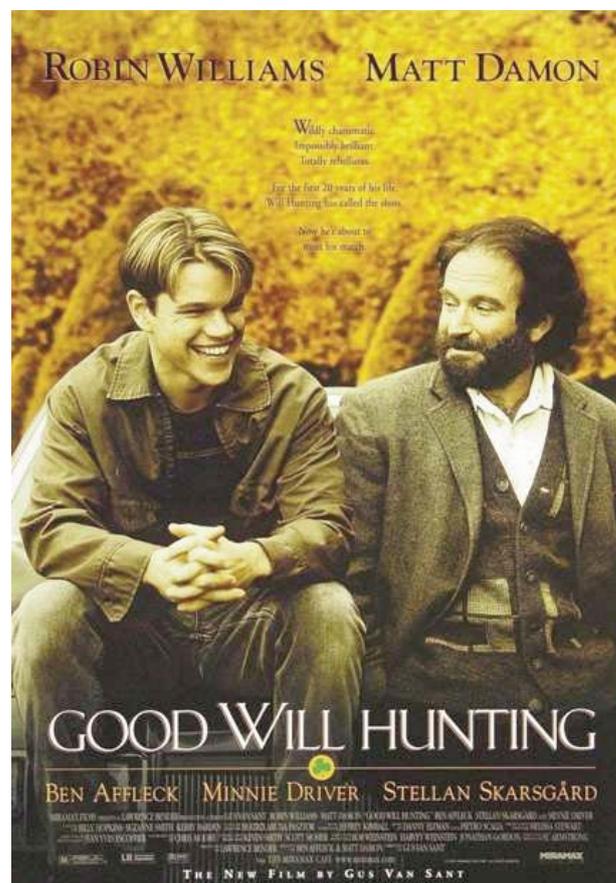
d.- In any case, this routine may be suspect, as occurs in *Equus* (1977) by Sydney Lumet, a film about a case of zoophilia in which the therapy eventually casts the values and perceptions of the insipid daily life of the doctor (Richard Burton) into utter darkness.

entrapped within his fascination for two attractive women (Uma Thurman and Kim Basinger) and immersed in a labyrinthine criminal plot. The film is a paradigmatic example of the use in contemporary thrillers of the figure of the psychiatrist as a male hero dispossessed of the capacity to bring order to things, and a territory where the phantasm of the femme fatale emerges with rekindled force. These heroes, who with no phalocratic weapons to defend themselves with, enter the murky swamp of psychic emotions end up being ensnared in the fatal net of aggressive womanhood. Films such as *Color of Night* (1995), by Richard Rush, or *Basic Instinct 2* (2006), by Michael Caton-Jones, have emphasised this critical deviation from the rational capacity of therapy to put order into the chaos of desire. Additionally, in some of these cases this all-devouring femaleness takes overbearing control of the psychoanalyst's unconscious until converting him/her directly into a murderer. Let us recall here the explicitness of the classic *erotic thriller* of Brian de Palma *Dressed to Kill* (1980), a covert remake of the narrative structure of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1969), in which the mysterious cross-dressing murderer who half way through the film has killed a woman (Angie Dickinson) turns out to be none other than her own psychoanalyst, played by the totemic Michael Caine.

What in the police genre is obligatory does not escape other formats that sometimes include a therapist as one of the main characters. The model of the psychiatrist in love (often a woman) is translated to melodrama in films such as *The Prince of Tides* (1991) by Barbra Streisand, in which one of the main characters, played by Streisand herself, falls in love with the traumatised patient (Nick Nolte), or *Mr. Jones* (1993), by Mike Figgis, where the doctor (played by Leona Olin) also falls into the clutches of passion with a bipolar patient (Richard Gere).

But it is not only in the field of sexual relations that the weaker side of the psychoanalyst is reflected. The change in paradigm that has emerged in North American fiction since *Star Wars* (1977), with the significant switch from *boy meets girl* to *boy meets fathers*, has also allowed some narrative explorations in which the figure of the psychiatrist as the main character can be introduced into the educational device underlying much of the new fiction. The most

emblematic case of this is *Good Will Hunting* (1997), in which the relationship between the genius Will (Matt Damon) and his therapist Sean McGuire (Robin Williams) is perfectly matched to a plot based on the idea of initiation, a process in which both characters exchange positions affectively. The doctor manages to get Will through his traumas but in turn the therapy invites him to address his own inner contradictions; so much so that he eventually abandons his professional career. Thus, here too -and following the central hypothesis of this article- the logic of the fiction bolsters the figure of the psychoanalyst precisely by looking at his deficits and weaknesses.



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