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Psychiatry in the movies

Right and wrong

Peter Byrne

Few movie psychiatrists can be faulted for their intelligent questions. It's their answers that drag us down.

Dr Fritz Lehman from *Bringing up Baby* (1938) declares Katharine Hepburn's leopard to be imaginary. This is an unwise judgement, given that both her tamed leopard 'Baby' and the other all-too-real circus leopard, untamed, escaped. As *Dead of Night* (1945) proceeds, expert psychiatrist Dr van Straaten gives increasingly implausible 'scientific' explanations for things that go bump in the night. A psychiatrist draws the wrong conclusions and pays with his life in many films, from *Strait-Jacket* and *The Third Secret* (both 1964) to *Candyman* (1992) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Clueless psychiatrists continue to inhabit the worlds of the supernatural and science fiction – in *The Exorcist* (1973) and three *Terminator* films (1984, 1991 & 2003), dogmatic judgments have painful consequences for psychiatrists. Although lawyer Richard Gere in *Primal Fear* (1996) gets 'a real psychiatrist, not one who lives in a witness box', his expert is easily duped by the killer who fakes multiple personalities.

Freud (1962) may be considered the culminating film in the golden age of mostly positive representations of psychiatrists. From this point on, psychiatrists fall from grace, for a variety of reasons (more adult themes, over-idealisation, loss of deference with anti-authority attitudes). Worse than being wrong, psychiatrists/detectives have abused their skills for financial gain (*Mr Deeds Goes to Town*, 1936), revenge (*A Fine Madness*, 1966), sexual advantage (*Bad Timing*, 1980), homicide (*House of Cards*, 1987), and to hide their mistakes (*Final Analysis*, 1992 and *Asylum*, 2005). For every abuser, there are ten incompetent psychiatrists. In *White Heat* (1949), psychiatrists demand Cody (James Cagney) be released from his strait-jacket when he asks for some food – 'hunger is a helpful sign [of recovery]'. He escapes immediately, as does the serial killer Hannibal Lecter when the hapless psychiatrist Dr Chilton mislays his pen in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Lecter's hunger to 'have an old friend for dinner' in the film's closing scene is an unhelpful sign for his psychiatrist.

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