

# Cinematic portrayals of psychiatrists

Abstract - Psychiatrists, as seen through the eyes of film makers, are at one and same time omnipotent and useless, progressive and reactionary, compassionate and destructive, perceptive and blind. A particularly popular representation of the psychiatrist is as a deeply flawed psychologically disturbed individual who cures through empathy or destroys through malevolence. Female psychiatrists are almost invariably portrayed as histrionic and dependent, as likely to be cured by love as therapeutically effective.

Psychiatrists seeing themselves portrayed on screen should take a careful look. Whatever the image, caricature or miniature, affectionate or hostile, however paradoxical or stereotypical, the image shown there is the image patients see. More recent portrayals, affected by a developing collaboration between psychiatrists and film and television writers and scriptwriters, suggest that a more realistic and balanced portrayal is beginning to emerge. In this paper, some of the more persistent cinematic stereotypes of psychiatrists are explored.

.....The psychiatrist as manipulator, as priest, as pervert, as lecher, as stricken, tortured soul - these are just some of the screen images that have seduced Hollywood. And when it comes to therapy, the winner is - catharsis. The excavation of buried, traumatic memories, for fairly obvious dramatic reasons, is the treatment to which again and again movie makers return.

In another Oscar-winning film, *Ordinary People*, catharsis appeared again and with it a portrayal of a psychiatrist as such a likeable, humane, approachable, jargon-free and unpretentious person that psychiatrists shown the film at an annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association reportedly indicated that this is the kind of psychiatrist they would most like to be!

Indeed, Judd Hirsch's portrayal of the sensitive, caring and fallible Dr. Berger served, in the words of Gabard and Gabard, (1987) "to reverse the antipsychiatrist tradition and in a sense to bring back the old pattern of reconciliation". Dr. Berger is

casually dressed, incompetent with machinery, has a cluttered desk, gives off a slightly addled aura and is not above hugging his patients, albeit male, and being quite blunt and confrontational.

One reason that doctors and patients liked Dr. Berger is that he appears to be the kind of psychiatrist one might wish to see when feeling vulnerable and isolated. He touches a cord. The part played by Judd Hirsch reminds one of the psychiatrist described by a manic depressive patient as follows:

*I remember sitting in your office a hundred times during those grim months and thinking, what on earth can he say that will make me feel better or keep me alive?*

*Well, there was never anything you could say, that's the funny thing. It was the stupid, desperately optimistic, condescending things you didn't say that kept me alive; all the compassion and warmth I felt from you that could not have been said, all the intelligence, competence and time you put into it; and your granite belief that mine was a life worth living.*

*You were terribly direct which was terribly important, and you were willing to admit the limits of your understanding and treatments and when you were wrong. Most difficult to put into words but in many ways the essence of everything. You taught me that the road from suicide to life is cold and colder and colder still, but - with steely effort, the grace of God and an inevitable break in the weather - that I can make it.* (Goodwin & Jamison 1991)

That anonymous patient, I have since learned, was Kay Redfield Jamison who has since made her own superb contribution to ending the stigmatization of the mentally ill by writing one of the truly great autobiographical accounts of psychiatric illness, *An Unquiet Mind*. (Jamison 1996).

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Cinematic portrayals of psychiatrists  
Anthony Clare

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