

Real to Reel – Psychiatry at the Cinema

Ron Roberts. (2012). Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.

The institution of psychiatry like the institution of slavery, consists of a socially sanctioned relationship between a class of superiors coercively controlling a class of inferiors.

(Szasz quoted in Roberts, 2012: p.iii)

This is a pleasantly presented book, with the text running for 110 pages, a useful 7-page reference list, an important 2-page appendix, and a 10-page index. This work critically examines seven key, cerebral films, dedicating a chapter to each one, in order to demonstrate social reality and the power of psychiatry. Ron Roberts is Senior Lecturer at Kingston University, and his writing is acutely perceptive, and passionate, delivering enlightening conclusions, for both the existential practitioner and the survivor of psychiatric services. It is no accident that several of the films in this book are set in the 1950s and 1960s, with the depiction of mental disability as often horrific, and psychiatry as a harmful approach to human well-being. In fact, it could be argued that in this book psychiatry is presented as the definitive betrayal of rationalist utopia; a unique guide of just what is at stake.

For this book review, I shall concentrate mainly on the films I believe to be the most useful in everyday existential practice, as the author utilizes a very specific vocabulary with highly sophisticated content. So, I shall consider *Shutter Island*, *A Beautiful Mind*, and *An Angel at My Table*, the three most straightforward, enjoyable and helpful films, each in turn. These films inspire caution, diligence and strength of willpower; all vital qualities for the analyst.

Firstly, to begin with we are in the year 1954 on one of the Boston Harbour Islands; *Shutter Island* is clearly an account of caution, and warning for the schizophrenic, not to drift into paranoid states of delusion, and to beware of psychiatry as a specific brand of ‘*Western savagery*’, (Roberts, 2012: p 1). On a plaque outside the Ashecliffe Hospital cemetery, we can read the inscribed words, ‘*Remember us for we too have lived, loved and laughed*’, as clearly *Shutter Island* is a forgotten corner of our common humanity, with the patients being totally disregarded, and sacrificed on ‘*the cold altar of scientific materialism*’ (*ibid*). The hospital has three wards, A for males, B for females, and C for the most dangerous and disturbed patients. The two Marshalls, Teddy Daniels, and Chuck are visiting the island to investigate the disappearance of Rachel Solando, a war widow and murderess.

However, as the events of the film unfold we see the content has been mainly a psychodrama, a role play, and an attempt to evaporate the delusional

reality of Teddy, and bring him back to reality, as Andrew Laeddis. Even his name, as Teddy Daniels is an anagram of his own, and he has retreated into a world to protect himself from the pain, that he has witnessed the murder of his family, and therefore killed his wife Dolores. The film portrays Andrew as unable to accept himself,

'Which would be worse...to live as a monster or to die as a good man?'

(Roberts, 2012: p 12)

His death was existential, via a lobotomy.

This film warns the viewers of the real evils of unethical institutional state-sponsored psychiatry, both historically and contemporaneously. For the psychiatric survivor this is a strong film, both educational and terrifying, that serves as a positive reality check, inspiring everyday caution.

The next film for our consideration is the brilliant, Ron Howard's, 2001 Oscar-winning, *A Beautiful Mind*. This particular film is of great use to the existential analyst. When confronted by a destitute schizophrenic on the existential couch, for once, we have an example and role model for the academic insane. The problem being how to inspire the broken hearted, who have given up on most of life, and live day to day in a spiralling, suicidal cycle of total despair. Although, Ron Roberts naturally takes a critical perspective on this film as well, claiming that the selfish behaviour found in economic theory can be observed in only two groups of people – *economists and psychopaths*. Therefore, Jacques Audiard's (2009) crime classic, *A Prophet*, might serve as an alternative, mystical model for the naturally spiritually visionary type, who are in a permanent altered state of consciousness. Despite the fact the hero is not at all academic, he still earns respect by using his alternative lifestyle, and extreme, intense consciousness to transcend time and space; an innate talent I dedicated my Master's degree thesis to, (Westlake, 2012). John Nash, Nobel Prize winner, remarked that *'the ideas I had about supernatural beings came to me the same way my mathematical ideas did. So I took them seriously'*, (Nasar, 1998: 11, in Roberts, 2012: p 55)

Nash's mathematical career began at Carnegie where because of his social difficulties, he was tormented and teased. From there he moved to Princeton for his doctoral work where he encountered both Albert Einstein and John von Neumann; he then moved on to the RAND Corporation where he began to be delusional, declaring that he was 'the emperor of Antarctica'. Psychiatrists it must be said, do not always make good sense of poetic metaphor when they encounter it. The author states that, *'Howard's film is littered with inaccuracies and not just those concerning the details of Nash's life'*, (Roberts, 2012: p 52). He continues to explain that the use of

his major tranquillising drugs as being based not on the elimination of hallucinations and delusions, but on the state of total indifference that they induced in him. Interestingly, when Nash was living in the asylums, he regarded the other patients as more intelligent than the doctors. Roberts concludes, that the filmmakers opted to portray a story of a congenital madman who happens to be a genius and is then saved by love. Perhaps, the truth was far more subtle.

Finally, I have chosen for discussion, the chapter dedicated to the film depicting the life of Janet Frame, *An Angel at my Table*. This is a story of human spirit and willpower, and the notion of never giving up in dejection and misery. Frame ascended from the depths of the Great Depression in New Zealand to become recognised as one of the century's great writers. Similar to other brilliant artists her story is a shining example of the limitations of the prevailing dominant outlook on 'mental health'. The author meditates on the apparent relationship between creativity and madness. Any vulnerability in the mental health patient as cultural icon, may actually be a simple artefact of the outlawing of creative modes of thought, referred to in academic discourse as 'cognitive disinhibition'. As Salvador Dali said that '*the only difference between a madman and myself is that I am not mad*', (Roberts, 2012: p 57). With cognitive *inhibition*, the norm, there has been a generalised retreat from trying to understand the human condition in terms of 'people's inner worlds'.

Confined to one of the hospital 'back wards', one of the forgotten people of society, and seemingly destined to remain there for life, Frame published her first book, *The Lagoon*, a collection of short stories. For this work she won the Hubert Church Memorial Award for best prose; so her dreams of being a writer continued whilst she was on the minimum of psychological life-support. The hospital cancelled the leucotomy they had scheduled for her, due to her talent and success. A crucial factor propelling her back to hope was her strong desire to lend a voice to her incarcerated companions. She was spurred on by their sadness and courage in the face of adversity and inhumanity. To conclude, Frame claims, '*The nightmares of my time in hospital persist in sleep and often I wake in dread, having dreamed that the nurses are coming to take me for treatment*', (Roberts, 2012: p 67). So, it would be fair to say that Janet Frame was very damaged and traumatized by the psychiatric system, despite being declared officially sane.

In my opinion the three films I have selected to explore, are the most useful in everyday psychoanalytical work, as they clearly demonstrate the qualities of caution, perseverance, individuality, genius and artistry. The other four films included in the book are *Changling*, *Donnie Darko*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Spellbound*. In the final chapter of the book, Ron Roberts meditates on the radical idea, if psychiatry could be

considered a form of terrorism – ‘*the use or threatened use of force against civilian populations for political purposes*’, (Roberts, 2012: p 98). The overwhelming impression conveyed throughout the book is that the therapeutic actions of psychiatry are not actually therapeutic but punitive. This is an extreme, militant view point, which is useful for the ‘worried well’, and those misdiagnosed. However, if you really are chronically insane, in an enduring psychotic state of consciousness, perhaps the careful application of contemporary psychiatry is both psycho-therapeutic and necessary if the patient wants to function outside the asylum. Sometimes life is not as simple as the cinema, and whilst these films are useful, practitioners should be wary of being irresponsible.

References

- Audiard, J.(2009). *A Prophet*. Why Not Productions: Chic Films.
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