

How Hollywood Depicts Psychiatrists

By Stephanie Schorow in THE BOSTON HERALD

Psychologists analyze Hollywood's distorted view of their profession
by Stephanie Schorow , THE BOSTON HERALD

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - If life were really like the movies, we would have three choices in therapists: Dr. Dangerous. Dr. Decent. And Dr. Dippy.

Psychologists and psychiatrists have been so thoroughly shrink-wrapped, packaged and stereotyped by Hollywood that moviegoers who need mental health assistance may think their lives will be transformed in just one session or that their therapist harbors demons just barely under control.

"People are leaving the theaters with a distorted impression or a reinforcement of already established prejudices," said Dr. Mark Komrad, a professor of clinical psychiatry at the University of Maryland, during a presentation yesterday at the annual conference of the American Psychological Association.

In a workshop on "Analyze This: Hollywood's Portrayal of Psychiatrists and Psychologists," Komrad, who has served as a consultant to movie makers, asserted, "the public learns about us mostly from the movies."

Just like we think we know about cowboys by watching westerns, moviegoers may think that, for example, having sex with a patient - a common theme on the screen - is normal.

Such misconceptions were driven home to Komrad as a young man when his dates would tell him, "You seem pretty normal - for a psychiatrist."

Building on other research, including a 1999 analysis of nearly 100 movies, Komrad finds therapists fall into three categories:

* Dr. Decent - These are the warm, caring, even loving therapists of "Good Will Hunting," "The Prince of Tides," "Tin Cup" and even "The Sixth Sense." Often the doctors become their patient's lover. They may not even have any skills, such as the fake, caring psychologist in "Mumford."

"Dr. Decent is typically three parts love and one part skill," Komrad said. Often they are healed by their patients, as was Robin Williams in "Good Will Hunting."

* Dr. Dippy - He or she is silly, zany, incompetent or weird. Think Richard Dreyfus in "What About Bob?" Or Billy Crystal in "Analyze This." Still, they usually end up helping their patients. * Dr. Dangerous - This doctor plays both god and monster; he usually works at an institute for the criminally insane ("Terminator II") or has unusual tastes in cuisine (such as Hannibal Lecter). He tries to hand out medication rather than talk with his patients.

If aliens were to visit Earth, Komrad said, their expectation of therapists, based the movies, would be: they are more interested in wealth than people; they are lovesick; they are all Freudian; and they always misinterpret truth for paranoia.

All this makes Harriet T. Schultz, a Houston-based psychologist, crazy - no pun intended. Moreover, "Hollywood has a special way of portraying female therapists," said Schultz, who is chair of the APA's Media Watch committee, which tracks portrayals of psychologists in movies and on TV.

In classic movies, the female therapist, a cool professional, is swept off her feet by a male patient and becomes a "true" emotional woman. Think of Alfred Hitchcock's "Spellbound" with Ingrid Bergman and Gregory Peck.

Schultz found striking differences between male and female therapists in 21 movies released in the 1990s. The 10 male psychologists fell into two extreme groups - either extremely skilled or extremely evil and/or inept. In "The Sixth Sense," "Good Will Hunting" and "The Color of Night" the therapists are warm and caring; in "Raising Cain" they epitomize evil.

The 11 female psychologists are nearly all sexualized in some way. In "Tin Cup" and "Basic Instinct," they have a romance with their patient; in "Flirting with Disaster," the adoption researcher does little more than flirt with her married subject.

But Schultz found a modern twist. In three movies ("Body Chemistry 3," "Never Talk to Strangers" "Jade") female psychologists are either murderers or murder suspects. They also seethe with aggressive sexuality or study violent subjects such as serial killers ("Copycat" and "Night Caller").

"We all know that Hollywood thrives on sex and violence. In this group of films it's the females who have been imbued with these impulses," Schultz said. "Why are we the black widow spiders of the group?"

Naturally, Schultz turned to psychology to answer her own question. Women in powerful positions can stir up primitive fear in men, she said. "The mostly male moviemakers, catering to the males in the audience, revel in showing the sexual conquest of a female therapist by her male patient. This allows the male viewers to master their anxiety."

Every female therapist, it seems, has an inner Nurse Ratchet ("One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest") waiting to burst out. "Movie women can't have it all, as a career women you're either trying to kill someone or someone is trying to kill you," Schultz said.

Moreover, since society tends to see men as poorly equipped to handle emotional issues, male therapists are portrayed as silly or bumblers. "Men can be shown as warm and caring but only if they are emotionally wounded," she said.

Granted, many of these films are comedies or satires. "I think 'What About Bob?' is hilarious," Schultz confessed. But perceived reality may discourage people from seeking the help they need.

This is why Shirley Glass, a family psychologist and frequent media commentator, helped form

the Media Watch committee two years ago after becoming concerned that movies frequently showed a therapist violating boundaries.

In 1999, the committee gave out the ``Golden Psi'' award to HBO's ``The Sopranos'' and CBS' ``Chicago Hope'' for their positive, realistic portrayals of psychotherapy. ``This year,'' Glass said ruefully, ``we have no candidates.''

Komrad said psychiatrists and psychologists are not trying to strip Hollywood of fantasy and fun. ``You don't need to compromise boundaries to have drama,'' he said.