

Psychiatry and the Cinema

By Krin Gabbard and Glen O. Gabbard.

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Review by Arnold D. Richards, M.D.

Psychiatry and the Cinema is the collaborative efforts of two brothers, the film critic and scholar, Krin Gabbard, Professor of Comparative Literature at SUNY, Stony Brook, and the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Glen Gabbard, Director of the Menninger Memorial Hospital in Topeka.

Their book, a labor of love, is really two books in one. The first, "The Psychiatrist in the Cinema," is devoted to portrayals of psychiatrists in 250 American movies from 1906 ("Dr. Dippy's Sanitarium") to 1986 ("Psycho III"). The second book, "The Psychiatrist at the Movies," begins with a chapter on methodology on film criticism that traces in particular the influence of de Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Althusser, Bartes, Kristeva, Derrida and Lacan. Treated also are the theories of narcissism developed by Kohut and Kernberg and popularized by Lasch.

The Gabbards' enthusiasm for their subject makes the book both entertaining and stimulating. What is not clear is the extent to which they have been able to offer new insights regarding sociological, cultural, and historical trends in twentieth-century America. A useful point they make is that the great film transcends its subject and cannot be judged by its devaluation of the profession of psychiatry or psychoanalysis, however, untoward: psychoanalysis does not rise or fall on Woody Allen's view of the profession and its practitioners.

Four chapters written by Krin Gabbard chronicle the fall, rise, and fall of the psychiatrist in the American cinema. Except for a brief "golden age" in the late 1950's and early 1960's, during which psychiatrists were idealized, they are almost consistently negatively depicted. The authors are struck particularly by an image of the psychiatrist as the facelle "whose presence allows the character to engage in intense self-scrutiny before the camera," the "faceless" psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist as "plot expediter" (p. 7). In recent films, they note, this facelessness is more often portrayed as a function of ineffectiveness: if psychiatrists had more character, they might be able to help people.

Despite the negative stereotype of the psychiatrist, the impact of some of these films should not be minimized. For many in my generation, such films as "Now Voyager," "Since You Went Away," and "Dark Mirror" introduced us to the practice of psychiatry, psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis, and may even have played some role in our choice of profession. Marshall Edelson has written that he can date his decision to become a psychoanalyst to seeing the movie "Spellbound" when he was in college.

The golden age of psychiatry in the movies, according to the Gabbards, was "over almost before it began." In this relatively brief period from 1956 through 1962, psychiatrists were portrayed positively, a fact credited by the authors to factors including the successes of psychiatry in World War II, the burgeoning of training after the war, and the general popularity of psychoanalytic ideas and treatment during the late 'forties and in the 'fifties.

The golden age ends with John Huston's "Freud," a project apparently conceived while the director was working on "Let There Be Light," a U.S. Army documentary that follows four soldiers through their psychiatric treatment, including narcosynthesis and hypnotism, at a Long Island Veterans

Administration hospital. The film presents the patients' dramatic cures. They are emotionally healthfully restored at the end of a remarkably brief treatment.

Having commissioned Jean Paul Sartre, an anti-Freudian, to write the script for "Freud," Huston eventually wrote and directed the film himself. It is noteworthy for its frankness regarding Freud's theories of infantile sexuality and for Montgomery Clift's solemn performance. The Gabbards note that Huston and Sartre had wanted Marilyn Monroe to play the part of Cecily, the central patient, but that the actress's analyst, Ralph Greenson, objected on the grounds that Anna Freud had not approved the project. The film, cut drastically, failed, prompting Ernest Kallenbach of *Film Quarterly* to remark, "It is impossible, I would think, for any educated person to sit through 'Freud' without bursting into laughter at least once" (p. 109). Huston himself quipped, "Audiences didn't give a damn whether children thought about or were influenced by or practiced sex. They were, if anything, disappointed that there wasn't more sex in the picture, especially on an adult level. What they wanted was 'healthy' sex, the Marilyn Monroe kind of sex."

The first part of the book concludes with two chapters written by Glen Gabbard on countertransference and cinematic visions of the phenomenon. Such films as "Lovesick" portray psychiatrists falling in love with their patients, exploiting them sexually, sadistically manipulating them and punishing them. Audiences are treated to the notion that sexual relations between patient and analyst are not damaging to the patient, and that supervision is ineffectual in helping the analyst deal with countertransference feelings. Gabbard makes a convincing case that, although "Lovesick" would not be appropriate as a psychiatric didactic film, a genre to which he is no stranger having himself made several, entertainment films are another matter. No esthetic lure requires a filmmaker's conformance with Freud's papers on technique. Gabbard is particularly concerned, however, about the effect of such movies on the emotionally disturbed; he cites the case of a hospitalized psychiatric patient who refused to consent to ECT because of its depiction in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." But these attitudes might be seen as just grist for the mill: patients come to treatment with negative attitudes derived from all kinds of experiences, and the task is to deal with these conceptions.

"The Psychiatrist at the Movies" is devoted to the Gabbards' commitment to pluralism in psychoanalytic film criticism. "Like the clinician who adopts different theoretical positions according to the needs of different patients, we have used a variety of perspectives to illuminate several quite different films" (p. 186). The Gabbards acknowledge problems presented by their efforts at psychoanalytic film criticism and connect them to problems afflicting the entire field of applied psychoanalysis. They cite J. T. Coltrera who argues that in "Freud's applied works, his only claim was psychoanalytic validity rather than historical truth, a critical, methodological distinction." Anticipating their discussion of Fosse's "All that Jazz" and Allen's "Stardust Memories," the Gabbards advise us there will be no effort to analyze the directors. The films' fictional protagonists will be analyzed as if they are real people by applying our understanding of narcissistic character pathology.

The films' critiques are presented by the Gabbards as examples of the possibility of psychoanalytically informed criticism, and are not offered as definitive efforts. Despite the overreliance in one chapter on the concept of narcissistic character disorder, which is left etiologically and dynamically unspecified, I found the discussions, especially those evoking the images of the films and the pleasure experienced in watching them, most enjoyable. The book has much to offer the film buff and will be appreciated more, perhaps, by the film critic than by the clinician or the social historian.