

The Cinema as a Teaching Tool in Psychology

El cine como herramienta docente en psicología

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The Cinema and its Educational Role

As teachers, we organize from time to time Cinema-forum sessions, which is an excuse to extend class hours and promote the psychological-social debate, in order to improve observation, encourage attentive listening, capacity for analysis, and to review the theories learnt in class and, then comes the healthy habit of conversation. It is about giving us time to watch a good film and reflect about it, nothing as human as reflection, in addition to feeling happy, angry, ashamed, fear, all those emotions that a film (as well as a good novel, a story or a photograph) can give us.

Nowadays, the cinema is increasingly more sophisticated in the work of characters and therefore, it is considered one of the greatest arts of humanity. But, what has the cinema portrayed if it has not been the individual and collective human activity? Behavior, prejudices, intra and interpersonal dynamics, “*our angels and our demons*”, in a word, the human psyche. We think that through films, we have an excuse to extend class hours and to practice psychic and social observation, analysis, diagnosis and forecast. Looking, being attentive, listening, at least two hours and all of these in silence (in this world of noise and stress), and seated, quiet and relaxed (in this world where there is little space for calm) are a great intellectual, emotional and physical exercise.

Although the list is huge, some of the following films have served us for the foregoing: *Amadeus*, *Dead Poets Society*, *The Prince of Tides*, *La boca del lobo (The Mouth of the Wolf)*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *12 Years a Slave*, *El hijo de la novia (Son of the Bride)*, *The bucket List*, *La piel que habito (The Skin I Live In)*, *Black Swan*, *The Chorus*, *Kill Bill*, *Pan's Labyrinth*, *Match Point*, *The Shinning*, *Amores perros (Love's a Bitch)*, *The Lion King*, *Schindler's List*, *I am Sam*, *El secreto de sus ojos (The Secret in their Eyes)*, *Taxi Driver*, *Mar adentro (The Sea Inside)*, *American Beauty*, *City of God*, *Betty Blue*, *Men of Honor*, *The Bridges of Madison County*, *Hannah and her Sisters*, *Philomena*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Up*, *Life is Beautiful*,

About Schmidt, Natural Born Killers, The Piano Teacher, The King's Speech, Modern Times; among other great stories.

Here are some brief comments about a small list of very good films, all of them are recommendable.

1. The Bucket List

“The Bucket List” is the title of a 2007 American film directed by Rob Reiner and starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, both are Oscar winning actors. The story is about two very different old men who meet in the hospital and then when they are diagnosed with terminal cancer by the doctors, they decide to spend time together and live a great adventure and finish some pending issues in their life.

We rapidly observe an evident difference between them during their stay in the hospital. Carter receives visits from his family, while Edwards does not. Family support during diseases like cancer is very important for the rehabilitation phase.

We know the impact of the mental component on health and illness conditions. The film also reflects the stress of the patients in hospitalization situations, since being in a hospital is not a nice experience. It is necessary the interdisciplinary work- doctors, nurses, psychologists, social assistants- to ensure that patients can have a nice stay in health centers as far as possible, so it is crucial the treatment they receive. This is a look at the human aspect and not only at the *person who is sick of something*. We see in the film how Carter and then Edward are not so comfortable with the assistance they receive, and the mood has to be considered as a necessary tool for the integral well-being of patients.

It is impossible to go through these moments of illness, pain, uncertainty, death, without asking great questions of life. At some point, they converse about the future, death, sense, God and faith.

The film reminds us that ancient Egyptians had a peculiar belief about death. When one dies, in the entrance of paradise, the gods ask the soul two questions to see if the soul can enter (according to the answers): 1 *Have you found happiness in your life?*, 2 *Has your life given happiness to other's life?* They are important questions that tell us about the commitment to oneself. Finally, what everybody (or many of us) seeks is happiness along with contributing with our existence to the well-being of others. It is known as the ability of transcendence, something exclusively human. Carter says it well: *"You are not everyone, but everyone is everyone."* At the end, we see how in this three-month relationship between them, they found some happiness in their lives and they contributed to the life of each other. Edward with his money, certainty, risky attitude and confident, and Carter with his wisdom, kindness and goodness.

2. The Experiment

The film THE EXPERIMENT (USA, 2010) directed by Paul Scheuring is about a psychological experiment that consists in observing the behavior of a group of volunteers previously interviewed and evaluated who spend two weeks together in a fake prison and are divided into two groups: prisoners and policemen.

This paper is not intended to summarize the story of the film, but to analyze some details of it. For example, the effect of being imprisoned on individuals, losing certain essential rights, not being called by your name, but by a number. This detail can start an oppression that could provoke, along with other elements shown in the film, a slow serious effect of stress and depersonalization.

The experiment tries to research how the assignment of roles (prisoner, policeman) can modify or boost certain trends in participants: boosting sadistic behaviors, submission, blind obedience and depression, among other psychopathological conditions. The film shows the feeling of power

experienced by the guards as the hours go by and we wonder if this is not something desired by humans as well. A scene shows that the self-proclaimed Head of the Guards (played by Forest Whitaker) has an erection after experiencing the power of controlling and directing other's destinies, so there is an erotization of the power. The rebel prisoner leader's hair (played by the actor Adrien Brody) is shaved (castration) by order of this character with a dose of sexual humiliation (urinating on him).

It is curious to see how "prisoners" end up accepting the role assigned. Do we behave as we think we *should*? Except for the leader, there is no sign of response, attack against the injustices suffered at fake prison. The prisoners accept the abuse committed and police excesses. We do not think this is only due to the money offered once the experiment finishes. Social psychology theories have studied the concept of individual and collective attributions (assignment of roles). However, the film can also be seen as being about the extent to which we are willing to go to amass money and power. This situation talks about a scale of values, where money and power would be put first rather than values like social, moral and spiritual, even legal values. Interestingly, the film is performed in the USA, a country well known for its overvaluation of purchasing power and economic materialism and this has become a hallmark of US definition.

Symptoms and signs in prisoners: a strong dose of pressure provokes emotional lability, tendency to tears, resignation due to the facts, isolation, confusion, feeling of impotence and abandonment, identification with the aggressor and even total indifference. The isolation situation (placing a prisoner in a small cage) generates confusion and hallucinations. It is a way to break the character. We can see loss of personal hygiene and symptoms typical of neurotic conditions: trouble sleeping, anhedonia, sporadic crying, and apathy.

A pathology is generated in guards, maybe an already latent pathology. The moment is favorable to assume a much more authoritarian, sadistic and violent "new personality." Remember that the scene where the head of guards

is having his hair, it can represent the fact of leaving the past behind and assuming another personality (another mask). The violence experienced in this experiment finishes when they go out from jail, with that scene showing a group of confused men, full of fear, maybe embarrassed by the possibility of behaving like animals or insects (like those shown in the first scene of the film). We think that the questions around their minds would be what happened here? What happened to all of us?

One of the last scenes occurs in the bus back to the city, after the experiment, when one of the “prisoners” as the principal actor: *We are higher on the evolutionary chain than monkeys?* The answer seems to be not yet. At least not when it comes to boundary situations.

This film is based on the experiment in prison carried out by the social psychologist Phillip Zimbardo in the Stanford University back in the 70’s. Although it did not end up in death, it had to be suspended several days earlier than thought due to psychopathological conditions found in the participants of the experiment. The participants were predominantly middle-class white young people. All of them were university students. Zimbardo and his collaborators found them healthy and psychologically stable. We suggest to review the original experiment.

3. The Double

“*The Double*” is a film directed by Dennis Villeneuve, and it is about Adam, a reserved and ordinary professor of History, whose routine life changes when he discovers that there is a guy who looks completely like him called Antony, an actor without too much success. He feels great curiosity and decides to go after him, but the meeting will cause him a lot of anxiety. Finally, he exchanges roles and lives with his double, who threatens him to do it.

There are many analysis approaches for this film: from *psychiatric* (it is about a subject with dissociative identity disorder, previously known as multiple personality disorder), *psychological* (it talks about the self and the

identity, as well as a difficult relationship with his mother) to *philosophical* (It addresses the individuality in a society that homogenizes and alienates).

We want to raise a pair of questions derived from the film (which is based on a homonymous work of José Saramago): What would happen if you kind reader suddenly found your “double”? ruling out the possibility that he/she is your twin. What would you think and feel? Can there be a person identical to me (to you)? What about the mind? What defines us as a unique and unrepeatable person? If I am not unique, different from everyone, anymore, so What I become?, but suddenly, this aspect that makes us different is not physical, not material, not economic or is not about the lifestyle, but psychological and specially, spiritual, which is understood as what is specifically human, what is typical and exclusive of humans (reflective self-consciousness, freedom, ability to value and to decide).

In this period of time where there is already talk about human clones, it is necessary to remember that cloning a psyche, a mind with all its possibilities is still a science fiction, since we have to provide that “clone” with the same experiences, education, parents, anecdotes, friends, accidents, human drama, misfortunes, and this is impossible.

Research in Psychology of Personality and in the field of behavioral genetics shows also that twins look like a lot, but even they are not identical copies. Fortunately, the story can cause us certain instability.

4. The Prince of Tides

“The Prince of Tides” is a film directed by Barbra Streisand, who also stars in this film along with the actor Nick Nolte and Melinda Dillon and it was filmed in 1991. It tells the story of a writer, Savana Wingo, who suffers from serious psychological problems and after trying to commit suicide again, she is hospitalized. Her psychotherapist, Susan Lowenstein, decides to ask the family for support, and thus, she meets Tom, Savana’s brother. Tom is a countryman, he loves soccer and simple life. He does not understand

psychology too much but when he meets the psychotherapist, a series of memories of the past brought up, a past linked to the past of his sister and to the origin of his psychopathology. Tom does not know it, but by helping her, he will start to find himself and his demons.

Tom and Savana come from a dysfunctional family and have that kind of parents who raise children prone to mental insane. There are scenes where you can see clearly how the parents are shaping their children negatively.

Can a person choose not to remember? The typical mechanism of Freud's theory of repression explains how a disturbing event can cause a mental block in the patient's memory, at least a partial amnesia that would place these memories in that secret darkness of the unconscious mind, until a later event activates again the disturbing past. And for Tom this event starts with his sister's new suicide attempt.

Tom seems to be an unsatisfied man who tries to fulfil parenting obligations, but his marriage is not going well. After he knows his sister's suicide attempt, he travel from South Caroline to New York. Now he will be the memory of Savana, it is a curious situation because he also wants to forget.

Tom's philosophy (learnt from his mother) lies in the fact that when things get hairy, "*we avoid them or we laugh at them*", but the therapist Susan asks him *when do you cry?* Thus, she makes him face a natural and necessary situation in the human being. We know that holding back tears and the systematic block of the human pain are dangerous for mind and body. For example, we see how the past (that has never overcome at all) interrupts Tom in several moments of the film through scenes that come to his mind. Many of the supposed problems of the past have not been "overcome", but they are still *alive and kicking* and torturing. They are in the *here and now* and they are reluctant to disappear. As said by the psychotherapist Frederick Perls "whether you remember or anticipate, you do it now. The past is no more, the future is not yet" and continues "...the past is the past. However,

we carry around a lot of problems from the past. We carry around them only when we have still unfinished situations.”

It is interesting that his sister has become a poetess. Why poetess? The art is usually a way of channeling feelings and thoughts that are unclear, vague, unconscious and strange to ourselves. Psychoanalysts called it sublimation, the ability to lead a fantasy, a sorrow, a painful or dangerous desire to socially accepted and recognized ways such as art, work, and social assistance. We see how Tom is a football coach and his sister a poetess.

What is curious is that Savana will also use, at some point, a different identity. Her second identity is a way to put her first personality into the background, even reject it, reject the real life, the life of *Callamwoide*, the horrible childhood experience. In addition, she chooses as an identity that of a Jewish young girl refugee fleeing from the Nazi persecution. That is the way how Savana feels, persecuted, tormented, without scape. Haunted since childhood by her feelings, emotions and ideas. In psychotherapy, we know that everything that is not understood, accepted and overcome tend to be repeated and remained.

The film ends with Tom saying these words: “*In families, there are no crimes beyond forgiveness*”. He learnt to accept his parents and so, forgive and accept himself. He freed himself in part from that enslaving part, where his parents chose to have a bad marriage and they influenced his life, but now they cannot take away his will to live, the freedom of his elections and the responsibility of his decisions.

This film was nominated for the 1991 Oscars. We recommend you to get it and appreciate it. We think that a film, like a book, a song or a play can leave us a lesson and be subject to psychological and social analysis of his characters and plots. It is a valuable exercise.

5. *You talking to me?* ⁽¹⁾

A group of classical films have been screened again, and one of them is directed by the renowned director Martin Scorsese and starring other legend like Robert De Niro. We talk about the film called *Taxi driver*, (1976). The film is about the story of Travis Bickle, a former Vietnam vet – who lives in New York city- disturbed by his past and who suffers from recurring bouts of insomnia, migraine and other symptoms. He decides to work at night as a taxi driver, so he knows the worst places of the city during the 70's. His distress increases and finally, he cannot stand the crimes and corruption in the streets and he decides to stop them.

What does Travis (Travi's body) communicate with these symptoms? What does he is afraid of if he leaves the supervision? What fears or night terrors prevent him to sleep? Psychologists have proven the idea that any symptom appears for some reason, even its manifestation is often useful, since it has a purpose, although neurotic. In addition, the alteration of the sequence or order of the sleep rhythms and wakefulness has a negative short-term and long-term effect, like fatigue and disorientation, increase of irritability, among other effects.

Travis is a former marine of the War of Vietnam. We know the famous “*war neurosis*” almost one century ago. Soldiers who come back home with a series of difficulties and problems, not only in terms of psyche but body: paralysis, contractures, night terrors, obsessions that surprised the physicians of that time. Travis is in contact with what is considered “the worst part” of society, the underworld: prostitution, drugs, criminality and murders. He rejects his society and wants to clean up the city. We wonder, how much filth does he see inside him that is unable to understand and manage?

The film touches on the theme about the soldiers who come back from the war to the city for which they are not ready. Mostly, they come back to a city (without psychological and medical assistance) where they do not feel good and with which they do not identify themselves; in addition to being

complex cities and with many social conflicts. In our national cinema, we can clearly see this problem in the film *Días de Santiago* (Méndez, 2004), a retired soldier who fought against terrorists, comes back to Lima without a good pension, health and education services, and who falls prey to his thoughts and poor social and emotional ability, and ends up in a wave of confusion and violence. We invite you to watch both films.

(1) A much more extensive work of the author and its theme can be found in <http://revistas.uigv.edu.pe/index.php/psicologia/article/view/11/15>

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