Psycho thrillers: five movies that teach us how the mind works

The Guardian (http://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/24/psycho-thrillers-five-movies-how-mind-works-psychologists) · by Catherine Shoard · April 24, 2016

Ten days ago in London, the Hungarian director László Nemes hosted a preview screening of his film, Son of Saul (https://www.theguardian.com/film/son-of-saul). He explained that if people didn't want to stay for the Q&A afterwards, that was fine; he wouldn't take personal offence. The audience giggled politely. "That's the last laugh you'll have for a while," he told them.

Son of Saul Photograph: Rex/Shutterstock

We've become suckers for risk free art, and the corporate world knows it. More fool us | Catherine Shoard

Read more (http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/13/art-challenge-preconceptions-artworks)

He was right: Son of Saul – out in the UK on Friday – is what you might call a taxing watch (https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/14/laszlo-nemes-i-didnt-want-son-of-saul-to-tell-the-story-of-survival). Set in Auschwitz in

1944, it shows a day in the life of a Sonderkommando (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonderkommando), a Jewish prisoner forced to work in the gas chambers, disposing of dead bodies. Almost every frame is filled by the beyond brutalised face of a man doomed to die – and already living in hell.

The film forces you to grapple with the most nightmarish moral choices imaginable. Should you deceive your fellow prisoners into thinking they're just going for a shower? Can you square a duty to truth-telling with a responsibility not to cause further trauma? Son of Saul (https://www.theguardian.com/film/son-of-saul) asks questions few dare to pose about the human condition. Many movies – from the sacred to the profane – do the same. Here, five leading psychologists look at the classic films that explore how human beings work.

Groundhog Day by Philippa Perry

'Freud gave his patients the chance to re-edit their narratives'

Andie MacDowell and Bill Murray in Groundhog Day. Photograph: Allstar/Columbia

In Groundhog Day (https://www.theguardian.com/film/groundhog-day), weatherman Phil Connors lives the same day over and over again. At one point, he has a chat in a bar with two drunks: "What would you do if you were stuck in

one place and every day was exactly the same and nothing you did mattered?" "That just sums it up for me," replies the drunk. Sums it up for a lot of us.

Freud encouraged patients to tell their stories and got them to free-associate around their narrative to find out how they thought and felt about themselves. This gave his patients the chance to relive, re-examine and possibly re-edit their narratives in terms of the way they conduct themselves in the present. Our earliest environment has a profound impact upon us and forms, to a great extent, how we see and interact with the world.

When we first meet Connors, played by Bill Murray, whatever happened to him in his past has made him grumpy, sarcastic, antisocial and rude. He is trapped in the narcissistic defence of assuming he is superior to everyone else and we see people being circumspect around him and not enjoying his company. In psychotherapy, we often talk about "self-fulfilling prophecy" – if you expect everyone not to like you, you behave defensively and, hey presto, your prophecy comes true. Being trapped in the same day is a metaphor for how he is stuck in this pattern.

Groundhog day also illustrates object relations theory: the theory of how we find bad objects (a negative influence from our past) in objects that are around us in the present. To find our bad object we search for and find negative traits even when, in other people's eyes, there would be none. For example, at the Groundhog Day festival that Phil reports on from the small town of Punxsutawney, he can only see hypocrisy and farce, whereas the TV producer, Rita (Andie MacDowell (https://www.theguardian.com/film/andie-macdowell)), sees the beauty of tradition and the enjoyment it brings to the people. In object relations theory, the idea is that the psychoanalyst becomes a good object for the patient, and with the analyst's facilitation the patient finds good objects where hitherto they could not. Rita is Phil's good object and the catalyst in Phil's transformation. Her influence begins to rub off. He discovers the joys of educating himself in literature, art and music. He finds out about people, helping them and befriending them rather than writing them off and finds out that this has its own reward.

Groundhog Day: the perfect comedy, for ever
Read more
(http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/feb/07/groundhog-day-perfect-comedy-for-ever)

The tradition of Punxsutawney is that if the groundhog, also called Phil, can see its shadow on Groundhog Day, the town will get six more weeks of winter. It takes Phil the weatherman quite a long time to see his shadow too, but when at last he does, the day miraculously moves on. In Jungian theory, the shadow refers to negative aspects of your own personality that you disown and project on to others. There are also positive aspects to the shadow that remain hidden from consciousness. Jung said that everyone carries a shadow and that the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the darker and more destructive it has the potential to be.

Although we don't have the luxury of living in the same day for as long as we need to in order to recognise how we sabotage ourselves, our mistakes do have a habit of happening often enough for us to become aware of them. What remains of our lifespan is time enough to do something about it.

Philippa Perry (https://www.theguardian.com/profile/philippa-perry) is a psychotherapist and the author of the graphic novel

The Godfather by Steven Pinker

'It explains why the instinct for violence evolved to be a selective strategy'

James Caan and Marlon Brando in The Godfather Photograph: Moviestore/Rex/Shutterstock

The Godfather is not an obvious choice for a psychological movie, but its stylised, witticised violence says much about human nature.

Except in war zones, people are extraordinarily unlikely to die from violence. Yet from the Iliad through video games, our species has always allocated time and resources to consuming simulations of violence.The brain seems to run on the adage: “If you want peace, prepare for war.” We are fascinated by the logic of bluff and threat, the psychology of alliance and betrayal, the vulnerabilities of the body and how they can be exploited or shielded. A likely explanation is that in our evolutionary history, violence was a significant enough threat to fitness that everyone had to understand how it works.

Among the many subgenres of violent entertainment, one with perennial appeal to brows both high and low is the Hobbesian thriller – a story set in a circumscribed zone of anarchy that preserves the familiar trappings of our time, but in which the protagonists must live beyond the reach of the modern leviathan (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leviathan_(book)) (the police and judiciary), with its monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Examples include westerns, spy thrillers, battlefield dramas, zombie apocalypses, space sagas and movies about organised crime. In a contraband economy, you can’t sue your rivals or call the police, so the credible threat (and occasional use) of violence is your only protection.

The godfather of Mafia movies is, of course, Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather (https://www.theguardian.com/film/the-godfather) trilogy. The screenplays are a goldmine for observations on the human condition in a state of nature, beyond the constraints of modern institutions. Four lines stand out: in the opening scene, Vito Corleone, having promised to mete out some rough justice on behalf of a victimised undertaker who had been forsaken by the American leviathan, demonstrates how reciprocity serves as the cement of traditional societies: "Some day, and that day may never come, I'll call upon you to do a service for me. But until that day, accept this justice as a gift on my daughter's wedding day."

The opening scene of The Godfather

Following the tragic death of his eldest son (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJU2cz9ytPQ), Vito addresses the heads of the rival crime families and explains the strategic rationality of apparent irrationality: "I'm a superstitious man. And if some unlucky accident should befall my son, if my son is struck by a bolt of lightning, I will blame some of the people here." Elsewhere, he elaborates: "Accidents don't happen to people who treat accidents as a personal insult."

A foot soldier of one of these rivals explains why the instinct for violence evolved to be a selective strategy, not an indiscriminate bloodlust or a hydraulic pressure: "I don't like violence, Tom. I'm a businessman. Blood is a big expense."

And for all our hotheaded urges, Michael explains the wisdom of controlling your emotions: "Never hate your enemies. It affects your judgment."

Steven Pinker is Johnstone family professor of psychology at Harvard.

Rushmore by Dacher Keltner

'It shows us that to unite in power, we must unite others'

Jason Schwartzman in Rushmore. Photograph: Rex Shutterstock

All art, French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu argues (https://bin.sc/Collection/Net/allanmc/web/bourdieu3.pdf), is an expression of social class, from the music you enjoy to the decorations you put on your walls. Few films, though, have tackled the class divide between the haves and have-nots as imaginatively as Wes Anderson's 1998 film Rushmore (https://www.theguardian.com/film/rushmore).

The film unfolds at Rushmore Academy, a prep school in Houston, Texas, and tells the story of the friendship between schoolboy Max Fischer (Jason Schwartzman (https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jun/04/jason-schwartzman-philip-roth-wes-anderson)), the son of a barber, and rich industrialist Herman Blume (Bill Murray (https://www.theguardian.com/film/bill-murray)). They both fall for a recently bereaved teacher at the school (Olivia Williams), and resort to misguided tactics to win her affection. As this timeless rivalry unfolds, the film illustrates several principles of class and power uncovered in psychological science.

The first – that wealth gives rise to unethical and socially disconnected behaviour – is on display at a birthday party for Blume's sons, who attend Rushmore (https://www.theguardian.com/film/rushmore) Academy with Max. The two sons greedily shred through a pile of presents (and are most delighted by a crossbow). Nearby, Blume's wife flirts blatantly with a young man, while Blume sits far away from the mayhem, languidly tossing golf balls into his dirty pool.

The pool scene in Rushmore

This scene captures recent studies showing that upper-class individuals are more disposed to impulsive and socially aloof behaviour (http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_inequality_is_bad_for_the_one_percent), including misreading others' emotions, swearing, lying in games to win prizes and violating the rules of the road.

Navigating power structures, such as prep schools, is a source of stress for lower-class individuals, and can elevate levels of the stress-related hormone cortisol. To adapt to such social stresses, people from lower-class backgrounds reach out and connect to others – a second principle of class and power. Studies (http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_poor_give_more) find that it is people from lower-class backgrounds who share more, cooperate, attend to others carefully and do things that unite others, a means by which they can rise in power when lacking the advantages of lineage. With brilliant detail, Anderson brings this principle to life in Max's defining social predilection: forming clubs. Max is at the head of every imaginable club, including the beekeepers society, the kung fu club and the astronomy club – all touching, quaint activities that reveal a deeper principle at play: to rise in power, we must unite others in common cause.

Dacher Keltner is a professor of psychology at University of California, Berkeley.

Altered States by Sue Blackmore

'It plays with the question of what we mean by reality'

William Hurt in Altered States. Photograph: Moviestore/Rex/Shutterstock

Ken Russell's Altered States (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080360/) is based on a wild time in the 1970s, when a whole lot of academics took hallucinogenic drugs (https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2012/dec/09/oliver-sacks-neurology-hallucinations-madness). One of them, John Lilly (https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/oct/05/guardianobituaries.highereducation), started working with isolation tanks where you float in saltwater in total silence, resulting in absolute sensory deprivation (http://www.where-to-float.com/john-c-lilly/) with resultant vivid imagery and bizarre sensations.

The film's hero is a scientist called Eddie (William Hurt) who starts experimenting with psychedelic drugs to explore other states of consciousness and our notions of reality. At one point he emerges from his isolation tank having been transformed into an ape (http://www.where-to-float.com/john-c-lilly/) – but I'm not so interested in this kind of impossible fantasy. What interests me is how the film handles the altered states of consciousness. We know that when you take hallucinogenic drugs of this kind, the earliest hallucinations are simple, colourful, geometric patterns. Tunnels and spirals are common, as they are in out-of-body and near-death experiences. The film has plenty of tunnels, and a wonderful whirlpool near the end, where Eddie is being sucked away into oblivion. That is all fanciful film stuff, but the whirlpool gives a good feel of hallucinatory experiences, and is rather well done.

Lilly was trying to understand the nature of reality, and that's what this film plays with. What do we mean by reality, anyway? You might say that what we know, and what Eddie in the film assumed, is that there is a physical reality and our brain interprets it, and that hallucinations are not real. But if you put a hallucinogenic drug into most people's brains, they get remarkably similar experiences.

A lovely detail in the film is where Eddie goes for a ceremony with an indigenous tribe in Mexico. He is given a potion, goes into an extreme altered state and sees streams of stars coming out of his body. The stars are not real in the sense that there are no white lights flowing from us, but lots of people who take those same drugs see the same thing – so there is a kind of reality here, a kind of shared experience.

In consciousness studies, we struggle with the "hard problem of consciousness". It is a deep mystery – how do subjective experiences arise from objective brain activity? We don't know. Many people, myself included, say there isn't really a "hard problem". We become dualists in childhood – we think that mind and brain are separate – and that's why we have a problem: how can the mind arise from the brain? Somehow, we have to see how the two are the same thing. Many people have these hallucinatory experiences, or go through intense rituals, and claim to have achieved non-duality. We don't get that answer in this film, but it would be amazing if we did.

Sue Blackmore is a writer, lecturer and visiting professor at Plymouth University.

The Seventh Seal by Susan Greenfield

'It's about the psychology of people – the hope you are going to be better'

Ingmar Bergman (https://www.theguardian.com/film/ingmarbergman)'s film is so stark and uncompromising, unlike most movies nowadays. A knight, returning from the Crusades to plague-ridden Sweden, is visited by Death, a pale-faced, black-cloaked character. They play out a chess match which, if the knight wins, will stave off his demise.

The Seventh Seal

The fact The Seventh Seal (https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/jul/20/worldcinema.drama1) is in black and white and was made in the 1950s is evidence of its enduring appeal, in the same way Greek tragedy endures – it is something that speaks of eternal values, people's hopes and fears, and is not dependent on current culture. It has been satirised, most famously by Monty Python's The Meaning of Life (https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/sep/30/monty-python-meaning-of-life), in a sketch in which Death turns up at a middle-class dinner party (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tIg2nK67LQ). It's funny, but it doesn't detract from the original, where everyone is doomed at the end. It is the opposite of the happy endings of films we have now.

The film has a very dark, nihilistic feel to it in an age when people are soft and easy. There is one scene where one of the characters, an actor, is up a tree, and Death comes to saw through it. He asks him who he is, and Death says he has come for him. The man says it's not his time, he has his performance to do. Death says: "It's cancelled. Because of death." All the dreams and hopes you have are annulled because of death.

I'm not aware that Bergman was necessarily expounding any particular psychological theory, but he does talks about the silence of God, which perhaps for many people rings true. I think it is about the psychology of people – the hope that you are going to be better and different, to think that you can get away with things.

The knight goes to confession and starts to tell the priest about the chess move (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4yXBIigZbg) he is going make and, of course, the priest is Death. You can't beat death and all of us are playing chess with death, in a way – hoping we'll be the one who won't get cancer, won't have a heart attack, that this happens to other people, not us. I think there is that

mentality in many people, and this film brings it home to you. I am an optimistic person, and it makes me appreciate life because of its highly transient and arbitrary nature.

Susan Greenfield is a scientist, writer, broadcaster and a member of the House of Lords.

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