Watching zee detectives

Peter Byrne

Psychiatrists ask a lot of questions. Had it not been already in existence (and practically sharing a birth date with cinema), filmmakers would have invented psychiatry to emotize the ‘Who?’ ‘What?’ and ‘How did you feel?’ questions that must be asked to pause the action, explain and illuminate. It saves on intertitles or narration. If the film requires an authority figure, a psychiatrist will do nicely. There are many films which are not direct representations of the practice of psychiatry, but where an investigating psychiatrist carries the narrative – Blind Alley (1939) and Nightmare Alley (1947), to name only two. During the 1940s, therapists were featured in 4% of all US movies, but for film noir this figure rose to almost a quarter of all productions. Warner Baxter played Dr Robert Ordway (criminal turned psychiatrist) in as many as ten Crime Doctor films, beginning 1945. If for nothing else, we should celebrate the ordinariness of Ordway’s name – think of Drs Max J. Englehoffer (Front Page, 1931), Otto von Strudel (Many Happy Returns, 1934), von Haller (Mr Deeds Goes to Town, 1936), Urganzieff (Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife, 1938) and Kropotkin (A Fine Madness, 1966). The archetype was upgraded to Hitchcock’s ‘dream detectives’ in Spellbound (1945), pictured. Though highly influential on movie psychiatry in general, and the representation of psychiatry as a bookish variant of detective work, Hitchcock described Spellbound as ‘just another manhunt wrapped up in a lot of pseudo-psychoanalysis’.

Spellbound and the psychiatrist/detective had its immediate imitators – Dark Mirror (1946) and Dark Past (1948) – as well as influencing more modern films – They Might Be Giants (1971), Still of the Night (1982), Agnes of God (1985), Color of Night (1994) and Copycat (1995) – but it is difficult to cite more recent examples (one of the few would be Borderline, 2002). Admittedly, 12 Monkeys (1995) though paying homage to Vertigo (1957), owes far more to the detective storyline of Hitchcock’s 1945 classic. However, despite a strong cast and talented director, 12 Monkeys failed to achieve commercial or critical success. Cinema may have played out the old-fashioned idea of a psychiatrist/detective.
Watching zee detectives – Psychiatry in the movies
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BJP 2009, 194:364.
Access the most recent version at DOI: 10.1192/bjp.194.4.364

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Published by The Royal College of Psychiatrists