Of course it is (the delusion that’s really true)

Peter Byrne

William Burroughs described the paranoid man as one ‘who knows a little of what’s going on’. In that rare beast, a mainstream Hollywood film that portrays schizophrenia with humanity and without a murderer, A Beautiful Mind (2001), John Nash (Russell Crowe) irritates his wife when he says he heard the garbage truck outside at night. He has been hospitalised with psychosis and in that movie convention much imitated in life, anything he says must be taken as fantasy, unless proven otherwise. But the garbage guys are outside and thus begins a process where she (and the audience) begin to trust and identify with Nash again.

Melodramas take the ‘unbelievable mental patient’ a stage further. Gaslight was a popular drama (filmed twice: 1940, 1944), in that movie convention much imitated in life, anything he says must be taken as fantasy, unless proven otherwise. But the garbage guys are outside and thus begins a process where she (and the audience) begin to trust and identify with Nash again.

Where A Beautiful Mind succeeds is in drawing in the audience into seeing and believing the content of Nash’s delusions. By the time the film demarcates reality from illness, we have been seduced by his experiences, and we feel his confusion and loss. True empathy.
Of course it is (the delusion that’s really true) – psychiatry in the movies
Peter Byrne
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