

A Glance at Real Reels

This is a legacy column so I guess I am a living legacy or something like that. I just wish someone would tell my wife. You wouldn't think a "living legacy" would have difficulty thinking of something to write about – but then you would be wrong. I began to think about which of the articles, books, etc I wrote I particularly like- the ones I enjoy rereading from time to time- and there are a few. Some of those favorites come from my brief tenure as a movie "critic" for *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*. It was a short-lived foray into the magic of Hollywood but I thoroughly enjoyed it. From 2006 to 2009 I wrote a column entitled *Real Reels*- get it? Because I had a lot of clinical experience in a state hospital and in outpatient settings, I saw myself as someone who could brush aside all the gimmicks and determine if the movie got it right. I focused on two kinds of movies- those that were explicitly about mental illness and those that purported to carry a mental health theme. And in the interest of full disclosure, I have evolved nicely into an opinionated, grumpy old man which probably colored my thoughts.

I reviewed 9 movies during this time (PPC is a quarterly journal). I can't cover them all here but I looked at some great movies and some that I thought were overrated.

Awakenings- *Awakenings* was the first movie I reviewed. I loved this movie. I remember Robin Williams, not too long before his death, was asked whether he had a favorite movie that he had played in and he said that he did- *Awakenings*. This movie has both historical and heuristic value. I started showing it to my students. I got the idea one day while browsing through the University library while looking for one thing, stumbled onto a quiz a pharmacy instructor gave to his students as they watched this film. I modified his quiz and started showing the movie. Students loved it and learned a great deal in the process. The movie does a nice job of showing how *encephalitis lethargica* (a disorder that has symptoms similar to parkinson's disease) responded to L-dopa and also the psychiatric effects of that drug when too much is given. A great movie.

The Devil and Daniel Johnston- I watched this movie which seems to fit a new word I see from time to time, docudrama. Of course, the movie title is a play on

words based on the Stephen Vincent Benet's short story of 1938, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*. I have read the short story and as I noted in the article, "...other than the title, no other similarity exists." In answer to the question, is this movie a Real Reel?- I gave the equivocal response "Yes and No". YES in that it gave a good portrayal of the rise and fall and rise and fall of a talented musician with bipolar disorder. NO in that the movie was confusing. With my background I think I followed it pretty well but was not sure students could do the same. My final comment in the article is telling, "Overall, I did not like the film but I plan on watching it again."

Groundhog Day- This is one of my all time favorite movies and I included it because it forces most of us to look at ourselves so I think it has a mental health message. I cannot do better than Jonah Goldberg's review when he said the movie informs that it "...is not what you get out of life but what you put into it." I added that man does search for meaning, as Dr. Frankl said years ago, but many go down blind alleys in their search. I loved this movie too and watch it at least once a year (yes, usually around February 2nd).

Sling Blade- This is a movie student after student asked me about. I hadn't seen it but after about the 10th inquiry I watched it. I loved it too. I thought that Billy Bob Thornton captured, "...the odd look, odd gait, ticks and jerks, persistent preoccupation, repetitive mannerisms, absent arm swing, the flat affect, the concrete response, and the stigmatizing dress patterns, (e.g. pants worn too high) of such patients. After working many years in a state hospital, I can attest that Mr. Thornton's portrayal was not far off".

Well, those are four of the movies I reviewed for *Real Reels*. I wondered to myself while writing this piece, that if I could only use one for teaching purposes, which one would it be. (And to be clear, this is not the same question as which movie I liked the most.) It quickly came down as choice between *Awakenings* and *Sling Blade* but with just a little more thought, it is clear to me that *Awakenings* provides the most educational impact, at least in my grumpy, old opinion.