The Politics of Helplessness

Your ideas are no longer normal, says Charles to Rupert outside the pub. Well, answers Rupert, you no longer wanted my normal ideas, did you? Ron Roberts's ideas are far from usual, as he muses, in his fourth book, on the abnormality of psychiatry as presented in various films over the course of the last 65 years, seven of which he has chosen as representative. His aim in this singular study is to analyse how the practice of real psychiatry relates to its representational cousin on the screen.

In this closely argued and complex survey of celluloid insanity, he uses the seven films as the corner stone of a textual analysis, which is far from a comfortable read. In his admirable presentation, psychiatry in its various guises on screen is reflected as real on the reel, showing explicitly its service to the body politic and to those in power who exude social authority and define social reality.

As a professional psychotherapist, I feel shame in seeing the closed mindedness of these professional people, professing to be psychiatrists, to be specialists of the soul's renderings on earth, especially those souls gone astray and desperate for further enlightenment. The theatre of lost souls is far from funny, and more often than not is, as the history of this profession teaches us, a diatribe of hellish treatments, resembling penal re-education more than a humane healing environment. The madness of psychiatric theory, with its one-sided biological explanatory model, is that, instead of treating lost souls with kindness and courtesy, it trivializes the crises of life within a barrage of pseudo-scientific explanation. A diagnosis is seeing through something and is always already a social one, conditioned by ideology, sentences of faith and dogma. Yet, as used in most of these films under discussion, it is not used as a depiction and then a description of a personal experience. Roberts calls attention to the dangers of what are instead moral exhortations, played out backhandedly by those with the power to define those detained in the institutions of asylum. How do we treat our fellow human beings, who are so disturbed and disturbing that many want little if anything to do with them?

In the films under discussion, Roberts looks at the role of behavioral science in refashioning women and men, to make them fit the goals, and structures not only of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Is it a given, that these intellectual fashions of the day are allowed to get by with a lazy conformity to the wishes of the powerful? Should psychiatry, which after all has the task of explaining the 'dis-ease' of the psyche (experience), be the handmaiden for social control of the masses, censoring experience and behavior? Is psychiatry, not only as presented on screen, itself a work of fiction?
Roberts presents the seven films in virtuoso, full of swings and surprises, especially the ones that I have seen myself, like One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest, or A Beautiful Mind. To each film he adds a series of concluding remarks, food for thought to chew over, as for example when he states, that Clint Eastwood, in his film Changeling (2008) … “has exposed the interlocking visions of social control which tie the mental health and justice systems together”.

He suggests that in future, psychiatrists alongside their medical training ought to take a course in language and literature, in order to prepare them to listen more carefully to the poetics of the soul. In his succinct discussion of ‘A Beautiful Mind’ (2001), he shows how the film-makers were stuck in the glue of their own wishful thinking, presenting us the viewers, with a travesty of truth, a travesty of Nash’s own biographical statement. Contrary to what the film portrays for example, Nash states that he never entered a mental hospital on a voluntary basis. Even his wife, Alicia, regretted the involuntary sectioning of her mathematical genius husband, “...as a mistake, which had no beneficial effects, rather the opposite”. (p. 52)

In most of the films under discussion, we can see an ‘idée fixe’ cementing individuals to the demands of institutions rather than helping professionals to tune into their own personal needs and longings. Roberts’ emotionally engaging thesis is that the raison d’être of psychiatry, is to maintain itself routinely as a total institution where the patient has to learn to adjust not change, and if she or he does not follow suit, will be forced to do so, by pharmaceutical whips if necessary. Thus the institution of psychiatry, as presented in these seven films, is the art of petrification and narrowing of the mind.

Yet, who controls those who control us? Who watches the watchers? Who examines the evidence of those, who check the evidence base of psychiatry? Well, we have the opportunity to do so, living after all as we do in a democratic system. We are in a position to discover and expose the power and the mask of benign etiquette that covers the helping professions, and serves power rather than patients. Roberts, in these authoritative and meaningful reflections, aids us the readers in the difficult task of unmasking real psychiatry from film and helping us to avoid the fallacy of the false self. As psy-professionals and/or patients, we often long for the refreshing sound and vision of liberation from the ground of illusions, shattered, more often than not, by a spiritual crisis, leaving us in a momentum of rich yet painful emotional disturbance. How to get out of this predicament is another story.

_Theodor Itten,
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**Body Encyclopaedia: A Guide to the Psychological Functions of the Muscular System.**
Lisbeth Marcher & Sonja Fich

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It is a privilege to be asked to write a review for my esteemed colleague's first and seminal book outlining the development of this theory and practice that has evolved over the last 40 years. This contribution attends to the task of outlining the precise assessment methodology of Bodynamic Analysis, a carefully researched and constructed somatic developmental psychology.

This book will be of aid to those in