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Psychiatry in the movies

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 emote 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. Englehoff (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.



Still from *Spellbound*; image courtesy London Features International.