Media Column

The Life Stories of Children and Adolescents
Using Commercial Films as Teaching Aids

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Commercial films have been used by educators as helpful components in the psychiatry training process. Professional literature describing cinema focusing on children, adolescents, and their families, however, has been conspicuous by its absence. A solicitation from child and adolescent psychiatry members of the Association for Academic Psychiatry resulted in a compilation of 97 substantial and relevant commercial films, with each accompanied by a single-sentence annotated description. The author proposes a teaching approach and suggests questions to assist educators in the utilization of these films during the training of residents about child and adolescent themes and issues. A description of this approach is illustrated using two representative films. (Academic Psychiatry; 2000:214–224)

Stone (1) asserts: “life is a moral [read psychological, behavioral, and ethical] adventure.” That is, human beings live, and tell, their stories. These stories become texts. Often these texts are the print or film descriptions of an individual’s moral adventures, and it is via these media that readers, viewers, and professionals can more closely examine situations, contents, and themes.

Both print and video media have the power to harness the attention and emotions of students and trainees in a manner that unadorned, reductionistic professional case descriptions often do not. As with the use of fiction literature by psychiatric educators (2–5), commercial film is similarly used for teaching purposes. Engaging films, viewed with a suspension of disbelief, usually evoke an unfolding, enveloping, and uninterrupted atmosphere for the duration of the story. The experience of this medium contrasts with that of print literature, during the reading of which the reader is more likely to experience interruptions and discontinuities. It is no accident, therefore, that films have been used in the education of sundry health professionals (6–8), and specifically that of medical students, general house staff, and, more to the point, psychiatry residents (9,10).

CINEMA AND PSYCHIATRY

Cinema has long captured the attention and interest of psychiatric professionals, who have devoted considerable effort to movie analysis (11–13). Commercial films have been used to illustrate numerous psychiatric concerns, including diagnostic considerations (14), psychopathologic manifestations (15–18), and differing treatment approaches (19). For example, As Good as it Gets, The Man with the Golden Arm, Play Misty for Me, and Klute represent films that, respectively, do good jobs of depicting manifestations of obsessive–compulsive disorder, substance abuse, borderline personality disorder, and therapeutic technique. Somewhat less tangible, but nonetheless important, concepts, such as countertransference (20) and stigma (21) have similarly been portrayed. Representations of charged attractions between archetypal characters, as commonly occurs in the genre of film noir, have promoted insights into the interper-

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sonal dynamics of ordinary individuals (22). Commercial film portrayals of physicians (23), psychiatrists, and psychiatric practice have received extensive description as well (24–26). The bulk of the psychiatric professional literature concerning films, however, as it relates to mental health concepts, practice, and education, has dealt largely with adult behaviors and manifestations. By contrast, the cinematic worlds inhabited by children and adolescents await larger exposure and more professional attention.

**Film Selection Process**

In March 1998, to address that need, the child and adolescent psychiatry members of the Association for Academic Psychiatry received a letter soliciting the titles, and one-sentence descriptors, of engaging and thought-provoking popular films depicting “important facets of child and adolescent development, pathology, and/or responses to the environment.” It was intended that the proposed compilation be used by psychiatric educators to portray, for teaching purposes in general and/or child and adolescent psychiatry residency training settings, the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence and associated psychological phenomena.

Over a 2-year period, 112 titles were submitted, and 97 were included. Fictional screenplays, several documentaries, and the occasional animated film comprise those selected. Excluded from the compilation were films focusing primarily on adults as subjects, as well as those produced specifically as teaching vehicles with explicit didactic foci, for example, treatment approaches for designated psychopathologies; school-based discussions of non-majority sexual lifestyles, or drug use, etc. Clearly, such educational tools have great value, and relevant lists can be obtained from a variety of educational video producers and distributors. The focus of this effort, however, is on the world of evocative, visually-based, cinematic imagination.

**Child and Adolescent Themes**

The cinema compilation (see Appendix) has been parsed into a variety of categories, and the films are listed in alphabetical order by title. Individual films focus primarily on child and/or adolescent and/or familial functioning. Consequently, the portrayal of cognitive functions, interpersonal dynamics, developmental tasks, interests, and responses to stressors will vary with the protagonists’ developmental stages. For example, *Ponette* deals with the life of a 4-year-old child, whereas *Clueless* focuses on adolescent shenanigans. The films also approach their subject matter in differing ways—with humor (comedy: e.g., *Caddyshack, Hairspray*), seriousness (drama: e.g., *Dead Poets Society, Los Olvidados*), a combination of the two (tragicomedy: e.g., *Matilda, Say Anything*), affection (e.g., *Peppermint Soda, The White Balloon*) and/or austerity (e.g., *Sleepers, The Sweet Hereafter*). Some films focus largely on single themes, for example, children’s responses to abuse (*Radio Flyer, This Boy’s Life*), loss (*Careful, He Might Hear You, House of Cards*), or war (*Europa Europa, Forbidden Games*); others focus on the varied manifestations of a developmental stage, for example, sexual interests, conflicts with parents, and inter-peer dynamics among adolescents (*The Breakfast Club, Dazed and Confused, Sixteen Candles*). Rarely, a film will depict children and/or adolescents with clear-cut psychiatric disorders (e.g., *David and Lisa*). More commonly, the delineation between normative and pathologic, when that issue arises at all, is hazy.

**FILM DESCRIPTIONS/EDITORIAL DECISIONS**

The descriptions of the selected films include the country in which the film was produced (for example, France) and, by implication, the language spoken (French); the nature of the approach (i.e., comedy, tragedy, drama, fable, fantasy, thriller), and year of release. The brief descriptions are written in the words of the contributing psychiatrist, identified in parentheses, with editing of the submission in order to improve clarity. The number of contributors and the wide variety of film subjects and approaches is confirmation of the range of tastes and interests among child and adolescent psychiatrists.

The request to avoid popular productions in favor of substantive ones was the single limitation posed for the contributors. A rating of 0–4 stars, derived from an industry-respected work that rates the perceived qualities of thousands of individual films (27), may possibly help guide instructor choices. It is certain, however, that determinations of quality most accurately reflect the tastes that exist in the eyes of