

Medicine on the big and small screen: Choice cuts

Therese Jones, PhD, and Lester D. Friedman, PhD, Movie Review Editors

Reviewed by Lester D. Friedman, PhD

Lester Friedman is Emeritus Professor in the Media and Society Program at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, New York, and a member of *The Pharos* Editorial Board.

Although this column usually contains several film or television productions that illuminate a particular topic, I thought that, for a change of pace, readers might want to consider screening some films that I have taught over the years in my “Medicine and Media” classes. Not all of these movies belong in the pantheon of cinema history, but they do offer pathways to engage colleagues and students in discussions about provocative matters encountered by contemporary health care professionals. Many of these movies fall within conventional genres, but, all provide viewers with something beyond the merely predictable, including a sense of the complex ideological strands within the fabric of contemporary medical culture. As such, they raise potentially controversial issues within a mainstream narrative format that encourages viewers to question some basic moral and humanistic assumptions about the intersections between modern medicine and the society within which it exists.

Racial injustice



Miss Evers' Boys

Starring: Alfre Woodard, Laurence Fishburne, and Craig Sheffer.

Directed by Joseph Sargent. Released February 22, 1997; Rated PG; Home Box Office (HBO); 118 minutes.



Something the Lord Made

Starring: Alan Rickman, Yasiin Bey, and Kyra Sedgwick.

Directed by Joseph Sargent. Released May 30, 2004; Rated PG; HBO Video; 110 minutes.

Miss Evers' Boys and *Something the Lord Made*, both based on historical events, turn a spotlight on institutional racism. The former traces the government-funded Tuskegee syphilis project that lasted more than 40 years, and the latter how Vivien Thomas was denied his rightful

place in medical history for decades because of his race. Both films ask viewers to consider the role race plays in the treatment of patients, and within a medical profession that prides itself on objectivity and factual analysis.

The right to die



The Barbarian Invasions

Starring: Rémy Girard, Dorothée Berryman, Stéphane Rousseau, and Louise Portal.

Directed by Denys Arcand. Released November 21, 2003; Rated R; Miramax; 112 minutes.



The Sea Inside

Starring: Javier Bardem, Belén Rueda, Lola Dueñas, Mabel Rivera, and Celso Bugallo.

Directed by Alejandro Amenábar. Released September 3, 2004; Rated PG-13; Fine Line Features; 125 minutes.

The Barbarian Invasions, a French-Canadian movie, and *The Sea Inside*, a Spanish production, both won Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film. Each explores whether or not a person has a right to end his or her own life. *Invasions* proceeds from the point of view of a son whose father has decided to die, and *Sea* (based on the true story of Ramon Sampedro) from that of a quadriplegic who fights for his autonomy.

These films raise significant moral problems by showing multiple aspects of this complicated, and often divisive, ethical dilemma.

Rising above



The Diving Bell and the Butterfly

Starring: Mathieu Amalric, Emmanuelle Seigner, Anne Consigny, and Max von Sydow.

Directed by Julian Schnabel. Released November 30, 2007; Rated PG-13; Miramax Films; 112 minutes.

Medicine on the big and small screen



Rust and Bone

Starring: Marion Cotillard, Matthias Schoenaerts, Armand Verduer, Celine Sallette, and Corinne, Masiero.

Directed by Jacques Audiard. Released November 23, 2012; Rated R; Sony Pictures Classics; 123 minutes.



Edward Scissorhands

Starring: Johnny Depp, Winona Ryder, and Dianne Wiest.

Directed by Tim Burton. Released December 7, 1990; Rated PG-13; 20th Century Fox; 100 minutes.

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, a British film based on Jean-Dominique Bauby's memoir, won numerous international awards. It offers viewers a stunning first-person point of view of an almost completely paralyzed man who desperately wants to remain alive, a nice comparison/contrast with *The Sea Inside*.

Rust and Bone, a French-Belgian movie, rises above its limitations as a potentially sentimental love story after the main character suffers an accident that results in her legs being amputated.

A surprising choice to explore this topic is *Edward Scissorhands*, a noirish fantasy film that demonstrates a spectrum of responses by "normal" people confronting "the other" in culture.

Medical researchers



Awakenings

Starring: Robert De Niro, Robin Williams, Julie Kavner, Ruther Nelson, John Heard, and Penelope Ann Miller.

Directed by Penny Marshall. Released December 19, 1990; Rated PG-13; Columbia Pictures; 120 minutes.



Extraordinary Measures

Starring: Harrison Ford, Brendan Fraser, Keri Russell, Meredith Droeger, Diego Velázquez, and Sam M. Hall.

Directed by Tom Vaughan. Released January 22, 2010; Rated PG; CBS Films; 106 minutes.



Lorenzo's Oil

Starring: Nick Nolte, Susan Sarandon, Peter Ustinov, Kathleen Wilhoite, Gerry Bamman, and Margo Martindale.

Directed by George Miller. Released December 30, 1992; Rated PG-13; MCA University Home Video; 136 minutes.



Extreme Measures

Starring: Hugh Grant, Gene Hackman, Sara Jessica Parker, David Morse, Bill Nunn, and Debra Monk.

Directed by Michael Apted. Released September 27, 1996; Rated R; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment; 117 minutes.



Godsend

Starring: Greg Kinnear, Rebecca Romijn, Robert De Niro, Cameron Bright, Merwin Mondesir, and Jake Simons.

Directed by Nick Hamm. Released December 1, 2003; Rated PG-13; Lionsgate Films; 102 minutes.



Splice

Starring: Adrien Brody, Sarah Polley, Delphine Chaneac, David Hewlett, Brandon McGibbon, and Simona Maicanescu.

Directed by Vincenzo Natali. Released June 4, 2010. Rated R; Warner Brothers; 100 minutes.

Despite some exceptions such as *Awakenings*, *Extraordinary Measures*, and *Lorenzo's Oil*, most films about medical researchers depict them as obsessive ego maniacs whose experiments endanger our very existence. Among the multitude of these post-Frankenstein movies, both *Extreme Measures*, about the ethics of research, and

Godsend, about the lure of cloning, intermittently shake off the conventions of this genre to probe the benefits and seductions of medical research.

Should you want to traverse into gorier cinematic realms, *Splice* delves into genetic engineering with predictably bloody results.

A melancholy group



Amour

Starring: Jean-Louis Trintignant, Emmanuelle Riva, Isabelle Huppert, Alexandre Tharaud, William Shimell, and Rita Blanco.
Directed by Michael Haneke. Released August 20, 2013. Rated PG-13; Sony Pictures Classics; 127 minutes.



Away from Her

Starring: Julie Christie, Gordon Pinsent, Olympia Dukakis, Michael Murphy, Wendy Crewson, and Kristen Thomson.
Directed by Sarah Polley. Released January 20, 2007. Rated PG-13; Lionsgate; 110 minutes.



Ikiru

Starring: Takashi Shimura, Miki Odagiri, Nobuo Kaneko, Kyoko Seki, Makoto Kobori, and Kamatari Fujiwara.
Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Released March 25, 1956. Rated PG; Cowboy Pictures; 134 minutes.



*M*A*S*H*

Starring: Donald Sutherland, Elliott Gould, Sally Kellerman, Robert Duvall, Tom Skerritt, and Jo Ann Pflug.
Directed by Robert Altman. Released December 31, 1970. Rated PG; 20th Century Fox; 116 minutes.



The Hospital

Starring: George C. Scott, Diana Rigg, Barnard Hughes, Richard Dysart, Andrew Duncan, and Nancy Marchand.
Directed by Arthur Hiller. Released December 17, 1971. Rated PG-13; United Artists; 103 minutes.



Article 99

Starring: Ray Liotta, Kiefer Sutherland, Forest Whitaker, Lea Thompson, John Mahoney, and Keith David.
Directed by Howard Deutch. Released March 13, 1992. Rated R; Orion Home Video; 100 minutes.

Amour, a French film that won both the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, achingly depicts the final several months in the lives of a long-married couple after the wife suffers a debilitating stroke. The Canadian film *Away from Her* follows the emotionally torturous path a husband must tread after his wife develops Alzheimer's and must be moved into a nursing home. Each is filled with the pain of losing a long-time companion and how the survivor copes with life without the person he loves most in the world.

One final suggestion for discerning movie lovers not put off by subtitles is Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa's incredibly powerful *Ikiru*. This compassionate, beautifully shot movie is one of the best films Kurosawa ever made, and truly deserves an honored place in cinema history.

This list is an incredibly melancholy group of movies. Students in my "Medicine and Media" course often remark that they like the class but find it depressing because of the subject matter explored week-after-week in the films. Over the years, I have tried to leaven the selections with movies that have more comic elements, but have found few that work, other than those with a decidedly cynical edge to them, such as *M*A*S*H*, *The Hospital*, or *Article 99*. Despite their serious nature, I hope you will check out some of these movies, and for those of you teaching medical professionals, find a place to introduce your students to them.

The author's E-mail address is friedman@hws.edu.