

## Editorial

# Medicine and Television Movies

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... *This instrument [television] can teach, it can illuminate; yes, it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box...* These words were, almost, the closing of Edward R. Murrow's speech at the RTNDA Conventions held in Chicago on 15<sup>th</sup> October, 1958. Likewise the final point is made in George Clooney's *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005). Edward R. Murrow was not far wrong then or now. The educational possibilities of television are enormous thanks to the fact that it is the most popular of the mass media. It has attained this position because of its almost universal accessibility, the fact that it is free or low cost, attractive to wide sectors of society, comfortable to use, and has the role of personal or family "companion". In order to achieve this, besides wanting to do so –something which depends on those responsible for the channels– freedom and independence are important, as is pointed out in the abovementioned film. Otherwise, with or without subliminal messages, all that will be achieved is to modulate the citizens' opinion in a sectarian way. Contents must also be provided so that it will not be *wires and lights in a box*. The cinema is one of those contents since it incorporates its ability to *teach, illuminate, inspire* and reflect to the objectives of amusing and entertaining generally sought by the channels.

Commercial films culminate their success by being shown on TV and those that do not reach success find this medium a source for compensating the cost of their making, especially if it is taken into account that the small screen can repeat a film over and over again, thus generating income for the film production companies. At times cinema-lovers only find the way to reach a certain film through television.

These characteristics mean that the effects of films that are educational, informative for raising awareness and reflection on health in the population in general and in personnel related to medical care, in particular students and professionals, can be produced thanks to their showing on television. This medium has an exponential multiplying effect which is not connected to the crises that can affect the film industry.

Leaving aside the showing of commercial films on television –when all is said and done they are a resource foreign to this medium– there are films that are produced, made and distributed specifically for the small screen, known among other names as movies made for television, films made for television movie, TV film or TV movies. Many of them have clear medical content and can be used for reflection, education and information in the field of health. The limitation due to the fact that programs were only broadcast at a specific time or date disappeared with the advent of recording devices, and especially with their almost total commercial distribution in the form of video cassettes and, later, DVDs. The companies that commercialize films in the new digital technologies will certainly include them in their catalogues.

We should not confuse films made for television with television series and miniseries. But it would be absurd not to mention that "medical pulling power" has made series with medical-care content sky-rocket nowadays. The characteristics and intentionality of these productions are different. The series have a clear predecessor in films in episodes, and in medical series we would have to look for the influence of films about doctors such as the Dr. Kildare films in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Films for the small screen are different from those for the big screen. It goes without saying that production costs are lower and that this can unfailingly reflect on the final result of the product. These films undoubtedly arose in order to lower costs and were a substitute for B series films.

Sometimes films made for television have gone on to the big screen because of their success [*And the Band Played On* (1993), by Roger Spottiswoode] or because of the interest of national distributors [e.g. *Death of a Salesman* (1985), by Volker Schlöndorff, in Spain].

In the course of the *Journal of Medicine and Movies*, some good television films have been analysed, which are mentioned here by way of equilibrium. *Miss Ever's Boys* (1997) by Joseph Sargent is a referent in the cinema on bioethical aspects<sup>1</sup>, and we should not forget its contents in the field of contagious diseases and anti-infectious chemotherapy<sup>2</sup>. *Door to Door* (2002) by Steven Schachter is an example of discrimination and labour integration of people with cerebral palsy<sup>3</sup>. *A Child's Cry for Help* by Sandor Stern helps to bring us into contact with a form of child abuse, Munchausen's syndrome by proxy<sup>4</sup>. A motive for reflection on thanatology is found in *Death of a Salesman* (1985) by Volker Schlöndorff, based on the work by Arthur Miller<sup>5</sup>. Films such as *An Early Frost* (1985) by John Erman, *Citizen Cohn* (1992) by Frank Pierson or *And the Band Played On* (1993) by Roger Spottiswoode are a reference point in filmography on HIV infection or AIDS<sup>6</sup>. *Something the Lord Made* (2004) is one of the many films, several with medical content, that the veteran Joseph Sargent directed for television, in which Fallot's tetralogy and heart surgery play a major role<sup>7</sup>. Finally *Wit* (2001) by Mike Nichols is a fundamental work on cancer and the end of life<sup>8</sup>.

These articles show a road to follow in the use of the cinema as an educational and informative resource in the field of health since they clearly show the great use of films made for television and the need to research on them. In many of these films the health problem is the core of the argument; it is founded on a specific problem, such as a disease, epidemic or research, often based on real facts that allow very effective reflection, given the educational characteristics of the cinema.

The publication in the current issue of an article on *Alice: A Fight for Life* (1982) by John Wills and Meter Jones, produced by Yorkshire TV, which deals with the occupational hazards of asbestos and which had great impact on sectors of the audience<sup>9</sup>, opens up the *Journal of Medicine and Movies* to the study of documentary films. Many of these works were made for television, for clearly financial reasons, and medical topics are frequent in them, and are usually constructed in greater depth than in other film genres.

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