

## Editorial

# “Biopics” about physicians: from the reality to the film

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In the present issue, Moratal Ibañez et. al.<sup>1</sup> analyze the film *Casas de fuego* (1995) by Juan Bautista Stagnaro. The film revolves around the life of the Argentinian physician Salvador Mazza (1886-1946), whose contribution to the understanding of the pathogenesis of Chagas' disease caused by the parasite *Trypanosoma cruzi* was essential. With the publication of this article, the presence of physicians as film characters is addressed.

When looking for story-lines, cinema finds its source in those celebrities and situations that might attract people's interest and among these it is not infrequent to find the life and professional activity of physicians. From the very beginning of cinema, physicians of different specialties and professional activities have appeared on the screen as protagonists in films of all kinds of genres. Obviously, there are movies where the main characters are actually real-life physicians, while others are a merely fictional characters as happens in most cases. Although the film being analyzed, namely *Casas de Fuego* can be fully included among the former, this is not the first time that this magazine analyses the true life of other physicians<sup>2</sup>.

As can be easily understood, physicians whose lives were brought to the screen were considered as positive persons who were helpful not only to their patients but also to humanity. Conversely, fictional physicians like Dr. Mabuse and Dr. Moreau portrayed as wicked characters, were extracted from novels by Norbert Jacques and H.G.Wells, respectively.

Although “biopics” or biographical pictures are supposedly based on history, discrepancies arise between the facts being narrated and the observations of actual history.

Several reasons account for this lack in historical accuracy. Political reasons may explain why so little attention was paid to facts and sources. Such is the case of the movies filmed during the Nazi regime. Films were to be deftly oriented so as to point out the values defended by the Nazi regime but detrimental to the reality. In other cases, ignorance of certain aspects of the lives of the main characters substituted for more or less accurate fictions. Cinema is based upon creativity destined for consumption and has to look for the necessary resources so as to be able to attract the spectator's attention even at the high cost of falsifying historical facts. The distortion of the facts in too many of these films cannot always be ascribed to the script but sometimes to the novel on which the movie is based.

It might be surprising that the number of biographic films about physicians is limited, thus raising the question of the absence of protagonism of the physicians whose contribution to the health of human beings has been enormous. The number of such films is slightly greater if one also considers short movies, documentaries and TV series but this is not the subject of the present article<sup>3-4</sup>.

“Biopics” about physicians are relatively rare as the lives of some famous physicians are only known for their professional activities but not for the personal aspects of their lives, such as personal anecdotes or their love lives. Themes like these are sought by the film industry when trying to create a script for

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\* Biopics = English term for biographical pictures

a movie. A dull life, a private life lived discreetly, or facts which have been lost over time may explain this ignorance. By contrast, the lives of other physicians were considered so attractive that they were brought to the screen on several occasions. Such is the case of the life of Doctor Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), the French physician and missionary who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1952 (*Il est minuit, docteur Schweitzer* by André Haguët) 1990, (*Schweitzer* by Gray Hofmeyr) 1995, (*Le Grand blanc de Lambaréné*), and with the life of the Hungarian physician Ignaz Phillip Semmelweis (1818-1865), father of the prophylaxis against bacteria (*Semmelweis* by André de Tóth, 1940), (*Semmelweis* by Frigyes Bán, 1952) and *Semmelweis* by Gianfranco Bettetini, 1980).

Another aspect to be considered is “fame”, the impact they produced not only on the general public but also in the professional world. Thus, many biopics about physicians have been basically produced for domestic consumption in the country where the physician was born. Most of the biographic films about physicians are to be found in this category. In Germany one can cite *Robert Koch* (1939) by Hans Steinhoff, a film about Robert Koch (1843-1910), the founder of medical microbiology and Nobel Prize winner of Physiology and Medicine, and *Paracelsus* (1943) by Georg Wilhelm Pabst, about a Renaissance scientist (Theophrastus Phillipus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim) (1493-1541), both movies corresponding to the propagandistic cinema of the Nazi era. Another movie is *Robert Mayer, der Arzt aus Heilbronn* (1955) by Helmut Spiess, about the physician and physicist Julius Robert von Mayer (1814-1878). In Canada *Bethune* (1977) by Eric Hill deserves mention. This is a film about the surgeon Norman Bethune (1890-1939). In Spain *Salto a la Gloria* (1959) by León Klimovsky, a movie about the histologist and Nobel Prize winner in Physiology and Medicine Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852-1934) stands out, and the Spanish-Venezuelan co-production *Camino de la Verdad* (1968) by Agustín Navarro, a film about the Venezuelan physician José Gregorio Hernández (1864-1919). In France, *Docteur Laennec* (1949) by Maurice Cloche, must be mentioned. This film is about René Théophile Hyacinthe Laennec (1781-1826) who invented the stethoscope and *Il est Minuit, docteur Schweitzer* (1952) by André Haguët about Albert Schweitzer, already mentioned. A co-production between Gabon, Cameroon and France, the film *Le grand Blanc de*

*Lamberéné* (1995), by Bassek Ba Kobhio, portrays the life of Albert Schweitzer who created a hospital in Lamberéné (Gabon). Mention of Hungarian films such as *Semmelweis* (1940) by André de Tóth and *Semmelweis* (1952) by Frigyes Bán; Polish films like *Korczak* (1990) by Andrzej Wajda, a film about Janus Korczak (Henrik Goldszmit) (1878-1942), a physician, educator and defender of children who even accompanied them to the concentration camp in Treblinka; Soviet films such as *Ivan Pavlov/ Akademiķ Ivan Pavlov* (1949) by Grigori Roshal, a film about the physiologist Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936), *Avitsenna* (1956) by Kamil Yarmatov, a film about the physician and philosopher Abu Ali ibn Sina (Avicena) (980-1037), who was born in Uzbekistan, a republic of the former USSR and *Pirogov* (1947) by Grigori Kozintsev, a film about the surgeon Nicolai Ivanovich Pirogov (1810-1881) who took part in the Crimean War and whose life was again portrayed in 1969 in another film and in a TV film.

The story about the American films is quite different since the Hollywood film industry mixes business with the arts as its aim is to obtain high profits through worldwide distribution of their movies. Among these are *The Prisoner of Shark Island* (1936) by John Ford and *The Ordeal of Dr. Mudd* (1980) by Paul Wendkos, a film which recounts the life of Dr. Samuel Mudd (1833-1883), who found himself unjustly implicated in the conspiracy to assassinate President Lincoln; *Yellow Jack* (1938) by Georg B. Seitz, a film about the physicians Walter Reed (1851-1902), James Carroll (1854-1907), Jesse W. Lazear (1866-1900) and Carlos Finlay and the transmission of the yellow fever virus by the mosquito *Aedes*. *Doctor Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940) by William Dieterle, a film about Paul Ehrlich (1854-1915), inventor of chemotherapy who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine; *The Story of Dr. Wassell* (1944) by Cecil B. de Mille, a film about Dr. Corydon Wassell (1844-1958), a physician and a WWII hero; *Freud* (1962) by John Huston, a film about the Austrian physician and founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939); the already mentioned film *Schweitzer* (1990) by Gray Hofmeyr and *The Road to Wellville* (1994) by Alan Parker, a film recounting the life of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1943) creator, among other things, of Kellogg cereals and of the resort of Battle Creek. Successful non-American films include the German movie *King in Shadow/ Herrscher ohne Krone* (1957), a film about the German physician Johann Friedrich

Struensee (1732-1772) who was appointed as a minister in Denmark and became the lover of his Queen; the Canadian film *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* (1990) by Phillipp Borsos; the French film *The Wild Boy/L'enfant sauvage* (1970) by François Truffaut, a film about the physician Dr. Jean Itard (1774-1838) and the French-British-German- and Rumanian co-production *Nostradamus*, a film that recounts the life of Michel de Nostradamus (1503-1566), who became famous for his prophecies.

Somewhat atypically, certain foreign films, apparently meant for the domestic market, portray the life of foreign physicians. Among these are the Mexican film *Nostradamus* (1937) by Juan Bustillo Oro and Antonio Helú; the Italian film *Semmelweis* (1980) by Gianfranco Bettetini and the Chinese film *Baiqiuén dai fū* (1964) by Zheng Gao and Shutian Li. The latter was conceived to render tribute to Dr. Bethune, its main character, who lost his life during the Japanese invasion of China.

A final group includes those films that are based on certain professional experiences of physicians who are still alive. Such is the case of *Awakenings* (1990) by Penny Marshall, a film based on the homonymous novel by the British physician Oliver Sacks about his experiences in the treatment of the encephalitis lethargica with L-dopa. The name of the main character in the film, however, is Malcolm Sayer. A similar case can be found in the film *Patch Adams* (1998) by Tom Shadyac, a comic drama based on a true story, and in the book *Gesundheit: Good Health is a laughing Matter* by Maureen Mylander and Patch Adams. The film *And the Band Played On* (1993) narrates the beginnings of the pandemic of AIDS with an additional reference to the famous physicians Luc Montaigner (1932) and Robert Gallo and to the dispute about which of them discovered HIV:

As physicians usually do not practice their professional activities alone but in collaboration with other colleagues, in biopics such important individuals make their appearance as the ones being characterized in the main roles; such is the case of Robert Koch and Emil von Behring portrayed in *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940).

Medicine is indebted to many professionals who were not physicians. The lives of some of these scientists have been made into films and the following examples are worth mentioning: Louis Pasteur (1822-1895), the chemist who was the founder of microbiology (*Pasteur* (1935) by Sacha Guitry and Fernand Rivers and *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1935) by William Dieterle; William Thomas Green Morton (1819-1868), the dentist who introduced the use of the ether in anaesthetics (*The Great Moment*) (1944); Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen (1845-1923), who discovered X-rays (*Das Herz muß schweigen*) (1944) by Gustav Ucicky; James Watson (1928) and Francis Crick (1916-2004) who were the ones who discovered the structure of DNA (*Life Story/The Race for the Double Helix Life Story* (1987) by Mick Jackson and finally, Alfred Charles Kinsey (1894-1956), the American biologist who developed a revolutionary concept of human sexuality in the books he wrote: *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953). (*Kinsey* (2004) by Bill Condon.

To sum up, if one considers the beneficial effects that Medicine has exerted over the general population, it might be surprising that one can hardly find too many biographic films about physicians but worst of all, they are hard to find. Therefore we welcome *Casas de fuego*, with its lights and its shadows, as we wish with this editorial to render homage to Salvador Mazza on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death.

## References

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