

## Editorial

# Medicine and cinema, why?

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### Why does cinema use illness in its scripts?

The seventh art, cinema, is nurtured by the histories of mankind; even in the cinema of animation the characters are humanized. In the histories of man, the act of becoming ill and the illness itself play very important roles. The creation of a cinematographic work involves keeping both elements in mind, as well as atmosphere, to produce a believable history (or nucleus of the plot). If the evolution of human life is occasionally interrupted by illness (as it surely is in the end) then this too occurs in cinema.

There are "healthy" movies in which there is no trace of ailments in their plots. A second category is that of "isolated presences of illness": visuals, commentaries, metaphorical uses, or even insults. Yet another is when the morbidity plays an "important role" in the script, in *As Good as It Gets* (1997) by James L. Brooks; Melvin (Jack Nicholson) is an obsessive compulsive. His neighbor should be admitted to a hospital due to being beaten and his waitress has an asthmatic son whose disease impedes her, at one point, from getting to work and serving Jack. Finally, there are movies in which the illness is "imperative" as in *Panic in the Streets* (1950) by Elia Kazan; the action centers itself around the control of pneumonic plague and everything revolves around this central idea. It is impossible to determine the impact, and type, of diseases in cinema, but one can be assured it is huge and has been present since the beginning of the artistic manifestation and that a multitude of psychiatric and infectious diseases have been incorporated into scripts.

Logically the presence of illness did not only make its debut in the cinema (*Not as a Stranger*, 1955, by Stanley Kramer)<sup>1</sup> but also in television (*Miss Evers' Boys*, 1997, by Joseph Sargent)<sup>2</sup> and in short films (*Hongos*, 1999, by Ramón Salazar). Its presence in documentaries, independent and professional, goes without saying.

The use of illness in a cinematographic plot is a decision for the scriptwriters and the people with executive powers, such as the directors, to decide. For example, in many films directed by Willy Wilder or John Ford, the presence of any given disease is quite habitual. From this point of view, cinema is an art which, by means of moving images and sound, seeks to reflect all aspects of human life and all that affects and interests it; all of this from the director's point of view and the interpretation of the actors<sup>3</sup>.

### Why is cinema of interest to medicine?

In past years, health professionals have begun to investigate how and which diseases cinema uses. Their studies have merited: a) the publication in prestigious professional journals<sup>3,4,5,6,7</sup>, b) the creation of cinematographic series about medical topics, c) the holding of scientific conferences and d) the publication of web pages. The interest of health professionals in cinema could have distinct levels: to be used sincerely, through mere curiosity or by personal motivations. In this case, one could value the impact of disease in cinema and the type of treatment shown. Cinema is not a scientific process and its scripts do not always follow historic or scientific truths and goes

into excesses, including in movies that do not pertain to pure science fiction. In *Outbreak* (1995) by Wolfgang Petersen, a monkey carrier of a hemorrhagic fever virus was captured, allowing in hours what doctors and patients most wanted - an immediate, effective treatment.

### Why medicine uses cinema: propaganda and training?

The critical use can go even further yet; cinema and television are without a doubt two sources of great social impact and hold enormous possibilities to inform, spread messages, and educate the public. In the pre-antibiotic era, numerous silent films and "talkies" were used to alert people of the dangers of and how to avoid syphilis. The outbreak of AIDS determined the debut of numerous films in which many informational and educational aspects were presented. The same could be said about other pathologies. Furthermore, using appropriate methodologies, cinema can be used for professional training<sup>8</sup>.

The *Journal of Medicine and Movies* wishes to combine these three "whys" without forgetting the cinematographic analysis of films with illnesses (*Lorenzo's Oil*, 1992, by George Millar)<sup>9</sup> or of the very interesting aspects of the ways used to promote these films, such as through posters. From the hands of the University of Salamanca: pioneers in university level teaching and in a bilingual edition in Spanish and English.

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