

## To be doctor, doctor and to be: *Not as Strange* (1955) Francisco S. Lozano Sánchez and Alberto Gómez Alonso

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### Summary

Melodrama based on hospital life, well documented from the medical point of view. The movie is long enough (135 minutes) as to give time to review numerous aspects related with medical training and professional practice. Everything is framed on the aspirations of an ambitious student and later general physician, that wants the “infallibility”, although at the end he realizes in a painful way that he is fallible. In an additional way, the student and physician’s human relationships are shown (marriage, friendship, etc.). According to this film, the good physician is the one that is capable of mixing knowledge and feelings appropriately.

*Keywords:* Medical training, Professional practice, Humanism, Vascular surgery, Aorta.

### Technical details

**Title:** *Not as a Strange*  
**Country:** United States  
**Year:** 1955  
**Director:** Stanley Kramer  
**Music:** George Antheil  
**Screenwriter:** Edna Anhalt and Edward Anhalt  
**Cast:** Olivia de Havilland, Robert Mitchum, Frank Sinatra, Gloria Grahame...  
**Runtime:** 135 minutes  
**Genre:** drama

### Synopsis:

A medical student, Lucas (Robert Mitchum) (figure 1), ambitious but lacking money, marries the operating theatre nurse Christine (Olivia de Havilland) (figure 2) so that she can pay him the costs of his medical studies. Christine loves Lucas but he only loves his work. Emotionally, he is not even a person that doesn’t open up to the other ones, to their best friend (Frank Sinatra) or to their alcoholic father (Lon Chaney Jr.). Finally he will begin to work for a rude but sensitive general physician (Charles Bickford). That colleague’s death, who was suddenly transformed into a patient of Lucas, forces him to re consider his attitudes and to reorder his life.



Figure 1: The masculine protagonist in the class



Figure 2: The feminine protagonist of film

### Characteristic of the movie

The movie is based on the Morton Thompson homonymous novel (of Morton Thompson) that was a “best-seller” at that time. The film had scarce success in box office because it was not very attractive for the general audience (spreading value included), but of great formative interest for medical students and physicians in practise. It deals with singular aspects for the vascular surgeons.

#### General aspects

As happens in real life, the movie highlights two well differentiated parts: medical training and professional practise.

**1. Medical training** (start of the plot): the climate (atmosphere) the personality of the main characters are presented.

**Climate (atmosphere) of the film:** the School of Medicine and the University Hospital at that time (1955) are very similar to the nowadays ones<sup>1</sup>. Although, it stands out the existence of pavilions (shared rooms of hospitalization) and how two of the in-bed patients in a pavilion, smoke cigars and cigarettes normally.

**Professors:** the movie focuses on two antagonistic professors; they are what they call a pre-clinician (pathologist) (figure 3) and a clinician one (surgeon). Both, their different personality and human characteristics are well reflected in the movie<sup>2</sup>. In fact when concluding a surgical operation, Lucas (medical student) speaks to the head of surgery with asking a question that recently he has read “it seems to be that not to cut the vague nerve induces ulcerous relapse”, to which the surgeon responds that in his extensive experience it is not necessary (figure 4) and he forces the student to apologize for the audacity of such a question. Later on the other professor (the pathologist) indicates Lucas that although he is right (the scientist) it is not convenient to face the powerful surgeon; for it in the following scene (surgery class) Lucas apologizes openly; such excuses are accepted by the surgeon who concludes saying “we all can make a mistake”. It is him evidently (it is him), although he didn't know it or he didn't wanted to know it, the one that had made a mistake and what really needed (required) was more modesty besides renovating their knowledge.

In another scene the same surgeon makes a reference differentiating public and private sick persons, indicating his students as these last ones had more privileges (“his operative wound should be aesthetically better”). On the contrary, the pathologist is presented as a kind and understanding although

demanding professor.

**Didactic methods:** during this part of the movie there are several scenes of theoretical and practical classes. Classes with slides, of autopsies and of surgical operations (one of neurosurgery and that “of the stomach” before referred). In these operations, it is of interest, as the surgery is carried out with many of the current techniques of asepsis (gloves, caps, masks, etc) but it is made in open amphitheatres, crowded of students.



Figure 3: The professor giving a check to Lucas



Figure 4: The protagonist and the professor of surgery

During the class scenes, two sentences call special attention, the first one is that when the pathologist refers the necessity to study and to learn to 100% and he says to his students “the physician is memory”;

and in second place when the neurosurgeon once concluded an operation with success subtracts importance to the fact, referring to “what you have seen is single mechanical work “, non explaining if what meant is that the surgeon is not “a God” or that all its work was routine and manual and that the scientific thing was irrelevant; anyway, the sentence set people to think.

**Students:** the students of second year, embodied by Robert Mitchum and Franck Sinatra, are too old, since when the movie was filmed they already had thirty eight and forty years old respectively. As is to be expected they concluded their period as residents before they were fifty years old. Mitchum and Sinatra are room partners and friends of a friendship that lasted a lifetime. However, their professional attitude is completely different, for Lucas the first thing in the life is medicine, over other values as I shall expose later.

**Professor-students relationship:** a small but narrow relationship is appreciated between Lucas and the pathologist. Scenes exist where the professor advises and even helped his student economically. When Lucas leaves the School of Medicine he says goodbye only to that professor.

**Infirmary:** this profession is not important for this movie. Christine is an operating room nurse when she met, falls in love and later on she gets married with the medicine student Lucas.

**Resident physician training:** the hospitable life, with their urgencies (e.g. Sinatra assists a childbirth in an ambulance), visit to sick, etc. is also reflected in the movie.

**Election of speciality:** an interesting scene exists where the students or residents mention numerous advantages and disadvantages (of the time and place: United States) of different medical specialities<sup>3,4</sup>.

**2. - Professional practise:** this phase of the movie (scene set and outcome of the plot) lapses in a small North American city and their regional hospital. It is Lucas’s first destination, there he will practise as general physician.

**Professional practice:** scenes of crowded consulting rooms exist; for them Lucas wonders if with so many patients it is possible to obtain quality. ¡It seems that the time has not passed!

**Relationship among colleagues:** this is an interesting aspect in the movie. In this way when Lucas and their wife arrive to the city, on foot of runaway he

waits them the one that will be their great colleague, which not only show them the city but rather he accompanies them to the place that will be their home. On the other hand, Lucas showed respect and affection for his old colleague and in this way he introduces him to his wife when he speaks about experience and wisdom.

**Relation with the industry:** a simple connection is presented. There is a sequence where the pharmaceutical delegate first gives some cosmetic products to the nurse receptionist and later he asks for the doctors. Already with the physicians first he presents them the novelties (a new stethoscope), and surprisingly later it aims a listing to provide the drugs service needs.

**Relation with other professions:** (in fact) in one of the few leisure scenes of the movie (in a dance hall) they introduce us to Lucas and a lawyer discussing to defend social focuses and opposed doctors.

**Medical negligences:** the movie refers this aspect in three moments: 1) during the residence period, when Sinatra extirpates a melanoma apparently improperly; 2) when the director of the regional hospital (acting as anesthetist) does it demonstrate their incompetence, and finally, 3) when again this doctor-director considers as terminal to a patient wrongly diagnosed (that finally presents a typhus, typhoid fever?). In all the cases Lucas not only will stand face up in a vehement way against the professionals, but rather in an active way he solves the above mentioned problems.

**The physician’s family life:** Lucas lives for and only to the medicine during the whole movie. Christine, a competent instrumentalist, abandons her profession to follow her husband. She understands the passion that her husband feels for the medicine since she helps him continuously (scene where they review the surgical names of the instrumental one).

In the case of the mentioned typhus, Lucas requests his wife’s help. Both are able to save the patient and to control a possible epidemic. For it Lucas transmits Christine his professional recognition, but what she wants it is another type of flatteries. Then Christine begins to understand the initial reason of her marriage (Lucas’s economic necessity), this fact joined to the existence of a brief extra-matrimonial relationship with a “cheerful” widow and it motivates the matrimonial rupture. If this wasn’t enough, Lucas’s good clinical eye is not good to realize that his wife is pregnant. In summary their family life is relegated to the medical aspect.

**The physician’s purchasing power:** the movie



shows the economic differences among physicians. Some of them (pathologist and Lucas) they earn less but they seem satisfied; to other ones on the contrary (surgeon and Sinatra), in the margin of other questions, money is their main interest: in this way in the movie private practice, or of possessing a Cadillac (well-known symbol of economic power of the time) is considered.

### Specific aspects

It is necessary to comment one of the greater (and long ones) sequences of the movie: the last surgical operation. The patient is Lucas's senior colleague; the own Lucas's surgeon head (figure 5). The diagnosis is of aortic rupture.



Figure 5: Surgical intervention for aortic aneurysm

The scene is a mixture of reality and fiction. A general doctor operating a thoracic aorta (complicated aneurysm or dissection type A) in a operating room of a regional hospital. But let us comment more data. A close up shows a medial sternotomy and in a very quick way the thoracic cavity. At the bottom of the taking we can see a negatoscope with two thorax x-rays, where an increase of the heart silhouette is observed. The surgeon requests immediate transfu-

sions. A monitor reflects an electrocardiogram. The surgeon's performance consists of making a suture of the rupture and to wrap the aorta with cellophane. The imminent heart stop forces to the heart massage and the injection of intra-cardiac adrenalin. The final result is death in *tabula*.

We should remember that the first operations with success on the aorta in fact date from the same time as the movie was shot (1955). We can affirm that the surgery of the aneurysms of the abdominal aorta changed radically when the French Dubost (1951) he carried out successfully the resection of an aneurysm and he used as substitute an homoplastic arterial graft. Later on the North American school began with success the treatment of the aneurysms of the thoracic aorta (De Bakey and Cooley, 1953) that already had a precedent in Shumacker (1947). It is also attributed to De Bakey the first operation with success of the dissecting aneurysms. Finally, the first resection of a thoraco-abdominal aneurysm was practiced by Etheredge (1954)<sup>5</sup>.

As added curiosity we can say that the cover with cellophane - *wrapping* - of the aneurysms was one of the techniques practiced before the introduction of implants and prosthesis as arterial substitutes, in fact it was carried out to Albert Einstein by Nissen in 1949. Years later, Einstein would die as a consequence of the rupture of that same aneurysm<sup>6</sup>.

### Comment on the medical and human personality of the main character

Lucas's passion is the practice of medicine. His personal life is more than secondary. He is very ambitious, but this ambition is not economic or of social prestige, in fact being one of the best medicine students in the history of its university, he chooses a small city and a small hospital to practise the profession.

What he seems to ambition is the medical infallibility; it explains to it their intolerance before the error of the partners and mainly as always faces the most difficult medical challenges. Fortunately when he realizes their fallibility, he still has time to rectify. This way the surgical failure with death of its respected and dear colleague, changes Lucas's vital attitude and it motivates to request help to its wife. He realizes that he is human.

### Conclusion

As Lucas's father refers, to become a good physician it is necessary to have brain and heart.

Because, if to practise medicine the professional competition it is necessary, to LIVE, feelings

are indispensable. For that reason the single medical excellence is achieved joining science and humanism.

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