

ISSN electrónico: 1885-5210

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14201/rmc.31200>

EVOLUTION OF THE REPRESENTATION OF THE DENTIST IN CINEMA

Evolución de la representación del dentista en el cine

Cyril VIDAL

DDS, Private practice, Poitiers (France).

e-Mail: drcyrilvidal@gmail.com

Recbido: 3 de agosto de 2022

Aceptado: 13 de octubre de 2022

Abstract

Over the years and with the evolution of cinema, the representations of the dentist have also evolved. From silent to talking pictures, from black and white to colour, from Hollywood to European cinema, we have tried to identify the characteristics of the dentist in the films. From being a secondary and anecdotal character, he has now become the protagonist of choice. From a caricature and a scripted argument, the dentist has gradually become a complex protagonist. The public's perception of the dental profession is influenced by these changes, giving hope for a better relationship between patients and dentists, with the aim of improving oral public health.

Keywords: dentist; films; dentist patient relationship.

Resumen

A lo largo de los años y con la evolución del cine, las representaciones de los dentistas también han evolucionado. Desde el cine mudo hasta el sonoro, desde el blanco y negro hasta el color, desde Hollywood hasta el cine europeo, hemos tratado de identificar las características del dentista en las películas. De ser un personaje secundario y anecdótico, ha pasado a ser el protagonista por excelencia.

De ser una caricatura y un argumento guionizado, el dentista se ha ido convirtiendo en un protagonista complejo. Estos cambios influyen en la percepción que el público tiene de la profesión dental, lo que permite esperar una mejor relación entre pacientes y dentistas, con el objetivo de mejorar la salud pública bucodental.

Palabras clave: dentista; films; relación médico paciente.

Introduction

Popular culture sometimes conveys caricatures, based on generalities and representations, or fantasizing a real unknown. These caricatures can concern professions, in particular the health professions. And in the first place, the dental surgery.

What image of dentists is conveyed in the media? Has it evolved over time? What is the societal consequence of the place given by the cinema to dentists?

To answer these questions, we will go through the cinema, from Laurel and Hardy to recent productions, in different countries, in order to observe the place occupied by this particular protagonist, the dentist.

State

Fictional works have a significant influence on society, whether it concerns consumption, behaviour or politics. We can see the interest of advertisers to place their products in films, blockbusters as well as independent films, with a market amounting to 2.7 billion in 2021¹; we can witness the development of sports practice accelerated by the cinema and other media², reviving a neglected practice [*Dodgeball: a true underdog story* (2004) by Rawson Marshall Thurber] or even the creation of a sport invented for fiction (*quidditch* in Harry Potter saga); we have even witnessed the election of an actor to the head of his country after having played the role of president in a fiction [*Servant of the people*, 2015-2019)].

Fictional media can have an influence on an entire professional population. For example, the «*CSI Effect*» was copiously described after the 2000s and the airing of the popular series *CSI: crime scene investigation*. The «*CSI Effect*» describes the influence of forensic fiction, playing on the general public and various professionals, in various fields, including social and legal. Among its consequences, we can note a renewed

and important interest of students in forensic sciences³.

The dental surgeon has a bad image and this is not new: before the professionalization at the end of the 18th century, only «*tooth pullers*» and barbers took care of teeth. Rather than taking care of them, they essentially performed extractions and surgeries, without anaesthetic techniques⁴. In the French-speaking world, the expression «*mentir comme un arracheur de dents*» (meaning «*lie like a tooth puller*») does not really pay tribute to the professionals of the mouth.

When the cinema makes fun of these clichés about dentists, we can imagine deleterious consequences for the oral health of the population: either by creating odontophobia, or by slowing down the vocations for this long, difficult and expensive course of study.

But, is the image of the dental surgeon found in fictional films really negative? Can it be characterized? Does it evolve over time and with the changes in our society?

Materials

By searching in international film database (*imdb.com*) for the keyword «*dentist*», we obtain 959 results. Filtering with a «*feature film*» selection, we find 384 titles, from 1923 to 2021, among which 11 documentaries. In this search, the dentist can be a main protagonist, or even the subject of the fiction, as well as a secondary character, or an important subject discussed. In any case, we note an important presence of this theme in the movies. To compare with two other medical professions, an equivalent search with the keyword «*midwife*» leads to 93 results, another with the word «*pharmacist*» gives us 157 titles.

Given the diversity of the place occupied by dentistry or dentists in these movies, we decided to focus our attention on some of them, chronologically, by placing them in their time, when they

left a sufficiently important place to this health professional, without aiming at exhaustiveness and abandoning *de facto* objectivity.

The dental surgeon appeared early in the cinema, as a comic spring Laurel and Hardy in *Leave'em laughing* (1928) by McCarey and Bruckman; Charlie Chaplin in *Laughing Gas* (1914) by Charlie Chaplin. If his role is of little importance, it is his practice that attracts attention, and particularly his workplace. In the practice, everything is possible: the chair can be in a semi-recumbent position, the instruments are curious and amusing, the gas is likely to be... hilarious. So many situational comics and visual gags that the silent cinema of the time allows to communicate, in a short format.

In 1923, a movie uses nitrous oxide to launch its scenario: Jimmie Poe will be able to take himself for a detective in *A Bride for a knight* (1923) by Hamilton Smith. The dentist's office was no longer just a prop, but became an indispensable part of the script.

With the arrival of talking pictures, the dental surgeon will finally take the place of a real protagonist in front of Alfred Hitchcock's camera in *The man who knew too much* (1934) by Alfred Hitchcock. The health professional appears for the first time with a defined character, and this one is not valorizing: he is venal and on the side of the crooks. But his practice remains the privileged place for a suspenseful sequence: the patient is lost in an unknown place, at the mercy of the practitioner, likely to create pain or an iatrogenic act.

From the 1940s and the appearance of colour cinema, the dentist is a character who will also take colour. He is no longer a secondary character, but can become a protagonist in his own right, taking on a more important role than his workplace.

All genre films will use the dentist, whether it is the western [*The shakiest gun in the west* (1968) by Rafkin], the biopic [*The great moment*

(1944) by Sturges], the comedy [*Dentist on the job* (1961) by Pennington-Richards], or even the western comedy [*The paleface* (1948) by McLeod]. The dentist is not always shown in a great light, but rarely in a bad, venal or sadistic way for example.

With the years 1970-1980, the colour will continue to evolve and the character of the dentist also with a gain of complexity. He remains an often secondary character but exuberant, with the emphasis on defects that remain human: for example, the sickly jealousy of the dentist in *The mad adventures of Rabbi Jacob* (1973) by Oury; the relational dilettantism in *The party* (1980) by Pinoteau; the stubbornness at the expense of professionalism in *Duos sur canapé* (1979) by Camoletti: the abandonment of passion in favour of reason in *Mes meilleurs copains* (1989) by Poiré; the refusal to settle in *24 hour playboy* (1989) by Morita. We can see that the dentist remains rich and snobbish, benevolent but seductive, disloyal or unfair to his family sphere. We note all the same that the health professional can henceforth be a woman dentist, reconciling with the statistical data of the time in North America as well as in Western Europe where the profession has been open to women since the 1960s⁵. A positive image of the dentist will be found in *Eversmile, New Jersey* (1989) by Sorin in which an Irish dentist gives free care to remote populations of Patagonia. His life is colourful and his adventures surreal, but he lives there again an extramarital relationship, moving away from his family commitments.

The genre film will exploit the burlesque capabilities of the profession, but focusing on the character rather than the profession. For example, in the almost musical comedy *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1986) by Oz, a mainstream film but one that constantly refers to the horror film, the dentist is a sadistic character, but above all, a zany and unusual one. Also, the horror film will contrast the white of the impeccable coat with

the red of the bloody mouth, when the maniacal dentist sinks into destructive madness [*The dentist* (1996) by Yusna] The heavy comedy will even be able to show him as an incompetent, running away from the law that catches up with him in *This won't hurt a bit* (1993) by Kennedy.

However, the height of venality and sadism falsely attributed to the profession is reached in a conventional film, *Marathon Man* (1976) by Schlesinger, where the dental surgeon is a war criminal, stealing diamonds from Jews, organizing a torture session during which he places himself in the position of god. A great movie for an exception in its time.

The second part of the 1990s marked a decline in the colour, which had been increasingly vivid up until then, and a return to a certain sobriety. The dentist will be able to become a more complex, more accomplished character.

The darkness is that of the place of practice, like the prison in *Captives* (1994) by Angela Pope, but also that of the relationship that the dentist has with a prisoner who has become a patient and then a lover. This darkness will frequently be that of a rather dull life, the light at the end of the tunnel being that of the middle-life crisis. This middle-life crisis is quite present in the films focused on the dentist, and this whatever the country [*Change me* (2007) by Karadzic, *Phil* (2019) by Kinnear]: the dental surgeon, however subject of interest in the cinema, is often associated with a life certainly comfortable but dull, from a professional point of view as well as from a personal one. This explains why it is easy to bring in a scripted element to turn everything upside down, because the controlled madness of the character is never far away. In the mainstream film *The whole nine yards* (2000) by Lynn, we will discover the metamorphosis of a dental surgeon who will leave his comfortable and monotonous life associated with the image often found in cinema to take his life in hand in order to save it. *Novocaine* (2001) by Atkins takes a dental

surgeon in a vicious circle that takes him out of his too peaceful life to give him adventure and character, and the setbacks he faces are reasonable prices to pay: the protagonist is not a bad person, but a man who wants to live differently and takes the risk. The dentist in *Decay* (1998) by Stephens is also a much more complex being than the one we think we know. *The Hangover* saga understood so well the spring that could be the character of the dentist that he becomes the pivot of *The Hangover part II* (2011) by Phillips.

We see dentist's characters who are initially empty, dull, homey, and content with their modern comforts, but who have a thirst for life, even if it means pushing at open doors that look unattainable. But they are now human, and it is possible to find in these characters a bit of ourselves and thus make the health professional more accessible.

Sometimes, this mid-life crisis is later: in *Wild grass* (2009) by Resnais, Marguerite's profession is an excellent pretext to guide us into an extramarital relationship within an absurd and surreal universe.

Sometimes it will be phantasmagorical as in the experimental comedy *Schizopolis* (1996) by Soderbergh in which the dentist is confronted with his double and his desires.

And there are cases where this crisis is not that of a defined age. In *Horrible Bosses* (2011) by Gordon, the dentist is rigorous in her practice, but hardly in her professional ethics, overtaken by her nymphomania, or at least her desire to get what she wants from her assistant. In contrast to the previous characters, this dental assistant wants to anchor himself in a life that seems settled: a job that he likes even if it is poorly paid; a wife he loves, even if sexual temptation is permanently offered to him.

On another note, the midlife crisis is sometimes the opposite of what is expected in our normal society: the dentist in *Cachorro* (2004) by Albaladejo is rich, single and homosexual, but he

will have to think about his lifestyle when fate forces him to take care of his nephew.

The caricature of the middle life crisis where a love encounter leads to an upheaval is sometimes disturbed. In *The secret lives of dentists* (2003) by Rudolph, we follow the evolution of a couple of dentists, beginning there as often on an infidelity: however, it is no longer the male dentist with his assistant or a patient, but the female dentist outside of his professional practice.

An interesting character of a dental surgeon [*Django unchained* (2014) by Tarantino] forces us to go back to the 19th century, with a protagonist who has left his profession: King Schultz no longer operates in Germany but persists in walking around with his ambulant practice that has no more practice than his tooth flocking on the canvas of the cart. Like all representations of the dental surgeon in the cinema, he has left a life that one imagines to be settled to experience the adventure of the Far West, he has left the neutrality of the caregiver to espouse the militancy of circumstance against slavery, he has left the practice according to science to act according to his philosophy without worrying about respecting the laws. For all the spectators of the film, he will remain «*the dentist*» without us imagining or seeing him once practicing, without us visiting his office, without us discovering a working instrument. He represents a dentist in contemporary cinema: a complex character, both rigid and elastic, both human and inconceivable, but above all an endearing being.

The image of the dentist in the cinema has changed over time, becoming a less caricatured and more human character. This improvement in the human aspect of this health professional is of considerable interest in terms of public health, bringing him closer to everyone. Imagining a more human and less caricatured character is likely to restore confidence in dentistry.

The series format has taken off in terms of visual fictional works. This medium is a continuation of the cinematographic production of the last few years: we take the time to deepen the characters, allowing us to discover them more human, closer, more involved, more anchored in a daily life. It is therefore quite logical to find dentists as main characters [*Spirited* (2010-2011) by Karen Gaviola; *My family* (2000-2011) by Fred Barron]. We also find dentists as secondary characters, with in these cases a return to fantasy [*Seinfeld* (1989-1998) by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld; *Desperate housewives* (2004-2012) by Marc Cherry].

It should be noted that the representations of the dental office have also evolved. The time of the pliers joke is over, and today's directors want to give their characters credibility, or simply not let the viewer's suspension of credulity fade. The studios even offer the service of dental surgeons as consultants⁶: they will make it possible to show realistic offices, with rigorous hygiene, allowing common acts. We can see dentists performing painless anaesthesia, scaling, setting up dental dam, reconstructing teeth with composite, etc. These aseptic and modern treatment rooms are reassuring for the spectator who will inevitably be a patient one day, whether it is for complex care or for a simple check-up.

Without going so far as to say that the patient has only an anecdotal place, the patient is no longer an attention point for the cameras. Similarly, little attention is left for the patient's pain, which is representative of what happens in today's dental offices: suffering is no longer a topical issue. More precisely, the patient's suffering. Indeed, the spectator will tend to follow the practitioner's psychological suffering which is highlighted. And sometimes, the psychosomatic one of his son, as in *With a friend like Harry...* (2000) by Moll: the accidental death of the father of the protagonist who,

in spite of his retirement, had kept his chair to look after his son, now adult, and to discuss with him, triggers dental pains in the son who is conscious of the psychological part of his physical pain.

Conclusion

The dental surgeon in film fiction no longer corresponds to his caricature. He has moved at the same pace as the background of film production, with more and more finesse and substance. It has also followed the progress of clinical and hygienic practice, becoming less and less invasive and iatrogenic.

The resulting image among the general public and society as a whole is that of a competent, trusted health professional, in whose hands our health will be safeguarded, in a painless moment. The dental surgeon has become a neighbour, a complete professional in whom we can recognize ourselves, and this proximity places him at the heart of the care process.

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Table 1. Films

<p><i>Dodgeball: a true underdog story</i> (2004) by Rawson Marshall Thurber. A group of misfits enter a Las Vegas dodgeball tournament in order to save their cherished local gym from the onslaught of a corporate health fitness chain.</p>
<p><i>Leave'em laughing</i> (1928) by Clyde Bruckman and Leo McCarey. In the dead of night, a terrible toothache wakes up poor Stan, and after a series of home-made remedies, Ollie takes him to the dentist. There, ample amounts of laughing gas lead to the perfect mess.</p> <p><i>Laughing Gas</i> (1914) by Chaplin. Charlie pretends to be a dentist though he is only his assistant.</p>
<p><i>A bride for a knight</i> (1923) by Smith. While having dental work done, Jimmy inhales too much gas and begins believing that he is a detective. He sets out to capture a gang of thieves who've robbed his uncle's bank.</p>
<p><i>The man who knew too much</i> (1934) by Hitchcock. An American doctor and his wife, a former singing star, witness a murder while vacationing in Morocco, and are drawn into a twisting plot of international intrigue when their young son is kidnapped.</p>
<p><i>The shakiest gun in the west</i> (1968) by Rafkin. A pardoned stagecoach robber becomes government agent and marries a naive unsuspecting east-coast dentist in order to join a wagon train and catch the smugglers who have been selling guns to the Indians.</p>

EVOLUTION OF THE REPRESENTATION OF THE DENTIST IN CINEMA

CYRIL VIDAL

<p><i>The great moment</i> (1944) by Sturges. The biography of Dr. W. T. Morgan, a 19th century Boston dentist, during his quest to have anaesthesia, in the form of ether, accepted by the public and the medical and dental establishment.</p>
<p><i>Dentist on the job</i> (1961) by Pennington-Richards. The marketing department of a pharmaceutical company decides to find a dentist to endorse its brand of toothpaste.</p>
<p><i>The paleface</i> (1948) by McLeod. Calamity Jane is dispatched to find out who's smuggling rifles to the Indians, and winds up married to a hapless correspondence-school dentist as part of her cover.</p>
<p><i>The mad adventures of Rabbi Jacob</i> (1973) by Oury. A bigoted Frenchman finds himself forced to impersonate a popular rabbi while on the run from a group of assassins - and the police.</p>
<p><i>The party</i> (1980) by Pinoteau. This is the story about a teenage girl's first love experiences. Her father is a dentist with love issues too.</p>
<p><i>Duos sur canapé</i> (1979) by Camoletti. Bernard, a lawyer, and Jacqueline, a dentist, married for many years, each have their own home office. This becomes problematic when they decide to divorce and neither of them wants to move their practice.</p>
<p><i>Mes meilleurs copains</i> (1989) by Poiré. This is a story about five best friends who spend a week end with their 15-years-ago love.</p>
<p><i>24 hour playboy</i> (1989) by Morita. This is the story of a playboy dentist who is insomniac, and had not enough time to spend time with all his women.</p>
<p><i>Eversmile New Jersey</i> (1989) by Sorin. An American dentist roaming the Argentinian countryside on his motorcycle preaching the gospel of dental hygiene.</p>
<p><i>Little shop of horrors</i> (1986) by Oz. A nerdy florist finds his chance for success and romance with the help of a giant man-eating plant who demands to be fed.</p>
<p><i>The dentist</i> (1996) by Yuzna. An extremely successful dentist goes off the deep end after he catches his wife cheating on him.</p>
<p><i>This won't hurt a bit</i> (1993) by Kennedy. An incompetent rogue dentist travels from Australia to the UK, where he wreaks havoc on English teeth until the law catches up with him.</p>
<p><i>Marathon man</i> (1976) by Schlesinger. After the shocking murder of his older brother, a New York history student finds himself inexplicably hounded by shadowy government agents on the trail of a Nazi war criminal who is trying to retrieve smuggled diamonds.</p>
<p><i>Captives</i> (1994) by Pope, 1994. A beautiful young dentist working in a tough British prison starts to become attracted to a violent inmate after the break-up of her marriage, and embarks upon an illicit affair with him, with terrible consequences for all.</p>
<p><i>Change me</i> (2007) by Karadzic. A Belgrade dentist goes through a midlife crisis.</p>
<p><i>Phil</i>, (2019) by Kinnear. A depressed dentist in mid life crisis tries to learn why one of his happiest patients suddenly commits suicide, and a dark comedic adventure ensues.</p>

EVOLUTION OF THE REPRESENTATION OF THE DENTIST IN CINEMA

CYRIL VIDAL

<p><i>The whole nine yards</i> (2000) by Lynn. A struggling dentist's life is turned upside down when a famous gangster moves in next door, and his wife convinces him to inform a notorious mob boss about the gangster's whereabouts.</p>
<p><i>Novocaine</i> (2001) by Atkins. A dentist finds himself a murder suspect after a sexy patient seduces him & steals all of the drugs from his practice.</p>
<p><i>Decay</i> (1998) by Stephens. A dentist's wife conspires the murder of her husband.</p>
<p><i>The hangover part II</i> (2011) by Philips. Two years after the bachelor party in Las Vegas, Phil, Stu, Alan, and Doug jet to Thailand for Stu's wedding. Stu is a dentist.</p>
<p><i>Wild grass</i> (2009) by Resnais. A quirky dentist (Marguerite) who spends her free time as a pilot has her purse stolen; when a mysterious man finds her wallet, they embark on a peculiar romance.</p>
<p><i>Schizopolis</i> (1996) by Soderbergh. Fletcher Munson, the lethargic employee of a pseudo-religious self help company, and his doppelganger, the friendly but dull dentist Dr. Jeffrey Korchek.</p>
<p><i>Horrible bosses</i> (2011) by Gordon. Three friends conspire to murder their awful bosses when they realize they are standing in the way of their happiness.</p>
<p><i>Cachorro</i> (2004) by Albaladejo. Pedro, a gay dentist with an active social life and many friends, takes in his nephew Bernardo for a couple weeks.</p>
<p><i>The secret lives of dentists</i> (2003) by Rudolph. An introspective dentist's suspicions about his wife's infidelity stresses his mental well being and family life to the breaking point.</p>
<p><i>Django unchained</i> (2014) by Tarantino. With the help of a German bounty-hunter, and ex-dentist, a freed slave sets out to rescue his wife from a brutal plantation-owner in Mississippi</p>
<p><i>With a friend like Harry...</i> (2000) by Moll. Harry knew Michel in high school; they meet again by accident, Harry inserts himself in Michel's life... and things take a sinister turn.</p>