

Trauma, Dissociation, and Amnesia: Myths and Reality in Cinema and Life

A look at the psychological responses to trauma that include dissociation and amnesia, phenomena which are often misunderstood in the media and public perception. After looking at models that explain common responses to trauma, including post-traumatic stress, traumatic amnesia, and dissociative identity disorder (formerly called multiple personality disorder), we will screen five films that portray these conditions in various contexts. All are Hollywood produced. The stories have sometimes been manipulated to add drama so as to appeal to popular audiences, which is one of the dynamics this course will examine.

Session 1 / Jan 31, 2020:

Lecture/discussion: An overview of the mechanisms and dynamic of memory and the ways in which it is subject to traumatic distortion, dissociations and episodes of amnesia. We will focus on understanding dissociative and amnesic responses to trauma as defensive and self-protective mechanisms. When seen in this context, behaviors that often seem bizarre begin to make sense.

Session 2 / Feb 7:

Prince of Tides (1991) / the screen adaptation of Pat Conroy's portrayal of the range of responses to childhood trauma in a dysfunctional, violent family. Starring Barbra Streisand and Nick Nolte, the film was also directed and produced by Streisand.

Session 3 / Feb 14:

The Three Faces of Eve (1957) / The Hollywood portrayal of a real-life case of dissociative identity disorder. This is the film that brought the phenomenon of multiple personalities to public attention, was highly acclaimed when it was released, and set up beliefs about multiplicity that lasted for decades. The screenplay uses actual dialogue from tapes of Eve's therapy sessions. Eve is played by Joanne Woodward who was able to view footage of those sessions to help her understand the character.

Session 4 / Feb 21:

Sybil / part 1: The 1976 made for TV portrayal of a true-life story of a woman in New York City who was treated by a psychiatrist who also befriends her. This time Joanne Woodward plays the psychiatrist and Sally Field is the patient. The portrayal is based on the book SYBIL, written by a journalist named Flora Rheta Schreiber who was acquainted with both the woman who is called Sybil and Dr. Cornelia Wilber, the psychiatrist who engages in an 11 year psychoanalysis of Sybil.

Session 5/ Feb 28:

Sybil / part 2: The denouement of the treatment that resolves Sybil's multiplicity in ways that don't always reflect reality.

Session 6 / March 6:

Frankie and Alice (2010) / A modern day portrayal of dissociative identity featuring a strip club dancer in LA who gradually realizes there are parts of herself of which she is unaware and that are radically different from the persona whom most of the people who know her see. The film is based on notes of a well-known psychiatrist, but the real-life Frankie has never been publicly identified. Despite lack of critical acclaim, the film has been well received by audiences.

Session 7 / March 13:

A review of the portrayals in the films previously screened, identifying the psychological dynamic in the story and the degree of reality in each of the Hollywood adaptations.

Session 8 / March 20:

Collateral Beauty (2016) / A heartwarming story about loss and extreme grief starring Will Smith, Helen Mirren, and Kate Winslet. The film was panned by critics as contrived but has good audience ratings. What critics didn't seem to understand is the nature of the story, which the principals involved (actors, director, and screenwriter) have described as a fable. In that context, the story becomes a parable of healing and redemption.