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psychiatry in the movies

Oedipus wrecked

Peter Byrne

The legend, tragic play, psychoanalytic theory and film plot line are tunefully summarised by Howard Dietz's lyrics to that Hollywood perennial *That's Entertainment*:

where a man kills his fadda
and causes a lot of bother

No film cited below offers any more sophisticated an analysis of the Oedipus complex than that song. People make films for the money and/or the attention: the trick is the pretence of High Art.

The villain of *Strangers on a Train* (1951), Bruno, attempts to persuade unhappily married Guy to kill Bruno's father; in return, he makes Guy a widower. Reviewers describe Bruno as a 'psychotic mother's boy'. Jimmy Piersal's biopic *Fear Strikes Out* (1957) portrays his depression as somehow caused by his over-competitive father. Similarly, *Shine* (1996) explains David Helfgott's psychotic breakdown in terms of a brutal father (traumatised by Nazi concentration camps) and an unhappy family. Helfgott's real life siblings were even more unhappy with their father's misrepresentation. Another ungrateful son, in *Affliction* (1997), looks like he is turning into his father, so he kills him. Patricide sets up the action of *Gladiator* (2000). Even comedy psychiatrists drag the ghost of Oedipus into their psychobabble: *Analyse This* (1999) and *Analyse That* (2002). Beyond the psychiatry film genre we have Westerns as the ultimate Oedipal quests. Fathers are either weak (*Shane*, 1953 and *3:10 to Yuma*, 1957, 2007) or absent (*The Cowboys*, 1972). Without these familiar motifs, we would not have had what Leslie Halliwell deemed the juvenilisation of cinema: *Return of the Jedi* (1983).

When Niles takes over his brother's radio phone-in show in television's *Frasier*, he explains that he (unlike his older brother) is a Jungian: 'so there'll be no more blaming mother'. Cody Jarrett (James Cagney) in *White Heat* (1949) becomes a sadistic criminal not because he is a bad person, but because of a domineering mother. We are told he has 'a fierce psychopathic devotion to his mother', and to gain his trust, any new friend will have to 'take mother's place'. Bad mothers do not just make violent sons – in cinema they also cause psychosis (Normal Bates in *Psycho* (1959), its sequels, remakes and countless imitators). In *The Miracle* (1991), Jimmy almost does what Freud thought he might have wanted, and in *Braindead* (1992), mother's boy Lionel is pulled back into mother's womb; and then there is *Spanking the Monkey* (1994). By *Spider* (2002), we are back in familiar territory. Over-attachment to mother causes psychosis. And psychosis plus cinema equals murder.

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