PSYCHIATRISTS IN FILM NOIR

A Quick Taxonomy of the “Couch Trip”

By Don Malcolm
Sentinel Managing Editor

Psychoanalysis and film noir? A natural combination. With so much aberrant behavior abounding in its reels, noir has a direct pipeline to all matters of character deterioration.

There’s a broader cultural context for the infiltration of Freudian ideas into American film, of course, and there is a wealth of academic literature showing how film is a medium most suited for displaying psychological concepts.

But it is clear that film noir made the most consistent use of these ideas, and often employed the psychiatrist as a central character. We’re going to focus on those films within the noir canon that made the psychiatrist a pivotal portion of the story and theme.

And, yes, an entire film festival can be constructed from this sub-genre of noir: more than two dozen noirs have a psychological specialist, often distinguished from the rest of the cast by his pipe-smoking habit, either solving a crime, caring for a troubled patient, failing to cure a patient (sometimes with fatal results), or using their powers of mind for self-serving (and often downright malevolent) purposes.

Let’s look at the categories:

SURROGATE-DETECTIVES: Blind Alley, Conflict, The Dark Mirror, The Dark Past, Experiment Perilous, Possessed

Not every one of these surrogate Sherlock Holmeses is a pipe-smoker (Lew Ayres, in The Dark Mirror, prefers lemon drops), but you get the idea.

Every one of these psychiatrists is engaged in some kind of cat-and-mouse game with a troubled, often violent person. Blind Alley is the template here: made in 1939, it’s not quite noir, but has lots of locked-room tension between pipe-chomping Ralph Bellamy (in a surprisingly nuanced performance) and gun-toting Chester Morris, who has a dark secret from his childhood that the doctor must reveal in order to neutralize him. (The Dark Past, in the post-WWII wave of noir, is a very close remake).

The most oftbeat of these films is the period “melo-noir” Experiment Perilous, which boasts one of the earliest historical

(continued on pg. 6, col. 1)
meet, albeit by his own methods. By story and modern urban setting, shadows- and light-camerawork, both films rate as full-blooded noirs. Consider those key scenes in The Reckless Moment where a visual chorus of quivering shadows is commenting on the psychological state of the protagonist, as the silhouettes of every branch of pine needles—indeed, each leaf, shaken by the wind through the trees—flits across the walls and their faces. It was a striking image. Max Ophuls was a strange fish—you might say one out-of-water. He was a man of the theater; he had been the director of countless plays on the provincial German stage and advanced to the big in the early thirties. His mind and aesthetics were molded, in Europe, by the German and French classics; he had a literary bent, clearly seen in his choice of film subjects while on the Continent. Yet Ophuls evolved into a supreme film modernist.

His theatrical foundation was manifest in a lifelong preference for ensemble work; in his use of lengthy, tracking shots; in his practice of long rehearsals alone with actors, in the absence of the cut film crew, before cameras rolled. He once remarked how he abhorred cuts in movies. Those long shots were Ophuls’ trade-mark: he thought in terms of a mobile mise en scène. In addition to the traveling shots, there was the crab dolly—it could move the camera up and down as well as sideways, go above and follow behind. His avoidance of close-ups and the stretched traveling shots set him apart and made him subversive in relation to Hollywood classicism, which tended toward short takes, covering shots, close-ups of the stars. His words: “Moving pictures should move.” At the wrap party for The Reckless Moment, the crew presented Ophuls with a pair of roller skates, “to keep up with the camera” on his next film.

Ophuls’ theatrical predilections were both his greatest strength and greatest weakness. His editor on Caught, Robert Parrish, noted: “With Max, first of all, you couldn’t cut these scenes because they were designed; they were moving. And this sharp, clever man knew that’s what would have to be the picture.” Ophuls thought and conceived his films in these dolly and tracking shots, with prolonged takes—not as separate, individual images. His visual thought formed itself in dramatic scenes, like in the theater. Yet this style proved astonishingly modern in mid-twentieth century film.

Consider one famous scene in Caught, an extended and idiosyncratic shot where Dr. Quinada (Mason) is pacing about, talking to his partner Dr. Hoffman (Frank Ferguson) while going back and forth between adjoining doorways, from his office to his partner’s office, paying no attention to any camera, leaving the room and disappearing. This scene made the studio tear its hair out: what a waste of shooting time! But Mason! It went against all current ideas for a star, without a close-up in sight. But Mason was in agreement with Ophuls, and wanted to do it that way. At the same time, Ophuls did away with rules for shooting a master scene—it looks as though the camera was eavesdropping, not shooting.

Ophuls was the exception proving the rule on women in film noir. He made two “feminist” films. In film noir, ladies in lead roles ended up being, more often than not, either femmes fatales or hapless victims. Yet in this director’s imagination, his two main female protagonists—Barbara Bel Geddes as Leonora and Joan Bennett as Lucia Harper—are strong dames. Ophuls rendered them as active players in their lives without being evil witches; this artistic and ethical choice was in notable contrast to many of his male contemporaries.

In his European films, before and after his stint in America, women in his movies appeared concerned with their sexual life alone. Joan Bennett in The Reckless Moment is light years removed from that; look how tough and hardened she is in addressing Darby during their first meeting. Leonora in Caught learns not to rely on her sexy figure and girlish charm: once she is confronted by a selfish, sadistic and possessive “dream husband,” she finds herself a job and a new meaning in life.

Nor would Ophuls allow any of the figures in his two noirs to be parodies either. We never see what amounts to a denunciation of a human being, something done more often in movies and literature than is generally acknowledged (the sole exception: Bea’s lothious boyfriend Darby in The Reckless Moment). Robert Ryan’s portrayal of the driven, egotistical and psychopathic multi-millionaire Smith Ohrig in Caught is a vil-lain if there ever was one—yet it is a portrayal far surpassing parody. Ophuls’ conscious fantasies here, at the time, were set on satirizing Howard Hughes and Preston Sturges. When Smith Ohrig orders Leonora to play hostess to his businessmen-guests well after midnight, taunting and humiliating her, the director claimed that this was identical to how he’d seen Sturges act with his own wife. Sturges was a disaster: Ophuls’ disappearance in the wartime comedy director/writer was complete. After he’d languished in Hollywood for four years since arriving in 1941, his first directing job came through Sturges’ independent company, Cal-Pix, whose financial backer was Hughes. Soon after, however, Sturges took away the film from him. No reason was given. He not only took it away, he actively humiliated the émigré director. Hilde Ophuls later claimed it was because Sturges could not allow another director to do a picture without interfering and eventually taking it over.

Ophuls’ longing for the Old World and its culture overcame him eventually. Late in 1949, he left America for France. At the time, he was still under contract with Walter Wanger and fully intended to return. Soon after, in Europe, he wished he was back and said so many times. But he would never return to America.

His Hollywood work had been accomplished under budget, under deadline. Great films entailed getting away from visual convention: due to serendipity, something unexpected like a delay, for instance, Ophuls would get in another of his beloved tracking shots, especially when he had temporarily fallen behind schedule. Squeezed into a lengthy tracking shot were several condensed script-pages from a few scenes. The only extra costs involved were in cutting open three walls of an interior in order to move the camera around, a crane needed to film at 180 or 360 degrees, or laying down track. The front office would request covering shots from alternative angles; Ophuls dispensed with these, thus using up little film. As a result, production bosses and editors found themselves helpless to alter his work. In effect, the studio was forced to accept how Ophuls filmed because he was so economical with time and money.

If the director did not exactly become another person as a filmmaker in America, he did become a more modern and focused one. America must have cleared his mind. The film noirs appear sui generis when seen next to his European work. Here, by virtue of his stealth, he became a modernist master, striking out in new directions. “He [Ophuls] was steadily gaining in stature, I think,” said Douglas Sirk, “and developed fully only in America. There’s a different handwriting … and I do think the American period, though not especially rewarding to him, helped him to arrive at his most personal style.”

Marc Svetov is a regular contributor to the Sentinel.