

# Medicine on the big and small screen: On Being Unsane in Insane Places

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Claire Foy, *UNSANE*, 2018. AF archive / Alamy Stock Photo

## Reviewed by Lorenzo Servitje, PhD

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## *Unsane*

Starring: Claire Foy, Joshua Leonard, Jay Pharoah

Directed by Steven Soderbergh; film released March 2018;  
DVD release June 2018; Rated R; 98 minutes.

*Unsane* is an asylum, psychiatric thriller. Those typical conventions we all expect from thrillers are all here: the questionable sanity of the protagonist; milder versions of Nurse Ratched-esque antagonists; an undercover journalist posing as a patient; and that aggressively-administered shot of Thorazine. Even a parodied version of the culturally-vilified electroconvulsive therapy, makes an appearance.

However, *Unsane* does more than rehash/revamp the conventions of the genre populated by the dozens of

movies with asylum in the title. In a #MeToo era, the film reflects on some of the technological and medical dimensions and implications of the sexual, emotional, and physical harassment and assault of women.

Sawyer Valentini (Claire Foy) has moved across the country to escape a stalker named David Strine (Joshua Leonard), and despite her professional and assertive performance, we are soon privy to the disabling emotional distress of the trauma.

Sawyer performs a Google search “support groups for stalking victims,” then the scene cuts to her meeting with a concerned counselor, and fleeting mention of feelings of despair and past thoughts of suicide. The counselor hands her a clipboard (suspiciously already out on the table prior to any suggestion of suicidal ideation) and says, “We can discuss treatment options when you finish the paperwork.”

Cut to her being escorted to a locked exam room where she is confronted by a procedurally hostile nurse. Stripped of her belongings and clothing, Sawyer is instructed to ingest a menagerie of pills, “You are upset. Take these.”

Viewers with experience in these settings might chuckle (hopefully wince) at the verisimilitude of the medical staff’s institutionally-crafted responses to Sawyer’s questions

regarding what is happening. The staff explains, “The nursing assessment includes a head-to-toe skin examination;” “It’s a hospital wide policy;” and “The door is locked for your privacy.” It’s the kind of informed consent a patient gets when they are told “these are to help make you feel better.”

Sawyer learns she consented to her voluntary commitment for 24 hours by signing “boilerplate” forms. The plot develops as expected: she resists; she tries to play the game, acknowledging that everyone is “just doing their job;” and she tries to call the police (does she know “how many calls like these the cops receive a week?” Yeah, but those are from crazy people.”).

Sawyer’s patience wanes as she is harassed by two patients. She bangs on the door of the communal room demanding to be released. Opening the door, dressed in scrubs and ID badge, is David Strine (Joshua Leonard) who is supposed to be 450 miles away.

Soderbergh’s editing here is seamless. We see Strine, as Sawyer does, but as soon as her defensive punch lands, his face changes to reveal he is shorter and heavier than in the previous shot. It is not Leonard. Sawyer’s mistake buys her another week.

The tension rises when during routine medication time Sawyer approaches another orderly (standing next to the one she previously mistook for Strine), the camera angled upward from the position of the table. We don’t see the attendant’s face, but paying attention, we can see a close up of his badge, and it is the face of David Strine. Sawyer looks up, staring in disbelief, and laughs uncomfortably; she looks down; the camera cuts to his face—it is Leonard. She looks down again, hoping her mind is once again playing tricks on her. It is not. This is confirmed at the next scheduled medication time, when Strine, a new orderly, apologizes profusely if he “said or did anything to upset” her—and flashes a letter from her mother’s house when no one is looking. There are really only about 15 minutes of uncertainty for Sawyer and the viewers as to the veracity of Strine’s infiltration of the Highland Creek facility.

It is unclear if Soderbergh drew inspiration from a 2012 case of a woman summarily being committed under the auspices of self-endangerment at a Millwood hospital in Arlington, Texas, after signing “routine paperwork.” It appears there is evidence, in words of the film’s undercover journalist Nate Hoffman (Jay Pharoah), of “Highland Creeks and Tumbling Pines and Cedar Valleys out there.” Perhaps some would argue, citing the Millwood case, that this is not entirely fictionalized, but subordinated to the film’s focus on gendered harassment. Sawyer’s primary

conflict/antagonist is Strine, the broken mental health care system is the milieu and catalyst that allows him to “not take no for an answer.”

The most oft-cited aspect of the film is that it was filmed with an iPhone 7, an experiment that was met with mixed reviews by film critics. Soderbergh has a penchant for voyeuristic cinematography, especially using over-the-shoulder shots. Visually narrating this story through the medium of the smart phone reflects the thematic stalking. Many of the shots mimic the perspective of licit (hospital) surveillance cameras.

The contradiction here is in the technology itself: on the one hand it affords security (safety apps in the case of assault, tracking location, a camera to document crimes and harassment); on the other, it can be used as a tool by a perpetrator (harassing text messages, sending offensive images, eavesdropping, etc). In a flashback, Sawyer is warned by a security professional (Matt Damon) to “think of [her] cell phone as [her] enemy;” just one element in a long list of security practices she is forced to employ. The point to take here is not that the ambiguity is inherent in the technology, but rather that the affordances it provides—documentation, constant contact, safety features—mediate but don’t resolve the cultural problem of masculine privilege. Soderbergh’s use of the smartphone as a film and digital medium can draw attention to what the technology itself obscures.

For medical professionals and humanists, the film suggests that we should be more attentive to the gaslighting of women under medical auspices, and to the sordid history of hysteria. When harassment, stalking, and rape frequently result in health-related consequences, when the voices of women are adjudicated medically as well as legally, medical professionals have a responsibility to be especially attentive of the way gender harassment and inequality influence diagnosis and treatment.

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#### Correction

In the Summer 2019 issue, in the article *Koch’s postulates & Kaposi’s sarcoma*, the graphic on page 18 was incorrect. At the top, the “Diseased” animal was incorrectly labeled “Healthy.” This inaccuracy was part of the artwork process. We apologize for any confusion or inconvenience this may have caused.