

The physician at the movies



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Medical conditions have been prominently featured in movies. In some cases, they have been used merely to create dramatic tension; in others, they have been the principal subjects of the films. Given the dearth of current medically-related films, I thought it would be fun to begin a series reviewing some of these different portrayals of illness. Given that many conditions will be outside my area of expertise, I hope that these commentaries will provoke informative responses from specialists in the relevant disciplines, including their favorite or least favorite movies involving their areas of expertise. The first entry focuses on the restoration of sight after many years of blindness. This was a plot device used in *Blink*, a murder mystery starring Madeleine Stowe and Aidan Quinn, in which a woman whose mother shoved the heroine's face into a mirror causing traumatic blindness, receives corneal transplants years later. Although her sight returns, it does so with delayed visual images and perceptual distortions, during one of which she gets a glimpse of a murderer. Despite this imaginative hook and the appeal of the stars, *Blink* is marred by a banal script and the crudity and stupidity of the main characters. So instead I'll review a film where blindness and the attempt to cure it are central to the story.

At First Sight

Starring Mira Sorvino, Val Kilmer, Kelly McGillis, and Nathan Lane

Directed by Irwin Winkler. Rating PG-13. Running time 128 minutes.

This film, which I passed on when it was released in 1999, is based on neurologist Oliver Sacks's story, "To See or Not to See" in *An Anthropologist on Mars*.¹ Though a pleasant enough entertainment, the movie's plotline strays so far from Sacks's case study that it severely strains credulity. The casting doesn't help. Mira Sorvino plays Amy Benic, a high-powered New York architect in partnership with her ex-husband. Amy looks way too young to be someone who has been married and divorced and has risen to the top of her profession. A workaholic, she has to be literally ejected from her office to go on a planned vacation at the Inn at Bear Mountain. There we meet another miscast actor, Val Kilmer, as Virgil Adamson, who appears way too handsome and suave to have stayed in his hometown to serve as the Inn's blind masseur. The principal reason for staying seems to be his support system, especially Jennie, his devoted

married sister, played by Kelly McGillis.

When Amy gets her massage at the inn, she does not realize Virgil is blind because she had seen him playing hockey by himself on a frozen pond when she drove into town. That in itself is some feat. We are told that his dream has always been to play forward for the New York Rangers. Needless to say, this must have been the scriptwriter's dream since none of this is in Sacks's story, which features a 50-year-old Virgil who, far from having drop-dead good looks, is afflicted with Pickwickian Syndrome and is both sedentary and passive.¹

Once Amy realizes that Virgil is blind, she blindfolds herself in her hotel room to simulate blindness, and promptly trips and falls. Naturally, as she is fantasizing about him, Virgil appears at the door and they begin a relationship. He tells her that he became blind as a child because of "congenital cataracts and a healthy dose of retinitis pigmentosa." He goes on to say that he "never wrote a book like Helen Keller," wishes he could "play the piano like Ray Charles," and "really sing like Stevie Wonder." Still, he's happy with his small town life, where everyone knows him and looks out for him. The librarian gets him the latest books and *Playboy* in Braille. He has memorized where everything is in his apartment, his work area, and the path to the bus that takes him to work. When Amy pushes him to get an experimental treatment she read about on the Internet, Jennie, who has become a co-dependent caregiver, is furious. She tells Amy that Virgil went through that for eight years and it almost killed him. We also learn that his father left them and Virgil's sure that it was because he was disabled and couldn't regain his sight. After his mother died when he was 18, Jennie was his sole remaining relative.

Virgil decides to reject Jennie's advice and to accompany



Val Kilmer and Mia Sorvino in *At First Sight*.
Courtesy of Photofest. Photo by Phillip V. Caruso/SMPSP

In Master and Commander, HMS Surprise encounters a fierce storm. © Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation and Universal Studios and Miramax FilmCorp.

Amy to her New York City apartment, with which he becomes acquainted. A specialist at Manhattan Eye and Ear (Bruce Davison) tells them that “25 years ago cataract surgery was in the dark ages,” but now he can hold out hope that Virgil will see. After the operation, the post-op scene, where presumably success or failure will be determined, is very poorly portrayed. It’s hard to believe that the surgeon would remove the patch in a very bright room and not prepare the patient for what he will or will not see. Virgil’s confusion and discomfort leads to an angry outburst by his sister about the folly of Amy’s raising everyone’s hopes.

The surgeon refers Virgil to Phil Webster, a visual therapist played by Nathan Lane who provides the comic relief and the common sense that the picture to that point sorely lacks. Webster explains to Virgil that he is suffering visual agnosia because he became blind before he developed the visual capacity to discriminate shape, size, depth perception, etc. (which is not entirely true). As he puts it, Virgil has a “screwed up foundation for sight” and that he “must die as a blind person to be born again as a sighted person.” He likens this difficult in-between state to “Limbo” or “New Jersey.” Webster notes that Virgil expected the operation to be a miraculous cure or as he puts it: “You were expecting Anne Bancroft” (who played Helen Keller’s therapist in *The Miracle Worker*). He notes that “you have to learn to see. You have extraordinary disorientation for space and distance. You are confronted by new images. You’re still relying on touch. Understanding three dimensionality is confusing.” He illustrates this by Virgil’s difficulty in discriminating between an apple and a picture of an apple. After weeks of visual exercises, Virgil begins to make sense of the world around him and everything seems rosy.

It turns out that one of the disadvantages of regaining his sight is that now he can see the television image rather than just listen to commentary and craft his own image of the New York Rangers, whom he appropriately refers to as the “New York Strangers.” When interrupted while watching a game when blind, he prefers to say that they “didn’t win” rather than that they “lost.” Having been cursed with being a Rangers fan since 1945, I can feel his pain. Now he can see the blunders of veteran defensemen and forwards. Before his vision disappears, his last sighted request is to see a Ranger game at Madison Square Garden. Virgil doesn’t tell Amy that his sight is ebbing until after the game ends and the Rangers lose. Before he does so, he sees the puffy pink thing that he last saw as a child, but couldn’t remember what it was. It turns out that his last visual memory was when his father bought him cotton candy at a Ranger game.

Virgil leaves Amy to return to his previous life and to the care of his sister, who is thrilled. What the odyssey presumably



has taught him is that, “as a blind man I see better than a sighted person because we don’t see with our eyes. To see what is real about yourself and others you don’t need eyes for that.” There’s more to the plot that I won’t reveal. The stimulus to read Sacks’s story was the film’s beneficial by-product. The real Virgil contracted polio, meningoencephalitis, and cat scratch fever at age three. Whether any of this led to his retinal damage or whether it was congenital is hard to sort out. In his sixth year, he developed cataracts and attended a school for the blind where he learned Braille and became proficient in the use of a cane. After graduation, he did become a massage therapist in Oklahoma.

Amy was someone Virgil had dated in his 20s but lost touch with when she pursued a graduate degree in botany in Arkansas. They reconnected 20 years later after she had developed severe asthma, had divorced her first husband, and had returned to Oklahoma. As in the movie, Amy was the prime mover in Virgil’s having his cataracts removed. As Sacks notes, both Amy and Virgil expected that after the operation “a man opens his eyes, light enters and falls on the retina; he sees.”¹ Sacks describes the disorientation that Virgil experienced because of his difficulty apprehending distance, space, and shape, and does a great job in comparing it to the accounts of the limited number of similar cases in the medical literature in which people regained their sight long after becoming blind.



He also discusses how children learn to put images together with the spatial nature of objects. The story was worth reading in itself and helped me to appreciate where the movie got it right, especially the post-procedural visual agnosia.

Reference

1. Sacks O. To See or Not To See. In Sacks O. *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales*. New York: Knopf; 1995.

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World

Starring Russell Crowe and Paul Bettany

Directed by Peter Weir. Rated PG-13. Running time 138 minutes.

This film, in which a doctor is a major character, is best described as an entertaining yarn filled with derring-do and reminiscent of the swashbucklers of my youth. There—I got to fill a sentence with terms I haven't used for years, and I must say it felt good. The movie opens in April 1805 with the ominous declaration that Napoleon is the master of Europe and that only Britain's control of the oceans stands in his way. We are transported aboard the HMS *Surprise*, captained by Lucky Jack Aubrey (Russell Crowe). The *Surprise*, sailing off the coast of Brazil with its "28 guns and 197 souls," is ordered to intercept the much more powerful French ship *Acheron* en

route to the Pacific or, as it was known in those days, "the far side of the world." As I will note later, this is a very important deviation from the book by Patrick O'Brian on which the film is based.¹ O'Brian, whose 20-book series featured Aubrey and the doctor Stephen Maturin (Paul Bettany), was known for his meticulous research into the shipboard life of the period. The filmmakers, who drew heavily on O'Brian's work, are much more faithful in portraying life on the high seas than many of the old films in which Virginia Mayo, Errol Flynn, Gregory Peck, Maureen O'Hara, et al. were resplendently dressed and coiffed as they sailed the *Spanish Main* or on His Majesty's service. Still Aubrey and his crew look a lot cleaner and more well-shaven than one would expect, especially since O'Brian points out that the Commander of the Fleet was very concerned that precious water not be used by the women to wash their "necessities."¹ Interestingly, the filmmakers decided against including the women who are described in the book as taking care of the children or accompanying their men. Instead, they highlighted the surprising reliance on young boys learning to be officers. Sons of lords and other prominent British citizens, they comport themselves with maturity beyond their years and display surprising competence.

We do see the close quarters with seamen sleeping in hammocks cheek by jowl; the primitive maps and equipment, with only a sextant for determining their ship's position and

nothing to locate its prey. As Aubrey puts it, trying to do so is like trying “to find an honest man in Parliament.” There’s the hourglass for telling time, the passing of which is characterized by long stretches of boredom accentuated by traveling through the stifling “Doldrums.” Shipboard routine is interrupted by the singing of sea chanteys, battles with treacherous seas during a typhoon, and encounters with other ships, which serve as sources of news and conveyors of mail to loved ones back home. Early on, the *Surprise* happens upon the *Acheron*, whose long-range guns severely damage the *Surprise*’s masts. As the *Surprise* limps away to safety, we see Maturin operating in a bloody unsterile field and later performing an amputation on young Lord Blakeney (13-year-old Max Pirkus) with little to relieve the pain save some laudanum. There are two less convincing surgeries in the film. One involves Maturin’s working on a depressed skull fracture during which he opens the skull to reveal the brain and the man survives with his faculties relatively intact. The other is when Maturin is accidentally shot in the left upper quadrant by a shipmate and winds up directing surgeon’s mate Higgins (Richard McCabe) as, book in hand, he removes the bullet (shades of 1935’s *Society Doctor* and 1943’s *Destination Tokyo*).²

Much of the film involves the interplay between Aubrey and Maturin, who are both rather erudite and who relax by playing chamber music duets on the violin and cello respectively. While the film’s score is excellent, these musical interludes are, as one might expect, not virtuoso performances. Aubrey’s impetuosity and his stubbornness in pursuing the *Acheron*, despite their disastrous initial encounter, are counterbalanced by the doctor’s voice of reason and caution. The latter is a naturalist and a good part of the film shows him and young Blakeney collecting beetles and other flora and fauna along the coast of South America. For him, the only saving grace of Aubrey’s decision to pursue the *Acheron* beyond Cape Horn, which exceeds his orders, is the possibility of making landfall at the Galapagos Islands. The film crew was the first to be allowed to film on the Galapagos, and this provides a very pleasant break for the sailors and the viewers, although one is left to wonder just how much the Galapagos figured in the thinking of the time, given that it was thirty years before Darwin’s voyage there on the H.M.S. *Beagle*.

One of the doctor’s discoveries is a phasmid, an insect that disguises itself to escape its predators. This gives Aubrey an idea as to how to overcome the French privateer. In the inevitable final battle, as in all the movie’s battle scenes, it’s hard to figure out on the small screen who is winning or losing and to distinguish the combatants. Then again, this is probably more true to life in that battles, especially those involving hand-to-hand combat, are chaotic. Winners and losers are probably difficult to sort out until the dust settles. The other difficulty with the movie is understanding the dialogue. The script, co-written by director Weir and John Collee, a former practitioner of medicine,³ is literate enough. The problem is

tuning one’s ear to the accents of the crew and the shipboard terminology. So, if you can, watch it on a big screen set with a good stereo sound system or opt for playing the English subtitles in the crawl.

As with *At First Sight*, this movie also led me to read the book. O’Brian’s series is said to be an acquired taste because it is heavily laden with information on sailing at the time and with nautical jargon. Nonetheless, the relationship between Aubrey and Maturin is a continuing thread and has appealed to many. As mentioned, the filmmakers chose to focus on the relationships of the men and left out the *Surprise*’s encounter with a female pirate ship, as well as a botched abortion by surgeon’s mate Higgins. However, what intrigued me the most was that in the book, the *Acheron* was not the prey of the *Surprise*; rather it was the American ship *Norfolk* that had been harassing British whalers. I guess the filmmakers were worried that Americans wouldn’t like being portrayed as the hated enemy and that the French would do nicely, thank you.

References

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From a reader: Dentists in the movies

I would like to compliment you on your movie reviews that appear regularly in *The Pharos*. In your Winter 2004 column, you mentioned that you had difficulty in listing films that portrayed dentists in a good light. I would like to add an additional film that chronicles the life of a not so upstanding dentist: the 1925 silent film *Greed* by Erich von Stroheim.

This classic (which is available on video) was based on the novel *McTeague* by the American realist author Frank Norris. As a native San Franciscan, I consider *McTeague* one of my favorite books.

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