

The Hands of Orlac (1924), by Robert Wiene.

# Medicine on the big and small screen: The portrayal of medicine in silent fiction films

Therese Jones, PhD, and Lester D. Friedman, PhD, Movie Review Editors

Reviewed by Dennis Henkel, MD, Axel Karenberg, and  
Eelco F.M. Wijdicks, MD, PhD

Dr. Henkel is an intern in the Department of Neurology and Clinical Neurology, University of Witten/Herdecke, Wuppertal, Germany.

Axel Karenberg is at Cologne University Faculty of Medicine and University Hospital Cologne, Institute for the History of Medicine and Medical Ethics, Germany.

Dr. Wijdicks is in the Department of Neurology, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN.

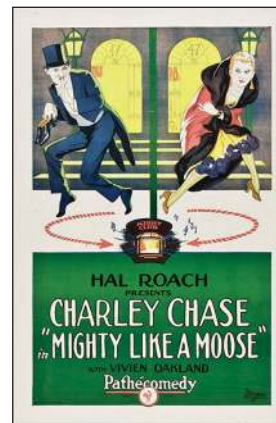
America's silent cinema relied on tropes and clichés to portray the practice of medicine. Today, this largely forgotten, nearly lost art form—only 20 percent of original silent-film production has survived—reveals how medicine and health professionals were perceived at the beginning of the 20th century. Fear of physicians, especially incompetent practitioners and psychiatrists, fear of infections, and fear of surgery were the major themes in silent film. These quickly evolved from pretexts for comedic situations to more serious consideration of medical ethics.

Pioneers such as George Albert Smith and George Méliès created the first fictional short films using editing tricks to stage fantastic spectacles in *The X-Ray Fiend* (1897) and *Les Rayons Roentgen* (1898). To shock and amuse audiences, Méliès and director Alice Guy portrayed absurd operations and transplants in films

such as *Twentieth Century Surgeon* (1897) and *Turn-of-the-Century Surgery* (1900).<sup>1</sup> A direct link exists between these early two-minute films and the later popular slapstick films of the 1910s and 1920s which included silly subjects such as lunatics in *Maniac Chase* (1904) and *Dr. Dippy's Sanitarium* (1906); dental treatments in *Laughing Gas* (1914) and *Leave 'Em Laughing* (1928); hypochondria in *Why Worry?* (1923) and *Oh, Doctor!* (1925); and plastic surgery in *Mighty Like a Moose* (1926).

During this silent film era, heroic surgical portrayals began to represent and laud the progress of medicine. Surgeons saved children from suffocation by tracheotomy (*The Country Doctor*, 1909), healed paraplegics (*Stella Maris*, 1918), and restored sight to the blind (*Journey into the Night*, 1921). However, movie surgeons could also be terrifying and unpredictable, peddling “cures” that led to potentially mutilating but medically improbable consequences. *The Hands of Orlac* (1924) presents the story of an injured pianist who receives the transplanted hands of an executed murderer and subsequently suffers from homicidal urges. *Wolfblood* (1925) depicts a patient who, after an emergency transfusion of wolf's blood, fears that he will mutate into a wolf-like predator in human form.

In more realistic medically-themed films, fear of infectious diseases dominated, especially tuberculosis, which was the leading cause of death in the United States at the time. These films depict unhealthy jobs (*The Temple of Moloch*, 1914), and poor, unhygienic urban living conditions (*The Italian*, 1915) as major causes of infection. Tuberculosis is also a backdrop in *The Phantom*



*Carriage* (1921) and *The Death of the Sun* (1922). Doctors are predominantly portrayed as rescuers from epidemics in *The Doctor* (1918) and *The Man Beneath* (1919).

Fear of psychiatrists, exemplified in the expressionist masterpieces of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), *Warning Shadows* (1923), and *Secrets of a Soul* (1926), became a popular trope in early German-speaking cinema.<sup>2</sup> Exceptional among psychiatric silent films was French director Léonce Perret's *The Mystery of the Kador Cliffs* (1912), in which a medium cures a young woman in an akinetic-amnestic state by staging a "reality re-enactment" that allows the patient to relive and confront trauma with immediate good results.

There were also films with caring family doctors such as *The Country Doctor* (1909), directed by D. W. Griffith, and *Dr. Jack* (1922) in which Harold Lloyd cures a chronically ill woman. Mary Pickford in *Pollyanna* (1920) becomes paralyzed after she is run over by a car while saving a little child. When the surgeon enters the room where she has been bedridden for months, the inter-title reads, "I am going to make you well because you have faith in me," and she walks again after a few attempts with crutches.

Early filmmakers in the silent era, with their reliance on facial expressions and pantomime, found rich material in medicine, bravely highlighting controversial topics and forging a path for filmmakers who followed them in the sound era. It is unlikely that most of the films portraying physicians in the silent era reflect a contemporary view of medicine, or have much relevance today, but they did

represent the common fears of seeing a physician, becoming infected, or being committed to an asylum.

The history of portrayal of physicians would change dramatically, and the following decades would lead to the heyday in the 1940s and 1950s, best remembered as the "Dr. Kildare era." These compassionate doctors fit well in the post-war "Hollywood happy-ending" culture, and set the tone by strongly implying that being a doctor is a vocation, something akin to a religious calling.

Not until the 1970s would physicians, particularly surgeons, fall off their movie pedestals and become objects of disdain. They would become part of a revolution in cinema when films became gritty, surly, and outside the bounds of respectability—a new generation of filmmakers and a new era in American cinema that questioned authority on every level, including within medical culture.

#### References

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The lead author's E-mail address is [henkel.dennis@outlook.com](mailto:henkel.dennis@outlook.com).

