

IRWIN HIRSCH, Ph.D.

SPECIAL ISSUE ON
PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE MEDIA

DISCUSSION—PORTRAYAL OF
PSYCHOANALYTIC THERAPISTS IN THE MEDIA

Abstract: Seven contributions from a combination of psychoanalysts, writers, and one academic are discussed. All contributors try to arrive at some understanding of how psychoanalysis has been depicted in the media and why so many of these portrayals tend to be outlandish. The authors' speculations range from efforts to deal with the threat of someone who can see unconscious process to a satirization and exaggeration of what may be actual qualities in many analysts. Each author's implicit or explicit psychoanalytic theory has much to do with his or her respective hypotheses.

Key words: psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, transference, countertransference, Interpersonal/Relational, Freudian analysis

PHILLIP BLUMBERG AND I ARE GRATEFUL to the four psychoanalysts, the two novelists, and the academic scholar who have, with careful thought and much intelligence and insight, contributed to this special issue. All took our invitation very seriously and have contributed meaningfully to an issue spoken of anecdotally by most analytic psychotherapists but rarely addressed in the psychoanalytic literature. The seven contributions shed considerable light on how psychoanalysis tends to be depicted in popular culture and, as well, on how our profession has been portrayed over time. My discussion of these essays is not anywhere near a thorough one, and as such can do only scant justice to their depth and complexity. My very limited aim is to find both common and disparate themes among these papers and to attempt to place them in a contemporary theoretical context.

Initially apparent in reading these papers is the diversity of the theoretical perspectives of the contributors. Readers of *Contemporary Psycho-*

analysis are exposed, for the most part, to writing that reflects an Interpersonal/Relational heritage. Even papers that are reflective, for example, of traditional Freudian or Kleinian points of view are likely to have some reference to the broader Relational writing currently pervasive in the United States. The essays published here help us appreciate the degree to which contemporary psychoanalysis remains highly diverse. The Interpersonal/Relational thinking that some of us see as having colored all current psychoanalytic thought is not reflective of this ongoing diversity among analysts, analytic patients (past and present), and those not in our field who write about psychoanalysis or portray it on one or another screen.

Inherent in the theoretical distinctions among these seven essays is the relative emphasis placed on analysts as entirely a construction of patients' or writers' fantasies, in contrast to the view of the analyst as a second party in the dyad who, indeed, has much to do with whatever elaborations are made by patients and writers. That is, the Relational turn in psychoanalysis begins with the concept of participant-observation—the analyst as intrinsically subjective and always participating unwittingly, for better and for worse. This unique and idiosyncratic subjective analyst, often unaware of the degree of his unwitting participation and how it influences each patient, has lost his authority both as an objective observer of patients' inner life and as one who can unequivocally know and diagnose patients' problems.

From this point of view, the unconscious of the analyst not only exists as a given but also cannot help but intrude into the process. The psychology of the patient as lived-out in the analytic dyad is thus thought to be coconstructed by the patient and the analyst in interaction with one another and as well, by the analyst's subjective interpretation of the patient's inner and outer worlds. Contrary to what might be interpreted as analytic symmetry or equal participation between analyst and patient, coconstruction means only that both parties contribute to the data of the psychoanalysis to some degree—one can never know for certain, or know objectively, the intrapsychic world of another person. Mutual participation does not mean equal degrees of participation, nor does it refer to mutual analysis.

My discussion here of each of the seven contributions is largely in that context, that is, the degree to which the portrayal of analysts begins with patients', writers', and filmmakers' pure projections and fantasies or is closer to a viewpoint that any analyst contributes unwittingly to the way

he is perceived. If we are to use the key concept of transference here, it is possible to view patients and creative artists as projecting their inner lives and fantasies onto a relatively blank-screen analyst; or, in some contrast, to view the analysts' participation as having a great impact on how they are seen in these contexts. This distinction can be simplified by referring to the now-popular dichotomy of a one- versus a two-person psychology, although this differentiation does not do entire justice to the shades of gray of many analysts and to the participants in this symposium.

Helen Taylor Robinson's essay reflects the most traditional Freudian perspective of the psychoanalytic situation. Her main thesis is that psychoanalysis is a universal threat to human narcissism, inasmuch as the analytic process is designed to point out all our primitiveness, weakness, fallibility, limitations, and ugliness. In response to these narcissistic threats, it is only natural to resist these pieces of awareness and to attack their source. Taylor Robinson views analysts as noble and well intentioned, whereas patients' rages and creative artists' rages are exclusively in the service of maintaining a blindness to psychoanalytic truths. From this point of view, negative criticism or biting satire of psychoanalysis is pure transference and, furthermore, serves as proof that the process is profoundly threatening. In Taylor Robinson's thinking, since analysis invariably and accurately pricks the defensive wish to be blind to one's limitations and one's ugliness, the power of analysis must be neutralized, and attacks are proof positive that each mocked analyst or analytic concept has come too close for comfort. So, when analysis is attacked or portrayed as foolish in the creative media, it demonstrates only the opposite: that is, the on-target threat of the analytic process is inherently touching a vulnerable nerve. To Taylor Robinson, this is a credit both to psychoanalysis and the validity of its potency. From this perspective, there can be no externally justified reason to mock or to criticize our profession, since the prototypical analyst is seen as participating exclusively as a well-intentioned and objective interpreter of others' unconscious, without the analyst's own subjectivity or unconscious intruding at all.

Ira Konigsberg gives us an interesting overview of the history of psychoanalysis as depicted in film. Konigsberg is not himself a psychoanalyst or psychotherapist, but an academic scholar of psychoanalysis, film, and other areas. On one hand, for him, psychoanalysis reflects a very traditional Freudian point of view, with the analyst as a sort of detective enlisted to ferret out the truth of patients' secrets and repressed memories. As with Taylor Robinson's model, the analyst's curious intellect impels

him to investigate and diagnose doggedly and without interference or intrusion of the investigator's subjectivity. In this regard, Konigsberg's analyst bears a similarity to a scholar; for both the search for knowledge and for truth is unwavering—the be all and end all.

On the other hand, in his interesting explication of the film, *Mine Own Executioner*, he describes an analyst who is filled with uncertainty and self-doubt. His description of the analyst in this film highlights both the effect of the person of the analyst on his patient and the personal influence of the patient on the analyst's life. Konigsberg's view of the analyst as a scholarly researcher/detective is markedly tempered by his assertion that it is impossible to know fully the mind of another, and by his recognition of the presence of the analyst as a complex and subjective participant in the analytic exchange.

Daniel Menaker's novels and short stories are replete with references to psychoanalysis, and in one novel it is the primary subject. He has clearly thought a great deal about the analytic situation and its effects, and his sophistication and sensitivity to the analytic process is evident in his essay here. Like Taylor Robinson's, Menaker's psychoanalysis is classically Freudian in conception. He speculates with great clarity and economy of language that media portrayal of analysts as silly, indulgent, phony, and cupidinous is in the service of creative artists' efforts (like their analytic-patient counterparts') to deny the frightening drive-states that analysts threaten to expose. He argues that, like analytic patients', creative artists' resistance to the awareness of frightening drive-states takes the form of anger, an anger expressed by making analysts look foolish and by discrediting the entire process. For Menaker, this invariably mimics the analytic interaction, a process wherein patients project onto their neutral analyst all the anxiety-making drive-states that are too threatening to reflect upon, much less to integrate. Media exaggerations and hyperbolic depictions of analysts are seen as diversions from conflicts surrounding real fears and wishes that are provoked by the analytic encounter or even by thinking about engaging this process. In this schema of psychoanalytic praxis, analysts' subjectivity and unwitting participation is bracketed: it does not carry much weight in how they are perceived. The shortcomings and limitations of the analyst himself are viewed by and large as a function of patients' projections and distortions and say little about the actual flawed participation or the affective states of the analyst. I have the sense that Menaker does view satirical portrayals of psychoanalysis as based in part on sensitivity to analysts' idiosyncrasies, though he does not speak to this here.

Isaac Tylim elaborates further on patients' and artists' wishes to discredit the threatening psychoanalyst, although he acknowledges that analysts' private affects operate with some parallel to patients' conscious and unconscious drive-states. On one hand, Tylim views the analytic process as unleashing passions and what is portrayed in film as being isomorphic to the passions unleashed by patients in analytic treatment. Film fantasy parallels individual patients' passions, drives, and fantasies, although in film and television these states are often expressed in concrete action. On the other hand, Tylim acknowledges that analysts have as much an inner life of passions and drives as do patients and that patients and creative artists alike are inherently aware of this and most curious about it. When analysts engage with the opaqueness thought by Tylim to be ideal, however, patients' perceptions of their analysts' inner world are likely to be projections of only the patients' fantasies. With what he implies is a revenge motive, patients who are writers and filmmakers, angry at knowing their analysts have secret inner lives yet not knowing what those lives are, turn the tables on their analysts by portraying them as inclined to act out passions destructively or foolishly.

While acknowledging that psychotherapists have as much of a secret inner life as patients, Tylim strongly advocates traditional analytic reserve, for it is this level of concealment that provokes patients' rich and productive projections. In what he refers to as the golden age of portraying psychoanalysis in film, analysts of that era were likely to strive toward a presentation of a blank screen. He suggests that more current depictions of analysts as bizarre and destructive are a result of the breakdown of analytic reserve—what he believes to be a reflection of patients' and creative artists' justifiable and non-projective anger at many contemporary analysts' excessive indulgence—that is, the tendency to reveal too much about themselves to patients. Tylim appears to believe that analysts' subjectivity, though always present, can be thoroughly concealed from patients when analysts behave ideally.

In stark contrast to Tylim's viewpoint, Andrea Celenza's golden age of portraying analysts in film and television is now. She argues that earlier and angrier depictions were largely reflective of patients'/creators' understandable rage at analytic authoritarianism and pomposity. She views films about analytic treatment as paralleling the trends in this field. She suggests that the classical analytic attitude of absolute authority, certainty, and knowledge created portrayals of psychoanalysts as characterized by extreme silence and the affectation of authoritatively knowing all. Rather

than seeing this attitude as nonparticipatory or opaque, she sees it as way of engaging, as extreme participation—the less human and ordinary the behavior of the analyst, the more extreme the patients' and the artists' fantasy. Although some might see this traditional approach as what ideally is supposed to happen in treatment, Celenza suggests that the angry feelings and hyperbolic portrayals are an artifact of analysts' behaving as infallible human beings with irrational authority. The level of submissiveness engendered by the affectation of extreme authority creates a retaliatory anger that may be more related to the analytic situation *per se* than to the actual inner life of the patient/creator.

Celenza's contemporary psychoanalyst, reflective of the influence of Interpersonal/Relational thinking, is one who does not try quite so hard to conceal all foibles, shortcomings, and ignorance. She views such concealment as an impossible effort, even when one tries to be opaque. Analysts' uncertainty is far more acceptable now than in an earlier generation, and analysts' humility conveys implicitly that they too have inner passions that are far from ideally controlled. Without the necessity of literal self-disclosure, analysts' awareness of their irreducible subjectivity and their recognition of unwitting mutual influence engender in patients a sense of agency and empowerment and run counter to creating patients' excessive submissiveness and idealization. In Celenza's eyes, these factors explain her observation that current film and television portray a more positive and less bizarre picture of a more fully human psychoanalyst and psychotherapist than previously.

Siri Hustvedt, in her recent novel, creates the very psychoanalyst described by Celenza. Both in his life and in his work, Hustvedt's psychiatrist is a fallible and nuanced human being, plagued with many doubts and uncertainties both in his personal and professional life. Again like Celenza, in her essay Hustvedt is highly critical of an authoritarian tradition in psychoanalysis. As well, she views the current emphasis within psychoanalysis on biological psychiatry, neurological psychiatry, and diagnostic entities as a medicalization of the field and a carrying forward of the notion of doctor as absolute authority. She is critical of the idea that human problems are more real when they can be located physically, for the risk here is the erosion of the effort to make meaning and to understand unconscious motivation—a turning away from the very heart of psychoanalysis.

Hustvedt links the tradition of the psychoanalyst as allegedly being an objective and scientific blank screen with more current efforts to explain

complex human experience by tying it to neurological and biological origins. She views these pseudoscientific positions as ripe for parody in the creative arts. In her eyes, any depiction of scientific objectivity in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy is blatantly phony and warrants strong satire. She argues strongly that a thoroughly subjective analyst always contributes, both consciously and unconsciously, to the patient's narrative. As well, she joins our other essayists in suggesting that, independent of anger generated by authoritarian attitudes, psychoanalysts are, indeed, inherently threatening (and prone to hyperbolic representation) to the extent that they serve as containers for affects and conflictual wishes and may be the only ones to hear the most intimate and humiliating of secrets.

Roni Baht provides us with an insider's look at how psychoanalysts are developed in film and in television. He teaches us that hyperbole is built into the very structure of this process, since creative artists are more concerned with what is possible than what really happens in the psychoanalytic situation. Like Menaker, he notes that any portrayal of real therapy sessions would be profoundly boring to viewers, even viewers in the analytic profession. For film and television, movement is needed, and movement is usually that which exists between or among people. Two people acting is inherently more dramatic than portraying the psyche of only one person.

For Baht this fact of dramatic life felicitously runs parallel to his Interpersonal/Relational psychoanalytic thinking. That is, he suggests that not only is it of more dramatic interest to look at the world of analyst and patient, it is also more true, albeit with exaggeration, to what actually occurs in all forms of psychotherapy. He observes that, although the creative people he worked with suspected that their analysts also had troubled inner lives and were subjective participants in the dyad, it was disturbing to have this fact validated by Baht. Yet he argues, like Celenza and Hustvedt, that the portrayal and the recognition of analysts as unexaggeratedly flawed human beings is less likely to lead to depictions of them as outlandishly bizarre. The more the dimensionality of the analyst is known, the more the artifact of authoritarian analyst and submissive patient is neutralized. Baht tells us that the portrayal of the deeply flawed analyst of *BeTipul [In Treatment]* led to a significant increase in Israelis seeking analytic therapies.

These seven insightful essays give us much to think about in our efforts to understand how psychoanalysis is portrayed in film, television, and literature. There are a number of significant points of similarity among the

contributors. All agree, for instance, that the efforts to uncover fantasies, affects, and humiliating secrets can readily lead to self-protective efforts to neutralize the power of the analyst. These can take the form of discrediting the analyst in a variety of ways or projecting into the fictional analyst those inner states that are the source of anxiety. Most of our contributors agree that analysts, too, have an inner life parallel to that of patients, although there is disagreement with regard to how much analysts' subjectivity is either visible to patients or has influence on patients. Three of our authors view analysts' inclination to deny personal subjectivity as an artifact that, in and of itself, creates anger and hyperbolic representation. However, one author views the very trumpeting of analytic subjectivity as an invitation to analytic indulgence, for him the most likely source of anger toward the profession. One or two others might well agree with this opinion if asked. These differences tend to divide along the lines of the authors' theoretical inclinations—traditional Freudian or Kleinian in one camp and closer to the Interpersonal/Relational tradition in the other. Indeed, the diversity of thought evident in this section is reflective of the widely conflicting points of view in the international world of psychoanalysis.

Irwin Hirsch, Ph.D. is Faculty, Supervisor, and Former Director, Manhattan Institute for Psychoanalysis; Distinguished Visiting Faculty, William Alanson White Institute; and Adjunct Professor of Psychology and Supervisor, New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis.

*1327 Lexington Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10128
Hirsch1514@aol.com*