

Fatal Disruption (A Film Essay on Social and Psychological Impacts of Murder)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

The theme of murder presents itself frequently in world cinema, with a major disruption in the narrative impacting both the main characters in the story and their unique environment or setting. Through the study of four drastically different films—ranging from psychological thriller, to traditional murder mystery, to slice of life and blockbuster—we will talk about how impending murder in film narrative offsets relationships, ties into class inequalities and is used as a tactic of control and manipulation. Such major disruptions—resulting from sinful behaviors such as lust, greed, envy and wrath—also threaten the delicate balance, harmony and overall security of the world within which characters coexist.

In Egoyan's film Felicia's Journey, young expectant mother Felicia ventures out of Ireland by ferry to the vicinity of Birmingham, England in an effort to track down her boyfriend Johnny who has relocated there. Upon her arrival, she accidentally crosses paths with a wealthy catering manager named Mr. Hilditch who appears to be helpful with directions in a foreign and seemingly inhospitable land. Little by little, Mr. Hilditch uses his skills of manipulation and subtle lies to gain the trust of Felicia and play upon her innocence and insecurities, like the many other young and vulnerable female victims he has previously encountered on the road.

In Altman's murder mystery Gosford Park, several guests and their servants travel to the McCordel's estate in the 1930s interwar period to dine and take part in high-society activities such as pheasant hunting on the vast adjacent acreage. As the film progresses towards its conclusion, we are left to ponder who—of the many present as visitors and guests at the estate—are involved in the conspiracy and murder of Sir William McCordel, a wealthy industrialist known to have had extra-marital infidelities and jealous rivals.

In Ceylan's film Three Monkeys, a road homicide leads a guilty politician named Servet—campaigning to win Turkey's leadership—to get his complicit chauffeur Eyüp to face jail time in his place, in return for a lump-sum payoff upon his release. With Erdogan's victory in the election and Eyüp still behind bars, Servet uses his position of power to take advantage of Eyüp's wife Hacer, which causes a breakdown in the household and leads to an ensuing act of violence from the part of Eyüp's son Ismail. At the film's conclusion, we are left to contemplate the impact of class system hierarchy within Turkey's criminal justice system, where an underling is routinely expected to represent their boss or superior when suspicions arise over criminal activity.

In Spielberg's fourth film in the Indiana Jones series set in the 1950s, a contingent of Soviet mercenaries led by ruthless Irina Spalko, infiltrate a top-secret American base and nuclear weapons testing site in Nevada to gain access to a warehouse containing a mysterious relic with electromagnetic powers. Soon Spalko, her KGB henchmen, and a familiar spy and double agent, follow leads from Indiana Jones and his outlandish academic colleague Oxley, as they plan to keep a crystal skull of alien origin—found in Roswell, New Mexico—safe amid a Cold War arms race where tactics of mind control, psychological warfare and assassination threaten peace-seeking experts and academics.

While characters within the film narratives discussed are impacted differently by acts of murder—which can occur through individual or collective violence—such cycles are manifested based on the social conditions of the worlds presented on the big screen. For instance, social hierarchy in the world of Gosford Park and Three Monkeys heavily dictates both the role and fate of the characters once the act of violence occurs. At the same time, in films like Felicia's Journey and Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, murder or premeditated harm can play a psychological role in weakening the defenses, manipulating and controlling characters as they struggle to break free from their power-seeking oppressors.

Filmography:

1. Felicia's Journey (1999). Dir. Atom Egoyan. Alliance Atlantis. Canada. 116 min.
2. Gosford Park (2001). Dir. Robert Altman. USA Films. USA and U.K. 137 min.
3. Three Monkeys (2008). Dir. Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Zeitgeist Films. Turkey. 109 min.
4. Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull (2008). Dir. Steven Spielberg. Paramount Pictures. USA. 122 min.