

## **Madness at the Movies: From Atypical Characters to Typical Antipsychotics**

**(By Toshio U.-P.)**

In contemporary American cinema, madness is often represented by an atypical central character who experiences delusions and mental anguish that inevitably leads to a (separated) hindered lifestyle and a difficulty fitting in. Following this downward descent, the character is lead into poverty, an uncertain bleak future or into some form of clinical incarceration. The environment or setting surrounding (or containing) this unconventional character can vary from ghetto-like, to upscale middle class, to bizarrely surreal and even to prison-like (institutional) isolation.

In The Soloist (1), Nathaniel is a homeless street musician who likes to hang out and play strings in city squares, highway underpasses and a Los Angeles ghetto community center. Through a journalist who encounters Nathaniel on the street, we learn about the African-American cellist's sad fall from grace when hallucinations, voices and other symptoms of mental illness began to interfere with his training to play music professionally for a symphony orchestra. These negative experiences eventually lead him into losing touch with his family with no desire to face the difficult traumas that occurred when he was younger and so full of promise.

In Donnie Darko (2), the teenage central character lives a more well off lifestyle as a rebellious high schooler who periodically sees a psychotherapist and takes prescribed medication for a diagnosed mental health condition. Throughout the film, Donnie is led by his delusions, which include hearing a muffled voice in his head and repeatedly seeing the hallucination of a man in a rabbit suit. He also believes he has the special power to travel in time and finds himself counting the days before the occurrence of cataclysmic event to which he feels intrinsically linked through his own destiny and through a time portal, which only he (and a select few) can comprehend.

In Being John Malkovich (3), a different sort of portal is found, which can lead human visitors to experience the senses of a host human 'vessel', which, in this case happens to be the body of celebrity actor John Malkovich. This relationship (which is host-parasite in nature), eventually leads the 'Malkovich vessel' into a state of mad-slavery, where the actor is controlled like a puppet despite making an attempt to 'seal' the door to his head 'forever' and reclaim his own sane-freedom.

In Shutter Island (4), character Teddy Marshall visits a psychiatric hospital on an isolated island during the 1950s. As the story progresses, we learn that Teddy is haunted by his past as a US soldier (who witnessed the extermination in Dachau) and by the loss of his wife (and kids). As Teddy's stay is prolonged on the island (where he initially believes he is investigating the case of a missing female patient), his mental health begins to unravel and he slides into delusion. After Thorazine finds its way into his system Teddy comes up short of fleeing the island and exposing a conspiracy involving a well-guarded lighthouse where Americans are behaving like Nazis during the war.

In The Soloist, Donnie Darko, Being John Malkovich and Shutter Island, madness evolves within its context or to quote Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison, "carves its own reality" (5). Through the study of American cinema, we can notice a significant gap between the 'normals' and the mad, or as Donnie Darko would put it, the "wacko". This

variable division present in cinema culture signals the existence of insurmountable barriers (and norms) that prevent the mad anti-hero from emancipation or triumph over a systemic (institutional) giant.

Sources:

1. The Soloist (2009). Dir. Joe Wright. USA. Paramount Pictures. 117 min.
2. Donnie Darko (2001). Dir. Richard Kelly. USA. Pandora Cinema. 113 min.
3. Being John Malkovich (1999). Dir. Spike Jonze. USA. USA Films. 112 min.
4. Shutter Island (2010). Dir. Martin Scorsese. USA. Paramount Pictures. 138 min.
5. Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison quote:  
<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1805379-an-unquiet-mind-a-memoir-of-moods-and-madness>