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## psychiatry in the movies

## And the winner is . . . the loser

## Peter Byrne

First of all, I want to thank the Academy (of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)<sup>©</sup>. If you want to win an acting Oscar<sup>©</sup>, play someone with psychiatric illness, intellectual disability or addiction. Think of the drama and the certainty that your character will play out a nervous breakdown (whatever that is) in full Technicolor<sup>©</sup>. Split personality (cinema's warped version of schizophrenia) won the Oscar<sup>©</sup> for Frederick March in 1931, Ronald Coleman in 1947, and again for Joanne Woodward in 1957. Addiction brought acting honours to Bette Davis (1935), Ray Milland (1945),\* Patricia Neal (1963), Elizabeth Taylor (1966), Nicholas Cage (1995), James Coburn (1998), Marion Cotillard (2007), Jeff Bridges (2009) and Mo'Nique (2009). Despite the relative rarity of films that feature a central character with intellectual disability or autism, when your agent calls with this prized (sic) role, just say yes. Ernest Borgnine (1955),\* Cliff Robertson (1968), John Mills (1970), Dustin Hoffman (1988)\* and Tom Hanks (1994)\* romped home. By today's standards, many of these films are clunky: the eponymous *Charly* (1968) wonders 'why people who would not dream of laughing at a blind or a crippled man would laugh at a moron'.

Being traumatised into madness won the day for Ingrid Bergman (1944), Alec Guinness (1957)\* and Christopher Walken (1978).\* Depending on your perspective, either faking madness or playing the socialised psychopath delivered the laurels to Jack Nicholson (1975)\* and Angelina Jolie (1999). Psychosis has rewarded Peter Finch (1976), Kathy Bates (1990), Anthony Hopkins (1991),\* Geoffrey Rush (1996) and Heath Ledger (2008). Unusually, the first and last recipients won their Oscars<sup>®</sup> posthumously. Obsessive–compulsive disorder gave Jack Nicholson another statuette in 1997; Tim Robbins won in 2003 for a character with indeterminate symptoms, probably schizophrenia. Playing a character with depression might be tough, but the Oscar<sup>®</sup> cheered up Jane Fonda (1971), Timothy Hutton (1980)\* and Nicole Kidman (2002). Two recent outstanding performances, by Tom Wilkinson (2007) and Michael Shannon (2008), depicted mania and depression. Though nominated, neither won, beaten by portrayals of psychopathy and psychosis respectively.

The total number of non-honorary acting Oscars<sup>©</sup> awarded to 2009 is 317: the 32 listed above account for 10% of winners. Mental health themes do not feature in 10% of all films, and nine of these winning films (\*) also received the Best Picture Oscar<sup>©</sup>. The serious point to be made here is that these representations evoke pity for the unfortunate 'victim', save those psychotic few 'empowered' to torture or kill. The key to removing stigma will be believable characters with whom audiences can identify: parity not pity.

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