Golden Ages and Silver Screens: The Construction of the Physician Hero in 1930-1940 American Cinema

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ABSTRACT

- The beginning of the twentieth century marked the rise of two powerful forces in American society: the modern institution of medical science and the Hollywood film-making industry. Medical research, effective success in the clinic with a greater understanding of microbiology and immunity. Furthermore, this success marked the beginning of a new genre, that of the heroic medical researcher story. Hollywood adopted this genre for its own success using techniques unique to film, while still promoting the new image of modern medicine. Three films, Doctor Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet (1940), The Story of Louis Pasteur (1935), and Arrowsmith (1931) exemplify the portrayal and construction of this image.

- Since research was critical to medicine’s success, it became intimately intertwined with the image of modern medicine and figured prominently in film with the depiction of items such as glassware and microscopes. Film also expanded the image of the heroic researcher using religious imagery.

BACKGROUND

- The physician in film has been analyzed from many different angles, including as a teaching tool for future physicians, as a public health tool, and as a representation of popular attitudes of disease. Nearly all of the work, however, has focused on the narrative aspects of films, but very few consider how tools unique to film – editing, lighting, camera angles, audio, framing, composition -- can be used to create a message more powerful than that constructed from prose alone. I hope to bring a new perspective to this intellectual landscape by considering how film as a medium is particularly well suited to change an image, given the variety of tools available to the filmmaker.

RESULTS

- The image of the modern medical researcher evolved from a focus on the processes of scientific research, as represented by laboratory paraphernalia (figure 1), to a display of its miracle properties, as illustrated by religious imagery (figure 2). The laboratory became intimately intertwined with what made modern medicine “modern.”

- The Flexner report solidified the importance of research in medicine by recommending its use in the curriculum of all medical schools. With this wave of optimism about the ability of science to cure disease, the genre of the medical researcher hero was created, in large part with Paul de Kruif’s Microbe Hunters (figure 3). Often, the heroes performed miraculous acts of healing, which initiated a trend to canonize medical heroes, while still maintaining a position for religion in the scientist’s world.

- While film adopted many of the same tropes as preexisting works, such as Microbe Hunters and Edelfelt’s painting of Pasteur, the unique tools available to film, including editing, mise-en-scene, shot angles and double exposures, can suggest additional meanings and further develop the images first established by the older works (figure 4).

- In the construction of the modern medical hero in Dr. Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet, The Story of Louis Pasteur, and Arrowsmith, these film techniques add new dimension to a given message.

METHODS AND SOURCES

- I have analyzed three films spanning the years 1930-1940 (Story of Louis Pasteur, Dr. Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet, Arrowsmith). Upon initial viewing, I marked scenes that were remarkable either because of the narrative events taking place or for striking film elements. I then deconstructed these scenes using modern film analysis techniques that examined each shot within the selected scene for lighting, contrast, composition, camera angle, depth of focus, as well as character and camera movements. The sequences of shots were then considered to determine editing and sound elements.

- Pasteur and Ehrlich are biopic films about real scientists. The other film, Arrowsmith is fiction, although was often advertised as real, and, thus I consider it a biopic.

CONCLUSIONS

- Film, one of the greatest forms of entertainment of the era, helped transmit the depiction of the new, heroic medical researcher to 1930s America.

- By examining how film can convey images and messages, we can better appreciate the role of film not only as an entertainment device, but also as a contributor to our social consciousness.

- The analysis of the silver screen during the Golden Age of medicine remains relevant to an understanding and appreciation of social forces today.

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