

[From the Fall/Winter 2004 issue of *The Amplifier*, the official newsletter of APA Division 46, Media Psychology]

Doing Cinematherapy for the BBC: A Hollywood Tale©

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Peter and Alexandra flew all the way from chilly, rain-swept London Town to the sun-drenched, glamour capitol of the world, Hollywood. Non-stop. Coach class. To save the BBC money. They arrive at my house late, hurried, but happy, having enjoyed their cab ride through the Hollywood hills, as a heavy afternoon rain accompanied the descending fog. Neither was prepared for the rain. Rain! This is Southern California. Hollywood, after all. Reigning movie stars, yes. Raining rain, no.

They came to do interviews. One of the interviews was to be with me, and concerned cinematherapy. This is a surprisingly popular topic in England nowadays. Peter hosts the BBC science-oriented radio show, *Frontiers*. Alexandra is his Segment Producer and “sound person.”

Peter is wearing a trench coat, but it isn't because he was expecting rain. He was a print journalist in a previous life. Trench coats. Journalists. It's a prop. Alexandra the Wet, alas, is proplless.

Initial chit-chat revolves around the traffic snarl in Hollywood. They arrived in Southern California just in time to be deviled by Academy Awards traffic which includes closed or barricaded streets forming a gauntlet to my house, all in servitude to the following evening's Oscar gala at the new Kodak Theater, a scant two miles from my home. Ironic, I thought, that Peter had trouble getting to an interview with me about cinematherapy (CT), because of the chaos surrounding a celebration of the cinema.

Alexandra snuffles as she runs through tech-sound checks on her digital tape recorder as we sit across from each other. She coughs several times and apologizes for bringing her cold germs all the way from London.

The plan is to first talk about the media's impact on people and culture, but Peter gives this arena short shrift because he really wants to get to the highlight of the show—for him at least, a brief, on-the-spot demonstration of cinematherapy. I will play the doctor, he, the patient. That was the pre-arranged plan, hatched in London, weeks ago.

Oddly though (or not), Peter throws this schedule a curve and begins to play psychological hide and seek with me. When that fails to accomplish his goal, he appeals to Alexandra to take his place as the cinematherapy guinea pig.

Surprise? Not really. Guys hate to be vulnerable in public.

But Alexandra has spunk (think Lou Grant hated so much in *Mary*). Deftly she turns the focus back on him, first cajoling then goading, appealing to Peter's talent and intelligence (both considerable), and his status as show host, and finally as celebrity-in-residence. Very eventually and very reluctantly, Peter relents. After all, if not him, then who? Not Miss Snuffles.

So, Peter positions himself on the celluloid couch. We try to mount a CT dialogue on some vague movie scenarios Peter tosses out as sops. This gets us nowhere because the films are a micron deep in

emotional importance for him. I scowl a bit and Alexandra laughs at the sheer flimsiness of his stalling. Grudgingly, Peter abandons his evasiveness, switches gears, and starts to talk about a film he saw recently on television, Carol Reed's 1949 shadowy masterpiece thriller, *The Third Man*.

At my urging, Peter recalls a pivotal, cinematic scene from the film: A drug dealer, Harry Lime (played by Orson Wells) and his old friend and pulp fiction writer, Holly Martins (played by Joseph Cotton), are on top of stationary carousel in East Berlin. From that height, the people below look like specks to them. Lime disdainfully points out to Martins how meaningless, how tiny, how thoroughly ineffectual, the people below are. Dealing them addictive drugs or diluted penicillin is no worse than squashing an ant, Harry Lime opines coldly.

Peter throws out a few word scraps about how much the scene upsets him, but then turns silent.

"Why," I prod Peter, "is this scene important?" He shrugs. I probe further. He's holding back. I verbally recreate the troubling scene and plumb again: "With whom do you identify? What feelings are uncoiled in this scene for you? This resonates with you. Why?"

At first Peter mumbles something about the scene making him feel like one of the ants. His speech is halting, then without warning, the dam breaks and words of bitterness spill out of him. As he talks, this Niagara of feeling seems to surprise Peter as much as it surprises Alexandra and me.

If this is an act, Peter's an Oscar contender. He bitterly decries his impotence in confronting the economic system that is presently gutting his pension plan. He resents his powerlessness to fight the powers that be, the "Harry Limes" who played with the stock market and bankrupted so many small investors, including himself and, more to the point, the portfolio managers who carelessly, impunitively "downsized" the value of his pension plan all the while lining their pockets with transaction fees. He feels the weight of future anxiety. He can scrap early retirement. It's history.

In this brief cinematherapy demonstration, a movie, *The Third Man*, became a road into Peter's barely hidden catacomb of angst. The movie became a TAT or Rorschach and more. The process had worked its projective voodoo on Peter, and he ultimately gave himself over to its brief voyage of discovery. It was a start. He could, if he wanted, continue the journey elsewhere, back in London.

Peter had his CT demonstration for the radio audience. But that's only the show biz part. What Peter was truly surprised at was how with rather modest prodding from his producer and me, he was so ready to risk vulnerability.

Films have a definite charm. And the synergistic impact of multiple visual and auditory skills of music, dialogue, lighting, camera angles, sound effects, enables a film to bypass ordinary defensive censors in a viewer. These filmic "effects" get to hidden or unnoticed cognitions by way of evoked emotions, or vice versa, and often get there more easily than any other artistic or entertainment medium. But what one does with and in response to a film, within the cinematherapy modality, in the moment or with aesthetic distance, is part of what differentiates the process from a rip-roaring, coffee house, intellectual debate.

Like many men, Peter hates to talk about his failings, his fears, and his depression over an uncertain financial future. Initially skeptical about the technique, his mental table was turned as the demonstration zeroed in on the emotions engendered by the affecting dialogue on an East Berlin carousel.

Peter says he was glad he did the demonstration: for the show, and for himself. From his looks and his words, it is clear to me that Peter has come to see movies as being a lot more than entertainment. I sense he now fully recognizes that if people choose to pay attention to their autobiographic resonances when watching films, there may be much emotional gold to mine. What's on the screen is only half of the treasure map, though. The other half is located squarely in the mind's eye, in the eye of the beholder.

Later, as we sit across from each other, eyeing each other, the mood of elation-from-discovery, shifts and gives ground to more self-protective and primal male feelings. Peter readjusts his mask and swears a little about the economics of England and the traffic in L.A., and the rain. The vulnerable moment has passed.