



Encyclopedia of Giftedness, Creativity, and Talent

Images of Gifted in Film

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Hollywood's fascination with exceptional individuals has led to an assemblage of films about genius—the gifted and talented—that ranges from the time of the film industry's own birthing in the age of invention with “Great man” biopics (*The Story of Louis Pasteur*, 1935; *Edison, The Man*, 1940), to contemporary depictions of troubled and mentally unbalanced geniuses (*A Beautiful Mind*, 2001; *Shine*, 1996). This entry discusses images of the gifted in films since the beginning of the 20th century.

Throughout, whether based on historical figures (*Young Mr. Lincoln*, 1939; *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell*, 1939) or fictional characters (*The Fountainhead*, 1949; *Good Will Hunting*, 1997), the filmic drive for narrative conflict and resolution has often led to the overdramatization and even pathologizing of exceptional individuals. Historical portrayals often selectively report the torment or tragedy of a gifted individual's life story. Thus, for example, Vincent Van Gogh's poverty, illness, and possible insanity and suicide provide ripe issues to be harvested by acclaimed directors in major studio releases (Robert Altman's *Vincent & Theo*, 1990; Vincent Minelli's *Lust for Life*, 1956) whereas Leonardo da Vinci's less turbulent personal life qualifies him only to be a minor side character popping up in eclectic and singular roles (e.g., *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, 1989; *Star Trek: Voyager*, 1997, TV).

Noted music philosopher Peter Kivy conceptualizes representations of genius into three models: the possessor, the possessed and, to a lesser extent, the workaholic. The possessor model situates the genius as an active, focused creator with a powerful mind and high capacity for originality—a natural genius who breaks new ground and breaks rules to build innovations. Films that feature this active model include the depiction of Beethoven in *Immortal Beloved* (1994), Jackson Pollock in *Pollock* (2000), and Michelangelo in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965). The possessed or inspiration model positions the genius as a passive conduit through which uncontrollable creativity passes through and manifests itself in the need to create. Mozart is commonly held as the classic example for this type of genius, especially as portrayed in *Amadeus* (1984). The geniuses in these films often have childlike qualities, but are gifted with incredible talents that allow them to create with seemingly no effort though these geniuses are continually on the edge of being driven into madness (Van Gogh in *Lust for Life*, 1956; John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind*, 2001; *Proof*, 2005). Mad scientists, individuals who lose themselves to the power of their own intellect without considering the repercussions of their actions, are extreme examples of the possessed model (*Frankenstein*, 1931; *Forbidden Planet*, 1956; *The Fly*, 1958). The workaholic model positions the genius as a sort of blue-collar worker whose genius is manifested through dedication and intensity. The success of the creator in this representation is not necessarily the result of genius but of industriousness. Kivy questions whether this mode really qualifies in our imaginings of genius. His best example, Johann Sebastian Bach, is a valuable argument for its inclusion though the lack of drama inherent in this model leads to relatively few filmic portrayals. This representation was more popular in early 20th-century depictions with films such as *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1935) and *Madam Curie* (1943).

Throughout the 20th century, there seems to be a shifting pattern of these representations from a normalizing to a pathologizing of genius. The representation of genius in the classical Hollywood era of filmmaking (1917–1960) often stressed the notion that geniuses were no different from the vast majority of the public—these often conformed to Kivy's possessor or workaholic models. This process usually involved rearranging and substituting aspects of historical figures' lives to make their lives more exciting (George M. Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, 1942; *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell*, 1939), the removal of bad habits, addictions, or sexual orientation (Cole Porter in *Night and Day*, 1946), as well as ethnic

identities and elitist tendencies.

The representation of genius in post-1960 films often stressed how different geniuses were from the rest of the public. This differentiation frequently occurs through a concentration on the pathology of the genius. Geniuses in these films are often depicted as isolated from society, unique and bizarre, and creativity and superior intellect is even represented as a kind of disease or psychological aberration (*Silence of the Lambs*, 1991; *Pi*, 1998). The genius in these films is often portrayed as narcissistic, opportunistic (*21*, 2008), or troubled (*Good Will Hunting*, 1997). Traits that would have been removed in classical Hollywood films are featured in more recent films (examples include womanizing in *Surviving Picasso*, 1996; drug addiction in *Basquiat*, 1996; sexual orientation in *Before Night Falls*, 2000).

The exception to these diseased and troubled depictions are portrayals of child geniuses where there is often hope and potential juxtaposed with bizarreness and the carnivalesque. The representations of these children range from charming and intriguing (*Little Man Tate*, 1991; *Searching for Bobby Fisher*, 1993) to comedic and ridiculous (*Real Genius*, 1985; *Baby Geniuses*, 1999).

Intrinsic to these films is the visualization and dramatization of creative and intellectual processes such as writing, composing, or performing complex equations which are not inherently filmic. Rather than positioning the stimuli for creative and intellectual breakthroughs as having an interior source in the mind of the genius, filmmakers often represent the source of such a breakthrough by using an external source such as the genius' environment. For instance, Van Gogh's harassment by birds inspires his final painting in *Lust of Life* (1956) and the daily acquaintances of Shakespeare become the models for the characters in *Romeo and Juliet* in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

The White, male hegemony in Western culture is also reflected in the paucity of diverse ethnic and gender depictions in theatrically released films focusing on gifted and talented individuals. Rare and notable exceptions include Marie Curie (*Madame Curie*, 1943), Elizabeth Kenny (*Sister Kenny*, 1946), George Washington Carver (*George Washington Carver*, 1940), and Isadora Duncan (*Isadora*, 1968). Often these exceptional individuals receive more screen time on made-for-television projects (e.g., *Something the Lord Made*, 2004, featuring the dramatization of Black heart-surgery pioneer Vivien Thomas).

Reviewing the history of the image of genius in film helps us to understand society's changing attitudes toward gifted people through time.

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See also

- [Attitudes Toward Gifted](#)
- [Film and Film-Making Gifted](#)

Further Readings

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