

MOVIE REVIEW: *The Game*

The Game: (1997). PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, directed by David Fincher, starring Michael Douglas, Sean Penn, Deborah Kara Unger.

Have you ever thought about just how far you would go to provide a client with the most powerful catharsis? Suppose you had a rich client and money was no issue. You could hire as many auxiliary egos and buy as many props as you wished, having the resources to direct a psychodrama that extends for several days and moves to different locations.

That is roughly what happens in *The Game*. Billionaire Nicholas Van Orton (a moving performance by Michael Douglas) receives a birthday gift from his brother who has enrolled him in a “game” facilitated by Consumer Recreation Services (CRS). The corporation promises to provide its client with some “fun” experiences, after thoroughly testing him psychologically. What makes the game interesting is that the client never knows when and where those experiences will occur. In the words of CRS Vice President Jim Feingold: “Think of it as a great vacation, except you don’t go to it—it comes to you.” As the plot unfolds, viewers recognize that the directors at CRS will stop at nothing to provide their client with the most intense experience, even forcing him to face death.

Some of the most profound catharses have been induced by near-death experiences. A range of positive effects of such encounters with death has been reported (see Farthing, 1992, pp. 70–72 and Elsaesser Valarino, 1997). Are there ways to bring about such an experience deliberately and safely? If the therapist tells a client about the plan, then the near-death experience will be less authentic and powerful because the client knows that he or she will return. Moreover, is it ever ethical to bring someone to a near-death experience without telling that person in advance, assuming that one has a sure way of bringing the client back to life? According to research ethics committees at universities and hospitals (Farthing, 1992, p. 72), that is never ethical. So for now, we can explore such an idea only in fiction.

Although today psychodrama is usually done in a confined and controlled setting, Augusto Boal has experimented with *Invisible Theatre*, in which actors go into community settings and galvanize the enactment of a certain scene that can serve as a learning experience for the unsuspecting onlookers

who happen to be at the place of performance. For example, Boal (1992, pp. 6–9) presented a description of actors who sexually harass each other on the Paris Métro, thus provoking the “spectators” to intervene.

Is invisible theatre unethical—always, sometimes, or never? What if the protagonist has signed a consent form (as Michael Douglas’s character did)? That would have to be a general consent—if the protagonist knew when and where the enactment takes place, then by definition it could not be invisible.

The Game also contains all the elements of great film-making: truthful acting, splendid cinematography, brilliant screen-writing, breath-taking suspense, complex characters, dark humor, and a cathartic surprise ending. Like any good piece of art, *The Game* raises many pertinent questions without giving easy answers. Here is a brain twister: “Discovering the object of the game IS the object of the game.” Psychodramatists and other practitioners of action methods, such as Boal’s theatre techniques, can use this film as a source for profound, imaginative, and humorous discussions or, for the creatively inclined, enactments. Practitioners, however, are cautioned against using any of the techniques shown in the movie.

REFERENCES

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