

## Film

### Movie madness

Few of us have consistent and predictable personalities. It is normal to behave differently in different situations, to promote those aspects of ourselves that are appealing, while repressing those that are less savoury. To be inconsistent is normal, to forget things we would rather not remember likewise. Oscar Wilde wrote: "I am certain that I have three separate souls". But he did not mean that he was three separate people, each unaware of the other's existence and identity.

But that is what is implied by the diagnosis of multiple personality disorder, perhaps the most famous example being Eve White, immortalised by American psychiatrists Corbett Thigpen and Harvey Cleckley in their 1957 book *The Three Faces of Eve*. After its publication—and to the dismay of Thigpen and Cleckley who encountered only one other patient with multiple personality disorder in the rest of their careers—the diagnosis caught on in the American psychiatric profession. And not only did the numbers of patients increase, so did the numbers of personalities reported—the record seems to be 95 in a single patient. Multiple personality disorder also entered popular consciousness as the lay person's idea of madness. The *reductio ad absurdum* was reached in a Wisconsin court room when each of the personalities of a witness claiming multiple personality disorder needed to take the oath separately; the effort was abandoned after three.

Multiple personality disorder is now in decline. We no longer see at psychiatric conferences therapists producing, as one sceptical commentator put it "videos of their latest patients producing their cute tricks". But perhaps the key factor in the disappearance of multiple personality disorder in the USA (it was never popular in the UK, and I have never seen a case in 25 years of clinical practice) was its collapse in the

courtroom. The demonstration that many criminals were faking multiple personality disorder and that, as in the related false memory syndrome, therapists could easily induce the disorder in suggestible patients led to the eclipse of the label.

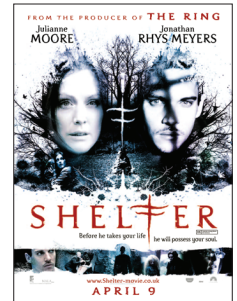
Despite the demise of multiple personality disorder in psychiatry, it seems to have a fascination for the

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public. Which brings us to *Shelter*, a new film starring Julianne Moore. She has previously played a depressed housewife (*The Hours*), a depressed housewife suffering from multiple chemical sensitivity (*Safe*), and now a depressed psychiatrist, Dr Cara Jessup, with a recently murdered husband. *Shelter* opens with Dr Jessup giving evidence in the trial of a murderer whose defence to the sadistic killing of a child is that of multiple personality disorder. But Dr Jessup is having none of this, telling the court that multiple personality disorder is a "therapeutic fad...it doesn't exist". The killer is executed.

Hubris is never far away in Hollywood. Dr Jessup's father is also a psychiatrist who does believe in multiple personality disorder. To show the error of his daughter's ways he tricks her into interviewing his latest new patient, called Adam (or David, or Wes), played by Jonathan Rhys Meyers, who apparently is the Real McCoy. The plot quickly descends into clichéd supernatural territory; Dr Jessup stumbles into houses that are a cross between Bates Motel and the kind of dwellings favoured by inhabitants of a Hannibal Lecter movie and questions her belief in science and religion. The scriptwriter is not on the side of Richard Dawkins, since all the characters who doubt their faith develop fatal haemorrhagic fevers, preceded by a bad attack of stigmata. This punishment is visited on them by Adam (or Dave or Wes). Jessup finally concedes the error of her ways. Multiple personality is not, as she thought, a non-existent or iatrogenic phenomenon. It is really satanic possession. What possessed a fine actress like Julianne Moore to take part in such risible rubbish remains to be explained.

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**Shelter**  
Directed by Måns Mårland and Björn Stein. Icon Films/Paramount Pictures, 2010.  
See <http://sheltermovie.co.uk/>

The printed journal includes an image merely for illustration