

## The Next Step

A review of the film



**The Soloist**

(2008)

Joe Wright (Director)

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Reviewed by

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All too often Hollywood serves as neither a kind nor a fair advocate of those who have a mental illness, particularly schizophrenia. Often this psychiatric disorder is reduced to a horror movie prop, as well-known portrayals have predominately ranged from drooling, shuffling residents of hospital wards (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; Forman, 1975) to alienated, fright-filled killers (*Spider*; Cronenberg, 2002). The end product is usually a distorted image of schizophrenia that perpetrates one or more of a dozen misconceptions about mental illness common in films (Wedding, Boyd, & Niemiec, 2009).

In recent cinematic history, films such as *A Beautiful Mind* (Howard, 2001) and *Canvas* (Greco, 2006) have broken new ground. In these films, the complexities and nuances of schizophrenia are presented in an even-handed and clinically astute manner, and both movies address positive and resilient aspects of a protagonist with a mental illness. *The Soloist* marks the next step in this evolution: films that explore the realities and the fullness

of the human condition by portraying characters who are “broken” but at the same time exert their character strengths and the inner resiliency necessary to face the vicissitudes of life.

*The Soloist* centers on an unlikely friendship that blossoms between Nathaniel Anthony Ayers Jr. (Jamie Foxx), a man with paranoid schizophrenia, and a *Los Angeles Times* reporter named Steve Lopez (Robert Downey Jr.). Moments of extreme intimacy and conflict occur during the development of a friendship that ultimately arrives at a place of mutual fulfillment and surprising hopefulness. Embedded within this plot is a bold vision of schizophrenia that forms one of the richer and more complete images presented on the big screen to date. In this film, misconceptions are debunked, and the hidden, positive side of schizophrenia is exposed in an objective portrayal of schizophrenia, its link to creativity, and the curative function of friendship.

In order to develop Nathaniel’s character beyond a cardboard cutout of mental illness, the filmmaker must trick us into being unbiased because of the human tendency to automatically oversimplify, categorize, and prejudge. The scene that introduces us to Nathaniel contains great cleverness, as we first encounter him through music. Before our eyes can register his disheveled appearance as “crazy,” we are seduced by his beautiful music. The tendency to develop uninformed and negative expectations is further thwarted by the decision to cast an inherently likable and trustworthy figure, Jamie Foxx, in the title role.

Once this positive frame is established, the film goes on to show us some of the unexpected gifts associated with schizophrenia. Life for Nathaniel is an emotional roller coaster ruled by a pervasive sense of disorganization. Every aspect of his functioning is compromised, as relationships, employment, and even positive mood states seem to dissolve for Nathaniel before they can stick. When he is not angrily diving into oncoming traffic to pick up charred cigarette butts, the homeless Nathaniel wanders among the predators and drug addicts of a skid row in Los Angeles. His estranged sister assumes he is dead.

He is not dead. In fact, he is alive with the sound of music, mainly the cello, and what slowly emerges from an internal hornet’s nest of deficit and distress is a brilliant musical ability and compassionate personality. In *A Beautiful Mind*, the brilliance and pathology of mathematician John Nash are treated as two separate aspects of self. There is the gentle husband and inspiring professor, and then there is the man who visually hallucinates and hides from imaginary FBI agents. In short, Nash is presented as either brilliant or severely mentally ill, with his schizophrenia symptoms acting as a sort of ghost that sporadically appears to haunt his mind and disrupt his life.

Provocatively, *The Soloist* convincingly and effectively fuses pathology with normal personality by depicting psychiatric symptoms that organically develop from childhood and contending that what makes Nathaniel schizophrenic is the same quality that makes him gifted. This is vividly highlighted when the camera lens zooms in on the former Juilliard prodigy’s dirty, unclipped fingernails as they move gracefully over the strings of his cello. This presentation of schizophrenia is consistent with cutting-edge research that is exploring the long-overlooked bridge between the schizophrenic brain and the creative brain.

Most research in this area highlights what is called *latent inhibition*—the ability or, in this case, the inability, to screen out irrelevant data in the environment. People with schizophrenia struggle to identify, select, and dismiss incoming information, as demonstrated by Nathaniel’s incoherent mumblings about Beethoven and loose associations about airplane pilots. The flip side of this coin is that people with schizophrenia can pick up on details that most people miss and attend to underlying meaning that most people ignore (Martindale & Dailey, 1996, p. 409).

There is a growing research literature on the link between the decreased latent inhibition found in schizophrenia and creativity. A recent Harvard study, for instance, found support for this simple equation: High IQ plus low latent inhibition equals an increase in reported creative achievement (Carson, Peterson, & Higgins, 2003, p. 499). Thus, what may be a defective filter in one context can be a springboard for creativity in another.

This schizophrenia–creativity link is further supported by research on the neurological overlap between the waking schizophrenic brain and the normal sleeping brain. People with schizophrenia are often plagued by blurry perceptual boundaries. They may struggle, for instance, in differentiating between self and other or between internal and external events. In the context of creativity, this boundary problem may facilitate an ability to consciously access the uninhibited, spontaneous, and rich imagery normally relegated to vivid dreaming. The bridge, here, according to Buckner, Andrews-Hanna, and Schacter (2008) is excessive levels of dopamine as well as an overactive default network in the control systems of the brain that has a broken *off* switch.

*The Soloist* promotes the reasonable notion that friendship can be an effective therapeutic intervention. In *A Beautiful Mind*, schizophrenia is presented as a disorder that can be understood only by psychiatrists and that can be cured only by medications and electroconvulsive therapy. The implicit message is that schizophrenia is a disease that requires purging. *The Soloist*, in sharp contrast, presents schizophrenia as a more relatable and multifaceted problem that can be effectively treated with the same methods that help with most emotional problems—social support and connection. Indeed, research has shown that high levels of social support and low levels of expressed emotion (the degree to which family members direct hostile, negative emotions toward the family member with schizophrenia) are the best defenses against relapse (Amador, 2007). Indeed, Steve becomes a meaningful friend whose honesty and generosity help to get Nathaniel off the street and reconnected to his music and to his sister. It is this experience of friendship that opens Nathaniel up to then use his most well-developed character strengths—creativity, persistence, kindness, and even gratitude and hope (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Despite a well-intentioned stance of affection and patience, the cinematic portrayal of Steve does not effectively illuminate the elements of social support that produce successful interactions with people with schizophrenia. People with schizophrenia often do not believe they are mentally ill. Nathaniel is reality impaired in the same way that a blind person is visually impaired.

But all too often Steve unintentionally models what not to do as he treats Nathaniel as if he were a garden-variety friend. He bulldozes over Nathaniel's paranoid refusal to live in an apartment with chants of "you can do it." He ponders deceptive ways of forcing Nathaniel to take psychiatric medications. He does not openly discuss with Nathaniel a legal document that declares him to have schizophrenia. For Nathaniel, these responses are akin to grabbing a blind man's walking stick in order to force him to walk unassisted. Nathaniel's distress is prolonged, and his paranoia is only reinforced.

Xavier Amador is a renowned lecturer and researcher on schizophrenia who has spoken and written extensively on his tumultuous relationship with his brother, a man with schizophrenia. In *I Am Not Sick, I Don't Need Help!* (Amador, 2007) he writes about an effective response to the predictably irrational behavior of people with schizophrenia. This approach involves listening, empathizing, and partnering. Robert Downey Jr.'s character, Steve, would have been wise to read it.

*Listening* might have solved the apartment conflict had Steve assured Nathaniel that his fear that an apartment would cut out the city noise he so desires would not come to pass. *Empathizing* might have prevented the climactic fistfight if Steve had explained the legal document instead of allowing Nathaniel to read it on his own and develop predictably paranoid fears. *Partnering* might have solved the medication compliance issue had Steve found common ground by saying, for instance, "The hallucinations seem to disrupt your ability to play music—your favorite thing. Maybe we should at least discuss how medications can make you a better musician."

These tools can help a person without schizophrenia learn the language of schizophrenia. Overall, the tools that are present in this film are cinematic ones, and they are razor sharp. The superior acting and direction of this film converge to produce a movie that is both an intellectually ambitious case study of schizophrenia and an entertaining piece of popular cinema that can resonate with a mainstream audience.

The accuracy of its portrayal of mental illness portrayal is strong, as indicated not only by the symptoms it depicts but also by what it deemphasizes (e.g., there is less emphasis on the visual hallucinations that are so abundantly displayed in *A Beautiful Mind*, despite their being a far less frequent symptom than auditory hallucinations). With a few forgivable missteps and obligatory dramatizations involving the common cinematic misconception that all people with mental illness are violent, this tale is told with considerable skill, balancing emotional poignancy with good science. The end result is a rare glimpse into a world that is intriguing, painful, and sometimes creative and vibrant—a world called schizophrenia.

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