

Film Review on The Experimenter

In my review on the movie *The Experimenter* (2015), I will be taking a closer look on what inspired Milgram on his experiment, how the results affected his way of understanding people's behaviour and how all of this was covered in the film.

The topic of the movie, Milgram's experiment (1963) on obedience, was interesting and it was gradually brought up in an effective way. The film covered Milgram's experiment successfully and took a closer look at Milgram's personal life as well, during and after the time of his experiment. The actors impressed me, I was pleased with the performances of Winona Ryder and Peter Sarsgaard who played the main characters, Sasha Menkin Milgram and Stanley Milgram. However, I was not convinced by the directing. Overall, it was quite dull and in my opinion the plot lacked a common thread. There were some aspects of the scenery and decisions made by the director that I did not enjoy. In some scenes, for example, there was an elephant walking behind Milgram as he was talking to the camera, breaking the fourth wall. I understand the symbolism behind the elephant but I think the point could have been made in an easier way. Simply put; I do not understand why the director made the effort to do something that pointless. What I did like about the film was the documentative style of showing Milgram's life. The director has done a good job on making a fictive movie based on facts.

Essentially, the film was not aesthetically pleasing for me. I will not get caught on those aspects and will be focusing more on how the film looked at Milgram's study, the results it got and what Milgram thought of it.

The film takes a closer look at the controversial, much-debated experiment looking at obedience, done at Yale University by the renowned social psychologist Stanley Milgram (Peter Sarsgaard). Milgram's (1963) study was focused on obedience, how people can be

ordered to give electric shocks to innocent people, as long as they know they are not responsible for any consequences that may lead from the shocks.

Milgram's experiment started with two participants entering the laboratory and picking a small piece of paper which will determine their task for the experiment. One will be the teacher and the other one, the student. However, there was actually only one participant, the other one was a confederate. The experiment was actually looking at obedience instead of learning and punishment, as the participant was told. The experiment was based on the teacher asking questions from the student, who was told to be sitting on the other side of a wall. When the student answered incorrectly the teacher gave the student an electric shock. For each wrong answer, the number of volts was increased. Gradually the student started to shout after the shocks and begged to end the project. The teacher was instructed to continue the experiment, which most of the participants did, even though they believed that continuing caused immense pain for the student.

I think that the message the film is trying to give, or at least what I got out of it, was the importance of Milgram's studies results. The importance of how to take them and how to react. About daring to question authorities and to rely on our own intuition. About not obeying.

Inspired by the horror examples from Nazi Germany a few decades earlier, Milgram wanted to try to understand and explain how ordinary citizens could kill the lives of others in the most cruel ways, just by obeying orders that were given to them from above. I think that is something that the elephant in the room, appearing a few times during the movie, was symbolising. About Milgram daring to talk about these events.

"The most fundamental lesson of our study is that ordinary people simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process." (Milgram, 1974, quoted by Gross, 2010, p. 418)

The movie, and obviously the experiment itself, is a reminder for people to always question everything. And to remind to think for ourselves in a greater extent than before.

Take something as awful as the Holocaust, an event almost everyone looks at with horror and misunderstanding while others, for example Milgram, spent their lives trying to understand that there might not be anything unnatural about it either.

There is a quote from the movie by Stanley Milgram, that I think is fitting to my previous chapters; “There was a time, I suspect, when men and women could give a fully human response to any situation. When we could be fully absorbed in the world as human beings. But more often, now, people don't get to see the whole situation but only some small part of it. There's a division of labor, and people carry out small, narrow, specialized jobs, and we can't act without some kind of direction from on high. I call this ‘the agentic state’. The individual yields to authority, and in doing so becomes alienated from his own actions.”

Something that stuck with me was that many of the supporting characters were saying how they would never have agreed to do that, after they heard about the experiment and the results. But the fact that Milgram's experiment went on for several years and around 65% of the participants continued to obey for the whole experiment and would have caused a lot of pain and damage to the student. Everyone expressed discomfort and guilt, but they all felt compelled to continue when told to do so. Only approximately 35% of the participants disobeyed and stopped the experiment on their own.

For me that shows another interesting fact about humans. The fact that we want to believe the best in ourselves (and possibly others), but there is no way of knowing if you did not take part in the study. And I immediately felt like that as well, I too would want to believe that I would not have continued, if i would have taken part in the experiment. That reassures me in a way, the fact that people would believe that they are fundamentally good. But at the same time, the results from Milgram's experiment suggest that people do not act in the ways they would want to believe they do in real life situations.

“Human nature can be studied but not escaped, especially your own.”

References

Gross, R. (2010) Psychology: the science of mind and behaviour. Sixth edition. Dubai: Hodder education.

The Experimenter (2015) Directed by Michael Almereyda. USA: Magnolia Pictures.