

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

What's it all about, Alfie? Antisocial males in the early films of Sir Michael Caine

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Early in his film career the actor Sir Michael Caine portrayed a series of antisocial males: Harry Palmer, Alfie Elkins, Charlie Croker, and Jack Carter. The behaviours exhibited by these fictional males resemble those of “real life” patients acquiring the diagnoses of antisocial or dissocial personality disorder. Prominent among their traits is a disregard for others, a lack of guilt, and a resort to instrumental (goal directed) violence. The exhibition of antisocial conduct may be seen as a rejection of the values of the social hierarchy, the dominant or patriarchal order. Demonstrable through a defiance of dominant males and a recurrent seduction of “their” women, these Caine characters act out an Oedipal theme, repeatedly attempting subversion of the symbolic “father”—society itself. So often, the material of “real life” social behaviour is fleeting and hard to elicit reliably; however, these fictional characters provide a stable source of such exemplars, both entertaining and instructive.

empathy, and so on).³ Though such a dimensional approach is probably most valid ecologically, it is the categorical approach that is applied most often clinically. Current proposals for UK mental health legislation have also adopted a categorical approach, by coining the term “dangerous severe personality disorder” to describe those who pose a serious risk to others, and for whom (it is argued) pre-emptive detention may be justifiable.⁴

The features of ASPD as defined in the DSM-IV are shown in box 1.¹ The features of the corresponding diagnosis in ICD-10 (dissocial personality) are shown in box 2.² Essentially, these criteria describe adults who habitually act against the mores of society, who lack concern for the consequences of their actions upon others, and who fail to experience remorse. Violence emerges in the context of their desires being frustrated (when it may be impulsive) or as a planned means to an end (when it may be termed “instrumental”).⁵

The characters played by Caine demonstrate features that are shared by some of those who exhibit ASPD. As such, these films provide a catalyst about which to consider the motivation for such modes of behaviour.

Between 1965 and 1971, the English actor Sir Michael Caine starred in five films that share a common theme of contemporary relevance: the lives of the antisocial. The characters played by Caine do not suffer from mental illnesses as such; they are not depressed or psychotic. It is in the expression of their personalities that such figures may be said to exhibit *disorder* (albeit simulated by a great actor). Their behaviour is egocentric, antisocial, and largely at odds with society. These films provide an accessible source of fictional “case” material, wherein patterns of antisocial behaviour may be examined repeatedly. These may form a basis for discussion and understanding and may provide valuable exemplars for teaching. The dramatic portrayal of these characters also serves to render some of the complexities of their “real life” counterparts: people to whom the diagnostic label of antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) may be applied.

ANTISOCIAL PERSONALITIES

Antisocial conduct, reflecting a personality style or trait, can be conceptualised categorically (as it is in the major diagnostic systems^{1,2}) or as comprising a variety of attributes, themselves distributed as spectra or continua throughout human beings (for example, impulsivity, lack of

THE FILMS

The five films are *The Ipcress File* (1965, director Sidney J Furie), *Funeral in Berlin* (1966, director Guy Hamilton), *Alfie* (1966, director Lewis Gilbert), *The Italian Job* (1969, director Peter Collinson), and *Get Carter* (1971, director Mike Hodges). In each, Caine plays a morally ambivalent hero—a single male, living outside the conventional world of regular employment, family, and friends. He enjoys a series of female sexual partners; his conduct charming or goal directed by turns. In only one film is he explicitly and deliberately violent towards women (*Get Carter*)⁶ but his attitude towards them is otherwise consistent; in each, they are described as “birds” and are largely replaceable. Whereas previous authors have identified an Oedipal theme in *Get Carter*,⁷ the same is discernible in all these films. The hero’s predicament is often that he is acting on behalf of, or in direct opposition to, more powerful (older) men, and his sexual conquests often include females who work for, or have relationships with, those same men. The latter have the ability to damage the hero. In three films (the Palmer and Carter films, below), an atmosphere of distrust is heightened

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Abbreviation: ASPD, antisocial personality disorder.

Box 1 The DSM-IV criteria for antisocial personality disorder¹

- A. There is a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others occurring from age 15 years, as indicated by three (or more) of the following:
- (1) failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviours as indicated by repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest
 - (2) deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure
 - (3) impulsivity or failure to plan ahead
 - (4) irritability and aggressiveness, as indicated by repeated physical fights or assaults
 - (5) reckless disregard for safety or self or others
 - (6) consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behaviour or honour financial obligations
 - (7) lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalising having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another.
- B. The individual is at least age 18 years.
- C. There is evidence of conduct disorder with onset before age 15 years.
- D. The occurrence of antisocial behaviour is not exclusively during the course of schizophrenia or a manic episode.

by the ambiguity of the female characters' intentions: are they working for the hero's antagonists or are they freelancing for themselves?

In none of the films is there a portrayal of mental illness, although in one, *The Ipcress File*, there is an attempted "brainwashing". In none of the films does the central character express remorse for his actions (although he comes closest in *Alfie*). Notwithstanding Caine's comments to the contrary,⁸ a case can be made for the characters examined here representing elaborations of a single central persona, a paradigm evolving across successive films. What begins in a relatively naive hedonism ends with multiple murders.

THE CHARACTERS

Harry Palmer

In *The Ipcress File* and its sequel, *Funeral in Berlin*, Caine plays Harry Palmer, a reluctant spy for the British secret service; obedient in order to avoid imprisonment for an offence he committed during National Service. The tone of the narrative suggests that this was a financial transgression—superiors perceiving Palmer to be a minor crook.

Although insubordinate to successive seniors, Palmer is apparently loyal to country, and shows circumscribed loyalty to colleagues. Despite being humorous, he is generally aloof; "successful" with women, his interest is casual (as in all these films). However, Palmer has qualities that surprise his superiors (and their women). Though perceived as a "shrewd little Cockney", and sporting a pronounced London accent (characteristics signifying that he is working class, in contrast to his public school superiors), his taste in music is for the classics (Mozart and Bach), and he is purported to be a gourmet. Palmer is a less glamorous (and more credible) version of James Bond: engaged in a dangerous enterprise and capable of killing when necessary, he nevertheless possesses taste. Where he differs markedly from successive

Box 2 The ICD-10 criteria for dissocial personality disorder²

Personality disorder, usually coming to attention because of a gross disparity between behaviour and the prevailing social norms, and characterised by:

- (a) callous unconcern for the feelings of others
- (b) gross and persistent attitude of irresponsibility and disregard for social norms, rules, and obligations
- (c) incapacity to maintain enduring relationships, though having no difficulty in establishing them
- (d) very low tolerance to frustration and a low threshold for discharge of aggression, including violence
- (e) incapacity to experience guilt or to profit from experience, particularly punishment
- (f) marked proneness to blame others, or to offer plausible rationalisations, for the behaviour that has brought the patient into conflict with society.

There may also be persistent irritability as an associated feature. Conduct disorder during childhood and adolescence, though not invariably present, may further support the diagnosis.

Bonds is in his explicit distrust of the system for which he works and in his solitude at the end of each assignment. For Palmer, the film does not conclude with him "getting the girl": he walks away, disenchanting.

With the exception of his chequered Army career (repeated in *Funeral in Berlin*), the viewer learns little of Palmer's earlier life. The moments when he expresses vulnerability are infrequent: in the first film he responds to the death of a colleague, although it is unclear whether his shock represents grief or the realisation that the bullet was meant for him. In the second film emotion is scarce, and Palmer's sole expression of loyalty is rendered morally ambiguous. Because he knows a foreign agent of old he disobeys an order to kill him, despite the revelation that the man is a war criminal. Palmer's attitude to the Holocaust and its aftermath is one of a general lack of interest, a response which now seems problematic. When telling the war criminal that he intends to do nothing (in recognition of their past friendship), the latter tries to justify himself, attempting to explain his past behaviour, but Palmer cuts him short: "I'm not a judge at a war crimes trial. I don't want to know..."

Palmer is a product of his time and these films are essentially entertainments, which may be incapable of bearing the weight of critical scrutiny. However, when seen in the context of Caine's subsequent characters, Palmer represents a relative baseline. He also initiates the continuing theme of deception. *The Ipcress File* pivots on the detection of double agents within Palmer's organisation. *Funeral in Berlin* pivots on whether a Russian colonel is really contemplating defection to the West or using the British to some other end. Palmer suspects him. However, some of the most insightful comments are ceded to the colonel, who pinpoints the lack in Palmer: he is committed to nothing.

Alfie Elkins

Set in the swinging sixties, *Alfie* finds Caine playing the eponymous womaniser, incapable of empathising with another person's feelings, be they male or female. Yet his most instrumental behaviour is reserved for women. The language of the film is such that Alfie addresses the camera, implicating the viewer as voyeur, complicit in his serial conquests. When doing so, he refers to women as "it": "Here

you are. Just listen to it.” The film follows Alfie’s progress through a succession of liaisons, of gradually diminishing “innocence”, progressively more damaging to those involved.

While living on and off with Gilda, who becomes pregnant with his child, he constantly undermines her, cheats on her, and urges her to give away their baby. Eventually he loses her to another man, an “ordinary” man who will raise Alfie’s son.

Alfie is a tragedy—the hero unable to alter his pattern of behaviour, failing to learn from experience, (causally) responsible for his own fate. However, every so often, there are moments when he seems to acknowledge a sense of foreboding. This happens twice in response to a funeral procession. First, when pausing to look at the hearse go by, Alfie stops, looks at the viewer, but says nothing. When it happens again, minutes later, he has just learned that he has a “shadow” on his lung. He begins to panic and eventually faints. It is as if his habitual mode of behaviour is one of denial of his own vulnerability. In a Kleinian sense, such a flight into omnipotence comprises the “manic defence”.⁹ Such a defence “requires” that the subject deny the importance of others to him; he must denigrate them (as when he refers to all women as “it”) lest he acknowledge his dependence upon them. Nevertheless, throughout the film there are moments when Alfie articulates this defence: “Now, about this little kid of mine. Well, he turns out to be a real quick’un. And he don’t half love it when I play games with him. Never wants his mother. Always asking for his father. Very soon I find I’m getting quite attached to him. Know what I mean? Now, that’s something I always guard against because sooner or later...that’s going to bring you some pain.”

However, his behaviour does not change and, when placed in a sanatorium, he espouses an even more cynical creed to his fellow inpatient Harry (whose wife, Lily, Alfie will subsequently seduce).

Alfie taunts Harry for his reliance on Lily’s visits, suggesting that Harry should be more like him: “living for yourself, like I do”. He keeps on goading, suggesting that unless Harry lives only for himself he will die in the sanatorium whereupon his family will forget him. Unsurprisingly, this upsets Harry but Alfie says he did not mean to hurt him; “I never mean to hurt anybody”.

Yet Alfie’s conduct continually causes pain to others. One moment of apparent insight follows an abortion he procures for Lily (their adultery resulted in her pregnancy). This is an illegal operation (in 1966), performed in Alfie’s kitchen by a particularly seedy “abortionist”.

While Lily goes through the procedure, Alfie leaves the apartment to go for a walk. As he is walking, he spots his young son, being played with by Gilda’s husband; the family enter a church where their new baby is being christened. Significantly, they begin to recite the “Our Father”. Alfie cannot approach his son and returns to the apartment to find Lily recovering after the abortion. Though she tells him not to enter the kitchen, he does so anyway. We see him enter and look down at the aborted foetus. We do not see what he sees but we see him react. For the only time in any of these films Caine’s character cries. He seems distraught. This is another moment when reality impacts upon his defences. He reacts by once more leaving the apartment, to visit his friend Nat. When he speaks he appears to be dissecting his feelings. He is embarrassed to tell Nat that he cried. When asked if he was crying for the foetus, Alfie replies that no, it was too late for “him” (the foetus); he was crying “for me bleedin’ self”.

Then, without affect, Alfie confesses: “You know, it don’t half bring it home to you, what you are when you see a helpless little thing like that lying in your own hands. He’d



Figure 1 Michael Caine pushing Geraldine Maffat into the trunk of a car in *Get Carter* (1971). Courtesy of MGM.

been quite perfect. I thought to meself: ‘You know what, Alfie? You know what you done? You murdered him.’”

Charlie Croker

The Italian Job is a far lighter confection than the other films reviewed here; a comedy caper, in which the character played by Caine—Croker—is cartoon like compared with Alfie (or Jack Carter, below). Croker starts the film with a satanic leer (savoured by the camera), leaving his cell on the day of his release from Wormwood Scrubs prison. Familiar themes recur: Croker is a womaniser, his worldview amoral.

He will lead a band of British criminals in an attempt to steal a consignment of gold from Fiat by paralysing the Turin traffic system. This leads to the famous car chase, involving red, white, and blue Mini Coopers. The film is suffused with a dubious nationalism, the English versus the Italians (including the Mafia), and a number of other stereotypes, familiar across these films: “birds”, “camp” males, and “chinless wonders” (representing the upper classes). We learn very little of the Caine character though the Oedipal theme persists, albeit with some modifications. One powerful male is an imprisoned homosexual, able to punish Croker from his cell via the criminal fraternity; the Mafia provides a further opponent (an older male whom Croker outsmarts); and the architect of the robbery is another older male, murdered by the Mafia, whose widow Croker seduces. The film soundtrack features a chorus pertinent to Caine’s characters across these five films: “This is the self-preservation society”.

Jack Carter

The sole Caine character for which any family history is proffered is Jack Carter, eponymous antihero of *Get Carter*. This gangster is making his way home to Newcastle for the funeral of his brother Frank. However, it soon becomes clear that Jack is really going home to avenge Frank’s murder. This is a violent film, far more realistic than the others reviewed here. Its director had anticipated Caine’s declining the project because of its possible impact upon his star image.⁷ However,

the film is purported to have held personal significance for the actor.^{7,8}

The Oedipal theme that Chibnall locates in *Get Carter* is certainly prominent.⁷ Carter is working for a London crime boss while conducting an affair with that man's wife. Arriving in Newcastle, he impacts upon two local bosses, who happen to share the same mistress (Glenda). Carter sleeps with her. He is punished for these (and other) transgressions of the hierarchical order.

For most of the film Carter is goal directed: he betrays little emotion and is ruthless in his pursuit of information regarding his brother's death. He uses those he comes across without regard for their safety. Several characters call him a "bastard" when they realise he doesn't care what happens to them. When he solves the murder he kills those responsible.

Yet, Carter exhibits one moment of emotional vulnerability, which emerges, rather like Alfie's, in connection with a younger relative. While he lies in Glenda's bed after she has picked him up from a meeting with Brumby (a crooked property developer), he casually runs the pornographic film that Brumby watches when in bed with Glenda. Carter's initial grin fades as he realises that the young girl being seduced in the film ("Teacher's Pet") is in fact his niece (Doreen). Carter's physiognomy transforms: the hand holding his cigarette seems to petrify, then slowly extend; he looks at the screen, averts his gaze, then looks again; he breathes deeply, puts his hands to his face; then his eyes water. He does not weep but is suffused with rage. So begins one of the most violent sequences in the film.

Does Carter experience "true" empathy? Or is his pain personal? Is he like Alfie ("crying for me bleedin' self")? The words he uses in ensuing episodes suggest the latter.

It seems likely that intertwined with Jack's wish to avenge Frank, and the abuse of Frank's daughter, is a desire to restore familial honour. In each of the film's pivotal exchanges, Jack explicates the kin relationship between himself and the wronged victim; their injury impacts upon him. The damage to his kin is an assault upon Jack's ego. Those kin relationships are themselves ambiguous: we learn that Jack's relationship with his brother had broken down some years before (Jack having slept with Frank's wife); and although Frank's daughter (Doreen) might actually be Jack's daughter, his attempts to engage with her are half hearted. On balance, it seems that Jack's aggression feeds off his affronted pride, perhaps accentuated by guilt (for his own betrayal of his brother). However, Jack does not avow such guilt and so, by inferring it, we are necessarily implicating unconscious processes.

ANTISOCIAL MALES

Do the four Caine characters portrayed in these films satisfy diagnostic criteria for antisocial or dissocial personality disorder? One problem with the diagnosis itself is that it is confounded by illegal conduct (if detected; see boxes 1 and 2).¹⁰ Hence, immediately, Caine's characters seem to migrate toward the diagnosis. Palmer may be working for the government but only because he has previously broken the law; Alfie is a petty thief, siphoning petrol, "working a fiddle"; Croker is a career thief (just out of prison), and Carter is a multiple murderer, unencumbered by remorse.

Turning to the specific behavioural criteria described in ICD 10 (box 2),² where three must be met to fulfil the diagnosis, it is clear that all the Caine characters would satisfy the first three criteria, although a complicating factor is the validity of the third criterion in a culture condoning sexual promiscuity (as in the swinging sixties of *Alfie*). However, those characters whom we "get to know better", because they have greater depth (Alfie and Jack Carter), do satisfy subsequent criteria. Alfie cannot quite experience the

consequence of his actions or connect with guilt (the fifth criterion) and he repeatedly distances himself from the causation of those actions (the sixth). Questioned by the abortionist as to why he is "helping" Lily, Alfie ignores his role in her pregnancy, saying instead that he is doing it for "a friend", her husband (whom he has cuckolded), accusing Lily of "a moral lapse". Similarly, he is unable to speak of his (living) son, without disavowing paternity, continually referring to "this kid I used to know".

Carter would satisfy the first five criteria (in ICD 10). Whether or not one believes in a Freudian "id", or unconstrained "jouissance" (Lacan's term¹¹), the prosaic fact is that Carter is unbound, unconstrained. He is like a Nietzschean superman, "beyond good and evil", exercising pure "will to power". We see this in his repeated use of others, without regard to their suffering, and in his unflinching resort to violence as a means to an end.

Nevertheless, the antisocial/dissocial diagnosis remains unsatisfactory (for reasons other than the fictional nature of these subjects). For instance, to what extent are Caine's characters so diagnosed purely because of their class? Being working class is not equated in the films with dishonesty but, as Caine himself has proposed, sufficient deprivation (and exposure to violence) might push a subject closer to exhibiting deviance: "If you are born into that working-class milieu as I was and as virtually every violent criminal is, then you're sure to want something different. And if the world hits you violently enough, then you will act in a violent way to alter your circumstances".⁷

There is a suggestion here that the male who is born into the underclass is immediately pushed towards the "necessity" of criminal activity, activity which in turn, almost by definition, pushes him towards a diagnosis of ASPD (should he be caught). In this context it might be of interest to consider the way in which society's structures may impinge upon individual psyches, and how the society and the family may be modelled in the mind of the individual.

Society as "father"

A psychodynamic reading of the antisocial would have to invoke the role of fathers. For if a son (as portrayed in each of these films) stands outside the social order, and reacts with subversion toward that dominant order, then he is, in a sense, rejecting of the patriarchy (in a patriarchal culture). From a Freudian or Lacanian perspective there is something of interest in that same character's repetitive seduction of (and by) females who are allied with dominant (paternal) males, as occurs throughout these films. What does it imply? It implies that the Caine figure has not integrated into the paternal/patriarchal/hierarchical order, and that he perpetuates an Oedipal relation to "the mother" (in this case, the woman who "belongs to" the dominant male). We might ask why such an antisocial individual has not incorporated a good enough father into his psyche. Speculations might include: an absent father (denying the young male a role model) or a violent/abusive father (providing a deviant model). Similarly, if a present father is despised or feared, then his defeat might be recapitulated in the subversion of other hierarchies (in later life). These must remain speculations; we have no information regarding the Caine characters' early parenting, although it is clear that each—from Palmer to Carter—believes that "it don't do to get dependent on nobody in this life" (*Alfie*). Such a philosophy suggests that its proponent has learned to trust no one (including his father).

We noted the significance of the prayer "Our Father" when recited in *Alfie*: the hero being unable to reach his live son at the christening, while another (foetal) son is aborted in his kitchen. It is also noticeable that the only time a Caine

character addresses an older male with a word for “father” (in these films) is when they are separated by language: when the gang of thieves is leaving its hideout in *The Italian Job*, Croker approaches a rather frail, elderly man, who appears to be a caretaker, saying “Molto bene, Dad”, giving the man some money. Hence, there is ambivalence in at least one Caine character: while subverting the patriarchal order, through his criminal and libidinal exploits, Croker is nevertheless kind to a frail old man (how credible this is remains debatable). Perhaps it indicates that defiance is reserved for those (older) males who pose a credible threat.

ANTISOCIAL AGEING

How might Caine’s characters age? We cannot say much on the basis of these five films because each portrays a relatively young man. The most violent of them (Carter) will not “live to fight another day”. Yet, if he were to do so, is it conceivable that he would belatedly develop some degree of insight into his behaviour?

Terence Stamp, an actor who shared accommodation with Caine in the 1960s, played such a character in a film released in 1999 (*The Limey*, directed by Steven Soderbergh), which took as its starting point a scenario rather similar to that of *Get Carter*. In the later film, Stamp plays “Wilson”, an ageing Cockney criminal, just out of prison, flying from England to Los Angeles, in order to investigate the circumstances of his daughter’s death. As in *Get Carter*, an “accidental” car crash was not an accident at all, and Wilson gradually ascertains who is responsible. Indeed, as in the Carter film, the denouement occurs on a deserted beach. However, through flashbacks to his earlier life and interactions with his daughter, Wilson comes to realise how he let her down, through repeated periods in prison. He also sees how, inadvertently, he may have contributed to her death many years later. Throughout his criminal career, when his young daughter suspected him of being about to do “another job” she would warn him that she was going to call the police: “If you’re naughty, Dad, I’ll put the Law on you...”; “I’ll shop you, Dad...”; “I’m calling the Old Bill now”. She did not mean to do so, of course. However, when, as an adult, her weak, decadent (older) boyfriend became embroiled in a criminal scheme she made the same threat (as if rehearsing her childhood taunts), thereby precipitating her death. Stamp’s character, the Limey, seems to grasp this; a

realisation which inhibits the revenge that is anticipated at the climax of this magnificent film.

COMMENT

Five films, emerging early in the film career of Sir Michael Caine, demonstrate the conduct of antisocial males; the consequences for them and the people they encounter. An Oedipal theme is discernible in each narrative, the central character defying the patriarchy and seducing their women. A fuller interpretation might question the role of father figures in such films and in the formation of the central characters described. Regardless of whether one accepts a psychodynamic account of the role of the father in the formation of “superego” or “conscience”, it is apparent that the antisocial male engages in conduct inherently rejecting of the patriarchal/hierarchical order. These Caine films may serve as teaching aids to illustrate the antisocial and his impact. They constitute a legacy of British cinema that should not be overlooked.

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