

*Articles:*

Beattie on Fairbairn

Scheftel, Spitz on Film

Kaufman on Forrest

Out of Our Past

Reports of Scientific Meetings

Book Review

In Memoriam: Jane Asch, Roy Schafer

# BULLETIN

OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR PSYCHOANALYTIC MEDICINE

SOCIETY OF THE COLUMBIA CENTER FOR PSYCHOANALYTIC TRAINING AND RESEARCH

VOLUME 53  
FALL 2018



## BULLETIN STAFF

**Editor in Chief**  
Bonnie Kaufman

**Associate Editor**  
Hilary Beattie

**Candidate Assistant Editor**  
Angela Hegarty

**Section Editors**  
Edith Cooper, Bonnie Kaufman *Reeling: Psychoanalysis and Film*  
Vivian Pender *Political Affairs*  
George Sagi *Technology and Layout Consultant*

**Copy Editor**  
Hilary Beattie

## THE ASSOCIATION FOR PSYCHOANALYTIC MEDICINE

**Officers**  
Hillery Bosworth *President*  
David Lindy *President Elect*  
Juliette Meyer *Secretary*  
Diana Moga *Treasurer*

**Program Chair**  
Hillery Bosworth: Fall 2013-Spring 2017  
Vaia Tsolas: Fall 2017—

**Appointed Advisors**  
Edith Cooper  
Lila Kalinich  
Jules Kerman  
Jonah Schein

**Council**  
Dina Abell  
Talía Hatzor  
Aerin Hyun

**Representatives to the American Psychoanalytic Association**  
Talía Hatzor, Alternate  
Jules Kerman

## Contents

### HISTORY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

- Psychoanalysts and their Demons: The Case of Ronald Fairbairn*  
Hilary J. Beattie 3

### REELING: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND FILM

- Movie Night 2018  
*The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*  
Susan Scheftel 12
- Documentary Danger: Reflections on Three Identical Strangers*  
Ellen Handler Spitz 22

### FACULTY PROFILE

- David Forrest: The Analyst as Artist; The Artist as Analyst*  
Bonnie Kaufman 30

### OUT OF OUR PAST

- Robert Liebert: A Retrospective*  
Katherine Dalsimer and Bonnie Kaufman 38

### REPORTS OF SCIENTIFIC MEETINGS

- Beyond the Binary of Sex: Psychoanalytic Exploration of Multiple Sexualities*  
Presenters: Jack Drescher, Patricia Gherovici  
Discussant and Reporter: Susan C. Vaughan 53
- Who is the Analyst in Lacanian, Ego-Object Relations and Self-Psychological Approaches?*  
Presenters: David Lichtenstein, Andy Lotterman, Jeff Halpern  
Moderators and Reporters: Diana Moga, Elhav Weinstein 60

## Documentary Danger: Reflections on *Three Identical Strangers*

Ellen Handler Spitz

*Three Identical Strangers* (2018), with its tantalizing title, is labeled a documentary film by its British director, Tim Wardle, and has garnered considerable box office success in the U. S. But is it a bona fide documentary with serious claims to truth-telling? (Definitions of “documentary” normally include phrases such as: “based on facts,” “captures reality,” “strives to be truthful.”) Or is it an under-researched melodrama, laced with biased sensationalism? Does it seek to manipulate viewers’ emotions and to persuade them that irresponsible, even reprehensible, acts were once committed by otherwise respectable members of the New York mental health professions and the upper east side New York Jewish community?

As a humanities scholar and cultural critic with four years of (non-clinical) training at the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research—where I was privileged to attend lectures by the late Peter Bela Neubauer, M.D. (1913–2008), whose project is featured in this film—I maintain that *Three Identical Strangers* falls into the latter category. Uncritically, it promotes contemporary fads favoring determinist explanations of psychological phenomena: heredity over environment, nature over nurture, neuroscience as master narrative. Its director fails to meet the demanding norms of the documentary genre. He offers no in-depth engagement with his material and its history, no fair-minded reportage, no nuanced tussle with his purported theme—namely, the age-old conundrum of nature-versus-nurture in the evolution of human personality.

*Three Identical Strangers* achieves its blockbuster status by a crude ploy. It sets up a deceptive moral dichotomy between two sets of characters. First, we have the alleged victims (eponymous male triplets, who are portrayed sympathetically and viewed almost continuously smiling on screen until one of them tragically commits suicide later in life). Second, we have the imputed perpetrators (the doctors who studied them and the adoption agency that placed

them, all of whom are largely absent from the screen and/or negatively portrayed). This split manipulates viewers, causing them to identify with the “victimized” triplets and their deceived adoptive families while, with high-minded anger, they are urged to loathe the villainous doctors and researchers. Such distortion sells movie tickets. It exploits its audience, first engendering in them and then slaking in them a latent thirst for blood-in-the-mouth indignation. Results: an exciting, feel-good couple of hours at the cinema. But what has this to do with the educative mission of a documentary? In this case, the appeal to raw emotion seems especially troubling for it perpetuates public distrust of the already much-maligned mental health professions. It sullies, moreover, the reputation of the late distinguished Dr. Neubauer, and it besmirches the memory of the now-defunct Louise Wise Services (adoption agency) of New York City, founded in 1916, a well-respected Jewish institution with a sterling record of reputability and charitable work.

The film shows us male triplets, born in 1961, given up for adoption at the Louise Wise Services by their birth mother, then separated in infancy (at six months of age) by being assigned to three different families. Never does director Wardle bother with the historical background of this event to inform his audience that, in 1961, the United States had not yet enacted laws requiring full disclosure to adopting families nor were there requirements for full disclosure on the part of researchers experimenting with human subjects. The mores, expectations, and sensitivities in the 1950s and 1960s were different from today, and, since they form the background of the story being told, they are core to a fair-minded telling.

In 1961, each of the three adopting families, while not told that their baby was a triplet, was asked to participate in a long-term study that would entail multiple home visits. The families agreed, without protest, to cooperate. Yet, later in life when, by happenstance, the three young men are reunited, they and their adoptive families—upon learning that they were deprived of the knowledge that they were born together—are shown as wrathful, vengeful, and wracked by feelings of betrayal. The film imagines an evil, scheming research doctor, Neubauer, whose purpose in separating and studying the triplets is never satisfactorily explained. His aims are merely a matter of speculation. Wardle’s Neubauer represents the mental health professions *tout court*—guilty of fraudulence, wanton manipulation of human subjects, and, most damningly (and incredulously),

culpability for the late-in-life suicide of one of the separated triplets. Wardle's truth-telling techniques consist of selective repetition, selective omission, and relentless distortion so as to fashion a tendentious tale that asks us to walk away with images of a horrifying experiment perpetrated on unsuspecting innocents by secretive researchers led by a deceptive and elusive fanatic.

In addition to the above, *Three Identical Strangers* indolently sidesteps the serious intellectual challenge of its purported theme, namely, the ages-old never-to-be-fully-resolved conundrum of nature versus nurture, a topic that, in other hands, might have spurred a fascinating investigation. My hunch, incidentally, that the film produces noxious effects, namely, the pleasurable stimulation of unearned outrage, was accorded anecdotal corroboration by random strangers in the anteroom of one Landmark Theater in Manhattan this August. After a screening, groups of (mostly) women, apparently strangers to one another, gushed audibly about how horrified they were. One gasped: "I can hardly process this!" Their self-congratulatory indignation was exactly what the director had spawned: that primitive stew of raw emotion which fuels box office returns.

In what follows, I shall say a few words not just about what takes place on screen but what, significantly, does not, so as to argue that *Three Identical Strangers* and other equally careless films about real people and real situations can, because they are misleading, present a danger to society and to those who watch them uncritically as entertainment.

First of all, as was surely known to the director beforehand, Dr. Neubauer's study, with its aims, methodology, contents, and findings, is unavailable. This is the study which presumably separated the triplets, whose story forms the spine of the film—and, furthermore, which separated several sets of twins, including Elyse Schein and Paula Bernstein, whose book *Identical Strangers* (2007) no doubt played a part in inspiring the film. Neubauer did not publish it during his lifetime, and the relevant papers are locked in an archive at Yale University until 2066. Under these circumstances, any documentary investigation is necessarily crippled. At the start of a film version, the public surely deserves to be informed of the study's unavailability, an insuperable limitation to telling a full story. The study's unobtainability gives no license for partisanship. On the contrary, lack of data ought to mandate reticence. Since the triplets, the so-called "three

identical strangers," were born in 1961, the 2066 date assures they will have died before Neubauer's papers are released; at present, we cannot know what Neubauer was seeking. Was it to examine the input of nature versus nurture by following sets of genetically identical infants exposed to different environments as they grew, or was it, as has also been intimated, to understand whether mental illness can be inherited? Both of these aims are proposed in the film. The public hears only speculation on the part of naïve interviewees.

What is curious, of course, and suspicious, is the century-long lock-up. Why? Again, we do not know, but a dose of history may help. In 1917, Minnesota passed a sealed adoptions law, and many other states followed suit. Closed adoptions, understandably, protected unwed mothers from social stigma, a disgrace which has, in the intervening century, dwindled and which has, by now, in many pockets of American society, virtually disappeared. It was not, however, until the 1970s, well after the shaping event of *Three Identical Strangers*, that the tide turned, and openness and access to information began to be available to the public. Laws concerning full disclosure by experimenters with all human subjects came on the books. In the late 1970s, a national ethics advisory board was created in response to a notorious Tuskegee medical experiment where medication had been withheld from black male syphilis sufferers for decades; many of them consequently died. This scandal caused doctors to rethink their views on informing experimental subjects. By the 1990s, nearly all adopting families in the U.S. and adoptees themselves had acquired legal rights to information concerning their identity. Law suits sprang up demanding access to sealed records retroactively, and, in this climate, the Neubauer study may have been deemed vulnerable. It is conceivable that Dr. Neubauer and his colleagues decided for protective reasons to sequester it. We do not know.

To view the events covered in Wardle's film with present-day sensitivity is anachronistic. Can we imagine parents of today failing to speak up and pose questions at the time of an adoption but rather—as do these three sets of parents on camera—behave passively for years and then turn indignant later on, as per the film? Meanwhile, it is Dr. Neubauer and the Louise Wise agents who are branded with demonic status.

Clearly, adoptive parents in 1961, anticipating a sealed adoption, which was then the norm, could have been informed—although it would have been unusual—of the scope of the projected

study and warned that their participation was a condition of their adoption of a triplet or a twin. In that case, potential adopting parents who did not wish to cope with follow-up visits, filming, question- and note-taking and/or did not wish to adopt one of a set of twins or triplets would have been free to wait for a different (non-twin) baby. Full information, however, was not provided in part because—according to speculation in the absence of the sealed data—researchers may have worried that such information to the adoptive parents could bias the study. If this speculation were true, the researchers might certainly be accused of insensitivity, that is, of giving priority to the terms of their project rather than to the putative feelings and concerns of its subjects, but we have no evidence whatsoever of intentional wrong-doing. All participants, the agency and the doctors, including the late Dr. Viola Bernard (1907–1998), not mentioned in the film but an important advisor to Louise Wise, a close colleague of Dr. Neubauer, and a prominent figure in the fields of child development, adoption, and the law, were of upstanding character; they gave lifelong professional dedication to human welfare. Moreover, the prevalent culture of the time actually valorized the reserve of doctors and of adoption agencies, and, as I have suggested above, of adopting parents, who—unlike their counterparts today—were not prone to pose searching questions or complaints.

To continue for a moment with the historical background of the story, it has, for many reasons—principally, the traditionally close-knit fabric of Jewish family life and community—never been easy to adopt a Jewish infant. Those who wished to do so at the time depicted in the film may well have grasped at the chance when it came along and been reluctant to wait. *Pari passu*, the Louise Wise adoption agency sought to place infants early in life so as to permit them to bond with their new caregivers (this was one of Dr. Bernard's strongest values and it jives with ground-breaking infant development work by Dr. Margaret Mahler, 1897–1985). From a practical point of view, placing one infant in a home was far more plausible than placing three infants in the same home. Louise Wise agents may have deemed it impractical to await a family that would or could accept three at once and not in the best interests of the child. (On camera, however, one adoptive father does say in retrospect that he would have been willing to do so had he known.) These speculations, of course, carry no more nor less weight than others

touted in the film itself; to give them voice would be to balance the moral scales, which weigh so heavily now on one side.

Dr. Neubauer gave lectures which I attended with intellectual profit and gratitude at Columbia University, when I was a research candidate at the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Research and Training in the 1980s. His insights, especially into the conflicts of adolescence, are engraved on my heart. I recall his special interest in the effects of children's exposure to representations of violence on television, from which I learned a great deal and was able to channel later on in my work at Harvard's Radcliffe (Bunting) Institute in 1996. I remember his somewhat off-putting German accent. I certainly hold that, ideally, he should not have been secretive concerning his study and should have given a clear statement of his goals to the adoption agency and to the parents. Dr. Neubauer, however, was no "evil genius," and it pains me to see him so portrayed. Furthermore, and this is crucial: the film insinuates that unpleasant circumstances to the triplets, including Eddy's suicide, can be laid to the door of Neubauer's supposed misdeeds. This is unfounded, unverifiable, even verging on libelous. We actually observe on camera Eddy's strange, militaristic father and learn that they did not get on; who knows what other contributing factors occurred in that unfortunate suicide's unhappy life? It is fallacious to plant in the audience the notion that separating him from his brothers at six months was the cause of his later-in-life suicide. This smacks of appalling ignorance and a troubling disrespect for the role played by a person's environment in the development of personality.

On another note, we should bear in mind that the adoption agency was the principal if not the only Jewish agency in New York, that the families (both the birth families and the adoptive families) were Jewish, as were Dr. Neubauer and Dr. Bernard. Louise Wise was the wife of Stephen Samuel Wise, rabbi of the Free Synagogue, descendant of the famed Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900), who founded the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and spearheaded the Reform movement in American Judaism. The daughter of Louise and Stephen Wise, Justine Wise Polier, the first woman judge in New York City, used her position on the Family Court to advocate for children of poverty. She was deeply involved with the adoption agency and worked with Dr. Bernard to bring principles of child development to the attention of lawmakers. It is extremely

difficult to understand the imputed vilification of such public-spirited individuals.

Most devastating of all is the mention in the film of the Nazi doctor Josef Mengele (1911–1979), nicknamed “The Angel of Death,” and of his deadly experiments on Jewish children during World War II. Both in *Three Identical Strangers* and in the book *Identical Strangers* mentioned above, an implicit comparison is made between this monster and Dr. Peter Neubauer. Should we discern here a deep, poorly hidden streak of anti-Semitism?

Finally, there is simply insufficient evidence here for a full-length documentary. The movie maker found an apparently sensational story and turned it into a popular hit by fanning flames of ire, prejudice, and righteous outrage. Minus facts, analysis, and interpretation, he resorted to meretricious repetition: the three brothers smile again and again: they pose by crossing and uncrossing their legs in unison, they repeat incessantly that they like the same foods and wrestling, they prefer the same brand of cigarettes and women. The repetitive visual representation, it becomes obvious, substitutes for a woeful dearth of substance. What about the banality of the interviewees on camera? Several women peripheral to the study and ignorant of its details smile and speak in platitudes. None of the adoptive mothers, nor the birth mother, is heard from. A Texas journalist frequently on screen has no training in any aspect of the topic, and we hear him say so over and over again, along with an LA-based woman with a cynical, pseudo-sophisticated air who informs the audience that she was a pretty 24-yr-old at the time of Neubauer’s study and knew very little about it. The film maker seems to have been incapable of finding anyone genuinely involved, anyone close to Dr. Peter Neubauer. A Jewish psychologist from Ann Arbor establishes zero credibility and has little to add. Why were professionals in Manhattan at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute or at Columbia, people with actual knowledge and experience, colleagues of the late Dr. Neubauer, not consulted?

Finally, we must remember that the three babies were separated but given to loving homes. Let us not forget that. No one was abused. The genuine philosophical puzzles—re nature vs nurture—are left far behind as the film fans hysteria among viewers instead of reasoning and calm discourse. If Dr. Neubauer did indeed bury his data for fear of personal legal liability, he deserves to be called out for cowardice, but mysteries remain, and many of us won’t be here in

2066. The filmmaker should have thought hard about this before beginning. Surely a finer, fairer film on this ever-intriguing subject could have been made.

This essay is dedicated to Jennifer Beulah Lew, Nathaniel Geoffrey Lew, Rivi Handler-Spitz, Celestia Bloch, and, *primus inter pares*, to Maxwell Lorber-Lew.

