

## Dirty Mind: A Joy for Psychologists

A review of the film

### **Dirty Mind**

(2009)

by Pieter van Hees (Director)

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Reviewed by

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The Dutch-language movie *Dirty Mind* is a comedy, an essay on the neurobiology of happiness, and an action movie all at once. It is not, however, an erotic tale, as the title might suggest. Sex is a main theme, but the movie does not contain arousing images; rather, it is neurology with a Freudian twist.

The story seems to be inspired by the curious case of Phineas Gage that was made famous by Damasio, Grabowski, Frank, Galaburda, and Damasio (1994) and Antonio Damasio (1994). Gage (1823–1860), a railroad worker, made a mistake when putting dynamite into place. An explosion followed, and an iron bar went through his eye, exiting through the top of his skull and taking vital parts of his frontal brain with it. Gage not only survived but was miraculously able to stand and talk. He seemed unaffected by the accident at first, but later it became apparent that his character had changed considerably. He had lost his conscientiousness and became very irritable. Gage's executive functioning was hampered, and he was no longer able to stick to the plans he made. He lost his job and died 11 years later.

The movie tells the story of Diego, who also comes to suffer from frontal lobe syndrome. When the movie opens, he is running a small company with his brother Cisse that is responsible for the (lame) stunts for a Belgian television series. Diego is a careful planner, but painfully shy and fearful. Cisse is the hero of the two who does the stunts and gets the

girls. Diego suffers from jealousy and decides to follow a therapeutic course in the woods to rediscover his manhood. However, the required shouting and macho attitude do not come naturally to Diego, and, to his surprise, the other men start kissing each other. When the trainer offers Diego a prostate massage, it is a small miracle that he dares to refuse the invitation.

When Cisse injures himself, he talks his brother into performing a stunt in his place. Diego has to jump through a window, but in a slapstick sequence during which everything goes wrong, Diego starts to run before the camera is ready, trips when he is supposed to jump, and falls face down on the ground, just missing the cardboard boxes that should have broken his fall.

His frontal brain is injured. When he wakes up in the hospital, he starts talking as if nothing has happened, but he shows the classic signs of behavioral disinhibition, inappropriateness, increased talkativeness, lack of tact, and a tendency to joke (Hanna-Pladdy, 2007). This is clearly evident when Diego recognizes the loneliness of the treating neurologist, Jaana, and comes on very strongly to her.

Diego seems to be liberated from his inhibitions. He no longer wonders what other people might think of him and behaves as a smooth talking womanizer who uses the language of the Bush era in an explicit manner. He wants to “shock and awe” with his “axis of evil.” His neurologist warns him that he is ill and he will get into trouble if he refuses treatment, but Diego, who now calls himself Tony T. (TNT), is way too happy as a “macho” to cooperate.

Tony’s success is partly due to an unrealistic portrayal of his symptoms. His inability to follow plans is not as pervasive as might be expected on the basis of the literature on frontal syndromes, and he is able to form and execute some of his plans efficiently. His happiness is best explained by his increased self-esteem and his rediscovered ability to try to get what he wants from life (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003).

The story addresses the question of whether the loss of the “real man” has negatively affected happiness for men. Is being a macho male from Mars better than being a timid male from Venus? The data do not support this view. Gender equality is positively correlated with happiness in nations, both for women and men (Chin Hon Foei, 2006).

The film also addresses the issue of which hedonistic attitude offers the best chances for happiness. Prior to his accident, Diego is so inhibited that he does not embrace the good and the pleasurable in life. Conversely, Tony is so eager to be happy at any cost that he loses sight of the long-term consequences of unmitigated indulgence. He performs dangerous stunts and injures himself but offers the reassurance that he is “more reliable than Mac and crashes better than Windows.” When he sleeps with the girlfriends of his brother and his father, he quickly finds himself alienated and alone. The story supports the idea that it is best to be open to pleasurable experiences but that it is quite possible to overindulge (Veenhoven, 2003).

The story does have a happy ending. An electrode in Diego's head takes over the frontal brain functions, and Diego's personality returns. In the last scene, he walks hand in hand with Jaana, toward a cell phone tower; the viewer has already learned that this is the only thing that can disrupt the functioning of the electrode in his head and bring out the sexy Tony T. again. With a little help from modern technology, he has found a way to reach emotional intelligence. By knowing when to control his impulses and when to let go, Diego achieves sustainable happiness (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005).

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