

# Psycho dramas

**ANOUSHKA BEAZLEY** begins a new column analysing film and television

**D**IRTY JOHN – NETFLIX. From a podcast and based on a true story, *Dirty John* is a Netflix original that you would swear is fiction. Much of this reality confusion lies in the sublime skills of actors Connie Britton (Debra), Eric Bana (John) and Juno Temple (Ronnie), who manage to lift the psychological complexities of not only the individual but also the family system to the viewing epidermis. It is hard to watch the characters in their natural habitats without questioning why she/he would behave in this way. And it is as if Netflix can hear us because as the ten-episode series unfolds the layers of the sociopathic, pathological charming manipulator John are revealed. So are the uxoricide of Debra's sister and the symbiotic relationship between four-time married Debra and her mother where their reverence of love, God and marriage shows two grown women function predominantly in their Child ego state. Their infantile union reeks of tragic melodrama; their belief in human goodness almost a racket.

John's open door (Ware, 1983) is behaviour: he cons, lies and cheats one person after another. His contact door involves only thinking about punishing those who dare to confront him, and through his trap door he feels no remorse whatsoever. Flashbacks help to decontaminate our adult protagonist and show a pre-adolescent John struggle under the bizarre tutelage of a sociopathic Critical Parent. John sashays through careers covering one fake CV with another while in contrast Debra is the pinnacle of American success, a woman of independent means with her own interior design company. Her status is at odds with her childlike innocence; the roots of Debra's multiple failed marriages and continuous forgiveness of John are less easy to identify. What is clear is that her two daughters are ending the cycle. They love their mother for her unconditional sweetness, simultaneously tiring of her judgment. Ronnie is painted as a materialistic, slightly spoilt, mouthy bitch who appears to be the only one not playing a game and aside from some rescuing of her child-like mother, without which it could be argued she would have no heart at all, she lives as much as possible off the drama triangle (Karpman, 1968) and is a shining example of physis in bloom. The story shows the dark side of online dating, of symbiosis and the evil of the Critical Parent. Brilliant TV viewing.

**THREE IDENTICAL STRANGERS** – Channel 4. At 19, a young man who was adopted discovers he has a

biological twin. In the jubilation that ensues the brothers discover that they are not merely twins but triplets. The boys were in fact a psychological nature-versus-nurture experiment, a scientific study conceived by Peter Neubauer, a child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. Adopted from an agency at six months old neither the biological nor the adoptive parents gave consent or even knew about the study, though as part of the adoption they agreed to four 'visits' a year. Each of the adoptive parents were deliberately chosen for their differing parenting styles, class and economic level. Neubauer worked closely with Anna Freud, published seminal papers on the damage of maternal and paternal deprivation, and was director of the Jewish Board Child Development Centre. The JBCDC was closely aligned with the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services who funded the study, and Neubauer devoted his life's work to understanding the psyche of children. Unsurprisingly, the study continues to evoke much controversy, re-ignited in this new documentary with moving testimony from two of the three brothers. As the story develops the ethical issues are mounting, climaxing in tragedy; results that Neubauer surely could not have wanted, though perhaps might have predicted? Neubauer is yet to publish the findings of the study fearing the anger of public opinion, and the records have been sealed until 2065. The documentary won the US Documentary Special Jury Award for storytelling and is truly fascinating as a study which has already happened, as a study which could never happen again in today's society, and as a study from which – in forty-five years or so – we may learn more about attachment than we have in a long time.

**KILLING EVE** – BBC 1 Villanelle (Jodie Comer) lives, kills and breathes from Rebellious Child. Contaminated to perfection she and Eve (Sandra Oh) drip lesbian counter-intelligence over MI5 dossiers as they demonstrate the intoxicating power of female obsession, violence and vulnerability. As slick as terrestrial TV gets.

## References

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**Anoushka Beazley** is training at The Berne. She works in primary care at a GP practice and in private practice in London. She is also a novelist, and has an MA in Creative Writing and a BA(Hons) in Film. [www.manderlaytherapy.com](http://www.manderlaytherapy.com)