

Movie: Tremors (2006)

Synopsis

Tremors is a 1990 horror film depicting Val and Earl, two handymen, who, along with Rhonda LaBeck, discover the shocking cause of seismic activity in the desert of Perfection, Nevada.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

Val and Earl are on horseback looking for help when they discover Wallace's buried car. With Wallace and his wife missing, they press on when an eruption reveals an enormous burrowing worm-creature. The creature, a graboid, is a metaphor of anxiety. Similar to anxiety resulting from intra-psychic conflict arising from below the level of consciousness, graboids cause significant distress from below the desert's surface. Given the town's name of Perfection, *Tremors* can be conceptualized as a case study of Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD).

OCPD is a personality disorder hallmarked by a pervasive pattern of preoccupation with perfection (as the Nevada town is aptly named) and control that causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social or occupational functioning. The psychodynamic etiology of OCPD focuses on maladaptive defense mechanisms: unconscious ego processes that alleviate anxiety caused by the mismatch between the id (what we want to do) and the superego (what we're allowed to do).

Three ego defense mechanisms define OCPD. First, **isolation of affect** (isolation) is objectifying and emotionally detaching oneself from a thought so as to avoid the painful feeling associated with a thought. The second defense mechanism, **undoing**, is the unconscious attempt to reverse a thought or feeling by performing an action that signifies an opposite feeling (e.g. compulsive hand washing to counter thoughts of infestation). Third, **reaction formation** includes adopting beliefs, attitudes, and feelings contrary to what you really feel (e.g. the individual expresses inner turmoil as perfect orderliness by having his tie pulled tight and beard always trimmed).

Interestingly, Graboids have as many life-cycle stages as OCPD has characteristic defense mechanisms:

- The first is the underground dwelling stage (isolation)
- The second is the walking stage when the graboid leaves its underground skin and grows two legs (undoing)
- The third is the flight stage where they sprout wings (reaction formation)

Key Words: Tremors, graboid, Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder, OCPD, defense mechanisms, id, ego, superego, isolation of affect, undoing, reaction formation

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