

# K-PAX

Dir: Iain Softley, USA/Germany, 2001

## A review by Diane R. Wiener, University of Arizona, USA

Throughout the film, Dr. Mark Powell (Jeff Bridges) is portrayed as being overly committed to his work, and not attentive enough to his wife and children. His wife Rachel (Mary McCormack) is dissatisfied with his priorities and with him, and her compassion is wearing thin. One night Mark has gone too far, as he wakes up Rachel in the middle of the night. She initially comforts him when she realises that he is fretting and troubled in his obsessive professional dreamscape. After he jumps awake, flees their bed, and subsequently frightens their children with an outburst of professional insight about Prot, she finally loses her patience and barks, "What is the matter with you? What is this patient doing to you? Unbelievable!"

The depiction of a troubled doctor who needs as much, if not more help than his own patients is a common thread in mainstream American films featuring psychiatric plots. A risky role reversal has taken place, and it is Mark not Prot who is in need of support. Indeed, it seems that Mark is quite imbalanced, and he requires a lot of help. He gets that help from Prot and his other patients, whose presumed dependency upon him makes him feel valuable and important. They present him with a set of philosophical principles with which to grapple, and he thinks about these rather than effectively attending to the expectations of prescribed suburban domesticity and daily family intimacies.

The film is packed with juxtapositions between family barbecues and inpatient psychiatric interludes. The public and private worlds do not mesh well for Mark, and their overlaps are downright disturbing to his wife. As viewers, we are encouraged to wonder how these worlds are separated in the first place, and what ideologies lie behind and beyond the therapeutic couch. Audience members are compelled to grapple with many themes when experiencing the film, including the definitional bounds of scientific inquiry, medicine, intimacy, family, point-of-view, normality and truth.

One of the quandaries Mark faces is that he is not consistently convinced of the efficacy of his own professional discourse. He is unsure that Prot is delusional when he avows that he comes from the planet K-PAX, near the constellation Lyra, a planet that is circled by seven purple moons and warmed by two suns that only overlap once every two hundred years. After an extended stay in New York's city hospital system (in Bellevue), Prot is transferred to a state facility, the Manhattan Psychiatric Institute, where Mark is Chief of Clinical Psychology. Upon reviewing Prot's referral materials, Mark jokes, "Let's hope extraterrestrials qualify for Medicaid." His flippant tone changes when he finds out that, when at Bellevue, Prot was unresponsive after receiving three weeks of Thorazine administered at a high dosage.

Mark is further perplexed by the fact that empirical tests demonstrate that Prot can see in ultraviolet light, which is humanly impossible. Simultaneously titillated and unsettled, Mark

seeks support from his brother-in-law Steven Becker (Brian Howe), who happens to be an astronomer. Steven presents Mark with a set of seemingly impossible queries for Prot to engage with. After Prot thoroughly answers all of Dr. Becker's complex questions, Mark reports the results to Steve, and, fascinated, Steve notes that his colleagues "want to meet this fella of yours".

Prot is escorted from the psychiatric unit by Mark to meet with Steven and a team of leading astronomers at a planetarium. Prot is able to illustrate for the experts how K-PAX orbits within its solar system. His masterful calculations solve dilemmas that have long perplexed and even haunted the astronomical community. The team is incredulous, and Prot explains, "Every K-PAXian knows this, just as every child on earth knows that your planet revolves around the sun. It is common knowledge."

In these and myriad other ways, the film continuously encourages its viewers to examine what is considered expert versus commonsensical knowledge, and to explore the processes by which ideas are framed as coming from expert sources. The film creates a layered critique of expertise in relation to earthly dangers and risks. By disrupting ideas of perceived reason and competency, it challenges the ways those who are seen as possessing these qualities might dangerously deploy their power within global and even larger astral scales.

Prot refuses to tell the scientists about light travel and how it is operationalised: "If I told you, you'd blow yourselves up, or worse, someone else. You'd be surprised how much energy there is in a beam of light." Earlier, Prot states that the earth is in an early stage of evolution with an uncertain future. During a conversation about why K-PAXians don't need a formal government structure, Prot explains to Mark, "Every being in the universe knows right from wrong." Mark finds this hard to accept and asks Prot what happens if a K-PAXian commits rape or murder. Frustrated, Prot indicates that Mark isn't really listening to him, and says, "Most of you humans subscribe to this policy of an eye for an eye, a life for a life, which is known throughout the universe for its stupidity...you humans, sometimes it's hard to imagine how you've made it this far." The cautionary message is especially chilling, given that the film premiered in the United States on 22 October 2001, mere weeks after the tragedies of September 11th.

The film's critiques are likewise levied on a local plane. The practices of medicine, psychiatry, and "science" more broadly, their foundations and power manoeuvres, and the techniques by which reason is established are all debated by the film. When Mark uses mirroring strategies to communicate with Prot, Prot declares, "You know, for an educated person Mark, you repeat things quite a bit. Are you aware of that?" When he first meets the team of scientists, Prot asks, "How many doctors are there on this planet?" As Prot's case is first presented during clinical rounds, Mark rejects his colleague's diagnosis, and asserts that Psychosis NOS (not otherwise specified) is "a wastebasket diagnosis". Later, Mark challenges Prot: "What would you say if I told you I think you're as human as I am?" Prot retorts, "I would say you're in need of a Thorazine drip, Doctor".

However, the film also eerily re-establishes psychiatric authority. Prot knows that his choices are restricted, even if he can travel faster than the speed of light. Mark invites Prot to his home for an Independence Day barbecue. At the party Rachel confides in Prot about Mark's poor relationship with son Michael (Aaron Paul), a product of Mark's first marriage. When she wonders aloud about why she is seeking his empathy, he observes, "Probably because I'm a locked up lunatic, so what harm could it do?" His typically facetious retort is both

empowering to him in the ways that it questions definitions of deviance, and a symbolic indication of his fraught positionality.

A series of interlocking questions are at stake for Mark, Mark's family, Prot, Prot's fellow inpatient clients and the audience. How is common sense properly defined, by whom, and in what contexts? What constitutes reason versus unreason? What moral codes are edified and dismantled by mainstream psychiatric practices? What constitutes a good parent? How is a healthy family to be understood and recognised? *K-PAX* does not provide easy answers, but much fodder for thought and discussion, whether metaphysical, astronomical, or both.