

## Film

### Soul searching

How does the medical profession treat the patient with pains of the soul? Traditionally, we offer psychotherapy, selective serotonin-reuptake inhibitors, sometimes a condescending pat on the shoulder. But what if we could extirpate the root-cause pathology? Just as we resect a melanoma, drain an abscess, excise an inflamed gallbladder, why couldn't the medical profession simply extract the angst-ridden soul?

This is precisely what Dr Flintstein—in the movie *Cold Souls*—offers (see webvideo). Paul Giamatti is an actor (incidentally played by the actor Paul Giamatti) whose anxiety and despondency is undermining his lead role in *Uncle Vanya*. With a simple MRI-like machine, Dr Flintstein (David Strathairn) painlessly removes Paul's soul, which, to the actor's consternation, turns out to be the size and shape of a chickpea. Paul feels better, lighter, but when his Chekhovian acting turns Chaplinesque, he returns again to Dr Flintstein.

The good doctor offers a second therapeutic option: Paul could rent a more conducive soul. Paul leafs through the catalogue of available souls and settles on that of a Russian poet. Quick slides of Paul's credit card and Paul's body into the respective machines, and the actor is the proud owner of a passionate Akhmatovik soul. His performance of *Uncle Vanya* is riveting. The Russian poet's soul, however, comes complete with the poet's suppressed nightmares. Paul is increasingly plagued by flashbacks to a dreary Soviet orphanage, and soon pines for the familiar warts and Weltschmerz of his old soul.

Meanwhile, we learn of the lively black-market trade flourishing in the poet's homeland. Legions of impoverished Russians line up at a gritty factory to extract their souls for a handful of rubles. Nina (Dina Korzun)

is the mule: a soul is implanted in her body, she travels to New York, walks innocently through customs, then arrives at Dr Flintstein's practice to make her deposit. Apparently Americans are highly desirous of artistic, romantic souls, so Nina trolls

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the halls of the St Petersburg conservatories for dancers, musicians, and painters strapped for cash. However it is clear that Nina has mixed feelings about her job.

Nina's boss, a creepy, Donald Trump-like figure, runs the operation. When his soap-opera-actress trophy wife decides that the soul of a famous American actor would advance her career, he orders Nina to snag the soul of Al Pacino. Failing that, Sean Penn will do. The only actor Nina can find in Dr Flintstein's practice, however, is the hapless Giamatti. With misgiving, she filches his soul out of the safe, ferries

it within herself on Aeroflot, and then delivers the booty to the tycoon's wife. When Paul shows up at Dr Flintstein's office to jettison the tortured poet's soul for his own neurotic one, he finds that his garbanzo bean is gone.

What follows is part-caper, part-existential meditation, as Nina tries to help Paul recover his soul. Imagine Woody Allen's *Sleeper* spliced with Bergman's *Persona*. Nina shepherds Paul through the absurdist contradictions that constitute modern Russian society—high art, mafia gangs, desperate poverty, glitzy consumption, learned helplessness, profligate deal-making.

The humour of *Cold Souls* is delightfully deadpan and the characters are superbly acted, but the themes of the movie are probed with intelligence. As a society, we are increasingly drawn to quick fixes, whether it be for the physical imperfections of the body, the balance sheets of our financial institutions, or the political shortcomings of our governments. The medical profession has responded to this demand—witness the rising tide of bariatric surgery in response to our addiction to junk food and plasma screen TVs.



**Cold Souls**  
Directed by Sophie Barthes.  
A Sophie Barthes and Anaraj Parekh Film. Samuel Goldwyn Films, 2009. On general release in the USA from Aug 7, 2009. <http://coldsoulsthemovie.com>  
See Online for webvideo

Adam Bell/Samuel Goldwyn Films



Adam Bell/Samuel Goldwyn Films

Angst of the soul used to be treated with psychoanalysis—a painstaking and protracted peeling back of our onion-layered neuroses. Even short-term psychotherapy requires a commitment of time and courage. Antidepressant medications, by comparison, are nearly effortless.

Antidepressants are of course a life-saving invention, and I certainly dispense them as needed to my patients. But I view them the same way I view non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs for a knee injury—a biochemical mechanism to decrease pain so that the real work of therapy can begin. I always encourage my patients with depression to take advantage of the relief offered by medication to engage in the more

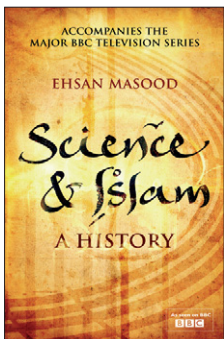
challenging but ultimately necessary treatment of the underlying issues—whether it be with psychotherapy, marital counselling, support groups, or simple introspection and stock-taking. But most shy away from this. It requires too much investment, too much effort, too much interpersonal mess. A pill is all they want.

*Cold Souls* is a thoughtful take on this conundrum. At one point, Paul is wracked by guilt and the bleak absurdity of the soul-transfer enterprise. “How did we come to this?” he asks his physician, the anguish palpable in his voice. Dr Flintstein answers with the prompt confidence of a white-coated clinician. “Progress”, he states.

The movie is beautifully shot by cinematographer Andrij Parekh—frozen landscapes of St Petersburg, blustery sea scenes in Brooklyn’s Brighton Beach, and of course the haunting, dream-like interiors of the souls. The dry humour and intricate plot make *Cold Souls* a deliciously imbibed diversion. But the dark and unsettling premise leaves us with plenty to think about afterward, perhaps—as Paul is forced to, in his desolate Russian hotel—over a steaming bowl of chickpea stew.

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*Science and Islam: A History*  
Ehsan Masood. Icon Books,  
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## In brief

### Book Science and Islam

Did European learning really crawl straight out of the glum ooze of the so-called Dark Ages and into the light of the Renaissance? According to Ehsan Masood, between 700 and 1400 CE while European scholarship slumbered, Islamic countries were having their own scientific revolution—an era to which European science owes much. But why has this history been underplayed in so many western accounts of the development of science?

In *Science and Islam*, Masood carefully picks his way through a tangle of fact and mythology, to argue that by rights, names like Abbas ibn-Firnas, ibn al-Nafis, and Jabir ibn-Hayyan should be as familiar to the world as Leonardo da Vinci and Robert Boyle.

In the bustling streets of the ancient city of Baghdad, knowledge was in fashion. Under the encouragement of the ruling religious leaders in the ninth century, the city’s elite paid handsomely for translations of the writings of Galen and Aristotle.

Islamic scholars were drawn to the city’s burgeoning libraries and debating salons, and this gathering of intellect proved fruitful. Abbas Ibn-Firnas, for example, created lenses to magnify objects and correct light, as well as experimenting with Da Vinci style flying machines.

This flourishing marriage between science and Islam came to fruition in medicine. Wealthy people donated money or time to the study of medicine for religious or cultural motives. One 11th-century Islamic scientist, ibn-Sina (or Avicenna) made legendary contributions to philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. Among his astonishingly varied insights were that light and heat were just different forms of energy; that diseases can spread through water; and that nerves transmit pain. In the 13th century, ibn al-Nafis, a physician from Cairo, discovered pulmonary circulation.

So why are Islamic countries today not the hotbed of scientific learning and progress they once were? In

medicine at least, the explanation lies partly in the influence of Prophetic Medicine, which advocated a faith in traditional practices to be found in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad over experimental science. And, as the Islamic empire began to crumble in the 16th century, European nations embarked on their eager colonisation of the world.

Authoritarian Islamic rule that shuts out new knowledge is a popular trope to explain why even the richest Islamic countries are not on a par scientifically with the USA or UK. But Masood notes that Islamic countries with the best science such as Iran, Malaysia, and Turkey have leaders as authoritarian as any from the early days of Islam. What Islamic countries need now, he says, is an environment in which both science and religion are given room to breathe: just as religion must not suffocate scientific learning, nor should science attempt to extinguish religious faith.

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