# PSYCHIATRY AND MOVIES

**Aleksandar Damjanović, Olivera Vuković, Aleksandar A. Jovanović & Miroslava Jašović-Gašić**

*Institute of Psychiatry, Clinical Center of Serbia, Serbia*

### *SUMMARY*

*As one of the most potent and substantial form of mass communication, film exercises a very significant influence upon the perceptions of the audience, especially in relation to mental illness issues, and that perception is very much blurred with populists' misinterpretation and lack of awareness regarding problems faced by persons suffering from mental disorders. Movies such as "Psycho", "One Flew Over Cuckoo's Nest", "Exorcist", despite being valuable in an artistic sense, corroborated and encouraged confusion and undermined the clarity and certainty concerning the fine line separating mental health from mental illness. Modern film makers and movie theoreticians try to overcome these limitations which are often generated by exploitation of stereotypes and myths referring to mentally ill people. This paper defines and discusses the most frequent thematic stereotypes seen in movies which are perpetuating stigmatization of mentally ill people. They are: free-spirited rebel, maniac on a killing spree, seducer, enlightened member of society, narcissistic parasite, beastly person (stereotype of animal sort). Psychiatry and cinematography are linked inseparably not only because they creatively complement each other, but also as an opportunity of mutual influences blending into didactical categories and professional driving forces, benefiting both the filmmakers' and the psychiatrists' professions.*

**Key words:** *film - social impact – psychiatry - mental illness*

\* \* \* \* \*

## INTRODUCTION

Taking into account the entire human perceptive experience, it is safe to say that no other means capable of capturing attention with presented information and evoking emotions, can live up to the effects of visually stimulated feelings. Filmmakers are accomplishing a rich and overwhelming visual experience, mixing it with sound stimulus, and thus they create the ultimate dream experience - the movie. The viewer enters a state of absorption, concentration and attention, gets caught up with the story and the unique attributes of the characters on the screen. The movie trancends the theater, making the viewer totally preoccupied with the images and sounds, thus it represents the most influential form of mass communication (Cape 2003).

Hollywood is to "blame" for the original invention of the movie camera and the same establishment also created this new artistic form which interacted with the viewers, making them participate directly in artistic communication. The camera transposes the viewer to each scene and the viewer reacts intimately to screen events and the atmosphere which is initiated by the "make believe" characters surrounding him while watching the movie. We (the audience) experience and process mentally the same emotional and factual stuff which the actors see and feel in the movie.

Exactly in order to initiate an emotional response to the movie and to enlarge its magnitude, the director carefully unfolds the plot and introduces us gradually to the psychological profiles of the characters, and that process is accomplished by the precise and meticulous filming of the camera which records happenings. The film editor creates visual and acoustic gestalt, triggering the viewer's response. The more effective the technique, the more it overwhelms and enchants the viewer and engages the viewer emotionally. One may argue that the director in fact constructs the movie and viewers' reality. Selection of locations, movie sets, actors, costumes and light contribute to the organization of the movie, in other words the mise-en-scene (physical arrangement of components making up the visual image).

## SOCIAL IMPACTS OF MOVIES

Film has definitely become an integral part of the present culture and it seems that the movie represents some sort of mirror reflecting us (humans) every day. When somebody is watching a movie, barriers between the viewer and the technical aspects of the movie projection become invisible due to the fact that the viewer is absorbing the images into his/her conscious mind. The best movies cause the experience of the viewer to be transformed into some sort of dissociative condition where usual, routine existence defined in terms of time gets suspended. It seems that no other art form is capable of capturing attention and enchanting the audience to such extent and of conquering the consciousness and experience of an individual human being. We are of the opinion that movies have more influence than any other art form, and this applies to an audience of any age, gender, nationality, background, culture. Film becomes a pervasive and omni-present element of our living in society.

Movies are exceptionally important in terms of influencing the perception of audience regarding mental illness due to a lack of awareness among general public about the problems associated with mental disorders, while on the other hand other communication media tend to a great degree to blur and mystify the definition of mental illness and persons suffering from mental illness. Although certain movies do portray likeable and appealing characters suffering from mental disorders and affable and cute mental health professionals (for example "Three Faces of Eve"; "David and Lisa", "Ordinary People"), there are by far many other movies which paint a different picture. Victims of mental illness are most often portrayed as aggressive, dangerous, and unpredictable. Psychiatrists, psychologists and other mental health professionals working with psychiatric patients are most frequently described as arrogant and aloof, cold, unemotional, cold-hearted and authoritative, passive and apathetic and manipulative. (Weeding & Niemec 2003).

Movies such as "Psycho" (1960) supported and reinforced confusion about the relationship between schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder (multiple personality disorder). "Friday 13" (1979) as well "Nightmare on Elm Street" (1980) are also movies which accentuate myths about persons discharged from the Psychiatric Ward, who exhibit extremely aggressive and brutal behavior. "The Exorcist" (1973) suggested to the audience that mental illness is equivalent to being possessed by the devil. Movies such as "One Flew Above the Cuckoo's Nest" (1975) promoted and generated anti-psychiatric sentiment, with mental hospitals simplified and reduced to a jail metaphor where patients were deprived of all human rights, almost as if being in prison. These movies feed even more biases and misconceptions about psychiatry and contribute to the stigmatizing of psychiatric patients.

## PRESENTATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMENA IN MOVIES

Thanks to its specific language consisting of images, colors and sounds, movie is capable of depicting realistically, vividly, lively, astonishingly and believably, psychological states of mind and changes in a person's mental state. The combination of images, dialogues, sound effects and music in movies may encourage and model our feelings and thoughts. Light, color and sound emanating from the screen may make viewers believe that they experience the same happenings presented on the screen.

In the movie "Secrets of the Soul" (1926) the German director G. Pabst dramatized the psychoanalytical theory of Freud using the help provided by two assistants of Freud, Abraham and Sacks, depicting a sequence of dreams with multiple levels of superimposition (accomplished by rewinding the movie in multiple exposures). Freud did not want his name to be mentioned in regards to this Project. In his letter addressed to Karl Abraham, Freud says: „My main objection to the movies is that in my opinion movies fail to present to a satisfactory degree how vivid, realistic, truthful and believable our abstract thoughts and fantasies may be". This skeptical attitude and mistrust regarding movie making was maintained by Freud until the end of his life.

Film is most often used as an attempt to present objectively subjective states of mind, such as dreams. Maybe the best example illustrating the above is the cooperation between Hitchcock and Salvador Dali in the dream sequence (frame in a motion picture) in "Spellbound" (1944). Hitchcock wanted to provide the audience with psycho-analytic insights and an overview of dreams. He wanted to break the established pattern of representing dream frames in motion pictures by blurred and foggy images. Hitchcock wanted to

present dreams with more distinguished visual sharpness as opposed to the standard movie practice at that time. He selected Salvador Dali as an assistant due to the painter's architectural precision of artwork. Originally, Hitchcock wanted to shoot these scenes outdoors and under natural light, but financial difficulties made him do the shooting in the studio. "Spellbound" depicts catharsis as a cure of oppressed feelings and intensifying of emotional experiences, capable to eliminate the amnesia suffered by the lead character (Wedding et al. 2005).

With its narrative technique and semiotics, movie may be used as a medium to intertwine fantasy (imagination) and reality. The director may create a situation where the viewer is not capable of distinguishing what is really happening and what is the subconscious imagination of the characters. Examples of this technique include Bergman's "Persona" (1966), Fellini's "Juliet of the Spirit" (1965), Bunuel's "Belle de Jour" (1966) as well as Altman's "Images" (1972). This technique becomes almost a trade mark of director David Lynch, who used it widely when creating movies such as "Erase head" (1977), "Blue velvet" (1986), "Lost highway" (1997), Mulholland "Drive" (2001).

Mental processes, such as thoughts, memories, imagination and feelings are not visible, but film editing language and techniques of the camera, such as slow disappearance/fading of images may suggest these invisible processes. Furthermore, movie editing may be very persuasive and capable of forcing the viewer to think over psychological phenomena. Including images with symbolic meaning, such as the undertaker's car carrying a coffin or the famous chess play with death bet from Bergman's movie "Seventh Seal" (1957) may evoke certain sentiments or prepare the audience for happenings to come. Symbolic sounds, such as a baby crying, may have similar effect.

The next symbol, used very often in movies, is the mirror. When an actor or actress looks at himself/herself in the mirror, this usually represents self-reflection, self-revelation, soul searching, figuring out oneself, self-exploration journey, new identity to be born or changed or even narcissistic obsession with oneself. Monster's "Ball" (2001) uses mirrors and a sequence of reflective objects to symbolize self-distortion, self-consciousness and a negative perception of self in connection with two lead characters who are so

alienated, aloof and almost dead inside and caught up in the drudgery of everyday life. The image of the mirror describes the broken down and destroyed personality of Marlon Brando in "Last Tango in Paris" (1972), disrespect and disdain in "American Beauty" (2003), self-criticism in Soldier's "Girl" (2003), deterioration in "Focus" (2001) as well as externalization of shame and embarrassment in dramatic and comic scenes in 25 hour (2002).

Film provides an abundance of subconscious motivation and defense mechanisms, involuntary thought patterns, feelings and actions growing as a response to subjective experience of anxiety. For example, in the movie "Sex, Lies and Video Tapes" (1989) Cynthia, having an affair with the husband of her sister Ana, negligently loses a pearl earring after sexual intercourse at her sister's house. The earring is found and it forces Ana to cope with the fact her sister is having an adulterous affair with her husband. Acting out is presented in the movies such as "Intimacy" (2000), "You Can Count on Me" (2000), "Lantana" (2001), as well as Michael Douglas' response to stress in the striking movie depicting all the horrors of urban hell "Falling Down" (1993). Altruism is promoted in the movie "Patch Adams" (1998) and also in the portrait of the doctor dedicating himself to helping and healing poor and vulnerable, unprivileged people of India in the movie "Streets of Joy" (1994). Self denial is dramatically illustrated in the acting of Katherine Hepburn and Ellen Burstyn as drug addicts in movies "Long Day's Journey into the Night" (1962) and "Requiem for a Dream" (2000) as well as with most actors in the movies "Village" (2004) and "Dogville" (2003). Intellectualization is presented by the acting of Nick Nolte and Susan Sarandon in Lorenzo's "Oil" (1993), and suppression is evident in the movie "Kill Bill 2" (2004) as well as in the famous "Gone with the Wind" (1939).

## MISCONCEPTIONS AND STEREOTYPICAL THEMES IN MOVIES

Depicting mental illness and psychiatrists in movies is not a recent phenomenon. Hollywood has a long history of an "emotional" relationship with psychiatry. Since the first psychiatric movie "Dr. Dippy's Sanitarium" (1906), almost 500 movies have dealt with and addressed mental disorders.

**Table 1.** Psychological disorders and movies depicting that topic/theme

| Category | Classic movie example | Recent movie example |
|---|---|---|
| Child abuse, troubled childhood and adolescence – Mental disorders emerging in childhood and adolescence (while growing up) | Kids (1995) | Thirteen (2003) |
| Mental retardation | Sling Blade (1996) | My Name is Sam (2001) |
| Autism and pervasive development disorders | Rain Man (1988) | American Beauty (2003) |
| Neuro-psychological disorders | On Golden Pond (1981) | Memento (2000) |
| Drug additions, substance abuse | Lost Weekend (1945) | Love Lisa (2002) |
| Schizophrenia | Clean, Shaven (1994) | Beautiful Mind (2001) |
| Emotional disorders | Ordinary People (1980) | Hours (2001) |
| Anxiety disorder | Vertigo (1958) | Man matches (2003) |
| Somatoform disorders | Persona (1966) | Hollywood Ending (2002) |
| Dissociative disorders | Psycho (1960) | Identity (2003) |
| Sexually deviant behavior | Lolita (1962) | Secretary (2002) |
| Sexual identity crisis- uncertainty | Boys Don't Cry (1999) | Normality (2003) |
| Eating disorders | The Best Little Girl in the World (1982) | Center Stage (2000) |
| Sleeping disorders, insomnia | My Own Private Idaho (1991) | Insomnia (2002) |
| Impulse control disorder, poor anger management skills | Marnie (1957) | Owning Mahowny (2002) |
| Maladjustment, poor skills in adapting to surroundings and circumstances | Wrong Man (1957) | Best on the Job (2000) |
| Personality disorder | Fatal Attraction (1987) | One Hour Photo (2002) |

The most famous ones are "Psycho" (1960) and "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" (1975). Contemporary cinematography supplies numerous examples: "Shine" (1998), "Iris" (2000), "A Beautiful Mind" (2001) and similar. Many questions come to mind in regards to the above said. How are psychiatric patients described in these movies? Is the depiction truthful and does it corresponds to reality? Are movies helping patients to understand the essence of their illness? Unfortunately, cinematography is dominated by twisting and distortion of diagnostic categories and very often disorders are simplified. Furthermore the spot light belongs to so called „exotic", spectacular DSM-IV syndromes (APA 1994). Mainstream movies in particular, but not very authentically and truthfully, bring into the spotlight and pay particular attention to amnesia, dissociative identity disorder (multiple personality) and other dissociative reactions on the account of the melodramatic potential which these disorders have. What is actually the most frequent way in which mental disorders are described and presented? Otto Wahl, an authority on media psychology in his book Media Madness (1995) provides brief summary of the forms media uses to portray mental illness: "All things considers, mass media do a very poor job and generate harmful effects by distributing false information, along with spreading stigmatizing stereotypes referring to mentally ill persons. Psychiatric terms are often misquoted, misinterpreted and used in inadequate, arbitrary, colloquial and rather offensive manner." Hyler et al. (1995) described the six most frequent stereotypes perpetuating stigma suffered by psychiatric patients. The first stereotype refers to a psychiatric patient labelled as free spirited rebel. Example of that portrait is seen in the following movies: "Crazy" (1987), "Dream Team" (1989), "Shine" (1996), and "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" (1975). The stereotype of the blood thirsty maniac, natural born killer is most often seen in low budget horror movies. "Sling Blade" (1996), a movie about a mentally challenged person

committing a second murder upon release from Mental Health Institution after 25 years of confinement, having been locked up because he murdered his own mother, is perpetuating the myth about people who are mentally ill or retarded who represent a danger to society. The patient as seducer, adulterer, and flirt is seen in movies "The Caretakers" (1963) and "Dressed to Kill" (1980). The most potent example was seen in the movie "Lilith" (1964) where the rising star Warren Beatty, playing a hospital therapist, was seduced by a psychiatric patient played by Jean Seberg. The stereotype of the enlightened member of society is associated with the concept of "anti-psychiatrist" such as R.D. Leing and Thomas Szasz, illustrated in movies like "King of Heart" (1968) and "Fine Madness" (1966). The stereotype of the narcissistic parasite represents humans suffering from mental disorders, but being egocentric, demanding, preoccupied with a desire to be center of attention all the time. The paradigm for that personality type is shown in movies such as "Annie Hall" (1977), "High Anxiety" (1977), "What about Bob" (1991). Finally, the stereotype of a beastly character describes mentally ill persons degraded in the community, treated with scorn, despised, harassed and abused by other people with their pain becoming a source of entertainment for so called normal people. Films built on that stereotype are "Bedlam" (1948) and "Marat/Sade" (1966). A variation of that theme occurs in the movie made by Brian de Palma "Dressed to Kill" (1981) where a psychotic and homicidal psychiatrist murders a nurse in a surrealistic, amphitheater like setting with patients sitting in the audience and quietly and approvingly watching the monstrous act. Hyler (1988) describes three dominant themes in the movies which facilitate establishing stereotypes about the etiology of mental illness. The first is the assumption of a traumatic etiology. That theme justifies the belief that a particular traumatic event, most often happening in childhood, may have a profound effect upon later life, most frequently anticipating mental illness. Examples include the amnesia experience suffered by Dr. Edwardes (Gregory Peck), which is by all means related to the death of his brother during their childhood (presented by Hitchcock in dramatic and unforgettable flash back scene) in the movie "Spellbound" (1945) and dissociative identity disorder happening when the little girl was forced to kiss the corpse of her grandmother in the

catafalque in "Three Faces of Eve" (1957). Hiler's second theme refers to schizophrenic parents. This is the most widely spread myth, almost of dogma like magnitude, implying the parents (most often mother) are prime villains, responsible for serous mental disorders of the children. National Mental Illness Association in USA has worked very hard and with dedication to overcome and fight this afore mentioned misconception, which is not legitimate, but still very pervasive and present among the general public and deeply rooted in popular culture as well as in movie making. Examples include "Carrie"2 (1976), "Face to Face" (1976), "Sybil" (1980), "Agnes of God" (1985) and "Shine" (1995). The last myth discussed by Hiler is the myth about the harmless eccentric whose behavior is exaggeratedly considered mental illness and treated inadequately. This theme is the light motive in the movie "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" (1975). Randall McMurphy, the character played by Jack Nicholson, is charismatic, ornate, colorful and lively. The only suitable diagnosis for him would be antisocial behavior disorder. However, in the ossified, hardened, bureaucratic, repressed health care system practiced by the hospital, he is treated with electro-convulsive therapy and lobotomy, in the first place as a punishment for his maladaptive behavior. Psychiatric treatment as a form of controlling and oppressing society is the most common theme in works by Thomas Szasz (especially in his books Myth of Mental Illness and Psychiatric Slavery)

Likewise, specific medical diagnosis of mental disorder is often neglected (when describing real or imaginary personality). The most frequently used terms are „psychiatric patient", or „mentally ill person". It is not so rare to hear terms with extremely derogatory connotations – crazy, foolish, loony, freak, mindless, insane, mad, possessed, unstable, gone crazy, sick pervert, maniac, psycho, eccentric, etc. However, unusual, peculiar behavior is not always an indicator of mental disorder. Many reasons may trigger a person's beginning to act in an extremely bizarre manner (for example, hypoglycemia, intoxication by alcohol or drugs, pathological affect, etc.).

Fortunately, there are exceptions. Many lecturers use certain movies to illustrate specific psychiatric syndromes and disorders. Thus, for example there is an astonishing description of schizophrenia in the movie "Shine 2" (1996), of

obsessive compulsive disorder in "As Good as it Gets" (1997), of dementia in the movie "Iris" (2001), or lets say, affective disorder in the movie "The Life and Death of Van Gogh" (1989).

Regarding the ways psychiatrists are presented and portrayed in the movies, excluding „Hollywood golden era" from 1957 until 1963, when 22 movies were made presenting psychotherapists favorably, and a few manor exceptions during next period, it seems psychiatrists are not welcome in the film industry. Gabbard and Gabbard (1980), say that since the mid sixties Hollywood authors have made just three films sharing some positive attitude and warm feelings about psychiatrists, such as "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden" (1977), "Ordinary People" (1980) and "Good Will Hunting" (1997). Psychiatrists are presented and depicted in the movie industry in three prototypes: the evil psychiatrist, the sick psychiatrist and the funny psychiatrist. Even in the movie "As Good as it Gets" (1997) the psychiatrist is described as very correct, with professional attitude, but to a certain degree rigid, stuck up and not natural. We want to mention that it is the first move in the history of cinematography which dares to say that medications (anti-depressant Prozac$^®$) are helpful in the treatment of mental disorders.

It is particularly interesting how cinematography views healing and medical treatment of mentally ill people. No need to say again how influential the movie "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" was in shaping patients' attitude towards electroconvulsive therapy. The antidepressant Prozac® is a fairly interesting phenomenon – it is the only medication (in medicine in general) which has appeared on the cover pages of certain magazines, such as Newsweek, Time and New Yorker. Psychiatry and cinematography are linked inseparably not only with the view of creatively complementing each other, but also as an opportunity of mutual influences blending into didactical categories and professional driving forces, benefiting both the filmmakers' and the psychiatrists' professions.

## REFERENCES

1. Allen R & Nairn RG: Media depictions of mental illness: an analysis of the use of dangerousness. Aust N Z J Psychiatry 1997; 31:375-81.
2. American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 4th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994.
3. Cape G: Addiction, stigma and the movies. Acta Psych Scand 2003; 163-9.
4. Coyle J & MacWhammel D: The importance of 'morality' in the construction of suicide in Scottish newspapers. Sociol Health Illn 2002; 24:689–713.
5. Corrigan PW: The impact of stigma on severe mental illness. Cogn Behav Pract 1998; 5:201-22
6. Gabbard G & Gabbard K: From Psycho to Dressed to Kill: The Decline & Fall of the Psychiatrist in the Movies. Film/Psychology Review 1980; 4:157-62.
7. Hyler, S, Gabard O & Schneider I: Homicidal maniacs and narcissistic parasites: stigmatization of mentally ill persons in the movies. Hospital and Community Psychiatry 1991; 1044-48.
8. Hyler S: DSM-III at the cinema: Madness in the movies. Comprehensive Psychiatry 1988; 195-206.
9. Monahan J & Arnold J: Violence by Philo G. Mass Media Representations of Mental Health/Illness: Audience Reception Study Glasgow: Glasgow University Media Group, 1993.
10. Philo G: Mass Media Representations of Mental Health/Illness: Audience Reception Study Glasgow: Glasgow University Media Group, 1993.
11. Weeding D & Niemec R: The clinical use of films in psychotherapy. Journal of Clinical Psychology, 59, 2003; 207-15.
12. Wedding D, Boyd M & Niemec R: Movie and Mental Illness. Hogrefe, Huber Publishers, 2005.
13. Wahl O: Media madness. Public images of mental illness. New Brunsvick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995.

*Correspondence:*

*Aleksandar Damjanović, MD, PhD, Associate Professor of Psychiatry*
*Institute of Psychiatry, Clinical Center of Serbia*
*Pasterova 2, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia*
*E-mail: damal64@yahoo.com*