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**THE IMAGE OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN MAINSTREAM CINEMA**

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## Abstract

Mass media can be seen to bear an enormous responsibility for the presentation of negative stereotypes which continually affect those who struggle with mental illness. These negative stereotypes can profoundly stigmatise those suffering with psychiatric conditions by exhibiting inaccurate and misinformed portrayals of mental illness and how it is medically treated. As a consequence of poor research, the media has often presented incorrect and sometimes deeply offensive images of mental health disorders. Mass media, in particular film, can contribute to and even intensify the societal stigma already aligned with illnesses of the mind. Consequently, the seriousness of such conditions is not taken into account and an unsympathetic perspective towards mental illness is encouraged.

Characters with mental illness are often perceived as dangerous, deviant characters or alternately represented in a comical manner. Poor understanding of medical conditions often lead to an incorrect depiction of a mental health condition. For example, Schizophrenia is frequently misrepresented as multiple personality disorder; the disease is commonly portrayed in film inaccurately and therefore identifiable to audiences as a split personality disorder. Films such as *Me, Myself and Irene* (2000) show that the understanding of Schizophrenia has showed no improvement as time has passed.

The portrayal of how mental illness is medically treated by professionals in film is also an issue that raises some concern. The use of medication as a form of chemical restraint and the abuse of electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) as a form of patient management, along with authoritative medical practitioners provides a terrifying insight into Hollywood's idea of the treatment of psychiatric conditions. It is possible to assume that such frightening images may discourage people who actually suffer with various mental illnesses to actively seek

treatment, as “*patients themselves are likely to be part of the psychiatrically misinformed and inexperienced general public*” (Wahl, 1995).

It is difficult to understand how little progress there has been in the area of mental illness in film. Negative, prejudicial images continue to grace cinema screens. There are a number of factors which may encourage this: for example, the commercial nature of film, being that it is driven by the demand of viewers; film-makers etc. remain ill-informed as do their audience; the historical popularity of the ‘mad man’ in art, literature, TV and film and the attempts to differentiate ‘them’ from ‘us’ through abnormal appearances and behaviour. Another factor that may be slowly starting to change is the lack of response from the people who are affected by these images of mental illness, including sufferers and non-sufferers.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

It has been identified that consumers of mass media identify it as their source of knowledge regarding mental illness (Wahl, 1995). Inappropriate and inaccurate representations of mental illness are associated with the burden of social stigma suffered by individuals suffering with their mental health. It has been identified that such stigma contributes to denial of a mental illness, a sense of shame and failure to seek adequate medical assistance and treatment (Stuart, 2006). In fact such misrepresentation can actually compound and reinforce the alienation already suffered by the victims of mental disease.

The clarification of negative stereotypes in film encourages ostracism, harassment and increase the burden of secrecy resulting in a sense of isolation for individuals with mental illness (Cutcliffe, 2001).

Historically mental illness has proved commercially successful in the media resulting in the proliferation of the issue. Early films relating to mental illness have been referred to as “chase movies” involving a “lunatic on the loose”. In 1908 D.W. Griffith released his film *Where the Breakers Roar* involving a young woman who is threatened by an escaped mental patient closely followed in 1909 by *The Cord of Life* and *The Maniac Cook* following a similar narrative formula (Byrne, 1998). Robert Weine’s production of *The Cabinet of Dr Calagari* 1919 saw the introduction of the “subjective use” of the camera to express the emotions of the characters involved. The use of unusual camera angles and lighting are used as a vehicle to express the world as seen by a mental patient. Using the hallucinations of insane people, Weine created a sense of melodrama (Wahl, 1995). *Dr Calagari* is seen as a landmark in the representation of psychiatry in film (Wahl, 1995). Weine’s film reflects the primitive attitudes and understanding of mental illness and the fear due to ignorance and the perceived importance of incarceration of people with mental illness (Fleming & Manvell, 1985).

Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* produced in 1945 saw the introduction of surrealism, employing Salvador Dali, an artist associated with the surrealist movement in Paris, and Ben Hecht who was heavily involved in psychoanalysis. Hitchcock described how he "wanted to do something more sensible to turn out the first picture on psychoanalysis" (Fleming & Manvell, 1985). Using surrealist methods Hitchcock created dream sequences which differed greatly from traditional images.

Anatole Litvak's production *The Snake Pit* (1948) reflected the newly found concerns regarding the poor conditions of state institutions. Although the film exhibits dreadful overcrowding and the inadequate state of such institutions, there is also positive focus on psychoanalysis, electroconvulsive therapy among other medical treatments. *The Three Faces of Eve* produced in 1957 by Nunnally Johnson depicts the story of Eve White's who is described as having "one more personality than Jekyll and Hyde". The film promotes the use of psychoanalysis and its therapeutic affects as Eve's doctors attempt to normalise her different personalities with great success, the product of which reunites a cured Jane with her new man and daughter from her previous marriage (Donaldson, 2005).

A changing perspective regarding the authority of psychiatry and psychiatric institutions saw the development of the Anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960's and 1970's. Influenced by the movement, Milos Forman's production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) derived from Ken Kesey's novel of the same name, took a "deliberately accusing gaze at the abuses of psychiatry" (McDonald & Walter, 2009). The film represents concerns regarding the inadequacies of state institutions and the abuses of power which occurred in state facilities with exploitative use of E.C.T, medication and even psycho surgery as methods of behaviour management and misdiagnosing of patients with mental illness and psychological disorder (Claude & Jr.Smith, 1999). The representation of E.C.T is very concerning as

representations of such treatment have little in common with actual practices (McDonald & Walter, 2009).

Produced by Hitchcock in 1960 starring Anthony Perkin, *Psycho* presents a man who is tormented by his crime of matricide, committed as a young child. Norman Bates is traumatised into a psychosis and repeatedly commits his original crime. Driven by his Oedipal complex, Bates may be considered the original 'psycho-killer' which precipitated a plethora of 'psycho films' by conflating violence with mental illness (Byrne, 2009). The *Halloween* series in the 1970's and the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* series being prime examples, both of which produced a villain who suffer with a mental illness and have escaped from the insane asylums (Byrne, 1998). Unfortunately the perceived link between homicidal behaviour and mental illness remains a major concern (Livingston, 2004). Hitchcock labels Bates a schizophrenic, reinforcing the common misconception the schizophrenia is characterised by a multiple personality. Regrettably this common misconception remains an issue in modern day cinema.

A more recent inaccurate representation of schizophrenia is exemplified in the Farrelly brother's 2000 production, *Me, Myself and Irene*. Considered a "pedagogical low" in its representation of mental illness and in particular schizophrenia, the Jim Carrey film reinforces inaccurate stereotypes in order to provoke a comedic response (Livingston, 2004). Films such as *Me, Myself and Irene* perpetuate negative stereotypes which exist within the media and contribute to the stigma relating to mental illness (Livingston, 2004). The power of film as a visual medium could be used as a vehicle to dispel the stigma associated with mental illness, but in many cases still re-iterates it.

Films such as *Fight Club* (1999), *Donnie Darko* (2000) and *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) present more accurate depictions of schizophrenia. Avoiding the split personality cliché they involve

the grandiose delusions and paranoia accurately associated with the disease. Viewers engage emotionally and intellectually in the viewing of a film. As a powerful medium it should be used appropriately to dispel negative stereotype, as it has in other arenas..

Films relating to other minority groups for example those dealing with homosexuality, disability and race or ethnicity have seen a change in stereotypical representation yet mental illness remains under developed (Swaminath & Bhide, 2009). Unfavourable, inaccurate stereotypes of people with mental illness are used in media deliberately and exploitatively to gain attention and commercial interest (Wahl, 1995).

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Criticism**

The representation of mental illness in film has been examined extensively by many theorists. By examining theory spanning thirty years of cinema, numerous negative stereotypes are identifiable in cinema now as then. Unfortunately it would appear little progress has been made with regard to the stigmatisation of mental illness. Changing culture changes the perception of “madness”, but individuals with mental health issues are still marginalised. Other minority groups such as homosexuals, people with disabilities and people of different ethnicities have seen an improvement in the representations of their relative cultural groups by the media. Regrettably mental illness has not witnessed such a change in perception. The stigma relating to mental health issues discourages people suffering with mental illness from seeking medical assistance or even declaring their illness. The term stigma “is used to refer to any attribute that is deeply discrediting and incongruous with our perceptions with what a given type of individual should be” (Kennedy, 2013) . Images of individuals with mental illness are presented in film through numerous negative stereotypes which are deeply discrediting to both the individuals and their health issues. In cinema, mental illness may be treated in a comedic matter but more often than not mental illness is attributed to violence, dangerousness and criminality (Cutcliffe, 2001). Characters with mental health issues are often presented as “disenfranchised” with very poor social connections, no occupation, a history of criminality and a lack of social identity (Stuart, 2006). Distorted images of psychiatry, psychiatric institutions and medical treatment presented in film may encourage avoidance of required medical treatment. Inaccurate images of mental health conditions, exploitative health care professionals and abusive medical intervention do little to de-stigmatise the concept of mental illness.

Psychologist Michael Fleming and Film Historian Roger Manvell collaborated in 1985, in Boston University to produce *Images of Madness: The Portrayal of Insanity in the Feature*

*Film (1985)*. The authors explain how the perception of madness changes as culture changes but the fundamental ideas reoccur. Fleming and Manvell examine the concept of madness through a historical context. Perceptions of madness are identified as far back as prehistoric man who perceived madness as a form of “possession” (Fleming & Manvell, 1985). The bible describes madness, as a series of “trances, visions, convulsions, seizures, hallucinations, unusual and unspeakable acts” (Fleming & Manvell, 1985). Madness is identified in the Greek and Roman classical period and the renaissance which saw the introduction of the institution for the mad. Scientific advancements in the 1600 have attempted to give a “scientific explanation” for madness (Fleming & Manvell, 1985). In identifying the historical perception of madness Fleming and Manvell recognize that the concept of madness is influenced by society and culture at any given time. By investigating artistic images of mental illness, Fleming and Manvell believe its visual depiction to be “especially powerful” (Fleming & Manvell, 1985)

The authors identify artistic depictions of insanity in Durer’s demonic wood cuts and Munch’s painting, *The Scream* and how they convey the power of the image and its effect and interpretation by mass audiences. Images of madness were as powerful then as they are now. Imagistic representations have developed further and as an influential visual medium, “film has the greatest potential for exercising a profound impact on the widest audience possible”. (Fleming & Manvell, 1985)

In their book, the authors examine repetitive themes which occur in films involving madness. In their chapters such as ‘Society and Madness’, Fleming and Manvel examine the cultural changes which effect images of madness in society and in film. Films such as *The Snake Pit* and *One Flew Over The Cuckoos Nest* exhibit the changing societal dynamic of psychiatry and psychoanalysis in the 1940’s and 1950’s and the questioning of state institutions and their efficacy. The attention drawn to the inadequacies of state institutions, the requirement for

effective therapeutic treatment and the development of the anti-psychotic drugs in the late 1950's contributed to the anti psychiatry movement of the 1960's (Fleming & Manvell, 1985). By examining thematic tendencies in images of madness, Manvell and Fleming exhibit the changing perceptions of madness in culture and society and how it is reflected in film.

The interrelationship between film and culture is also significant in the image of psychiatry in film. Much like characters with mental health issues in film, psychiatry is dogged by negative stereotypes which effect reputation of the profession and those who access treatment. In their examination of images of psychiatry in film, Krin Gabbard and Glen O. Gabbard observe the representation of psychiatrists, psychiatric treatments such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT.) and medication and the exposure of psychiatric institutions in American cinema. According to these authors films have a tendency to "de-medicalize" psychiatry and put an emphasis on the "talking-cure" such as psychotherapy and little importance is given to alternative therapies such as pharmacological treatment and ECT. Instead medication is often administered ambivalently as a form of chemical restraint and ECT is used as a form of behaviour management (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987) . Furthermore psycho surgery such as the lobotomy is used as a permanent form of "castration" for individuals who cannot be managed through medication or ECT (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987). Films such as *The Snake Pit*, *Shock Corridor* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* present ECT as punishment which is prescribed in order to manage disorderly behaviour. The treatment is a traumatising experience for all characters who endure it. In *Cuckoo's Nest*, as Virginia, Johnny and McMurphy are forced to sit on a corridor awaiting their treatment not quite sure what to expect, they each encounter a recipient of the treatment who is unconscious and appears severely affected following their procedure. Characterised by dramatic "camera angles, orchestral crescendos" and severe spasms, the use of ECT treatment appears "grotesque". (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987)

Films like *The Snake Pit* and *The Three Faces of Eve* herald the use of psychotherapy and reinforce the ideology of the “cathartic-cure” which results in the a sudden recovery from a mental illness (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987). Although it encourages the “talking –cure” *The Snake Pit* acknowledges the use of psychotherapy in conjunction with other forms of therapy, the sudden recovery is more dramatic and is favourable for filmmakers as it creates a significant “climatic release”. (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987)

For Gabbard and Gabbard images of psychiatry and institutions reflect changing conventions in culture in society. The changing image of the psychiatric institution and treatment were sensationalised in film but also reflected emerging concerns in society regarding the inadequacy of state psychiatric facilities. *The Snake Pit* reflected public concern for the inadequacy of state institutions. The film produced at the same time as Albert Deusch's book ‘Shame on the State’, gives audiences an insight into the kind of institutions Deutsch was criticising in his book. *The Snake Pit* has been credited as catering to the public’s new found interest in the otherwise hidden institution. (Donaldson, 2005). Considered a “sub-genre of the prison-movie” the institution film sensationalised the repressive ‘prison-like’ institutions. (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987) *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, was also produced at a time when the perception of madness and its treatment was changing.

Criticism of the purpose of institutions had been called in to question by Erving Goffman in his book *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1961). Goffman considered that institutions were detrimental to the recovery of a mental illness, and were in fact more likely to cause further harm to patients. The perception of madness was criticised by Thomas Szasz in his book, *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct* .And Scottish psychiatrist R.D.Laing along

with many others including Ken Kesey, the writer of the original book developed the anti psychiatry movement which questioned the use of psychiatry as a tool the “repression of individual differences”. (Wahl, 1992)

Negative stereotypes of psychiatry, psychiatric institutions and treatments in cinema can be attributed to scepticism regarding the efficacy of the profession; psychiatry as presented in film may be considered an “accomplice of a culture that does not hesitate to use electroshock and lobotomy to punish its transgressors.” (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987)

In his book, *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness* (1995), Otto F. Wahl a Professor of Psychology examines the impact of mass media’s portrayal of mental illness. Wahl identifies numerous aspects of mass media coverage of mental illness and how this impacts on mental illness stigma. Through research Wahl has identified that large numbers of Americans have indicated that they have learned about mental illness through mass media. This is detrimental as the majority of mass media coverage regarding mental illness is misinformed, inaccurate and highly offensive. (Wahl, 1995)

Wahl heavily criticises the misuse of psychiatric terms and the use of slang in mass media which is disrespectful and also encourages further misinformation. Derogatory terms such as ‘crazy’, ‘sick’, ‘loons’, ‘whacko’ are used as tools of repression to describe those who may suffer with mental health issues (Wahl, 1995). They may also be used for comedic effects which have “undertones of disapproval and negative judgement of some sort” (Wahl, 1995). These inappropriate terms lessen the seriousness of a mental illness and convey less respect for the condition. Mental illness should be treated with the same seriousness as any other illness. Much like mental illness, mental health professionals undergo scrutiny and are often conveyed as corrupt or inept. The terms ‘shrink’ or ‘quack’ may be used to describe a

psychiatrist, may be considered deprecating and patronising the health profession and inspires less confidence in the efficacy of the psychiatry profession (Wahl, 1995).

The most common misconception mainstream cinema is the concept of schizophrenia, presented as a split personality disorder. Inaccurate information leads audiences to perceive symptoms relating to a split personality are attributed to schizophrenia. Film-makers are clearly unconcerned about the accuracy of their portrayal of this illness. Unfortunately distorted and inaccurate representations of illnesses such as Schizophrenia are interpreted by mass audiences, many of whom learn about mental illness through the cinema screen. (Wahl, 1995)

In his book *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness*, Otto Wahl examines the poor understanding and misinterpretation of Schizophrenia in films relating to mental health. Schizophrenia may be characterised by “delusions, hallucinations (usually auditory), disorganised speech, and grossly disorganised or catatonic behaviour” (Frances & Ross, 2002). Although the word schizophrenia literally mean ‘split-psyche’ it refers to the

“Fragmentation of the personality into many disorganised parts- not splitting into two or more relatively well organised alternative personalities”. (Wahl, 1995)

Continual portrayals of schizophrenia as a split personality disorder misinform audiences and may be distressing for individuals diagnosed with the disease as they are often part of the “psychiatrically misinformed” audience. (Wahl, 1995)

In his book Otto Wahl confronts the convention that characters with mental illness look or act differently to those who do not suffer with a mental illness. He draws attention to the casting for characters of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, according to Wahl a distinctive physical appearance was necessary for the patients in the film, it was considered that real patients

would be used for walk in parts but the crew felt that in patients were not distinctive enough to depict in patients in the film. Mass media attempt to differentiate people with mental illness “communicate that people with mental illness are different in many fundamental ways” (Wahl, 1995).

This perception of people with mental illness as being different increases stigma, creating a sense of shame for those who suffer with a mental illness. Such stigma discourages people from engaging in society for fear of acceptance and may therefore isolate people discouraging them from seeking appropriate medical assistance. (Wahl, 1995)

In his article *Depictions of Mental Illness in Children's Media* Otto Wahl discusses the impact of mass media on children's perceptions of mental illness. Wahl explains how negative attitudes towards mental health issues has established over a life span. In order to discourage negative stereotypes children's exposure through media must be addressed. (Wahl, 2003) During his examination of children's media the use of slang is also an issue. Derogatory terms were used instead of accurate medical or professional terms. The use of words such as 'crazy', 'psycho' and 'lunatic' were used in reference to people with mental health issues. Children's exposure to negative stereotypes encourages negative behaviour and reinforces stereotypes which exist in adult media. (Wahl, 2003)

For Wahl the reinforcement of negative stereotypes is detrimental to those suffering with a serious mental illness. The shameful stigma associated with such an illness may prevent individuals from seeking treatment and engaging with mental health services due to societal stigma.

Steven Hyler, Glen O.Gabbard and Irving Schneider collaborated on the article *Homicidal Maniacs and Narcissistic Parasites: Stigmatization of Mentally Ill Persons in the Movies*, which discusses the underestimated influences negative portrayals of mental illness have on

publics perceptions of conditions and how they are treated. The authors examine images of people who experience mental illness and how cinematic representations contribute to stigmatisation by reinforcing negative stereotypes. A number of common stereotypes are identified by the authors such as the 'rebellious free spirit', an example being R.P.McMurphy. His character cannot be contained in an institution resulting in him assisting a number of other patients to escape from the hospital, hijacking a bus and stealing a boat. Unfortunately for McMurphy his character is 'fixed' following his lobotomy which makes him a more suitable patient for the psychiatric institution (Hyler, et al., 1991). The authors identify the 'homicidal maniac' as a more deviant and violent image of those with mental illness, insinuating that there is a threat of dangerousness from those with mental illness. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* reflects the common misconception of schizophrenia as a split personality disorder and that one of the personalities is violent and dangerous. Other popular images of violent, homicidal maniacs include *Halloween's* Michael Myers, Jason who featured in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* and Freddy Kruger in *Nightmare on Elm Street*. All of which have a supposed "psychohistories" which give an explanation for their behaviour and a hidden depth to their character (Hyler, et al., 1991).

The 'female patient as seductress' or the 'nymphomaniac' is employed by Robert Rossen in *Lilith*, a story involving a young seductive female patient played by Jean Seberg, who pursues a trainee occupational therapist characterised by Warren Beatty. This destructive female character causes the suicide of a fellow inmate and the psychological demise of Beatty who approaches his supervisor and pleads 'help me!' following his seduction by Lilith (Hyler, et al., 1991).

Further stereotypes include the 'enlightened member of society', influenced by views expressed by theorists of the anti psychiatry movement, Thomas Szasz and R.D.Laing, suggest that individuals who are perceived as deviant are in fact rejecting the restrictive

constraints of society, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* character R.P. McMurphy may be considered such a character as he appears to identify and reject the controlling repressive nature of the institution and its employees such as Nurse Ratched (Hyler, et al., 1991).

Hyler et al also identify psychiatric patients as 'zoo specimens'. Characters are "dehumanized specimens for scientific observation". In *The Snake Pit*, Virginia Cunningham identifies the similarity between the hospitalised patients locked behind bars and caged animals in the zoo (Hyler, et al., 1991). The authors have identified a number of stereotypes and images which "insidiously work their way into the collective unconscious of society" and influence perceptions of individuals with mental illness.

More recently Consultant Psychiatrist and film studies lecturer Dr Peter Byrne has further examined the impact of negative stereotypes in cinema and how these images contribute to stigmatization of those who suffer with mental illness. As cited by Byrne "stigma is another term for prejudice based on negative stereotyping" (Corrigan & D.L.Penn, 1999). Byrne has scripted many reports documenting the incessant stereotypes presented through film which contribute to societal stigma for those who suffer with mental illness. In *Screening Madness: A century of negative stereotypes of mental illness* (2009) Byrne discusses the damaging stereotypes and myths continually portrayed on the cinema screen. He considers the stigma encouraged by negative imagery in film encourages the topic to be "drive underground" (Byrne, 2009). As a minority group people with mental illness are marginalized like many other minority groups. According to Byrne racial, homophobic stereotypes have been addressed in mainstream cinema and have been "watered down" (Byrne, 2009). Yet films involving negative portrayals of mental illness are as prolific as ever.

Byrne categorizes films into four distinct Stereotypes. The treatment of mental illness as comedic is often based on inaccurate information, therefore misinforming the audience. For

Byrne more recent films have “intensified the humour”. The Farrelly Brothers film, *Me, Myself and Irene* is the epitome of inaccuracy. The main character Charlie is diagnosed with ‘advance delusionary schizophrenia with narcissistic rage’ however the character displays a split personality disorder, which according to Byrne this a habitual misconception about schizophrenia. Much like Otto F Wahl, Peter Byrne asserts that these misrepresentations are responsible for the common misconception of schizophrenia as a split personality disorder. In her journal article *Dispelling Myths About Schizophrenia Using Film*, Patricia Owen cites the American Psychiatry Association 2000 in saying the “schizophrenia and split personality are neither etiologically nor diagnostically related”. Unfortunately, inaccurate portrayals of such an illness constantly mislead audiences into believing otherwise.

Further problems arise when portrayals of psychopathic, violent behaviour is attributed to schizophrenia. In the ‘psycho-killer’ film almost all villains are motivated by a mental illness. For example Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, Norman Bates behaviour is justified by a split personality disorder. The association between mental illness and violence remains a serious issue.

The ability to fake a mental illness has also been a common misconception in the treatment of mental illness in film spanning decades. *Shock Corridor* saw a journalist fake a mental illness in order to gain access to a mental institution and solve a murder case. Little progress would appear to have been made in relation to the faking and indulgent storyline with more recent releases such as *Primal Fear* (1996), a murderer fakes a personality disorder to avoid imprisonment for his crime. (Byrne, 2009)

The final category of stereotype is Pity. For Byrne the melodrama dwells on the tragic figure and compels the audience to feel sympathy for those with mental illness or who live in an institution. Films such as *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* depict frightening living conditions, abusive staff and terrifying treatment which strike fear in audiences and further

reinforces the stigma of mental illness, institutions and treatment. (Byrne, 2009) According to Byrne, the importance of audience awareness of their participation in stereotyping is detrimental to ending such stigmatisation (Byrne, 2003) .

Examination of the theory relating to mental illness in film it would appear that, cinema continues to cultivate negative images of individuals with mental health issues. Inaccurate portrayals of mental illness continue to misinform the viewing public and encourage stigmatism of those with mental health issues, therefore encouraging prejudice against them.

### **Chapter 3: Case Studies**

The idea of madness has historically been associated with psychiatric institutions. The growth of demand for institutions and the lack of development and financial investment has, in the past, led to ill treatment of patients with mental illness and issues such as over-crowding. Little attention was given to such organisation until the 1940's and 1950's when concerns were raised regarding the unsatisfactory conditions people were forced to live with. Anatole Litvak's production *The Snake Pit* (1948) was produced during a period when the efficacy of mental institutions was finally being called in to question. Influenced by Albert Deutsch's book *The Shame of the State*, Litvak's film highlights issues of over-crowding, inappropriate treatment of patients with mental illnesses and lack of training and empathy by those employed in such institutions.

A number of changes in psychiatry influenced a new found concern for institutionalisation of people with mental illness. The development and application of psychoanalysis to the rehabilitation of people within institutions, the concern regarding the implications of institutionalisation and the lack of therapeutic benefits for in patients and the development of anti-psychotics and the use of such medication in the management of mental illness all contributed to the changing perception of institutionalisation (Fleming & Manvell, 1985).

*The Snake Pit*, produced during a time of Technicolor productions, was purposefully shot in black and white as Litvak wished to reflect the colourless world of state institutions (Fleming & Manvell, 1985). The film follows Virginia Cunningham in her struggle with schizophrenia following a number of traumatic events which have occurred throughout her life, including the untimely death of her father, her complicated relationship with her mother and the death of her suitor. Virginia begins to struggle with what appears to be a multiple personality disorder, and is admitted to Juniper Hill for treatment. While an in-patient in the state

hospital, Virginia is treated by Dr Kik, who appears to be a dedicated physician, committed to the effective, effective treatment of mental illness. Reflective of the period of the film's production, Dr Kik promotes individualised care, and a belief in the power of psychoanalytical form of therapy. He treats Virginia with other more controversial therapies such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and hydrotherapy, in conjunction with psychotherapy in order to establish whether her treatment is working. Virginias ECT and hydrotherapy are not carried out in retribution as a result of bad behaviour, but in a controlled prescribed manner. However, Virginia does not feel this is the case as she questions one of the head nurses, Ms. Davis for taking part in her treatment:

*Virginia: Why do you hate me?*

The effectiveness of her treatment is constantly assessed by Kik and only carried out if it is necessary to do so.

The over-crowded conditions of institutions is addressed on a number of occasions throughout the film as patients sleep in congested dorm rooms and day rooms and crowded with people wandering dazed and confused, under stimulated and under treated.

As the women show signs of improvement they move up the numeric scale with the wards improving, the admittance of visitors and items of their own clothing returned to them. An apparent difference in the treatment if the patients and their state of mind is viable. Unfortunately for Virginia her condition regresses as she struggles to acclimatise to her new surroundings and also engages in a confrontation with the head Doctor, Dr. Curtis and Nurse Davis. As a result of these altercations Virginia is removed from ward 5 to ward 33 along with the most "primitive patients" (Fleming & Manvell, 1985). It is here the viewer is confronted with the devastating affects the institution has on patients and staff. Virginia is in

complete despair when she realises she has been thrown in to “the snake pit” and realises that she may never escape (Fleming & Manvell, 1985).

One of the final scenes in the film is extremely poignant. As the patients are encouraged to socialise with male patients from another section of the hospital a timid young lady, a friend of Virginias, gets up on stage to sing a song. The beautiful young lady does not speak throughout the entire film but climbs the stage to sing ‘Going Home’. Each individual is captivated by the emotion in the song and the atmosphere in the room in heavy hearted as though they come to the realisation that they may never go home.

*The Snake Pit* is extremely effective in reflecting the deplorable conditions within which patients were forced to live. Over-crowding, lack of stimulation or rehabilitation and inadequate training of staff led to further deterioration of patient’s mental health. Positive interventions were necessary to address the issues raised. In saying that, the film also highlighted the positive therapeutic effects of psychotherapy, ECT and other forms of treatment of mental illness, when administered correctly. Dr Kik is representative of a new breed of therapists which were determined to change the treatment of people with mental illness and state institutions. A more negative perception of institutionalisation is presented some 30 years later in *One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest* (1975).

Considered a reflection of the changing perception of psychiatry, the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* based on Ken Kesey’s book of the same name, was produced during a period coined the ‘Anti Psychiatry Movement’ which took place during the 1960’s and 70’s. Public consciousness was developing around the nature of psychiatric institutions and the institution of psychiatry. These changing attitudes were fuelled by a number of theorists dedicated to highlighting the issues which existed in psychiatry (Fleming & Manvell, 1985).

Michael Foucault discussed the nature of 'the asylum' as a form of institutional control in his book *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in an Age of Reason* (1964) (Donaldson, 2005). In his essay 'On the Characteristics of Total Institutions' (1961) Erving Goffman began to investigate large institutions such as the infamous St. Elizabeth's Hospital. He argued that the nature of these institutions were ineffective and in fact extremely harmful for inpatients (Donaldson, 2005). He pointed out that patients were forced to accept a role which is induced by the institutional setting (Fleming & Manvell, 1985).

In the same year Thomas Szasz published *The Myth of Mental Illness*, which examined the 'metaphorical' nature of mental illness. Szasz inferred that physicians had deflected their attention on disease and instead became focused on illness which causes disability and suffering:

“Such things as hysteria, hypochondrias, obsessive compulsive neurosis and depression were added to the category of illness. Then with increasing zeal, physicians and especially psychiatrists began to call “illness” (that is, of course “mental illness”) anything and everything in which they could detect a sign of malfunctioning, based on no matter what norm” (50) (Fleming & Manvell, 1985).

Psychiatrist R.D Laing discussed this labelling of illness as a form of social control in his book *The Politics of Experience and The Birds of Paradise* (1967) (Donaldson, 2005). For Laing, psychiatry is seen as a political profession which is used for repression of individuality (Fleming & Manvell, 1985). During this period, the authority of psychiatry was challenged, as is reflected in Milos Forman's 1975 production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) which was based on the Ken Kesey novel of the same name (Donaldson, 2005). In the film we witness the free-spirited R.P. McMurphy confined to a psychiatric unit, instead of serving time in prison for statutory rape. McMurphy is labelled by psychiatrists, assimilated

into the psychiatric unit, and much to his misfortune, falls victim to the repressive nature of the institution and its enforcers, in the shape of Nurse Ratched.

The opening scenes of Forman's film, a wide open range, with rolling hills and filled with a sense of freedom are in binary opposition to the restrained atmosphere within the walls of the psychiatric unit. Doors are locked, furniture bolted to the floor, bare walls and clothing restricted and plain. Any sense of freedom, comfort and individuality are but a distant memory. Many of the scenes in the film remain static contributing to the sense of confinement.

McMurphy is an out spoken character, belligerent and has no respect for authority. When interviewed by a psychiatrist on admission to the hospital McMurphy is asked:

*"Doctor: Do you think there is anything wrong with your mind?"*

To which he answers:

*"McMurphy: Not a god damn thing!"*

And although he has many convictions and a blatant lack of respect for the law it would appear that McMurphy does not have a mental illness, but rather a rebellious character. For McMurphy a trip to the "Looney bin" is a get out of jail free clause which he has chosen. McMurphy is retained in the psychiatric unit and brought to the wing in which he will stay.

On arrival to the psychiatric unit R.P. is confronted by the authoritarian Nurse Ratched. He immediately underestimates her authority and her penchant for cruelty. McMurphy constantly questions her authority, which inevitably results in his punishment. Operating from the microcosm of the nurses' station Nurse Ratched micro manages the daily activities of the men through music, group therapy and medication rounds (Rutten, et al., 2012). Constantly

reinforcing the importance of routine, she is manipulative and vindictive using ECT and psychosurgery as her arsenal.

Her powerful tactics of coercion undermine the patients as men and individuals. For example, R.P. questions the administration of medication, unsure of what they are for and why everyone must take them, he asks:

*McMurphy: What's with the horse pill?*

*Nurse: Its good for you.*

*Nurse Ratched: If he doesn't want to take it orally we can think of another way to give his meds, but he wouldn't like it much.*

This brief altercation results in R.P. taking his medication and taking a distinct disliking for Nurse Ratched.

R.P. struggles further with Nurse Ratchett's group therapy sessions, questioning their effectiveness and necessity. These sessions appear to do little more than infantilize the patients (Donaldson, 2005). During these sessions, McMurphy is disturbed to discover that a number of the patients residing in the unit are voluntary and can be discharged at any time. It is at this stage that the debilitating presence of Nurse Ratched becomes apparent.

The most notable patient affected by her presence is Billy Bibbit. Billy's "guilt ridden, psycho-sexual maladjustment" has been caused by the controlling presence of his mother, his problems are further exacerbated by the dominant presence of Nurse Ratchett (Claude & Jr. Smith, 1999).

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is clearly demonstrative of the punitive and controlling nature of the institutions. Representative of the abuses of psychiatry during this period of

change is the mistreatment of ECT as a form of behaviour management (McDonald & Walter, 2009). In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* ECT is administered benevolently in order to subdue R.P. and teach him a lesson for attempting to defy Nurse Ratched and her rules. Although the viewer is presented with a shocking scene of McMurphy thrashing violently during the treatment he appears unaffected by the treatment but further driven to challenge Ratched.

Much to his calamity, McMurphy underestimates Nurse Ratched's disposition for cruelty. Following his final furore involving hijacking the nurses' station and turning the entire unit into a fraternity party involving his fellow inpatients in the activities, R.P.'s final confrontation results in the castration of his character in the form of a lobotomy. Throughout the film viewers witness R.P. slowly assimilating into the routine of the ward, he even begins to wear the pyjama style uniform that other patients wear but it isn't until we witness his zombie like behaviour following his lobotomy that we see McMurphy truly assimilate into the oppressive, controlling environment of the psychiatric unit.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* highlights a number of binary oppositions which demarcate people with mental illness from "normal people". Oppositions such as individuals inside the institution versus those outside, nurse versus patient, nurses station versus the ward, Nurse Ratched versus McMurphy, power versus repression and most importantly sane versus mad (Rutten, et al., 2012). R.P. feels himself that the sane people are inside the institution hidden safely away from the insane people on the streets.

Criticism of the impact of institutionalisation is epitomised by the placement of a "normal individual" in a facility for treating mental illness who in turn becomes 'crazy' by the destructive nature of the facility and its staff. McMurphy may not have had a mental illness

upon entering the institution but he soon became the product of its repressive system (Anderson, 2003).

A more recent adaption of the institution film is *Girl Interrupted* (1999). Produced by James Mangold, the film relays the story of a young lady Susanna who is coerced by her family to commit herself to Claymore psychiatric hospital following a series of events including an affair with her English teacher, general promiscuity and an attempted suicide. Once admitted to the hospital Susanna befriends a number of the patients who have an array of psychiatric illnesses including pyromania, compulsive lying, eating disorders and sociopathy. The unit appears to be a much more comfortable and relaxed in comparison to the facilities McMurphy was forced to accept. With the staff on a more formal basis with the patients, and an African American head nurse who appears to genuinely care for her patients. The unit appear normal until the charismatic rebel Lisa returns to the ward having escaped. Labelled a 'sociopath', Lisa "represents the intrusion of the danger and menace often associated with mental illness into the relative calm, order and apparent 'normality' of ward life (Chouinard, 2009).

Although her behaviour is often unpredictable and violent, she wins the heart of the other patients. Susanna soon befriends Lisa and the two manage to escape Claymore. It is during their escape that Susanna realises Lisa's capacity for cruelty as she is involved in the suicide of a former in patient and has an indifferent attitude Daisy's death (Chouinard, 2009). It is through Lisa's indifference that Susanna is confronted by her "monstrous otherness lies in part in a capacity to distance the self emotionally from the horrific consequences of her acts" (Chouinard, 2009). By realising Lisa's mental illness Susanna questions the reality of her illness and begins to work towards her own release.

Gender roles have been identified as an important issue in *Girl Interrupted*. Most notably, gender construction draws attention to the “inappropriate and unfeminine ways of embodying” a woman with mental illness (Chouinard, 2009). Lisa’s aggressive, sadistic behaviour appears all the more monstrous because of her gender. Although the other women suffer with mental illness, Lisa appears to be the only one in need of hospitalisation.

Unlike *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the mental health professionals in *Girl Interrupted* appear to have the women’s health at heart. Valerie is a maternal figure for the women, nurturing them but remaining strict. The In house therapist, Dr Melvin, inspires little confidence in the women as he has a tendency to fall asleep during their sessions, he would appear to genuinely care about the women. Susanna appears shocked when she sees that he is visibly upset about the death of Daisy.

Although *Girl Interrupted* does not encourage negative images of mental institutions, it does reinforce the long standing stereotype the people who suffer with mental illness are dangerous, unpredictable and retain the power of manipulation which can influence suicide. The film indicates that individuals with mental illness require incarceration in order to spare the public the affliction of “being drawn into the destructive, monstrosly other ways of engaging with mad female self” (Chouinard, 2009).

According to Fleming and Manvell the concept of madness is influenced by society and culture at any given time, it may be seen as a vehicle for social change, as is evident in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) (Byrne, 2009; Fleming & Manvell, 1985). It is perceived that Hitchcock’s portrayal of a morally and sexually confused Norman Bates and his homicidal tendencies are linked to social concerns of political and sexual deviance emerging in America during the early Cold War (Genter, 2010). Bates presented the frightened American population with a warning about the “deviant behaviour lurking within each other” (Genter,

2010). At the time of *Psycho*'s production, America was experiencing which affected the core of societal structure, the family.

Rising inflation rates, high rates of male unemployment, lowering wages and the dislocations of war encouraged many women into the work force offering them an opportunity to partake in "union activities, political campaigns and other public organisations" in what was labelled the "womanisation of America" (Genter, 2010). As a result of the empowerment of middle class women it is felt that men has abdicated their position as patriarch of the home and the workplace and therefore altering the structure and relations within the family unit. Aware of the consciousness of society and the fear of consequences due to the collapse of traditional gender roles, Hitchcock utilised this changing dynamic in his film (Genter, 2010).

Hitchcock's casting of Anthony Perkins varies greatly in comparison to the image of Norman Bates presented in the original Robert Bloch novel of the same name. Bloch's characterisation of Bates is that of a "middle-aged man with obvious dysfunctions" whereas Hitchcock preyed on the fear and anxieties of society by casting Perkins who was a handsome, sympathetic character "a predatory yet innocuous figure", difficult to distinguish in the general public (Genter, 2010).

Normans behaviour draws attention to his fragility for example, his speech impediment, his obsessive compulsive behaviours including his need to change the bed linen in the empty cabins even when they have not been used and his scrupulous cleaning of the murder scene (Genter, 2010).

Alfred Hitchcock develops Bloch's character Marion Crane. By extending her story, audiences are reminded that there is a little deviance in us all. In the parlour scene, Hitchcock purposefully mirrors Marion and Norman representing varying extremes of neurotic behaviour with Bates behaviour being that of the extreme. Hitchcock forces the audience to

acknowledge they are also engaging in deviant behaviour as they engage voyeuristically with the film; they become “peeping Toms” (Genter, 2010). Bates confronts the audience further when he explains to Marion:

*Norman Bates: “We all go a little mad sometimes”*

He emphasises the fragility of all of mankind, as Norman is perceived as a man “who wouldn’t hurt a fly” but could repeatedly commit murder.

Bates insanity is associated with his involvement in the crime of matricide which according to the psychiatrist at the end of the film:

*Psychiatrist: “Matricide is probably the most unbearable crime of all- most unbearable for the son who commits it”*

Through the disembodied voice of Mrs Bates and its ability to impose its own law, Hitchcock demonstrates the consequences of a paternalistic mother, lack of an adequate paternal figure and confusing gender roles, “a political and sexual deviant , the psychopath was an emblem of this dysfunctional (and maternal ) order” (Genter, 2010). Norman draws a similarity between Marion and his Mother which results in her murder, Bates repeats his original crime of matricide.

*Psycho* emphasises a panic and concerns experienced by society caused by the shifting gender roles, Hitchcock evoked fear in his audiences by playing on their fears and anxieties of the destructive influences such changes resulting in neurotic, psychopathic men who were emasculated and confused by their possessive mothers (Genter, 2010).

Films featuring mental illness continue to reflect widespread cultural beliefs (Claude & Jr.Smith, 1999). Films depicting characters with mental illness often portray symptoms of

illness inaccurately and continually mitigate common stereotypes which perpetuate stigmatic images of characters with psychiatric disorders (Livingston, 2004).

The 'mad murderer' is a consistent stereotype in films involving mental illness (Wahl, 1995). In a more recent adaption of the psycho-killer film, *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) details the story of "the mad doctor of the mad" (Donaldson, 2005). Dr Hannibal Lector is an imprisoned psychiatrist who assists F.B.I. Clarice Starling in her search for a serial killer. Lector is representative of the "all-to-permeable boundaries dividing the normal and the abnormal, health and illness, the sane and the insane" as he has shifted from doctor to patient (Donaldson, 2005).

Lector is not only dangerous because of his physical power, but also through his manipulation of people through the art of conversation. *Silence of the Lambs* reinforces the mistrust of mental health professionals by displaying the thin line between sanity and madness.

Unfortunately little progress has been made regarding the distorted misrepresentation of schizophrenia which has been "particularly subject to movie-perpetuated stereotypes" (Owens, 2007). Public knowledge of schizophrenia is principally linked with media portrayals of the illness, which is predominantly inaccurate and offensive. Often portrayed as a split or multiple personality disorder schizophrenia is neither "etiologically or diagnostically related" (Owens, 2007). Misinformation is provided by mass media, in particular film regarding the cause of schizophrenia. Perceived to be triggered by a traumatic life event in the movies, the illness is in no way related to psychosocial events in reality. Also the common misconception that schizophrenia may be cured with the resolution of a traumatic event is also false and misleading (Owens, 2007). And probably the most damaging perception is the Medias link between schizophrenia and violent tendencies as this

contributes to the stigmatisation and discrimination of individuals who live with the illness (Levey & Howells, 1994).

A recent example of such misrepresentation of schizophrenia is characterised in the Farrelly Brothers film, *Me Myself and Irene*. The film depicts the nervous breakdown of Rhode Island state trooper Charlie Baileygates. Charlie suffers his breakdown due to a number of traumatic events which have occurred including his wife giving birth to another man's children and her then leaving with the father of their children, leaving Charlie a single parent and a shell of a man. Charlie lives a life of denial and commands little respect in his position of authority. A number of events occur, leading to the manifestation of a second personality named Hank.

Hank would appear to have a darker personality than Charlie. He demonstrates violence on a number of occasions, including forcing a child's head under water in the town fountain, displaying sexually inhibited behaviour by engaging with a breast feeding mother and defecating on his neighbour's lawn.

Charlie is sent to the 'head doctor' where he is diagnosed with "advanced delusionary schizophrenia with narcissistic rage" yet his symptoms are completely unrelated to schizophrenia. Instead the character displays a multiple personality disorder. The film perpetuates a number of stereotypes that do not only reflect cultural beliefs, they also influence them (Livingston, 2004). In mass media, schizophrenia is characterised by a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde impression and *Me Myself and Irene* is no different.

The film is a "fanciful departure from reality" which is convenient for the producers to provoke a sense of melodrama and comedy (Byrne, 2001). Through continual stereotyping and ridicule of Charlie, the film "represents a new low in laughing at people with mental illness" (Byrne, 2009). Mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and split personality disorder are considered an easy option for film makers as it offers up an excuse for bizarre symptoms,

such as Hanks hyper-sexuality and deviance and also gives an opportunity to develop a melodrama with a happy ending. As is the common misconception, Charlie is cured of his alter ego after he confronts him and pursues Irene who apologises in public for his behaviour and explains he is a “schizo” (Byrne, 2001). The cruelty of comedic representations of mental illness detracts from the seriousness of mental health conditions.

Cinematic representations continue to perpetuate negative, inaccurate stereotypes of mental illness thus encouraging societal stigma. Unfortunately such images which are considered abnormal attract huge attention and are exploited for their commercial value. Little progress would appear to have been made throughout the decades to improve the image of mental illness through film; people with mental illness continue to be marginalised through mass media.

#### **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

It could be argued that how the media represents any marginalised group in society is merely a reflection of how they really exist in society and the times in which they are made. But equally there is a contention that the media influences cultural thinking (Fleming & Manvell, 1985). It has a responsibility to be truthful but unfortunately it succumbs to the commercial. We have seen massive changes in how those previously marginalised in society are represented in the media. Protest groups, general education, political lobbyists etc have strived to improve depictions of people of different ethnicities, religious beliefs, sexual preferences and physical abilities (Wahl, 1995). However the representation of mental illness is still lacking. This may be due to the fact that those suffering with psychiatric conditions are still stigmatised in society in general; but this is re-enforced by the negative and ill-informed depictions that continue to grace our screens. Psychiatric conditions are incorrectly represented, most commonly Schizophrenia; there is no attempt to show the specifics of illnesses and how they differentiate patient to patient (Wahl, 1995). The person suffering with mental illness is regularly de-humanised as either a 'psycho-killer' or a 'schizo' jester. They are to be feared, they are distanced as the "other". Likewise the treatment of psychiatric conditions is in no way a mirror of the reality of today's treatments. Psychiatric hospitals are still depicted as grim 'Looney bins', often run by morally or politically corrupt doctors. There appears to be laziness especially on behalf of more mainstream elements of the media in researching and presenting the reality of mental illness.

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