

Chapter 1

Films and Psychopathology

If it can be written, or thought, it can be filmed.
Stanley Kubrick

For better or worse, movies and television contribute significantly to shaping the public's perception of the mentally ill and those who treat them.
Steven E. Hyler

Introduction

In all of human perceptual experience, nothing conveys information or evokes emotion quite as clearly as our visual sense. Filmmakers capture the richness of this visual sense, combine it with auditory stimuli, and create the ultimate waking dream experience: the movie. The viewer enters a trance, a state of absorption, concentration, and attention, engrossed by the story and the plight of the characters. When someone is watching a movie, an immediate bond is set up between the viewer and the film, and all the technical apparatus involved with the projection of the film becomes invisible as the images from the film pass into the viewer's consciousness. The viewer experiences a sort of dissociative state in which ordinary existence is temporarily suspended, serving as a "psychological clutch" (Butler & Paesh, 2004) in which the individual escapes from the stressors, conflicts, and worries of the day. This trance state is further enhanced in movie theaters where the viewer is fully enveloped in sight and sound, and in some instances experiences the sense of touch through vibration effects. No other art form pervades the consciousness of the individual to the same extent and with such power as cinema. Many consider movies to be the most influential form of mass communication (Cape, 2003).

Hollywood took the original invention of the cinematic camera and invented a new art form in which the viewer becomes enveloped in the work of art. The camera carries the viewer into each scene, and the viewer perceives events from the inside as if surrounded by the characters in the film. The actors do not have to describe their feelings, as in a play, because the viewer directly experiences what they see and feel.

In order to produce an emotional response to a film, the director carefully develops both plot and character through precise camera work. Editing creates a visual and acoustic **gestalt**, to which the viewer responds. The more effective the technique, the more involved the viewer. In effect, the director *constructs* the film's (and the viewer's) reality. The selection of locations, sets, actors, costumes, and lighting contributes to the film's organization and shot-by-shot **mise-en-scene** (the physical arrangement of the visual image).

The Pervasive Influence of Films

Film has become such an integral part of our culture that it seems to be the mirror in which we see ourselves reflected every day. Indeed, the social impact of film extends around the globe. The widespread popularity of online movies, DVDs by mail (e.g., Netflix), \$1 Redbox rentals at the street corner, the use of unlimited rentals for a monthly fee (e.g., Blockbuster), and in-home, cable features like On-Demand make hundreds of thousands of movies available and accessible to virtually anyone in the world (and certainly anyone who has Internet access). No longer are individuals limited solely to the film selection and discretion of the corner video store. People now have wide access to films beyond Hollywood, including access to films from independent filmmakers, even those from developing countries. Moreover, with the affordability of digital video, neophyte and/or low-budget filmmakers can now tell their stories within the constraints of a much more reasonable budget without sacrificing quality (Taylor & Hsu, 2003);

this increases the range of topics and themes that can be covered. Award-winning films such as *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), *The Celebration* (1998), and *The Fast Runner* (2001) were all shot on digital video.

We believe films have a greater influence than any other art form. Their influence is felt across age, gender, nationality, culture, and even across time. Films have become a pervasive and omnipresent part of our society, and yet people often have little conscious awareness of the profound influence the medium exerts.

Films are especially important in influencing the public perception of mental illness because many people are relatively uninformed about the problems of people with mental disorders, and the media tend to be especially effective in shaping opinion in those situations in which strong opinions are not already held. Although some films present sympathetic portrayals of people with mental illness and those professionals who work in the field of mental health (e.g., *The Three Faces of Eve*, *David and Lisa*, *Ordinary People*, and *A Beautiful Mind*), many more do not. Individuals with mental illness are often portrayed as aggressive, dangerous, and unpredictable; psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, and other health professionals who work with these patients are often portrayed as “arrogant and ineffectual,” “cold-hearted and authoritarian,” “passive and apathetic,” or “shrewd and manipulative” (Niemiec & Wedding, 2006; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003).

Films such as *Psycho* (1960) perpetuate the continuing confusion about the relationship between schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder (multiple personality disorder); *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) both perpetuate the misconception that people who leave psychiatric hospitals are violent and dangerous; movies such as *The Exorcist* (1973) suggest to the public that mental illness is the equivalent of possession by the devil; and movies such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975) make the case that psychiatric hospitals are simply prisons in which there is little or no regard for patient rights or welfare. These films in part account for the continuing stigma of mental illness.

Stigma is one of the reasons that so few people with mental problems actually receive help (Mann & Himelein, 2004). The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that only 20% of those with mental disorders actually reach out for help with their problems, despite the fact that many current treatments for these disorders are inexpensive and effective. In addition, there is still a strong

tendency to see patients with mental disorders as the cause of their own disorders – for example, the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) has polling data that indicate that about one in three U.S. citizens still conceptualizes mental illness in terms of evil and punishment for misbehavior.

Cinematic Elements

A film director must consider countless technical elements in the making of a film, often orchestrating hundreds of people, many of whom monitor and pass down orders to hundreds or thousands of other collaborators. There are three general phases involved in making a film.

The time spent prior to filming in the **pre-production phase** is often seen as the most important. Many directors “storyboard” (draw out) every shot and choreograph every movement for each scene to be filmed. Countless meetings with each technical supervisor (e.g., cinematographer, costume designer, set designer, electrician) are held to facilitate preparation, coordination and integration. The director will also scout out locations, work with casting appropriate actors and actresses for the various roles, and may re-work the screenplay.

In the **production phase**, the director attempts to film his or her vision, working closely with the actors and actresses to encourage, stimulate, guide, or alter their work, while carefully monitoring camera angles, lighting, sound, and other technical areas.

In the **post-production phase**, editing and laying out the musical score and background sounds are major areas of focus. The director integrates each of these elements while working to honor the original purpose, message, and underlying themes of the film.

Some of the most important cinematic elements are summarized with film examples in Table 1.1. Of course, these three phases exclude countless other tasks involving financing, budgeting, marketing, and other business, administrative, consulting, and legal aspects. A mental health consultant may be used with certain films and may play an important role in any phase, particularly involving fine tuning the screenplay and helping the director and actors understand psychological and related phenomena; we believe mental health consultants should be sought out for *every* film portraying a psychological condition or a therapeutic encounter. Unfortunately, such consultants are sorely underutilized in cinema.

Seventh Seal (1957), can evoke certain moods or prepare the viewer for events that are about to occur. Symbolic sounds, such as a baby crying, can have a similar effect.

Another symbol often used in film is the mirror. When a character is filmed looking in the mirror, it often represents self-reflection, insight, a new identity emerging or changing, or even a narcissistic preoccupation with oneself. *Monster's Ball* (2001) uses mirrors and other reflective objects to symbolize self-distortion and negative self-perception in the two lead characters who are numb to their own lives. Mirrored images depict Marlon Brando's broken and distorted character in *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), self-deprecation in *American Splendor* (2003), self-criticism in *Soldier's Girl* (2003), deterioration in *Focus* (2001), and externalization of blame in a dramatic, comical scene in *25th Hour* (2002).

"Beyond all physical and palpable reality another dimension defined only in painting, a mirror which deforms life... an instant reflected... a magical reality where all is possible."

Goya in Bordeaux (1999)

Films offer numerous examples of unconscious motivation and **defense mechanisms**, involuntary patterns of thinking, feeling, or acting that arise in response to the subjective experience of anxiety. **Acting out** in reaction to stress or inner conflict is present in *Intimacy* (2000), *You Can Count On Me* (2000), *Lantana* (2001), and in Michael Douglas' response to the stress in his life in *Falling Down* (1993). **Altruism** can be seen in *Patch Adams* (1998), and the character of the doctor who devotes himself to the indigent people of India in *Streets of Joy* (1994). **Denial** is dramatically illustrated in Katharine Hepburn and Ellen Burstyn's gripping roles as drug addicts in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1962) and *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), respectively, as well as most townspeople in both *The Village* (2004) and *Dogville* (2003). **Intellectualization** is present in *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992) and **suppression** is apparent in *The United States of Leland* (2003) as well as *Kill Bill, Vol. 2* (2004), and is commonplace in *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

"I'll think about it tomorrow. Tara! Home. I'll go home, and I'll think of some way to get him back! After all, tomorrow is another day!"

Gone with the Wind (1939)

The Depiction of Psychological Disorders in Films

This book organizes categories of psychological disorders with appropriate film examples. Table 1.2 presents an overview of well-recognized and accepted disorders and some of the best representations of them in cinema. Watching any of these films will provide the viewer with insights about the presentation of the particular disorder portrayed.

Psychopathology in Different Film Genres

The depiction of mental illness in films most commonly appears in three popular genres: the drama, the horror film, and the suspense film. Often the most effective portrayals of mental illness are those that infuse surreal and expressionistic images into a montage that is realistic and plausible, powerfully conveying the "interior" of a character's psyche.

The popular genre of **drama** is perhaps the most fertile ground for psychopathology to be portrayed in movies in a very realistic, engaging way. Every chapter in this book has numerous examples of dramatic films depicting psychological disorders. The range is vast and it extends from the slow-moving drama of *The Human Stain* (2003) and the disjointed, complex drama of *21 Grams* (2003) to the affectively engaging dramas of *Love Liza* (2002) and *Mystic River* (2003).

An early film that served as a prototype for **horror** films, Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), is highly expressionistic and established a precedent for setting macabre murders in mental institutions. Like dozens of films that followed, it linked insanity and the personal lives of psychiatrists and implied that mental health professionals are all "a little odd." Evidence of the enduring

Table 1.2. Psychological disorders and movies that portray them

Category	Classic Film Examples	Recent Film Examples
Disorders of Childhood and Adolescence	<i>Kids</i> (1995)	<i>The Chorus</i> (2004); <i>Thirteen</i> (2003)
Mental Retardation	<i>Sling Blade</i> (1996)	<i>Pauline and Paulette</i> (2000); <i>I Am Sam</i> (2001)
Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders	<i>David and Lisa</i> (1962); <i>Rain Man</i> (1988)	<i>Breaking and Entering</i> (2006); <i>American Splendor</i> (2003)
Neuropsychological Disorders	<i>On Golden Pond</i> (1981)	<i>Away From Her</i> (2006); <i>Memento</i> (2000)
Substance-Related Disorders	<i>The Lost Weekend</i> (1945)	<i>Half Nelson</i> (2006); <i>Love Liza</i> (2002)
Schizophrenia	<i>Clean, Shaven</i> (1994)	<i>Proof</i> (2005); <i>A Beautiful Mind</i> (2001)
Mood Disorders	<i>Ordinary People</i> (1980)	<i>Shopgirl</i> (2005); <i>The Hours</i> (2002)
Anxiety Disorders	<i>Vertigo</i> (1958)	<i>Batman Begins</i> (2005); <i>Matchstick Men</i> (2003)
Somatoform Disorders	<i>Persona</i> (1966)	<i>Therese</i> (2004); <i>Hollywood Ending</i> (2002)
Dissociative Disorders	<i>Psycho</i> (1960)	<i>Unknown White Male</i> (2005); <i>Identity</i> (2003)
Sexual Disorders	<i>Lolita</i> (1962)	<i>The Woodsman</i> (2004); <i>Secretary</i> (2002)
Gender Identity Disorders	<i>Boys Don't Cry</i> (1999)	<i>Transamerica</i> (2005); <i>Normal</i> (2003)
Eating Disorders	<i>The Best Little Girl in the World</i> (1982)	<i>Primo Amore</i> (2004); <i>Center Stage</i> (2000)
Sleep Disorders	<i>My Own Private Idaho</i> (1991)	<i>The Machinist</i> (2004); <i>Insomnia</i> (2002)
Impulse-Control Disorders	<i>Marnie</i> (1964)	<i>Klepto</i> (2003); <i>Owning Mahowny</i> (2002)
Adjustment Disorders	<i>The Wrong Man</i> (1957)	<i>The Upside of Anger</i> (2005); <i>Best in Show</i> (2000)
Personality Disorders	<i>Compulsion</i> (1959); <i>Fatal Attraction</i> (1987)	<i>Notes on a Scandal</i> (2006); <i>One Hour Photo</i> (2002)

effects of these themes is found in the successful and highly acclaimed film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), in which Anthony Hopkins plays a mentally deranged and cannibalistic psychiatrist. The various *Saw* (2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008) movies and *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003) portray psychopathic villains who are clearly out of touch with reality.

The seminal films of Alfred Hitchcock provide the best examples of the **suspense** genre. They are unique in the way they engage the viewer and pander to his or her anxieties in subtle, unrelenting, and convincing ways. The majority of Hitchcock's films, noted for their stylized realism, invariably evoke a sensation of vicariously pulling the viewer "in" to the plight of the characters as a not-so-innocent bystander, through a carefully edited montage

of a variety of objective and subjective camera shots. Hitchcock's filmography reflects not only a fascination with pronounced and extreme psychopathology (e.g., *Psycho*, 1960), but more importantly, an appreciation of more subtle psychological phenomena such as acting out, reaction formation, idealization, repression, and undoing. These defense mechanisms are depicted in Hitchcock's films *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Spellbound* (1945), and *Marnie* (1964). Hitchcock's style is immensely popular and has been imitated frequently by other directors such as Brian De Palma and Roman Polanski.

Mental illness is also depicted, although less often, in the genre of **documentary** films. Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967) and *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003) illustrate clear