

# **The Portrayal of Mental Illness in Film and its Application as a Learning Tool in Medical Education**

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**'If you really want to understand a man you have to slip into his shoes  
and walk around in them...'**





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An Introduction to Cardiothoracic Surgery

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## The Portrayal of Mental Illness in Film and its Application as a Learning Tool in Medical Education

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### Introduction

*'If you really want to understand a man you have to slip into his shoes and walk around in them...'*

Atticus Finch, To Kill a Mocking Bird



Figure 1: Medfest 2011 (with permission from Kamran Ahmed, Rory Conn, Peter Byrne)

Film offers an unrivalled medium for entertainment but also a unique interface for public education. Indeed public opinion is strongly influenced by vivid images in the form of documentaries and feature films<sup>1</sup>. Film can also, as alluded to in the epigraph of this article, provide viewers with an insight into the psyche of people with psychopathology so that we may *"Slip into their shoes and walk around in them"*. By virtue of cinema, we can learn more about what mental illness is like from the

inside and this in turn can help us to better understand what it is like to have a psychiatric disorder, be that the narrowing of repertoire in Autism as depicted by Dustin Hoffman in *Rainman* or Schneider's First Rank Symptoms of Schizophrenia as portrayed by Russel Crowe in *A Beautiful Mind*...

With the above in mind, it should come as no surprise that film is utilized in the field of medical education. Indeed, over the last three decades mental educationalists have attempted to use film as an educational tool for teaching medical students and psychiatry trainees for a number of mental health conditions and scenarios. This remit includes personality disorders, assessment of mental state, response of others to the mentally ill and the relationship between the therapist and the patient; especially on issues of transference and counter-transference<sup>2</sup>.

### The Role of Film as a Learning Tool in Medical Education

A key advantage of films as an approach in teaching mental illness is that their use does not involve encroaching on the confidentiality of a real patient. In addition the 'patient' can be seen interacting with others encompassing them thus giving a clearer understanding of the impact of the illness on others. Unlike clinical consultations in myopic settings focusing on symptoms and treatment which are time-limited, this gives a wider picture on the lives and interactions of people with mental illness with those around them<sup>2</sup>.



The use of cinema in postgraduate psychiatry training has been gaining increasing acceptability, but its potential for use in undergraduate psychiatry has received little attention in the literature hitherto. Special Study Modules (SSMs) in undergraduate medical education have developed in response to the General Medical Council's recommendations. St George's, University of London offers a 'Psychiatry and Film' SSM for medical students on the 5-year MBBS course<sup>3</sup>. A similar SSM is also run in King's College London (KCL). A paper by Datta reports on the rationale behind and medical students' responses to an SSM for third year medical students at KCL. In summary, the medical students in this study were very receptive to the use of film as an educational tool and were able to understand both the strengths and limitations. The participants found the module enjoyable, and subjectively rated their knowledge of psychiatric topics and the history of psychiatry as significantly improved<sup>4</sup>.

These findings do provide provisional support for the use of film as an educational tool in undergraduate psychiatry however more systematic research is needed to elucidate the potential role of cinema in undergraduate psychiatric education<sup>4</sup>.

#### Film as a Therapeutic Tool

In recent years in the United Kingdom film has been not only been used as an educational tool for medical students and psychiatry trainees but also as a therapeutic tool for service users. For example, researchers on marital strife have suggested that relationship therapists recommend service users to watch a film that specifically revolves around the theme of disharmony amongst partners. The couple is then invited to return for a further therapy session in order to have a detailed discussion about the film in a facilitated environment which may yield new insights and consequently ameliorate discord<sup>2</sup>.

An example of a film with a theme on marital disharmony is the 1994 motion picture *When a Man Loves a Woman* starring Andy Garcia and directed by Luis Mandoki. It tells the story of an airline pilot, Michael Green (Garcia), and his wife, Alice (Ryan), a school counselor, who ostensibly have a wonderful life living with their daughters in San Francisco, until the truth about Alice's alcohol dependence reveals itself and threatens to destroy everything. What is especially interesting about the film is that it is based on the real-life experiences of one of the two scriptwriters, Al Franken, who is now a United States Senator. Al Franken's wife struggled with alcohol dependency whilst their two children were young and this placed a tremendous strain on their marriage as well as on the upbringing of their children. *When a Man Loves a Woman* is especially valuable in its portrayal of the far-reaching effects that alcohol addiction can have on married couples and their children<sup>5</sup>.

#### Cinematherapy

The term *cinematherapy* has been coined and refers to using film as a therapeutic tool with service users to deal on issues such as relationship disharmony and identity crises. Recently, films have also been used for character building and as a means to make apparent the benefits of virtuous character traits<sup>6</sup>. Niemiec et al have used positive psychology models portrayed in film to illustrate and inculcate a number of strengths such as wisdom, knowledge, courage, humanity and justice. Such an approach also looks at matters such as love, kindness, citizenship, hope, humor and spirituality, which can also be developed using models from films. Although some of these models are fictional they can nonetheless still be utilized as the morals they convey can be explained, understood and applied in the real world<sup>2</sup>.

#### Film, Policy and Society

Policy makers are not oblivious to the influence that film has on the public and the ministry for health has utilized motion picture for promoting public health campaigns. Notwithstanding this, film has also had an influence on policy making. For example, the portrayal of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and the associated negative connotations were seen most powerfully in films such as *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which influenced public attitudes to the extent that there were changes in the law regarding the use of ECT in several countries leading to a reduction in the number of ECTs actually being given<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, the role of how substance abuse is portrayed, including nicotine and alcohol, has led to changes in consumption of these substances. In some countries governments have restricted the depiction of smoking in films and have also recommended that film actors reduce their smoking in public to protect impressionable members of society<sup>2</sup>. These are but some of the examples of the dynamic relationship between policy, society and film.

#### The 'Negatives' of Film

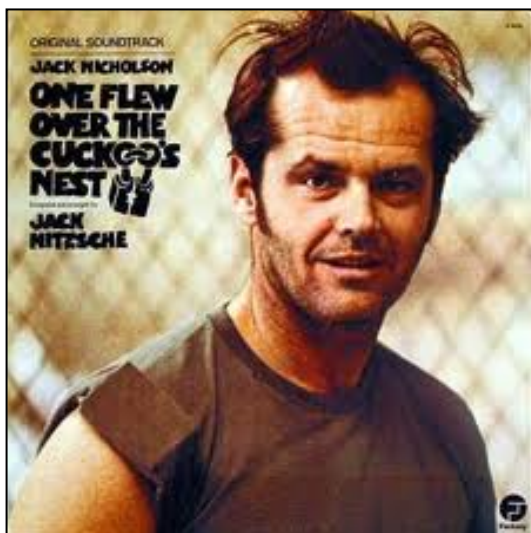
Regarding film and its application to medical pedagogy, this point is moot. It has been posited that in cinematherapy patients do not have the medical acumen and/or expertise to filter out the pseudo-psychiatry. This may lead to misinterpretation, which has been attributed to adverse consequences. In 1995, for example, Sarah Edmonson and Benjamin Darrus murdered two people and in a statement claimed that they were inspired by Oliver Stone's motion picture *Natural Born Killers*. The same film was also allegedly an influence for the perpetrators of the infamous Columbine school massacre, with the phrase "going NBK" in the journal entries of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold signaling the start of their killing spree that tragically ended 13 lives.

The above does illustrate that films may have a negative influence on its audience. Service providers must be aware of this; this awareness will allow them to guide the

cinematherapist to diligently identify suitable films, especially with more impressionable service users, and to explore the piece with enough detail with the patients so as to avoid misunderstanding and corruption of an effective form of therapy.

### **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: the Archetype of the Portrayal of Mental Illness in Film**

By the end of the 1950s psychiatry had reached the zenith of its prestige in the American imagination. Washington, D.C.'s St. Elizabeth's Hospital, with more than seven thousand patients became the bastion of segregating the mentally ill from the community for successful treatment. The 1948 adaptation of Mary Jane Ward's novel *The Snake Pit* depicted the psychiatrist as the savior of a woman suffering in a mental institution. Indeed, the portrayal of psychiatrists in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century film as knights of reason and order rescuing damsels in distress from the fire-breathing dragons of their minds was in vogue<sup>7</sup>.



**Figure 2: Jack Nickleson as Randle McMurphy in Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Google images)**

But by 1960, the dragons had become the psychiatrists and the institutions of psychiatric care themselves. Budapest-trained psychoanalyst Thomas Szasz, in *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1960) turned on his own training and called the idea of psychiatric illness "scientifically worthless and socially harmful." Michael Foucault's magnum opus *Madness and Civilization* (1961), provided a narrative on the inception of the asylum and contended that the modern concept of madness was a cultural invention of control; the mad who had once been an

accepted part of society and life's folly became seen as threats, separated into asylums, and silenced<sup>7</sup>.

Despite the prestige and influence of these seminal books in intellectual circles, none of them had the widespread impact of a novel that was begun in 1960 by a twenty-four-year-old writing student who was working the graveyard shift at a mental hospital and participating in government-sponsored drug experiments. Ken Kesey worked on the mental ward in the Menlo Park Veterans Hospital near Stanford University, and became sympathetic to the patients and began to question the boundaries that had been created between sane and insane. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey turned the mental ward into a symbol of the tricks afoot in postwar American society<sup>7</sup>.

### **Medfest: a Celebration of the Fruitful Collaboration between Film and Psychiatry**

(with permission from: Kamran Ahmed, Rory Conn, Peter Byrne).

MedFest was founded in 2011 as the UK's first ever Medical Film Festival and is run by a group of Trainee psychiatrists under the auspices of the Public Education Committee of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. The purpose of Medfest is to explore the relationship between medicine and cinema. Medfest 2011 explored 'The Image of Doctors in Film' and was warmly received at 9 Universities throughout the nation. The festival in 2012 was entitled 'HealthScreen: Understanding Illness through Film' and toured 16 universities throughout the United Kingdom. The aim of the 2012 festival was, 'To stimulate debate of the social, political and ethical implications of portrayals of health and illness on our screens'<sup>1</sup>. Indeed when viewed through a romantic or sensationalistic lens, the lack of veracity in the inaccurate portrayals of psychopathology in film can perpetuate myths, propagate falsehoods and promote stigma. But when correctly presented, films with a medical theme have the potential to inform the public, empower patient groups and dispel prejudice<sup>1</sup>.

An example of a film that accurately portrays mental illness would be the 2004 box office motion picture *The Aviator*, directed by Martin Scorsese with Leonardo DiCaprio playing the American billionaire magnate Howard Hughes. Scorsese actually consulted an expert in obsessive compulsive disorder, Dr Jeffrey M. Schwartz MD, an Associate Research Professor of Psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine and a medical advisor to the UK's national Obsessive Compulsive Disorder charity [OCD-UK](#), on every aspect of DiCaprio's portrayal throughout the filming. The painstaking work that went into this enterprise did not go unnoticed as *The Aviator* went on to garner 5 Academy Awards<sup>8</sup>.



**Figure 3: Medfest 2012 (with permission from Kamran Ahmed, Rory Conn, Peter Byrne)**

MedFest's panelists are selected from a broad range of backgrounds and include; doctors, filmmakers, medical ethicists, playwrights, social scientists and celebrities with an interest in medicine, particularly mental health. The audience MedFest primarily aims to gauge with is medical students, but a wide range of health professionals, as well as members of the public and indeed patients are also invited to attend the enlightening events<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, the heterogeneity of attendees in previous festivals is indicative of how broad and diverse Medfest's appeal is.

MedFest was the brainchild of Dr Kamran Ahmed who, amongst his other accomplishments, was the winner of the prestigious Morris Markowe award in Psychiatry for his essay 'Beards and Bow Ties'. Dr Ahmed sees strong parallels between his works as a psychiatrist and the art of film making and story-telling. As a movie buff, Kamran is fully aware of the impact that portrayals of doctors in

film and the media have on public perceptions. His short film (which was an adaptation of his award winning article accessible on YouTube) was, in the words of the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet*, "A charming animated short film... that sets out to dispel the many myths that apparently prevail about psychiatrists<sup>9</sup>."

The inauguration of Medfest is a celebration of the fruitful collaboration between doctors and film. Indeed, the Art of Medicine has a long history in film and was one of the first professions to make it onto the big screen at the inception of cinema which was towards the end of the 19th century. For better or for worse, it has survived the ravages of time and has been there ever since; but why this should be the case is the question that begs to be asked. Doctors will touch most people's lives in some way or another, yet they work in a realm that is for the most part obscure from the public's eye. Perhaps artistic representations of medicine allow people, to some extent at least, to get behind the scenes, while the definitive themes of medicine—namely life and death—provide scriptwriters with ample material to derive their inspiration from<sup>2</sup>.

### Conclusion

Our exposition has revealed that film can be used as an effective learning tool as well as a therapeutic one. Medical pedagogy can be replete with tedium however due to the entertaining nature of film this mode of percept has utility in the realm of medical education since it can appeal to students of knowledge. Moreover, festivals like Medfest offer an opportunity for people to augment their humanity by providing an insight into psychiatric illness through film and discursive debate by esteemed and eclectic panelists. Further research, however, in the field of film, mental health and medical education is recommended by the authors.

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