

Psychiatry and the media

The 'evil' psychiatrist and modern cinema

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Celluloid psychiatrists tend to fall into a limited number of stereotypes (Schneider, 1987). 'Dr Evil' is the unscrupulous psychiatrist who harms others, often his patients. Although common throughout cinema history, this stereotype appears to be becoming more extreme. Recent examples from mainstream cinema, many of which have been shown on British television, and possible clinical implications are discussed.

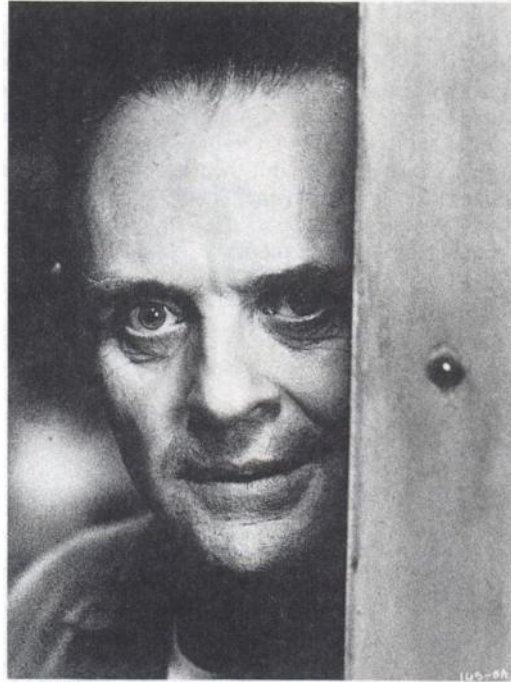
Different guises

Dr Evil appears in a wide variety of guises, the most dramatic is the homicidal psychiatrist. In *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919), the earliest example, a psychiatrist uses hypnosis to make a man commit murder but in a final twist the plot is revealed as the delusions of an asylum patient. Modern cinema is more blatant.

In the infamous *Dressed to Kill* (1980) Michael Caine is a psychotherapist who murders female patients who sexually arouse him. *Manhunter* (1986) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) both involve a psychiatrist (Dr Lecter) who is a serial killer who eats his victims' corpses. In *House of Games* (1987) a female psychotherapist, and author of a popular book on 'Compulsive Behaviour', is tricked out of a large sum of money by a con-man. Subsequently she kills him, purely for revenge. She shows no remorse; in the final scenes she happily autographs a copy of her book before stealing a cigarette lighter. Throughout the film the con-man is portrayed as having far more self-control and insight into human nature than the hypocritical doctor.

Dr Evil also appears as the psychiatrist who abuses his professional position for personal benefit. In *Dead of Winter* (1987) a psychiatrist attempts to extort money by blackmail. His scheming involves misusing confidential information revealed in psychotherapy, imprisoning the film's heroine by sedating and falsely admitting her, and amputating one of her fingers to make her resemble someone else. When his plans fail he becomes enraged, pours the contents of a goldfish bowl on the floor, stamps on the fish and tries to kill the heroine.

Dr Evil is at his mildest as the callous psychiatrist who lacks empathy. Examples include *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Birdy* (1985); in both, psychiatrists



Anthony Hopkins as the monstrous Dr Hannibal Lecter in 'The Silence of the Lambs'. Copyright Orion Pictures Corporation.

show a complete lack of understanding of the trauma suffered by Vietnam veterans.

The final manifestation of Dr Evil is the psychiatrist who is an agent of social control, using his power to stifle dissent and destroy individuality. The best known example is *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). Jack Nicholson plays a charismatic figure who shows no signs of mental illness, but receives ECT and a leucotomy for daring to challenge the status quo in a mental hospital.

'Inhumane' treatments and accomplices

An important element of the Dr Evil stereotype is the portrayal of physical treatments as coercive and inhumane. In contrast, cinema is more likely to show psychotherapy as a panacea for mental illness and associate it with an idealised psychiatrist (termed Dr

Wonderful by Schneider, 1987). Virtually every film that has depicted ECT or psychosurgery has done so in a destructive fashion (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987); recent examples include *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *Frances* (1982). Behavioural therapy is used to abolish 'antisocial' thoughts in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). In *Dead of Winter* (1987) distorted filming and sound convey a terrifying image of sedation. In *I'm Dancing As Fast As I Can* (1982) a psychiatrist turns his patient into a diazepam addict.

Children's films are not immune from references to ECT (Hodgkinson, 1986). In Walt Disney's *Return to Oz* (1985) Dorothy is taken to an 'asylum' by her aunt to get treatment to make her forget Oz. To a background of sinister music the doctor explains that 'electrical treatment' is needed. Dorothy is strapped to a trolley and wheeled to the ECT room. She escapes but is pursued by a nurse. When she enquires about screams she can hear she is told "they're patients who've been damaged, they're locked in the cellar". In *Oz* the doctor and nurse reappear as the evil king of the gnomes and the wicked witch.

Nurses often appear as accomplices of the villainous psychiatrist. In *Frances* (1982) nurses accept bribes to allow soldiers to rape a female patient, lie to patients about the medication they are being given and are seen spoiling for a fight. Not surprisingly, psychiatric hospitals appear as squalid prisons with locked doors, high walls and fences, while compulsory detention is seen as a punishment arbitrarily dealt out according to the psychiatrist's whim.

Clinical relevance

Unfavourable stereotyping is not unique to psychiatry, film has no obligation to mirror reality and within the Dr Evil stereotype there is some truth; psychiatry has had many scandals regarding patient care. No doubt on an individual basis callous psychiatrists also exist. However the fact remains that Dr Evil is a gross misrepresentation of the average psychiatrist.

Unfortunately this stereotype may prejudice public opinion, film being the closest contact many

will have with the profession. For example a survey of lay attitudes to ECT (O'Shea & McGennis, 1983) indicated public hostility to ECT and a tendency to accept adverse publicity without questioning it. In particular, the majority who had seen *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) reported being "put off ECT" by the film. At an unconscious level assimilated images from the Dr Evil genre may be detrimental to doctor-patient relationships; this may be particularly relevant within psychotherapy. At a more overt level, the content of psychopathology in the mentally ill may be influenced. For example, psychotic patients may be more likely to incorporate psychiatric staff into their persecutory delusions; the negative effects on treatment are obvious. It is ironic that in his film debut (*The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, 1919) Dr Evil was portrayed as part of the delusional system of an asylum patient.

Why has Dr Evil had such a successful screen career? Perhaps he reflects a deep-seated public unease about psychiatrists, in particular that they might have the disturbing ability 'to read minds and analyse behaviour and motives'. The 'eccentric quack' and Dr Wonderful, cinema's other psychiatrist stereotypes, could be regarded as alternative defences to cope with this disquieting thought; the former by ridicule, the latter by idealisation. As films are made primarily for profit, winning formulas tend to persist. For this reason alone Dr Evil is likely to remain a stock character for some time. On a constructive level, a knowledge of the stereotype may help psychiatrists understand some of the apprehensions patients and their families have about psychiatric care.

References

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The times

Re-launch of *Bekhterev Journal*

The *Bekhterev Journal* was founded in 1896 in St Petersburg by V. M. Bekhterev and, with two inter-

vals, existed until 1930. Its title was modified several times and in 1927 it was given the name of its founder.