

# Fall and rise of the movie 'psycho-killer'

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The Glasgow Media Group, through a combination of media watching and group interviews, has confirmed the importance of media representations of mental illness, with its finding that negative images can outweigh even an individual's direct experiences in this area (Philo, 1996). In one recent summary, Philo concludes: "the results show clearly that ill-informed beliefs on, for example, the association of schizophrenia with violence can be traced directly to media accounts" (Philo, 1997). The origins and strength of this association can be traced to cinema, where powerful images of violent 'insanity' endure today. In a questionnaire of 487 people who had a family member with severe mental illness, 85.6% identified "popular movies about mentally ill killers" as the largest single contributor to the stigma of that illness (Wahl & Harman, 1989).

## Early images of 'madness'

What began as a variation on the chase movie, the 'lunatic on the loose' formula found early popularity with cinema audiences. French filmmaker Georges Méliès' 1901 film *The Escapees from Cherenton* was one such film, distributed in the USA as *Off To Bloomingdale Asylum* and in the UK as *Off To Bedlam*. In D. W. Griffith's *Where The Breakers Roar* (1908), a young woman is threatened by brute force, knife and gun, by a man who has escaped from the 'lunatic asylum'. He is defined in terms of his dangerousness and his 'lunacy', as if one feeds into the other, and the film ends with his safe return to custody. Two of Griffith's films released in January 1909 support this association: *The Cord Of Life* shows a child being held out of a third floor window while the eponymous *Mantac Cook* puts a child into an oven.

## A brief respite

This demonic view of mental illness pertained at that time, but 1909 marked a distinct change in Griffith's approach to the subject of mental illness, with more sympathetic portrayals. Friedberg (1992) has suggested that this change was

due to the US National Committee for Mental Hygiene of 1909, which sought to change popular misconceptions of mental illness, but it is also worth noting that Freud's first lecture tour in the USA, at Clark University, Massachusetts, was in 1909.

From this time, 'violent lunacy' could be cured, as for example in Griffith's *The Restoration* (November 1909) where a jealous husband who has attacked a mistaken suitor to his wife, is *talked out of his 'insanity'* by a convivial doctor. From then on, bad guys were just bad guys. Images of lunatics running amok became less fashionable for the next decades, but did not disappear from movie houses.

## The return of the 'mad': fitting and splitting

Two screen actors who were best known for their bad guy roles helped to end this respite in two popular and important films of the 1940s. Edward G. Robinson as Captain Larsen in *Sea Wolf* (1941) suggested that mysterious headaches were the cause of his malevolent rages. In *White Heat* (1941), James Cagney also displayed symptoms of epilepsy as if to explain his motiveless violence. Cagney, who initially rejected the role of gangster Cody Jarrett as a reprise of a stereotype he was trying to avoid in his later career, admitted that he had brought much to the part:

I knew what deranged people sounded like, because, once as a youngster, I had visited Ward's Island, where a pal's uncle was in the hospital for the insane. My God, what an education that was! The shrieks, the screams, of those people under restraint. I remember those cries, saw how they fitted and I called on my memory to do as required (Cagney, quoted in Katz, 1979).

Another film image of 'insanity' was the disintegration of personality. *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957) depicted multiple personality disorder, but owed more to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* than to psychiatry. It presented mental illness as loss of control, with images of possession reminiscent of the witch trials of the Middle Ages. Although this film

inspired many imitators, its enduring legacy can be seen in 'Psycho' (1960). Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) is presented as a split personality, where the dominant dead mother's personality has taken over. Even the opening titles and the film's poster shows the word *psycho* fragmented into three pieces. His and his mother's mental illness are signposted throughout the film, as in the final exchange between resident Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) and Bates:

Bates: We all go a little mad sometimes. (He smiles)  
Haven't you?

Crane: Yes, sometimes just one time can be enough.

### Psycho-killer: Qu'est-ce c'est ca?

Alongside the *action adventure* genre of the video-store sits the psychological thriller, which has 'evolved' into the 'Psycho Film'. The key element of these films is the all powerful, all evil psycho-killer. The prototypes, Michael Myers of the *Halloween* series (6 films), Jason from *Friday the Thirteenth* (7 films) and Freddy from *Nightmare on Elm Street* (7 films), tend to pop up again and again, not just in the sequels, but after countless apparent on-screen deaths. He (rarely she) is an outsider who intrudes on a community or a family, examples of the latter being *The Stepfather* (1987) and *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle* (1992).

The film may begin with the psycho-killer's escape from prison and/or institution, as in *Halloween* (1978), although in *Psycho II* (1983), Bates is released by the psychiatrists who have 'cured' him. Often there has been a perceived wrong done to the person, who returns to the scene of that event and the initial killing(s) may have a revenge motive. The killing brings pleasure in its own right, and a pattern develops to taunt detection, a recent example being *Seven* (1996).

Given that these films contain a wealth of clichés, it is hardly surprising that a film has been released which deconstructs the genre. In *Scream* (1997), the characters watch, talk and then *live* these films. They identify the next victims (anyone who leaves a room saying "I'll be right back", or if female, after sexual intercourse) and discuss the motives of their heroes: "Did Hannibal Lecter have a *reason* for wanting to eat people?". At one point, the murderer enters the video violence debate: "movies don't make psychos. Movies make psychos more creative".

### Based on a true story – almost

In addition to gruesome special effects, these films use other gimmicks: audiences are instructed not to reveal the (surprise) ending, while

Hitchcock barred people from entering cinemas after *Psycho* had begun. Another device is tainting these films with *real life* crimes. The Jack the Ripper legend has led to many films, not least Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1927). Each of *M* (1931), *The Boston Strangler* (1968) and *10 Rillington Place* (1971) were written around specific criminal cases, and marketed as such.

Robert Bloch, writer of *Psycho* claimed to have based the story on Ed Gein. This case is also said to have 'inspired' *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), changing the killer's *modus operandi* (the title is a give-away) and increasing the number of murderers four-fold.

More often the films present a type of pseudo-science, obfuscating details behind the supernatural insight of criminologists. Capture of the killer in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) hangs on the fact that the killer is personally known to serial killer/psychiatrist Lecter (Anthony Hopkins). The film was an immense critical and commercial success, but the demonic cannibalistic psychotic Lecter would not have been out of place in a D. W. Griffiths one reeler. The 'knock on' effects of such films can be seen in a recent front page headline of an Irish national newspaper about the murders of two former psychiatric patients, which in the absence of any supporting evidence or even a suspect, declared: 'Psycho murderer a cannibal' (*The Examiner*, 24 March, 1997).

### What's in a name?

Many readers will find the frequent use of the word 'psycho' in this article offensive. This is however, the language of these films, with titles like *Paranoiac* (1963), *Strait-Jacket* (1964), *Estate of Insanity* (1970), *Asylum* (1972), *Deranged* (1974), *Schizo* (1976), *Delirium* (1977), *Maniac* (1980), *Madhouse* (1987) and *Schizoid* (1988). With such titles, it is hardly surprising that reviewers and critics pick up these labels and compound errors further. In his book *Movie Psychos and Madmen – Film Psychopaths from Jekyll and Hyde to Hannibal Lecter*, McCarthy (1993) uses the terms 'psychotic' and 'psychopathic' interchangeably, most often settling for the generic 'psycho'. This homogenisation of mental illness makes these stereotypes more difficult to challenge.

Although these films have been examined by psychiatrists infrequently, Hyler *et al* (1991) have defined these psychokillers as "homicidal maniacs", comprising one of six common stereotypes of mental illness. The prevalence and influence of these other cinematic images of psychiatric patients, along with suggested remedies are also presented (Hyler *et al*, 1991).

### Conclusions

Both studies cited in the introduction have identified these films as sources of misinformation about mental illness, causing actual distress to relatives of the mentally ill. The images reinforce the spurious association between all mental illness and violence. The stereotypes described are clearly ridiculous, but the films remain popular in cinemas and through repeated television screenings and video releases. Identifying them in a variety of popular cultures, across a number of media, is a useful first step in beginning the process of mounting an effective challenge to these misrepresentations.

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