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Note

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Images of Madness: Feature Films in Teaching Psychology

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An interdisciplinary course, Psychology and Film: Images of Madness, has been taught at Boston University since 1979 by two instructors: a psychologist and a film historian. This course may be pedagogically unique because of its use of feature films (90 to 110 min) as a major element of instruction. The films allow students to explore the interaction between art and psychology and make them cognizant of the cinema's ability to reflect and affect our perceptions of madness and treatment. A student survey and course evaluation substantiated the effectiveness of this instructional program.

Educational films of under 60 min are widely accepted and appreciated by psychology instructors and students. Feature films (90 to 110 min) have not been used as frequently as educational films, although some instructors have employed such films with apparent success. Kinney (1975) found that the full-length commercial film, *The Wild Child* (1970), was rated very favorably by students in comparison to educational films on developmental psychology. Dorris and Ducey (1978) and Nissim-Sabat (1979) related their successes in teaching psychology courses that use feature films as an integral part of the instruction.

Feature films, even from the pre-1920s silent days, are particularly suitable for handling intimate psychological subjects. These films can offer students a unique opportunity to see realistic manifestations of psychiatric disorders, apply models of psychopathology, and suggest modes of treatment. Through the subtleties of editing and the juxtaposition of sound and image, a good feature film can also afford students a "firsthand" perspective on madness that is not easily imparted by lectures or textbooks.

The value of feature films in psychology courses, however, does not end with their power to render a convincing depiction of madness. Such films can also make students aware of an important interaction between art and psychology. This interaction involves the cinema's ability to reflect and affect popular perceptions of madness and treatment. *One Flew*

Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975), for example, perpetuated certain stereotypes about mental illness but created a national furor over the use of electroconvulsive therapy. A brief historical overview of film portrayals of madness will reveal to students that these popular perceptions, like psychiatric nosology itself, have changed over time.

Since 1979, Michael Z. Fleming (the first author) has been co-teaching an interdisciplinary undergraduate course, *Psychology and Film: Images of Madness*, with a film historian at Boston University. The average enrollment of 80 students is drawn about equally from the College of Liberal Arts and the College of Communications. The psychology faculty liked the idea of an interdisciplinary course, but thought that it should not count as one of seven courses required for the psychology major.

The course uses a series of modern and classic feature films to introduce students to the interaction between psychiatric and cinematic disciplines. We attempted to document the students' understanding of this dialectic process.

Course Format

The course is taught in 15 class sessions that meet for 4 hr once a week. The two instructors lecture at the beginning of class, a film is then screened, and class discussion follows. Class discussion after the film takes the following form:

1. Initially, students are encouraged to talk about how the film affected them, focusing on their subjective, affective responses. The film's power to present wrenching emotional struggles needs first to be reacted to on a feeling level, and students are encouraged to voice their feelings without worrying about grounding them in logic.
2. The second phase of discussion is to take the students' stated feelings and connect them to the specific visual and auditory stimuli in the film that elicited such

feelings. Analysis concentrates on a careful process of consensual validation of what was actually shown as opposed to what we believe we saw (e.g., the specific images in the alcoholic hallucinosis in *The Lost Weekend*, 1948).

3. The final phase of discussion links the readings and lectures to the film. For example, readings and lecture material on posttraumatic stress disorder are linked to the major and seemingly minor stressors presented in *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and the characterological flaws of the three friends who go to war.

Much of the lecture material is centered on the various diagnostic categories from the American Psychiatric Association's *Mental Disorders: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (1st ed. [DSM], 1952) and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2nd ed. [DSM-II], 3rd ed. [DSM-III], and 3rd ed. rev. [DSM-III-R], 1968, 1980, and 1987, respectively). Handouts are given on specific diagnostic categories from the edition of the DSM in effect when the film was released. (The DSM is presented as the official scientific description of psychopathology of a period.) The presentation is supplemented by brief excerpts from the DSMs, which are distributed at the beginning of class and include a short summary statement of the psychopathological entity presented in the film. The lectures emphasize the "scientific views" of a period and the historical context in which psychopathology must be placed. The succinctness of the DSM is especially helpful for those who are not psychology majors.

The film's interaction with the psychiatric community is documented by discussions of period psychiatric literature. Student discussion is encouraged and, because of students' enthusiasm, frequently lasts beyond the scheduled end of class. A budget of \$1,500 covers the rental cost of the 12 films. Although there is a text for the course (Fleming & Manvell, 1985), students are expected to read outside sources on the topics discussed in class (see appendix). Grading is based on two 10-page papers and a midterm exam. Students are asked to choose from a series of paper topics on the cause-and-effect relation between a thematic motif in film and psychiatry. After selecting a topic, students are encouraged to meet with the instructor to formulate a specific question and to plan an appropriate method for investigating it. The instructor suggests pertinent references during these discussions.

Themes of Madness and Films Selected

The changing perceptions of madness are investigated by screening two feature films separated by at least 20 years. To be selected for the course, the film must have been popular and have generated literary criticism. Popularity is assessed by looking at the films' gross earnings published in *Variety* magazine. Films selected have also enjoyed coverage in the popular and academic press, and students are encouraged to use literary indexes to research this aspect.

The course has been offered 12 times; some of the film themes and representative films that have been incorporated are:

1. The family and madness: *Now, Voyager* (1942) and *Ordinary People* (1979).

2. Institutionalization of the mad: *The Snake Pit* (1948) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975).
3. Possession as madness: *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) and *The Exorcist* (1973).
4. Murder and madness: *White Heat* (1949) and *Halloween* (1976).
5. War and madness: *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978).
6. Drugs and madness: *The Lost Weekend* (1948) and *The Rose* (1979).
7. Paranoia and madness: *Rope* (1948) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978).
8. Sanity as madness, madness as sanity: *You Can't Take It With You* (1938) and *King of Hearts* (1966).
9. The psychiatrist and madness: *Spellbound* (1945) and *Face to Face* (1975).

The following analysis of *The Lost Weekend* is an example of the substantive issues that can be illustrated by film. When we present the film, we first set the historical context by describing the cinematic presentation of alcoholism before the release of *The Lost Weekend*. Previous film treatments lead into popular and clinical views of alcoholism and the evolution of these views as they affected and then came to be affected by *The Lost Weekend*. Students seldom appreciate the fact that Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a relatively recent movement which had to, and still has to, fight for the acceptance of alcoholism as a disease. The popular view that dominated the depiction of alcoholics in films up to 1945 was that of an anonymous, indigent derelict. The limited attention of the psychiatric community to alcoholism emphasized biological treatments with greatest interest given to the rest and isolation of such patients. Alcohol was ostensibly a weakness of the poor, and those who were not indigent and suffered from it were hurried away to sanitariums that treated those who needed a "rest."

Discussion of the film raises many points: (a) Students erroneously come to think of contemporary views as "enlightened" and as always existing or certainly existing since 1900. An exploration of the relatively recent advent of AA is, therefore, eye-opening and allows for discussion of the role of self-help groups in substance abuse. (b) The film serves as an introduction to the social and economic forces that influence diagnoses in terms of the perception that only the poor were alcoholics. (c) Biological psychiatry versus social psychiatry and the social political forces that influence the dominance of either a nature or nurture etiology are raised in discussion of the film. Students are encouraged to read the period professional and lay literature associated with the film. Although *The Lost Weekend* supports a social etiology for the protagonist's alcoholism, it avoids the issue of repressed homosexuality stressed in the popular book on which the screenplay is based. (d) The film graphically portrays both substance use disorders (maladaptive behavior that surrounds the taking of the drug) and substance-induced disorders as dramatically depicted in the formication hallucinations of delirium tremens.

Those who teach a course on film and mental illness have a number of formats from which to choose. Two of the most obvious are: (a) using specific films to portray particular abnormal states that reflect the DSM-III-R criteria, or (b) using film as both reflector and effector and doing so from a

historical perspective. Using both to some degree is also possible.

Changes in Students' Knowledge and Opinions

Students in a recent class completed a 10-item questionnaire that focused on knowledge of mental illness and depiction of illness in the cinema. Students rated each question on a scale ranging from *very little* (1) to *very much* (5). The questionnaire was distributed to 35 students (23 women, 12 men) on the last day of class. These students were representative of those who have taken the course over the years. There were an almost equal number of communications, psychology, and other liberal arts majors. Questions were designed to determine if students believed their knowledge increased as a result of the course.

When asked how much they knew about the study of people with mental illness and the depiction of the mentally ill in the film media, students responded strongly in the affirmative ($M_s = 3.8$ and 3.9 , respectively). Films were seen as providing very accurate depictions of posttraumatic stress syndromes ($M = 4.1$), substance abuse ($M = 4.0$), antisocial behaviors ($M = 3.9$), and depressive disorders ($M = 3.7$). However, less well reflected in film were eating ($M = 2.7$) and sexual ($M = 3.3$) disorders. When asked the extent to which film influences individuals' perceptions of the mentally ill, students believed that the perceptions of the general public ($M = 4.1$), family members ($M = 3.8$), and nonmental health professionals ($M = 3.6$) were shaped by such images. Psychiatrists ($M = 2.9$) and the respondents themselves ($M = 3.4$), however, were rated as being less influenced by film.

University course evaluation forms were completed by all students ($N = 35$). Students felt that: (a) there were many opportunities for questions and discussion ($M = 4.5$), (b) the amount of work for the course was moderate ($M = 3.3$), and (c) the assigned readings were clear ($M = 3.0$). Students considered the course germane to their education and careers ($M = 3.9$) and one they would definitely recommend to other students ($M = 4.5$). Overall, this course had a positive impact on the students. Not only was it effective in engaging the students in thought-provoking discussions and encounters, it was also a useful didactic vehicle for conveying a wide range of psychological information.

Conclusion

Courses like Psychology and Film: Images of Madness can help students who are going into mental health or communications fields to realize how each of their respective disciplines interacts with the other. Such courses can increase students' knowledge of psychopathology and their appreciation for how feature films influence our thinking about mental illness. From the students' perspective, the course provided information that they can take with them into their future careers in communication and psychology.

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Note

Requests for reprints and an extended bibliography should be sent to Michael Z. Fleming, Department of Psychology, Boston University, 64 Cummington Street, Boston, MA 02215.

Appendix: Selected Bibliography on Film and Madness

- A. General references
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