

The value and veracity of psychiatric themes depicted in modern cinema

Aparna Atluru, MD, and Damien M. Miran, MD

Perhaps more than any other medical specialty, psychiatry enjoys a longstanding and, at times, complicated relationship with cinema. Recent award-winning films, such as *Still Alice*, *Silver Linings Playbook*, and *Birdman: Or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* continue traditions rooted in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, *Spellbound*, and dozens of other films. Through these films, psychiatry is afforded exposure unavailable to most medical specialties. This exposure has proven to be a double-edged sword, however.

Exposure vs accurate portrayal

Relative benefits and disadvantages of psychiatry's position in film and popular media are difficult to calculate. A film such as *Still Alice* can provide a vivid, concrete personal narrative of a patient with Alzheimer's disease, equipping millions of viewers with knowledge that might otherwise remain esoteric and inaccessible. *Martha Marcy May Marlene* offers a similar stage for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as does *Spellbound* for dissociative amnesia.

Such exposure comes at a cost, inevitably, because information about psychiatry is incorporated into a dramatic storyline assembled by filmmakers who are not medical professionals and who are bound by conflicting pressures. At times, those pressures outweigh the desire to accurately portray psychiatric illness.

'Magical realism'

Two of last year's celebrated films, *Birdman* and *Still Alice*, have continued the longstanding tradition of portraying mental illness in film. Medicine often is touted as art and science; film likewise sits at this intersection. However, filmmakers are artists, primarily, and the nature of storytelling is to emphasize art over scientific accuracy.

The main character in *Birdman*, for example, manifests psychosis, but many of his presenting signs and symptoms are incongruent with any diagnosable form of psychosis. To tell its story, the film employs *magical realism*, a celebrated literary and film technique. Although magical realism might detract from the accuracy of the condition portrayed, it adds cinematic appeal to the film, likely creates more entertainment value, and, in turn, garners appreciation from a broader audience.

Expansion of medical information, accurate and otherwise

As in the 1970's, we are, today, in the midst of rapidly evolving societal norms. One of the most rapid changes is in how the public acquires information. We are in the midst



Aparna Atluru, MD
PGY-3
Department of Psychiatry
University of Texas Southwestern
Medical Center
Dallas, Texas



Damien M. Miran, MD
MS-4
University of Texas Southwestern
Medical Center
Dallas, Texas*

*At the time this article was written.

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Clinical Point

Films on the theme of psychiatry and mental illness have long held a distinctive position in the canon of Western cinema



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of the “Googlification” of medical knowledge and the expansion of online medical resources. These resources can, simultaneously, inform and mislead the public.

Popular films behave in much the same way. There is no motion picture-guild requirement that mentally ill characters in films such as *Birdman* meet any set of psychiatric criteria, from DSM-5 or elsewhere. Similarly, the fact that psychiatrists do not control the information in films that portray mental illness comes as no surprise.

‘One flew East, one flew West...’

The tension between engaging storytelling and medical accuracy certainly is not a new phenomenon, extending not only to representations of disease but to representations of treatment. Consider director Miloš Forman’s seminal 1975 film, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, whose chief importance for psychiatry rests not in its individualized representations of patients but in a portrayal of the environment in which they are treated. Louise Fletcher’s Academy Award-winning portrayal of cruel Nurse Ratched has lingered in the public consciousness, remaining a prominent image for many Americans when they think of a psychiatric institution.

When *Cuckoo’s Nest* was released, it was considered by critics to be an “exploration of society’s enforcement of conformism” that “almost willfully overlooked the realities of mental illness”¹ so that it could vivify its protagonist’s struggle against

tyrannical Nurse Ratched. The film’s primary intent might not have been to make a statement about the injustices of the time, but it has certainly had a lasting effect on the public’s perception of psychiatric illness and treatment.

Films offer an opportunity for discussion

Films on the theme of psychiatry and mental illness have long held a distinctive position in the canon of Western cinema. In this vein, films from the past year have made timely contributions to the genre. Although *Still Alice* and *Birdman* might prove to be ground-breaking in changing societal views over time, we must not *expect* them to do so.

Nevertheless, psychiatry ought to take advantage of popular films’ wide exposure and ability to destigmatize mental illness—rather than lament medical inaccuracies in these films.

Cinema is, first and foremost, an art. Although patients and the public might pick up misconceptions about psychosis, Alzheimer’s disease, or PTSD because popular films take artistic liberty about mental illness, psychiatrists are available to set the record straight. After all, psychiatry has long been about managing perceptions, and patient education is at the core of our specialty.

Reference

1. Ebert R. “One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest (review). <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-one-flew-over-the-cuckoos-nest-1975>. February 2, 2003. Accessed September 9, 2015.