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# Psychosis in Films: An Analysis of Stigma and the Portrayal in Feature Films

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**Psychosis in Films:**  
**An Analysis of Stigma and the Portrayal in Feature Films**

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## Abstract

Films have a major impact on popular beliefs in American society. The images and ideas in movies are absorbed without difficulties into the popular imagination. This effect can leave long-lasting impressions. Movies can inspire people to raise awareness of various issues such as mental illness but can lead to inaccurate assumptions and stigma. In this thesis, I write about the media and its portrayal mental illness and especially how mental illness can be cast in a negative light with little positive effects. I viewed films with depictions of mental illness and developed four categories for analysis: 1) “The thin line between genius and insanity”, 2) homicidal maniacs, 3) realistic but disturbing and 4) sympathetic but unrealistic. In addition, I included another category which contains mental illness in animated films. Media representations are often criticized for their unrealistic portrayal of psychiatric disorders, the negative stereotypical images they provide, and the myths they perpetuate about mental illness (Livingston 2004). The stigma that results prejudice fosters against people who are diagnosed with mental illness. The discontent brought in by the stigma has caused society to be prejudiced against people who are diagnosed with a mental illness. Other times, the portrayal is more positive. In this thesis, my goal is to focus on movie portrayals of characters intended to be with psychosis, to provide a more in-depth view about ways that the depictions are stigmatizing or positive and, in particular, to see how the movies reflect and reinforce social attitudes and stigma.

## Introduction

Popular films can influence sociological thinking by showing society how images can be manipulated to maintain or create stereotypes. The public often classifies only bizarre and/or threatening behavior as mental illness. The media continues to display a connection between violence and mental illness (Ritvo 2001). For instance, in *Terminator 2*, directed by James Cameron, the movie gives the audience inaccurate diagnostic information about schizoaffective disorder (“The usual indications,” says the doctor in charge, “depression, anxiety, violent acting out, delusions of persecutions”) and glimpses of hospital life that include gray-clothed patients being herded by burly attendants with billyclubs (Wahl 1995, pp. 9-10).

Films often use visual stereotypes, which reflect and reinforce popular attitudes. The cinema allows members of society to get an understanding of what influences community acceptance and rejection. Many people are aware of the effects that mental illness can have on a family, but the media often portrays mental illness in an offensive way. Wahl writes, “Stereotypes about violent behaviors by persons with mental illness abound, fueled by media portrayals” (Wahl 1995, p. 14).

Depictions of mental health are often negative, and this may result in increased stigma. In sociological analysis, a person diagnosed with a mental illness becomes “labeled”. Stigmatization therefore can result in fewer mentally ill people accessing services, and frequently leads to discrimination in employment, housing and virtually every other aspect of their lives (McKnight 2011). Films are an important way people get their understandings of mental illness and treatments. Moreover, recent investigations

suggest that, in deciding what is mental illness and what is not, "the public generally comes to quite different conclusions than psychiatrists would" (Manis 1965, p. 49). Some films portray mental health in such a way as to increase the awareness of its audiences, for example *A Beautiful Mind*, and *The Soloist*. These movies represent that there is a thin between insanity and genius. Some seem more negative, like *Psycho* and *American Psycho*, where the films seem to portray mental illness as dangerous, using stereotypes. Others are more complicated, like *Clean, Shave* and *Benny and Joon*, which portray sympathetic roles.

In today's society, many people are not aware of the symptoms of any type of mental illness, especially psychosis. Criminal behavior and mental illness are too often confused (by the public and by attorneys), further stigmatizing those who suffer with mental illness (Ritvo 2001). "In films, the general public is learning that people with mental illnesses need forceful control, that communities seek to punish those with mental illnesses, and that people with mental illnesses are best treated like children" (Wahl 1995, p. 10). Earlier movies that were displayed to the audience provided an image to the public to believe that any violent actions caused by a person are linked to mental illness, like psychosis. In addition, many filmmakers and viewers get confused when schizophrenia and split personality are intertwined. Those in mental health fields see the stigmatization of mental illness as the reason that many people do not seek professional help (Valtz 1996).

In this thesis, I analyze films that have characters with depictions of mental illness. The characters are analyzed to determine if the movie is being sympathetic or stigmatizing. As Wahl writes, out of all representation of disability in movies, mental

illness has been the most commonly depicted disability in feature films (Wahl 1995, p. 9). Wahl continues, “A common complaint of mental health advocates about mass media is that psychiatric labels are often used incorrectly and serve to misinform and confuse viewers and reads” (Wahl, p. 14). I want to show the audience that films have easily influenced society about the stereotypes that these films have developed with the use of mental illness’ descriptions. By analyzing several films including *A Beautiful Mind* and *Psycho*, I have developed several categories such as “the thin line between genius and insanity”, homicidal maniacs, realistic but disturbing and sympathetic but unrealistic, as way to give a better understanding to the audience. In the end, I give several ideas that can help the audience get a better understanding about mental illness and ways to educate them.

Psychosis is a severe mental disorder that is characterized as a “thought disorder”, which is followed by delusions, hallucinations, and disorganized thoughts. It is estimated that 1 percent of the world's population has psychosis. While there is evidence that genetic factors have a role in developing psychosis, other unknown causes may play a significant part as well. Mental health officials diagnose patients with psychosis disorder by describing their experiences and observing their behaviors. In addition, there is no cure for it. However, medications can help over time. Not only is it devastating for the person affected by psychosis but also it can affect the entire family. As the illness continues, psychotic symptoms develop such as bizarre behavior, delusions and disorganized thinking.

Psychosis has numerous consequences: morbidity (people being sick), mortality (dying earlier, including from suicide), effects on employment, and family life. Mental



illness such as psychosis can affect many lives including the individual involved and their families. People diagnosed with psychosis have a difficult time trying to live a normal life. Many patients have difficulties in adjusting to their new life with living being diagnosed with psychosis. Some of them might not tell anyone about their problems due to the stigma, while others might tell their families when in need of their support. Nevertheless, the people who seek help in treatment will more likely get a job, continue with school and pursue other opportunities if medications and therapy are effective. However, patients who are schizophrenic without any treatment might end up being placed in residential hospital, shelters or living in the streets among with other homeless people. Overall, help is available for people that deal with psychosis but it is voluntary for them.

Antipsychotic medications are used to treat schizophrenics, since being discovered in 1950s and introduced clinically in the 1970s. Over time, medications have helped dramatically improved the functioning of people dealing with psychosis. Common medications used for psychosis include, but are not limited to Olanzapine (Zyprexa) and Risperidone (Risperidal). Various other antipsychotic medications are used depending on the patient and his or her response and/or side effects. In cases of acute psychosis, individuals might face hospitalization, day treatment centers or intensive outpatient treatment to regain their lives. Compliance with medications is always the main focus in assisting an individual with psychosis. In addition, supportive counseling or psychotherapy may help to improve their daily lifestyle. Lastly, some patients might be in denial of their diagnosis, it is often necessary for friends or relatives to make certain that proper treatment is required.

## Literature Review

Over the course of the past 25 years, mental health issues have become more prominent and more connected to physical health care. Most professionals recognize that it is inappropriate to institutionalize people with mental illness for major segments of their lives, depriving them of normal experiences (Mowbray 2002). Mowbray adds that the introduction of antipsychotic medications provided a sense of optimism to the public about the care of patients. Since 1980s, many health officials have become involved with mental illness. As more studies have shown, they have been finding better ways in to lower the stigma of mental illness that has been enhanced by the media. *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* marked a turning point in mental illness and films. Before it appeared in 1975, few would have believed that film sympathetic to the mentally ill could win all five of the Academy's top awards (Cox 2010). Lately, more films and televisions have been more sympathetic portrayals prior to earlier years since the film, *Psycho*. For example, documentaries have been a big influence in trying to eliminate the stigma of mental illness. In addition, television shows has been displaying more episodes related to mental illness that are sponsored by NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness).

Psychosis is a mental health disease that involves delusions, hallucinations and other psychotic symptoms. Psychosis is a loss of contact with reality that usually includes false beliefs or delusions, and seeing or hearing things that are not there (James 2010). Most individuals diagnosed with psychosis need to be treated to live a “normal” lifestyle. To define a normal is living with paranoid and continue doing activities of daily living. Though people are in need of treatment, many of them are scared away from the

misconceptions that has developed among several of networks that psychosis is a disease that causes the affected individuals to become violent and dangerous. As researchers and many health professionals have shown, this theory is wrong and people with mental illness are more likely to be the victims than perpetrators. But the negative stigma is still continuing. For example, many horror films involving serial killers are associated with the following terms: “insane”, “psychotic”, “crazy” and other negative terms. Negative images of people with mental illness (PWMI) in visual media such as television and film are ubiquitous (Wahl 1995), and the popularity of “mental patient and asylum” films has been explored. Most disturbing is the linking of mental illness with homicidal behavior, a myth that appears frequently in horror films (Hylar, Gabbard, and Schneider 1991) and the plethora of films about serial killers (Livingston 2004). These lead the public to believe that these are true or factual or accurate perceptions of mental illness. An individual that hears another person being described as psychotic will ultimately associate the individual as being a killer, which is far from the truth, according to American Psychiatric Association (Goldman 1984). In reality, said Wahl, mental illness is a poor predictor of violence, ranking well after these factors: youth, male gender, history of violence, or poverty. Aside from people who abuse substances, people with mental illness commit violent acts at the same rate as non-patients, and 80 percent to 90 percent of people with mental illness never commit violent acts (Levin 2001)

Many of the films that emphasis the stigma gives wrong diagnosis and/or symptoms. The portrayal of mental illness in films can be viewed as negative for a variety of reasons: stigma, lack of knowledge, and understanding with a focus on entertaining rather than on educating. Filmmakers are showcasing these issues without

any knowledge that it is can be promoting negativity. The more negativity that is promoted throughout these films, the harder is to dismiss the stigma that has been created. The media easily influences or is manipulative of the public on their views of certain situations. Movies that deal with the mentally ill are easily teaching the audience about the issues without any accuracy. As Cox illustrates in his article, research has been conducted to show that people have a difficult time telling the difference between fiction and fact: the public will believe that symptoms showcasing in the movies are what it is seen in reality. As Levin illustrates, “Since so many Americans obtain their view of the world through movies, television, and the news media, however, the perpetuation of this and other exaggerated stereotypes of mentally ill people reinforces culture wide stigmatization” (Levin 2001). The stereotype that is associated with mental illness because a part of an individual’s subconscious after being constantly exposed to the same stereotype.

Films that portray an accurate story of psychosis can help to ease the stigma and create a tool for other viewers to see that psychosis does not equal violence. As Jason Rosenstock, MD, writes in *Beyond A Beautiful Mind*, “Film can be especially helpful in teaching about psychosis because it exposes a variety of audience types and sizes to the relatively unfamiliar phenomenology of psychosis” (Rosenstock 2003, p.117). *A Beautiful Mind* sets the theme that there is a thin line between insanity and genius. The film is a story about John Nash, a brilliant mathematician, begins to believe that he is being followed by a government agency (Rosenstock 2003). Rosenstock reports that film tries to connect with the audience that a person with psychosis can be a person that

intellectually gifted and still hope for recovery. In other words, the film offers hope and reduce stigma.

In this thesis, using various different roles played by different actors, observations are made on the depictions of each character with the role of psychosis. For example, earlier films displayed schizophrenic patients being homicidal maniacs (such as *Psycho*) compared to more modern representations, like *The Soloist* which shows more accurate portrayal of psychosis where the main character, Jamie Foxx plays a paranoid character with untreated illness. Films can be powerful and useful when teaching other people the effects that a person with psychosis can have on themselves and their families. As Rosenstock writes, “The film’s depiction (*A Beautiful Mind*) of psychosis has inspired countless patients and their families, and psychiatric educators have already begun using it as a tool for instructing a wide variety of trainees” (Rosenstock 2003, p.118). In addition, Rosenstock provides excerpts from *The Fisher King*, which shows visual hallucinations and delusions, might ideal for an audience of high school students who know little about the illness (Rosenstock 2003, p. 120). However, documentaries can provide accurate details to the audience because of its authenticity that many documentaries have established already. Many viewers are turned off by documentaries because it might be too “boring” for a regular audience. At times, documentaries can lead increases fear and prejudice against psychiatric patients, which have developed a double standard.

Since the introduction of medications, many health officials have been keeping track to find a cure or help people with mental health diseases such as psychosis. The basis of this report is to try establishing a way to get the message across that mental

illness is a serious issue. In the past, many people felt that mental illness is for weak people who cannot be strong enough to handle everyday duties. Others felt that people diagnosed with mental illness are just “crazy”. Nevertheless, many people believe that psychosis is a split personality disease, which is incorrect.

Highly praised films, such as *The Beautiful Mind* and *The Soloist* based on two real-life characters that were schizophrenic gave a somewhat accurate portrayal of psychosis. These characters demonstrate that they were two intelligent individuals that dealt with hardships of psychosis. The films demonstrate in a dramatic way that psychosis can be overcome as these characters in film succeeded. In addition, they showcase how people with psychosis can be geniuses of their own kind, which provides a positive outlook for others watching the film. The films do not provide a true story feel to the movies but it represented a positive feeling, which it was hardly seen in movies that dealt with the mentally ill.

Films with violent characters are more often dealing with mental illness, which reinforces the stigma. Most of the time, the audience considers violent characters as psychotic with no clue of the actual symptoms. Films that deal with violent characters, such as *Mr. Brooks* and *Psycho*, are considered “psycho” for their addiction to killing and erratic behaviors that are seen out of the norms. The audience must understand that psychosis consists of delusions, hallucinations and other symptoms that are minimally or not displayed in these films. For instance, *Mr. Brooks* demonstrates a character that has hallucinations of killing but does not have any other symptoms that the character can be prove that he is actually psychotic or psychosis. As Peter S. Goodman from *The New*

*York Times* added, that violent movies are likely to create more violent crimes from the audience which can leave long-term effects.

Using a large range of movies that have depictions of psychosis, I put together a thesis that will help people understand the true meaning of someone being diagnosed with psychosis. This project will help break barriers among many cultures and give an educational message to our society which mental health is a serious issue. The research for this project would help readers get a better understanding on the support that psychosis patients need to in their daily lives.

Many of these are horror films, which contribute to the stigma of psychosis, creating a society of discrimination towards individuals that are diagnosed psychosis. Many of them are afraid to pursue any activities such as following up with therapy sessions or seeking other ways of help, as they do not want to be discriminated from the general public. It is illegal for patients to be discriminated against but it is still ongoing our society. For instance, many patients are worrying that being hospitalized or seeking therapy can lead to a permanent record in their system. A few of them never lead to a normal lifestyle such as finding jobs because of the paranoia that has been built upon due to the stigma. These stereotypes discourage the mentally ill from seeking help.

Films and articles have selected to shed light on the portrayal of psychosis. I analyze contemporary films that have a central figure with symptoms of psychosis. Films that are included in my thesis include, but are not limited to, *A Beautiful Mind*, *The Soloist*, *Black Swam*, *Benny & Joon*, *Psycho*, and *Mr. Brooks*. These films have some sort of portrayal of psychosis roles that can be viewed in different ways. Each film has its accuracy, inaccuracy and complicated depictions of psychosis, which can confuse the

public and gives its stereotypes. The articles that I have selected will provide more information about the portrayal of psychosis.

Let it remain clear that films do not create these stereotypes of mental illness but reinforces them to the public. The reason I chose most of the films is because of their popularity among with people across the nation. Many viewers go to the theaters to watch these films as an escape from reality. I want to stop the stigma that these films are constantly presenting. These films that have negative portrayals of mental illness create stigma, which plays a role in how the mentally ill will shy away from seeking therapy. In addition, I want to analyze the effects that these portrayals have on viewers' mentality towards mental illness. For instance, watching several films that has characters with mental illness and see how they are portrayed with their symptoms. The portrayal can be either positive or negative, which can influence the audience on their view of psychosis.

In general, media gives several common myths about a person with mental illness such as psychosis. For instance, people with mental illness are violent, unpredictable, evil, "just a phase" and unpredictable. In fact, all of these myths are not true which the media continues to reinforce to the public.



## Methodology

This thesis examines feature films that involve depictions of psychosis, focusing on films from the 1950s to the present day, using a sociological approach that will compare perceptions of psychosis in different characters to these films. This thesis will give the reader a better understanding on the stigma of mental health (from a sociological perspective) and its portrayal in media. My goal is to lower down the common myths of mental illness in the general public.

The films that I analyze to further support my thesis are the following: *A Beautiful Mind*, *The Soloist*, *Black Swan*, *Psycho*, *American Psycho*, *Mr. Brooks* and *Me, Myself and Irene*, *Clean*, *Shaven*, and *Benny & Joon*. Each film has a character or characters that are portrayed as having a mental illness that includes psychosis and/or schizophrenia. Each character from each film plays a prominent role that can easily influence the audience about its symptoms. Besides *Clean*, *Shaven*, the rest of movies being listed have been a box office hit among the general public. Nevertheless, *A Beautiful Mind*, *The Soloist*, and *Black Swan* have received high critical praises from characters that loosely based on real life and the former was nominated for several Academy Awards.

As I have watched films dating back to the 1950s. Each film I identified was put into four categories to further analyze the roles these films played in society. These categories were into themes that many mental illness films and audience can relate. In addition, the films were categorized to give a better understanding how mental illness is portrayed.

The first category that *A Beautiful Mind*, *The Soloist* and *Black Swan* falls into is “insanity as genius.” These films reinforce an idea that psychotic disorders are a reflection of creative genius. In other words, there is a thin line between insanity and genius. Keep in mind, that out of all the characters in every film analyzed, Jamie Foxx is the only minority in the group.

The second category is based on “homicidal killers”. This category sets the tone for people with mental illness when they are stigmatized as violent and homicidal killers, which does not come close to the common experience of psychosis. In addition, movies that belong to this category such *Psycho*, *American Psycho* and *Mr. Brooks*, portray psychosis as a terrible illness that causes people to hurt others that usually comes from horror films. Mental health officials negatively view these movies because it reinforces the stigma on psychotic disorder. Interestingly, *Psycho* sets the mold for movies to have a mental illness associated with violent behaviors. However, another movie that is associated with the 2<sup>nd</sup> category is *Me, Myself & Irene*. The film does not have any horror-like features but the main character is portrayed as someone that has split personality and becomes out of control to others when his second personality appears.

*Clean, Shaven*, falls into the third category, which is a film that being portrayed as sympathetic can actually be viewed negative by the audience. *Clean, Shaven*, was one of the first films to actually attack the stigma of mental that previous horror films have created. Critics and health officials praised the film for its accuracy on portraying a person living with schizophrenia. However, the audience found it to be “too gross” and “disgusting” for several of its scenes that can only be seen in horror films.

Lastly, the fourth category in the film analysis of characters with psychosis is sympathetic portrayals that the audience views as actually being sympathetic. *Benny and Joon* falls into this category because of Mary Stuart Masterson's character, Joon. When the film was released the general public fell in love with characters from this movie which in the context of its happy ending.

My goal is to influence the audience that people with mental illness are not properly defined as "crazy". Many of them are human beings who are sick and are in need of help that must be sustained over time. The main objective is to break down the stigma in our society among minorities about mental health using contemporary films that everyone will understand and have better sense on the struggles that these patients go through. Stigmatization has a number of negative consequences including reduced housing and work opportunities, lowered quality of life, reduced self-esteem and increased symptoms and stress, thus making an already difficult situation even worse. Perhaps more importantly, assimilation into society is especially difficult for people diagnosed with schizophrenia as a consequence of psychiatric stigma (Laroi and Linden 2009).

## The Thin Line between Genius and Insanity

There is a close relationship between creativity and psychosis, particularly schizophrenia. For example, Albert Einstein had a son that was schizophrenic and many historians speculate that Einstein, himself, was schizophrenic. Researchers have developed that thinking “outside of the norm” creates opportunity to become creative. This way of thinking tends to be abnormal which can be associated with mental illness. Modern-day films such as *A Beautiful Mind*, *The Soloist*, and *Black Swan*, furthers initiate the conversation of the “thin line” between genius and insanity.

### *A Beautiful Mind*

*A Beautiful Mind* directed by Ron Howard and starring Russell Crowe, is a movie based on John Nash’s story about a mathematician who struggles with the harsh realities of dealing with psychosis. *A Beautiful Mind* became one of the first movies to depict the harsh realities for a person with untreated paranoid psychosis. The symptoms that are shown in the film are auditory and visual hallucinations, paranoia and delusional thinking. The plot of the movie is about a mathematician who has been suffering a severe case of psychosis for many years and who goes unnoticed about his diagnosis. Nash believes that he is actually secretly working with the government to break down Russian codes, but in reality, it just a creation of his mind. In the movie, it is depicted that his relationships with others such as, families and friends, become disrupted by his erratic behaviors. After time, his peers try to avoid that any mental health issues were happening but become aware after series of erratic events, which leads him to stay a

mental health hospital. After several series of events, which led him to discontinue medications and relapse, the film shows the positive and negative sides of being on medications and the way treatment can help a certain individuals. While some of the scenes were fiction, *A Beautiful Mind* gave a closely accurate portrayal of psychosis compared to other movies in the past. As Brander writes, “In the movie Nash is a very sympathetic and likeable figure, whereas the real Nash, before becoming dysfunctionally delusional, was cruel, insensitive, and very hard to like. The overall plot ‘arc’ of the movie was transformed into the standard ‘love conquers all’ Hollywood theme” (Brander 2003). Throughout the film, the theme of love is constantly seen through several scenes. Love becomes a theme that improves Nash’s behavior or helps maintain his sanity. In previous articles, it has been mentioned that Nash’s wife, Alicia, actually divorced him while he was going through his symptoms of psychosis. The Hollywood movie dramatized the scenes to capture the audience but in reality, it was much darker as Nash explained through several interviews.

### *The Soloist*

*The Soloist*, directed by Joe Wright and starring Jaime Foxx, is a story based on a true story of Nathaniel Ayers who develops psychosis and becomes homeless. In the film, Ayers is considered a cello genius who is discovered by Steven Lopez (Robert Downey Jr.) and writes a newspaper article in the *Los Angeles Times* regarding Ayers’ times living with psychosis. Similar to *A Beautiful Mind*, the main characters have similar symptoms such as auditory hallucinations and being unstable without any treatment. The voices that Ayers was hearing made him very fearful being at home that

he preferred to live in the streets. Foxx's character provides a more in-depth look of psychosis at young age and being discarded by his love ones instead of Crowe's character where family was involved to him through the difficult times (Clayton 2009). The movie demonstrates people living with psychosis need all the love and support that a regular person needs. As shown throughout the film that without any treatment, Ayers was still hearing voices in his head. Even though, the powerful of friendship changes both of these characters' lives, treatment is still needed to help the mental ill to be stabilized.

### *Black Swan*

In late 2010, the psychological thriller, *Black Swan*, was released to the general public. Darren Aronofsky directed the film and Natalie Portman and Mila Kunis had the starring roles. The film gathered a lot of attention after being nominated for several awards for the Academy Awards including Natalie Portman winning the Best Actress Award. The film is not inspired by a true story like *A Beautiful Mind* and *The Soloist*. However, it gave a good representation of psychosis as the lead actress, Nina Sayers, trying to become a perfectionist with the constant pressure from her director, mother and herself, which leads to have symptoms of psychosis. Throughout the film, the film never mentions that the character is psychotic but the symptoms that were shown in the movie are associated with first on-set psychosis.

The film stars Natalie Portman as Nina Sayers as a fragile ballerina who wins the lead role in Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake". The role requires Nina to play both the gentle white (Odette) and the enticing black swans (Odellie). But in the process, she will have to shed her "sweet girl" persona and embrace her darker side to fully embrace the role and

to please her demanding and sexually aggressive director (James 2010). The director wants Nina to stop being a perfectionist and to become more “loose” with herself because it can naturally bring out the role of the black swan. Throughout the film, Nina begins to experienced several psychotic and hallucinations symptoms including seeing herself in black clothing, her mother's paintings talking back to her, peeling of her skin and fighting with herself at the end of the film. As well, she feels paranoid that Lily (Mila Kunis) is going to take the lead away from her. At the end of the film, Nina is laying on the floor, dying after having a fight and stabbing Lily but it was all a hallucination in which in reality Nina stabbed herself. Nina final words expresses that she felt perfect which she wanted to be from the beginning of the film.

## Homicidal Maniacs

*Psycho* (1960)

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* is a psychological thriller that changed horror in films. *Psycho* received high praises from critics and four Academy Awards for its artistic work. The film created a genre that many people have tried duplicate but never mounts the success that this film has established. In addition, it established a way of portraying characters with psychosis as homicidal maniacs *Psycho* is memorable for the shower-murder scene, which is considered one of most famous scenes in cinema history. The plot is about Marion stealing money from her employer and checking in at a nearby motel, where she meets Norman Bates. In the film, Marion is murdered in the shower that leads to the investigation with Marion's sister and a detective.

Norman Bates is portrayed as a serial killer who hears voices from his mother to murder others. These symptoms are related to psychosis but it does not give you the urge to hurt others as Norman Bates is portrayed. In the film, the specific mental illness is not mentioned. However, the psychiatrist in the film mentions that Bates has another personality who is his dead mother. The psychiatrist added that the "mother" living in Bates' mind is controlling him. The ending of the film sends Norman into mental illness facility, which in decades later led to spin-off sequels.

Keep in mind that in the film, the psychiatrist never mentions the mental illness that has affected Norman Bates to become a serial killer. The audience can assume that the symptoms of Norman Bates shown in the film could come from a psychotic and/or psychosis person. This film sets the tone for the stigma of mental illness. The serial



killer, the mental asylum and hearing of voices illustrates on the behaviors that are shown in films by psychotic portrayals. The audience should be aware that people diagnosed with psychosis and psychosis is not as they are portrayed as serial killers. Films that came after *Psycho* developed the same set of rules of a serial killer, which have some sort of mental illness.

### *American Psycho*

The 2000 film, *American Psycho* directed by Mary Harron, stars Christian Bale as Patrick Bateman, who offers a satire of the dark side of “yuppie” culture in the 1980s. The plot of the film is based on a wealthy young investor, Patrick Bateman, who lives two different lifestyles. In the daytime, Bateman is obsessed with success, status and style which many considered today being as a “yuppie”. In the nighttime, he turns into a psychotic killer who rapes, murders, and dismembers both strangers and acquaintances without incitement or purpose. The film never mentions how Bateman is considered psychotic but throughout several scenes in the film, he has several hallucinations. For example, a scene in the film that relates to a psychotic episode is when Bateman is using an ATM, which asks him to feed it with stray cats. Another scene is when Bateman uses an apartment to hide all his dead corpses but the next day, it has been cleaned and being sold to the general public.

A way to determine that Hollywood labeled Patrick Bateman as psychotic is by reading the synopsis. However, the audience is easily influenced that Bateman is delusional because throughout the film it is never shown that he really committed those murders. In the film, Bateman confesses about his murders but no one

acknowledges it. The film leaves an open ending that he actually never committed those murders but instead fantasized about them.

### *Mr. Brooks*

*Mr. Brooks* is a 2007 film directed by Bruce A. Evans, which stars Kevin Costner as Earl Brooks, who is a businessman and serial killer with auditory and visual hallucinations of an alter-ego person by the name of Marshall. This movie is interesting as Mr. Brooks has some characteristics of psychosis but this is never acknowledged in the film. This movie demonstrates how the creator of this film takes advantage of the public's ignorance about not knowing enough about mental illness in order to make the plot of the film. The film does show that Mr. Brooks created some delusion and having hallucinations with the character of Marshall. These symptoms demonstrate characteristics of psychosis. Nevertheless, these are the only symptoms that are shown through the film. Throughout the film, Mr. Brooks does not have disorganized thinking, inconsistent thoughts and/or any depression symptoms. *Mr. Brooks* has a bad representation of psychosis because the character's addiction to killing, which is unrelated, and not being specific with its symptoms.

### *Me, Myself & Irene*

The 2000-comedy film, *Me, Myself & Irene*, directed by the Farelly Brothers, starred Jim Carey, is another film that deals with the subject of psychosis. *Me, Myself & Irene* made an attempt to portray psychosis as a comedy but it was highly criticized for making the main character, Charlie Billygates as a schizophrenic who can be dangerous

and unpredictable at times. In the film, Billy Gates is constantly being taken advantage of by his peers including his wife, while anger continues to build up inside him. Following events, the Billy Gates has a mental breakdown, which develops a split personality by the name of Hank. In the film, the psychiatrist diagnosed Charlie with "Advanced Delusional Psychosis". In addition, Charlie's psychiatrist supplies him with medications to keep his "double-personality" suppressed. As the psychiatrist explains that if Charlie does not take his medications, his split personality, Hank, will appear with outbursts and narcissistic rages. Throughout the film, Charlie runs through several of scenes where he does not take his medications, which leads to Hank showing up. Hank is more of a person who does not show any remorse to anyone, which is completely the opposite of Charlie. In addition, Charlie finds a love interest with Irene, who has no idea about Charlie's split personality or called in the film, "psychosis". At the end of the film, Charlie eliminates Hank after a confrontation with the antagonist character in the film.

The portrayals of psychosis in *Me, Myself & Irene* are not positive at all. The film tries to portray psychosis in a funny way but it is seen in a negative light. It demonstrates someone having a split personality that is very different from psychosis. Split personality is known as dissociative identity where the individual displays several personalities such as alter ego, like Charlie's alter ego, Hank. However, the positive outlook of this movie is that it teaches the audience that a person taking his medications may help. As the movie became a box office hit, it led to viewers believe that movie displayed an accurate portrayal of psychosis even it was in a comedy matter. The writers could have easily made change of diagnosing of Charlie with split-personality disorder, instead of psychosis, which would have caused less confusion with the public and lower the stigma.

## Realistic but Disturbing

### *Clean, Shaven*

In 1995, a film that did not become a big box office hit but instead gave one of its most excellent representations of psychosis, and is not based on a true story, is *Clean, Shaven* directed by Lodge Kerrigan. Critics have claimed that the movie did not do well in the box office because of its “shock method”, which scared many viewers from watching the film. However, Rosenstock writes in his article, *Beyond a Beautiful Mind*, “Some psychiatrists have described Green’s performance as ‘the best portrayal of untreated psychosis ever presented on film’” (Rosenstock 2003). Peter Winter is the main character of film that is played by Peter Green. Rosenstock adds, “the movie details a chapter in the life of Peter Winter, an individual suffering from psychosis, who is on a quest to find his adopted-away daughter” (Rosenstock 2003). The film is psychological thriller that tries to give without bias the point of view of psychosis and those who are affected by it. Winter demonstrates the highs and lows of psychosis (Rosenstock 2003). The movie uses images and sounds that a common schizophrenic person might experience. The audience are place in the role of schizophrenic person whose symptoms that includes auditory hallucinations, isolation and paranoia.

The audience might view the movie as being disorganized because of the images that it presents but clearly, it demonstrates goes inside a person’s mind that is being diagnosed with psychosis. In the film, Peter Winter, is paranoid about mirrors and believes that he has been implanted with a transmitter beneath his skin. In these scenes, Winter use steel wool to scrub him to get rid of transmitter and cutting into his scalp with

a scissor are considered scenes as grueling such as the horror movie *Saw*. Such grueling scenes were not particularly used in the mid-1990s as they are in today's feature films. The development of the story without dialogue, in addition to the confusing and grueling scenes did not help the movie to reach the mass audience and so it did not get its message across. In an interview by Kerrigan, he states that he wanted "the audience would feel at the end of it like how it must be to feel that way for a lifetime and not just eighty minutes--but I also wanted to attack the notion that people who suffer from mental illness are more violent than other people" (Chaw 2005). The director wanted to challenge the stigma that psychosis are least likely to be more violent than a normal person.

## Sympathetic but Unrealistic

### *Benny & Joon*

*Benny & Joon* is a 1993 comedy that displays a humorous and romantic story of two siblings and their romantic relationships with their partners, respectively. Benny devotes his life taking care of his younger sister, Joon, who suffers from psychosis. Joon's behaviors push all her caretakers away, which leave Benny the only person taking care of her. Benny puts a hold on his life to give Joon all of her attention. As Benny takes Joon everywhere he goes, they end up going to one of Benny's friends' poker game. In this scene, Joon meets one of Benny's friends, Sam, where they develop a romantic link with each other. The movie displays various situations where Benny and Joon have various conflicts with each other and among their social groups. A scene that stood out that in the film in which Benny calls Joon, "she is crazy"; soon after Joon tells Benny that she is romantically linked to Sam. Benny and Sam have a physical confrontation; Sam and Joon try to run away but are stopped shortly after one of erratic episodes causes her to be hospitalized. While Joon is in the hospital, Sam tries several of ways to visit her to continue their relationship. After a series of mishaps, they are united in the film with Benny being happy between them, as he continues his life.

The movie did show a somewhat good portrayal of psychosis. It shows the difficulties that someone goes through while dealing with the illness. It was a good moral story as it shows that support and love can help someone cope with their illness. However, throughout various scenes in the film, it never explained on the severity that Joon's psychosis really is. Joon shows signs of psychosis such as erratic behavior but the

doctors never go into details about how severe she is. The psychiatrist, Dr. Gravy, Benny several times that Joon's behavior is better suited in a group home to meet her needs but never explains why. Nevertheless, Joon gets her own place with Sam living with her as her supportive spouse. *Benny & Joon* is a romantic tale that gives a positive light in the mental illness cinema about people loving each other without feeling any remorse. This movie touches like a fable-like story that leaves many of us weeping for joy and give a positive strength for psychosis patients that they can find help from their loved ones and continue to live a normal life.

## Mental Illness in Animated Films

Children are constantly exposed to depictions of mental illness in animated films like Disney. Many villains in Disney films have a connection of being labeled as “crazy”, and/or “nutty” which has a relationship of enforcing the stigma of mental illness. For instance, Cloverdale writes, “In *The Lion King*, 3 characters (the hyenas) are depicted as being mentally ill, as evidenced by their rolling eyes, their high-pitched hysterical laughter, and the antics of Ed (the “craziest” of them all), who at one point mistakenly gnaws on his own leg (Cloverdale 2006). As the film progresses, it is clear that the hyenas represent the lowest social group in the animal kingdom and that they are to be feared and avoided, similar to people that are diagnosed with mental illness. Thus, these “mentally ill” characters represent an animated example of being feared, socially distanced, and (or) alienated” (Cloverdale 2006). Wahl writes, “two of Disney’s highly successful animated films, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin*, have included segments related to mental illness. Beauty’s eccentric father, referred to by the townspeople as “crazy old Maurice,” is threatened with commitment to an asylum, and Aladdin rescues Princess Jasmine from palace guards in the marketplace by telling them that “she’s a little crazy”. (Wahl 1995 p.10) Other characters that have symptoms of mental illness such as, Cruella in *102 Dalmatians*, and Margena from *The Little Mermaid*, show them trying to threaten the protagonists in their respective films. Children watching these films grow up learning that the mentally ill should be either banned from society and have no interaction with the general public or laugh at them. Lawson added that in her research study, 85% of the Disney films reviewed contained references to mental illness in major



or minor characters, compared to the 9.5% global incidence of mental illness. A way to fix the labeling is having parents of children watching these animated films is that everything that is depicted in these films are fiction and educate them the true symptoms and seriousness of mental illness.

## The Role of Stigma

Stigma is created when a person uses labels to brand or stereotype someone. Stigma leads to discrimination, which causes people that are being stigmatized to have negative consequences including reduced housing and work opportunities, lowered quality of life, reduced self-esteem and increased symptoms and stress (Laroi and Linden 2009). It can create a negative environment for many individuals with psychosis, which can lead to having no support from the general public. Many of them will try to avoid treatment or being seen near mental health clinics to avoid being labeled. Stigma creates a lifestyle that is hard to overcome and can lead to self-destruction as many individuals give up on their hope of succeeding.

The sociologist Erving Goffman (1961) described the social theory of stigma. He analyzed stigma as a characteristic or behavior causing an individual to be judged by others in a negative stereotypical way rather than in an accepted view. He focuses on the relationship between an individual whose stigma is defined and the means of social control that define the stigma. Two types of stigma (discredited and discreditable) are present in individuals with fundamentally different problems. Since their stigma is known, discredited persons are confronted with the problem of managing the tension caused by that knowledge during social contacts with normal. On the other hand, discreditable persons must manage information so that others cannot learn of their stigma.

The stigma connected to psychosis is one of the worst among the stigmas of mental illness. Penn writes, “Individuals with a severe mental illness (SMI) such as

psychosis experience significant stigma in their day- to-day lives (Hayward and Bright 1997; Farina 1998; Corrigan and Penn 1999).” For example, the majorities of people have stated that they would be afraid or avoid the person if they found that individual has been diagnosed with psychosis. Many of them believe that schizophrenic person is violent and can become a sociopath because the way the media portrays them. Most of the members of society have developed a judgment against schizophrenic patients, which is hard to break down. Many of the homeless are mentally ill and the poster child for a mentally ill homeless person is a schizophrenic. This leads people to assume that they cannot work or support themselves. As Chovil explains, “By using stereotypes to pay to the public’s sense of what and who is dangerous, cinematic narratives and images powerfully reinforce social norms” (Chovil 1999).

Villains in movies are often schizophrenic which lead them to be serial killers. Hardly any individual with psychosis portrayed in movies have a positive role. Only a few characters are positive roles, and these dramatic stories are often inspired by true stories. However, Hollywood studios add dramatic scenes that can either be positive or negative towards the character roles. People with psychosis are assumed to have multiple personality disorder. The general population does not know the difference between multi-personality disorder and psychosis.

Stigma discourages people from getting help. In order to reduce stigma, the audience needs to understand that psychosis or any other mental illness is biochemical disorder. It is not a change of behavior or mood disorder. People are in need of treatment and support when they have a mental illness occurring. As John Morgan reports, “according to the National Institute of Mental Health, over 22% of adult

Americans – or approximately 44 million people — suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. Mental illness accounts for four of the 10 leading causes of disability in the U.S. and other developed countries.” Having more advocates in making mental illness known to the public will have better chances of erasing the stigma. Health officials need to make a statement that mental illness is the same thing as physical illness.

Tipper Gore has been one of the vocal supporters and advocates in erasing the stigma that mental health has developed. In fact, Gore (who was Vice President Al Gore’s wife) worked as an advisor to President Clinton in mental health issues. Gore and along with various non-for-profit organizations have been making headlines in ways of demolishing the stigma. For instance, Gore was supportive in changing the disability act that insurances and health professionals cover mental health as it was for a physical illness. Prior to her role as an advisor to Clinton, she got the chance to fund and support various organizations in helping patients and combating the stigma that has been brought upon the public. In addition, Mowbray argues “that reports by the surgeon general on mental health and illness of adults and children, plus the 1999 White House Mental Health Conference, should further improve public attitudes. Finally, the emphasis on evidence-based practice and on translating research into practice should mean increased access to federal funding sources and expanded support from managed care providers, demonstrated by a willingness to pay for interventions established as effective” (Mowbray 2002, p. 168).

## **Conclusion: Final Take**

In conclusion, psychosis is a serious brain disorder that falsifies the way a person thinks, understands reality and affects how the person interacts with others. It is an illness that can cause major hardships for the person and surrounding family members. Many people who have suffered from psychosis have problems adapting to society, which make them difficult to continue a normal life. There is no known understanding for how psychosis develops in someone's brain. It cannot be cured but for many it can be treated with proper medications and therapy. Based on someone's behaviors and analysis from psychiatrists, people get to be diagnosed under those circumstances. At times, psychosis patients feel that they are being labeled "crazy" after seeing several of media portrayal that is negative. It can scare them away from seeking treatment and continue to suffer more as many families might not be able to handle their crisis. Expanded treatment effectiveness research means that many childhood and adult psychiatric disorders have at least some program models documented to produce positive outcomes (Mowbray 2002, p. 168).

Using films as a resource to educate and illustrate to the public about the authentic portrayal of psychotic disorder with fictional characters or documentaries. The utility of a motion picture film for instructional purposes is well recognized: Burton writes, "Film can provide the emotional impact; the specifics of human interaction, even a sense of drama, that often get left out of abstract sociological thinking and writing" (Curry 1984, p. 42). As Laroi and Linden writes, "studies have shown that film documentary significantly influenced participants' negative and derogatory attitudes concerning

psychosis” (Laroi and Linden 2009 p. 62). There are reasons that viewing documentary films can reduce negative attitudes associated with psychosis. Primarily, when documentary films portray real people it can support reducing stigma for mental health problems. The general public will get a first-hand look at the ways the mentally ill live, as they can be normal people as anyone else. Furthermore, it can lower the stigma that predecessors have created and create a positive role for others. To help further support the facts, the Mann & Himeleism 2008 studies suggest that stigma-reducing interventions that include a first-person perspective and personal information of psychosis patients are most effective.

Documentary films can demonstrate the positive portrayal of psychosis that can help people seek therapy. Documentaries are not popular with the general public but reality shows on television have gained a lot of viewership. Shifting from documentary films into television reality shows might lead to positive to the public and get a better understanding of psychosis. Laroi and Linden continues, “it can enable them to have a less negative and derogatory stereotyped view of psychosis, they could see that persons diagnosed with psychosis live normal lives and are not much different from people without psychosis” (Laroi and Linden 2009, p. 64). The public will get a better understanding of the struggle that many psychosis patients go through. Schizophrenic people are normal and not violent to the public.

These films can help families and people from different cultures learn about the truth of psychosis. It can eliminate the stigma and create an educational tool that many people are not aware about. Television channels such as PBS and Discovery can get involved with non-for-profit organizations to create documentaries like mini-series about

psychosis and seeking treatment. The more people who gain knowledge about psychosis, the fewer stigmas can be found in our surroundings. For instance, there is a predominance of denial about mental illness in Hispanic families. Many of them believe that people that are mentally ill because of religious purposes or the use of drugs. A lot of those patients avoid using treatment because of the stigma that is associated with it. Documentaries can help to reduce this stigma and create an environment of acceptance and learning.

I find that inaccurate or stereotypical film images can be used as classroom assets rather than liabilities, because visual stereotypes allow students to go beyond the rote learning of symptoms to an understanding of what influences societal acceptance and rejection (Livingston 2004). These images can help teach students about the negative portrayal that psychosis has in media. Popular films can facilitate sociological thinking (Dowd 1999; Tipton and Tiemann 1993) by showing students how images can be manipulated to perpetuate or mitigate stereotypes about PWMI (people with mental illness) and illustrating how stereotypes about PWMI and illustrating how stereotypes are related to stigma and discrimination against minority groups (Livingston 2004, p. 119). As a group, we can show different movies such as positive and negative portrayals to promote a learning environment to lower the stigma that movies have created in psychosis. In addition, Rosenstock promotes that despite some weaknesses, “*A Beautiful Mind* is a powerful and influential film that will and should be used in psychiatric education” (Rosenstock 2003, pg. 118).

As you have read, the stigma of psychosis still exists in our society. The public often portrays mental illnesses negatively, which creates new stereotypes and opinions of the mentally ill and their condition. The purpose of this study is to lessen the stigma that

the media has created with mental illness. Hollywood uses psychosis as a label to promote the idea of the violent sociopath. Most high-profile movies have vague diagnosis of psychosis, which leaves the audience seeing the same symptoms in movies such as “crazy” and “violent”. The connection of mental illness with violence and criminality is no less a part of children’s media. “Future generations are receiving repeated messages about the dangerousness of people with mental illnesses through their special media” (Wahl 1995, p. 62). This type of special media includes comic books and cartoons that describe characters being “nutty”, “crazy” and/or even “psycho”. It leads them to believe that all psychosis patients are associated with violent behaviors.

In popular movies, psychosis is often displayed as a split personality disorder. However, it is not true assessment of psychosis but instead it is a form of psychosis or of dissociation (which is not considered “psychotic”). Symptoms of psychosis include, but are not limited to, hallucinations, paranoia, disorganization and being catatonic. Films such as *A Beautiful Mind* and *The Soloist* create positive portrayals as two individuals who are geniuses suffer from psychosis but after a series of events continue to live their own lives. These movies portray somewhat accurate symptoms of someone dealing with psychosis and psychosis. *Benny and Joon* is a good portrayal of family relationships with Joon having psychosis and falling in love and becoming more independent in the film with the support of her brother, Benny, and her significant other, Sam. Other films such as *Me, Myself & Irene* and *Psycho* have created negative portrayals as being violent and using symptoms of split personality as being labeled as psychosis. Nevertheless, there are many more films about psychopath killers and other mentally unbalanced individuals



who are inherently evil and dangerous than there are sensitive portrayals of courageous individuals struggling with severe mental illness (Chovil 2010).

“Advocates still argue that public knowledge about mental illness needs to be increased and that discussions and depictions in the mass media are important means to that end. That information about mental illness is available in so many different and easily accessible sources seems in line with mental health goals” (Wahl 1995, p. 12). The public needs to learn more and be educated about the reality of psychosis and its symptoms. The public needs to know the accurate definition of psychosis and psychosis as a person who has hallucinations or delusions instead of the popular definition of psychotic as someone who is violent or twisted. “Learning the symptoms of mental disorders is necessary but insufficient in the sociology of mental illness class” (Livingston 2004, pg. 119). Documentaries are an effective way for the public to learn the true meaning of psychosis and psychosis. This genre of films helps to create a positive effect in the public. Research studies have stated that documentaries are a great way for the classroom to learn more about psychosis and how it affects people diagnosed with it. Secondly, by pushing and funding more independent films that give a positive outlook of psychosis will create a balance among portrayals that are constant being seen in the movie industry. Lastly, the audience can get educated and learn more about a patient leaving with schizophrenia by reading books and/or memoirs. For example, My Schizophrenic Life by Sandra McKay proves a powerful insight of a woman living with schizophrenia. She writes significant details about the realities of living with schizophrenia, which can give the audience a better understanding of schizophrenia and lower the stigma.

In the end, movies with mental illness are improving as more research and documentation is being done. Although movies from the 1990s have more stigma than 1950s, *A Beautiful Mind* and *The Soloist* changed the public perception of the true definition of psychosis and psychosis. The general public and other filmmakers are becoming more aware about the stigma that has been created. We need to let society know that psychosis and psychosis is not a violent illness and instead we can help others that are suffering from a mental illness into creating a *happy ending*.

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## **Appendix:**

*The following movies are listed alphabetical order for this study. The asterisk indicates the films that I analyzed.*

102 Dalmatians (2000)\*

A&E -- Investigative Reports: Mental Health Dilemma (2008) (Documentary)

American Psycho (2000)\*

Aladdin (1992) (Animated)\*

A Beautiful Mind (2001)\*

Beauty and the Beast (1991) (Animated)\*

Benny and Joon (1993)\*

Black Swan (2010)\*

Clean, Shaven (1995)\*

Conspiracy Theory (1997)

Donnie Darko (2001)

Igby Goes Down (2002)

K-PAX (2001)

Mr. Brooks (2007)\*

Psycho (1960)\*

Revolution 9 (2001)

Shadow Voices: Finding Hope in Mental Illness (2006) (Documentary)

Shutter Island (2010)\*

Spider (2002)

Terminator 2 (1992)\*

The Fisher King (1991)\*

The Lion King (1994) (Animated)\*

The Little Mermaid (1989) (Animated)\*

The Madness of King George (1994)

The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc (1999)

The Soloist (2008)\*

Through a Glass Darkly (1961)

Understanding Mental Illness and Schizophrenia (2006) (Documentary)