The Implications of using Mental Illness within a Cinema Narrative

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the ways in which mental illness is used in contemporary cinema, highlighting the differences of representation of the mentally ill in accordance to genre. Furthermore, this article will examine not only the use of mentally ill characters, but also the narrative structure of films which include the mentally ill, and how the genre of such a film can dictate the resolution of the narrative. The genres studied include horror, comedy, drama, and children’s cinema, as well as sub-genres within these; an analysis of these genres will illuminate the ways in which modern cinema uses mental illness as a narrative drive, and how doing so has implications on the audiences that watch it.

Keywords: Mental illness, narrative, genre, social implications
Mentally ill characters in contemporary cinema tend to fall under one generic category: “crazy”, and quite often, it is this character’s mental instability that drives a film’s narrative forward, regardless of what their condition might actually be. There are hundreds of films worldwide which feature mentally ill characters, ranging from horror films, dramas and romantic comedies. It is key to establish the fact that mental illness is used differently in each genre, with the conventions of each genre dictating the narrative structure, and therefore how a mentally ill character can fit into this structure. Therefore, the representation of madness can be extremely genre-specific, as it is the generic conventions that “define how the spectator reads actions and character in terms of madness”, and therefore each representation tends to differ from one genre’s narrative to another (Fuery, 2003:33).

The mentally ill character is typically found more frequently in horror films, due to the fact that that mental instability is “a convenient […] explanation for the maniacal violence that makes up the backbone of these stories” (Suzdaltzev, 2014). Though, the role of a mentally ill character in a horror film needn’t be limited solely to the psychotic murderer of slasher films; in supernatural horror films, there are frequently characters who believe in the otherworldly beings that are key to the narrative, and these characters are often portrayed as mentally unstable or out-of-touch with reality by their fellow characters. Ironically, these characters have a tendency to be proven right in later stages of the narrative, and are rewarded for their open-minded attitude, usually by surviving the terrors of the storyline, in comparison to the doubters, who usually suffer fatally as a result of their disbelief. The key point to be made regarding the narrative role of a mentally ill character within the horror genre, is the fact that the narrative arc of such a character depends on the type of character they encompass, for instance, whether they are the villain, the hero/heroine, the false hero, etc. (in accordance to Propp’s character theory, 1968). Within the horror genre, the mentally ill can be assigned certain character roles depending on the sub-genre of the film; for instance, in a slasher, the mentally ill character will be the murderer, in a supernatural horror they could be the hero/heroine, and in a psychological horror they could be the false hero. In each example, the fact that the character is depicted as mentally unstable is a driving force behind the narrative, whether it is because their condition has made them psychotic, and turn to immense violence (slasher), or because their beliefs are the foundations of the plot (supernatural), or because their behaviour is seen as threatening (psychological)ii. These character assignments are just as varied when applied to other genres, such as dramas or comedies, but in different ways.

In comedies, the narrative purpose of a character with mental illness usually depends upon the character role. There are some examples of the lead character (hero/heroine) suffering from a mental condition, but it is much rarer than finding a supporting character who is suffering from an affliction. Examples of the former include What About Bob? (dir.
Oz, 1991) and Lars and the Real Girl (dir. Gillespie, 2007), in which it is the lead characters who are suffering from mental illness. In both examples, the narrative is driven by their illnesses, and is eventually resolved when both characters overcome their illnesses. It is also particularly common to use mental illness in “rom-coms”, in which both comedy and romance ensues from one or more characters being mentally unstable; some key examples include A Fine Madness (dir. Kershner, 1966), Me, Myself and Irene (dirs. Farrelly & Farrelly, 2000), Punch-Drunk Love (dir. Anderson, 2002), and Wristcutters: A Love Story (dir. Dukic, 2006). In this sub-genre, it is common to see both the lead character and supporting characters being depicted as unstable in one form or another, in which case it is their illnesses which often bring them together as a romantic item. As such, the mentally ill character can take on several roles in this sub-genre, such as a hero/heroine, the false hero, or the princess (the female character who is to be won by the hero). Due to the nature of the romance and rom-com genres, the narrative tends to end quite well, with the ill characters generally overcoming their illnesses, or living happily with their love-interest despite their illness.

With regards to drama, the narrative cycle of a film can depend greatly on the type of illness which is being depicted; for instance, in Cronenberg’s A Dangerous Method (2011), a large majority of the depiction of mental illness is at the beginning and thus acts as an initial driving force behind the narrative and, ultimately, acts as a way of two characters establishing a love affair. This is because the mental illness involved (hysteria) was treatable and was overcome by the character; similarly, the same can be said of A Beautiful Mind (dir. Howard, 1997), in which the narrative revolves solely around the character’s development of paranoid schizophrenia and how he overcomes it in the end. In both examples, a romantic partner plays a significant role in the sufferer’s conquering of the illness. However, there are examples within this genre which emphasise the fact that some illnesses cannot be successfully treated, whether it be by medical intervention, personal mental willpower, or intimacy with another person, and the narrative tends to focus solely on the downfall of its characters. In Frances (dir. Clifford, 1982), the narrative focuses on the film’s namesake, Frances Farmer (Jessica Lange), and her life as a mentally unstable actress. After years of fighting addiction, failed medical treatments and doomed romances, the character dies as a recluse. A similar narrative is used in Forman’s 1975 classic, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, in which the lead character descends into mental illness, only to die as a result.

As is demonstrated in the above paragraph, the diagnosis of a character’s mental illness is sometimes eluded to, but not always; if the character’s illness has stereotypical symptoms which can be beneficial to a film’s narrative, then they will be diagnosed with a specific illness. But, it appears that including a character with a mental condition does not always mean that the character has to be diagnosed; sometimes, it is better for the narrative if a
character is merely depicted as “crazy”. This vagueness is extremely beneficial to both directors and audiences alike, as it makes character-role assignment, and thus character-role recognition, much easier; if a horror film director or writer creates a generically “crazy” character to fulfil the role of the killer, then no diagnosis is necessary, as it will be apparent that the murderer is mentally ill from the beginning of the narrative. A diagnosis would be redundant, not least because it is socially accepted that a mass-murderer would have to be suffering from some sort of condition, but also due to the fact that audiences have come to expect only one slasher-type killer in such a film, and that this character is established early into the narrative. This can usually occur either via an introduction to the murderer themselves, or through the fact that murders are occurring – after one, or both, of these acts, the audience has accepted that there is a crazy killer whose actions will dictate the rest of the narrative.

Furthermore, the use of a generic crazy character, particularly within horror films, can make the narrative more appealing to the audience, especially if the illness is not diagnosed. The lack of diagnosis of the killer character of a slasher film makes them both mysterious and more threatening, as the audience infers that there is a reason for their mental instability, but one is not given; Fuery states that “the idea…that any act of madness has a meaning underlying it propels so much of the narrative in cinema” (2003:28). Crucially, the fact that the frequently-used “crazy killer” continues to be used within horror films without a diagnosis means that they are destined to be reused in the narrative of future horror films – obviously, they will take different forms and undertake different actions, but the character will be exactly the same, ideologically. This is due to the fact that madness has come to be a form of cinematic transposition, in which the representation of the mentally ill is repeated over and over again, taking its influences from the societal and cultural opinions of madness which were established when cinema began, and have continued to be replicated ever since (Fuery, p.31). As such, the narratives which include the mentally ill have come to be similarly redundant, with few options available for a narrative resolution.

If one were to analyse the narrative arc of any film, regardless of genre, which features the mentally ill, it would become apparent that there are a very limited number of ways in which that character’s story can end. Naturally, a film’s narrative resolution is dictated by the genre to which it belongs, but if a film features a mentally ill character (who is being used as a protagonist or another lead role), then there are only three possible endings that a film can take. The first is that the ill character overcomes their illness, either through their own personal willpower, medical treatment, or falling in love. The second is that the sufferer does not overcome their illness, and their futures are left open, with the resolution of the film being highly ambiguous. Finally, the third is that the character does not overcome their illness, and dies as a result. Essentially, there is a happy ending, a sad ending, and an open ending, with
each of these narratives being able to be included in a wide variety of genres. Despite the fact that any of these three endings can occur in any genre, there are certain types of narrative endings which tend to feature specifically in one genre or another. For instance, in the horror genre (particularly slashers or psychological), the narrative resolution tends to end ambiguously, or with the sufferer dying, with the mentally ill character (i.e. the murderer, stalker, etc.) usually being killed. Sometimes this makes for a seemingly-happy ending, as the film’s protagonists believe their horror to be over, only for a last-second scene to depict their stalker or killer re-emerging, their death having been faked or unsuccessful. This leaves the narrative open and intentionally ambiguous, usually in order for a sequel to be made, such as in the *REC* series (*REC 1* and *REC 2*, Balagueró & Plaza, 2007, 2009). Crucially, these kinds of endings are normally selected to conform to societal expectations, in as much as the audience has come to expect these specific endings in accordance to genre. This can be due to several different reasons, including societal roles, cultural opinions of the mentally ill, as well as how an audience perceives the mentally ill psychologically – i.e. if they find them intimidating, frightening, misunderstood, or do they consider themselves to be empathetic.

As has been previously stated, narrative has to follow certain conventions, usually those belonging to a specific genre; but these generic conventions have often been established as a result of the society in which they were developed. For instance, the negative representation of the mentally ill has long been established in children’s films, with Walt Disney’s *Dumbo* and *Alice in Wonderland* being prime examples of how negative associations can be made with mentally ill characters by labelling them as “crazy” or “nutty” (Lawson and Fouts, 2004). In a study by Lawson and Fouts, it was revealed that 85% of Disney films which were released since 1937, contain references to characters with mental illness, and as such:

“...children who watch animated films of TWDC [(The Walt Disney Company)] are exposed to a greater incidence of mental illness than is typically seen on TV and are exposed to a greater incidence of mental illness than they may experience in their everyday lives. Consequentially, young children may acquire an unrealistic and stereotypic view of individuals with a mental illness in society, which could be exacerbated by their failure to distinguish between fiction and reality.” (2004:312)

It is then explained that the aforementioned buzz-words (“crazy” and “nutty”) are used in order to alienate the referenced character, in order to intentionally segregate them from the more sane protagonists. In adult films, there is usually no need to highlight mental illness through words, as the audience is capable of identifying a mental sufferer through their actions. But, the aforementioned study shows that a negative representation of mental illness has been prominent in children’s films for almost eight decades, meaning that at least three separate generations of society has been influenced by these portrayals. If each generation has this stereotype ingrained into their understanding of the world as children, then it seems obvious that the negative representation would continue to be repeated, if not because
contemporary writers and directors have assumed the worst about the mentally ill since childhood, then because it is what has become expected by their audiences. What is most crucial about the portrayal of the mentally ill in children’s films is not that they are referred to by derogatory terms, but that they are usually the villains. Lawson and Fauts support this point by giving the example of the three hyenas in *The Lion King*, who are not only depicted as scary, but also as comedic and unpredictable (2004:313); other examples include Cruella de Ville in *101 Dalmations*, who is depicted as psychotic, the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*, whose violent mood-swings could be interpreted as bi-polar disorder, and Scar in *The Lion King*, who is portrayed as a power-hungry sociopath. It is key to remember that *Alice in Wonderland* and *101 Dalmations* were released ten-years apart (1951 and 1961, respectively), at a time when mental illness was not as greatly understood as it is now; as for *The Lion King*, it is well-established that the plot of the film is based on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (Teague, 2006:165), meaning that the plot is archaic, but that does not account for the representation of mental illness. Only 3 years earlier to the release of *The Lion King*, Disney also released *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), which depicts several mental illnesses; the villain Gaston suffers from extreme narcissism and misogyny, the lead female character, Belle, suffers from some sort of dissociative personality disorder – and, not to mention, an extreme case of Stockholm Syndrome, while the protagonist, The Beast, suffers from depression. In accordance to the aforementioned narrative resolution structure outlined above, two of the characters overcome their illnesses by falling in love and living happily ever after, while the villain dies as a result of his. With regards to children’s films, it seems that mental illness is usually overcome, as long as the sufferer is not the villain; if they are the villain, then they will either die, or be left by the protagonist, as is the case in *101 Dalmations* and *Alice in Wonderland*, with their fate left open. In each film, however, the villains have attempted to overthrow the protagonist as a result of their mental illness; this is a narrative device which has come to be used frequently in cinema, both in children’s films and adult.

It is frequently the case in films, particularly horrors and thrillers, that the mentally ill character is the villain; combine this fact with the idea that children’s films also cast the mentally unstable character as the villain, and this has a great impact upon the way that society views mental illness. This can often be the case because a narrative that involves a mentally ill character will often depict mental illness either as something to overcome, or a narrative device that leads to a less-than-favourable ending for the sufferer. The latter of these options is particularly common, and can often conjure-up a kind of “scare-mongering” within the audience; this is not just the case with horror films and the insane murderers, but can occur in a drama or biopic. What is most startling about the inclusion of severe mental illness in biopics is the fact that the audience takes the film – often only loosely based on true events – as complete truth, often unaware that a director or writer has changed the nature of the character’s illness in order to make it more cinematically pleasing. The best example of this is
in Howard’s *A Beautiful Mind*, in which the lead character – world-renowned mathematical genius John Nash - suffers from schizophrenia. Critically acclaimed and the winner of several Academy Awards, the film falsely depicts Nash’s illness, incorporating visual hallucinations into actual characters with which Nash interacts; the issue with this is that Nash did not suffer from visual hallucinations, and the delusions which he experiences in the film are far more exaggerated than the reality (Ziegler, 2002:27). Though visual hallucinations can occur in a sufferer of schizophrenia, the fact that this particular film includes this as a symptom of the illness, when it did not actually happen, is greatly misleading.

It seems that regardless of the genre, cinema has a tendency to express mental illness in a strictly negative way; that can be in the form of a Disney villain, a mass-murderer or, a historical figure whose symptoms are greatly exaggerated. All of these examples contribute to society’s perception of mental illness, and this perception is not only negative but also inaccurate; if a film’s narrative revolves around the actions and experiences of a character with mental illness, then the sufferer’s symptoms are made to be as obvious as possible. This is usually the way in which the narrative is driven, as the audience is taken on a journey; sometimes the journey revolves solely around the sufferer, or occasionally, the sufferer plays a small part – but either way, their inclusion within the narrative is what drives it forward.
References


Filmography


-Alice in Wonderland, 1951. [Film] Directed by Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske. USA: Walt Disney Productions.


-Dumbo, 1941. [Film] Directed by Samuel Armstrong, Norman Ferguson, Wilfred Jackson, Jack Kinney and Bill Roberts. USA: Walt Disney Productions.


-Lars and the Real Girl, 2007. [Film] Directed by Craig Gillespie. USA/Canada: MGM.


-Me, Myself and Irene, 2000. [Film] Directed by Bobby Farrelly and Peter Farrelly. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

-One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, 1975. [Film] Directed by Milos Forman. USA: Fantasy Films.


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1 Examples include overly-pious characters within the Paranormal Activity series (specifically 2), Claire Spencer (Michelle Pfeiffer) in What Lies Beneath, and the parents of a demonic child in Case 39, all of which are deemed unstable for believing in the supernatural.

ii Examples of characters in slasher films who, it is implied, are suffering from a severe mental illness include Michael Myers (Halloween series), Leatherface (Texas Chain Saw Massacre series) and Norman Bates (Psycho). Similar examples for psychological horrors include both Nina and Beth (Black Swan), Teddy Daniels (Shutter Island) and both Su-mi and Su-yeong (A Tale of Two Sisters).

iii Several characters are diagnosed with a specific illness, and as such, the symptoms are included as a driving force behind the narrative; examples include A Beautiful Mind and He Loves Me…He Loves Me Not (Colombani, 2002), with the characters suffering from schizophrenia and erotomania, respectively.