

Mental Illness In Popular Media

Essays on the Representation of Disorders

Edited by Lawrence C. Rubin

Foreword by Jonathan Metzl



Mental Illness in Popular Media

ALSO EDITED BY LAWRENCE C. RUBIN

*Food for Thought: Essays on Eating
and Culture* (McFarland, 2008)

*Psychotropic Drugs and Popular Culture: Essays on Medicine,
Mental Health and the Media* (McFarland, 2006)

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*Essays on the Representation
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McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London

ISBN 978-0-7864-6065-6

softcover : 50# acid free paper 

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA ARE AVAILABLE

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING DATA ARE AVAILABLE

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Front cover design by David K. Landis (Shake It Loose Graphics)

Manufactured in the United States of America

*McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640
www.mcfarlandpub.com*

Acknowledgments

I remember the day I found out that the Popular Culture Association had given my first volume, *Psychotropic Drugs and Popular Culture: Medicine, Mental Health and the Media* (McFarland 2006), the Ray and Pat Browne Award for best anthology. I had a Sally Field moment — “They like me, they really like me!” What they liked, really, was the way in which I brought together a chorus of talented voices that understood the myriad ways in which our culture has become, as Simon Gottschalk called it, “a chemically gated community.” I was fascinated by the messages in the many forms of popular media that the road to better living is through chemistry. While the ensuing reviews of that volume have been mixed, I believe that for a brief moment in time, I helped to enrich the conversation. I am grateful to the Popular Culture Association, to those who contributed to that volume, and to people who bought the book.

Each of the essays in the present volume seeks understanding of the ways in which social construction of mental illness is represented in popular culture. Whether in the bold graffiti of sidewalk artists, the subtle subtext of a blockbuster film, or the alluring prose of a Broadway play, they seek to highlight messages about what it means to be psychologically fit and psychologically disordered.

As always, I want to express my deep and abiding love for my wife, Randi; my son, Zachary; and my daughter, Rebecca. Each of them, in their own way, has helped me to appreciate the power of popular culture, whether it is in the form of a mindnumbingly violent video game, the seemingly random perturbations in the life of Hannah Montana, or in the complexity of the plots and personalities in literary fiction. I am truly blessed to have my parents, Esther and Herb, in my life. They beam every time I put pen to paper and then send copies of my writings to distant relatives. Finally, I am indebted to Grace Bernard, my competent and ever-so-patient assistant.

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Foreword

JONATHAN M. METZL

Psychology and popular culture have long been inexorably linked, and understandably so. In differing ways, both domains aggregate projected imaginations. Both are concerned with understanding cathexes, longings, perspectives, attitudes, and memes. And both use language and representation to anatomize inchoate communal anxieties and desires.

For much of the latter half of the twentieth century, the relationships between psychology and popular culture flowed in rather predictable narrative trajectories. Films from Cavalcanti's *Dead of Night* to Olivier's *Hamlet* to Hitchcock's *Spellbound* drew freely on psychological or psychoanalytic concepts of subjectivity in order to portray the troubled inner lives of filmic characters. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, film theorists appropriated Lacanian theories of the "gaze" in their analyses of films, while psychoanalytic literary theorists applied analytic principles to the study of literary texts. Meanwhile, popular representations of mental illness served as metaphoric critiques of American political culture. Anitole Litvak's 1948 film *The Snake Pit* exposed American viewers to gendered conditions in state mental hospitals. Samuel Fuller's 1963 *Shock Corridor* depicted the asylum as a "street" in which the problems of American modernity drove its inhabitants to insanity. And Milos Forman's 1975 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, based on the 1962 Ken Kesey novel, warned of the dangers of state authoritarianism.

These and other examples demonstrate the rich historical resonances between psychological, psychiatric, and popular cultural sensibilities. But they also suggest how the study of these resonances was, for a long time, rooted in a set of heuristic models, such as classical psychoanalysis or literary studies, that emphasized somewhat linear relationships between psychology and popular culture. Psychology remained a totalizing analytic system, represented as psychology *per se*, while the culture it examined was culture

with a capital “C,” as manifest in classic works of literature or mainstream films.

Recent scholarship has created new ways to explore how psychology and culture are not only distinct entities, but also forms of knowledge and expression that mirror, critique, reinforce, and even disprove one another over time. Awareness of the fluidity of this relationship has allowed new generations of scholars to expand how psychological study understands many diverse popular cultures, and at the same time to explore the cultural aspects of psychology. This new focus has upended the once top-down relationship between psychology and popular culture. Scholars now understand the overlap between the two domains, not just as a set of psychological “facts” that disseminate downward, but also as a set of mutually affecting rhetorics and representational schemas that themselves reflect larger economies and demands.

As the essays in this book demonstrate, this new focus allows scholars to expand the analytic focus of the field beyond questions of identity into newly political terrain. To be sure, many authors collected here are concerned with the ways that various popular cultures represent matters of mental illness and mental health. But their analyses of sources as disparate as Batman films, Broadway musicals, print media, internet sites, Canadian graffiti, and Nigerian home videos reveal how the rhetorics of mental health and its discontents are made to stand in for a much wider set of assumptions and ideologies. The essays thus reveal how definitions of mental illness, mental health, and even of psychology itself intersect with discourses of race, gender, law, capitalism, and globalization. Such embeddedness can lead to enhanced stigmatizations of particular groups. Essays by Laura Tropp, Shawn Phillips, Julian Vigo, and Elizabeth England-Kennedy show how cultural representations propagate negative views of postpartum mothers, persons with disabilities, lesbians, and persons with attention deficit disorder, respectively. But cultural representations also allow the means of forming new opinions or communities, or for fighting back, as essays by Jeff Johnson, Wanda Little Fenimore, and Lawrence Rubin suggest.

Playing devil’s advocate, one might argue that psychological and popular cultural studies simply represent a new form of psychomedicalization, in which ever-expanding psychological frameworks place endlessly expanding cultural sites under their purview.

To be sure, skepticism about over-psychologizing everyday life remains vital in our present, over-psychologized era. Yet the essays collected here demonstrate how medicalization can have potentially liberating functions in addition to potentially colonizing ones. In differing ways, the authors also show how attention to representations of psychological issues allows for a means of exposing the oft-troubling agendas that lie behind constructions of

mental illness. And, they demonstrate the importance of ongoing awareness of psychological and cultural issues during an age when so many vital topics — stigma, advertising, identity, betterment, desire, torture — combine the two discourses in exceedingly complex ways.

Ultimately, recognition of the psychological aspects of popular cultures enables deeper understanding of our collective and projective selves and of the forces involved in constructing them.

Jonathan M. Metzl is the Frederick B. Rentschler II Chair of Sociology and Medicine, Health, and Society and the director of the Program in Medicine, Health, and Society at Vanderbilt University. His books include The Protest Psychosis (2010); Against Health (ed., 2010); Difference and Identity in Medicine (ed., 2005); and Prozac on the Couch (2003).

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Introduction

LAWRENCE C. RUBIN

*Last night I saw upon the stair
A little man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
Oh, how I wish he'd go away!*

A few semesters back, I was given the opportunity to construct an undergraduate course of my choosing. Eager to break free of the constraints of the traditional undergraduate psychology curriculum, I decided to bring together two of my professional passions — popular culture and psychopathology. The course, “Mental Illness and the Movies,”² gave students (and me) the chance to explore the ways in which American film captures the heights and depths of the human experience. Who can possibly forget Jack Nicholson’s portrayal of sociopath R.P. McMurphy in *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Olivia de Havilland’s depiction of the fragile Virginia Cunningham in *The Snake Pit*, Dustin Hoffman’s powerful rendering of the autistic Raymond Babbitt in *Rainman* or Patty McCormack’s frightening Rhoda Penmark in *The Bad Seed*? Students, particularly the younger ones who had never seen these movies, instantly appreciated the powerful and compassionate depictions of mental illness these films offered.

Due to popular demand, or perhaps the desire to escape experimental psychology or research statistics, I was once again asked to construct a course that would somehow catch the attention of students already sated on Freud, Pavlov and Kitty Genovese.³ How to capture the imagination and stimulate both the intellect and curiosity of students raised on social media, video games, and fast food? The resulting course, “Psychology and Popular Culture,” explored the ways in which foundational research in the field of Psychology was reflected in every facet of popular culture — from cartoons to commercials

to fast food. Students immersed themselves in the course and came away more savvy and psychologically sophisticated consumers of all things popular.

Soon after these courses debuted, I was given the opportunity to create a new division of the Popular Culture Association (PCA), Mental Health & Mental Illness and Popular Culture. My call for papers was greeted with interest from scholars all over the globe. The proposed topics ranged from stigmatization of the mentally ill in Nigerian film to the psychologically traumatizing effect of piloting simulated warrior drones and to the gendering of hysteria in 19th-century France. Each topic was more fascinating than the last, and choosing between them for representation at the 2010 annual conference of the National Popular Culture and American Culture Association in St. Louis was a challenge.

On the heels of that conference and the energy of the presenters, I turned my efforts to this volume and once again reached out to scholars and clinicians interested in exploring the unique crossroads of mental illness and popular culture. It was my hope that this call would generate interest both here and abroad in the ways in which the full range of popular culture has been used as a conduit to deepen our discourse around and understanding of mental illness. My hopes have been exceeded.

The essays in **Section One**, “Mental Illness Depicted in Popular Culture,” address how various specific forms of psychiatric disorder have been addressed in film, on stage, and in literature. Jeffrey K. Johnson’s “The Hero with a Thousand Dysfluencies: The Changing Portrayals of People Who Stutter” compares the way that popular culture venues have traditionally presented people who stutter with new narratives that display stutterers as heroes. Elizabeth S. EnglandKennedy’s “Representations of Attention Deficit Disorder: Portrayals of Public Skepticism in Popular Media” focuses on media representations of attention deficit disorder (with and without hyperactivity) and the ways in which these portrayals intensify cultural stereotypes. Debra Merkin’s “Smooth Operator: The Compensated Psychopath in Cinema” describes the subclinical expression of psychopathy and how it is romanticized in Hollywood cinema. Shawn M. Phillips’s “The Most Dangerous Deviants in America: Why the Disabled Are Depicted as Deranged Killers” asks how people with disabilities have been negatively typecasted in popular culture, particularly in slasher/horror films and stories. Laura Tropp’s “Off Their Rockers: Representation of Postpartum Depression” explores such questions as how “madness” and “craziness” are associated with postpartum depression, who is represented as shouldering the burden of the illness, and how depictions of this illness position the role of motherhood in society. Julian Vigo’s “Lesbianism and the Fourth Dimension: The Psychotic Lesbian” analyses the popular cultural media representations of the lesbian as insane — from the popular les-

bian, knife-wielding doppelgänger in *Basic Instinct* to the very “real life” interpretation of “Celestia.” Finally, Alena Papayanis’s “‘The Veteran Problem’: Examining Contemporary Constructions of Returning Veterans” revolves around the image of the “damaged” war veteran by drawing both from case studies and media analysis in order to deconstruct the popular mis-characterization of the veteran as dangerous.

The essays in **Section Two**, which is entitled “Popular Culture Genres and Mental Illness,” pull back the lens, so to speak, in order to understand how various genres of popular culture are utilized to communicate our often confusing and conflictual relationship with the mentally ill. Esther Terry’s “Musical Storm and Mental Stress: Trauma and Instability in Contemporary American Musical Theater” offers a study of the depiction of mental illness and treatment in Broadway musicals. Wanda Little Fenimore’s “Bad Girls: From Eve to Britney” examines media portrayals of three contemporary “bad” girls — Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, and the late Amy Winehouse — all of whom have a history of sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, mental illness, and run-ins with the law, and asks, Are they really “bad girls?” Sarah J. Rudolph’s “Evolving Stages: Representations of Mental Illness in Contemporary American Theater” considers the various iterations of the relationship between gender and mental illness on the American stage and situates them on the larger landscape of popular culture. Katie Ellis’s “New Media as a Powerful Ally in the Representation of Mental Illness: YouTube, Resistance and Change” seeks to understand the way in which homemade videos convey messages of mental health and mental illness. Finally, my own “On the Wings of Icarus: Exploring the Flawed Superhero” asks why it is so compelling to construct our superheroes as wounded warriors.

The essays in **Section Three**, entitled “Mental Illness and Popular Culture Abroad,” investigate the fascinating ways in which popular culture reflects mental illness outside the United States. Kimberley White’s “The Aesthetics of Mad Spaces: Policing the Public Image of Graffiti and Mental Illness in Canada” explores the way that the narratives of madness, disease and disorder have been taken up in the representation and regulation of graffiti as a social problem and as sign of social danger in Toronto. Philippa Martyr’s “Beyond Beyond Reason: Images of People with Mental Disabilities in Australian Film Since the 1970s” examines Australian film’s portrayal of mental illness in the last thirty years, from the production of Australia’s first self-consciously “psychiatric”-themed film, *Between Wars*, to the present. Saheed Aderinto’s “Representing ‘Tradition,’ Confusing ‘Modernity’: Love and Mental Illness in Yoruba (Nigerian) Video Films” illuminates the intersection of love, sexuality, masculinity, and mental illness in Nigerian home video, drawing evidence from a particular Yoruba movie entitled *Ayo ni Mofe*. And finally, Lee Knifton’s

“Reframing Mental Health and Illness: Perspectives from the Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival” takes us to the Scotland to investigate a grass-roots movement that has impacted the perception and treatment of people with chronic psychiatric disorders.

NOTES

1. From the poem “Antigonish” by Williams Hughes Mearns (1875–1965), this was the chilling mantra of the serial murderer/dissociative identity disordered protagonist in the film *Identity* (2003).

2. For an excellent discussion of the many ways in which psychopathology has been depicted in cinema, see Danny Wedding, *Movies & Mental Illness* (Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe, 2005).

3. Kitty Genovese was a New Yorker who was brutally murdered in the early 1960s while neighbors reportedly failed to assist. Her story became the subject of a subsequent body of social psychology literature on the topic of “bystander apathy” and “diffusion of responsibility.”

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One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. Directed by Milos Forman. 1975. Hollywood, CA: United Artists, 2002. DVD.

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The Snake Pit. Directed by Anatole Litvak. 1948. Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2004. DVD.

SECTION ONE

*Mental Illness Depicted
in Popular Culture*

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1

The Hero with a Thousand Dysfluencies

The Changing Portrayals of People Who Stutter

JEFFREY K. JOHNSON

Mentally and physically challenged characters have appeared for decades in popular culture mediums like film, television, and genre fiction. Traditionally, creators have often constructed these characters to be the embodiments of a disorder or impediment, and thus these creations have commonly borne little to no resemblance to actual human beings. Frequently, a mentally or physically challenged character acted as either comic relief or a story point, but he/she rarely was allowed to be lifelike. Although popular culture portrayals have begun to change over the last few years, one of the slowest types to evolve is the character in film, television, and popular fiction who stutters.

Generally, before the late twentieth century, a person who stuttered was almost never shown to be a three-dimensional character and often was merely seen as the embodiment of a speech impediment. Interestingly, within the last decade or so writers and artists have together created a new crop of films, television shows and children's stories that showcase a person who stutters as a hero.

This chapter will compare the way that popular culture venues have traditionally presented people who stutter with new narratives that display stutters as heroes. The differences between the traditional and new narratives reveal a fascinating change in not only how society views people who stutter but also how cultural normality is being refined.¹