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Visions of Madness

An Investigation into Cinematic Representations of Unreason

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Abstract

Madness is often associated with violence, criminality, and degenerative human failure in stigmatising media reports, and these are most people's site of information about madness. Despite (or maybe because of) reductions in stigmatising reporting,¹ negative perceptions of madness persist, notwithstanding stringent broadcast standards and expensive public health campaigns. When regulation dominates, extreme views can move underground² into less monitored areas such as film which enjoys a wider scope to explore ideas and issues concerning a culture. Agencies which have more freedom to represent madness beyond objective journalistic conventions can be more subversive.

This work takes Foucault's archaeology of madness (among other works) as its point of departure to look at cinematic representations of madness, exploring the notion that cinema reflects and reinforces the asylum discourse. It investigates cinema as a strategy of neurotic reiteration to confine madness in narrative to close down the spectre of the Other in cultural structures to exorcise it from the collective consciousness. Commercial imperatives drive stigmatising representations of madness, drawing on cultural loadings inherent in the asylum discourse, trading on demonising and pathologising to exacerbate drama and tension, essential elements of tragedy. Foucault's framework is the basis for detailed analyses and close readings of a selection of cinematic representations, critiquing their role as constituent of, and constituting, the spectacle of madness. The films considered are from New Zealand and dominant (i.e. Hollywood) cinema in order to permit comparisons between representations here and overseas.

This work follows my master's thesis (1999), which used a similar methodology to examine representations of suicide in cinema in four popular films. Here, I look at the ideas that represent knowledge and authority about madness as represented in discourses associated with cinema. I look at loadings of illness, moral failure, Otherness, animality, and the mechanisms through which the asylum discourse of containment and spectacle is validated (or otherwise). This links with Fuery's discussion of madness and cinema, and madness as a necessary aspect of spectatorship that makes cinema possible. It also connects to my current employment on a project addressing stigma and discrimination against people with experience of madness.

¹ Fikkers, D., et al. (2005). *Discriminating Times? A Re-survey of New Zealand Print Media Reporting on Mental Health*. Wellington, Mental Health Commission. Smellie, P. Foreword. P. 1.

² Ibid.

Preface

This work continues my interest in the subject of madness in cinematic representation, looking at its forms, communications, sources of meaning, and the agencies that disseminate them. My master's thesis researched representations of suicide onscreen, and I continue the project of ascertaining levels of enquiry, their articulation, relative importance to the subject, and their socio-historic periods. From this basis I look at the extent to which these articulations are resisted or challenged, subject to internal discrimination and separation, and how varying ideologies are represented in specific texts. I isolate the practitioners of representation and explore their reasons for doing so, and how their interests were advantaged or otherwise.

This enquiry connects to my work in the mental health sector where I was conscious of the popularity and ubiquitous nature of cinema³ and its potential usefulness in disseminating and communicating ideas about stereotypes and stigmatising representations. I know the effect of representations on people receiving services, the staff providing them, policies, laws, employment, social services, medical services, and participation in the community for people deemed insane by the medical system. This was apparent in December 2005 in West Auckland when a person receiving mental health services was involved in high-profile attack in a downtown Henderson street⁴ not far from where I worked. The media maelstrom surrounding the incident was intense, and calls to lock them up came from the mayor and across talkback radio. The consensus was that there were packs of roaming mental patients at loose in the community, unsupervised and unpredictable. This was perceived as being because asylums had closed down, and mental patients were being left unsupported, unsupervised, and at large.

Even the most balanced reports had connotations of a community under siege by irrational, violent people let loose from mental health care without follow-up support and regular supervision. The overarching perception was of besieged communities threatened by idealistic, politically correct, liberal political ideals, and of under-resourced mental health services staffed by underpaid and overworked people stretched too far, stressed, and

³ The term 'cinema' here is intended to refer to more than specific films; it includes the wider cinema industry, marketing and distribution, film teaching and education, criticism, reviewing, and writing. Also included are video and DVD marketing and distribution, and broadcast television media.

⁴ -Psyche Team Assessed Attacker as 'No Threat' in *Western Leader*, 1 December 2005.

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in crisis themselves. Sadly, part of this was true. Fundamental aspects of treatment and support for people post-crisis and pre-recuperation were inadequate, which bolstered calls to *ōlock øm upō*, whereas more resourcing and better services might have prevented the tragedy. Part of this research is directed towards dismantling the stigma invested in icons of madness in cinema, conveyed through representations that reinforce and assert stereotypes of unpredictability and violence in people diagnosed with mental illness such as were conveyed in media reports of the West Auckland incident. As sector workers know, the most useful way of supporting people to avoid trauma and crisis (people using mental health services or otherwise) is for the stigma of madness to be reduced. This will in turn encourage people to feel less shame or guilt about asking for help and support. In a violent society where murders committed by people with a mental illness are less than six percent of total murders in New Zealand in a year (a proportion declining since the closing of asylums⁵), it is vital to address media stigma and scapegoating to help build a society where people feel safe and free to contact help when they need it. Stigma against mental illness stops people doing this, and is a barrier to people accessing and participating in recovery and full citizenship with its rights and responsibilities. I argue that the asylum discourse, furthered by cinema unfettered by standards and ethical considerations, contributes to societal discrimination and internalised stigma against people diagnosed with a mental illness and prevents people from seeking help. It also inhibits people's recovery to becoming law-abiding, valued members of society who enjoy fulfilling lives. I hope this thesis plays some part in dismantling the stigma and negative messages associated with so-called mental illness, and offers enlightenment as to how the processes and mechanisms of these communications work to constitute stereotype and sanction discrimination.

⁵ Simpson, D. A., et al. (2003). *Myth and Reality: The Relationship between Mental Illness and Homicide in New Zealand*. Auckland, Health Research Council of New Zealand supported by the Mental Health Commission.

Acknowledgements

I have been studying for all of my sons' lives, and I owe them the greatest debt a father can owe. I had no idea of the demands and pressures this study would require. I embraced Doctoral research with gusto and selfish regard, little realising the time and attention it would take. I look forward to getting to know my boys free from this tyranny, and for them to know me as a father without this driving imperative and seemingly never-ending pursuit. I look forward to being their father; I will now spend quality time with them to repay some of the time I have been absent physically or psychologically. I love them more than life; I thank Theodore for being understanding and patient; he has not known a 'traditional' dad for fifteen years. I look forward to his vitality, not to mention his talented guitar playing, as he begins adolescence. I thank Joshua for coming along and reminding me of the delight of fatherhood. I thank them both for teaching me the true meaning of life and what really matters. These boys are my achievement, humility, pride, and bliss; I feel strengthened and fulfilled by them.

I lost my mother Valerie many years ago, but she is always with me. You would have loved your grandchildren; they are characters and sweet people, and I wish they could have known you. You inspired me with your love of reading and knowledge, and though I wandered away from your advice, I came back to it at last. You knew me so well, better than I knew myself. You were taken too soon; I miss you but I know you are proud.

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Page 12 (top): Jack Nicholson as Randall P. McMurphy restrained in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman, 1975).

Page 12 (bottom): Chief Bromden (Will Sampson) embraces McMurphy (Nicholson) in the final scene to *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Bromden has just smothered McMurphy with a pillow after McMurphy has been lobotomised as punishment for his antics.

Page 212 (top): Janet Frame (Kerry Fox) is perched precariously on a hill, epitomising the insecure nature of Antipodean Gothic film and Frame's resistance to its hegemony.

Page 212 (bottom): Dante's geocentric universe with Jerusalem at the top and purgatory directly opposite near the antipodes. In Alighieri, D. (1998). *The Divine Comedy*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. P. 6.