Schizophrenia and the Movies: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Schizophrenia has been around for a very long time since the times of the Bible. When schizophrenia was given and declared a name by Eugen Bleular many ideas of what schizophrenia was came into play and had a great impact on the Medical and Western World as well as the movie industry. This literature review is written to draw a brief history on how schizophrenia impacted the medical world and how it would become depicted in the slasher film and if the movie industry would ever have an impact on the western world.
Schizophrenia and the Movies: A Literature Review

Schizophrenia is a mental disorder in which some individuals show signs of irrational thoughts. Poor speech, hallucinations, and strange emotional responses to certain events. These are the bizarre additions to a schizophrenic’s behavior. Another form of schizophrenia includes social withdrawal, lack of emotion, and experience feeling drained of energy and interest to achieve goals. In other cases of schizophrenia individuals may show odd gestures, awkward movements or repeated grimaces. Others may display a catatonic stupor or what would seem as though they are frozen in time for several hours. (Comer, 2010, pp. 456-463).

Schizophrenia can be found in various types of literature. One of the best known stories that displays signs of schizophrenia is Edgar Allan Poe’s the Tell Tale Heart. In which a man overcome by paranoia kills an elderly man suspecting that the man’s eye is evil and can do no good. Scenarios such as these are not uncommon especially in the movies and as a result it can be debated on what influence the movies have on a westernized audience, as well as what stereotypes and beliefs are drawn from the movies. In order to grasp a better understanding on what power the movies have had and more specifically in issues of schizophrenia four major questions need to be asked:

1. What is schizophrenia and when was it first diagnosed?
2. What impact has schizophrenia had medically and socially?
3. How has schizophrenia been depicted in media?
4. How might perceptions be changed regarding schizophrenia?

The purpose of this paper is to address the following: schizophrenia, the diagnosis of schizophrenia, the impact of schizophrenia socially and medically, the depictions of schizophrenia in the movies, and how the movies can alter perceptions and ideas of schizophrenia.
What is schizophrenia and when was it first diagnosed

Schizophrenia is a mental disorder that has been around since the times of the Bible. It was often described as “madness” (Lavretsky, 2008, pp. 3-13). For many centuries there was no definite name for it. Yet come 1865 a psychiatrist named Benedict Morel named it “early dementia”. In 1899 psychiatrist Emil Kraeplin renamed it again, but in 1911 psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler named it schizophrenia. Which means “split mind”. When Bleuler created this name he intended it to reflect, “1 a fragmentation of thought processes, 2 a split between thoughts and emotions, and 3 a withdrawal from reality” (Cutting, 1988, p. 152). Since the time of Bleular schizophrenia has been the name that has remained to this psychosis.

Like any disease schizophrenia has symptoms these symptoms, are grouped into three categories. These categories are labeled schizophrenia with positive symptoms which are considered the really bizarre additions to an individuals personality. The symptoms usually consist of delusions which can vary from delusions of grandeur to delusions of paranoia. Poor speech better known as loose associations which refers to connecting words to express an idea but the words have no true relation to each other. [Ex. “The train is coming, a train runs fast, I read an article of people becoming faster”]. A third symptom is heightened perceptions and hallucinations which refers to schizophrenic patients feeling that their senses are going into overdrive which in turn effects them in a way that makes it difficult for them to function. Next there is schizophrenia with negative symptoms which consist of lack of emotion, feeling unusually drained to the point were they cannot achieve their goals, and social withdrawal. Finally the third type of symptoms revolve around psychomotor symptoms which refers to awkward movements and unusual gestures sometimes patients may display catatonia which refers to staying in one position for countless hours as though going into a stupor. (Comer,
An example of this would be someone who holds their arms up while lying down for 6 hours as though they are frozen in time. However, what all these symptoms have in common is that they make it so a schizophrenic patient cannot carry out regular functions. This in turn has certain impacts both medically and socially.

What impact has schizophrenia had medically and socially?

In the early years of medicine back in the last decade of the 1700s institutions became opened by a French physician named Philippe Pinel to treat the insane in a moral manner [Goshen, 1967]. At this time it was considered the first time that the mentally ill were treated with kindness and sympathy. Yet as the times progressed the number of mentally ill patients increased dramatically to about 600,000. At that time there were not enough institutions or room to treat the patients. As a result of the constant increase in patients and lack of funding nurses were left to look after the much greater majority of patients. The institutes eventually became more and more over crowded and the nurses became less and less. The job then shifted from moral treatment to keeping things in order which further created problems in that treatment eventually became immoral. Due to the treatment many patients underwent, more of them began to develop additional symptoms. This soon became named, “social breakdown syndrome” [Comer, 2010, p. 482]. Social breakdown syndrome symptoms were “extreme withdrawal, anger, physical aggressiveness, loss of interest in personal appearance and functioning” [Comer, 2010, p. 482]. This type of treatment lasted up until 1950 which was the period milieu therapy was created.

The concept of milieu therapy was invented in the belief that if patients were, “deprived of opportunities to exercise independence, responsibility, and positive self-regard and to engage in meaningful activities” [Comer, 2010, p. 484]. Then their condition would deteriote. Based on
a study conducted in 2007 by the University of Pittsburgh, revolving 32 individuals, the primary objective was to see how quality of life would effect patients who had schizophrenia. “Quality of Life” was defined as social support and meeting basic needs by making sure that the participants had leisure time, and financial resources [Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 2007, pg. 220]. By the time this study was concluded the results showed that the mental health of schizophrenics had a negative impact on their quality of life. Through the research conducted the testers also found that those who did have schizophrenia, a support system, and had their needs met had a better quality of life which increased by 25% [Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 2007, pg. 221]. Which this study could be used to confirm that Mileu Therapy to some extent is in fact effective. In that it allows patients more freedom to express themselves. Yet even though some aspects of milieu therapy is effective the discovery of anti-psychotic drugs has a greater impact in improving the functions of schizophrenic patients. As shown in the video Young schizophrenic at her mind’s mercy [2009]. In which a young child with schizophrenia is given a medication named Thorazine which helps control her delusions. The professionals who also conducted this study state that, “As newer medications are developed and control of the most troublesome symptoms of schizophrenia becomes reality for most individuals, quality of life is emerging as an important treatment outcome” [Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 2007, pg. 221]. Thus also validating that medication is an important aspect of treatment. The producers of the study also state that though their findings MAY have significance their study was conducted on only a small amount of the schizophrenic population. Which would mean that findings may differ on a grander scale of the schizophrenic population.

While many developments have emerged in the medical field so have developments on perceptions of schizophrenia occurred in American Society. From the perspective of sociocultural theorists however they feel as though schizophrenia is a label that pertains to
individuals who do not fit into the social norms of the greater human population [Modrow, 1992]. In an account Modrow writes about a patient who was diagnosed with schizophrenia at the age of 6 years old. The patient tells Modrow that psychiatrists labeled the young boy as crazy and recommended they send him to a psychiatric hospital immediately. The boy's mother, believing that would damage her son did not send him to an institution but after being told her son was crazy the speaker states that his Mother often thought him to be crazy and as time progressed he himself began to think he really was crazy [Modrow, 1992, pp 1-2]. Social theorists would go on to say that those who are diagnosed with schizophrenia are immediately viewed as crazy and believe that many schizophrenic patients will go on to pretend that they are crazy in order to fit into a stereotype that has been created for them. [Comer, 2010, pg. 475]. This is where the role of movies, more specifically the slasher films come into play by creating, enforcing and projecting commonly used clichés. That of an insane mental patient on the loose murdering the unsuspecting victims [Worland, 2007, p. 227].

How has Schizophrenia been depicted in the slasher film

However, out of all the slasher films John Carpenter’s Halloween (1978) really opened the stage of creating a label for the mentally impaired. [The Horror Fiend, 2010]. The beginning of John Carpenter’s Halloween opens on Halloween night in the year 1963 when a 6 year old boy has just finished watching his sister have sex with her boyfriend. The boy which is later given the name Michael Myers murders his sister. The movie then fast forwards 15 years and it becomes learned that Michael is considered insane and has escaped from a mental hospital that he was confined to since he was 6. As the movie progresses Michael is no longer deemed insane but rather, “pure evil” by his Psychiatrist Dr. Sam Loomis [Carpenter, 1978]. This image implies that Dr. Loomis an assumed professional in the medical field has already given up hope in helping Michael recover from
his psychosis. As the movie later progresses Michael goes on a killing rampage and by the end of the movie has slaughtered 5 victims. One of whom is murdered off screen. This is but one depiction of a mentally impaired individual in the movies.

In 1980 another movie had come out that was directed by William Lustig named Maniac. The movie centers on a Vietnam veteran who owns a small apartment, but what the viewer later finds out is that the veteran named Frank Zito is actually a perverse serial killer diagnosed with schizophrenia. Within Frank’s apartment there are a series of mannequins laid out. To add more to how crazy Frank is, his preferred method of killing is by scalping his victim, stealing their clothes and then placing these items on his mannequins. On another note to add more depth to this character Lustig makes it known that Frank talks to the mannequins as well. [The Horror Fiend, 2010]. Wanting to add further information to this character’s mental state there are depictions of delusions and hallucinations both of which are associated with schizophrenia. [Ex. Frank’s dead Mother rising from the grave and the very end of the movie when all of Frank’s mannequins transform into his victims and then attack and murder him in his bed].

In a non-scientific poll of 38 individuals, conducted on Schizophrenia and the movies 19 of the participants could not come to a consensus on depictions of schizophrenia and the movies. The remaining 19 that did come to a consensus were asked to list the movies that they had seen with depictions of schizophrenia. They were then asked to read a list of symptoms of schizophrenia taken from Comer and then voted whether or not the movies they had listed gave realistic depictions of schizophrenia. The 19 participants voted as follows:

46.4% of the participants when given the list of symptoms in schizophrenia voted that the movies present a non-realistic depiction of schizophrenia and it’s symptoms. 32.1% voted that the movies did depict a realistic depiction of schizophrenia and it’s
symptoms and 21.4% said that it depended on the movie.

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<th>Realistic Depiction of Schizophrenia in the movies</th>
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<td>Yes: 21%</td>
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Though these numbers are considered overall insignificant in terms of the larger human population, the more significant finding from this survey comes later on when the remaining 19 participants were asked about the influence of the movies in western society depicting schizophrenia.

How might perceptions be changed regarding schizophrenia

As social theorist proposed according to Comer, patients of schizophrenia are labeled as “schizophrenic” because these patients do not fit into the social norms of western society. Going back to Cutting when he spoke about how Bleular developed the name, “schizophrenia” Bleular’s logic is that schizophrenic patients are different as they already have, “1 a fragmentation of thought processes, 2 a split between thoughts and emotions, and 3 a withdrawal from reality” (Cutting, 1988, p. 152). In another portion of the survey conducted on schizophrenia and the movies, participants were also asked if depictions of schizophrenia in the movies had influenced western culture in their assumptions of how and why a schizophrenic patient behaves the way they do. The 19 that had reached a consensus on the movies and schizophrenia voted 73.7% “Yes” and the remaining 26.3% “No” the participants were then asked to explain why they voted the way they did one participant who voted “Yes,” as an answer said the following, “Yes- I believe that they make the condition seem, at some times, much worse than it actually is- or that it adds a certain
edge to it. It certainly makes you more hesitant to behave or react a certain way, when confronted with the possibility of schizophrenia—namely because you never know quite what to expect in the movies,” and a participant that answered, “No,” explained “I have not seen a movie about schizophrenics.” In an article written by Vivek Datta the author had this to say about movies and mental illness, “For many people, the movies have coloured their perception of the mentally ill and doctors who care for them. The representation of mental illness, psychiatry and psychiatrists in cinema has reflected the prevailing attitudes to the aetiology of mental disorders and public attitudes towards the discipline of psychiatry” [Datta, 2009, p. 261]. In other words Datta is stating that they believe the movies have carved out an image as to how and what a mentally impaired person is and acts like. However, Datta only expresses one view and only time will tell if movies play a key component in perceptions of mental ailments.

Conclusion

The information covered within this paper has come from many points of view differing from the medical perspective, the perspective of everyday humans, and perspectives relating to the slasher films. Within this essay schizophrenia has been discussed as a mental disorder that has been around for a very long time and that has captivated many people, doctors, audiences, and film directors. It has been explained that schizophrenia has influenced the medical world and social world by forging new ideas and theories that in time have influenced the medical world, and helped birth the slasher films which has questioned whether schizophrenic patients are different from the greater majority of western society, or just insane. Which has revealed that there are perceptions of schizophrenia that have had an impact on western society. However, the research remains inconclusive on whether or not these perceptions of schizophrenia are good or bad.
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