

The depiction of schizophrenia in films



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Clean, Shaven (1993): The Depiction of Schizophrenia on the Silver Screen

- Juwairiya Hussain
- Ibrahim Fatheen Abdul Sameeu

Due to the level of eccentricity involved with it among the general public, mental disorders have long since been a subject of popular culture. They have found their way into literature, classical and contemporary artworks, music, TV, and movies. Schizophrenia is one such disorder; classical tales such as Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843), and Oscar nominated movies such as *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) famously described and depicted the lives of characters living with schizophrenia, although the authenticity of these depictions are debatable. The movie to be reviewed in this paper isn't as well-known as the aforementioned works, but it has been lauded for the objectivity in its depiction of the disorder; this paper will review *Clean, Shaven* (1993) .

Directed Lodge Kerrigan, *Clean, Shaven* depicts the life of Peter Winter (portrayed by Peter Greene) as he struggles to find his daughter after he is released from a mental institution. Abstract and vivid images and sounds are shown throughout the movie, attempting to represent the delusions and hallucinations of someone suffering from schizophrenia. In addition to the primary plot which involves Peter trying to find his daughter, the movie also has a secondary plot involving the case of a murdered child. This sub-plot plays the role of a red herring by trying to convince the viewers believe that Peter is the killer, adding to the level of mistrust the audience already has towards the character. The secondary plot also introduces Jack McNally, the detective investigating the murder, as he convinces himself that Peter is

indeed the killer and pursues him throughout the movie. After a long search, Peter finally finds his daughter in the care of a woman who has adopted her as her own. They finally meet and he takes her to the beach where, thinking that he is killing another little girl, Peter is shot to death by Det. McNally.

Throughout the movie Peter was shown to be socially inept with a peculiar fear of mirrors, or any reflective surface, which he covers up. The social withdrawal and the loneliness felt by individuals suffering from schizophrenia are depicted by the minimal use of dialogue in the movie.

Schizophrenia is a psychotic disorder where individuals' functioning becomes worse due to abnormal motor functions, disturbed emotions and odd thinking. Schizophrenic individuals lose their touch with reality and typically experience hallucinations and delusions. It is very likely that according to the DSM-IV criteria, Peter would've been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. DSM V categorizes five symptoms which are required in order to diagnose an individual for schizophrenia. (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013)

They are:

1. Delusions
2. Hallucinations
3. Disorganized speech
4. Grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior
5. Negative symptoms

Two or more of the above must be present for a significant amount of time during a one month period. Out of the two symptoms, at least one of them

must be delusions, hallucinations, or disorganized speech. These symptoms must be present for at least 6 months. (APA, 2013)

In the movie, Peter is shown to have extreme delusions of persecution. He believes that he had been taken and operated on by someone, and that he has been implanted with some kind of a receiver under the skin on the back of his neck and a transmitter in his left middle-finger. Throughout the movie, Peter rubs the back of his neck repeatedly and goes as far as removing his own fingernail in order to take out the supposed transmitter under it, after a particularly severe case of hallucinations. He is also shown cutting into his own scalp using a pair of scissors, presumably to remove the receiver somewhere in his head or neck. The depictions of his delusions are such that even the newspapers used to cover the windows of his car all contain articles about conspiracy theories and pseudoscience. In one of the last scenes of the movie where he was taking his daughter to the beach, Peter told Nicole that she must be very careful since there are people out there who want to harm her. He also informed her about the receiver and transmitter implanted in him; the last scene of the movie shows Nicole calling out to a dead Peter using a radio set. He also displays delusions of reference in some of the scenes, especially in one scene where he encountered an enraged individual shouting at and mocking an unknown person or animal; for the next few scenes he kept remembering the man shouting, as if he had been shouting at Peter all along.

As mentioned before, Peter also suffers from auditory hallucinations. He kept hearing voices in his head which he believed was due to the implants in his body. As such, his hallucinations are depicted in the forms of disembodied

voices seemingly coming from a radio and just static white noise. At first, these noises could be confused for him listening to the stereo in his car, but the sheer agony in his face when he keeps on hearing them swiftly cleared up that particular misperception. The voices didn't address him directly and he didn't have conversations with the voices in his head; they were just there to cause him extreme discomfort.

Peter also displayed some levels of deteriorated motor functioning. Despite it not being severe enough to be debilitating or to make him catatonic, it did hinder some of the daily functions which required fine motor skills. For instance, he seemed to be able to drive around in his car, which he also lived in, without incident, but in a scene where he was shaving all his body hair clean (except for his head; hence the name of the movie), he did manage to cut himself several times rather badly. He didn't display any other indication of motor dysfunction.

Peter portrays heightened perception and social withdrawal throughout the movie. He was shown to be very sensitive to voices and sounds (whistle of the kettle and people talking) and as a result remains restless most of the time. When he was offered food by his mother, he handled the food with extreme care directing his full attention to the process of fixing a sandwich. He was told by his mother to go out and not stay inside all day, indicating he was socially very withdrawn. The only times Peter spoke in the movie was when he was in his mother's kitchen with her and when he was with Nicole; even then he barely spoke and had difficulty putting his thoughts into words, also indicative of poverty of speech. It was quite fascinating to observe similar kinds of social isolation in his daughter's behavior, who

always played alone, spent a lot of her time in isolation, and was portrayed as a girl with few words and emotions.

Speaking of Peter's family, the relationship between him and his mother showed signs of double-blind communication. (Comer, 2009) Even though it was mentioned that Peter had a happy childhood, she appeared quite unaffected by the fact that her son is suffering from a serious mental disorder and didn't display any kind of maternal affection towards him. In fact, the realization that she was Peter's mother, and not some distant relative or his landlady, came when he called her "mom" when he was leaving her house after the visit. On the other hand, she did order him around several times during his brief stay at her house as mentioned in a previous example. While her body language and behavior seemed quite apathetic, she did ask him to do something that would actually be helpful to him. This is enough to cause dissonance. Furthermore, she was portrayed as the kind of schizophrenogenic mother that Frieda Fromm-Reichmann described in her explanation of schizophrenia. (Comer, 2009)

The relative ease in which everyone involved with the murder case was convinced that Peter was the killer is likely to occur in a similar fashion if the same thing were to happen in this culture. Irrespective of the culture, there are high levels of prejudice displayed towards individuals suffering from mental disorders. Peter was looked upon as an oddball by the few people he was seen to be in the same scene with. One fine example is when he spent an entire day combing through books in a library, looking for his daughter. His haphazard appearance and bizarre attitude left practically everyone in the library staring at him. When the detective came to the library following <https://assignbuster.com/the-depiction-of-schizophrenia-in-films/>

Peter's trail the librarian gave an exaggerated account of her encounter with him, making him out to be a degenerate and pervert, which the detective ate up. The family dynamic would, however, would be different. In many instances, whole families have gotten together to take care of a family member who is mentally disabled by providing monetary and living aid. There are instances of family members being isolated from the rest of the family due to their mental disorders but they would almost never be entirely cut off.

For all intents and purposes, this movie did indeed hold up to its claim to be objective in its depiction of schizophrenia. It is a beautiful movie which displayed the struggles of a schizophrenic in his daily life, both internal and external. This movie conveyed a lot of emotion through its setting, cinematography and score; consequently, the emotions conveyed are quite ineffable and need to be experienced personally to appreciate. As the late Roger Ebert (1995) said, this film will be “valued by anyone with a serious interest in schizophrenia or, for that matter, in film”.

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