

Depictions of Mental Illness in Feature Film

Barry H. Schneider

Barry H. Schneider is a retired clinical psychologist and professor of psychology. He has taught full-time at the University of Ottawa, the University of Toronto and Boston College as well as visiting professor appointments in 11 countries. He also has some background in film studies, including academic coursework and consulting work with independent filmmakers.

Series Description:

This course provides an overview of the depiction of mental illness in feature film, featuring a brief historical overview and an introduction to the technical tools used by filmmakers. The material presented in class will be complemented by an in-depth analysis and discussion of one film each week.

Schedule of Topics:

1. Week 1: Historical and Technical Introduction; Reconciling Film Depictions with the Definition of Psychopathology

A chronological history spanning over a century opens the course, along with a brief presentation of film techniques such as editing, lighting, music, and camera position. Our discussion focuses on the basic nature of psychopathology based on the main character in *Lars and the Real Girl*.

2. Week 2. The “Nervous Breakdown” in Context

We begin an in-depth analysis of *Streetcar Named Desire*, including the roots of Blanche's situation in the life history of Tennessee Williams, the music, acting and symbolism.

3. Week 3. Gender Differences in the Images of Mental Illness

This discussion begins with a comparison of Blanche and Stanley in *Streetcar*. We continue with a brief overview of other films with revealing depictions of gender differences, including *Amélie*, *Play Misty for Me* and several foreign films useful in understanding the intersection of gender and culture.

4. Week 4. Filmmakers against Institutions

We discuss the merits of Blanche's institutionalization. The many excellent films depicting horrific aspects of institutionalization (e.g., *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*, *Shock Corridor*, *One Flew over the*

Cuckoo's Nest) are compared with the minority in which institutionalization is seen as beneficial (e.g., *Boys' Town*, *Spellbound*, *Short Term 12*).

5. Week 5. Film Depictions of Developmental Disability

This week's class is devoted to the contributions of feature films to debates about the nature, cause and treatment of intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder.

6. Week 6. Psychotherapy in Film

Stereotyped depictions of the “aha” moment (e.g., *Ordinary People*, *Spellbound*) are contrasted with the more nuanced description of therapy in *The Son's Room* and the revelations emerging from films in which total imposters conduct psychotherapy.