

PAPER**PSYCHIATRY: BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES**

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Psychopathy and the Cinema: Fact or Fiction?

ABSTRACT: The authors investigated the relationship between cinema and psychopathy to describe and analyze the portrayal of fictional psychopathic characters in popular films and over cinematic history. From 400 films (1915–2010), 126 fictional psychopathic characters (21 female and 105 male) were selected based on the realism and clinical accuracy of their profiles. Movies were then analyzed by senior forensic psychiatrists and cinema critics. Secondary (71%) and manipulative (48%) subtypes were the most common in the female group, while secondary (51%) and prototypical (34%) were the most common in the male group. Corresponding to the increased understanding of clinical psychopathy by professional mental health providers over time, the clinical description of and epidemiological data on fictional psychopaths in popular films have become more realistic. Realistic fictional psychopaths remain in the minority but are very important for didactic purposes in Academic facilities, as “teaching Movies.”

KEYWORDS: forensic science, forensic psychiatry, cinema, psychopathy, education in forensic psychiatry, art

Film is particularly well suited to depicting psychological states and mental illness. Its influence on the public's perception of mental illness is especially notable because many people are poorly informed about mental disorders. The combination of images, dialog, sound effects, and music in a film mimics our stream of consciousness. Finally, psychology and psychopathology have a long and deep history in cinema (1–4).

Our principal interest is the portrayal of fictional psychopaths in films. Rather than assessing their commercial success or “esthetic efficiency” and appeal, we assess the degree to which their portrayal was realistic from the clinical and psychopathological viewpoint of psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and mental health professionals. The authors propose an in-depth analysis and description of fictional psychopaths over time. Furthermore, by focusing on psychopathy in these fictional characters, we are able to discuss the portrayal of mental illness in cinema and propose a fictional psychopathic character nosography for film history.

Method

Sample: Film Databases

The author used the following international databases and film sources: The American Film Institute (AFI), Academy Awards, Archive.org, Base de Données Françaises du Cinéma sur Internet (BDFCI), British Film Institute (BFI), Cinebaseinternational, Cinefiches.com, Cinemovies.fr, Cinoche, CITWF, Les Gens du Cinéma, Greatest Films, Il était une fois le cinéma, Internet Movie Database (IMDb), Oh My Gore!, and Western Décrypté.

All of these film databases were accessible on the Internet without requiring authorization.

The authors obtained as much information as possible about each fictional character, relying primarily on the films but also using any other available sources or documentation to make an accurate psychiatric diagnosis, specifically in terms of psychopathy. Because of the heterogeneous and abstract nature of our materials, we were not able to perform either classical clinical evaluation or psychometric tests. That is, our diagnosis and classification were the sole results of reviewing films and any additional information on a specific character and our discussions regarding how the character evolved in a specific context (e.g., interactions with others, personal history). Movies were visualized and analyzed by senior forensic psychiatrists and movie critics.

Psychopathy Subtypes and Nosography

Currently, there is a growing support for the heterogeneity of psychopathy; however, as evidenced through many different studies, there is little agreement on how to differentiate and identify subtypes. Although the current literature primarily supports the primary–secondary distinction, it is too soon to conclude that this is the optimal distinction (5,6). However, based on an exhaustive literature review, the authors opted for two classifications.

The first classification is an expansion of Karpman's (1941) original idea of primary and secondary psychopathy (5–7). According to Karpman, primary psychopathy is characterized by a heritable affective deficit with the following characteristics: high heritability etiology, high factor 1 scores on the PCL-R, and higher levels of overt narcissism. Secondary psychopathy is characterized by an environmentally acquired affective disturbance with consequences such as high environmental etiology, high factor 2 scores on the PCL-R, a higher level of covert narcissism and anxiety as well as a constellation of borderline traits. Secondary psychopaths have low levels of heritability etiology

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and low factor 1 scores on the PCL-R (5–8). Finally, according to Karpman's theory, both primary and secondary psychopathies are phenotypically similar, differing only in the source of the symptoms: a constitutional affective deficit or an affective disturbance resulting from early psychosocial learning (5–8).

The second classification is related to the study regarding psychopathic subtypes conducted by Hervé in 2003 (9–11). Hervé used the three-factor model of psychopathy (interpersonal, affective, and lifestyle) proposed by Cooke and Michie in 2001 instead of the more common two-factor model (12,13). The analysis was conducted on archival data from 202 Canadian federal prison inmates with high scores (≥ 27) on the PCL-R. Four main clusters emerged from Hervé's study: (i) classic/idiopathic/prototypical, (ii) manipulative, (iii) macho and (iv) pseudopsychopath. The subtypes differed in the constellation of the core characteristics of the portrayed disorder. The highest overall PCL-R scores and high scores on all three factors characterized the classic/idiopathic/prototypical subgroup. The macho group had the second highest overall PCL-R scores and low scores on the interpersonal factor but scored highly on affective and lifestyle factors. This group lacked the glibness and charm required for a confidence game but was capable of manipulating others through force and intimidation (e.g., robberies and assaults). High scores on the interpersonal and affective factors but lower scores on the lifestyle factor characterized the manipulative subgroup. They are "talkers," especially in crimes involving fraud and deception. The final group, the pseudopsychopaths (also called sociopaths), had the lowest PCL-R total scores and interpersonal and behavioral but not affective characteristics. Hervé noted that, in general, this group did not meet the PCL-R research cutoff of a total score 30 that is typically required for a diagnosis of psychopathy. Hervé and Hare also examined the relationship between group membership and past crimes committed by participants. Their findings suggest the following: pseudopsychopaths and prototypical psychopaths have more past offenses than the two other groups; pseudo and macho psychopaths have more anger-related past offenses (e.g., vandalism, threats); manipulative psychopaths have the fewest past offenses, the least serious interpersonal violence, and the most fraud offenses; and macho psychopaths have the greatest number of drug-related offenses (11). These data provide an alternative to the primary–secondary distinction and may suggest that lower levels of psychopathic traits may result in additional subtypes of psychopathy (9–11).

In general, these studies provide very important and current support related to psychopathy and the heterogeneous character of this syndrome.

Statistical Analyses

One way that we described our set of observations was to calculate the average value (measure of central tendency) of each group using the arithmetic mean (14).

Results

Using the film database cited above, the villains from 400 films (one per film) were selected for analysis. All these movies were visualized and analyzed by senior forensic psychiatrists and film critics. From this sample, 274 characters were excluded because they were too caricatured and/or too fictional (Fantasy and Comics Movie Villains). Additional exclusion criteria were (i) invincibility, (ii) having magical powers, (iii) being

nonhuman (monsters, spirits, ghosts) and other elements evoking a (iv) nonrealistic context.

Thus, 126 films comprised our basic sample. These films were international and released between 1915 (*The Birth of a Nation*) to 2010 (*The Lovely Bones*). All film genres were represented: adventure, comedy, drama, melodrama, thriller, blockbusters, western, film noir, and war films.

The 126 fictional characters were comprised of 21 women (17%) and 105 men (83%), based upon their villain characteristics and psychopathic-like profiles and behaviors.

In Table 1, the authors propose a nosography based on psychopathic character variations in popular film history.

Among the male characters, 51 were primary (49%) and 54 secondary psychopaths (51%). Using the Hervé classification, 36 were classic/idiopathic (34%), 21 were manipulative (20%), 28 were macho (27%), and 20 were pseudopsychopaths (19%).

Among the female characters, six were primary (29%) and 15 secondary (71%) psychopaths. Using the Hervé classification, three were classic/idiopathic (14%), 10 were manipulative (48%) and eight were pseudopsychopaths (38%). No macho psychopaths were found among our female sample.

Discussion

Analysis of Psychopathic Characters through Film History

Early representations of psychopaths in film were often created with a poor or incomplete understanding of psychopathic personalities or, as they are usually labeled today, psychopathic syndrome. They were often caricatured as sadistic, unpredictable, sexually depraved, and emotionally unstable with a compulsion to engage in random violence, murders, and destruction, usually presenting with a series of bizarre mannerisms, such as giggling, laughing, or facial tics, often creating famous and unreal characters. It was similar to a mix of axis 2, especially cluster B, with clinical diagnoses with additional characteristics, such as efficient success (15). The public's overall unfamiliarity with mental illness or psychological disorders led them to accept this depiction and even perceive it as almost "realistic." Until the late 1950s, American cinematic conventions usually relegated the psychopath to genre villains, such as gangsters, mad scientists, super villains, serial killers, and many other types of generic criminals. Even homosexuality was portrayed as psychopathic behavior in films such as *They Only Kill Their Masters* (1972) prior to the removal of homosexuality from the DSM in 1973.

Famous examples of caricatured psychopaths of this type are Tommy Udo in *Kiss of Death*, Cody Jarrett in *White Heat*, and Antonio "Tony" Camonte in the 1932 version of *Scarface*. One of the first, rarest, and more realistic exceptions to this depiction before the 1960s is the character of child murderer Hans Beckert in the 1931 Fritz Lang film *M*. Lorre portrays Beckert as an outwardly unremarkable man tormented by a compulsion to murder children ritualistically, which is a substantially more realistic depiction of what would eventually be known today as a sexually violent predator (SVP) most likely suffering from psychosis.

A very interesting change occurred in 1957 with the arrest of Ed Gein in Plainfield, Wisconsin (16). Because of the attention it received in America, the portrayal of psychopaths in film was re-routed into an almost separate and exclusive film genre: horror. The exploits and details of the Ed Gein case, including grave robbing, cannibalism, and necrophilia, became a broad template for the characteristics and activities of what was considered psycho-

TABLE 1—*Clinical fictional psychopathic nosography.*

Fictional Character	The Movie (date)	Diagnosis of Psychopathy		
		Primary (P)/ Secondary (S)	Classic/Idiopathic – Manipulative – Macho – Pseudopsychopath	Alternative/Additional Diagnosis
Male				
Aaron Stampler	Primal Fear (1996)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Anton Chigurh	No Country for Old Men (2007)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Al Capone	The Untouchables (1987)	Primary	Macho	N/A
Alex DeLarge	A Clockwork Orange (1971)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Alonzo Harris	Training Day (2001)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Amon Goeth	Schindler's List (1993)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Angel Eyes	The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly (1966)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Archibald Cunningham	Rob Roy (1995)	Primary	Manipulative	N/A
Auric Goldfinger	Goldfinger (1964)	Primary	Macho	N/A
Bartel	Calvaire (2004)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Psychosis
Ben	Man Bites Dog (1992)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
Bill	Kill Bill (2003 and 2004)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Bill the Butcher	Gang of New York (2002)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Billy Loomis (aka Ghostface)	Scream (1996)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Bruno Davert	Le couperet (2005)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
Cal Hockley	Titanic (1997)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Narcissistic Personality Disorder
Cardinal de Richelieu	The Three Musketeers series	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Castor Troy	Face Off (1997)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Charles Lee Ray	Chucky series	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	Paraphilia
Charlie Venner	Straw Dogs (1971)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Christian Szell, MD	Marathon Man (1976)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Clarence Boddicker	Robocop (1987)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Clyde Barrow	Bonnie and Clyde (1967)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
Cody Jarrett	White Heat (1949)	Primary	Macho	N/A
Colonel Nathan R. Jessep	A Few Good Men (1992)	Primary	Macho	N/A
Colonel Stuart	Die Hard 2 (1990)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Colonel Walter E. Kurtz	Apocalypse Now (1979)	Secondary	Manipulative	Psychosis
Commodus	Gladiator (2000)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Cyrus Grissom	Con Air (1997)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Dale Massie	Cold Creek Manor (2003)	Secondary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Damon Killian	The Running Man (1987)	Primary	Manipulative	N/A
Denis Klein	36 Quai des Orfèvres (2004)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Denis Peck	Internal Affairs (1990)	Primary	Manipulative	N/A
Dick Jones	Robocop (1987)	Primary	Manipulative	N/A
Dick Lecter	Pootie Tang (2001)	Primary	Manipulative	N/A
Early Grayce	Kalifornia (1993)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Eric Qualen	Cliffhanger (1993)	Primary	Macho	N/A
Fernand Montego	The Count of Monte Cristo series	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Francis Dolarhyde	Red Dragon (2002)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Psychosis
Francis "Franco" Begbie	Trainspotting (1996)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
Frank Booth	Blue Velvet (1986)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Fred J. Lincoln	The Last House on the Left (1972)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	Paraphilia
Judge Claude Frolo	The Hunchback Of Notre Dame (1939)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
George Harvey	The Lovely Bones (2010)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	Paraphilia
General Francis X. Hummel	The Rock (1996)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Gordon Gekko	Wall Street (1987)	Primary	Manipulative	N/A
Hans Beckert	M (1931)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Psychosis
Hans Gruber	Die Hard (1988)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Harry Lime	The Third Man (1949)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Hatcher	The Rundown (2003)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Henry	Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (1989)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Henry F. Potter	It's a Wonderful Life (1946)	Primary	Manipulative	N/A
Howard Payne	Speed (1994)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
Hughie Warriner	Dead Calm (1989)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Psychosis
Inspector Richard	Kiss of the Dragon (2001)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Ivan Korshunov	Air Force One (1997)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
The Jackal	The Jackal (1997)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A

TABLE 1—Continued.

Fictional Character	The Movie (date)	Diagnosis of Psychopathy		
		Primary (P)/ Secondary (S)	Classic/Idiopathic – Manipulative – Macho – Pseudopsychopath	Alternative/Additional Diagnosis
Jamie Gumb (aka Buffalo Bill)	The Silence of the Lambs (1991)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Paraphilia
Jaws	The Spy Who Loved Me (1977)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
Jimmy Markum	Mystic River (2003)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
John Doe	Seven (1995)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Psychosis
John Herod	The Quick and the Dead (1995)	Primary	Macho	N/A
Jonathan Corliss	A Kiss Before Dying (1991)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Joshua Foss	Sudden Death (1995)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Justice Raghunat	Awaara (1951)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Krug Stillo	The Last House on the Left (1972)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Lacenaire	Children of Paradise (1945)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Louis Mazzini	Kind Hearts and Coronets (1949)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Marsellus Wallace	Pulp Fiction (1994)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Martin Burney	Sleeping with the Enemy (1991)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder
Matthew Poncelet	Dead Man Walking (1995)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
Max Cady	Cape Fear (1962, 1991)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Max Zorin	A View to Kill (1985)	Primary	Macho	N/A
Michael Corleone	The Godfather Part II (1974)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Mick Taylor	Wolf Creek (2005)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Mickey Knox	Natural Born Killers (1994)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
Mitch Leary	In the Line of Fire (1993)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Mr. Blonde	Reservoir Dogs (1992)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Nicky Santoro	Casino (1995)	Primary	Macho	N/A
Noah Cross	Chinatown (1974)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Norman Bates	Psycho (1960)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Psychosis
Norman Stansfield	Léon (The Professional) (1994)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	Substance abuse
Patrick Bateman	American Psycho (2000)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Peter Stegman	Class of 1984 (1982)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Professor Brézé	Sept Morts sur Ordonnance (1975)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Randle Patrick Mc Murphy	One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
Reverend Harry Powell	The Night of the Hunter (1955)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Roger "Verbal" Kint	The Usual Suspects (1995)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Sam "Ace" Rothstein	Casino (1995)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Sergeant Barnes	Platoon (1986)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Sheriff of Nottingham	Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves (series)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Silas Lynch	The Birth of a Nation (1915)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Simon Gruber	Die Hard with a Vengeance (1995)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Stuart Maker (aka Ghostface)	Scream (1996)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
The caller	Phone Booth (2002)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Tom Ripley	The Talented Mr Ripley (1999)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	Psychosis
Tommy DeVito	Goodfellas (1990)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Tony Montana	Scarface (1983)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Top Dollar	The Crow (1994)	Secondary	Macho	N/A
Uncle Charlie	Shadow of a Doubt (1943)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Vicomte de Valmont	Dangerous Liaisons (1988)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Vito Corleone	The Godfather (1972)	Primary	Macho	N/A
Walter Finch	Insomnia (1997)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
William "Billy the Kid" Wharton	The Green Mile (1999)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	Paraphilia
Female				
Alex Forrest	Fatal Attraction (1987)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Borderline Personality Disorder
Annie Wilkes	Misery (1990)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Psychosis
Baby Jane Hudson	Whatever Happened to Baby Jane (1962)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A

TABLE 1—Continued.

Fictional Character	The Movie (date)	Diagnosis of Psychopathy		
		Primary (P)/ Secondary (S)	Classic/Idiopathic – Manipulative – Macho – Pseudopsychopath	Alternative/Additional Diagnosis
Baby Firefly	The Devil's Rejects (2005)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	Psychosis
Bonnie Parker	Bonnie and Clyde (1967)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	N/A
Catharina	The Black Widow (1987)	Primary	Manipulative	N/A
Catherine Tramell	Basic Instinct (1992)	Primary	Manipulative	N/A
Eunice	Butterfly Kiss (1995)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Borderline Personality Disorder
Heather Evans	Final Analysis (1992)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Hedra "Hedy" Carlson	Single White Female (1992)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Borderline Personality Disorder
Mallory Knox	Natural Born Killers (1994)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
Marquise de Merteuil	Dangerous Liaisons (1988)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Mona Demarkov	Romeo Is Bleeding (1993)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	N/A
Mrs. Iselin	The Manchurian Candidate (1962)	Primary	Manipulative	N/A
Peyton Flanders	The Hand that Rocks the Cradle (1992)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Phyllis Dietrichson	Double Indemnity (1944)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Rachel Phelps	Major League (1989)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A
Sadie	The Last House on the Left (1972)	Primary	Classic/Idiopathic	Paraphilia
The Papin sisters	La Cérémonie (1995)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	Psychosis
Thelma Dickinson & Louise Sawyer	Thelma & Louise (1991)	Secondary	Pseudopsychopath	ASPD
Vera	Detour (1945)	Secondary	Manipulative	N/A

pathic behavior (which was actually most likely a type of psychosis). Next, two notable divergences in the typical portrayal of the psychopath emerged: (i) the socially functional misfit with a (usually) sexually motivated compulsion to kill and (ii) the extremely violent, chaotic mass murderer with idiosyncratic behaviors and appearance. Characters such as Mark Lewis in Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* and most famously Norman Bates of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* are examples of the former, while characters such as Leatherface of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and Jason Voorhees of *Friday the 13th* and Michael Meyers in the Halloween series are classic examples of the latter.

The exploits of many real-life psychopaths and serial killers during the 1960s and 1970s led to an increasing amount of information concerning the behaviors, mostly the clinical description of psychopaths with ritualistic methods of murder, coming into public knowledge (17). Motion pictures began to incorporate the graphic and widely misunderstood practices of these behaviors into sensationalistic film themes that eventually became known as slasher films. Bearing a strong resemblance to the Grand Guignol theater of Europe, slasher films consisted of a recurring idiosyncratic villain with a signature, modus operandi, weapon, and in particular, visual appearance—most often a « distinctive mask »—in a story involving the sequential slaughter of many innocent adolescents in many spectacular and grotesque manners. The advent of latex prosthetic appliances in special effects makeup allowed for more graphic on-screen kills in a single shot rather than separate shots spliced together, adding to the spectacle-driven allure of the films. Many films that can be characterized as prototypical slasher films originally began as stand-alone films commenting on the nature of morality and human nature (*The Last House on the Left*, *The Hills Have Eyes*). However, the slasher film subgenre came to dominate the tone and design of the psychopathic model for decades, mostly due to the sensational aspects of the films and the extreme marketability of the iconic villains (e.g., producing trademarked costumes and masks for Halloween). The *Halloween*, *Friday the*

13th and *I Know What you did Last Summer* series are a few examples of the genre. In these slasher films, psychopathic characters are generally unrealistic, accumulating many traits and characteristics, such as sadism, intelligence, and the ability to predict the plan that the future victims will use to escape. Today, these are more iconic popular evil representations of fictional killers than of interesting psychopaths. For that reason, most of these characters were not included in our Table 1.

While the psychopath remained a staple of many other traditional film genres, the more sensationalistic aspects of the past were toned down or abandoned entirely to avoid association with slasher films, and the popularity of the psychopathic character waned in favor of characters who often represented the "banality of evil," mirroring the cultural events of the 1970s. For some time, psychopathic models were typically restricted to crime films, psychological thrillers, horror films, and erotic thrillers.

Eventually, the arrest and popularity of the notorious serial killers John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Ted Bundy and the eventual formation of the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (ViCAP) in 1985 led to an additional increase in the description (and comprehension) of how psychopathy and criminal investigations (such as criminal profiling) were perceived and portrayed in film (17,18). An increasing interest in the realistic depiction of psychopaths led to the formation of a new hybrid of traditional psychopaths from early film and late 19th century literature, with high-functioning behavior and the false-selves presented by psychopaths such as Bundy and Dahmer. This change led to the popularity of the "elite psychopath," or a psychopath exhibiting exaggerated levels of intelligence, sophisticated manners, and cunning, sometimes up to superhuman and supermediatized levels. Doctor Hannibal Lecter is probably one of the best examples of this type of unrealistic but sensational character. Since early 2000, the depiction and description of fictional psychopaths has changed. In fact, they have become more human and vulnerable, having true weaknesses.

From Michael Myers to Hannibal Lecter through Travis Brickel: Psychopathy in Popular Fiction Today

Psychopaths in films generally possess a number of standard characteristics that are not necessarily as common among real-life psychopaths, referred to the Cleckley criteria, studied by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists (19). The traditional “Hollywood psychopath,” generally found before 2000, is likely to exhibit some or all of the following traits, which make them “ideal villains/superhuman”: (i) high intelligence and a preference for intellectual stimulation (e.g., music, fine art); (ii) a somewhat vain, stylish, almost “cat-like” demeanor; (iii) prestige or a successful career or position; (iv) a calm, calculating and always-in-control attitude; and (v) unrealistic, exceptional skill at killing people, especially with blades or household objects (sometimes overpowering multiple assailants with superior armament). These traits, especially in combination, are generally not present in real psychopaths.

Psychopathy in film is often portrayed in a haphazard or exaggerated fashion to enhance the dramatic properties of a character or characters to render them memorable. Typically, a psychopathic character in a film is the villain, whereas the general characteristics of a psychopath, such as a lack of empathy, remorse, and oftentimes impulse control, are useful to facilitate conflict and danger, usually involving death and destruction on varying scales. Because the definitions and criteria for psychopathy have varied over the years and continue to change even now, many characters in many notable films may have been created to fall under the category of a psychopath at the time of the film’s production or release but may be classified in another way according to more recent criteria.

Moreover, some of the most famous “psychos” in films are not psychopaths, but psychotics. Well-known examples of these are found in the films *Psycho* (Norman Bates) and *Taxi Driver* (Travis Bickel). These characters are, in varying ways, disconnected from reality and suffer from delusional ideation.

The criminal or antisocial psychopath is probably the most common form to appear in films. Often, the characters are based on actual psychopaths, such as James Wood’s character in *The Onion Field*, Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner’s Song*, Peter Lorre’s character in *M*, and Charles Starkweather (the basis for Kit, played by Martin Sheen in *Badlands*). Notable examples of fictional criminal psychopaths in films are Michael Corleone in the *Godfather* films, Scarface in the De Palma version of that gangster film, and Dennis Hopper’s character in *Blue Velvet*. Psychopaths may occur in a film with a moral heart to serve as a contrast to an upright protagonist (Richard Rich vs. Sir Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons*) and appear in other films as an evil double or antagonist to the main character (Harvey Keitel’s character in *The Duelists*, Bruno Anthony in *Strangers on a Train*). Other interesting psychopathic portrayals in film are that of Robert Mitchum as “Preacher” in *Night of the Hunter*, that of Eric Roberts as Paul Snider (Dorothy Stratton’s husband) in *Star 80*, Keith Carradine’s character in *Nashville*, and Robert Duvall’s Bull Meecham in *The Great Santini*.

As in reality, film female psychopaths are rare (and not well known and studied), and when used, they often serve as scheming manipulators whose main weapons are sexual (Table 1).

We can observe, in parallel, a certain evolution between fictional and real-life psychopaths, documented and studied through criminal and civil trials. Several films have very interesting psychopathic characters, who are more realistic and more «social»

and successful, such as George Harvey in *The Lovely Bones* (2009).

The “Realistic Clinical Psychopath” Variations in Popular Fiction

Variations of the “nonmaniacal” but “realistic psychopath” from a clinical viewpoint began to emerge in 2000, arising from the same sources from different genres with varying levels of success (generally less). Frequently, the success of a particular model of psychopath depends on the skill or iconic qualities of the actor’s portrayal in a particular film. The variations of “elite psychopath” have become less mannered and more subdued over time, leading to characterizations that are more psychopathological, clinical, and motivated by the core of this severe personality disorder or syndrome, such as lack of empathy, cold-blooded attitudes, and occupational requirements, rather than an abundance of dysfunctional and horrific behaviors.

Among the most interesting recent and most realistic idiopathic psychopathic characters is Anton Chigurh in the 2007 Coen brothers’ film, *No Country for Old Men*. Anton Chigurh is a well-designed prototypical idiopathic/primary psychopath. We lack information concerning his childhood, but there are sufficient arguments and detailed information about his behavior in the film to obtain a diagnosis of active, primary, idiopathic psychopathy, incapacity for love, absence of shame or remorse, lack of psychological insight, inability to learn from past experience, cold-blooded attitude, ruthlessness, total determination, and lack of empathy. He seems to be affectively invulnerable and resistant to any form of emotion or humanity. Having read and studied Richard Kuklinski’s case, Chigurh and Kuklinski have several traits in common (20). In the case of Chigurh, the description is extreme, but we could realistically almost talk about « an anti-human personality disorder ».

Another realistic interesting example is Henry (inspired from Henry Lee Lucas) (*Henry-Portrait of a Serial Killer*, 1991). In this film, the main, interesting theme is the chaos and instability in the life of the psychopath, Henry’s lack of insight, a powerful lack of empathy, emotional poverty, and a well-illustrated failure to plan ahead. George Harvey is another different and interesting character found in *The Lovely Bones*, 2009. Harvey is more « adapted » than Chigurh and Henry. He has a house, is socially competent and seems like « the average man on the street ». Through the film, we learn that he is in fact an organized paraphilic SVP. Here, the false self is well illustrated. In terms of a « successful psychopath », Gordon Gekko from *Wall Street* (1987) is probably one of the most interesting, manipulative, psychopathic fictional characters to date. Manipulative psychopathic characters are increasingly appearing in films and series. Again, we observe the same process, as observed and explained before, with antisocial psychopaths. For the past few years, with the world economic crises and some high-profile trials (such as the Bernard Madoff trial), the attention of the clinicians is more focused on « successful psychopaths », also called corporate psychopaths by Babiak et al. (21). Films and series presenting characters such as brokers, dishonest traders, vicious lawyers, and those engaged in corporate espionage are emerging (e.g., *Mad Men*, *The Wire*) and are generally related to the global economy and international business. Again, we see a strong parallelism between what happens in our society and what happens in film.

In the fictional character examples cited above, more than sensationalistic patterns (such as physical stigmata or exceptional

abilities) as well as affective and emotional disturbances are presented. Finally, at the opposite end of most of the fictional characters presented in films, they are vulnerable and have limits, as they do in the real world. These fictional characters and a few others could be used as pedagogic examples because of their psychopathological properties.

Fictional Psychopathic Mental Health Professionals

Psychopathic psychiatrists (evil psychiatrists) are rare in popular fiction but do exist (22).

Perhaps the most famous and « caricatured » example of this type of psychopath is that of the cannibalistic psychiatrist Dr. Hannibal Lecter, as portrayed by Anthony Hopkins in the acclaimed, Academy Award-winning 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs*. As portrayed by Hopkins and imagined by Harris (23), Lecter is an exceptionally intelligent sophisticated socialite, whose disarming charisma, erudition, civility, and wit disguise his true nature as a psychopath who murders people and makes gourmet cuisine out of their flesh. Hannibal Lecter, while the embodiment of evil, is also an extraordinarily astute clinician who can diagnose Jodie Foster's psychological conflicts by identifying her perfume and assessing her shoes and clothing with Holmesian accuracy. He also seems to be invulnerable. Again, Dr. Lecter accumulates many personal characteristics that are not generally found in everyday clinical practice.

Predictably, « evil psychiatrists » surface throughout the decade. Patrick Stewart plays a corrupt CIA psychiatrist in *Conspiracy Theory* (1997). Mel Gibson plays a cab driver who has been manipulated as Stewart's guinea pig in a series of *Manchurian Candidate*-like experiments in mind control. Rivaling Dr. Lecter in his malevolence (but more realistic and psychotic as well) is the psychiatrist portrayed by John Lithgow in Brian De Palma's *Raising Cain* (1992), which appeared 1 year later. Once again borrowing heavily from Hitchcock, not to mention his own film *Dressed to Kill*, De Palma depicts a psychiatrist as an abusive father who tortured his son in an effort to create a multiple personality disorder.

Corrupt and incompetent psychiatrists abound, especially in the films of the 1980s (22). At times, they are comic, such as John Waters' behaviorist who shocks his patients with a cattle prod in *Hairspray* (1988). In other films, the psychiatrist is more complicated, such as the character portrayed by Lindsay Crouse in David Mamet's *House of Games* (1987). Mamet rounds up the usual assortment of con artists and sleaze balls, only to throw a psychiatrist in their midst. The film's narrative suggests that she is ultimately corrupted by her contact with these shady psychopaths but was perhaps corrupt to begin with, given that psychiatry is viewed as simply a variant of a con game. Others are more conventionally seedy, such as Michael Higgins in Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987), who falsifies medical records for money (22).

Conclusion and Pedagogical Perspectives

Although we are able to describe the psychopath fairly well, we do not understand him (24). What we know does not reduce but expands the wonder at the beautiful complexity of the brain and behavior. One of the values of literature (of which film is a part) is the vicarious experience. We can experience people and situations that we would never experience otherwise. We can absorb some of the wisdom of dead men and vanished cultures. For example, films such as Kubrick's, which seek to portray

man and his experience in some of its darker aspects, are superior to those that tend to deliver an obvious "message" or to preach or moralize. One can never definitively explain a work of literature or art because such an explanation would not only embody every thought put into it by its creator but every thought which will be evoked in every reader, even those not yet born; every work is infinite.

In the final analysis and in a more general way, psychiatry and the cinema are both capable of offering a compelling glimpse into the complex human psyche. It is, of course, this point of convergence that will keep these two unlikely companions inextricably bound for years to come. In our specific topic of interest, it appears that psychopathy in the cinema, despite a real clinical evolution *remains fictional*. Most of the psychopathic villains in popular fiction resemble international and universal boogeyman, almost as « villain archetypes », who are related to the existence of universal countless forms that channel experiences and emotions, resulting in recognizable and typical patterns of behavior with certain probable outcomes.

Finally, realistic fictional psychopathic characters do exist, but they are in the minority. Despite this, they continue to contrast with their very interesting clinical descriptions, especially since 2000. These characters, which mirror some types of our society, are very important for the cinema itself and art in general but mostly for future generations of forensic psychologists and psychiatrists as pedagogic materials. In fact, some of these fictional characters can be considered valuable for teaching and illustrating several aspects of forensic psychiatry, such as personality disorders, paraphilia, expert witness characteristics, portrayal of the legal system, behaviors of the lawyers, and courtroom procedures. Moreover, these movies can be sources of lessons, questions about clinical cases and lead to discussions between students and faculty members.

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