

'One flew over the psychiatric unit': mental illness and the media

M. ANDERSON PhD MSc BA (HONS) RN (Mental Health) DipHE

Lecturer in Mental Health, School of Nursing, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Nottingham, Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham, UK

Correspondence:

M. Anderson

School of Nursing

Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences

University of Nottingham

Room B50

Medical School

Queen's Medical Centre

Nottingham NG7 2UH

UK

E-mail:

martin.anderson@nottingham.ac.uk

ANDERSON M. (2003) *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 10, 297–306
'One flew over the psychiatric unit': mental illness and the media

Media representation of mental illness has received growing research attention within a variety of academic disciplines. Cultural and media studies have often dominated in this research and discussion. More recently healthcare professionals have become interested in this debate, yet despite the importance of this subject only a selection of papers have been published in professional journals relating to nursing and healthcare. This paper examines the way in which mental illness in the United Kingdom is portrayed in public life. Literature from the field of media studies is explored alongside the available material from the field of mental healthcare. Three main areas are used to put forward an alternative approach: film representation and newspaper reporting of mental illness; the nature of the audience; and finally the concept of myth. The paper concludes by considering this approach in the context of current mental health policy on mental health promotion.

Keywords: audience, culture, film, health promotion, media, mental health problems/illness, newspapers

Accepted for publication: 7 December 2003

Introduction

Throughout the century psychiatry has sought scientific understanding and effective treatment for the conditions so vividly depicted in the movies. At the same time, movie psychiatry has projected a view of the profession through the distorting lens of fear, defensive ridicule, and the yearning for an ideal parent. (Schneider 1987, p. 1002)

The images of Bosch or Van Gogh, of Warhol or Escher may reflect the mental representations of some inner world, but not the mundane one in which we live and yet these private constructions are real. They are expressions of myths about the world, the ideas that we project onto it and that shape our understand-

ing of the realities that we experience. (Gilman 1988, p. 18)

Media representations of mental illness can have a significant effect on public images of people who experience mental health problems (McKeown & Clancy 1995). The implications for people living in the community are considerable, particularly when the media depict people suffering from a mental illness as being 'dangerous' and 'violent' (Signorielli 1989, Wahl 1992, Cutcliffe & Hannigan 2001). Throughout the 1990s, the media increased attention on issues surrounding governmental community care legislation and the discharge of people from institutional care. This resulted in a stream of news reports on homicides involving a person known to be suffering from a mental illness (Department of Health 1989, 1994). News-

papers in the United Kingdom (UK) have been one of the most powerful forms of media portraying such incidents. The case of Stephen Laudat, a person known to be suffering from schizophrenia, and who was convicted of killing Bryan Bennett, is identified as the 'Killer who should not have gone to jail' in an article attempting to illustrate the inadequacies of community care provision (Brindle 1995). Another report confronts the reader with 'Mental patient kills mother after quitting hospital', which tells the tale of Gilbert Steckel, who was found to have killed a teacher and her two daughters soon after being discharged from a psychiatric hospital (O'Neil & Fletcher 1996).

Such events, along with the cases of Christopher Clunis (Ritchie *et al.* 1994) and Jonathon Newby (Davis *et al.* 1995), are clearly attributed to health policy and health service failings, as an article in the *Independent* announces 'NHS accused over mentally ill killers' (Timmins & Brown 1996). More recently, Paterson & Stark (2001) suggest that policy development in the period 1990–2000 became pre-occupied with the assumed need to prevent such violence. What ensued was a moral panic in reaction to the above incidents involving a person experiencing a mental health problem. However, the National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicides in England and Wales revealed that only 8% of homicides were committed by people with a serious mental health problem (Department of Health 1999a). The new millennium has seen a significant shift towards working with the media. This is a central part of mental health promotion strategies and forms a key part of current mental healthcare policy (Department of Health 1999b).

During the last decade a number of studies and analytical papers attempted to demonstrate that negative reports in the press have contributed to the formation of negative public attitudes towards the mentally ill (Philo *et al.* 1994, Thornton & Wahl 1996, Conrad 1997). Ward (1997) found that broadsheet and tabloid newspapers made a significant link between mental ill health, criminality and violence. Such stories were often given more exposure than positive articles. Yet Allen & Nairn (1997) challenged the idea that the media present negative depictions of mental illnesses because journalists are not always well informed regarding mental health issues. Additionally, the work that journalists do is based on the premise that 'sensation sells'. It is therefore not too surprising that negative 'representations' can be found in the press (this point will be returned to later). Newspaper articles function within the whole 'sphere' of the media, and coincide with other forms of communication, but in particular with film. The assumption here is that the connotations underlying these headlines might well have been generated by popular films such as *The Snakepit* (1948), *Psycho* (1960), *Taxi Driver* (1976)

and *Halloween* (1978). The argument for film stereotypes contribution to the stigmatization of people with mental health problems is convincing (Hyler *et al.* 1991, Wahl 1992). Torrey (1994) links newspaper reports, film representations and stereotypes of mental illness amongst the public. It is maintained that the stigma created by the image of the 'dangerous mentally ill' has been propagated by the press, together with the popularity of such films as *Psycho* and *Halloween*. Here we can see where fiction and reality cross over. However, the relationship between various media messages, our beliefs and individual experiences is very complex (Philo *et al.* 1996).

The examples of current media attention identified above represent a form of popular culture, which accepts the entertainment value of both the press and film. These representations fall into Curran & Spark's (1991) view of audience pleasure, gratification and entertainment, which is applied to the style of tabloid newspapers. These terms are used to explain an important framework in this paper. Audience describes all members of society who consume and interact with media products. In the field of media studies the audience is often regarded as constantly interacting with the media they consume (i.e. film and newspapers, radio, etc.). Another concept used when examining media (particularly film) is point of view. Basically, this refers to the person's viewpoint in the film. Symbolic representation in the media broadly refers to a sign, object or act that stands for something by virtue of agreement among the members of the culture that uses it (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1983). Finally, an important concept is the uses and gratification approach, which is a theory suggesting that audiences take in media (read newspapers/watch a film) for the gratification of certain individually experienced needs (Curran & Sparks 1991). This is explained in more detail later in the paper. The ideological dimensions of entertainment have to be extended to the nature of the reporting of such press articles and the depictions created in film. These forms can be seen as far removed from a sociological way of conceptualizing the world. Instead:

Society is portrayed as a series of discrete events unrelated to broader social determinations . . . Their function is to define the contours of what is good and bad, and draw attention to the consequences of wrong doing. (Curran & Sparks 1991, p. 229)

This view of the media has to be considered alongside the evidence that such contemporary portrayals continue to arouse public anxiety and fear of people suffering from a mental illness living in the community. Studies in community attitudes to mental illness continue to show that levels of intolerance and stigma remain (Brockington *et al.* 1993, Huxley 1993, Kelly & McKenna 1997, Rose 1998). The purpose of this paper is to explore the way in which mental

illness in the UK is portrayed in public life. Whilst there are many ways in which mental illness is represented in everyday life (novels, art, radio, etc.), the focus here is on film and newspaper reporting. Both of these form a significant part of mass media, they have been regarded as culturally dominant (i.e. Hollywood films, *The Sun* newspaper) and they are produced for mass audiences (Kuhn 1996). Specific concepts found in media research and cultural studies are examined. An alternative approach to the relationship between mental illness and the media, and the way in which an audience (the public) respond to representations of mental illness is proposed. Conclusions are drawn in the context of current mental healthcare policy relating to the reduction of stigma and mental health promotion (Department of Health 1999b).

Representations of mental illness in film: audience response

The representation of mental illness and psychiatry in film is not a new phenomenon. Many films portraying people who have a mental illness, very often produced in Hollywood, continue to be broadcast on television in the UK. *Psycho* (1960) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) remain well-cited examples of representations of madness (Hyler *et al.* 1991). Contemporary pieces continue to be produced attending to themes relating to the experience of mental illness. *Shine* (1998) and *Some Voices* (2000) have presented sensitive images of individuals living with serious mental health problems (Byrne 2000). More recently, *Iris* (2002) tells the story of Iris Murdoch and her life and death from Alzheimer's disease. Whilst *Iris* has been seen as a reasonable and compassionate portrayal of mental illness, *A Beautiful Mind* (2002) has been attacked for reinforcing many of the enduring myths about severe mental illness (Wilkinson 2002, David 2002).

Contemporary cinema has a difficult task on its hands in attempting to depict the experience of mental illness. The vivid images created in films over the past 30 years have had a lasting effect. Therefore, this paper will draw upon the films that have historically been recognized as having significant influence on public audiences. Domino (1983) recognizes the medium of film as an important cultural concept to be explored, and focuses on the influence of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* on attitudes towards mental illness. A study involving 146 college students revealed that considerable negative changes in attitude had occurred following the screening of the film, yet there were no changes after the students had viewed a television documentary. Films of this nature may well have a considerable influence on the way we see things, but this can only

be due to the focus on the individual's health and subsequent problems. Clearly, the impact of Jack Nicholson's R.P. MacMurphy rebelling against the total institution had a significant effect on public attitudes during the 1970s. MacMurphy may not have been 'mad' before he entered the mental institution but eventually he becomes a product of the system. This 'individual point of view' is a narrative used with powerful effect in other popular post-war films, for example Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960) pushes forward his experience of psychopathology in the form of a split personality with terrifying effect. We also see the impact of society on one individual (Norman Bates); this is the most powerful message. This method of developing an image of mental illness around the individual is also used in *Halloween* (1978) and earlier in *The Exorcist* (1973) (Hyler *et al.* 1991).

The 'individual point of view' in these representations can have a considerable effect on public opinion, but in the first instance the process might be simple in that in most cultures people fear things that they do not understand. *Psycho* (1960) and *Halloween* (1978) are examples of contemporary film using mental illness or psychiatry, depicting the theme in a controversial or horrific manner, engendering this cultural response. On this basis, the films described so far were incredibly successful and perhaps more successful in reinforcing the feeling of fear and 'I'm glad it's not me'. In a cultural context, film allows us to dissociate with the experience being represented. We can still take a look at what is represented, find out about it and think that we know something about it. Films portraying mental disorders serve us in this way. Hyler's (1988) discussion of the relationship between DSM III and mental illness in film illustrates some of the ways in which mental disorders are represented. *The Snake Pit* (1948) and *The Bell Jar* (1979) are regarded as an accurate depiction of a schizophrenic disorder, both films draw us in through the individual point of view to observe the unimaginable horrors of experiencing such a disorder. With these points in mind, an interesting argument can be found in Schneider's (1977) discussion of psychiatry in contemporary film, in that such images of madness have become 'symbolic representations' of the individual in society. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is returned to, not only because of the theme of freedom against authority (a relevant topic for the 1970s), but because of MacMurphy's impersonation of insanity and his rebellion against the psychiatric system. In this case the symbol is a hero, but other 'symbolic representations' can be found in the other films identified.

This is the point at which the main themes of this argument collide: individual point of view; symbolic representation; and a concept introduced earlier, audience pleasure, gratification and entertainment. Curran & Sparks (1991)

see the audience as 'active', which is an essential factor when considering film representations of mental illness. Uses and gratification research places importance on the way in which audience needs form the satisfactions gained from media consumption. In this way the audience are regarded as active participants in the communication process and people are selective in the way they understand or respond to communications. In the present context, this point of view can be extended to Robins' (1994) understanding of audience consumption, which is applied specifically to television. Robins (1994, p. 457) states 'To watch television in our culture is to be exposed to violence, suffering and death'.

The war in Bosnia is used to illustrate this point and in particular the visions of death we were exposed to in the media coverage of the war. Robins' (1994) question surrounds the uses and gratification of consuming such reality in television. The answer may be that we are all looking to gain knowledge about the problems and issues in the world, and therefore as an audience we are actively concerned. However, this does not seem to be entirely true. Real images of war and death (such as those in Bosnia) must be intensely shocking; these representations should traumatize the audience. But, Robins argues, this is not the case, and audiences appear to be 'unscathed' after viewing the violence of war. This process works in a similar way when audiences see representations of mental illness in film. The effect should be traumatic (for example the images of MacMurphy experiencing ECT, or the result of a disordered personality in *Psycho*). But audiences have returned to these films for years, just as they return to more contemporary films such as *Silence of the Lambs* (1992) and *Single White Female* (1992), to revisit some of the horrors presented and these audiences remain 'unharméd'.

The interaction of the three concepts of individual point of view, symbolic representation and audience pleasure, gratification and entertainment is not a straightforward process. But it is hard not to see them as interrelated concepts. Therefore, when we consider the effect of media portrayals of mental illness, such as film, on public (audience) response, the audience has to be regarded as active. Curran & Sparks (1991) stress that there is much research demonstrating that audience members can construct different forms of pleasure from the same communication. Audiences will read the intended meaning of the message, while some will establish meanings of their own. But in the end the meaning itself is formed by the interaction of 'audiences' with 'communications'. Therefore, audiences identify with individual points of view and will always pursue symbolic representations of things they may not know much about (and fear). Ultimately, there is a pleasure and gratification

gained from this sense of security. This connects with Robins (1994) suggestion that certain 'post-modern environments' of consumption have developed a 'psychotic' element, which is a collective experience and has become the social norm. This is an escape from the reality of the dangers of the world. However, the contention here is that these processes depend on the combination of media portrayals of mental illness at any one time, the most powerful is the relationship between film representation and press reporting. Therefore, in the light of the issues raised here the next section will deal specifically with newspaper reporting of societal events involving a person experiencing a mental health problem.

The national press and mental illness

In the first instance it may be worthwhile returning to some of the media and social research connected to this field before focusing on press reporting as a part of the mass media. Research studies conducted in relation to media, news reporting and mental illness have most often looked to prove or disprove the notion that negative images of mental illness engender negative public attitudes towards the mentally ill. In the UK, Appleby & Wessely (1988) considered the impact of the Hungerford massacre on public attitudes to mental illness. Following the acts of homicide committed by Michael Ryan (whose mental state was unknown) the study found a significant increase in the amount of people believing that those who commit horrific crimes are likely to be mentally ill. Tests were carried out 6 months later and discovered that this increase was no longer found. Appleby & Wessely (1988) suggest that this brief change in attitude might be linked to the style in which the event was represented by the media. The combination of expert views from within general and forensic psychiatry that Michael Ryan may have been suffering from a mental illness, and the language used by the popular press to report on the incident, may have underpinned the public view that extreme violence is connected to mental illness. Some studies have taken a more comprehensive approach in investigating this area. Philo *et al.* (1994) conducted a study focusing on the impact of the media on public images of mental illness. This study revealed that two-fifths of the general sample believed mental illness was connected to violence. The individuals who were found to have rejected the dominant media message based their judgement on personal experience. Philo *et al.* (1994) argue that if there is to be a move towards destigmatization of mental illness, and if more positive and accurate images of mental illness are to be developed, then more work needs to be done with the media. This must involve ensuring that newspaper and broadcasting organizations do not produce

stereotypical images of people with mental health problems. Media representations should include the views of individuals and this should begin at a local level where mental health promotion departments can work more closely with the local media.

More recently, Meagher *et al.* (1995) examined the Irish daily broadsheet and tabloid newspapers issued between July and December 1993. Three hundred and eighty articles contained references to psychiatric issues. Articles featured on the front page of tabloid newspapers more often than others detailed forensic psychiatric issues (69.5%); however, articles on the front page of broadsheet newspapers contained more informative reports. It was discovered that very few mental health professionals contributed to the writing of these articles and it was concluded that their involvement would help in constructing more positive portrayals of people who experience mental health problems. Further internationally based studies have been conducted in order to demonstrate the existence of stereotypes in newspaper representations of mental illness. In Germany, Angermeyer & Matschinger (1996) tested Scheff's suggestion that selective media reporting simply reinforces the stereotype of mental illness. Population surveys indicated that there was a trend in the tendency of the public to see the mentally ill as either 'dangerous' or 'unpredictable', thus supporting Scheff's argument. Thornton & Wahl (1996) asked 120 college students in the United States of America (USA) to read a newspaper report on a violent crime committed by a mental patient in order to examine people's attitudes towards mental illness. The research findings indicated that negative media reports contribute to negative attitudes towards people experiencing mental health difficulties. However, in contrast to these findings, a study conducted in New Zealand examined the argument that people with a mental illness are dangerous by focusing on media depictions of mental illness. A total of 12 articles on the subject of mental health were explored using discourse analysis. The study challenges the idea that the media present negative representations of mental illness. This is based on the fact that there are often journalists who are 'poorly informed' (holding inaccurate information on mental health issues) and the concept of 'sensationalism' (shocking stories sell). Allen & Nairn (1997) conclude that the media (particularly the press) need to use individual cases and a specific way of writing that ensures readers use 'common-sense knowledge' of mental illness to comprehend the text.

There is, however, some criticism over the validity of the research conducted in this field of social science and the media. In particular, there are a number of methodological issues relating to the way in which data are collected and analysed. The process of content analysis for example is

complex and the exact relationship between a media representation and formation of the audience's (public) images of mental illness is not always explained convincingly. The impact of media reporting in individuals involves the complicated interpretation of messages and images and the interaction of these processes with preconceived attitudes (McKeown & Clancy 1995).

Newspaper reporting of mental illness: the audience as co-creators of text

Despite the methodological questions surrounding some of the investigations already discussed, this research has highlighted some of the factors relating to the way in which national newspaper reports on mental illness may effect public opinion. Essentially, the process is that newspapers represent mental illness with a single, negative meaning in the message. These issues must fall into John Fiske's continuing search to describe the process through which media texts are made into meaningful units of our everyday lives (Tester 1994, p. 71). But these points are perhaps also part of a whole trend in media research and specific studies, going back to Stuart Hall's initial article on 'Encoding and decoding' (Hall 1980, Hartley 1982, Fiske 1987a, 1987b). In this sense news reporting on mental illness can be examined in terms of the potential meanings in media texts and the way in which audiences interpret them. Barthes (1972) offers an important way of considering the media by arguing that particular texts (i.e. literature) do not allow the reader any one single fixed meaning. In this situation, the reader's interpretation is essential and the meaning is left 'open', leaving the reader the opportunity to construct the meaning of the text. In contrast, realist forms of literature (such as newspapers) attempt to block the 'plurality' of possible meanings and such texts generate a 'fixed' meaning for the reader.

However, Curran & Sparks (1991) argue that Barthes work was very much about demonstrating how these 'fixed' meaning texts do not offer a simple 'single' meaning. Thus, whilst it appears that newspapers stand as an example of a 'fixed' form of text, further analysis indicates that they are created from very different elements. This is useful when attending to the nature and meanings constructed around mental illness in the news. Such an argument would appear to go against the notion that newspapers send 'single' negative representations of mental illness (Thornton & Wahl 1996, Angermeyer & Matschinger 1996). Instead, the process is less straight forward than that, with audiences constructing interpretations and meanings of their own. Ultimately, this supports the notion that newspapers use a method of enlisting readers as co-creators of the text, which in turn increases their (the readers') interest.

Narratives, codes and other methods

An alternative view surrounds the concept of narrativity in news reporting. Jacobs (1996) indicates that in the past, journalists have, in the process of generating news narratives, actually begun to see the world through these narratives. This might be seen as the 'ontological narrativity', a key element in the process of news production. Thus, news producers do tell stories, but then they receive the world in a 'storied' form (Sherwood 1994). However, such a process involves a number of other methods used by news producers to make stories 'newsworthy' (Katz 1987). These methods involve the use of specific codes, and in the present context, one of the most important is the code of 'public problems'. News reporters therefore 'code' events in terms of whether the event will become a 'public problem', which needs to be reported on in order to inform their audience. In this way, an item is judged in terms of its 'newsworthiness', then the news reporters will decide on how to research the subject and how to write the story. The code of 'public problems' facilitates not only the justification of reporting and writing about a particular event, but also a justification of their own (the newspapers') importance in society (Jacobs 1996). However, past research indicates that newspapers (as an example of news reporting) use such narratives and codes alongside other methods in order to make an event 'newsworthy'. This is particularly true in terms of reports on crime in the news. Katz (1987) suggests that in order to make an item 'newsworthy' crimes have to be depicted in one or more of four categorical ways: personal competence and sensibility; collective integrity; moralized political conflicts; and white collar crime. These appear to be constructed around specific moral issues continuously generated within modern-day society. For the present discussion, the first of Katz categories appears to be of most relevance, highlighting the way in which a news story reporting a mental health issue evolves to become 'newsworthy'. Personal competence and sensibility involves controversial, vicious and the most audacious crimes, such as homicide. These news stories guide the audience on the boundaries of personal competence and sensibility.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the cases of Peter Sutcliffe and Dennis Nilsen (Prins 1995) became renowned examples of the way the media, and newspapers in particular, maintained the newsworthiness of these stories by depicting the sheer moral insensitivity of the individuals involved. However, more contemporary reports on homicide cases involving an individual known to be suffering from a mental illness in the news have had a latent and even more powerful impact. Public awareness of key cases in the 1990s has been increased by the desire of newspapers to make specific

events newsworthy. The case of Christopher Clunis (an individual known to be experiencing a mental health problem and who stabbed and killed Jonathon Zito) was reported on extensively in 1992, and is an example of the way newspapers continued to focus on violent acts carried out by mentally ill people in the community. *The Guardian* in 1993 reported that the 'Mentally ill face tighter controls', but also reminded the reader that all of this had started with incidents such as that involving Christopher Clunis (Brindle 1993). Moreover, the theme underpinning the article is the continuity of attention on what might be seen as the personal moral competence and insensibility of this individual. The audience's moral boundaries in modern everyday life were truly tested. There is no doubt that this case represents an important chapter in the problems surrounding community care, as the official reports on the case have now become important policy documents (Ritchie *et al.* 1994), but the case of Christopher Clunis also illustrates the methods used to make an item 'newsworthy', namely by integrating the theme of personal competence and sensibility into such a news story (Katz 1987).

In summary, these points illustrate the character of newspaper reporting on issues relating to mental illness. Media research focusing on the impact of representations of mental illness in the press, highlight the continued stigmatization of the mentally ill. Putting aside the inherent methodological problems, this research does not indicate the true nature of the effect newspapers have on their audiences. The techniques used by newspapers (and other forms of media such as television) to report on events involving 'mental illness', are fundamental to the way in which meanings are constructed. This is not just about creating stereotypes of people with mental illnesses. Unfortunately, the answer is not necessarily a new one, the construction of these meanings is dependent on the nature of the interaction between news media and their audiences.

The relationship between film representation and newspaper reporting of mental illness

Fiction and reality

Having considered some relevant factors in relation to the two forms of media, this is the point at which to address the relationship between film representation and newspaper reporting of mental illness. At the centre of this connection is the basic premise that these two forms of media are identifiable by their aim to communicate societal values via symbolic forms. These representations, however, may be manifested in different ways, the immediate difference may be that fictional characters are used to represent 'mental illness' in film, and the characters found in newspaper

reports are real. But the popular press operates with its essential perspective on the world, with its focus on the individual, the fictional-like and dramatic-like story, its 'common sense' frameworks of explanation and its moral rather than political solutions (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1983, Curran & Sparks 1991). The truth is, film never really departs from this exact technique. *Psycho* is one of the most influential films ever made, and demonstrates this obsession with the individual. French (1998), in a recent review, revisits this observation, indicating that the central character Norman Bates, mentally persecuted by his thoughts, and a psychological victim of 'this society', escapes this modern world by wandering on to his own private island. Looking closely, this might not be so far from the case of Christopher Clunis. Indeed, another case around the same time can also be examined in this way. In 1993, Andrew Robinson, a patient experiencing schizophrenia, was convicted of killing Georgina Robinson, an occupational therapist. In his interview with the police, Andrew Robinson claimed that his actions were his only way to escape from 'psychiatry' (Bloom-Cooper *et al.* 1995). The inquiry into the case of Andrew Robinson is perhaps the only common-sense way we can deal with such an event. In a similar way this process of finding a common-sense answer is experienced in the final summary statement by the psychiatrist in the final scenes of *Psycho*. Indeed, we are informed that Norman Bates' crimes were 'crimes of passion'.

This cross-over of fiction and reality is the most important point of this argument. It is the strengthening force behind an audience's treatment of media reports on mental illness. The reports are most often about a violent incident involving a mentally ill person, and must therefore be related to what is known about 'mentally ill people'. This is not to say that audiences (the public) cannot differentiate between fiction and reality, but that both are used together in juxtaposition to interpret and understand the message about mental illness. The focus on the individual and the frameworks of explanation used are pivotal in a viewer's understanding of the representation. But this connection between newspaper reporting and film representation of mental illness has a more quiescent effect on the public's image of mentally ill people and the psychiatric services involved in their care. Film portrayals of patients (and professionals) will always 'override' into other media forms interested in 'psychiatric issues', and this is often how patients and their families will be seen (Hyer 1988). With this notion in mind, it would appear that Scheff's (1963) original argument that public views fall between those of the media and mental health professionals (and services), and therefore are being shaped by the media, has to hold some value. However, in this instance the argument is that public views towards mental illness fall between the central

forms of media (film and newspaper reporting) and the mental health professionals/services. Thus, it is not just the cross-over of 'fiction and reality' (the fictional status of Norman Bates and reality of Christopher Clunis or other publicized cases), it is the fact that different forms of media function at the same time, generating a similar kind of message about mental illness. Chambers (1986), in his study of popular culture, recognizes that it is not possible to see one form of media, such as film, as the only 'ideological apparatus' serving to represent one particular view. This would appear to be very true in the present contexts and discussion.

Myth

So with the idea that film representations and newspaper reporting operate together in depicting mental illness, it is quite evident that the relationship between the two remains complicated, to say the least. The complexity arrives when attempting to examine where audience (public) opinion fits in to this connection. Some of the most influential studies attempting to demonstrate that media images of mental illness shape public opinion have already been cited (Scheff 1963; Philo *et al.* 1994, Allen & Nairn 1997). However, this leads to the final point to be made in this part of the discussion, and this concerns the power of the media. This discussion has, up to a certain point, as many other writings on the subject have done before, assumed that the very nature of the media is one of direct power. That is, the media imposes concepts on us, we accept its ideas and it has some control over our everyday way of seeing the world. The media is very much part of the role of myth, that is the way a culture comes to understand, express and communicate concepts that are central to its identity as a culture (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1983).

There is nothing particularly new about this proposition. But Connell (1986) argues that the view of the media as biased, and subsequently to blame for any problematic situation, would seem to be a popular one. The miners' strike during the 1980s is used as an example of the way in which the media were accused of shaping public views towards the dispute. In the current climate of care for the mentally ill in the community, a similar process of 'blaming the media' is quite evident. This is where this discussion agrees with Connell's observations, and we could indeed be seeing a myth 'at work'. Ultimately, there are problems with this straightforward 'blaming of the media'. In the first instance, it is easy to construe the media as presenting meanings already developed, and ready to be absorbed by its audience. This misses the fact that as we (the audience) watch films and read the newspapers we are also part of creating meanings, based on previous interactions with the

media and other aspects of our lives (Connell 1986). This has been discussed and demonstrated by presenting the well-established characteristics of film representations (i.e. individual point of view, symbolic representation and audience pleasure, gratification and entertainment) (Curran & Sparks 1991), and the methods used in newspaper reporting (i.e. fixed vs. open meanings, newsworthiness, code of public problems and personal competence) (Jacobs 1996). Moreover, these characteristics all have a part to play in constructing this myth. Such processes only function in conjunction with an active media audience. This therefore lends support to the suggestion that such 'blaming of the media' for the status of public opinion towards mental illness, is a myth, and myths, Connell argues, 'enable us to avoid coming to terms with our own part, our own involvement, in making things as they are' (Connell 1986, p. 92).

Perhaps this is fundamental to our culture today. Myth, and the myth described, surrounding mental illness and the media is our culture's only way of understanding, expressing and communicating to itself concepts that are crucial to its own identity as a culture (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1983).

To summarize, it is fair to say that it may seem odd to try and draw some analogy between fictional and real representations of mental illness in order to get to this point. But so often the representation of mental illness involves a violent situation (at the extreme, homicide). Obviously, the cases of Christopher Clunis and Andrew Robinson remain very serious incidents, and can in no way be condoned. Also, we would never be able to condone the images presented in films such as *Psycho*, *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, *Silence of the Lambs* and *Single White Female* (Torrey 1994). In our culture phenomena such as fiction, reality and myth exist, they are used, they operate together. It is this that is so intrinsic to the relationship between film representations and newspaper reporting of mental illness.

Discussion

It has not been possible to cover every aspect of the media in this paper. There is much that can be said about television for example (news, documentary, film, etc.). There is also a wide range of other film representations that could have been discussed in more detail (see Hylar 1988 for an overview). Yet, this paper has aimed to re-examine and discuss the relationship between mental illness and the media. Much of the discussion has been about the impact of media images on audiences (the public). But, as Tester (1994, p. 80) asks, 'Where does this leave the audience?'. It is impossible, perhaps, to offer any definitive answer to this question. It may be impossible to conclusively say anything about media audiences where there is universal acceptance simply because the methodological and theoretical

approaches used to investigate the media are so far removed from each other. Therefore, an exact 'definitive' understanding of the interaction between media texts and media audiences (particularly where mental illness is represented) may never be found. However, this kind of conclusion may be attractive to those interested in exploring the nature of the media, and even more so, the complex relationship between the media and mental illness (Tester 1994). Thus, certain points raised in this paper will not necessarily be grounded in empirical research evidence. Instead, a number of fundamental concepts have been 'borrowed' from the field of media and cultural studies, and applied to contemporary and historically significant film representations and newspaper reports relating to mental illness. By doing this, it is now possible to identify three pivotal points in connection with the relationship between mental illness and the media.

First, film representation and newspaper reporting of mental illness remain part of the way in which media audiences gain pleasure, gratification and entertainment. Thus, they fall into the boundaries of the study of media audiences and media consumption (McQuail 1972, Morley 1980, Curran & Sparks 1991). However, they also remain removed from 'broader social determinations' (Curran & Sparks 1991). Newspaper reports continue to focus on bad events (such as homicide) involving a person with a mental illness, and films still use psychiatry and mental illness as an excuse for depicting violence and horrific crimes (e.g. *Silence of the Lambs*). These factors are therefore central to the nature of mental illness and the media, and the essence of the communication process involved.

Secondly, audiences viewing contemporary films depicting mental illness and reading newspapers are active in the processing of the intended message. Subsequently, there is a fundamental flaw in research studies attempting to provide evidence to support the hypothesis that the process 'basically' involves negative media representations of mental illness (Appleby & Wessely 1988, Philo *et al.* 1994, Angermeyer & Matschinger 1996), and therefore public attitudes must be influenced. Current investigations should endorse this notion when attempting to analyse the connection between mental illness and the media. This is particularly true when the issue of dangerousness and violence is considered. As with any form of media, newspaper reports and film representations draw upon an audience's knowledge of mental illness (right or wrong: it usually involves dangerousness and violence) in order to maintain interest (Allen & Nairn 1997). Thus, in this process audiences do become co-creators of texts, and are very much part of constructing the meaning(s) within media messages concerning mental illness (Barthes 1972). This is not to discount the methods and techniques used by the media (described in the previ-

ous sections relating to film representation and news reporting). In becoming active and 'co-creators' of texts and meanings, audiences also 'use' those methods and techniques when interacting with the media.

Thirdly, the notion that film representation and newspaper reporting of mental illness are responsible for the formation of public opinion is a myth. This is perhaps the most significant conclusion, both historically and in relation to the two previous points. Our culture has now come to conceptualize and understand the topic of 'mental illness' as an integral part of our social experience, and this has been pivotal to an action of contemporary 'myth-making', just as during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, this way of seeing 'madness' resulted in the objective of separating out those who were perceived as different, and just as a myth developed out of Brant's painting Ship of Fools in the 15th century, leading to a requirement to keep mentally ill people in a place away from the outside world (Gilman 1988).

Conclusion

It is clear that the current government has made serious efforts to build health promotion into national mental health policy, and also to tackle the stigmatization of people who may experience mental health problems. A key part of this work will be working with the producers of newspaper and mainstream films (Department of Health 1999b). This paper has raised a number of issues and put forward three main points that need to be addressed in the field of mental health promotion/mental illness and the media. Recognizing the way in which real stories relating to mental illness coincide with fictional depictions of mental illness will help mental health promoters advise journalists and filmmakers alike. Yet more important will be the way in which all mental health professionals/producers of mass media, come to understand the nature of the audience consuming representations of mental illness.

This is perhaps a suitable place to end this discussion for now. But it is also a point at which to leave ideas for further debate and analysis, and these must concern the moral perspective overseeing all that has been considered in this brief paper. An examination of the cultural relationship between film representation and newspaper reporting has been useful in developing a new approach to mental illness and the media. However, this leaves behind a point well made by Tester (1994, p. 130):

Certainly the media communicate harrowing representations of others, but the more the face of the other is communicated and reproduced in this way the more it is denuded of any moral authority it might otherwise possess.

References

- Allen R. & Nairn R.G. (1997) Media depictions of mental illness: an analysis of the use of dangerousness. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 31 (3), 375–381.
- Angermeyer M.C. & Matschinger H. (1996) The effect of violent attacks by schizophrenic persons on the attitude of the public toward the mentally ill. *Social Science and Medicine* 43 (12), 1721–1728.
- Appleby L. & Wessely S. (1988) Public attitudes to mental illness. The influence of the Hungerford massacre. *Medicine Science and Law* 28 (4), 291–295.
- Barthes R. (1972) *Mythologies*. Paladin, St Albans.
- Bloom-Cooper L., Hally H. & Murphy E. (1995) *The Falling Shadow. One Patient's Mental Health Care*. Duckworth, London.
- Brindle D. (1993) Mentally ill face tighter controls. *The Guardian* 5 August, pp. 2–19.
- Brindle D. (1995) Killer who should not have gone to jail. *Daily Telegraph* 26 September, p. 2.
- Brockington I.F., Hall P., Levings J. & Murphy C. (1993) The community's tolerance of the mentally ill. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 162, 93–99.
- Byrne P. (2000) Some Voices. Film review. *British Medical Journal* 321, 770.
- Chambers I. (1986) *Popular Culture. The Metropolitan Experience*. Methuen, London.
- Connell I. (1986) Fabulous powers: blaming the media. In: *Television Mythologies* (ed Masterman, L.), pp. 88–93. Comedia, London.
- Conrad P. (1997) Public eyes and private genes: historical frames, news constructions, and social problems. *Social Problems* 44 (2), 139–154.
- Curran J. & Sparks C. (1991) Press and popular culture. *Media Culture and Society* 13, 215–237.
- Cutcliffe J.R. & Hannigan B. (2001) Mass media, 'monsters' and mental health clients: the need for increased lobbying. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 8, 315–321.
- David A. (2002) A Beautiful Mind. Film review. *British Medical Journal* 324, 491.
- Davis N., Lingham R., Prior C. & Sims A. (1995) *Report of the Inquiry Into the Circumstances Leading to the Death of Jonathon Newby (a Volunteer Worker) on 9 October 1993 in Oxford*. HMSO, London.
- Department of Health (1989) *Caring for People: Community Care in the Next Decade and Beyond*. HMSO, London.
- Department of Health (1994) *The Health of the Nation. Key Area Handbook: Mental Illness*. HMSO, London.
- Department of Health (1999a) *The National Confidential Inquiry Into Suicide and Homicide by People with Mental Illness*. HMSO, London.
- Department of Health (1999b) *National Service Frameworks for Mental Health*. HMSO, London.
- Domino G. (1983) Impact of the film, 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest', on attitudes towards mental illness. *Psychological Reports* 53, 179–182.
- Fisk J. (1987a) *Introduction to Communication Studies*. Methuen, London.
- Fisk J. (1987b) *Television Culture*. Methuen, London.
- French P. (1998) Alfred the great. *The Observer* 2 August, p. 5.

- Gilman S.L. (1988) *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS*. Cornell University Press, London.
- Hall S. (1980) Encoding/decoding. In: *Culture, Media, Language* (eds Hall, S., Hobson, D., Lowe, A. & Willis, P.), pp. 128–138. Hutchinson, London.
- Hartley J. (1982) *Understanding News*. Methuen, London.
- Huxley P. (1993) Location and stigma: a survey of community attitudes to mental illness. Part 1. Enlightenment and stigma. *Journal of Mental Health* 2, 73–80.
- Hyler S.E. (1988) DSM III at the cinema: madness in the movies. *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 29 (2), 195–206.
- Hyler S.E., Gabbard G.O. & Schneider I. (1991) Homicidal maniacs and narcissistic parasites: stigmatisation of mentally ill persons in the movies. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry* 42 (10), 1044–1048.
- Jacobs R.N. (1996) Producing the news, producing the crisis: narrativity, television and news work. *Media, Culture and Society* 18, 373–397.
- Katz J. (1987) What makes crime ‘news’. *Media, Culture and Society* 9, 47–75.
- Kelly L.S. & McKenna H.P. (1997) Victimization of people with enduring mental illness in the community. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 4, 185–191.
- Kuhn A. (1996) The power of the image. In: *Media Studies: a Reader* (eds Marris, P. & Thornham, S.), pp. 50–55. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- McKeown M. & Clancy B. (1995) Media influence on societal perceptions of mental illness. *Mental Health Nursing* 15 (2), 10–12.
- McQuail D. (1972) *Sociology of Mass Communications*. Penguin, Harmondsworth.
- Meagher D., Newman A., Fee M. & Casey P. (1995) The coverage of psychiatry in the Irish print media. *Psychiatric Bulletin* 19, 642–644.
- Morley D. (1980) *The ‘Nationwide’ Audience*. British Film Institute, London.
- O’Neil S. & Fletcher D. (1996) Mental patient kills mother after quitting hospital. *Daily Telegraph* 16 January, p. 3.
- O’Sullivan T., Hartley J., Saunders D. & Fiske J. (1983) *Key Concepts in Communication*. Methuen, London.
- Paterson B. & Stark C. (2001) Social policy and mental illness in England in the 1990s: violence, moral panic and critical discourse. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 8, 257–267.
- Philo G., Secker J., Platt S., Henderson L., McLaughlin G. & Burnside J. (1994) The impact of the mass media on public images of mental illness: media content and audience belief. *Health Education Journal* 53, 271–281.
- Philo G., Secker J., Platt S., Henderson L., McLaughlin G. & Burnside J. (1996) Media images of mental distress. In: *Mental Health Matters: a Reader* (eds Heller, T., Reynolds, J., Gomm, R., Muston, R. & Pattison, S.). Macmillan, London.
- Prins H. (1995) *Offenders, Deviants or Patients*. Routledge, London.
- Ritchie J., Dick D. & Lingham R. (1994) *The Report of the Inquiry into the Care and Treatment of Christopher Clunis*, North East and South Thames Regional Health Authority, HMSO, London.
- Robins K. (1994) Forces of consumption: from the symbolic to the psychotic. *Media, Culture and Society* 16, 449–468.
- Rose D. (1998) Television, madness and community care. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 8, 213–228.
- Scheff T.J. (1963) Social support for stereotypes of mental disorder. *Mental Hygiene* 47, 461–469.
- Schneider I. (1977) Images of the mind. Psychiatry in the commercial film. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 134 (6), 613–620.
- Schneider I. (1987) The theory and practice of movie psychiatry. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 144 (8), 996–1002.
- Sherwood S. (1994) Narrating the social. *Journal of Narratives and Life Histories* 4 (1–2), 69–88.
- Signorielli N. (1989) The stigma of mental illness on television. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 33 (3), 325–331.
- Tester K. (1994) *Media, Culture and Morality*. Routledge, London.
- Thornton J.A. & Wahl O.F. (1996) Impact of a newspaper article on attitudes toward mental illness. *Journal of Community Psychology* 24 (1), 17–25.
- Timmins N. & Brown C. (1996) NHS accused over mentally ill killers. *Independent* 15 January, p. 1.
- Torrey E.F. (1994) Violent behaviour by individuals with serious mental illness. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry* 45 (7), 653–662.
- Wahl O.F. (1992) Mass media images of mental illness: a review of the literature. *Journal of Community Psychology* 20, 343–352.
- Ward G. (1997) *Mental Health and the National Press*. Health Education Authority, London.
- Wilkinson D. (2002) Iris. Film review. *British Medical Journal* 324, 177.