



Physical Anthropology Section - 2013

119 Psychopathy and the Cinema: Fact or Fiction?

Samuel J. Leistedt, MD, PhD*, Ave Louis Go 32ET, 64, Bavdour, BELGIUM

After attending this presentation, attendees will gain knowledge about psychopathy and about the heterogeneity of this complex syndrome through movies and cinema history.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community, especially the forensic behavioral science community, by demonstrating the utilization of fictional characters as “teaching movies” for future generations of forensic psychologists and forensic psychiatrists.

This research investigated the relationship between cinema and psychopathy. They described and analyzed the portrayal of fictional psychopathic characters in popular films and over cinematic history.

Rather than assessing their commercial success or “aesthetic efficiency” and appeal, the degree to which the portrayal was realistic from the clinical and psychopathological viewpoint of forensic psychiatrists, forensic clinical psychologists, and mental health professionals in general was assessed. Furthermore, by focusing on psychopathy in these fictional characters, the discussion of the portrayal of mental illness in cinema and the proposal of a fictional psychopathic character nosography for film history is possible.

The following international databases and film sources were used: “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 cinema,” “Internet Movie Database (IMDb),” “Oh My Gore!,” and “Western Décrypté.” All of these film databases were accessible on the internet without requiring authorization.

Based on these databases from 1915 to 2010, 400 films and the fictional, psychopathic-like profile characters therein were visualized and analyzed by senior forensic psychiatrists, forensic psychologists, and movie critics. As much information as possible was obtained 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 these materials, neither “classical clinical evaluation” or psychometric tests were able to be performed. That is, the diagnosis and classification were the sole results of reviewing films and any additional information on a specific character and the discussions regarding how the character evolved in a specific context (e.g., interactions with others, personal history).

In a final step, the authors proposed a clinical fictional psychopathic nosography was proposed based on two documented psychopathic classifications: (1) Primary/secondary; and, (2) Classic/macho/manipulative/pseudopsychopath. From 400 films, 126 fictional psychopathic characters (21 female and 105 male) were selected based on the realism and clinical accuracy of their profiles. Secondary (71, 43%) and manipulative (47, 62%) subtypes were the most common in the female group, while secondary (51, 43%) and prototypical (34, 28%) 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 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.

Psychopathy, Forensic Psychiatry, Cinema