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Does Film Keep Anti-psychiatry Alive? : Aesthetic Knowledge of Mental Illness and Institutions

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Abstract

The paper aims at evaluating contemporary films on psychiatry and their ‘knowledge’ of mental illness: How are mental illness and psychiatric institutions characterized rhetorically, and, are some psychiatric theories more present than others in the epistemological development of the films? I will argue that the film ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’ (1975) by Milos Forman has an iconic status. It was based on a novel by Ken Kesey from 1961 and can be related to anti-psychiatry – a political movement as well as a psychiatric theory influenced by social constructivism, e.g. Michel Foucault. In *The Divided Self* (1960) by Ronald D. Laing and *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1962) by Thomas Szasz conventional psychiatric language was deconstructed. Thus, Szasz pleaded that mental illness did not exist and built up a new effective anti-psychiatric language characterized by metaphors such as ‘prison’ and ‘prisoner’. These metaphors were given both presence (Perelman) and *evidentia* by Forman, who focused on clanking keys, bars, and belt fixation in the introduction to ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’. Also contemporary movies dealing with psychiatry, such as ‘Girl Interrupted’ (1999) by James Mangold, use the prison as a metaphor, probably as an intertextual reference to Forman’s film. In the end of the paper I will discuss the effect of these movies. Do they keep anti-psychiatry alive in the 21st century – even when the psychiatric theory as well as the political movement have lost influence?

Key words

Antipsychiatry, film, Milos Forman

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Does Film Keep Anti-psychiatry Alive? Aesthetic Knowledge of Mental Illness and Institutions

The movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) by Milos Forman is strongly inspired by antipsychiatry – a psychiatric theory questioning psychiatric epistemology and common practices in psychiatric institutions in the 60s and 70s. This article approaches the psychiatric theory as well as the film from a rhetorical point of view aiming at answering the following questions: How is antipsychiatry – here understood as epistemic knowledge – present in the movie? What does cinematic narration add to anti-psychiatric theory? And finally, does an iconic movie like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* keep antipsychiatry alive – both due to its status as a classic and due to its influence on new films on mental illness and institution?

Antipsychiatry

Antipsychiatry was a theoretical manifest as well as a political movement, which opposed the theory, practice, and institution of contemporary psychiatry. Inspired by post-structural philosophy, for instance by Michel Foucault,¹ these psychiatrists pleaded that mental illness was not medical in nature but social, political, and legal – a reaction to an unhealthy and disciplining society (Dain 1994). And if psychiatric illness was thus socially constructed, it had to be deconstructed to free the patients from the stigma of being pathologically ill (Shorter 1997, 274).

The term 'antipsychiatry' was retrospectively invented in 1967 by David Cooper. Ronald David Laing, however, who is also associated with the movement, did not identify with the term. He did not see himself as being *against* psychiatry (Kotowicz 1997).

Many discourses associated with anti-psychiatry discuss and deconstruct the clinical language of psychiatry aiming at describing objective symptoms to support a final diagnosis. Laing, for instance, pleads that the professional terminology

1. Michel Foucault's historical work on the treatment of psychiatric patients *Folie et Dérailson: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* was published in 1961 by Librairie Plon in Paris and became an influential warrant of the anti-psychiatric movement.

creates a “distance” between the psychiatrist and the patient:

As a psychiatrist, I run into major difficulty at the outset: how can I go straight to the patients if the psychiatric words at my disposal keep the patient at a distance from me? How can one demonstrate the general human relevance and significance of the patient’s condition if the words one has to use are specifically designed to isolate and circumscribe the meaning of the patient’s life to a particular clinical entity. (Laing 1973, 18).

From a rhetorical perspective it is obvious to interpret Laing’s phrase “go straight to the patients” as implying identification. Thus with Kenneth Burke’s words, Laing seems to be aiming at becoming *consubstantial* with his patients through a common language:

To identify A with B is to make A “consubstantial” with B. [...] A doctrine of consubstantiality, either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life. For substance, in the old philosophies, was an act; and a way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*. (Burke 1969, 21).

Laing also emphasizes how the psychiatric vocabulary refers to an isolated man thereby making it difficult to discuss “a relationship” between two persons:

The words of the current technical vocabulary either refer to man in isolation from the other and the world, that is, as an entity not *essentially* ‘in relation to’ the other and in a world, or they refer to falsely substantialized aspects of this isolated entity. [...] How can we speak in any way adequately of the relationship between me and you in terms of the interaction of one mental apparatus with another?” (Burke 1969, 19).

Another influential figure of the anti-psychiatric movement was the Hungarian psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, who served as a professor of psychiatry e.g. at Syracuse University in United States. In *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1961) he argued that mental illness was a metaphor. That it did not exist: “Strictly speaking, disease or illness can effect only the body; hence there can be no mental illness.” (1961, 275).

And when mental illnesses did not exist, hospitalization and psychiatric treatment did not make sense: “There is no medical, moral, or legal justification for involuntary psychiatric interventions, such as ‘diagnosis’, ‘hospitalization’, or treatment’. They are crimes against humanity.” (Szasz 1961, 276).

In 1961 Szasz therefore testified before a Senate Committee. He argued that one violated the patient-doctor relationship when using mental hospitals. The doctor was thereby turned into a keeper of a prison (Oliver 2006, 68-84). Together with George Alexander, and Erving Goffman he also founded The American Association for the Abolition of Involuntary Mental Hospitalization in 1970, which was announced in the *American Journal of Public Health* as well as in the *American*

Journal of Psychiatry.² The organization aimed at providing legal help to psychiatric patients. Moreover, it published a journal: *The Abolitionist*.

Thus, the anti-psychiatric discourse deconstructs the conventional psychiatric language and its metaphors. At the same time, however, it constructs a *new anti-psychiatric language* marked by characteristic metaphors such as ‘prison’ – also involving a set of sub-metaphors such as ‘prisoner’ and ‘inmate’. These metaphors are developed in an aesthetic way in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* with forceful appeals to the senses creating cinematic *evidentia*.³ The introduction, for instance, where the camera and the sound recording follow Nurse Ratched (played by Louise Fletcher) arriving at the mental institution, focuses on her steps in the long corridor, bars, clanking keys, and belt fixation framing the mental institution as a prison and setting the scene for the narrative plot.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest

One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest is based on Ken Kesey’s bestseller from 1962. It received five Oscars in 1975 and caused intense debate on contemporary treatment in psychiatric institutions both in United States and Europe.

The main character Randle McMurphy (played by Jack Nicholson) was hospitalized at a psychiatric institution in Oregon even though he was not mentally ill, which emerges clearly from the first dialogue between the leading psychiatrist of the hospital and McMurphy. The patient was only remanded for medical report after some minor offences. In that way the construction of the main character seems to be based on the anti-psychiatric theses: McMurphy has offended social and legal norms of society, but he is not ‘sick’ in a pathological sense. In spite of that he is placed at the disciplining mental hospital.

A dynamic dichotomy between ‘sick’ and ‘healthy’ marks the development and entire plot of the film. The healthy employees represent a system that makes the patients feel bad, and the patients, on the other hand, are – contrary to the staff – able to treat each other in a way that improves their mental condition. McMurphy, for instance, succeeds in making passive and introvert patients collaborate and develop physical as well as psychological skills when playing basketball through pedagogical instructions and enthusiastic feedback.

A conflict between the patient McMurphy and Nurse Ratched is very central to the plot. Seen through an anti-psychiatric lens their interaction can be interpreted as the fight of the normal subject (McMurphy) against the disciplining system

2. *The American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 61, 1971, pp. 1076, and *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 127, 1971, pp. 1698.

3. The Latin concept *evidentia* is a rhetorical quality of a clear and vivid description inviting receivers to create their own inner pictures. *Evidentia* is often constructed through the use of adjectives, verbs in the active, and various appeals to the senses.

(Nurse Ratched). Szasz' claim that psychiatric treatment is torture also seems to be uttered between the lines in the end of the movie: it is obvious to interpret the treatment with ECT and McMurphy's lobotomy as punishment inflicted on the patients because of actions seeming like rebellion.

The character McMurphy embodies important anti-psychiatric theses, and during the film an analytical approach to the disciplinary systems of the mental institution is added through his utterances and gesture. This is part of a meta-level of the movie, a critical perspective on the practices of the hospital. However, McMurphy is not aggressively opposing the staff at the beginning of his hospitalization. He discusses the rules and routines, such as the delivery of medicine and the group therapy. Even though the patients are urged to participate in an active way, the therapeutic sessions are strongly controlled by Nurse Ratched whose norms can be interpreted as a Freudian super-ego inhibiting the patients instead of releasing them from their psychological pain – or trying to help them solve their “personal, social, and ethical problems in living” to quote Szasz.⁴

The movie also contains satirical and parodical elements displaying the vices of psychiatry. According to John Meyer's four humoristic parameters in public discourse that are part of his humor theory (2000), *differentiation* and *clarification* are dominating. In the movie *differentiation* has the form of polarization: patients versus staff, and *clarification* expressed in subtle lines or dramatic gestures unveiling paradoxes and injustices. An example is the doling out of medicine implying both clarification and differentiation: The medicine is handed out from an open window in a closed little room that can be interpreted as a metaphorical border between the world of the patients and the world of the staff. The closed room also protects the nurses against the patients who are not allowed to enter. The medicine distribution is always carried out to the same calming classical string music in major and triple time – a sort of manipulative Muzak (functional background music) that helps a relaxed atmosphere along preventing conflicts with the patients who accept taking their medicine without offering resistance. The medicine distribution is repeated several times in the movie underlining the ritualistic and mechanical character of the event. In the end of the movie the ritual is also parodied in that the patients distribute alcohol to each other to the same music as part of their Christmas party. The performance now changes into a grotesque carnival in Bakhtin's sense in that the power hierarchy of the hospital is turned upside down – some of the patients now play the disciplining nurses.

4. "Mental illness is a myth. Psychiatrists are not concerned with mental illnesses and their treatments. In actual practice they deal with personal, social, and ethical problems in living." (Szasz 1991, 296).

What does cinematic narration add to anti-psychiatric theory?

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest can be seen as a rhetorical example (*paradigma*) making both psychiatry, mental institutions, as well as patients and staff present (Perelman 1990, 1088). Moreover, strong cinematic *evidentia* with appeals to both ears and eyes make it easy for the audience to relate to and identify with the fictive patients and their psychological pain. In that way fiction and reality are potentially intertwined which might mark the audience's pre-conception of 'real' psychiatric institutions.

In the movie the anti-psychiatric theses are maintained as an *indirect* warrant of the fictive narrative: e.g. Szasz' claim that mental hospitals are disciplining prisons is expressed both through the introductory setting of the scene and the narrative development: McMurphy is locked up in a mental institution and treated with both medicine, ECT, and lobotomy even though he is not mentally ill. This hidden argumentation does not call for counter-argumentation in contrast to the anti-psychiatric theory itself. The discourses of Laing and Szasz are argumentative and can easily be expressly opposed. It is for instance easy to think out counter-argumentation opposing Szasz' claim that mental illness does not exist. But how does one disagree with the tragic development and plot of a narrative?

The reception of the movie

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest strongly influenced public opinion as well as official and vernacular discourse on psychiatry and can be seen as iconic in accordance with Robert Hariman's and John Louis Lucaites' description:

Even though iconic images usually are recognized as such immediately, and even if they are capable of doing the heavy lifting required to change public opinion and motivate action on behalf of a public interest, their meaning and effects are likely to be established slowly, shift with changes in context and use, and be fully evident only in a history of both official and vernacular appropriations. (2003, 38).

Edward Shorter, for instance, emphasizes the film's portrayal of ECT – scenes that both reflected and contributed to the anti-ECT sentiments of the period (1997, 283). And the movie seems to continue to influence the reputation of psychiatry due to new airings.⁵

The iconic status of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is also clear from an article published in *The Guardian* (April 13, 2015). Marc Burrows, a former psychiatric patient, reflects on his experiences at a mental institution and refers to *the chief*, one of the movie's important subordinate parts:

5. The movie was broadcasted twice on Danish television in 2014: April 4 (DR1) and December 16 (DRK).

In the next bed along from mine – and I promise I’m not making this up – was a 6ft 6in Native American man, probably because since *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, all psychiatric wards must be issued a giant Native American as standard. Sadly I never saw him throw a concrete water fountain through a window, though I’m sure the shockwaves from his constant, rumbling flatulence must have caused some structural damage to the building.⁶

The iconicity of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* also marks newer films on psychiatry, such as *Girl Interrupted* (1999) by James Mangold and *Shutter Island* (2010) by Martin Scorsese. These movies also characterize the mental institutions as prisons marked by surveillance and discipline incorporating an important anti-psychiatric metaphor also evoking a dialogue with the legendary *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

The effect of the movie

The Danish psychiatrist Aksel Grosen describes the effect of the movie in this way in a newspaper article from 2007: “The movie’s point is that patients recover as soon as they leave the hospital. Unfortunately this does not happen in real life.”⁷

Grosen argues that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and the following psychiatry debate caused abolition of psychiatric sections in Denmark. When the film had its first screening in 1975, the Danish psychiatry had 10.000 beds. At the beginning of the 21st century this number was reduced to 3000. In the same period crimes committed by psychiatric patients increased sevenfold.

As an alternative to hospitalization the district psychiatry was built up offering patients help in their immediate environment instead of isolating them in mental institutions. However, this de-institutionalization also covered up great budget cuts. Psychiatry was given a lower priority compared to the somatic areas of the Danish health system.

In another newspaper article from 2013 the psychiatrist Birgit Wandahl Bundesen also opposes movies like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and their horror-like representation of psychiatric treatments, which has little to do with modern practice. Nevertheless, the patients become scared, and sometimes they do not accept treatment offered by the psychiatrists.⁸

This effect is confirmed in a newspaper article from 2015 by the former psychiatric patient Nanna Balslev who describes how scenes from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* showing treatment with ECT frightened her:

6. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/13/psychiatric-ward-laugh-about-mental-illness-patient>

7. ”Filmens pointe er, at patienterne bliver raske lige så snart de er udskrevet. Det bliver de desværre ikke i virkeligheden.” ”Opgør med Gøgereden”. *Jyllandsposten*, April 16, 2007. (<http://jyllandsposten.dk/indland/ECE3357239/Opgør+med+Gøgereden/>)

8. Birgit Wandahl Bundesen: “Horroragtige fordomme om psykiatrien”. *Information* June 4, 2013. (<http://www.information.dk/462573>)

It is a process that takes a long time, but during three weeks I feel better. I have received treatments with ECT for the first time in my life. I have watched *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, so I am horror-struck before the treatment and prepare myself for waking up as a vegetable. But when my parents come to visit me, I feel like going for a walk and I eat the strawberry cake that they had brought with them. For the first time in months single streaks of light force their way behind the toned windows.⁹

Conclusion

The anti-psychiatric warrant of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is reproduced due to frequent airings. Moreover, the film has an implicit presence in new films on psychiatry that reproduce its metaphors. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* antipsychiatry is transformed into cinematic narration invigorating argumentation, values, and ideals of the theory. Identification with the fictive patients of the film is also potentially created e.g. due to strong *evidentia*. In that way the film is still able to influence our view on psychiatry many years after antipsychiatry lost influence as a theory – and to some degree was even exploded as epistemic and scientific knowledge.

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9. Nanna Balslev: "'Det værste er skammen over at have mistet sig selv'" ["'The Worst Thing is the Shame to Have Lost Oneself'"]. *Information* July 25, 2015: "Det er en proces, der tager lang tid, men i løbet af tre uger får jeg det bedre. Jeg har fået elektrochok for første gang i mit liv. Jeg har set *Gøgereden*, så jeg er rædselsslagen inden behandlingen og forbereder mig på at vågne op som en grøntsag. Men da mine forældre kommer på besøg, har jeg lyst til at gå en tur og spiser den jordbærkage, de har med. For første gang i flere måneder trænger der enkelte lysstriber ind bag de tonede ruder." (<http://www.information.dk/540292#kommentarer>)

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