

# Hollywood schizophrenia

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## ABSTRACT

The portrayal of mental disorders in Hollywood movies has a considerable negative impact on public understanding, argue **Alison Smith** and **Stephen J Cooper**

## FULL TEXT

Our culture is full of fictional portrayals of mental illness, and cinema has become fascinated with one condition in particular. A huge number of Hollywood blockbusters centre around a violent sociopath with a split personality who, in many cases, is labelled schizophrenic. Vague implications of mental illness in characters can be found in some of the most high profile pieces of cinema. In the Star Wars trilogy, Anakin Skywalker undergoes a personality flip to become the evil Darth Vader, as a result of a traumatic event in his life revealed in parts by the series of movies. In The Lord of the Rings, Gollum bickers with his alter ego Sméagol, apparently driven to madness and ugliness by dark forces associated with the ring he calls his "precious." Beyond the world of fantasy films, however, Hollywood tends to use the schizophrenic tag directly, often in an inaccurate and stigmatising way.

### **The split personality is born**

Alfred Hitchcock's classic 1960 thriller Psycho stars another dangerous character with dual personality. The seemingly harmless Norman Bates takes on the persona of his dead mother when committing murder, his psychosis supposedly triggered by the stress of her death. As the fictional psychiatrist Dr Fred Richmond attempts to explain, "When the mind houses two personalities, there is always a conflict, a battle..." It seems to be during Hitchcock's era that Hollywood schizophrenia was born, the symptoms of which are a split personality and tendencies towards evil, homicide, and genius.

Ironically, none of these are symptoms of real life schizophrenia. Split personalities are associated with a separate illness - multiple personality or dissociative identity disorder - and violence is not generally related to either condition. Although patients with schizophrenia can become hostile and aggressive during periods of acute relapse, in general they are not. In fact they tend to withdraw from the rest of society. When aggressive behaviour does arise, it is not a sudden switch from an apparently calm state to one of violence. More likely is a steady progression from increasing suspicion of people surrounding the patient to frank hostility, sometimes accompanied by hallucinations commanding the patient what to do. This gradual change, usually recognised by community nurses or family who know the patient well, is rarely depicted by Hollywood, which seeks more dramatic effects.

The notion of split personality may have become associated with schizophrenia after the ideas of Eugene Bleuler, who introduced the term schizophrenia in the early 20th century and wrote about the splitting of mental functions in the condition - a process by which he meant disintegration of the coherence of thoughts and personality, something very different from the idea of separate personalities.

Dissociative identity disorder, the condition associated with split personalities, is quite controversial, and the diagnosis is rarely made outside North America. In fact it is not recognised in the international classification of diseases (ICD). The behaviour most often portrayed in Hollywood cinema is more characteristic of psychopathic or sociopathic personalities. The impulsive behaviour that such people often exhibit is something that the lay

population finds difficult to understand and therefore tends to attribute to madness. True psychotic illness is something with which the general public has little acquaintance.

### **Misrepresentations and truths**

Hollywood schizophrenia has cropped up in recent cinema. The protagonist in the 1999 film *Fight Club* hallucinates a companion, or alter ego, played by Brad Pitt. And once again we see a split personality interwoven with violent behaviour.

One of the most outright misrepresentations of dissociative identity disorder as schizophrenia is found in *Me, Myself and Irene*. Jim Carrey plays a man with multiple personalities, diagnosed in the film as having "advanced delusory schizophrenia with narcissistic rage." This fundamental inaccuracy caused widespread anger. In the United Kingdom alone, the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the mental health organisations Mind and the National Schizophrenia Fellowship made a joint protest against the film.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after this protest came the 2002 release of a very different high profile Hollywood portrayal of schizophrenia. *A Beautiful Mind*, the biographic movie of mathematician John Nash, was relatively successful in illustrating the devastating realities of the condition, winning the approval of both film critics and the psychiatric community in the process.

The symptoms of real schizophrenia can be categorised into two groups - positive and negative. The negative symptoms often prove the most difficult for patients and their families to cope with, and respond least to drugs. They include feelings of emotional numbness, difficulty in communicating with others, and lack of motivation. The effects of John Nash's negative symptoms were portrayed accurately and sensitively in *A Beautiful Mind*, arguably less so than his positive symptoms, which included delusions (strange beliefs), visual and auditory hallucinations, and paranoid thoughts.

### **The patient's view**

Ian Chovil, who has experienced schizophrenia, explains how film compares with real life, "Hollywood has a hard time shooting delusions and hallucinations. It's very hard to capture the experience of a psychosis on film because it is mostly internal. They show hallucinations using ordinary actors, and I've never met anyone with schizophrenia who experienced hallucinations of people of such exact detail. At the same time, just because the voices are invisible doesn't mean they aren't as real as real people. You relate to them as if they are real, and this movie conveys that very well."

Although films that attempt to represent true life mental illness often get it wrong, fantasy films can be obscurely accurate. There is evidence that dissociative identity disorder is a subtype of post-traumatic stress disorder caused by childhood trauma.<sup>2</sup> It makes some sense then, that Anakin Skywalker and the hobbit Sméagol would experience personality changes after dramatic events early in their lives. The fact that characters become evil and dangerous is still stigmatising, although probably less so when they are non-human and come from either Middle Earth or a galaxy far far away.

In absolute contrast to dissociative identity disorder, the causes of schizophrenia are unconnected to events in childhood. Biological factors are involved comprising disturbances of brain development and disturbances in the brain dopamine system. Wrongly placing blame on parents and upbringing for the development of schizophrenia - failing to recognise its biological basis - is one of the damaging effects of misinformed portrayals of the condition. From a patient's point of view, Ian Chovil is equally aware of the negative impact society and the media can have. He says two factors need to be overcome in recovering from schizophrenia, "There is the illness itself, and the way we, as a society, treat people who develop it." Chovil agrees that the premise of *Me, Myself and Irene* was stigmatising, but he finds a positive message in the film. "It was a comedy that actually had considerable compassion for the hero. When he took his medication he improved, and, when he didn't, he hurt himself more than anybody else." Conversely, he feels that the plot of *Fight Club* carries dangerous connotations for people with schizophrenia. At the end of the movie, the main character shoots a hole through his own cheek in an attempt to destroy his hallucinated alter ego - and it works. "I know people who start cutting themselves to get rid of their delusions when their symptoms flare up. I hope none of them see this film."

Chovil's worries are supported by psychiatry. Copycat behaviour is recognised in upsurges of people presenting with deliberate self harm after depictions on television, although this phenomenon has not been shown to be associated specifically with cinematic releases. It should be emphasised that self harm by patients with schizophrenia is most often related to distress due to their psychotic symptoms or a sense of hopelessness about their illness, rather than from an external influence. Patients with psychosis may sometimes mutilate themselves in response to a hallucination or a delusional idea, but this is relatively uncommon, as most will not see any real link between what they experience and what is portrayed on screen.

In Ian Chovil's experience, movies certainly did reflect and even become involved in his psychosis. "My experience of delusions were somewhat like the story of Terminator - powerful enemies, nobody realising the truth you have learnt, and the fate of humanity resting on your shoulders." Speaking of his persistent delusions, Chovil says "Sometimes it seems like I'm living in The Matrix. The real world is very much different than the one we know." This is evidence indeed for how deep into our psyches Hollywood can reach: how many of us stepped out of the cinema after seeing The Matrix, in full mental health, experiencing similar what ifs? If movies can affect our view of the world so profoundly, then, on some level, even if we are fully educated to the contrary, perhaps we expect to come across a violent, split personality schizophrenic. Similarly, people who believe that dissociative identity disorder is highly rare or non-existent speculate that its high cinematic profile can increase the frequency with which people present such symptoms and increase diagnoses made by doctors.<sup>3</sup> Reinforced mental health clichés are therefore dangerous to us, both as members of the susceptible public and as medical professionals.

### **Not all is well in film and fiction**

#### **Reality of the unreal**

Film makers often use cinema's deep reaching effects to play psychological games with their audiences. Part of what makes The Matrix, Fight Club, and A Beautiful Mind such effective films is their presentation of what is not real as if it were real. Later in the films, the viewer comes to realise that things they wholly believed about the world they are absorbed in are not true - giving them a taste of the loss of grip on reality that comes with mental illness. This is a scarier notion than any knife wielding psycho, and movies that use mental illness in this way are often more moving and impressive than films that create caricatures of split personality. Split personalities are useful tools for film makers though, providing a tangible human flipside to an extreme or evil character, making it easier for an audience to sympathise with them. It is likely, then, that the epidemiology of dissociative disorders will remain very different on the silver screen to the reality.

*A Beautiful Mind* has low profile predecessors and successors that give accurate and moving portrayals of the true schizophrenia, notably *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) and to some extent *Donnie Darko* (2004). Much of the mental health community agrees, however, that the Oscar winning blockbuster *A Beautiful Mind* has improved public understanding of the condition. Although public attitudes towards mental illness in the 1990s were actually worse than in the '50s,<sup>4</sup> the optimist might speculate that Hollywood, the media, and society as a whole are now becoming increasingly aware of the realities of schizophrenia, as well as how damaging fundamental mistakes, misconceptions, and prejudices can be.

In the words of Ian Chovil, it is important that we recognise schizophrenia as "a tragic illness that can have a happy ending."

Ian Chovil fully documents his experience of schizophrenia at [www.chovil.com](http://www.chovil.com).

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## Footnote

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