



Psychiatric Issues in the Italian Movies

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Conflict of interest

The Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Summary

The main objective of the research was a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the treatment of psychiatric issues and of the roles played by the figures of psychiatrists or by psychiatric institutions in the international cinema and specifically in the Italian cinema. To carry out this research, the following were taken into consideration an audiovisual catalog published by Secchi in 2007 containing 1781 films and documentaries relating to psychiatry and mental illness and a specific website for film research called www.filmabout.it (2190 films on psychiatric issues). From both sources it was possible to extract all the films and, in particular, Italian films dealing with psychiatric issues. Subsequently the percentages were calculated to evaluate the quantitative contribution of Italian films to international cinematography. Finally, a table was formulated containing the main topics concerning mental illness and the related Italian films; in particular, the films that received the greatest success were cited, measured by the prizes received and the critical notations from each of them (source wikipedia).

All the data obtained by this study have been processed detecting: the total number of films according to the selected topics; the number of Italian films according to the selected topics; the percentage characterized by Italian films compared to the total number of films produced for each topic selected from sources; the number of international films translated into Italian; the percentage of Italian films compared to the total number of films produced for each topic; the Italian films on psychiatry and mental health that have received the most success, measured by the prizes received and the critical notations for each of them (source wikipedia).

Key word: films, movies, cinema, italian cinema, psychiatry, psychiatric issues, psychiatric topics, mental health, mental illness

Introduction

Undoubtedly, cinema and films in general are of great importance in influencing public opinion. This influence overcomes barriers of age, gender, nationality, culture and time. Films have become an integral part of our culture and our society, and where awareness of their profound influence has been taken into consideration, they have also been used for educational purposes¹⁻⁴. This is due to the fact that none of all human perceptual experiences are capable to convey such an amount of information or to evoke emotions as much as vision. The filmmakers demonstrate that they can grasp the richness of this visual sense, combine it with acoustic stimuli and thus create a dreamlike experience such as the film. For this reason, many consider cinema as the most powerful and influential medium of mass communication. Films, in particular, are important in influencing the public perception of psychiatry and mental illness^{5,6}

and this is also caused by the fact that many people are poorly informed of the problems of people with psychiatric disorders. In this sense, the mass media are particularly effective in determining opinions in little-known situations. In the field of psychiatric diseases, however many films have dealt with these topics, there is still much confusion and ignorance today.

The representation of mental illness and the operators who intervene on it was carried out mainly in the most popular genres, namely horror, suspense and drama; however more recently descriptions of these topics have appeared through documentary film and comedy ⁷.

However, only a few films manage to properly outline the social and emotional context in which mental illness is experienced and the difficult work that is carried out by professionals in the sector (psychiatrists and psychologists). People with mental illness are more often portrayed as dangerous, aggressive and unpredictable.

Hylar et al. ⁸ listed six common stereotypes with which mental illnesses are described in the films: a) patient described as a rebel free spirit (e.g. *Frances*, 1982, *Angel at my table*, 1990, *Shine*, 1996, *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*, 1975); b) patient described as a homicidal maniac, (e.g. *The Maniac Cook*, 1909); c) patient seducer-seductress, (*Lilith*, 1964, *Dressed to kill*, 1980) d) patient described as the person without prejudices (e.g. *Kings of Hearts*, 1968, *Fine Madness*, 1966); e) patient described as a narcissistic parasite (e.g. *What about Bob*, 1991; *Annie Hall*, 1977); f) patient described as a zoo specimen, (*Bedlam*, 1948; *Dressed to kill*, 1980).

In the same way, the operators of the sector, and in particular psychiatrists and psychologists have been described according to the cases as: arrogant, ineffective, cynical or in any case not empathetic, inert, manipulative, authoritarian. Starting from silent films such as *Dr Dippy Sanitarium* (1920) and *The cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919), *Doctor Mabuse* (1922) in which the psychiatrist is described as evil and underhanded, subsequently this figure appears described between madness and cruelty (e.g.: *Elettroshock*, 1964, *Altered States*, 1990, *Freeway*, 1996). In *Manhunter* (1986) a cannibal psychiatrist makes an appearance, returning later in *The silence of the lambs* (1991). In the same way many films treat psychiatric institutions emphasizing only sadistic and normative aspects (*Manicomio*, 1946; *La fossa dei serpenti*, 1948; *Pazza*, 1987; *A beautiful mind*, 2001). Among these films, a particular mention deserves *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*, which significantly denounces the repressive mechanism of certain mental institutions by reinforcing the idea, already present in the collective imagination of a punitive and persecutory psychiatry, which has little to do with care. It is only since the 1950s that in American cinema, as Gabbard and Gabbard ⁹ point out, the psychiatrist has assumed more positive and esoteric functions, giving voice to the belief that he can also carry out a socially useful activity. In Italian cinema both the figure of the psychiatrist and that of the psychoanalyst do not assume, at least initially, much

importance, while mental illness is already described on various occasions in the years of the First World War (*Il fuoco*, 1915; *Tigre reale*, 1916; *Il fauno*, 1917; *Carnevalacca*, 1918). In these years, passions above all open the way to madness, while the figure of the psychiatrist, as well as that of the doctor in general, appear as near-absent creatures. In a country with a predominantly agricultural economy, like Italy was until the 1950s, where there had never been a real trust in medicine as a science, let alone in therapeutic institutions, cinema could hardly be a guarantor of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Until the late 1950s, a sort of demedicalization of psychiatry was observed, as had happened in American cinema. Furthermore, this figure was so confused in the collective imagination that the only way to represent it, at that time, was the parody. However, in those years, Italian cinema also began to highlight individual malaise and to connect it with larger phenomena of family and social unease (e.g.: *Europa 51*, 1952; *Traviata*, 1953; *La strada*, 1954; *Il ferroviere*, 1956; *Il grido*, 1957; *Deserto Rosso*, 1964; *I pugni in tasca*, 1965; *Un uomo a metà*, 1966; *Diario di uno schizofrenico*, 1968, *Per le antiche scale*, 1975). Psychiatry and psychoanalysis in those years began to support some directors to deal with these issues in a more profound way; the perception of mental illness changed, becoming less feared and closer in the collective imagination; the figure of the psychiatrist acquired a more stable, unnecessary, but at least more useful social role. It was between the 60s and 70s that a new social drama (after that of the two world wars) came to be experienced in Italy, namely that of the terrorism of the lead years; the films became more reflective and tried increasingly to understand even the deepest dynamics of the individual stories. In these years, in fact, the first films appeared in which experts of the unconscious were involved in the drafting of the screenplay (e.g.: *Il diavolo in corpo*, 1986; *La balia*, 1999; *L'ora di religione*, 2001) and in which the protagonists they move according to a problematic approach to reality lived in a neurotic way with references to unresolved conflicts. Psychic distress and psychiatric disorder since the early 2000s are described in a more faithful and painful way in dramatic films (*La stanza del Figlio*, 2000; *Piano solo*, 2007; *Il papà di Giovanna* 2008; *Caterina va in città*, 2003; *Un ragazzo d'oro*, 2014), in a more detached and ironic way in comic films (*Ma che colpa abbiamo noi*, 2003; *Ma che bella sorpresa*, 2015). The figure of the psychiatrist and the psychoanalyst acquires a charge of greater humanity, empathy, in some cases of great personal problematic (e.g.: *Il grande cocomero*, 1993; *La stanza del figlio*, 2000; *Si può fare*, 2008) if not of real sympathy (*Caruso Paskoski*, 1988; *Confusi e felici*, 2014). Finally, the effect that Franco Basaglia's psychiatric reform of 1978 had on the cinema with the consequences it brought (closure of asylums; integration of psychiatry in the general hospital and in territorial medicine) must be underlined in Italy; this event not only determined a different diagnostic and therapeutic approach to mental illness (e.g.: *Si può fare*, 2008) but it

constituted a historical fact with undoubted repercussions on the cultural and social life of the Italians (*La meglio gioventù*, 2003; *C'era una volta la città dei matti*, 2010).

Purpose of the research

The main objective of the research was a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the treatment of psychiatric issues by international cinema and specifically Italian cinema.

Methodology

To carry out this research, the following were taken into consideration: 1) an audiovisual catalog published by Secchi in 2007 containing all the films and documentaries relating to psychiatry and mental illness; b) a specific website for film research called www.filmabout.it.

In the first case, since the material was already organized on the subject, it was possible to extract all the films and Italian films on the following topics: *adolescence, agoraphobia, hallucination, persecutory anxiety, anxiety; autism, dementia; depression; substance abuse; obsessive-compulsive; electric shocks; phobia; hypochondria; hysteria; psychiatric institutions; mania; psychiatrist; chronic schizophrenia; suicide*.

In the second case, since it was a more non-specific website, it was possible to extract all the films and the Italian ones on the following topics: Alzheimer's, amnesia, autism and Asperger's syndrome, self-harm, depression, learning disabilities, eating behavior disorders, personality disorders, drugs and addictions, psychiatric institutes, mental manipulation, psychotropic drugs, psychotherapies and psychoanalysis, mental retardation, suicide.

After extracting all the titles on the aforementioned subjects, we then proceeded to select all the films shot in Italy; subsequently the percentages were calculated to evaluate the quantitative contribution of Italian films to international cinematography. Finally, a table was formulated containing the main topics concerning mental illness and the related Italian films; in particular, the films that received the greatest success were cited, measured by the prizes received and the critical notations from each of them (source wikipedia).

Results

From the audiovisual catalog published by Secchi, 1781 films were extrapolated and from the website www.filmabout.it 2190 films were considered pertaining to the themes listed above, bearing in mind that numerous films do not deal with a single theme. Therefore, this quantitative data does not correspond to the real numerical sum of the films examined, but results from the sum of times in which they are put in relation to the various themes (Alzheimer, amnesia, autism and Asperger syndrome, self-harm, depression, learning disabilities, eating behavior disorders, personality disorders, drugs and addictions,

Table I. Shows respectively: the total number of films according to the selected topics; the number of Italian films according to the selected topics; the percentage characterized by Italian films compared to the total number of films produced for each topic selected from source 1) or from the audiovisual catalog published by Secchi.

Theme	N of Films Tot	No. of Italian Films	%
Adolescence	104	20	19%
Agoraphobia	16	3	19%
Alcoholism	53	3	6 %
Hallucinations	76	13	17%
Persecutory anxiety	279	35	12%
Anxiety	204	27	13%
Autism	40	8	20%
Dementia	11	2	18%
Depression	238	28	12%
Substance abuse	22	4	18%
Memory disorders	44	4	9%
Obsessive- compulsive Disorder	8	1	12%
Post traumatic stress disorder	33	1	3%
Elettroshock	22	3	14%
Phobia	19	2	10%
Hypochondria	12	2	17%
Hysteria	28	7	25%
Psychiatric institutions	122	22	18%
Mania	17	4	23%
Paranoia	11	0	0%
Psychiatrist	191	26	14%
Chronic schizophrenia	55	16	29%
Suicide	176	31	18%

psychiatric institutes, mental manipulation, psychotropic drugs, psychotherapies and psychoanalysis, mental retardation, suicide).

Discussion

The first note to be made concerns the interest of Italian cinema in mental illness and psychiatry in general.

Infact, out of a total of 1781 films extracted from Secchi's audiovisual catalog, 262 Italian films (15%) were found. Considering, however, the website www.filmabout.it, out of a total of 2190 films, 156 are Italian (7.12%) and 1691 have been translated into Italian (77.21%).

This data, in itself, testifies to the sensitivity of the Italian state towards these problems, a sensitivity which has already been noted in the early twentieth century, as men-

Table II. Shows respectively: the total number of films according to the selected topics; the number of Italian films according to the selected topics; the number of films translated into Italian according to the topics covered; the percentage of Italian films compared to the total number of films produced for each topic; the percentage of films translated into Italian compared to the total number of films produced for each topic selected by source 2) or by the search engine filmabout.it.

	No. of Films (Tot)	No. of Italian Films	No. of Films translated into Italian	% of Italian Films	% of Films translated into Italian
Alzheimer	33	2	19	6,06%	57,57%
Amnesia	57	6	49	10,53%	85,96%
Autism and Asperger's syndrome	67	3	35	4,48%	52,24%
Self-harm	26	1	19	3,85%	73,10%
Depression	102	16	89	15,69%	87,25%
Learning disorders	26	1	15	3,85%	57,70%
Eating behavior disorders	73	9	50	12,33%	68,49%
Personality disorders	113	7	103	6,19%	91,15%
Drugs and addictions,	1117	52	839	4,66%	75,11%
Mental institutes	82	14	71	17,07%	86,59%
Psychotropic drugs	46	3	35	6,52%	76,09%
Mental manipulation	72	3	64	4,17%	88,89%
Mental retardation (disability)	61	1	42	1,64%	68,85%
Psychotherapies and psychoanalysis	135	28	118	20,74%	87,41%
Suicide	180	10	143	5,56%	79,44%
TOTAL	2190	156	1691	7,12%	77,21%

tioned above. In the same way, as was said in the introduction, the figure of psychiatric operators, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts in the first place, has been deeply examined especially in the last 30 years. In fact, while mental illness was already described on various occasions in the years of the First World War, the figures of the psychiatrist, the psychologist and the psychoanalyst, as well as that of the doctor more generally, appear as near-absent creatures. Furthermore, these figures appeared so confused in the collective imagination that the only way to represent them, at that time, was the parody. It was only from the late 1950s with Italian cinema that it began to increasingly represent individual malaise by linking it to larger phenomena of family and social unease, that mental health workers began to acquire a physiognomy or at least to exist. At the beginning of the 70s with the appearance of new social problems in Italy (struggles between social classes, terrorism) but above all with the reform of the health legislation on psychiatry (Basaglia reform)¹⁰ of 1978, there was a radical revision by the world of culture on mental illness and psychiatric operators.

In this regard, the data of our research show that 18% of the films in the Secchi catalog¹¹ and 17.07% of the films extracted from filmabout.it are dedicated to the description and discussion of psychiatric institutions. The activity of Basaglia and his team began in the 1960s, based on the descriptions reported by Goffman (1961)¹² on Ameri-

can psychiatric hospitals and after having contributed to the Italian translation of this work; Basaglia was particularly influenced by Goffman's descriptions and his conceptualizations of "psychiatric patient career" and "total institution" and on these premises he showed how patients admitted to psychiatric hospitals ended up becoming passive, dehumanized, real "numbers"; Basaglia's theories led him to carry out the Gorizia experiment (opening to the outside a psychiatric hospital), to write a text in which he reported his experiences, *The institution denied*, and to contribute to the production of a television documentary from the name *I Giardini di Abele* (Zavoli, 1969) which was seen by millions of Italians and in which it faithfully reported original films, photographs and texts¹³⁻²⁰.

This experience is faithfully reported in the following Italian films: *Matti da slegare* (1975), *La meglio gioventù* (2003); *C'era una volta nella città dei matti* (2010).

If we consider the data highlighted by our research in greater depth, other important considerations emerge: exploring the audiovisual catalog of Secchi, the highest percentages found in Italian films mainly concern the psychopathological issues inherent in schizophrenic psychosis (29%); and Mania (23%). It would therefore seem that Italian cinema has been particularly attentive to serious psychiatric pathologies of a psychotic type rather than psychiatric pathologies, so-called neurotic, with the exception of hysteria (25%) which also in Italy could have above all

Table III. Shows the Italian films on psychiatry and mental health that have received the most success, measured by the prizes received and the critical notations for each of them (source wikipedia).

Theme	Film
Adolescence	Il grande cocomero (1993)
Agoraphobia	Il male oscuro (1993)
Alcoholism	La casa dell'angelo (2005)
Hallucinations	Diario di una schizofrenica (1968)
Persecutory anxiety	Giulia e Giulia (1987)
Anxiety	La balia (1999)
Autism	Pulce non c'è (2012)
Dementia	Una sconfinata giovinezza (2010)
Depression	I giorni dell'abbandono (2005) La stanza del figlio (2001)
Substance abuse	La luna (1979)
Memory disorders	La regina degli scacchi (2002)
Obsessive- Compulsive Disorder	Ma che colpa abbiamo noi (2003)
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder	Enrico IV (1984)
Elettroshock	La meglio gioventù (2003)
Phobia	Ma che colpa abbiamo noi (2003)
Hypochondria	Il male oscuro (1993)
Hysteria	Prendimi l'anima (2002)
Psychiatric institutions	La ragazza di Trieste (1982) Il papà di Giovanna (2008) Matti da slegare (1975) La meglio gioventù (2003) Diario di una schizofrenica (1968) La seconda ombra (2000)
Mania	Ivo il tardivo (1995)
Paranoia	/
Psychiatrist	Il grande cocomero (1993) La stanza del figlio (2001) Prendimi l'anima (2002) Cattiva (1991)
Chronic schizophrenia	La ragazza di Trieste (1982) Diario di una schizofrenica (1968) Senza pelle (1994)
Suicide	Un'ora sola ti vorrei (2002) La ragazza di Trieste (1982)

had a historical character. This greater interest of Italian cinema in the more serious psychiatric pathologies is difficult to interpret and needs further investigation; it could be related to a greater curiosity towards pathologies whose etiology is not yet clear, compared to others to which it is

easier to attribute a secondary genesis to environmental events. Furthermore, this interest herein in Italian cinema could be used in order to build suitable health education tools, as has been proposed in some researches^{6,21,22}, especially in order to reduce stigma and social isolation²³. Depression in Italian cinema seems poorly described (12% and 15.69% respectively). However, there is a high sensitivity on the part of the Italian audience regarding this issue, testified by the percentage of films translated into Italian on depression (87.25%).

The films relating to suicide in Italy seem to be numerous in percentage terms in the cases reported by Secchi (18%) and few (5.56%) in the cases extracted from www.filmabout.it. Also in this case, the percentage of films translated into Italian remains high (79.44%), allowing a particular sensitivity to this topic to emerge from the Italian audience. Let us recall that suicide in the cinematographic image has been, time by time, related to different psychological mechanisms: as a sign of rebellion or a final act towards a dream of freedom (*Jules et Jim*, 1962; *Dead Poets Society*, 1989; *Thelma and Louise*, 1991); as a heroic act in the name of high values (*Mishima*, 1985); as a behavior determined by the inability to overcome early unresolved traumas (*Le mari de la coiffeuse*, 1990) as a way out of an extremely painful life (*Deserto rosso*, 1964; *Le Locataire*, 1976) or from a particularly conflicting family situation (*The Virgin Suicides*, 1999) or the impossibility of making an important choice (*La femme d'à côté*, 1981). In the Italian film *La ragazza di Trieste* (1982), the suicide of the protagonist, suffering from a serious psychiatric pathology, constitutes the only way out of an existence characterized by solitude, prejudice and neglect. In another Italian documentary film *Un'ora solo ti vorrei* (2002), awarded several times and discussed in various locations, the director Alina Marazzi has recovered sixty amateur film reels in 16 and 8 mm that tell the life of her mother, who died committing suicide in 1972 at just 33 years old and her family. It is a very painful journey of search, which focuses on the distress and the pain of living that led a beautiful woman, who seemed to own everything, to give up on life. But it is also the journey of a bourgeois family through Italy in the second half of the twentieth century.

Another interesting fact that emerges from our study is that international cinema seems enormously interested in the issue of alcohol and drug abuse (1117 are the films mentioned in relation to this topic on the website www.filmabout.it), although Italian cinema has contributed relatively little in dealing with these issues (4.66% is the percentage of Italian films out of the total, 75.11% percentage of films translated into Italian). Moreover, even on these topics, cinema plays a very delicate role, if we consider the wide international discussion that there has been on the role of films in facilitating the use of tobacco²⁴⁻²⁶ and advertising in promoting the use of alcohol²⁷.

Finally, from the Secchi audiovisual catalog emerges a high number of films focused on the figure of the psychiatrist (191) of which 14% are Italian. There is no doubt

that the figure of the psychiatrist (and probably also of other professional figures in the field of mental health) has aroused an evident interest in Italian cinematography. Also from the data extrapolated from the second source, a particular sensitivity in the topic of “psychoanalysis and psychotherapy” stands out, highlighted by the high percentage of Italian films (20.74%). If this data correlates to that already discussed previously of the considerable interest for psychiatric institutions, it can reasonably be hoped that further research will increase the presence in Italian films of those stereotypes (concerning patients and operators) highlighted in the literature and if they could have been affected positively or negatively of the effects of the aforementioned reform, at least in the years following its implementation (1978).

Finally, the film *La pazza gioia* (2016) by Paolo Virzi, in which two women, admirably played by Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Micaela Ramazzotti, suffering from mental disorders and traumas that have isolated them from civil society very different from each other and therefore complementary, they arbitrarily move away from the therapeutic community that hosts them and make an escape that alternates moments of joy and hilarity with dramatic scenes to reach a final that seems however to indicate a process of growth.

In this film, which was followed by a rich media discussion, all the problems of Italian psychiatry are highlighted, from the difficulty of unifying the therapeutic path, often “dissociated” between quite discordant streams of thought (biological-environmental), to the scarce consideration of traumatic events, from the difficult understanding of the rehabilitation pathways (let us think of the scenes performed in a therapeutic community), to the criticism, always very current, towards treatments without consent. And this makes it clear that the issue of Italian mental health, still far from having resolved its internal disagreements, seems to be of great interest to the population who does not want to relegate it to the world of suspense, horror and noir, as has happened in other times and in other places.

Conclusions

The first and the most interesting fact that emerges from our research is the interest of Italian cinema in mental illness and psychiatry in general. The research results testify the sensitivity of the Italian public particularly towards the figure of psychiatric operators and psychiatric institutions, a sensitivity which has already been noted in the early twentieth century and that continues and grows deeper in the present days. Exploring the audiovisual catalog of Secchi, the highest percentages found in Italian films mainly concern the psychopathological issues inherent in schizophrenic psychosis (29%); and Mania (23%); depression in Italian cinema seems poorly described (12% and 15.69% respectively). However, there is a high sensitivity on the part of the Italian audience regarding the issues of depression and suicide, testified by the high percentage

of films translated into Italian. Furthermore, international cinema seems enormously interested in the issue of alcohol and drug abuse, although Italian cinema contributed relatively little in dealing with these issues; moreover it emerged that the cinema plays a very delicate role, in facilitating the use of tobacco.

There is no doubt that the figure of the psychiatrist and other professional figures in the field of mental health have aroused an evident interest in Italian cinematography. And this makes it clear, among all the other themes dealt with Italian cinema highlighted in this study, that the issue of Italian mental health, still far from having resolved its internal disagreements, seems to be of great interest to the population.

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