



"POSSESSED"

FOR well over a half a century, there have been more than one billion admissions a year to motion picture theaters as the public has been drawn by the compelling attraction of life-like images appearing on a screen in a darkened room. Reaching a high of 90 million admissions per week during the 1930s and early 1940s, film attendance is aug-

mented today by huge television audiences. When Al Jolson burst into song and spoke a few words in 1927, the silent era ended and movies entered a new and more powerful dimension which eventually resulted in several highly dramatic films pertaining to mental illness that yielded a more informed public opinion, widespread legislative action, and

reform in the care of the mentally ill.

What then has been the place of the psychiatric nurse in this cinematic legacy, and what is the quality of the resultant image that has become ingrained in our culture?

The depiction of psychiatric nurses was investigated as part of a general study of over 200 feature

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length films released between 1930 and 1980 that pertained to the image of nurses and nursing. Utilizing the research methodology of content analysis, trained coders viewed the films and coded them on instruments devised and tested for the study.* Eleven motion pictures and sixteen nurse characters were identified as having a strong focus on psychiatric nursing and these were subjected to a comparison analysis with the other motion pictures and nurse characters in the sample.

Demographic Characteristics

In most respects, the psychiatric nurses were demographically no different from other nurses portrayed in the sample. Nurse characters were always female. All psychiatric nurse characters were

Caucasian, while 96 percent of the other nurses were Caucasian. While overall, 68 percent of the nurses were single and 91 percent childless, psychiatric nurses were single 88 percent of the time and childless 94 percent of the time. They were also older than other nurses (Figure 1). In terms of professional roles, psychiatric nurses were significantly more likely to hold an administrative position than other portrayed nurses.¹

Sexual Attractiveness and Romantic Involvement

An analysis of the physical appearance of psychiatric nurses—dress, hairstyle, mannerisms—showed them to be physically less attractive than other nurses.² The dearth of physically appealing psychiatric nurses was coupled with de-emphasis on their sexuality. Psychiatric nurses in the sample had less sex appeal than other nurses,³ and none of the older psychiatric nurses was involved in romantic relationships. Compared with all other nurse characters in motion pictures, they fared poorly in romantic success.⁴ A spinster-ish image was typical. Rigidly arranged coiffures; glasses; prim and starchy uniforms; and props associated with

power—keys, clipboards—frequently marked these nurses.

When nurse characters were involved in romantic or sexual relationships, these associations were cast in a somewhat, if not totally, negative light. For example, the 1974 film, *The Crazy World of Julius Vrooder*, concerns the antics of a mentally disturbed Vietnam veteran (Timothy Bottoms) and his efforts to defy the establishment and to win the hand of his true love, a passive, smiling Veteran's Administrative hospital psychiatric nurse named Zanni Willis (Barbara Hershey). Julius fixes up a little underground "hooch" or hideaway in the woods adjacent to the hospital grounds and taps into the San Diego freeway telephone and power lines as well as the sprinkler system for utilities. This retreat soon becomes a symbolic island of sanity in an otherwise insane world. Zanni is easily lured to Julius's hideaway, and falls at once under his spell. His vision is to run away to Canada and live off the land. The nurse, who thinks Julius is cute, finds nothing unusual in accepting a marriage proposal from one of the mental patients in her hospital, despite the fact that she is engaged to a strait-laced psychiatrist.

Three content analysis tools were developed, tested, and utilized in the coding of motion pictures: one dealt with the overall motion picture, one was used to analyze each nurse character, and one was used to code physician characters. Coders who applied the instruments underwent a standard training program developed for the project. Intrarater reliability was 93 percent and interrater reliability was 91.6 percent. Validity testing was also carried out. For a further description of study methods see: B. Kalisch, P. Kalisch, and M. McHugh, "Content Analysis of Film Stereotypes of Nurses," *International Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 3 (November-December) 1980, pp. 531-558.

Abuse of Power

One of the most pervasive images to emerge from the analysis of motion pictures with psychiatric nurses is found in their great desire for and abuse of power. In contrast to other cinema nurses, psychiatric nurses were significantly more likely to have power.⁵ In this regard, one of the most potent portrayals of the abuse of professional power of all-time is found in the highly acclaimed, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which resulted in the 1975 Best Actress Oscar for Louise Fletcher for her portrayal of Nurse Ratched. Set in an Oregon asylum for the mentally ill in 1963, *Cuckoo's Nest* is a metaphor for the ills of a well-meaning but ultimately destructive bureaucratic society. The story pits a rakish, non-

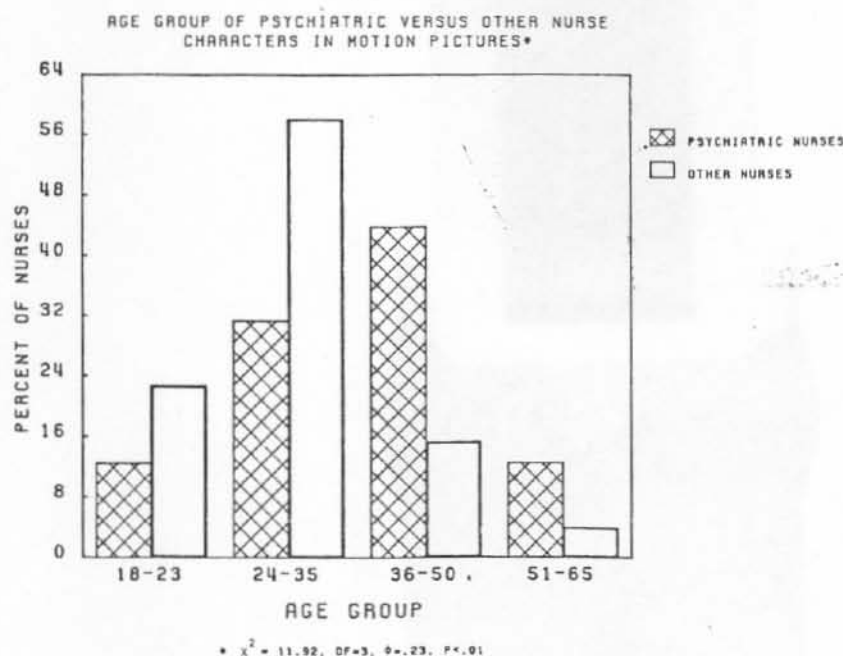
conformist Randle P. McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) against the head nurse of a men's ward, Mildred Ratched. McMurphy, a convict, has tricked prison officials into thinking he is disturbed so that he can spend his six-month term for statutory rape in the relative comfort of a mental hospital. Once Randle is in the hospital, however, the world shrinks to the size of his ward, which is the private domain of Nurse Mildred Ratched. McMurphy becomes a hero to the men of the ward; he alone challenges Nurse Ratched's authority and leads the men out from under her dominance for their first taste of freedom and autonomy.

But Nurse Ratched, more a fanatic than a villainess, is a more formidable foe than McMurphy could ever imagine. Smiling, pa-

tient, and unruffled by any contingency, she is a stickler for the rules and has learned how to make the rules work to her benefit, enjoying the exertion of her will in the name of meaningless regulations. In *Ratched's* sweetly reasonable way she foils McMurphy at every turn. The men in the ward belong to her and she will not tolerate any erosion of control. Trim and starched in her uniform and cap, an early sign of her obsession occurs when Ratched refuses to discuss an issue with McMurphy until he steps out of the 'nurses' station. Later she asks him to remove his hand from the glass encasing the station because it is staining the window. When some of the men, egged on by McMurphy, want to change the ward routine so that they can watch the World Series on television, she puts it to a vote but includes among the voters patients whose minds are too far gone to care one way or the other. During group therapy she places herself at a considerable distance from the patients. Her territory is inviolate; she has to maintain the defenses of her small fortress against the incursions of her subjects, as insubordination on her ward is a sickness worse than any catatonia.

After one act of rebellion, she arranges for McMurphy to undergo shock treatments. Finally, McMurphy has had enough and intends to break out of the hospital, but not before treating his friends to a farewell party. He brings in a couple of girls, plenty of liquor, and leaves the men to their fun. The ward is a shambles in the morning when Nurse Rat-

FIGURE 1



ched arrives. All might be well, but Ratched discovers young Billy Bibbit, a repressed, mother-obsessed boy, in bed with McMurphy's girlfriend. Ratched shames him back into his sexual trauma for his actions and insists that she will tell his mother. Within minutes Billy has killed himself; McMurphy, giving up his last chance to escape, attacks Ratched and tries to strangle her.

The final scene in the film shows McMurphy, who has been lobotomized at Nurse Ratched's recommendation, being wheeled back to his room, a mere shell of his once vibrant self. Chief Bromden, a huge Indian, mercifully suffocates what is left of McMurphy and makes his own escape.

The high level of power the cinema psychiatric nurse holds has had an interesting effect on the tenor of motion picture nurse-physician relationships, as psychiatric nurses in motion pictures wield significantly more influence over the physicians with whom they work than non-psychiatric nurses. They are more often consulted by physicians about patient care issues⁶ than other nurses and volunteer their opinions about both patient care and other professional issues to physicians significantly more often than other nurses.⁷ Also, psychiatric nurses are significantly more likely to openly disagree with a physician's order or professional judgment than other nurses⁸—44 percent of the psychiatric nurses disagreed with a physician as compared with 7 percent of the other nurses.



"ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST"

Lack of Compassion

Motion picture psychiatric nurses lack the nurturant behavior that has typified the image of the nurse generally. They are deficient in sympathy,⁹ altruism,¹⁰ kindness,¹¹ permissiveness,¹² and warmth.¹³ Mental health nursing emerges as less humanitarian than psychiatry as every negative, reactionary, unattractive psychiatric nurse in film serves as the antagonist to a positive, progressive, attractive psychiatrist.

Although indifference to patients was a theme in many of the films under study, in four of them it was particularly in evidence. In the very first film to portray a psychiatric nurse, *Private Worlds* (1935), a rigid and brutal nurse is pitted against two kindly psychiatrists, one of whom, Dr. Alex Mac-

Gregor (Joel McCrae), expects to be appointed as the new hospital director. Alex and his colleague, Dr. Jane Everest (Claudette Colbert), are noted for their modern, progressive, and compassionate methods of dealing with the mentally ill. The sole opponent to Alex's and Jane's innovations is Matron, an aging, tyrannical nurse who prefers punishment to sympathy in treating the mentally ill. Alex and Jane are disappointed to learn that the new director will be foreign born Dr. Charles Monet (Charles Boyer); especially disturbing is his frank prejudice against women doctors. One of his first actions is to demote Jane to a less important role, making Matron happy. Gradually, however, Monet comes to recognize the value of Jane's compassionate approach to mental health care, and

he turns against the tyrannical nurse. She resigns in a huff, bemoaning that her "fifteen years and six months of slavery" in the hospital have been ignored and that she will tell everyone in the community all the hospital gossip and secrets.

Although there are several kindly nurses in this film, Matron, played by Esther Dale, dominates the image of nursing. She appears more a prison wardress than a nurse involved in humanitarian work. She expresses open contempt for "new-fangled treatments" based on compassion and patience, advocating heavy-handed discipline such as locking patients in solitary for the slightest infraction of the rules. She wears a high-buttoned uniform, her hair in a tight bun, and a big bunch of keys at her belt—all in visual emphasis of her repressive personality. She never speaks kindly to anyone and her decidedly unattractive professional image is more than matched by her ugly personality. On the other hand, Claudette Colbert, playing the lady psychiatrist, represents goodness, truth, and beauty. Her portrayal won her a 1935 nomination for Best Actress.

Another motion picture portraying an insensitive psychiatric nurse is *The Caretakers*, which was previewed by members of Congress in early 1963 and was credited with helping to create the favorable political climate that culminated in the enactment of the Mental Health and Mental Retardation Act (Public Law 88-164). In this film, Dr.

Donovan MacLeod, a young psychiatrist introduces new, more relaxed methods of treating the mentally disturbed in a psychiatric hospital, with stress on the use of group therapy for those patients judged "borderline." His main adversary is the aging, hardened, Director of Nurses, Lucretia Terry (Joan Crawford), who rules her staff with an iron hand and advocates "the intelligent use

of force" in treating the mentally disturbed woman with homicidal tendencies. At one point things get out of hand when a patient attacks a nurse with a knife. At this, Lucretia again tries to have MacLeod's new method quashed, but the crusading young doctor is given a last chance. His ideas are eventually vindicated and a progressive psychiatrist triumphs once again over a reactionary psychiatric nurse.



"THE CARETAKERS"

of force" in treating the mentally ill, personally training her nurses in judo to achieve this end. Despite Lucretia's scornful belittlement, the hospital director allows MacLeod's experience to continue, and Miss Terry asks one of her older nurses to report to her any negative developments in the new mode of therapy. MacLeod's most controversial move is to assign to the borderline ward a

Given Joan Crawford's stature as an actress, her character is one of the more memorable of all the nurse portrayals in the film. As Lucretia Terry, she bitterly opposes Dr. MacLeod's innovations from the very beginning; she has no knowledge of his methods yet she immediately fights his noble efforts to improve patient care. She appears to be a toughened veteran nurse, unmarried, and in a

position of power. Nothing of her personal life emerges, and the viewer senses that her entire life has been spent in maintaining a rigid control over her professional environment. Miss Bracken, Lucretia's closest ally, is another aging nurse without personal fulfillment and shares Lucretia's distrust of any innovative methods. Together they fulfill all the requirements of the stereotypically reactionary, older, psychiatric nurse of the film world of mental health nursing.

In the 1941 film, *Shining Victory*, a malevolent nurse also serves as the female contrast to an attractive, selfless physician who is dedicated to science and humanity. In this motion picture, Dr. Paul Venner (James Stephenson), a brilliant psychiatrist doing research on drugs to cure mental illness, is cheated of his discoveries and thrown out of his laboratory in Budapest. Eventually, he lands a position in Hopewell Towers, a private asylum in Scotland, and even acquires research facilities and an assistant. The latter is a newly qualified woman doctor, Mary Murray (Geraldine Fitzgerald), but Venner refuses to work with a female assistant. Mary perseveres, convinced of the importance of Venner's work; her real ambition, however, is more humanitarian than scientific: she intends to become a medical missionary in China. Venner's work does progress, and he and Mary develop a good working relationship. Venner's drugs begin to help some of the patients, but one of them, Mr. Foster, proves an ex-

ceptionally difficult man to help. Constant work by Mary and Venner creates a strong bond between them and eventually pays off for Mr. Foster, even though he has a bad heart and cannot live much longer. So close do Venner and Mary become that they decide to marry.

During the months that encompass these developments, Miss Leeming, (Barbara O'Neil), a repressed nursing supervisor, hovers at the periphery. She is a neurotic, primly dressed, middle-aged spinster with romantic designs on Venner. She is the only staff member who encourages Mary's desire to go to China, and the announcement of Mary's engagement to Venner infuriates the nurse. When Mr. Foster dies of a heart attack, Venner orders an immediate post-mortem, without waiting for the proper permission, and this unorthodox decision prompts a tragic confrontation. In a jealous fit, Miss Leeming accuses Venner of killing Foster merely so he could do an autopsy; she threatens to inform the widow and encourage her to seek an indictment for murder. Venner calmly denies her charges and informs her that he has documented proof of Foster's serious heart condition locked in his desk. Sometime later Mary comes to the lab and finds the malicious Miss Leeming lurking outside; Mary forces her way inside, where she finds that Miss Leeming has set the room ablaze. Immediately, she rescues the important records by tossing them out the window but is unable to save herself from death. Venner

becomes an internationally acclaimed authority but his fame is hollow without Mary.

Seven years later another motion picture, *The Snake Pit*, portrayed unfeeling nurses. This film, based on Mary Jane Ward's best seller, was the third most attended and the most talked about film of 1948. It also yielded an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress for its star, Olivia De Havilland. The blatantly negative portrayals also elicited a timely article by Edith Morgan, Director of Nursing of the New York State Psychiatric Institute and Hospital in the February, 1949 issue of *Trained Nurse and Hospital Review*. Entitled, "Psychiatric Nurses Misrepresented in Movie," Morgan noted that *The Snake Pit* was being regarded by audiences as almost a documentary and while no professional group was subject to truly authentic portrayals, nurses received major misrepresentation in the film:

In only one place does a nurse manifest any warmth for the patient, and this is merely a fleeting instance. The scene in which an undergraduate is showing sympathy is mentioned by many as an indication of kindness, but actually it is a childish bit of instruction to the patient about how to get along with a sadistic and militaristic head nurse. Otherwise, nursing personnel are shown as an uninformed, cynical, brusque group primarily concerned with an inflexible routine.

Based on her own eight and a half months of hospitalization in a



Olivia De Havilland

mental institution, Miss Ward wrote the story of Virginia Cunningham (De Havilland) and her experiences in a gloomy, large, overcrowded state hospital for the mentally ill. Virginia is married to Robert for just a few days when she becomes mentally ill and is diagnosed as schizophrenic. The case history was worked out by the scriptwriters with three prominent psychiatrists, and experts claimed that it was both accurate and typical. At the hospital where Robert has her committed, Virginia comes under the care of Dr. Kik, a compassionate psychiatrist. As in the book, *Juniper Hill Hospital* and everyone in it, including Virginia, are seen through Virginia's eyes. The viewer is brought to experience the often degrading conditions within the hospital from the absolute despair of Ward 1, with the prospects of release, to the lowest depths of Ward 33, a true madhouse called the snake pit (in reference to the crawling snake pits of centuries ago into which the insane were thrown, on the theory that if such an experience would drive a normal person insane, it would shock one who was mentally ill back to sanity). While Virginia is still in a delusional state, she actually believes she is in prison, and indeed there seems little difference between a prison and a hospital for the mentally ill. Using electroshock therapy, hydrotherapy, and narco-synthesis, Dr. Kik slowly helps Virginia to reconstruct her personality. The most prominent nurse character, Miss Davis, is authoritarian and unsympathetic. She seems to resent Virginia's status as Dr.



Miss Davis

"THE SNAKE PIT"

Kik's special patient. Miss Davis once nearly gives Virginia a shock treatment that she does not need because she fails to read the psychiatrist's new orders.

Miss Davis' authoritarian measures interrupt Virginia's progress and plunge her backward. At Kik's orders, Miss Davis furnishes a typewriter for Virginia, so that she may write as part of her therapy. But the nurse taunts the patient about being a writer and angers Virginia who responds that the nurse is in love with Kik and jealous of Virginia. Horrified by her outburst, Virginia tries to apologize but the nurse refuses to listen. Virginia hides in the washroom, locking herself in. When Miss Davis tricks her into coming out, Virginia is bundled into a straight jacket and sent to Ward 33, the snake pit.

Dr. Kik is out of town and for several days Virginia remains among the hospital's sickest women, each acting out her own fantasy. In a pivotal scene, Virginia sees herself standing outside and above the severely disturbed women and begins to realize that she is not one of them. With Dr. Kik's return, Virginia's recovery is quickened and soon she is discharged to return home with her husband.

Here again the strongly drawn and positive character of the psychiatrist, Dr. Kik is contrasted with nurses who fail to help their patients and in fact cause them harm. Until *The Snake Pit* appeared in the form of both novel and motion picture, few Americans were aware that more than a

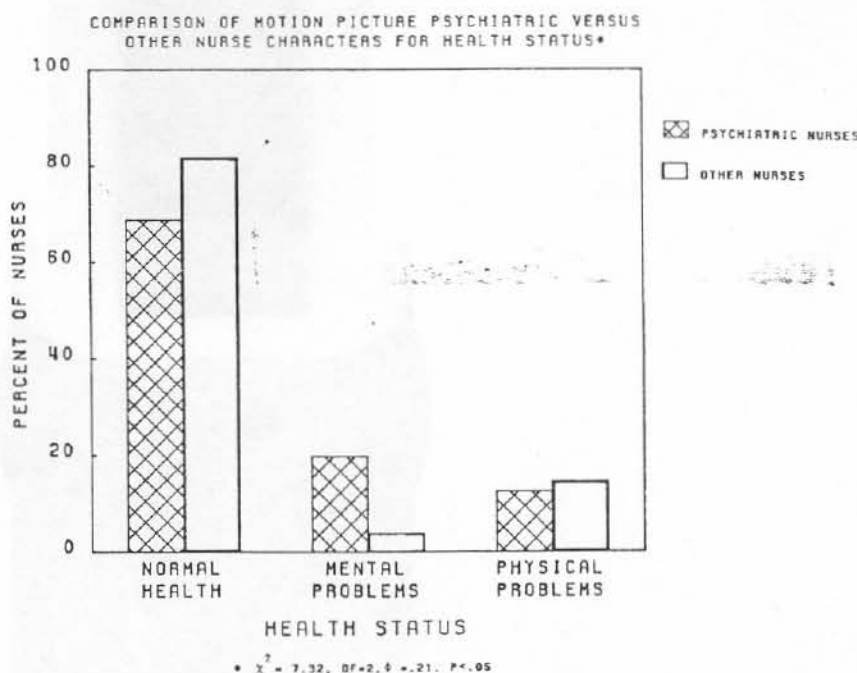
half-million men, women, and children in the United States in 1948 were in mental hospitals, mostly state institutions; another 7 million, although at large, suffered from some kind of mental illness. The state mental hospitals, desperately overcrowded and understaffed, were pictured in the films as being seriously in need of more federal and state tax dollars. According to the film's producer, Darryl Zanuck, 26 state legislatures were prodded into passing mental health legislation as the result of public pressure generated by *The Snake Pit*.

Pathological Personalities

Motion pictures yield another major image of the psychiatric nurse. Of all nurse characters in the motion picture analyses, psy-

chiatric nurses revealed mental illness most often (*Figure 2*). Miss Leeming, in *Shining Victory*, despite the fact that she had achieved a position of relative success in her career, was portrayed as having an unfulfilled personal life which prevented her from taking pleasure in her success. As a result, she succumbed to emotional instability, and her own mental illness led her to the vindictive attempt to destroy both Venner and Mary; she was the direct cause of Mary's death. In *The Snake Pit*, a mentally ill patient was identified as formerly being a nurse at the hospital. The unspoken assumption was that after years of faithful service, this nurse had succumbed to the madness around her and now spent her days in a pitiful imitation of herself at work—i.e., taking people's temperatures with a pencil.

FIGURE 2



In the 1947 film, *Possessed*, Louise Howell (Joan Crawford) is a warped and repressed private duty nurse who is caring for the mentally ill wife of a wealthy man, Dean Graham (Raymond Masssey). Louise is cold and aloof until she falls in love with David Sutton (Van Heflin), one of Graham's architects. She then develops a possessiveness that strangles the man, and he uses blunt means to break her hold. David explains that Louise is too possessive and demanding for him, and he walks away from the relationship despite Louise's begging him not to. She remains, obsessed by her love for David.

While on duty Louise must put up with the accusations of her patient that she is having an affair with Mr. Graham. The accusation is totally false, and Mr. Graham admires Louise for her patience with his wife. Soon, Mrs. Graham commits suicide by drowning herself. There is momentary hope for the nurse when she marries the widower, and manages to win the affection of his daughter who, at first, had shared her mother's jealous suspicions. But to a growing obsession that she was responsible for her patient's suicide is added an hysterical fear that David Sutton, who has returned, will marry her husband's daughter. She resorts to lies, threats, and finally murder to stop him. Louise then wanders away in an amnesiac state and is found in a catatonic stupor in California. The end of the story reunites Dean with Louise as a psychiatrist predicts an eventual re-

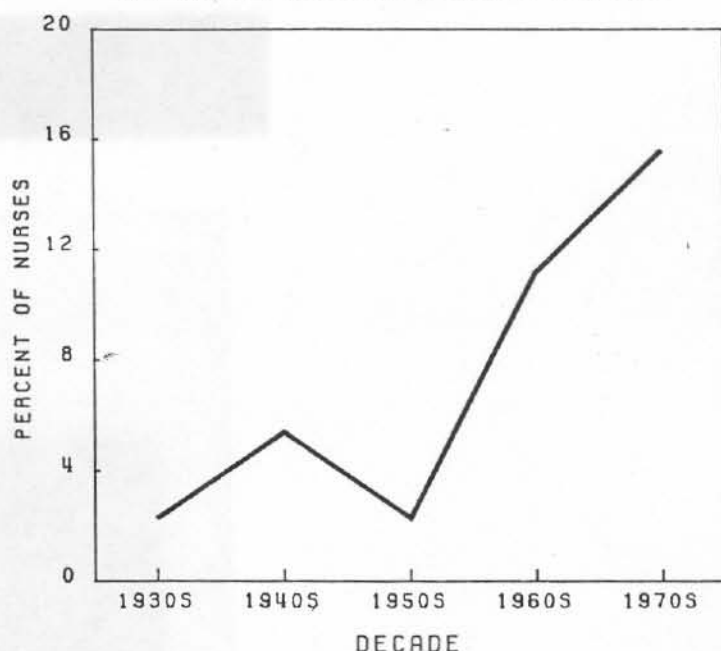
covery but warns that it will be a slow and painful process.

In the highly acclaimed 1967 Ingmar Bergman film, *Persona*, the plot follows the collapse of a famous stage actress, Elisabeth Vogler (Liv Ullman), into a catatonic state. When psychiatric examination fails to indicate the source of her problem, her psychiatrist assigns a young, naive nurse named Alma (Bibi Andersson) to take Elisabeth away from the hospital to an isolated beach house on the Baltic for an extended rest. Elisabeth persists in her speechless, withdrawn personality, so Alma fills the vacuum, by talking constantly, revealing her own most intimate secrets including her feelings of guilt over a youth-

ful beach orgy that led to pregnancy and abortion and her plans for marriage. The actress silently absorbs all that she hears and the nurse is drawn closer and closer into her personality until there is almost a complete transferral or assimilation of personalities and the nurse, who strikingly resembles her silent patient, starts to assume her patient's identity. Bergman may have chosen a nurse for this character as the natural symbol of the caring, nurturing healer (the name "Alma" derives from Latin for "nourishing"). To the extent that Alma functions as a psychiatric nurse, it is interesting that she appears to undergo more emotional testing than her patient, and actually reveals more

FIGURE 3

PERCENT OF MOTION PICTURE NURSE CHARACTERS WHO WORK IN PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS: 1930-1980*



* $\chi^2 = 8.0496$, $DF=4$, $p=.19$, $P<.05$

symptoms of disturbance than her patient. The actress creates a void by her silence. The nurse, by speaking, falls into it, depleting herself. As in other, much less distinguished films, we once more have a nurse unable to remain objective and professional in the face of emotional stress.

Sadistic Personality

A special form of the pathological personality—sadism—was especially prevalent among psychiatric nurse characters in motion pictures. They were significantly more likely to be sadistic than non-psychiatric nurses.¹⁴ The most striking example of this behavior is found in the 1977 film, *High Anxiety*. Dr. Richard Thorndyke (Mel Brooks), a Harvard psychiatrist, comes to California to take over the directorship of the Psychiatric Institute for the Very, Very, Nervous, a posh, private asylum for the wealthy. Immediately upon arrival, Thorndyke learns that his predecessor's death might have been a result of foul play, and that several of his new

associates, namely Dr. Charles Montague and Nurse Charlotte Diesel (Cloris Leachman) are not happy about his appointment.

Soon after his arrival, another staff member is found dead, in mysterious circumstances. Unbeknownst to Thorndyke, Diesel and Montague are partners in crime, in more ways than one. Together they have turned the Institute into a profit-making proposition. They keep the wealthy patients locked up and continue to milk them of thousands of dollars for care. In addition, they enjoy a sadomasochistic love affair—Montague craves discipline and bondage, and Diesel eagerly supplies it while dressed as a Nazi storm trooper. Within the madcap Brooks' parody of Hitchcock films, the character of Charlotte Diesel takes the aging, authoritarian, mentally deranged nurse administrator character and exaggerates her to the ultimate degree. She is a vulgar joke, but also a masterful parody of all those repressed, sadistic, psychiatric nurses who have stalked the corridors of the movie world's mental institutions over the past five decades.

Impact on Patient Welfare

As far as effect on patient welfare, motion picture psychiatric nurses have usually done more harm than good. Psychiatric nurses were seen causing harm to patients significantly more than other nurses.¹⁵ Matron, in *Private Worlds*, caused a violent outbreak from a patient because of her fail-



"PERSONA"

ure to observe a psychiatrist's order; Nurse Bracken's heavy-handed tactics prompted a violent reaction from a patient in *The Caretakers*; Nurse Ratched, among other actions, brought on Billy Bibbit's suicide by her heartlessness in *Cuckoo's Nest*; and, Charlotte Diesel in *High Anxiety* deliberately conspired to keep her patients from recovering. Relatively few psychiatric nurses ever contributed to any patient's clinical progress.¹⁶ While two pretty young nurses in *The Caretakers* contributed indirectly to patients' improvement through their support of the liberal psychiatrist, Dr. Macleod, they were not shown interacting with patients. Zanni Willis of *Julius Vrooder* helped her patient improve, but by the nonprofessional action of agreeing to marry him and run away to Canada.

Sympathetic but Professionally Marginal Psychiatric Nurses

A few well-meaning psychiatric nurses have been seen in motion



"HIGH ANXIETY"

pictures but they have largely played passive roles. For example, in the 1950 film, *Harvey*, a rendering of one man's hallucination and the effects of this hallucination on his family and acquaintances, Jimmy Stewart plays a genial, mellow alcoholic named Elwood P. Dowd. His most problematic fantasy is that he is constantly accompanied by a six foot, three inch white rabbit called Harvey. Harvey does not fit well into the lifestyle of Elwood's socially respectable family and friends, and Elwood's sister, Veta, eventually tries to commit Elwood to a mental hospital. In a comedy of errors, however, it is Veta who is admitted, while Elwood, having gravitated to a nearby bar, effects a romance between a shy, young psychiatrist, Dr. Sanderson, and a pretty nurse, Miss Kelly, (Peggy Dow). When Veta is finally released, she decides she can live with Elwood's eccentric behavior after all.

Nurse Kelly emerges in a sympathetic light in this comedy, but her professional image is very sketchy. Her work consists of serving as a receptionist at the mental hospital and occasionally assisting the young psychiatrist with whom she falls in love.

In *Captain Newman, M.D.*, Gregory Peck plays the title role of a compassionate psychiatrist in charge of the mental ward at a state-side rehabilitation hospital during World War II. He is chronically short of staff and always looking for new nurses and orderlies. His commanding officer is under pressure to return men to duty as soon as possible, and Newman's painstaking efforts to restore his patients to



"HARVEY"

health bring him some criticism.

Soon into the movie, Newman manages to hoodwink a new hospital orderly, Jackson Laibowitz (Tony Curtis), into accepting a job in the psychiatric ward. However, the orderly had been meant for another ward, and a pretty nurse from that ward, Lieutenant Francie Corum (Angie Dickinson), mildly rebukes Newman for taking Laibowitz. A mutual attraction between Newman and Francie develops. Newman takes her out for a romantic dinner, flatters her with champagne, flowers, and compliments, and quite gradually reveals his intentions: to have her transfer to his ward. He explains that his current nurse, Lieutenant Grace Blodgett, simply cannot provide the level of inspiration for the men that Francie could; specifically, the sight of Francie's attrac-

tive legs would undoubtedly motivate the men better than any other form of therapy. Although she is a bit irritated by his ulterior motives, Francie does accept the transfer and becomes Newman's loyal assistant.

The most important nurse in this 1963 film, Francie, is treated sympathetically and positively. However, she is admired because of her physical charms and compared advantageously to Blodgett, considered less effective as a nurse because she is less physically attractive. There is absolutely no hint that education, experience, skill, or special aptitude in a nurse might make her a better psychiatric nurse. In addition, pretty Francie makes clear to Newman that her real goals in life are getting married and having children, and she has checked his personnel records to find out if he is an eligi-

ble bachelor. Although Francie is appreciated by Captain Newman, she has no authority and takes no great role in helping the patients recover. Francie's focus is on Newman, the man, while the psychiatrist's attention is directed toward his patients.

Emphasis on Nursing

It is not surprising to find that motion pictures portraying psychiatric nurses project a significantly more negative image of nursing than the other films pertaining to nursing.¹⁷ It also follows that the other characters in the film express strongly negative attitudes toward psychiatric nurse characters.¹⁸

Ironically, nursing is a significantly more important element in the story plot when a character is identified as a psychiatric nurse than when she is not a psychiatric nurse.¹⁶ Psychiatric nurse characters spend more film time in their professional capacity than other nurses,¹⁹ and are more often filmed wearing a uniform than other nurses.²⁰ Furthermore, nursing is a more important element in the character development of psychiatric nurses than other nurses.²² Figure 3 shows that the portrayals of psychiatric nurses increased during the 1960s and 1970s. Utilizing a combination of exposure, focus on nursing, and time in the professional role, psychiatric nurses were found to be more widely exposed to motion picture viewers than any other nursing specialty.²³ Thus, not only is the depiction of psychiatric

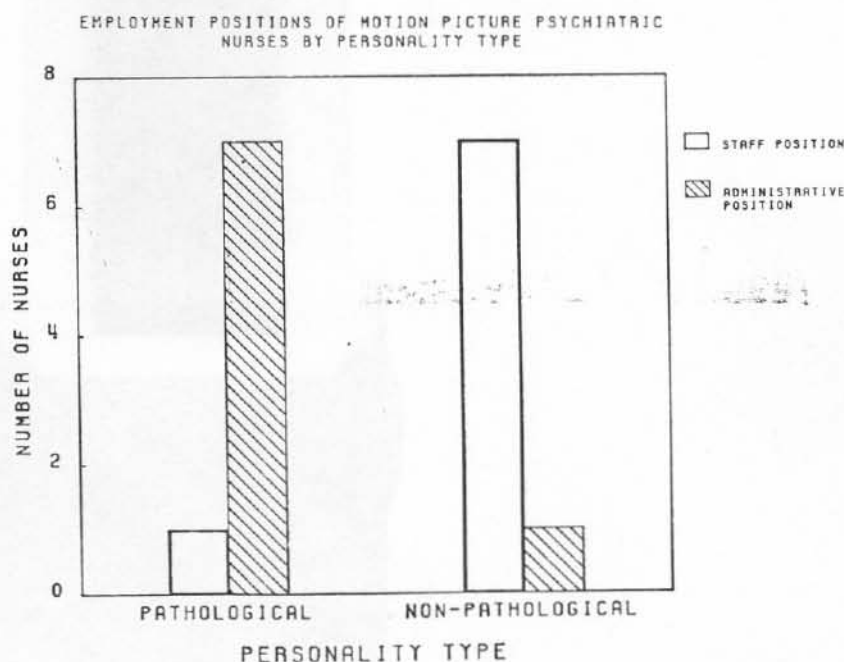
nurses largely negative, but their emphasis on nursing gives the projected image substantial public impact.

Conclusion

The dominant image of the psychiatric nurse in film is that she is a frustrated, aging, unmarried woman who occupies a position of power in a mental hospital. An apparent corollary of her age, position, and marital status is her authoritarian nature and her often pathological personality. As can be seen in Figure 4, the psychiatric nurses in administrative roles tended to be portrayed as having pathological problems, not the staff nurses. Exceptions to this image occur, but they serve more

to emphasize the strength of the dominant image rather than to mitigate it. There has been nothing subtle about Hollywood's treatment of psychiatric nurses. The very names given these nurse characters leave no doubt of the expected audience's reaction. "Matron" sounds like a prison wardress; "Miss Leeming" is a variation on a rodent species; "Blodgett" is as unattractive as the name implies; "Lucretia" is a Borgia-like head nurse, plotting for power; "Ratched" sounds too much like "wretched" for coincidence; and, finally, there is "Nurse Diesel" who can be likened to a roaring truck engine with little difficulty. In all cases of nurses portrayed as exercising consider-

FIGURE 4





"CAPTAIN NEWMAN, M.D."

able administrative power within their work environment, they are also shown as misusing this power and frequently obsessed with preserving their authority and control no matter who suffers. None of these nurses in power enjoys a satisfying personal life; all appear to be married to their jobs, with no outlet for fulfillment other than their work. There is little to persuade the viewer that career advancement in the nursing profession brings happiness.

Hollywood has created a potent negative stereotype in the figure of the successful psychiatric nurse who has achieved a measure of power and influence in her work. In the hands of this nurse, power and influence are turned to ruthless personal advancement, revenge, sadism, or greed; the attitude toward the mentally ill displayed by these powerful career-oriented nurses is one of deep distrust, intense dislike, and harsh discipline. Not a single film psychiatric nurse who has any degree of power demonstrates professional concern for the improvement of her patients. The association of mental health nursing with an insensitive philosophy of patient care not only does great disservice to the thousands of psychiatric/mental health nurses in our nation, but also to the nursing profession as a whole, since, as noted earlier, the identification of nurse characters with the nursing profession is strongest in the film portrayals of psychiatric nurses.

The only positive, sympathetic, psychiatric nurse characters to appear in the 45-year history of films

on mental illness have been the young, pretty, powerless female nurses who certify their legitimacy in the world of mental health professionals by winning the romantic interest of the leading man, who is usually a psychiatrist. Generally, these physically attractive nurses are depicted in a slightly comic context that undermines their being taken seriously as professional nurses. The dominant negative image of the psychiatric nurse remains unchallenged by these lightweight, non-career-oriented young nurses.

In many ways, the psychiatric nurse characters represent what should be the most strongly positive image of nursing—women who have chosen to continue nursing throughout their lives. They have reached positions of power and influence in their profession. They stand on nearly equal ground with the psychiatrist in these films. By all objective professional standards, psychiatric nurse characters more often than not represent successful nursing professionals. Unfortunately, this professional success has been totally turned against them. Instead of marking her as a valuable contributor to the mental health care world, the professional success of the psychiatric nurse has turned her into a thoroughly unsympathetic, frustrated virago, ready to take out her personal prejudices on anyone who steps into her orbit. Thus, the public has little opportunity to see balanced psychiatric nurse characters in positions of authority and responsibility, and this void

translates into little recognition and understanding of the work of today's psychiatric nurses.

References

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Statistical Footnotes

- ¹($\chi^2_{m_1} = 9.96$, $df = 2$, $\phi = .29$, $p < .01$)
- ²(Mann-Whitney $U = 1138.5$, $N = 229$, $p < .02$)
- ³(Median test, $N = 225$, $p < .001$),
- ⁴($\chi^2_{m_1} = 8.37$, $df = 1$, $\phi = .20$, $p < .01$)
- ⁵($\chi^2_{m_1} = 9.96$, $df = 2$, $\phi = .29$, $p < .01$)
- ⁶(Mann-Whitney $U = 12.63$, $N = 229$, $p < .003$)
- ⁷(Mann-Whitney $U = 1131.5$, $p < .01$)
- ⁸(Mann-Whitney $U = 1126$, $N = 229$, $p < .01$)
- ⁹(Mann-Whitney $U = 1043.00$, $N = 225$, $p < .01$)
- ¹⁰(Mann-Whitney $U = 1066$, $N = 219$, $p < .02$)
- ¹¹(Mann-Whitney $U = 1126.5$, $N = 223$, $p < .02$)
- ¹²(Mann-Whitney $U = 900.00$, $p < .02$)
- ¹³(Mann-Whitney $U = 1162.00$, $p < .03$)
- ¹⁴($t(185) = -5.9052$, $p < .0000$)
- ¹⁵(Mann-Whitney $U = 980.00$, $p < .0001$)
- ¹⁶(Median Test, $N = 169$, $p < .06$)
- ¹⁷(Mann-Whitney $U = 421$, $N = 218$, $p < .0001$)
- ¹⁸($\chi^2_{m_1} = 16.04$, $df = 2$, $\phi = .31$, $p < .001$)
- ¹⁹(Mann-Whitney $U = 581$, $N = 187$, $p < .02$)
- ²⁰(Mann-Whitney $U = 823.5$, $N = 226$, $p < .001$)
- ²¹(Mann-Whitney $U = 1119.5$, $N = 228$, $p < .02$)
- ²²(Mann-Whitney $U = 988.50$, $N = 228$, $p < .01$)
- ²³($t(177) = -2.9959$, $p < .00$)