



## A Little Look at Film and Mental Health

# Film

- Film *shows* rather than *describes*.
- Film provides a lot of spatiotemporal information (e.g. what, where, when – recall Week Two) while allowing ambiguity (e.g. why?).
- All sorts of factors affect how a film portrays mental ill-health, e.g.:
  - Is it factual or fictional, documentary or acted?
  - Is it *about* mental ill-health, or just using ideas?
  - Technical aspects: editing, special effects etc.

# Titicut Follies

- A documentary filmed in 1966 at the Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Mass. USA.
- Directed by Frederick Wiseman, it provides an indication of attitudes towards, and conditions of, inmates of 'total institutions' (Goffman (1961) Asylums) of that time.
- Shows the utter lack of privacy and self-determination of patients.

# R.D. Laing

- Born Glasgow, 1927.
- Qualified in 1951 aged 24, then spent some time in a neurosurgical unit, where lobotomies were performed, “... which Laing abhorred.” (Burston (1996) *The Wing of Madness*, p. 29)
- Involved in setting up experimental day ward (‘Rumpus Room’) at Gartnavel Hospital in Glasgow, 1953.

# Rumpus Room

- Patients (all women, and ‘intractable chronics’) were provided with reading material, their own tea-making facilities, allowed to wear normal clothes, and have their hair done. (ibid. p. 37)
- Nursing staff were encouraged to interact with them.
- Patients’ behaviour improved, both towards each other, and staff: they became *socialised*. (Abrahamson (2007), R.D. Laing and long-stay patients: discrepant accounts)

# R.D. Laing, Divided Self

- We cannot understand the psychotic or schizophrenic person “Unless we begin with the concept of man in relation to other men and... ‘in’ a world...” (Laing (1960) p. 19)
- We need to see the mentally ill as persons, not as organisms (ibid. p. 23)
- We have to understand “the other’s scheme of things”, and not just see them from our own vantage point (ibid. p. 26)
- We have to assume we can relate (ibid.)

# Villa 21, Shenley

- Experimental unit set up by psychiatrist David Cooper at Shenley Hospital in 1962.
- Three main aims:
  1. Separate service specifically for young men (aged 15 -30) with first experience of mental illness;
  2. Provide space for group/family observation and therapy;
  3. Act as prototype for future community-based units.

# Villa 21, Shenley

- Became increasingly informal (patients not forced out of bed, not forced into organised work projects).
- Formal boundaries between staff, and staff and patients blurred.
- After brief experiment with staff almost entirely 'hands off', some boundaries and expectations of patients re-enforced (e.g. supervised eating and cleaning, attendance at meetings).
- Experiment ended in 1965/66 (Cooper (1967)).



# Kingsley Hall

- Owned by Lester sisters, who made it available for various radical gatherings (Suffragettes, General Strike of 1926, Gandhi's stay in 1933)
- Rented to Sid Briskin, Laing and the Philadelphia Association between 1965-1970.
- No distinction was made between 'residents' and 'staff': Laing and others frequently stayed there, minimal rules.
- Residents (14 max.) mostly aged 20-40.

# Kingsley Hall



Communal evening meal, Kingsley Hall, 1965

# Asylum (1972)

- Filmed in the PA successor to Kingsley Hall, a therapeutic community in Archway, London.
- “The community... was filmed by Mr. Robinson and his two-man crew during what must have been for them six very trying weeks early in 1971.” (NY Times review, 1972)
- <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/hiddenpersuaders/blog/reviewing-laings-asylum-in-the-age-of-neuroscience/>

# One Flew Over... (1975)

- Based on the book by Ken Kesey, stars Jack Nicholson.
- The psychiatric hospital (and staff) are portrayed as authoritarian, trying to prevent people expressing their individuality and making choices.
- Filmed in a real psychiatric hospital (Oregon State), with some real patients as extras, the film won five Oscars, including Best Picture.

# Donnie Darko (2001)

- Stars Jake Gyllenhaal in the title role
- Donnie appears to have hallucinations, and is treated for schizophrenia by his doctor.
- Donnie's main hallucination is a giant rabbit (or person in a rabbit costume) called Frank, who tells him to do things (cf. 'command' verbal hallucinations, Week Two).
- It turns out what Frank tells Donnie is true, and Donnie isn't mad after all.

# Film and Mental Health

- Could portrayals of unusual experiences in film in particular help us make sense of them?
  - What benefits and limitations might different film have?
  - Does the *veracity* of the portrayal matter?
  - Does it matter how the experiences are characterized (e.g. as the result of illness rather than as something useful, like an insight or vision)?

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