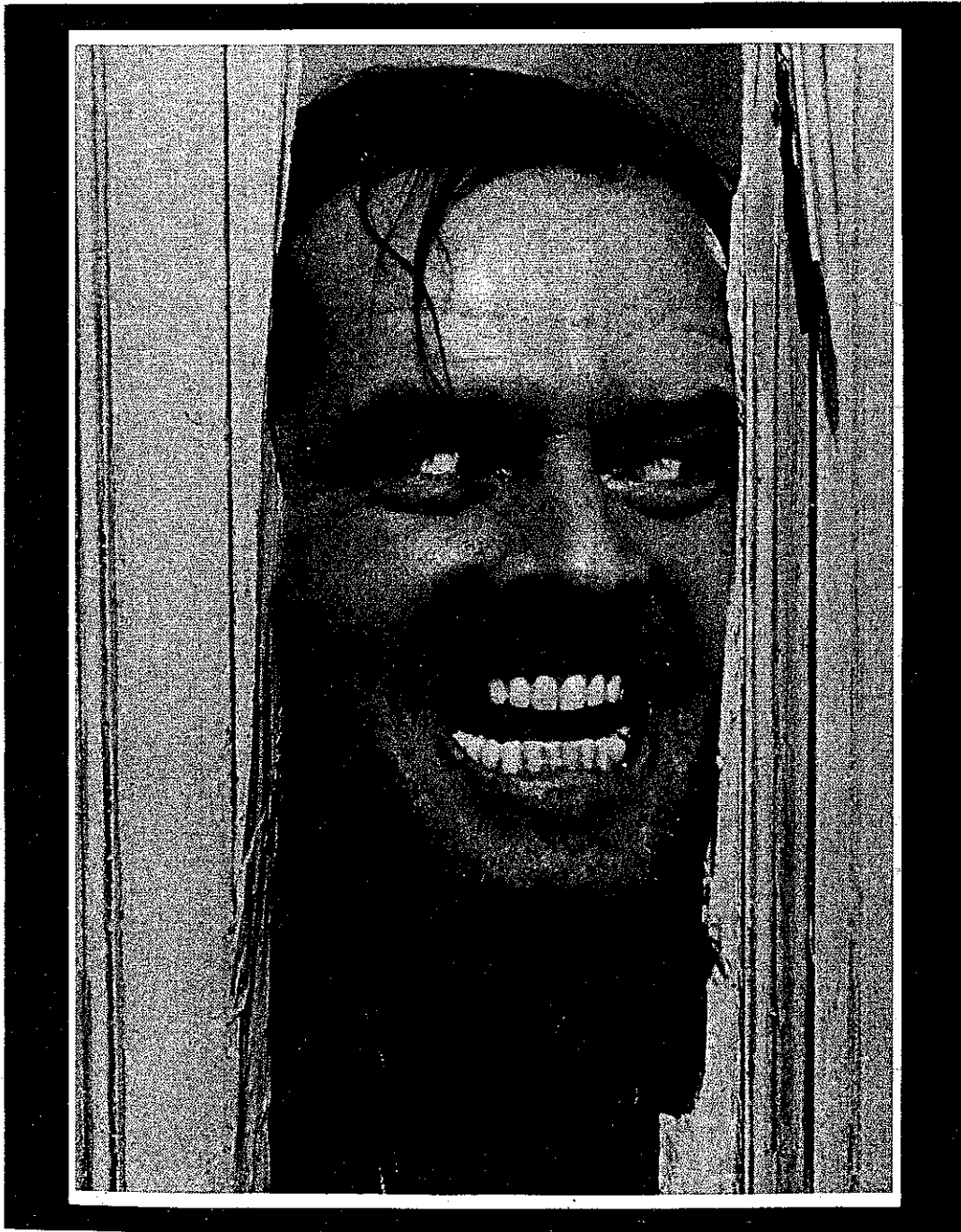


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JACK NICHOLSON in Stephen King's modern horror classic of escalating madness, *"The Shining"*
Warner Brothers (1980) Courtesy of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

IMAGES THAT HURT: MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE MASS MEDIA

by George Gerbner, Ph.D.

Humankind may have had more bloodthirsty eras but none as filled with frightful images of "madness" as the present. The author of the NBC series "Mad About You" just produced for CBS "In the Company of Darkness" about a mild-mannered serial killer. Movies released by major companies in the one week before I wrote this include "Hexed" about a sexy model who is really a "homicidal maniac"; "Children of the Corn II" in which they perform ritual murderers of their parents; "Double Threat" of a "diabolical plot" in which "the predator becomes the bait in a twisted love affair turned nightmare"; and "Knight Moves" of a chess champion "taunted by a psychopathic serial killer." "Bram Stoker's Dracula" is riding high as "an orgy of bloodsucking, bloodletting, and bloodpoisoning," writes Frank Rich of the *New York Times* while the front page in the Metro Section features a suspect in a Bronx murder who was "Recalled as a Mentally Ill Loner" and a full-page ad in the book review section displays pictures of "Six Women, One Fate, A Serial Killer on the Loose," promoting *The Shadow of Death* as the "account of the hunt for this maniac." My own folder of atrocities bulges with headlines such as "FREED MENTAL PATIENT KILLS MOM"; "THE VICTIM OF A CRAZED TORMENTOR... DERANGED PSYCHOPATH KNOWN ONLY AS 'THE POET'"; a cover story of a 9-year-old boy "ritually murdered by a violent mental patient"; promotional copy for books declaring "His demons are women. All women. He is compelled to kill...and kill...and kill..."; "Nowhere to hide when murder and madness are programmed by remote control"; ads for movies entitled "Phobia," "Schizoid" and "Maniac" with blurbs saying "Dear Julie: Don't let me do it again..." and "I warned you not to go out tonight!" and a character in "The Amazing Spider Man" growling, with blade in hand, "I've escaped the asylum

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at last... Now the world will pay for what it did to Herbert Lombard!" The only good news I found is that when Superman died (temporarily) last fall, it was not at the hands of a "superlunatic" escapee from an "interplanetary asylum" as originally announced, due to a protest movement mounted by mental health groups across the country.

We live in a media culture that extolls power and exploits vulnerability. Stigmatization is no longer a cultural lag or lack but a manufactured product. It serves global markets with news and entertainment made profitable by the injection of cheap industrial ingredients into the cultural assembly-line. The product also projects a structure of power and rationalizes terror.

Stigma is a mark of disgrace that justifies disgraceful behavior. Labeling some people barbarians makes it easier to treat them as barbarians. Naming them aggressors justifies aggression against them. Proclaiming them enemies makes it legitimate to kill them. Calling them crazy or insane makes it possible to suspend rules or rationality and decency in dealing with them.

Images of mental illness in the mass media cultivate some of our most distorted and damaging assumptions. The ultimate victim is the community's ability to think constructively and creatively about illness, conflict, injustice, tragedy. In order to understand what these images are and what they do we shall place them in the context of our electronic age and the cultural climate in which they perform their functions.

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Most of what we know does not come from personal experience. The world we know best is the world of stories we tell. Story-telling used to be face-to-face. Today most of our stories are mass-produced. We attend to events selected for us by a few distant corporations that have something to sell.

Our children are born into homes where the television set is on an average of seven hours a day. It is the first medium since tribal religion to come into the home with a coherent mythology for all people, and one that requires no

literacy or mobility. It is the first medium that displaces the parent, the school, and the church in telling stories about life and the world.

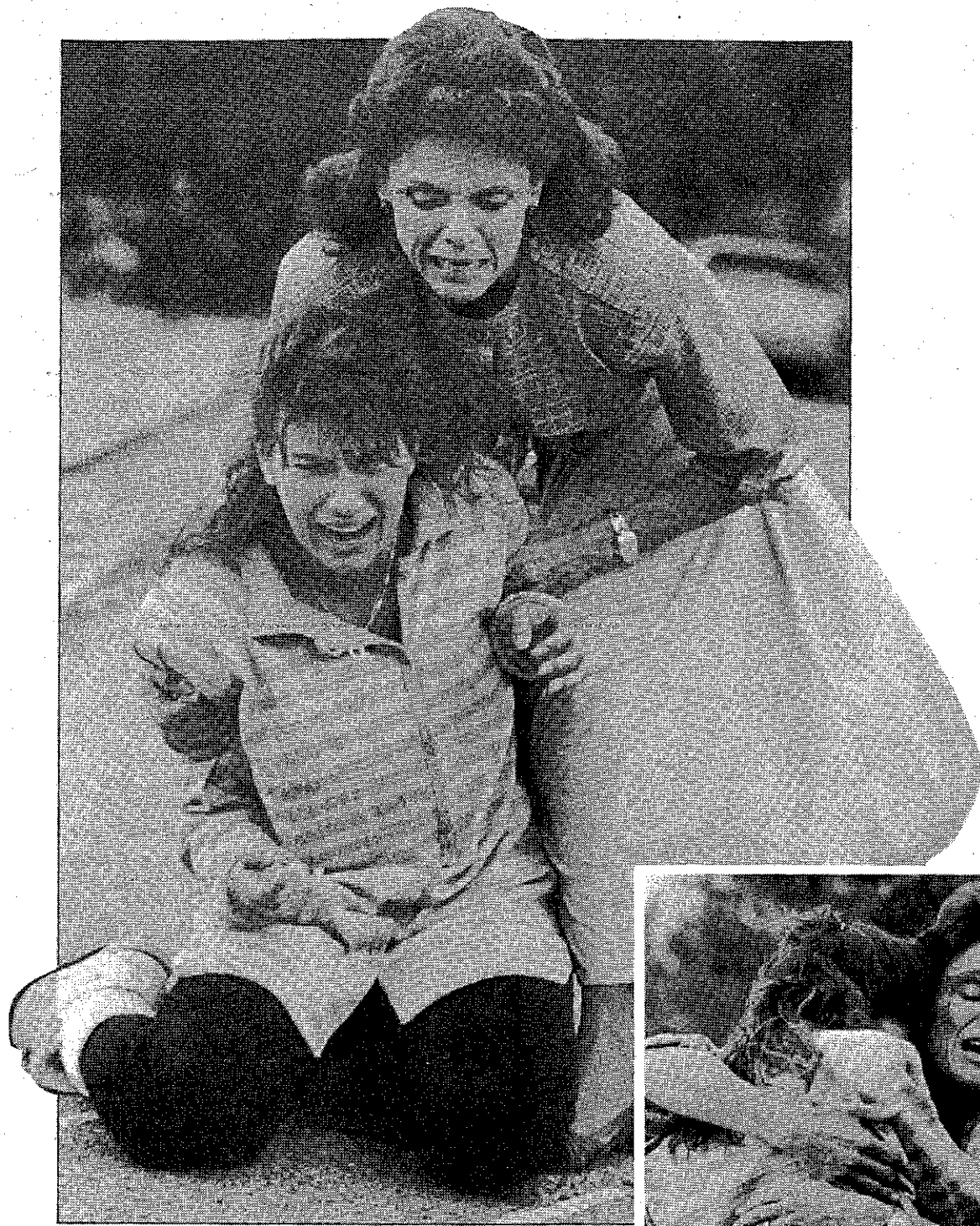
The world television presents is not much different from the popular press and pulp magazines before it. But it is much more centralized, streamlined, and pervasive. It must attract audiences to sell to advertisers at the lowest cost. Therefore, it must present life in saleable packages, catering to the tastes, assumptions, and prejudices of the largest number of viewers. The image of mental illness, and of everything else, must by and large conform to marketing rather than artistic, educational or therapeutic requirements.

When we first studied the portrayal of mental illness on television in the late 1950's, we found that instead of mediating between expert and public conceptions, it was pulling public conceptions in the opposite direction. The networks agreed to moderate the medieval imagery, and even cautioned writers to avoid the term "crazy" unless warranted. Then came the phenomenal success of the movie "Psycho," and the guidelines went out the window. We have the misfortune of being treated to three or more sequels, in addition to innumerable clones.

The typical viewer of prime time television drama sees an average of three characters labeled mentally ill each week, one in about every 11 programs. This is by far the most pervasive, vivid, and compelling source of public information, or misinformation, about mental illness.

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We have studied the world of network television drama and the consequences of growing up with it in our ongoing research project called Cultural Indicators for over twenty-five years. We have found that it is a world in which men outnumber women three to one. Young people represent one-third, old people one-fifth of their true proportion of the population. Other minorities also tend to be underrepresented, stereotyped and diminished in life chances, but overvictimized.



NANCY McKEON & VALERIE HARPER in "Strange Voices" an accurate, insightful look at the emotions and actions of an entire family when the tragedy of schizophrenia strikes down one of its members. Rumor, myth and ridicule are all dealt with, as are feelings of guilt, shame, fear and embarrassment, and the distancing of once friendly neighbors. An extensive fact sheet was made available by producers, with information developed by E. Fuller Torrey, M.D. and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

A Landsburg Company/NBC Television Network Production (1987)

What plays best in the world of prime time is the power-play. Not because it is the most popular, as I will contend later, but because men like it and it is the best buy for advertisers. Most power plays involve violence—i.e. threats to and defense of the social order—as the quickest dramatic demonstration of power. It bears no relationship to real crime statistics but reveals a realistic pecking order. It occurs an average of 6 to 8 times per hour in prime time, and 25-30 per hour in weekend daytime children's programs. Two entertaining murders (with its overkill of women) is the nightly diet of the moderate viewer. Deviants are feared, shunned, shamed, and punished. Mentally ill characters are cast mostly in the role of deviants both in drama and in the news.

Women and minorities tend to be more vulnerable than majority characters compared to their ability to inflict punishment on others. This lopsided "victimization ratio" cultivates a sense of vulnerability and dependence

characteristic of powerlessness. Mentally ill characters are both the most violent and the most victimized single group on television, and not much different in other major media. Furthermore, violence and retribution are shown as inherent in the illness itself and thus inescapable.

Out of all prime time dramatic characters, 42 percent of the "normals" are violent, but 70 percent of characters labeled as mentally ill are violent. Furthermore, 45 percent of the "normals" but 75 percent of the mentally ill become victims of violence. They are the single most frequently victimized group of all television characters.

Five percent of the "normals" are killers and three percent are killed, but two out of ten characterized as mentally ill are killers and the same proportion are killed. That is four times the violence rate and six times the victimization rate of other characters. No other group in the dramatic world of television suffers and is shown to deserve such fate.

About six out of ten characters are depicted in a clearly positive way. Only two out of ten of mentally ill characters (one-third of the "normals") are depicted as "good." Conversely, three times as many mentally ill as "normals" are shown as clearly "bad." Their success rate is half and failure rate is double that of the "normals." The majority of mentally ill characters on television, in most popular media, are not only dangerous but are also touched with a sense of evil that justifies mistrust and eventual failure and victimization.

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Media depictions of mentally ill people tend to have three special characteristics. The first is unpredictability. That means that there is no sure way of telling who is that kind of deviant or when anyone might go berserk.

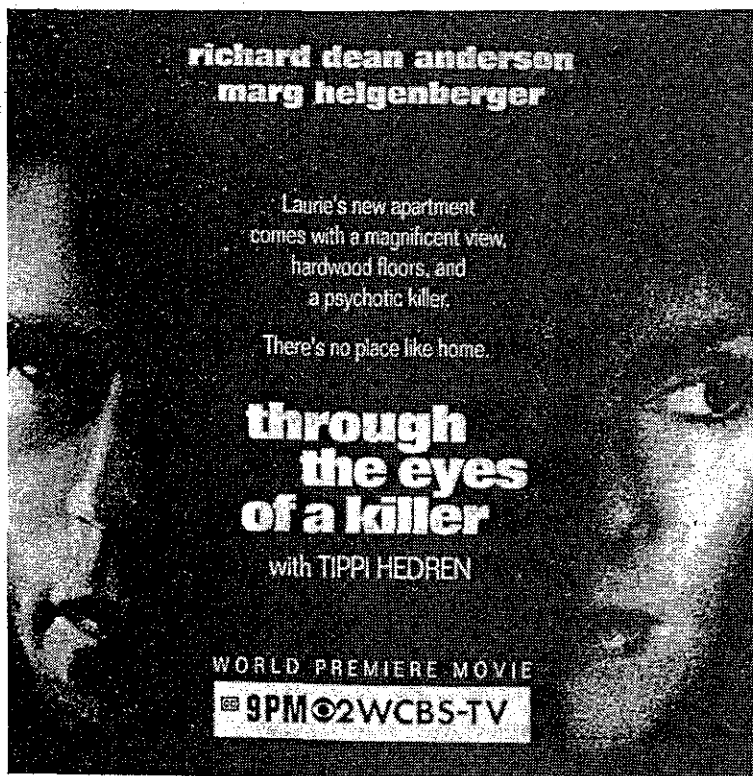
The wholesale distributor of the stigma of mental illness is television drama.

The second critical aspect is the element of danger. The sense of danger is constantly reinforced by the label "ex-mental patient," attached usually to violent and bizarre behavior. How often have you read in the newspaper or heard on the radio or television that "Mr. John Smith, ex-mental patient, was elected president of the Rotary Club last night?" And yet that is probably more frequent than some unpredictable outburst of irrational violence.

Finally, the image of mental illness usually contains a touch of evil. Sin or moral flaw tend to justify potential irrationality and brutality toward the persons so depicted, as if to suggest that they asked for it or deserve it.

A study of what makes top crime news copy found that the most likely elements were [1] insanity ("psychopathic killer," "homicidal maniac") [2] unpredictability, (multiple personalities, ordinarily mild mannered, loner, etc.) and [3] the victimization of ordinary, unsuspecting people, like the reader, implying menace lurking around every corner. The study concluded that "Nothing sells newspapers like an insane, unpredictable, sudden gory killer on the loose..."

You can find examples nearly every



A network ad in TV Guide. Familiar theme: Woman in jeopardy; unsafe even in her own home.

December, 1992

Is the villain mentally ill? The network says, no. But a misuse of the word, "psychotic," and the line is blurred between mental illness and criminality. The next day, when people with neurobiological disorders seek housing in the community, are they feared? A reasonable network exec agrees to modify the ad for reruns, but the damage is done... stigma is reinforced. DEW

TWO OUTSTANDING TV DRAMAS



MARLO THOMAS in *"Nobody's Child"* the story of Marie Balter, a woman who survived the ordeal of long term institutionalization in a mental hospital.
Gaylord Production Company (1986)



JAMES WOODS & JAMES GARNER in *"Promise"* the story of two brothers, one of whom is mentally ill, and the other who has promised to take over the primary supportive role when their mother dies.
A Garner/Duchow Production for Hallmark Hall of Fame (1986)

day. You may remember the Laurie Dann schoolhouse shootout case in Winnetka, Illinois. The most chilling part was the rush of movie producers to exploit what one called "a commercial type of story."

Another study demonstrated the effect of reporting on public conceptions. The survey asked the respondents to name people who are "criminally insane." All those named were murderers, mostly mass murders and assassins or would-be assassins of presidents or other dignitaries. Actually, of course, the term "criminally insane" means incompetent to stand trial in a felony case. The vast majority of the "criminally insane" commit crimes against property and minor offenses. Only 14 percent have ever been accused of homicide. But as the term is used in ordinary reporting it is applied to the most irrational and heinous type of behavior.

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The wholesale distributor of the stigma of mental illness is television drama. It usually fails to provide the familiar trappings of occupation, marital status and family, and emphasizes the bizarre symptoms of the illness.

Violence-laden television, including its stigmatization, cultivates a general sense of danger and mistrust. That is what we call the "mean world syndrome." Survey responses of heavy viewers indicate greater mistrust of those who are "different," greater dependence on authority, and more restrictive and often repressive attitudes.

This is not to suggest that television and other media do not have useful and thoughtful and even courageous programs. But they are up against the massive flow of everyday images and messages that is hard to overcome. And the reason is not popularity or ratings alone. Most highly rated programs are not violent but they are more expensive to produce and don't travel as well on the global market. Violence and stigmatization are good business because they are formula-driven and relatively cheap to produce. They need no translation or thoughtful comprehension, and speak action in any language. They can be sold dirt-cheap abroad where big media profits come from.

Cheap violence and stereotyped

stigmatization are the results of a de-facto censorship foisted on creative people by global marketing formulas. We need not more censorship but, on the contrary, the loosening of the existing marketing noose on creativity and cultural freedom.

Parents, relatives, and mental health professionals need the help of schools to teach media literacy and critical viewing. We all need to act as citizens and form a Cultural Environment Movement to address the problems of our cultural climate as we are beginning to address global warming, by recognizing its roots, and building a constituency for democratic participation in cultural decision-making. The health and social service professions have every reason to be in the forefront of that movement. We need to lift the conventional formulas and constraints that govern the mass media assembly line and discharge into the common consciousness the stories and images that hurt too many people too much. Those interested in joining such a movement may write to me at the University of Pennsylvania, 3620 Walnut Street, PA 19104. ■