



# Mental Health Issues in Cinema

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### **Abstract**

Philosophizing films is a recent venture; since the 1980s the formal structure of *Philosophy of Film* came into existence, though film-philosophy is tied together from the time of the inception of films as a new medium. Film as an art form was reluctantly accepted, but film theorists already categorized films and put films on the pedestal of independent art form. Theories of Films gave an asserted ontological status to films. Under the banner of theories of film, films were categorized into various genres, say, the Auteur Theory, the Marxist theory, the Formalist theory, the Genre (especially of literature) theory, the Cinematic Apparatus theory, the Feminist Film theory, Psychoanalytic Film theory and so on. The paper ruminates on the Psychological Film theories, mainly Psychoanalytic film theory and mental illness. The emphasis is on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis in films and of films (the impact film has on the audience). And this is done by analyzing two films, namely, Russian film *Stalker* (1979) directed by Andrei Tarkovsky and Hindi film *Kohraa* (The Fog) (1964) directed by Biren Nag.

### **Keywords**

Philosophy of Film, Film Theories, Psychoanalytic Film theory, Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalytic Film Theory, Mental Illness.

## **Introduction**

Yesteryears have seen tremendous progress in philosophizing other forms of arts; and since cinema was introduced in late 19th century it was not in the purview of art. De facto, people like Hugo Münsterberg and Rudolf Arnheim initiated a serious thinking about film as an art form distinct from theatre and photography, and then followed by various ontological debates about films. *Philosophy in film*, philosophy of film, film studies and theories of film – all came as distinct areas of film research. Under the banner of theories of film, films were categorized into

various genres, say, the Auteur Theory, the Marxist theory, the Formalist theory, the Genre (especially of literature) theory, the Cinematic Apparatus theory, the Feminist Film theory and so on. In theories of film, the most intriguing is the Psychological Film theory that contemplates on the audiences' psyche and how the films impact the audience through the characterization in film. The paper concentrates on Psychological Film Theories and Mental Issues in Cinema.

## **Philosophy of Film and Philosophy in Film**

Philosophy of Film is a de rigueur subject in vogue since the 1980s; though films were analyzed philosophically (as Philosophy in Film), the subject did not have its formal structure till the 1980s. Films were never considered as a distinct art form like the frescoes, painting, cathedral choir or opera/theatre. It was considered as a new technological development that mainly existed for entertainment. But Hugo Münsterberg and Rudolf Arnheim started analyzing films and thereafter, a serious contemplation on film as a distinct art form came to the forefront. Later master film theorists like Siegfried Kracauer, Bela Balazs and others ventured into this new found subject. But the master stroke came from Andre Bazin (1918–1958) the French film critic and theorist, co-founder of the film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* with Jacques Doniol – Valcroze and Joseph-Marie Lo Duca; and the contribution of François Truffaut along with other theorists started with *French New Wave* [*Nouvelle vague*]. Though they believed in a realistic pattern in cinema with the dominance of the director as the sole author of the film, psychological theories were never segregated from realistic or formalistic cinema.

### **Psychological theories of film included two main types**

1. **The Freudian Psychoanalytic theory**
2. **The Lacanian Psychoanalytic theory**

Psychological film theories incorporate the viewpoint that the unconscious mind of the person is constantly conversing with the environment in which one is stationed. This includes the categories of '*philosophy of film*' and '*philosophy in film*'. So, the silver screen having an impact on the audience and vice versa is an ongoing procedure. As mentioned by Christian Metz, ".....films have the

appeal of a presence and of a proximity that strikes the masses and fills the movie theatres. This phenomenon, which is related to the impression, is naturally of great aesthetic significance, but its basis is first of all psychological.” (Cozyris, 1980, 22)

## **Psychoanalytic Film Theory**

The Freudian Psychoanalytic Film Theory works to dig deep into the psyche of the filmmaker and his/her audience. The unconscious is examined and symbols, ciphers, myths and motifs in the film are deciphered. The film is scrutinized often on the works of masters like Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung and Jacques Lacan. Film critics were now analyzing films under the lens of these master psychoanalysts who tried to understand mental health issues through cinema. Sigmund Freud’s Psychoanalytic theory analyses the human mind which is depicted in a film. This enables the audience to read the why and how of the characters portrayed in a film; and somewhere get to know about their own mental state as well. Since films are a powerful medium to convey ideas, ideologies and philosophies, psychopathology becomes an important aspect of films.

## **Mental Health Issues in Cinema**

“For contemporary audiences, attending movies is an experience that provides catharsis and unites the audience with their culture in much the same way that the tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus performed these functions for the 5th century BC Greek audience.” – Glen Gabbard and Krin Gabbard (Wedding & Niemiec, 2014, 01)

According to Mark Bracher, the echo of the above quote is reflected in Lacanian psychoanalysis. In his work Jacques Lacan reiterates the Freudian psychoanalysis and moots the idea that the unconscious is the cardinal aspect of human existence; the processes of our unconscious mind is structured in the form of language. The four key social phenomena are formed and translated in the edifice of language; these four social phenomena are: educating, governing, protesting and revolutionizing. Lacan notes, “What I am trying to articulate is what dominates [society] is the practice of language.” Therefore he furthered Freudian psychoanalysis and brought together psychoanalysis with language

and surrealism (notably Salvador Dali) to dwell in the unconscious of the individual. (Bracher, et al, 1994, 107) Cinema can produce psychopathology on the silver screen with the backdrop of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Some filmmakers explicitly feature the mentally ill person and some do it in a subtle manner. The aesthetics of cinema lie in how the filmmaker portrays the character where the unconscious plays a pivotal role.

The kind of cinema of *Italian Neo-Realism* style has contributed immensely in digging deep into the character's psyche. Every human being has a dark side that can be defined as mental illness. From silent era to talkies, to Eastman colour to techni-colour to virtual films, good cinema has portrayed human characters in realistic format keeping in mind the script, movement, props, lighting, camera, art design and characters; all aiding the cinema to go abyssal length into the unconscious of the character. Though the majority of commercial films have been very loud, stigmatizing mental illness and portray mentally ill patients in exaggerated form; these films are rated as bad films. These films make use of "violence, aggression, and bizarre behavior, as well as, rely on demeaning slang terms to refer to mentally ill individuals classified stereotypical portrayals of individuals with mental illness in film." (Portrayals of Mental Illness, 2023)

In the case of *philosophy of film*; most serious cinema will portray the characters' unconscious in a highly realistic and cinematic manner, where the audience can resonate with their own mental status and disorders. I will take two iconic films of three different genres to discuss the representation of mental illness through cinema.

## **First Film**

Russian film *Stalker* (1979) directed by Andrei Tarkovsky depicts the life of a *stalker* who guides a professor looking for some scientific discovery, and a writer who seeks inspiration, to a Zone, a restricted area where there is a room that will fulfill the innermost desire of the person. This film incorporates *philosophy in film* with theology, science and mainly psychology. At a certain point one feels all the characters suffer from some mental illness, but when one opens up the layers of the unconscious of each character, one realizes the most insane character is the sanest one. Psychological issues surround the film; like political

psychology, spiritual psychology, economic psychology, existential psychology, and technological/scientific developmental psychology (if I am permitted to use these terms); and therefore, on exterior surface the film does not speak of mental illness but in this fast-changing era, political crisis, economic upheavals, religious ideology – all have impact on the psyche of the individual, the form of mental illness that we all suffer. As expounded by Peter Wuss, “The final sequence (in *Stalker*) shows that stalker’s world is not powerless, despite or perhaps because of the doubts and insecurities it involves. The genre of science fiction joins up with parables to direct the audience’s imagination to view the individual as being capable of acting despite everything.” (Wuss, 2009, 299)

## Second Film

Hindi film *Kohraa* (The Fog) (1964) directed by Biren Nag is an iconic horror film based on English film *Rebecca* (1940) by Alfred Hitchcock. The ending has been tweaked to suit the Indian psyche. Rajeshwari marries a billionaire Amit Kumar and moves in a grand villa with a disgust towards Poonam’s nanny Dai Maa. Poonam was the first wife of Amit who died in mysterious circumstances. The film actually begins when Amit leaves for work for a few weeks and Rajeshwari witnesses Poonam’s apparition. Her mental health deteriorates and she lives in constant phobia of Poonam’s ghost. Coming out of this unbearable situation she investigates and is exposed to the dark secrets of the villa. Biren Nag, like Hitchcock, has well-crafted the movie (in black and white) the psychological journey from degrading to the epiphany of Rajeshwari. Are our fears, suspicions, ambiguities and confusions real or the fabrications of our unconscious?

Biren Nag makes his audience excavate buried desires, will, ambitions and aspirations from the unconscious. The Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis becomes significant in the film which is equally true of one’s life. The film depicts feminist psychology and it is noticeable that the female characters come out of their psychological issues by herself and not through the interventions made by the male characters. As noted by Deimantos Valačiūnas, “*Kohraa* presents us with the perspective of its female protagonist, Raj (Rajeshwari). This is also emphasized by the first-person voice-over narration at the beginning and the end of the film. This radical shift in perspectives might be an indication of a specific position to read and interpret *Kohraa* especially if we situate the film in

relation to the historical moment of Nehruvian modernity. (Ancuta & Valačiūnas, 2021, 102) Therefore, though belonging to the genre of horror films, *Kohraa* has discussed psychological issues which are interwoven and engaging with various realms of Indian life.

## Conclusion

World cinema has quite many films that deal with psychological issues and mental illness. Some of the films that explicitly deal with mental illness are *Psycho* (1960) by Alfred Hitchcock, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) by Miloš Forman, *Rain Man* (1988) by Barry Levinson, *Sixth Sense* (1999) by M. Night Shyamalan, *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) by Ron Howard, *Still Alice* (2014) directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland. From Bollywood, *15 Park Avenue* (2005) by Aparna Sen, *Taare Zameen Pe* (2007) by Amir Khan (and Amole Gupte), *Karthik Calling Karthik* (2010) by Vijay Lalwani, *Saat Khoon Maaf* (2011) by Vishal Bhardwaj, *Dear Zindagi* (2016) by Gauri Shinde and many more. These movies have maintained the aesthetic standards as well as the sanctity of mentally ill patients. They belong to different theories of film but the commonality amongst them is the functioning of the human psyche – its glorification and degradation.

But can we actually judge and label anyone as mentally ill? In fact, popular cinema like *Sholay* (1975 by Ramesh Sippy) or *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975 by Vijay Sharma, the film that was a box-office super hit) – do exhibit the characters' psychological issues and its impact on the audience's psyche. *La Aventura* (1960, Italian master-piece by Michelangelo Antonioni), *Rashomon* (1950, Japanese film by Akira Kurosawa) and *Cries and Whispers* (1972, Swedish film by Ingmar Bergman) are all films that dwell in the unconscious of its characters. These masterpieces and many more deal with subtle psychological issues, which we all face in our day-to-day lives. Jabbar Patel's *Sinhansan* (1979, in Marathi) displayed the psychological framework of politicians. All films in general deal with some kind of mental issues of the character; one who can read between the scenes may comprehend life in a better manner. I conclude my article by quoting the Joker from the film *Joker* (2019, by Todd Phillips), "The worst part about having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you don't."

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