

Article: 0667

Topic: EPW19 - e-Poster Walk Session 19: Eating Disorders, Personality and Personality Disorders

Dissociative Identity Disorder: Fact or Fiction?

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Introduction: Beginning with classic Hollywood melodramas of the 1940s, cinema has maintained a prolific output of films with their own take on mental illnesses – none more so than the rare syndrome of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). The DSM-5 provides criteria to diagnose dissociative identity disorder, 'two or more distinct identities or personality states are present, each with its own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and self', is the main one.

Objectives: A brief description and discussion about the controversies surrounding the diagnosis and approaches to treatment of Dissociative Identity Disorder are presented, followed by a reflection about the use of this disorder in cinema.

Methods: A non-systematic literature review was performed in PubMed, about Dissociative Identity Disorder. Only original articles in English language were included. An informal search about films contemplating DID and their plot was also conducted.

Results: Clinical findings suggest that DID involves an authentic mental disorder related to factors as traumatization and disrupted attachment. A competing view indicates that DID is due to fantasy proneness, suggestibility and role-playing. As patients tend to switch personality states when there is a perceived psychosocial threat, the treatment goal is the fusion of the personality states while retaining the entire range of experiences contained in all of the alters. DID representations in cinema correspond closely to contemporary thinking about its phenomenology and aetiology.

Conclusion: Art imitates Life, but sometimes Life can fake the Art...DID may have had its turn...