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WELCOME

How is mental illness represented in film and television? What emotions are elicited from the viewer? How have these portrayals changed over time? And what are the implications of these portrayals for mental health awareness in the community?

This interdisciplinary symposium brings together academics, filmmakers, mental health practitioners and consumers to explore these and other questions concerning the portrayal of mental illness on screen. Across two days of screenings, lectures, panels and workshops, we will discuss a range of representations of mental illness, from early cinema to Hollywood studio films, from ethnographic documentaries to television programs. The symposium has a particular focus on women’s mental health and the portrayal of mental illness in Australian films.

A key theme of the symposium is the emotion of empathy. If sympathy suggests feeling for someone (that is, feeling sorry for them), empathy is distinguished by feeling with them. This sharing of emotion gives us valuable insight into how things are with another person. This insight can lead to a greater understanding that reduces stigma and discrimination, and helps us to see ‘the other’ as an equal human being. That is why empathy is such an important concept in philosophy, politics, psychology and human rights education.

Cinema and television are powerful media that can take the audience on an imaginative journey and tap into our potential to empathise with another human being. Our speakers will examine the ways in which the viewer’s empathy is elicited (or not) by these screen portrayals of mental illness, as well as the benefits and limitations of an empathetic relationship between viewer and character. In this way, the symposium contributes to the broader discussion initiated by the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions about the ways in which emotions shape individual, community and national identities.

We welcome discussion of these issues from all participants – both speakers and audience members – and we look forward to a dialogue that is open-minded and sensitive to all involved. We hope this will be the start of many more conversations on this important issue that affects us all.

Fincina Hopgood, Patricia Di Risio and Victoria Duckett
Convenors