



4. Psychopaths in Film: Are Portrayals Realistic and Does It Matter?

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Introduction

Despite the fact that what the clinical or forensic literature might classify as “realistic” depictions of psychopaths remain underrepresented in popular film, such depictions continue to influence wider public perception of the association between mental illness in general, and psychopathy in particular, and the ensuing criminal behaviors. These misconceptions, which often focus on violent and homicidal acts, bizarre mannerisms and appearance, sexual depravity, above average intelligence, and a calm, calculating demeanor, perpetuate myths of psychopathy that hinder the diagnosis and treatment of those who qualify according to professionally accepted criteria. The realistic depiction of a psychopathic character is made more problematic by the fact that psychopathy is not a homogeneous personality construct. Various researchers, including Karpman (1941), Hare (2003), and Hervé (2003) have proposed differentiated constructs, but their validity remains largely untested. Among these subtypes, in film we have seen a graduated change in popular depictions that range from socially misfit, violent, and chaotic mass murderers in horror and slasher films to more sophisticated and calculating iterations among more dramatic or ostensibly “serious” motion pictures. However, although very few psychopaths are violent and become murderers, it is here that the focus and fascination remains very much attached to such misconceptions.

Certain psychopathic traits are also well suited to successful careers, and despite the fact that harm and mayhem is also created by psychopaths in these circles, the corporate psychopath continues to attract relatively little attention with the exception of a few films such as *Wall Street* (1987) and *The Wolf of*

Wall Street (2013). Here, television seems to lead the way. The trends of the depiction of psychopaths in film and the reasons and implications are further explored, including in two other largely ignored groups: women and youth.

Therefore, it is the aim of this discussion to emphasize the importance—and to some extent a tacit responsibility—of film to advance the general knowledge about psychopathy. It might be argued that there is a heightened duty among filmmakers in their attempt to appropriate the related nomenclature to balance commercial interests with credible information. By bringing together the scientific status and understanding of psychopathy with the cultural views that are guided by film, the principal interest here is to analyze trends and the effective and realistic, and not so effective and realistic, portrayals of psychopathic characters in these media channels. Following a discussion of the development of the conceptualization of psychopathy, including its current definitional status and nosological classifications that include those proposed by Cleckley (1941), Hare (2003), and Millon (1998), examples of the depictions of psychopathic characters found in some better-known film are offered. More specifically, these examples disaggregate the filmic psychopath into discrete classifications that include adult male, adult female, the young, and the corporate psychopath. By focusing on psychopathy in such a selection of fictional characters, the effect that film and television has on the public perspectives of psychopathy is highlighted.

Development of the Psychopath Concept: From Cleckley to Hare

Psychopathy was initially associated with general mental illness and psychotic conditions, but after its definition settled, mainly due to the important conceptualizing of Hervey Cleckley (1941), the impact and magnitude of such characters became better understood. In this same era came a focus on capitalism and individual enterprise in the Western world that some have since argued came to celebrate and even lionize psychopathic traits in its culture and institutions (Olson, 2012; Boddy, Miles, Sanyal, & Hartog, 2015). In fact, capitalism at its most ruthless rewards psychopathic behavior as a rule with a requisite glibness, cunning, manipulation and lack of empathy. As such, capitalism, with its inherent remorselessness, is the material manifestation of psychopathy.

Capitalist culture also celebrates a predatory spirit and fearless attitudes in life, which are probably part of the widespread fascination that psychopathy holds for consumers of fiction. Maybe we recognize in it a part of our darker self, a part that we go to great lengths to hide from others; or, maybe we wish we had some of the same qualities to protect ourselves against abuse

and exploitation by others like that. Whatever the case may be, it is in the best interest of societies to understand psychopathy correctly, including the tremendous impact that psychopaths have in terms of social harm and financial cost, in order to be prepared and able to act appropriately. Psychopathy is not a medical problem; rather, it is a societal problem. According to an estimate by American neuroscientist Kent Kiehl and Judge Morris Hoffman (2011), the cost of psychopathy in the U.S. alone amounts to \$460 billion per year based on the direct and indirect cost of the criminal justice system, which does not even account for costs of the treatment of victims and their emotional suffering and financial losses. This is barely lower than the estimated combined annual cost of substance abuse and obesity (\$529 billion), and roughly 10 times the cost of depression.

Although the concept of psychopathy emerged mostly in the nineteenth-century based on the works of French psychiatrist Phillipe Pinel and American psychiatrists Benjamin Rush and JC Pritchard as a synonym for aggressive and irresponsible behavior, it was still a generalized attempt to explain ‘moral insanity’. In the late nineteenth-century J. L. Koch introduced the term “psychopathic inferiority,” but with Garofalo and Lombroso in the late 19th century, continued to equate a lack of intelligence to the characteristics of irrational behavior, lack of insight, moral non-sensitivity and the lack of shame in adulthood that they observed (Buzina, 2012). The first mention of psychopathy in terms of the current construct, instead of in the general sense of mental illness, was in 1904 when German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin addressed moral insanity by referring to specific psychopathic subtypes involving antisocial, criminal or dissocial behavior (Millon, Simonsen, & Birket-Smith, 1998). After the First World War, Kraepelin and others developed categorization schemes under the heading “psychopathic personality,” only some subtypes of which were thought to have particular links to antisocial behavior. In 1917, the Statistical Manual for the Use of Institutions for the Insane, a forerunner to the American Psychiatric Association’s guiding text, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), included a category of psychoses with constitutional psychopathic inferiority. A clear distinction was therefore beginning to take form between psychopathy (as a behavioral and personality disorder) and psychosis (as the impairment of thoughts and emotions that results in a break with external reality).

Beginning in the late 1920s American psychologist George E. Partridge influentially narrowed the definition of psychopathy to antisocial personality, and from 1930 onward suggested that a more apt name for it would be sociopathy. The concepts slowly crystallized, but it was American psychiatrist Hervey Cleckley’s (1941) seminal work *The Mask of Sanity* that produced the

basis for the modern conceptualization of psychopathy. The first version of the DSM in 1952 included sociopathic personality disturbance, and identified four subtypes: antisocial, dyssocial, sexual, and addiction. As it was very broad compared to later definitions, only antisocial personality disorder was included in subsequent versions of the DSM, while sociopathy was relegated. Until today, psychopathy has never been included in any formally accepted mental health classification as a distinct disorder. Instead, it is recognized, at varying levels, in the criminal justice systems of many countries and jurisdictions, primarily as a measure of risk of violence.

Cleckley's treatise was first published in 1941, yet the basic elements of psychopathy outlined therein remain relevant today. Cleckley's clinical profile listed 16 behavioral characteristics of a psychopath, which Gowlett (2014) has subdivided into three categories:

A. Positive Adjustment

1. Superficial charm and good intelligence
2. Absence of delusions and other signs of irrational thinking
3. Absence of nervousness or psychoneurotic manifestations
4. Suicide threats rarely carried out

B. Behavioral Deviance

5. Inadequately motivated antisocial behavior
6. Poor judgment and failure to learn by experience
7. Unreliability
8. Fantastic and uninviting behavior with drink and sometimes without
9. Sex life impersonal, trivial, and poorly integrated
10. Failure to follow any life plan

C. Emotional-Interpersonal Deficits

11. Untruthfulness and insincerity
12. Lack of remorse and shame
13. General poverty in major affective reactions
14. Pathologic egocentricity and incapacity for love
15. Specific loss of insight
16. Unresponsiveness in general interpersonal relations

According to Cleckley, the main characteristic of a psychopathic person is that he is able to outwardly mimic a normally functioning person with precision, masking or disguising his impaired internal personality structure to achieve his self-centered goals in a repeated and purposeful way that is often destructive to himself and others. Nearly 75 years later, Cleckley's work continues to

act as a cornerstone to modern research and clinical practice, which included the embracement of the psychopathy label, the Psychopathy Checklist—a measurement tool of psychopathy developed by Robert D. Hare—and continued refinement of the scientific understanding of the construct. As is evidenced in this paper, Hare’s classification of psychopathy in particular has also been embraced by popular culture where, through representations that vary greatly in terms of accuracy, it is used to simultaneously entertain and frighten audiences.

The Psychopathy Checklist (PCL) is a psychological assessment tool that was developed to measure psychopathy in male offenders and forensic inmates. It is a 20-item inventory of perceived personality traits and recorded behaviors that is completed by means of a semi-structured interview and supplemental information such as public records. The items were largely based on Cleckley’s characteristics of psychopathy, but with Hare’s amended version widely considered to be the gold standard among practitioners. With a maximum score of 2, each item is scored as either a 0 (does not apply at all), 1 (applies somewhat), or 2 (applies fully). The scores are later added and in the United States a total score of 30 or above (max=40) indicates a serious, or clinical, psychopath. The most current version known as the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) officially divides the 20 items into two factors. These are sometimes further divided to form a four-facet structure.

Factor 1 Traits: Interpersonal/Affective Expression

Facet 1: Interpersonal

1. Glibness/superficial charm
2. Grandiose sense of self-worth expressed as pompous arrogance
3. Pathological/compulsive lying
4. Cunning and manipulative

Facet 2: Affective

5. Lack of remorse or guilt
6. Shallow affect/lack of emotional depth
7. Callousness or lack of empathy
8. Failure to accept self-responsibility

Factor 2 Traits: Social Deviance

Facet 3: Lifestyle

9. Need for stimulation and proneness to boredom
10. Parasitic lifestyle (living off others)
11. Lack of realistic, long-term goals
12. Impulsivity
13. Irresponsibility

Facet 4: Antisocial

14. Poor behavioral controls (unpredictability; never learning from mistakes)
15. Early behavioral problems
16. Juvenile delinquency
17. Revocation of conditional release
18. Criminal versatility

Additional Factors

19. Promiscuous sexual behavior
20. Many short-term marital relationships

Despite its widespread acceptance and use to identify psychopathy, there have also been several criticisms of Hare's scoring model. Of note, Skeem and Cooke (2010) argue that the checklist does not represent or equate with the definition or theoretical construct of psychopathy by leaving out key factors, and that it places excessive emphasis on criminality. This may lead, they argue, to diagnostic problems and inappropriate applications such as securing convictions or harsher punishments in court. Also, some contend that its use in real world settings and non-forensic populations is questionable. However, regardless of these concerns, the PCL-R remains the best validated instrument to measure psychopathy at this time.

Psychopath Subtypes: A Brief History

There continues to be growing scientific support for the heterogeneity of psychopathy, but there remains little agreement on the basis of differentiation. Although the primary-secondary distinction is still the most widely used, many other researchers have opted for more nuanced multi-faceted classifications. Despite the fact that there are many more in various stages of empirical investigation, I have opted for three types of classifications: the two-factor model, a multi-facet (three- to five-factors) model, and a personality-based classification.

Cleckley (1941) first hinted at the distinction between two major types of psychopathy; namely, a prototypical, or primary psychopath whose dysfunctional characteristics are not due to social disadvantage, low intelligence, neurotic anxiety, or other psychopathology—different from the secondary type. Therefore, the inappropriate behavior of a primary psychopath is presumed to be due to some intrinsic deficit that prevents self-regulation and normal adjustment. It does not appear to be influenced by environmental and societal experiences that can be linked indirectly to “inadequate intelligence,

psychotic thinking, excessive neurotic anxiety, unusual sex drive, or other attributes that increase a person's vulnerability to chronic misbehavior" (Newman, MacCoon, Vaughn, & Sadeh, 2005, p. 319). These associations underlie the secondary type of psychopath, a person who appear to be more fluid and less encumbered by inherited psychopathic traits.

Since Karpman's (1941) original development of the concepts of primary and secondary psychopathy, several classification systems have expanded on it to further nuance differences. Hervé (2003) has used these distinctions as basis to follow on from a proposed three-factor model that distinguished between interpersonal, affective, and lifestyle types. Four main clusters emerged from Hervé's study of 202 Canadian federal prison inmates with PCL-R score of 27 and above. He termed these groups as follows:

1. *Classic/idiopathic/prototypical subtype*: Typified by high overall PCL-R scores, as well as high scores on the interpersonal, affective, and lifestyle factors. They are most related to the primary type.
2. *Manipulative subtype*: Distinguished by high scores on the interpersonal and affective factors, but lower scores on the lifestyle factor. These are the 'talkers' who use cons and ruses to defraud and deceive their victims.
3. *Macho subtype*: Has the second highest overall PCL-R score while scoring high on the affective and lifestyle factors, but low on the interpersonal factor. As such, the group lacked the charm and social skills to con and manipulate others, relying on force and intimidation instead to achieve their objectives
4. *Pseudopsychopath subtype*: These are akin to sociopaths, and have the lowest overall PCL-R scores, low scores on the interpersonal and lifestyle scales, but high in affective characteristics. (Morana, Arbole-da-Flórez, & Câmara, 2005)

Personality psychologist Theodore Millon (1998) recognized that psychopathic behaviors are also rooted in appreciably different personality patterns that could not always be associated with only one personality disorder. Different pathways to psychopathy therefore exist that may stem from fundamentally dissimilar styles of life to end in varying forms of social deviance. As a result, Millon and Davis (1998) described 10 variants of psychopathy to account for a great majority of behavioral patterns and expressions of psychopathy. By placing a focus on the discriminant characteristics beyond the common core of a marked self-centeredness and disdain for the needs of others, the differential classification was devised to add more distinction to

various clinical and personality backgrounds. A short description of each of the 10 subtypes of psychopathy follows.

1. *The unprincipled psychopath* is highly narcissistic, and gets satisfaction from exacting vengeance through humiliation. They exploit and abuse other people, and generally enjoy the anguish they create.
2. *The disingenuous psychopath* enjoys popularity and usually has a convincing social façade that is used to charm others in the short-term. However, long-term relationships eventually suffer due to their unreliability, their intense resentment, and their tendency to plot against others. They view life as a zero-sum game, and always strive to be on the winning side of the inevitable win-lose outcome.
3. *The risk-taking psychopath* lives for the rush that they get when they take risk and put their lives or the lives of others in danger. They thrive on a lifestyle of dangerous and treacherous activities, and are convinced that they are invincible.
4. *The covetous psychopath* displays envy and revenge as core characteristics. They are exhibitionistic and self-indulgent as they relentlessly pursue aggrandizement, believing that they have been deprived of their rightful share of love, support, and material rewards. In the process they often have little concern for the people that they deceive and exploit.
5. The *spineless psychopath* views himself as defenseless and weak and will therefore strike out first in a counterphobic manner to avoid or preempt the aggression of other people. They tend to project a false bravado and are desperate for others to see them as invincible and not to be provoked.
6. *The explosive psychopath* is defined immediate and frequent access to deep feelings of rage that are directed against those who are innocent or vulnerable. Their main difference from the other types lies in their tendency to erupt instantaneously in a sadistic and savage manner. These tantrums are unpredictable and often erupt when they feel thwarted or threatened, as a reaction to cope with frustration or fear.
7. *The abrasive psychopath* is oppositional and surly by nature, who resembles a rebellious teenager. They are unable to build deep relationships due to their enduring and defining personality traits that are contentious and quarrelsome. They often use insults in an indirect, but intentionally antagonistic, manner, causing and magnifying incessant discord with others. They feel entitled to do and say anything that they please, relishing their contemptuous stance. They exhibit

no remorse for their cruel insults, even when leveled at their most intimate associates.

8. *The malignant psychopath* is driven by paranoid beliefs and follows power hierarchies. Compared with other types of psychopaths, they are often less effective, and their efforts to inflict harm on others tend to backfire. They have often endured terrible abuse in the past and see the world as a dangerous and treacherous place, thus resorting to fantasy rather than to action, and they invent scenarios that place people around them in dark and menacing roles.
9. *The tyrannical psychopath* is stimulated by the vulnerability of others, which supports his cunning and calculating demeanor. They find satisfaction in subordinating and subjugating their victims, while delighting in their fear, humiliation, and intimidation. An important distinctive feature is that they target those who they predict will submit, while avoiding conflict with those more likely to fight back. They relive and relish the memories of their conquests and their victims' suffering, even to the point of amusement. The tyrannical psychopath is one of the most violent, cruel, and treacherous types, and use crude and vulgar methods to force victims to cower and submit.
10. *The malevolent psychopath* is also cold-blooded and ruthless, and perhaps the most prototypical of the psychopathic types with a blend of paranoid and sadistic features. They are intolerant and deeply suspicious of tender emotions, which they generally view as a tool to manipulate and hurt them. They seek and enjoy power, which they demonstrate in the deliberate mistreatment of others.

Quickly becoming evident from the brief summaries of Millon's 10 subtypes of psychopathy, adequate distinction between the groups are not always clear-cut, which may add to the conceptual confusion among creators of these fictional characters and the audience.

Filmic Depictions of the Criminal Psychopath: Message and Meaning

Initially, and to a certain extent still today, fictional portrayals of psychopaths in the visual media are mostly limited to criminal types. Many earlier depictions in the horror/slasher genre featured antagonists with psychopathic traits as misfits with some obvious impairment resulting in social rejection that caused their deep resentment towards society or specific groups. They are depicted as feeling wronged—an approximation of the covetous psychopath—which

fuels the human monster narrative, in some sense justifying their clear motivation for hunting their victims—the malevolent psychopath. It is in their hatred for their advantaged peers, which sometimes involves sexual compulsion that fuels their obsession with revenge. They are opportunistic, but organized. Characters such as Jason Voorhees in the *Friday the 13th* franchise (1980–2009) and Michael Meyers in the *Halloween* series of films (1978–2009) are two better-known examples of this characterization of psychopathy that diverge significantly from the accepted profile. Other social misfits with a sexual motivation to kill include Norman Bates of *Psycho* (1960) fame and his younger version in the contemporary A&E television series *Bates Motel* (2013–2015).

These grotesque and caricature-type psychopaths eventually decreased in their prevalence in commercial films into the late 1980s as several high profile (and real life) psychopaths in the 1960s and 1970s lead to the public becoming more knowledgeable about the clinical description of psychopaths and their behaviors and methods. The Zodiac Killer, John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy, the Hillside Stranglers (Angelo Buono and Kenneth Bianchi), and the Son of Sam (David Berkowitz) represent some of the most publicized psychopaths and serial killers from this epoch—their heinous crimes simultaneously fascinated and informed the public, leading, in circuitous fashion, to an enhanced public understanding of the clinical and forensic underpinnings of psychopathy and the associated nomenclature. In a sense, these real life cases also became the backdrop for broader misconceptions in popular culture reified through disinformation conveyed via Hollywood. This included, most notably, the belief that all psychopaths are intelligent and serial killers (Ted Bundy’s reported IQ was 136 and that of John Wayne Gacy and David Berkowitz, both 118).

The spectacle-driven allure of horror and slasher films continued unabated, however, based in large part on the sensational marketability of the villains in these films—characters molded on real-life sexual murderers and thus, by extension, similarly depicted (or erroneously classified in film) as psychopaths. Towards the dawn of the 1990s, the increase in publicity and information flow about criminal investigations, including criminal profiling, also lead to more realistic depictions of psychopaths in film. This arguably lead to the “birth” and popularity of the “elite” psychopath, or a psychopath “exhibiting exaggerated levels of intelligence, sophisticated manners, and cunning” (Leistedt and Linkowski, 2014, p. 171), which often surpassed or contradicted the typical traits of a psychopath. As such, as the times and information flow changed, fictional psychopathic characters in popular media continued to perpetuate common myths rather than dispelling or addressing

those. The most notable of these depictions in film from the 1990s, one that would later spawn countless imitators and engender a great deal of misunderstanding about the nature of psychopathy, is of course Hannibal Lecter in the films based on Thomas Harris's acclaimed crime novels.

Hannibal Lecter as Exemplar of Psychopathy in Film

The character Hannibal Lecter, who in the wake of Harris's novels has been solicitously featured in three movies, three seasons on television, and countless publications and discussions, is widely regarded in popular culture as the ultimate prototypical psychopath—the exemplar of the clinical and forensic nomenclature to which all filmic psychopaths should aspire. He is perhaps the most arrogant, cunning, manipulative, callous, and cruel character to ever grace fiction and has become a cultural icon and model for later portrayals of seriously disturbed offenders (Gullhaugen & Nottestad, 2011). Yet, his variety of characteristics includes many that are in fact, upon closer inspection, *contrary* to the accepted symptoms of psychopathy. He had an adverse childhood, but cannot truly be thought of as antisocial. He demonstrates some affection and grief that appears genuine (as far as fiction goes), and fulfills 8 out of 10 items of the criteria from the PCL-R Factor 1 (the interpersonal and affective domain), but only 4 out of 10 from Factor 2 (the lifestyle and antisocial domain). According to Gullhaugen and Nottestad (2011), this provides Lecter with PCL-R score of 24 (max = 40), which is below the generally applied cutoff in America (≥ 30) or Europe (≥ 25) for severe—or clinical—psychopathy. Similar conclusions seem to apply to Dexter Morgan, eponymous serial killer in Jeff Lindsay's series of novels and the subsequent, and arguably better-known, Showtime series. Fulfilling seven criteria from Factor 1 and only one from Factor 2, he scored even lower at 16. Both scores are still moderate to high with the average score of the general public around five. While Dexter Morgan is a television creation rather than one based in film—the more common habitat of the fictive criminal psychopath—it is curious to note that he and Lecter share mutual literary origins and that Dexter Morgan, as a television analog of Lecter in many respects, shares a number of traits that contradict the accepted literature with respect to diagnosing psychopaths.

As explained, the depiction of psychopathic characters in film—both antagonists and tortured protagonists that court public interest, such as Hannibal Lecter—evolved in part due to the expectations of audiences that were based on the information that they had available. It helped shaped their fascination, which also changed with time. From the majority of violent and antisocial misfits or earlier horror, slasher, and other serial killer narratives,

psychopathic characters eventually became more nuanced in their construction, their being aligned more closely with the clinical understanding of their traits and behaviors. As a result, psychopaths with a wider and more realistic array of affective and interpersonal deficits (primary type), as well as those who primarily utilized manipulation instead of overt violence, became more prominent in popular culture (see Figure 1). As such, the focus shifted away from the idiosyncratic misfits of the previous genres to the “elite” iconography seen in the case of Hannibal Lecter, beginning with the 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs*.

While Lecter was previously depicted in the 1986 film *Manhunter* directed by Michael Mann of *Miami Vice* fame, the character was then portrayed by British actor Brian Cox and the surname spelled as “Lecktor” in original billing. The film, while since becoming a cult favorite, is often considered non-canonical in the Lecter series, the preferred reading of Lecter beginning in 1991 with the character being re-cast with Anthony Hopkins and *Manhunter* later being re-made, true to the title of the original Harris novel, as *Red Dragon* in 2002. It would therefore seem as though it is not just Hannibal Lecter that has become the referent for filmic depictions of psychopaths, but specifically Hopkins’s interpretation of the character. It is a distinction that may help chart future research with respect to what Danesi (2014) and Arntfield (2016) refer to second order forensic semiotics, or the feedback loop between actual crime, media depictions of that crime, and the ensuing—and erroneous—nexus drawn between actual events and so-called “true crime” which is actually interpretative and performative.

Based on analyses of the data provided by Leistedt and Linkowski (2014) of 125 films screened between 1915 and 2010, it appears that the 1990s were the decade where the psychopath had the most presence (a central psychopathic character appeared in a total of 51 movies). Just focusing on the 30 years between 1981 and 2010, secondary psychopaths featured slightly more often (55%) than primary psychopaths. During the same period, based on Hervé’s classification, the classical/idiopathic/prototypical subtype made up the most prominent group (30%), followed by macho (25%) and pseudo psychopaths (25%). The presence of classical psychopaths reached a high in the 2010s (42%), while the macho type was least used (16%). The manipulative type was the most featured in the 1980s (37%). This implies that the primary, prototypical psychopath has enjoyed greater attention in film recently.

Hannibal Lecter was, and still is, an important influence on the idea of a psychopath in popular culture: intelligent, successful, sophisticated, manipulative, cunning, callous, almost with no perceptible emotions, self-centered, and acting without hesitation using extreme violence when required. With his

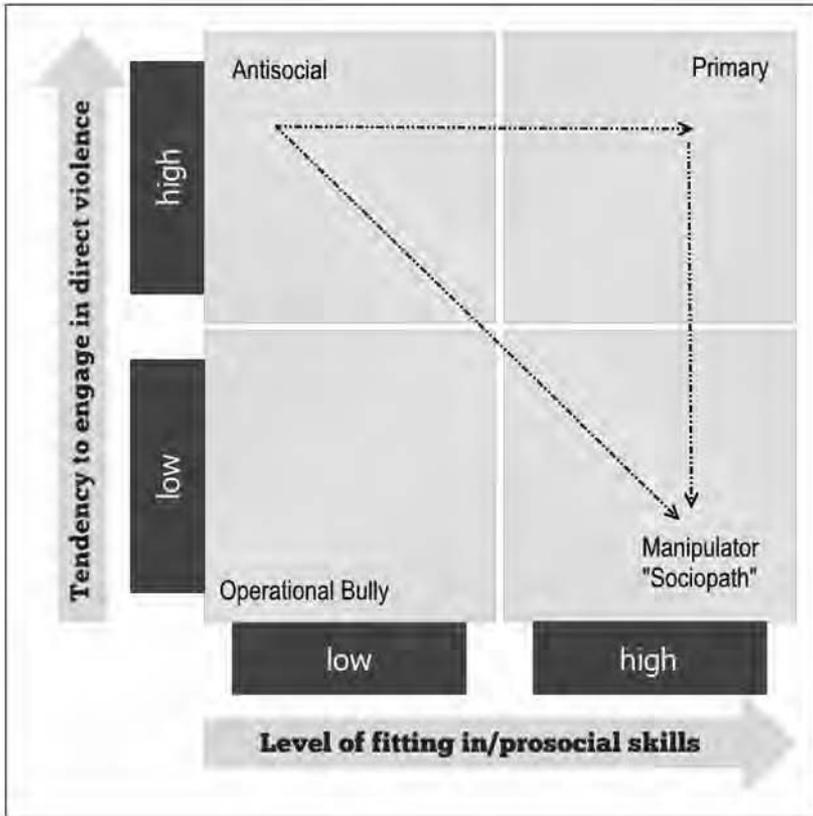


Figure 1. Four-Quadrant Model of Psychopathy.

calm, calculating, stylish, and always-in-control demeanor Lecter became the venerable psychopath for some time. But, the problem is that, in the context of the literature, the character traits are simply too extreme, even flawless to a point, thereby caricaturizing psychopathy to a point where it became an unrealistic portrayal that created and sustained many of the misconceptions for the sake of sensationalism.

But, popular culture also has a point beyond simple entertainment: reflecting real life to ponder important societal questions. These include questions that cannot be asked and explored in unrealistic portrayals. Since the early 2000s, psychopathic characters in fiction became more vulnerable, struggling with the changes that they knew are required, with their weaknesses, adverse pasts, and their relationship issues. The chaos and damage left in their wake became more apparent and relatable. As a result, a more

realistic depiction of psychopaths emerged in film and the characterizations of psychopathy became more accurate. These included symptoms of lack of empathy and remorse, cold-bloodedness, impulsivity, and capacity for violence. Earlier depictions especially, tended to ignore two important symptoms of psychopathy, namely lack of goals and focus, and impulsivity. Many psychopathic characters in film, especially ones at the height of the Lecter era in the 1990s, were meticulous in devising and executing plans motivated by a longer-term goal and focus. In reality, psychopaths are far less organized and premeditated. Films like *No Country for Old Men* (2007), based on the 2005 Cormac McCarthy novel of the same name, with the realistic prototypical idiopathic/primary psychopath, Anton Chigurh, is a leading example. He is incapable of love, lacks shame, remorse, empathy, and psychological insight, is unable to learn from past experiences, and has a cold-blooded, ruthless, and determined attitude. The absence of psychological insight is an important, if heretofore unmentioned, characteristic of a psychopath that creates unique problems for filmmakers. It is perhaps the main reason why psychopaths are unwilling to seek treatment or accept help—a detail that is seldom accounted for in the diegesis of on-screen narratives.

Corporate Psychopaths in Film

Compared to criminal populations, there are little information and understanding available about corporate psychopathy and its implications, although it is estimated that one in twenty-five high level business people can be considered a psychopath (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010). With their ruthless and callous predatory behavior that is sometimes exposed as criminal, businesses and entire industries are impacted by psychopaths, likely more than anyone would freely acknowledge. After all, it is often said that capitalism awards psychopathic behavior, including the exploitation of the vulnerable—a detail famously first depicted with great candor in the 2003 documentary film, *The Corporation*. It is then understandable that corporations are not interested to avail themselves of research in psychopathy.

Whatever the reason, there has also been relatively little attention paid to corporate psychopaths in film. Among Leistedt and Linkowski's (2014) list of motion pictures, there is only one corporate psychopath among the many crime, action, apocalyptic, war, and horror characters: Gordon Gekko in the 1987 film *Wall Street*. With his credo being that "Greed is good. Greed is right, greed works [...] Greed captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit," Gekko personifies both affective and interpersonal traits of psychopathy (e.g. grandiose sense of self-worth, cunning/manipulative, lack of remorse/guilt,

callous/lack of empathy). As most psychopaths do, he justifies his exploitive actions with complete disregard, even disdain, of others for his own benefit. He has a complete sense of entitlement, and an overriding devotion to personal profit at the expense of morality.

Two subsequent Hollywood films also portrayed psychopathic characters: the 2010 sequel, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and the 2013 biographical black comedy *The Wolf of Wall Street*, directed by Martin Scorsese. Both movies were criticized for glorifying psychopathic behavior, but became part of a Wall Street pop culture that vilifies its ruthless exploits, but adores its riches. An open letter written by a victim of Jordan Belfort, the stockbroker portrayed in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, claims that the depiction is a “reckless attempt at continuing to pretend that these sorts of schemes are entertaining, even as the country is reeling from yet another round of Wall Street scandals” (McDowell, 2013, para. 5) and that the cultural message that aligning with a criminal who left victims destitute and degraded women is acceptable, is both irresponsible and despicable.

There is also a film, at the time of this writing, presently in development based on the story of Bernie Madoff, the American corporate criminal and former stockbroker convicted of fraud of an estimated 65 billion dollars. The Madoff case made headlines worldwide in 2008–2009, and he is widely considered to be the consummate corporate psychopath, which will no doubt form an important character part in the film. Madoff, claiming to have been simply misunderstood, continues to rationalize and minimize his behavior. He took risks without regard for investing clients, distributes guilt, consistently lied to his family, became obsessed with wealth, was a master manipulator according to family and friends, and obsessively upheld a façade of success and genius. These features are all symptomatic of a corporate psychopath.

The Female Psychopath in Film

Although the male psychopath continues to dominate in film, perhaps in part as psychopathy is associated much more with males than females in the related real world literature, there have been a few notable representations of female psychopaths in contemporary cinema. While about 1% of Western general populations are thought to meet the criteria for psychopathy, the ratio between men versus women has been documented as high as 20:1 (DeLisi & Vaughn, 2016). It is thought that some of the difference between men and women may not be in the existence of deceitful, manipulative, and exploitive personality traits but in the expression of them, particularly as aligned with and diagnosed as another mental illness (Sprague, Javdani, Sadeh, Newman,

& Verona, 2012). Also, female psychopaths are outnumbered 3:1 by their male peers in violent prison populations (Wynn, Hoiseth, & Pettersen, 2012).

According to Logan (2011), “on the whole, women are not physically harmful to the same degree or with the same frequency as men and they rarely attack strangers, and this is thought to be the case with psychopathic women too” (p. 119). However they can still be equally damaging and devastating to others, if not on a physical level, then definitely at an emotional and relationship level. Fictional portrayals in particular highlight their deep-seated insecurity and need for the admiration of others that underlies their hostile, manipulative, and coercive behavior. In a sense, it is a protective mechanism to safeguard a perilous fragile ego. Not surprising then, female psychopathic characters in film tend to exhibit features of manipulative and pseudopsychopathic (sociopathic) subtypes rather than those that are more physically oriented.

According to the data set of Leistedt and Linkowski (2014), there are only 21 female psychopathic characters in film history up to 2010, with almost half being portrayed in movies produced in the 1990s. Almost three-of-four are secondary psychopaths, with the most the pseudo (47%) and manipulative (40%) subtypes. As expected, there were no female macho psychopathic characters and only two classical psychopaths in this period (Sadie in *The Last House on the Left*, 1972; and Mona Demarkov in *Romeo is Bleeding*, 1993). Although the harmful potential of women has been overlooked for a long time in fictional portrayals, the more ‘equal’ depiction of women behaving badly is arguably a reflection of a willingness to acknowledge the devious intentions and behavior of some women to achieve a goal or express themselves. Atwood (2009) explained the possibilities of “evil” female characters in fiction as follows:

[...] female bad characters can also act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face. They can be explorations of moral freedom—because everyone’s choices are limited, and women’s choices have been more limited than men’s, but that doesn’t mean women can’t make choices. Such characters can pose the question of responsibility, because if you want power you have to accept responsibility, and actions produce consequences. I’m not suggesting an agenda here, just some possibilities; nor am I prescribing, just wondering. If there’s a closed-off road, the curious speculate about why it’s closed off, and where it might lead if followed; and evil women have been, for a while recently, a somewhat closed-off road, at least for fiction-writers. (p. 20.8)

So, “evil” women have, in many respects, taken a rightful place in film. Sometimes, but not often, there is a more direct relation to reality. Although the 2003 film *Monster* was not included in the Leistedt and Linkowski (2014)

analysis, it is mentionable here for a couple of reasons. The crime drama was based on the life of U.S. female serial killer, Aileen Wuornos. The film also got overwhelming praise from critics and won several awards, including an Academy Award for Best Actress by Charlize Theron. It grossed a respectable \$60 million and ranks number 13 in the true crime genre, according to the Box Office Mojo website statistics. Wuornos, who was executed in 2002 for the murder of seven men in Florida between 1989 and 1990, is recognized as one of a handful of female serial killers worldwide outside the medical field and who targeted strangers. She was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder (Krop, 1992), but her PCL-R score of 32 also evidenced a psychopathic personality (Myers, Gooch, & Meloy, 2005).

The second cinematic portrayal of a female psychopath that received significant critical attention was the character of Amy Dunne in the 2014 film *Gone Girl*, based on the 2014 Gillian Flynn novel of the same name. Dunne's devious, revengeful, and manipulative schemes, dishonesty and lack of remorse is indicative of a textbook example of a primary psychopath, or in terms of Hervé's classification, a classical subtype that does not hesitate to use violence when required, even seeming to revel in the opportunity. But, unlike many typical real-life psychopaths, she is not that impulsive—observing, collecting information, and meticulously planning her revenge for over a year before acting. However, her anger when things don't go her way brings an intensity and urgency that threatens to derail her carefully made plans. Her lack of perspective of her behavior in the context of acceptable norms is another aspect of psychopathy. She continually creates her own narrative where she has to be in the center of attention. All things considered, the character of Amy Dunne reflected mainstream willingness to consider a female psychopathic character, albeit one that is over the top and shocked most audiences. Where the 1990s brought viewers frightening psychopathic characters such as Alex Forrest in *Fatal Attraction*, Annie Wilkes in *Misery*, Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*, and Tracy Safian in *Malice*, which were written by men, more recent depictions, including *Gone Girl* were created by female authors, which is still a rare occurrence, especially in popularity. However, it perhaps brings with it a less sexualized character version with psychopathic traits more integrated and pervasive in a primary sense.

Children and Adolescent Psychopaths

There has been a great deal of controversy about the labeling of youth as psychopaths, both from a developmental and ethical viewpoint. The label of being assessed as a psychopath carries with it the burden of stigmatization

and possible inaccuracy. A child and adolescent's brain and personality is still developing, and therefore there is an increased chance of a wrong diagnosis or changed condition later in life. Remember that 'psychopath' is not a true diagnostic type, but is mostly used in criminal offender populations. Using it outside these settings is often thought to cause proneness to over-diagnosis of traits that could lead to psychopathic tendencies if they persist. Such a premature label may actually have the opposite effect by traumatizing and marginalizing the child and family, exacerbating symptoms, and decreasing the willingness to commit to an assessment and treatment. The most widely used test instrument to measure psychopathy in children is the Psychopathy Checklist-Youth Version (PCL-YV), which has not been well-validated outside of youth offender settings. It consists, like the PCL-R, of a list of 20 items that are rated on a scale of 0 to 2.

Despite the associated controversies in academic and clinical circles, however, the film industry has been fascinated by the concept of young psychopaths for some time now. Earlier depictions focused on "evil" children as demonically possessed cold-blooded killers, such as Damien in the *The Omen* (1976–1985) and *The Children of the Corn* (1984–2011) franchises. Many newer films and television present children and adolescents with traits that are closer to those exhibited by prototypical psychopaths, though there are thought to be a number of conceptual problems with the way children and teenagers are featured as psychopaths in fiction. These often perpetuate myths and misconceptions held by the lay public about the condition, which may hinder early identification.

In the first place, the children are usually depicted as having superior intelligence and being from affluent homes with both, loving parents present. In real life, this seems to be the exception rather than the norm. Empirical studies have shown that there are no intelligence differences between psychopaths and non-psychopaths (Johansson & Kerr, 2005). Higher psychopathy scores on the PCL-YV are associated with physical abuse and non-parental living arrangements during childhood (Campbell, Porter, & Santor, 2004).

The second issue is a conceptual one. Although the diagnostic distinction of sociopathy was eliminated with the publication of the DSM-II in 1968, there is a reluctance in the popular media to abolish the classification. Therefore, as a pop psychology term it has become confounded with the psychiatric diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder (APD) and the legal concept of psychopathy. Only APD is officially recognized in the DSM-5, the current mental health classification system in use in the U.S. Today, psychopathy is, in professional terms, mostly defined by the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised

(PCL-R), which contains a significant criminal/antisocial construct, and used to evaluate risk of future violence and recidivism in adult offender populations. With few exceptions, fictional characters of child and adolescent in film and television are referred to as sociopaths, technically a redundant and nonscientific term, and therefore conceptually confusing.

The third issue is that the youth version of the instrument (PCL-YV) that was previously mentioned and most widely used to identify youth psychopaths is controversial in terms of its predictive ability. There is no established threshold score for the PCL-YV, which causes concerns of inconsistency, and a potential increase of false positives if the cutoff is lowered in non-offender populations. Although research by Lynam, Caspi, Moffitt, Loeber, and Stouthamer-Loeber (2007) found that psychopathy from early adolescence in a middle school sample (13-year-old) into young adulthood (24-year-old) was moderately stable, predictive power was poor. In simpler terms, this means that a low percentage of boys who were identified as psychopathic at age 13 were psychopathic at age 24. The dangers of false positives should be clear here. Not only is treatment and institutionalization expensive, the effect of a pejorative label is unknown, as are effectiveness of treatment for a young psychopath, and distinction of those young psychopaths whose antisocial behavior will remit over time.

The fourth issue that pertains to child and adolescent psychopathy in the popular media is the need to highlight legal implications of such a diagnosis. It has varying impact and meaning between jurisdictions and there is a lack of knowledge and opportunity to cover the implications. In many instances, especially barring acts of serious violence, a child cannot be committed for treatment involuntarily (without the consent of parents and legal guardians), and in more serious cases heard in juvenile court, proper care will not be available after conviction. Proper education of the condition and availability of options is important to ensure early identification and intervention. The entertainment media can play a responsible role here, but is perpetuating misinformation, perhaps for the sake of sensationalism, that can make positive efforts more challenging.

A more recent example of the portrayal of an adolescent psychopath in mainstream film is *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011). In most other films the effect of psychopathy on the individual, their family, and community is obfuscated in the vilification of unambiguous characters. The cause-and-effect of dysfunctional interpersonal relationships on psychopathic behavior is rarely illustrated. No person can be thought of as exclusively bad. This is a misconception that is most often perpetuated in entertainment media where ambiguity is not easily absorbed. Society does not want to be blamed

or associated with her ‘monsters’. Instead, they provide a fascination from afar. Such a shortsighted view is limiting, but in Kevin’s case the evolution of psychopathy in a person is a refreshing (albeit somber) take. Having basic childhood needs fulfilled helps protect a person against genetic imperfections, enabling a young person to learn functional ways to cope with it. However, although the film offered this not-often-seen interpersonal perspective of psychopathy, it remains a fairly shallow view offering many of the same conclusions that the media often does about the ‘pure evil’, unconditional nature, and untreatability of psychopathy that perpetuate the usual misconceptions.

Conclusion: Psychopaths on Television ... a New Standard?

Psychopathy is not straightforward and unitary condition. Film provides a vicarious experience that we can parallel to an extent to our own lives and those around us, helping us to understand and navigate our own and others’ complex personalities more effectively. Hopefully such an improved insight helps us to appreciate the profound impact that we can have on our children. Collectively, children’s health and wellbeing is a reflection of the status of entire societies and nations. Through fictional characters, people can absorb their experiences and interactions, shaping discourses about responsibility, accountability, empathy, and moral values. Such characters can blunt our senses or bring new hope. Universal boogeymen and archetypes may hold a fascination and appeal to many, but they can also increase aggression and violent behavior in some consumers by desensitizing them and normalizing bad behavior.

Therefore, there is a compelling argument for the realistic depiction of psychopaths in film, or at least a thoughtful consideration by producers of how to portray (and market) characters with psychopathy to audiences. This will help people beyond professional fields to gain insight into the interpersonal dynamics, inner complexities, and behavioral inconsistencies of those with psychopathy that they may encounter in real life. After all, there is a great need to learn about dealing with psychopaths in order to protect oneself against their threats, manipulation, and exploits.

As television continues to espouse an increasingly post-broadcast model and continuously competes with conventional motion pictures in terms of production values, serialized storytelling, and its ability to attract high profile talent, depictions of psychopaths in television can be expected to follow a similar evolutionary design when looking back at its various iterations in film, although a survey of texts produced post-2000 suggests that television may in fact be charting a new—and more accurate—course.

Table 1. List of Main Psychopathic Characters in Contemporary TV Series.

No.	Character Duration	Television Series	Psychopathic Main Character
1	2001–2003	24	Nina Myers
2	2011–2013	American Horror Story	Bloody Face
3	2011	American Horror Story	Tate Langdon
4	2013–2015	Bates Motel	Norman Bates
5	2008–2013	Breaking Bad	Walter White
6	2001–2003	Coronation Street	Richard Hillman
7	2006–2007	CSI	The Miniature Killer
8	2008–2010	CSI	Nate Haskell
9	2011–2013	CSI Miami	Esteban Carlos Navarro
10	2009	Dexter	Arthur Mitchell
11	2006–2013	Dexter	Dexter Morgan
12	2011–2014	Game of Thrones	Joffrey Baratheon
13	2013–2015	Game of Thrones	Ramsay Bolton
14	2013–2015	Hannibal	Hannibal Lecter
15	2013–2015	House of Cards	Frank Underwood
16	2012–2014	House of Lies	Monica Talbot
17	2010–2013	Luther	Alice Morgan
18	2007–2015	Mad Men	Don Draper
19	2014	Murder in the First	Eric Blunt
20	2005–2009	Prison Break	T-Bag
21	2011–2015	Revenge	Emily Thorne
22	2005–2006	Rome	Gaius Octavian
23	2015	Secrets and Lies	Abby Crawford
24	2013	The Fall	Jamie Dornan
25	2013–2015	The Following	Joe Carroll
26	1990–2015	The Simpsons	Sideshow Bob
27	2001–2002	The Sopranos	Ralph Cifaretto
28	2010–2012	The Walking Dead	Shane Walsh
29	2012–2014	The Walking Dead	The Governor
30	2014	True Detective	Errol Childress

As a series that generally lacks a storyline and characters with emotional stability or healthy relationships, the HBO production *Game of Thrones* (2011–2015) in particular offers a veritable buffet of psychopathic types. Although Joffrey Baratheon was only 18-years-old when he was murdered, he displayed characteristics consistent with Millon's spineless psychopath type. He was a sadistic and cruel young man who commanded others to fight his battles for him, thereby hiding his own fears of being weak and defenseless with a false bravado. Another character in the same show, Ramsay Bolton, can be seen as a malevolent psychopath according to Millon's classification. He delighted in the torture and domination of others, and he used his victims' emotions against them, often by offering a glimmer of hope before ruthlessly crushing it. He derived personal pleasure and satisfaction from the torture and murder of others. But, as a medieval fantasy, *Game of Thrones* is far from modern real life and its everyday challenges. A nuanced view of many different types of psychopathic characters has entertainment merit, but the caricaturized depictions offer minimal real insight. Other series are better positioned to reflect real-life situations—a characterization that remains lacking in a balanced understanding of psychopathy.

Silicon Valley prodigy, Eric Blunt, main protagonist in the first season of *Murder in the First* (2014), is a prototypical manipulative psychopath in Hervé's nosology. He was a pathological liar, manipulated others to get what he wants, but also for amusement, used and coerced others to perform his crimes, but also did not hesitate, and took pleasure, to murder someone up-close-and-personal. He was extremely impulsive and aggrandized himself, which eventually led to his fall. In fact, Eric Blunt may be a good fictional example of the so-called dark triad personality—a particularly malevolent and destructive blend of psychopathic, narcissistic, and Machiavellian traits. Akin to some psychopathic symptoms, narcissism is characterized by grandiosity, pride, egotism, and a lack of empathy, while Machiavellianism is characterized by manipulation and exploitation of others, a cynical disregard for morality, and a focus on self-interest and deception (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006).

Television has also taken much of the initiative in the increasing depictions of child and adolescent psychopaths, also called a 'budding psychopath'. The growing popularity of criminalistic shows such as *CSI* and *Criminal Minds* had an important contribution to this trend. In addition to these single-episode depictions, youth with psychopathic traits have also played main characters in television series. The list of television characters in Table 1 features teenager Norman Bates in *Bates Motel* (2013), Joffrey Baratheon who was 16-years-old in the first season of *Game of Thrones* (2011), and 12-year-old Abby Crawford in *Secrets and Lies* (2015). Nevertheless, despite the growing

fascination with young psychopaths in the popular media, the merits of such a concept and labeling remains highly questionable.

Psychopathy has become a topic of increasing interest to armchair viewers in the last decades, not just because ‘evil’ makes for compellingly entertaining material, but viewers can feel complacent that they are different and uninvolved. This is perhaps symptomatic of a collective need to confirm that ‘evil’ is only a problem of the ‘other’; that the labels and stereotypes do not apply to oneself. In a sense the complexity of the human experience is simplified by erecting boundaries between “good” and “evil.”

Unfortunately, the media continues to perpetuate this effect; thus, one should always ask: *Cuo bono?* Meaning, literally, “who benefits?,” it is a Latin coinage that questions the producer’s motivation for a specific portrayal—in this case the psychopathic character. In news and fiction alike, it is often beneficial to promote a dichotomous “us-and-them” mentality in order to evoke positive feelings of one’s own group. The medium of film, however, has to much more to offer in terms of realism, including its acting as a catalyst for insight and positive change instead of further alienation and labeling that is encouraging negative values and sustaining misconceptions about “evil” and the nature of psychopathy and other mental disorders. Television is even better situated to make a positive contribution in the perception about psychopathy as it offers increased scope for character nuances and development in serial storytelling, access to broader audiences, and more opportunities to experiment and make adaptive changes. However, both film and television continue to fall short in an accurate portrayal of psychopathy. There consequently endures a need for the professional mental health, film, and television industries to collectively collaborate to counter inaccurate stereotypical portrayals of psychopathy that sustain misconceptions and stigma, discourage help-seeking, and, ultimately, impede rehabilitation initiatives.

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