Donnie Darko **and the Impact of the Stereotypical Representation of Schizophrenia**

Donnie Darko **y el impacto de la representación estereotípica de la esquizofrenia**

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Abstract

Understanding the impact that media can have on people and, particularly, marginalized groups is key to bringing about change and a more accepting society. Thus, I have analyzed the portrayal of schizophrenia in *Donnie Darko* (2001), emphasizing the impact stereotypical portrayals of schizophrenia can have on individuals. I elaborate briefly on the history of schizophrenia as a diagnostic category and its current diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5-TR. The employment of techniques like a qualitative-based methodology, content analysis and a social constructionist framework allowed me to examine and understand how schizophrenia is portrayed, and how this can impact people. Finally, I have argued for the replacement of stereotypical portrayals of schizophrenia through accurate representations based on the deconstruction of social categories, and the real experiences of people with schizophrenia, wherein they can have a hand in defining their own portrayals in media.

Keywords: schizophrenia, stereotypes, perceptions, visual media, representation

Resumen

Comprender el impacto que los medios pueden tener en las personas y, particularmente, en los grupos marginalizados es clave para poder crear cambio y una sociedad más tolerante. Por ende, he analizado la representación de la esquizofrenia en *Donnie Darko* (2001), haciendo hincapié en el impacto de esta en las personas, con o sin esquizofrenia. Discuto brevemente la historia de la esquizofrenia como una categoría diagnóstica en el DSM-5-TR. El uso de una metodología cualitativa, el análisis de contenido y un marco teórico de construccionismo social me han permitido examinar la representación de

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esquizofrenia, comprender los síntomas presentados y cómo esta puede impactar a los individuos. Finalmente, he argumentado por el remplazo de las representaciones estereotípicas de la esquizofrenia a través de las representaciones basadas en la deconstrucción de las categorías sociales y las experiencias reales de personas con esquizofrenia, con el fin de que estos puedan definir sus propias representaciones.

Palabras clave: esquizofrenia, estereotipos, percepciones, medios visuales, representación

Humans are social beings, and as such, we are affected and changed by the happenings and circumstances of the world and society around us, whether they are political, economic, or social in nature. Our perception, similarly, is also affected by how we observe the world, and the way people perceive things can be influenced by a wide array of factors, like personal experience or the experience of other people, and the acquisition of external information that can present itself in the form of newspapers, articles, books, TV shows and films.

Therefore, I will be analyzing the presentation of schizophrenia in the film *Donnie Darko* (2001) with the objective of exploring if it accurately represents people diagnosed with schizophrenia and, if it does, analyzing if it perpetuates a stereotypical portrayal of the "violent" schizophrenic. To embark on such a project, I have established a set of questions to focus the work even further: 1) Does the character of Donnie present the necessary criteria for a diagnosis as per the DSM-5-TR?; 2) How is schizophrenia represented in the film?; 3) Does the portrayal of schizophrenia in the movie promote a stigmatizing stereotype of schizophrenia?

Finally, I have chosen a qualitative methodology that is focused on the examination and analysis of content and analyzed through a social-constructionist perspective to undertake this project. I have chosen this methodology due to its utility in collecting and analyzing of non-quantifiable information such as verbal or audiovisual information with the purpose of understanding the way individuals perceive and experience the phenomenon around them, while content analysis was selected as it is focused on processing and interpreting communicative

products with the objective of understanding the context in which they are produced or what their consumption may entail (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014; Piñuel, 2002). The social constructionism perspective will allow me to partake in a deconstructive analysis of the film that explains how people's perception can be impacted by the socio-cultural world around them as the framework "…attempts to articulate common forms of understanding as they now exist, as they have existed in prior historical periods, and as they might exist should creative attention be so directed" (Gergen, 1985, p.267, as cited in Aceros, 2012, p. 1003).

Understanding Schizophrenia and Analyzing *Donnie Darko*

Firstly, before delving into *Donnie Darko* (2001) and analyzing its portrayal of people with schizophrenia, it is pertinent to understand the history of schizophrenia as a psychiatric category and its current criteria under the most recent publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5-TR) (APA, 2022). The creation, and subsequent rise, of the term 'schizophrenia' (*schiz* – to split; *phrene* - mind) began in 1908 when the Swiss Psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler used the word as a reformulation for the already established dementia praecox. Bleuler considered schizophrenia a "disease characterized by a specific type of alteration of thinking, feeling, and relation to the external world" (Bleuler, 1911, p. 9, as cited in McNally, 2016, p. 24). Bleuler's term and classification of "schizophrenia" would first be considered a symptom of dementia praecox, eventually becoming synonymous with it, until finally displacing it as the primary form of classification and diagnosis.

However, Bleuler's concept was relatively vague and confusing, which led many psychiatrists of the twentieth century to try and accurately define schizophrenia, further emphasizing the ever-fluctuating definition of the term and leading towards generalizations or inaccurate assessments based on personal biases, opinions, or societal norms (McNally, 2016).

Consequently, the American Psychiatric Association would try to pin-point a definition, but by the time the *DSM-III* came around in 1980, McNally (2016) notes that a "definition would become unnecessary for the classification and diagnosis of schizophrenia" (p. 59) due to the rise of support for operational definitions (definitions with optional criteria and checklists) in the psychiatric field. This same form of operational definitions continues in use today, as can clearly be seen through the most recent publication of the DSM-5-TR (2022) and its current diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia can be diagnosed if the person being evaluated has presented with hallucinations, delusions, disorganized speech, grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior and negative symptoms (like diminished emotional expression) for at least 1 month and, specifically, presenting with at least one of the three first symptoms, for a combined total of two or more. Furthermore, the person must showcase that, after the beginning of the onset of symptoms and disturbances, there is a markedly low level of functioning whether that be in work related areas or personal relations, and such disturbances persist for at least 6 months and are not attributable to other forms of psychotic disorders or a history of substance abuse (APA, 2022).

In relation to the purpose of this analysis, *Donnie Darko* is a science fiction psychological thriller film that focuses on a teenager (Jake Gyllenhaal) who experiences vivid hallucinations of a man in a giant bunny costume named "Frank" who urges him to commit crimes and makes him believe the end of the world is coming. The film gives a strict timeframe of 28 days for Frank's prophesized end of the world, through which the viewer is witness to Donnie's deterioration and increasingly psychotic behavior, although it is suggested that he has had symptoms for a long time. As such, with the glimpses of Donnie's behavior and with the timeframe established, it is possible to consider that Donnie has schizophrenia or, at least, schizophreniform disorder (less than 6

months of disturbances) as he presents several of the diagnostic criteria established in the DSM-5-TR such as hallucinations (both visual and auditory), delusions (in the form of beliefs like the prophesized end of the world and his role in it), catatonia (as he is shown to be in a trance-like state whenever Frank talks to him), and negative symptoms for the period of a month, as well as increasingly low expected academic performance since the onset of the disturbances.

Although it is impossible to definitively diagnose Donnie due to the lack of information and proper evaluation, the film does present Donnie as having previously had "imaginary friends", a history of "behavioral problems", and frequent visits to a psychiatrist who diagnoses him with paranoid schizophrenia. All these scene and character choices showcase that the filmmakers explicitly wish the viewers to consider Donnie as a schizophrenic, specifically an aggressive, lonely, and increasingly unstable one. For example, he is shown to commit increasingly more violent crimes at the behest of Frank such as flooding his school, burning a house down, or shooting someone without a glimpse of emotion.

While this portrayal may represent schizophrenia, at least in the DSM-5-TR approved diagnostic criteria, it likewise also presents a stereotypical portrayal of the "violent" schizophrenic who, according to Owen (2012), is plagued by vivid and visual hallucinations, erroneous beliefs, is aggressive, unpredictable, and cannot stop himself from committing crimes due to both delusions and hallucinations. The character of Donnie embodies most of these stereotypical traits, as seen through his visual hallucinations, growing aggression, delusions of the end of the world, and tendency for violence, which is further exemplified by the actor's choice to smile and act in a menacing way, almost as if Donnie is enjoying his actions when interacting with Frank, which is made to unease its viewers. This portrayal influences audiences as showcased in a 2016 study where *Donnie Darko* was selected amongst films portraying schizophrenia and shown to elicit

feelings of nervousness, hostility, and apprehension from participants (Perciful & Meyer, 2017). Specifically, Perciful and Meyer (2017) found that "the fear-based film provoked negative affect typically associated with stigmatizing attitudes, increased social distance, and discriminatory behaviors" (p. 8).

It is not to say that people with schizophrenia cannot be aggressive and violent, though as studies show, most people with schizophrenia that are violent are affected by comorbidity with other disorders and forms of substance abuse, but more so that popular representations of the "violent schizophrenic" in movies like *Donnie Darko* can perpetuate the stigma that individuals with schizophrenia are inherently violent or more prone to violence than other people, when even the DSM-5-TR notes that: "…the vast majority of persons with schizophrenia are not aggressive and are more frequently victimized than are individuals of the general population" (Silverstein et al., 2015; Walsh et al., 2002; APA, 2022, pp. 116-117).

Thus, as it is clear to see that stereotypical forms of portrayals can cause undue harm and cause people to internalize said stereotypes, I believe it is important to showcase in visual media other forms of representation for schizophrenia, in particular, people who have the diagnosis but that can live happy and fulfilling lives, as the production of films and shows that present "violent schizophrenics" can further hurt an already vulnerable population. Even further, people with schizophrenia can also take on these harmful stereotypes and, as Foucault (1991) states, make schizophrenia possible by making individuals strangers to themselves, to their own forms of human signification, and making them live in a world where the social and economic productions oppress them in their day to day lives. In other words, if humans are social beings, and if our perceptions and our identities are formed and influenced by the social world around us, it is possible to see how oppression in the form of misrepresentation, stereotypical portrayals and

marginalization can cause groups of people, like people with schizophrenia, to form identities, and to understand themselves based on social constructs that make them "other".

This is why, for example, people like Parker and Rodero argue for the deconstruction and retaking of social constructs, categories, and symptoms, such as psychotic discourses, and for a society where people, particularly those who are shunned and sideline for their perceived differences, can be vulnerable and open in a safe and inclusive environment (Parker, 1995; Rodero, 2017). These forms of deconstruction and reclaiming of spaces would allow people diagnosed with schizophrenia to break down the social categories, and boxes they are placed in and redefine their experiences in a way that accurately represents them, specifically because they themselves would have a hand in how those experiences are portrayed. As such, when it comes to media it is not only important to showcase more accurate representations of schizophrenia but allow for people with schizophrenia to have an active and primary say in how they are represented, whether that be by inquiring directly over their experiences or directly including them in the process of creating characters and films.

This undertaking, although hard, is not impossible, as can clearly be seen with organizations like Argentina's *LT 22 Radio La Colifata,* which serves as a way for people diagnosed with mental illnesses and who have been sent to mental hospitals to redefine their experiences and communicate with others just like them, as well as inform and establish connections with those whose lives look nothing like theirs. As Alfredo Olivera, psychologist, and co-founder of *La Colifata,* says: human beings live in a world where they are constituted by others and, as such, for them the radio serves to make friends, and to create bonds with "the other", establishing relationships and social links where they too can be implicated and seen (Larrondo, 8:54). This can be implemented across other forms of media, like visual media, and can be done

so individuals with schizophrenia can feel a little less alone, and a lot more seen in the world around them.

Conclusion

Visual media can have a deep and lasting effect on people, whether that be by influencing their opinions, their beliefs, or their perceptions. Forms of entertainment like TV shows and films can, thus, influence and cause harm on people, as has been showcased in the analysis carried out through this work. Marginalized people, like people with schizophrenia, can find themselves surrounded by media that doesn't accurately represent them, but perpetuates and promotes stereotypical portrayals of their lives, causing others and, even themselves, to internalize such depictions. Films like *Donnie Darko* (2001) can be seen as promoting such stereotypical portrayals, and as studies show, clearly having an impact on people and eliciting behavior they may have not had had before viewing the film.

Therefore, in line with the analysis in this work and the social constructivist perspective used, I maintain that Donnie Darko, though it presents a representation of schizophrenia as per the diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5-TR, does so in a way that continues harmful tropes and stereotypes. Specifically, these stereotypes can cause people with schizophrenia to not see their lived experiences accurately represented on the screen. Consequently, combined with other deconstructive perspectives, I suggest that, in order to make sure people with schizophrenia are not oppressed, shunned and misrepresented by media that pretends to use their experiences as plot and character devices, that people with schizophrenia themselves have a hand in, not only in the retaking of the social categories they are placed in, but redefining their experiences and having an active voice in how the media portrays them.

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