

## **Bachelor Thesis Review (opponent)**

**Name and surname:** Lucy Roberts

**Title:** *Behind the Scenes of Deinstitutionalization: A Gendered Perspective on Mental Health in American Cinema*

**Supervisor:** PhDr. Marek Urban, PhD

**Opponent:** James G. Pfaus, PhD

This thesis is a qualitative review of 12 films from the United States of America released between 1962 and 1975 that depict the treatment of protagonists in psychiatric facilities. The timeframe was chosen by the candidate because it fell within a famous period of deinstitutionalization in the US. This began as a movement started by concerned mental health activists and psychologists, individuals incarcerated in mental health hospitals and their family members, feminists, and civil rights activists within individual states, but was also amalgamated into a comprehensive federal program by President John F. Kennedy. The idea was to end the mass incarceration of people in institutions, often for indefinite periods of time, and create community based mental health facilities where people could be integrated into society with some form of dignity, all the while still being treated for whatever mental illness – from depression to schizophrenia – they might be experiencing.

The candidate's research comprised an inductive analysis of 9 general themes about mental illness and psychiatric hospitals (e.g., "Hospitals are safe and/or effective places for the treatment of mental illness;" "Mental illness is dangerous and/or shameful;" etc.) that were portrayed in the 12 films, and introduced for the first time a gender-based analysis of themes related to female vs. male patients (e.g., "Mental illness is threatening to masculinity;" "Mental illness is threatening to motherhood;" "Mentally ill people are sexually deviant;" etc.). Her analysis revealed a definitive portrayal of psychiatric hospitals being terrible and often abusive places, of mental illness in men being the consequence of largely internal (e.g., assumed genetic) forces outside of their control, but also of women's mental illness being caused by trauma done to them (e.g., depression from abuse), something that was discussed in terms of a limitation of agency relative to men.

The Results and Discussion of the analysis were comprehensive and insightful. The thesis was a pleasure to read and gave me much food for thought. The formatting was nearly perfect from the standpoint of APA style (some references are not formatted properly). The Introduction was a wonderfully engaging history of psychiatry and the incarceration of people with mental illness in institutions, and a critical analysis of some "therapeutic" interventions throughout history. Although the candidate tried not to take sides on the issues, it was clear from citing

Szasz and from the tone of her criticism that there is much skepticism about the nature of mental illness, medicalization, and the ever-changing diagnostic criteria, which is a relevant point (and one that is part of the reason why community based mental health treatments and facilities eventually failed – along with President Ronald Reagan gutting the Federal programs themselves in the 1980s). It would be really interesting to see how the themes themselves fare for more modern films about psychiatric treatment and hospitalization. I think the 1995 film *12 Monkeys* showed different conditions in the psychiatric hospital that character James Cole found himself in within different eras that he spent time there. But... I suspect that not much has changed, despite 50 years of second- and third-wave feminism, WAY better pharmacotherapies, conservative backlash, Woke movements, etc. Just watch *Girl, Interrupted* (though, that film does take place in 1967).

In the theoretical background of the introduction I would have liked to see a bit more history of the depiction of individuals with mental health problems in films prior to the period of deinstitutionalization. Did anything change from films like *The Maniac Cook*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Riptide*, *The Seventh Veil*, *High Wall*, *The Snake Pit*, *Lizzie*, *Three Faces of Eve*, *Home Before Dark*, etc.? I am also wondering why the film noir *Shock Treatment* (which came out in 1964) was not included.

But, that said, this was a wonderful thesis to read and think about, and one that utilizes a very interesting qualitative thematic methodology that can be applied to other genres of film from historical standpoints. The quality of writing was excellent and the content engaging.

**I would rate this thesis as excellent with a grade of 1.**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Pfaus', with a stylized, cursive script.

James G. Pfaus, PhD

In Prague, 10 June 2024.