

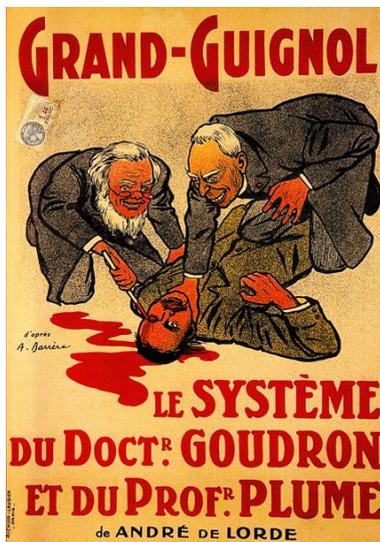
Lunatics (Le système du docteur Goudron et du professeur Plume): An Early Encounter Between Cinema, literature and Mental Distress

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Abstract

In this work, our main aim has been to catch the early moments when film, psychology, psychoanalysis and mental distress came in contact in filmmaking. We have identified Poe's 1845 tale *The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether* as an interesting starting point of this connection, and the film adaptation by Maurice Tourneur as a fundamental crossing, upon which we have drawn the title of this article. These early films of the silent short-movie stage of film history, have been important as they already contained issues that would have fully resounded through the cinema of the following decades: the reversal of roles between "insane" patients and sound minded professionals; the association between horror and mental hospital institutions; a "sound minded" visitor that for some reason enters a mental asylum, is subjected to and tells the spectators of it, something that for the spectator is easier to identify himself with.

Key words: Early cinema, Literature, Mental Distress, Psychiatry, Asylum, Horror



As, it is well known, at their early stages of development, films mainly consisted in screening authentic facts and persons from everyday life. A true narrative being absent, they resemble newsreels, rather than films as we are nowadays used to. The early usage that the medical science made of the camera belongs to this strand. According to Schneider (1985), filming became a teaching and research tool, to visually document and to study psychiatric and neurological disorders. Shortly after Lumière's first public showing, Paul Schuster, who was a doctor in Berlin, in 1897 filmed some of his patients, who suffered of different neurological disorders. In the subsequent year, Georghe Marinesco, a Romanian doctor, filmed paraplegic and hemiplegic patients. In 1905, well known Kraepelin, in Munich, started filming psychiatric case studies. In the same year, in the United States, dr. Walter Chase, brought a group of 125 epileptic patients, naked though in the shelter of blankets, out on a meadow, in sunshine , in order to be able to film them when epileptic convulsions appeared, after uncovering them; 21 occurrences were filmed in the end.

Almost all authors agree on the fact that the first two films in history bringing mental illness on the screen were *The Escaped Lunatic* and *Dr. Dippy's Sanitarium*, released in the era of silent short movies.

In *The Escaped Lunatic*, for the first time the play-acting is centered on an asylum inpatient and his keepers – so named in the promotional material. It is a one-reel silent short movie of about ten minutes, directed by Wallace McCutcheon and produced by American Mutoscope & Biograph in 1904. We could not see it, as only one copy exists, at the U.S. Library of Congress Film Archive. It is worth saying that, at the time, the film director's role and that of the movie cameraman were not yet clearly distinct from each other; especially the role of the film director as an author was not fully recognized, as it started to be later on: as a consequence, films were mainly a brand-product, largely identified with their production companies.

Basing on the promotional material used to advertise it, the movie shows the chase after a lunatic who is dressed as Napoleon Bonaparte. A few months later, another almost identical short movie was released, *Maniac Chase*, produced by the rival Edison Manufacturing Company.

To better understand such an operation, one has to be aware that at that time, in the U.S., remakes of foreign films were usual, because copyright in the motion picture industry was not fully enforced. Moreover, production companies – and among them, certainly American Mutoscope & Biograph – engaged in exclusive agreements with distribution firms, leaving out other distributors from screening the same film.

Considering the success of *The Escaped Lunatic*, Biograph's rival Edison Manufactory Company – founded by Thomas Edison, who is credited as inventing the first motion picture camera, in competition with Lumière –, following huge demand by owners of motion picture theaters not associated with Biograph, decided to realize a remake that was released in the same year. *Maniac Chase* was directed by Edwin Porter, one of the most important in the history of world cinema, who had realized the successful western *The Great Train Robbery* just in the previous year.

The Escaped Lunatic is among the first films where we can find a form of narrative structure. Indeed, it belongs to a vein, much popular at the time, of comic chase movies. It is almost contemporaneous to another movie on the same subject, *Personal*, that also gave origin to a remake by Edison's company directed by Edwin Porter: *How a French Nobleman Got a Wife through the 'New York Herald' Personal Columns*.

Maniac Chase, differently from the original film produced by Biograph, is still available¹ nowadays. The movie begins showing the patient of a lunatic asylum, locked up in a barred room, dressed alike Napoleon Bonaparte, and even standing alike the French emperor. In the following scene, a quarrel started by the patient with one of the three keepers about the poor food, suddenly turns in a fight with all of them; as a result, the patient, knocked out, is left laying on the floor. Then, the patient decides to escape: after dismantling violently a leg from a table, he forces the bars of

¹Available at <http://archive.org/details/TheManiacChase1904>.

the cell's window and runs away, after jumping down to the ground by about thirty feet. The three keepers immediately start running after him through the countryside, crossing small rivers and climbing up trees, giving rise to a series of picturesque and laughable situations. In one of the scenes the lunatic stops aside a beggar, who is sleeping next to a straw stack, and pretends to be his watchman. In the end, the exhausted "Napoleon" returns back to his cell. The short movie ends when the three attendants, exhausted as well in their muddy uniforms, formerly white, enter the cell and find him quietly sitting at the table, reading a newspaper. The most comic picks are those where the lunatic, usually before any new scene begins, during the chase suddenly stops and takes the attitudes of the French emperor.

It is worth noticing that in the film the character of a psychiatrist is still absent, and those in charge of looking after asylum inpatients carry out the job with no care attitude or method, but rather just to guard them. Keepers are usually rough, in contrast with the fact that the white uniforms they wear resemble those used in hospitals. The character of the lunatic who thinks he is Napoleon Bonaparte reflects a cliché which is typical in a psychiatric context. The film director, in order to make this phantasy apparent to the spectator, shows him up fully dressed as the emperor of the French, there including the typical hat.

In later films we will often find again the character of a lunatic who thinks he is Napoleon (that is, dressed alike him): let us just recall, as an example, a short movie of 1922, *Mixed in Nut*, directed by James Parrott, in which Stan Jefferson acts for the first time (when he still has to become famous as Stan Laurel), interpreting a lunatic confined in an asylum; another example is *Siamo Uomini o Caporali* [Are we men or corporals] (1955), directed by Camillo Mastrocinque, where Totò – who also wrote the story – , interprets the madman. We wonder if this deeply rooted stereotype, as confirmed by many jokes and aphorisms, is also historically grounded. Precisely on this issue, a book has been recently published *L'homme qui se prenait pour Napoléon: pour une histoire politique de la folie* [The Man Who thinks He is Napoleon. A Political History of Madness], by Laure Murat (2011). The author essentially investigates whether and how history influences mental disorders of psychiatric patients, following Pinel and Esquirol, two fundamental theorists of psychiatry in France. Murat research seems rather accurate and covers the archives of main French sites of mental hospitals. She mentions instances of numerous patients that in 1793 thought they had been executed by guillotine, and that their head had been placed on the body of someone else. As of 1840, when the Ashes of Napoleon the 1st were brought back to France, the number of psychotics who thought to be Napoleon rose to a pick: Esquirol counts at least 14 of them at his Bicêtre asylum. An explanation that has been proposed by some authors is that the majority of lunatics hosted in asylums at the end of the nineteenth century were syphilitics. The reason is that one of the typical effects of syphilis, in the advanced – tertiary – stage, is the delirium of greatness, of which Napoleon Bonaparte is clearly the prototype.

Going back to our topic, the character of the psychiatrist shows up for the first time in dr. Dippy's Sanitarium, released by American Mutoscope & Biograph in 1906. The

film lasts about 20 minutes, and the identity of the director-cameraman it is unknown, even if one recurrent hypothesis is the name of James Marvin. We do not have news about any remake.

The short film begins showing a young man who is hired as a keeper in a sanatorium. The Director, dr. Dippy – a kind, stout, bearded man wearing tails and pince-nez – introduces him to the four inmates: three males and a woman. The inpatients immediately start bullying him: they beat him, they throw knives around him as in a circus performance, they put him into a barrel and roll it along. As a consequence, a series of fights and pursuits follow between inmates and keepers. In the end, the Director comes and soothes his patients by dishing out a slice of pie to everyone. Schneider (2002) poses the question whether the piece of pie might be a precursor of psychotropic drugs.

As we can see, in the film one can find several elements already present in previous films: the comic chase – an early sketch of a narrative form – and the rolling of someone inside a barrel. Indeed, in *The Escaped Lunatic*, the inmate dressed as Napoleon slips himself into a barrel and rolls down a hill, in order to escape the keepers in close pursuit after him.

As the Gabbard notices (1999), dr. Dippy's distinctive features will also serve to identify the character of a psychiatrist in following films: beard, tails and pince-nez, and a portly appearance. Even the name Dippy, the Gabbard state, should sound funny to the producer. We notice also a resemblance with the character portrayed in the picture we put at the beginning of our article: the man who is performing "the treatment" on which we will say something more later.

Dr. Dippy will become one of the three archetypes, together with dr. Evil and dr. Wonderful, that following Schneider (2002) film used to represent the psychiatrist character. The scene when dr. Dippy dishes out the pie, reminds – perhaps not by chance –, what in his tale of 1845, *The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor. Fether*, Edgar Allan Poe called the "system of soothing.", a new method of treating mental illness. This short story inspired a bunch of films, often unheard of; we will say something more on this later on.

In the same years many short silent films portrait a professional psychiatrist dealing with mental illness. One year before the release of *Dr. Dippy's Sanitarium*, in 1905, Porter directed *The Kleptomaniac*. The story features two women protagonists, opposed to each other: one is rich, the other one is poor; they both are thieves, one because she's kleptomaniac, the other one because she's in need, and only the latter will be condemned having stolen a loaf of bread to nourish her family. This is one of the first instances in which a film is used not only as a cheap form of entertainment, but to convey a highly social issue. Porter suggests an idea of justice as being blind when dealing with the wealthy and tough with vulnerable individuals.

In 1909 four films directed by David W. Griffith, were released: *What Drink Did; A Drunkard's Reformation; The Criminal Hypnotist* and *The Maniac Cook*. Griffith is best known as the pioneering American film director of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the first film western and an epic narrative that deeply changed filmmaking. Back to

his four earlier films, the first two plots tells about alcoholism. Instead, *The Criminal Hypnotist* tells the story of a young woman who goes under the spell of a hypnotist that induces her to steal money from her father; the treatment of a “mind specialist” let her recover consciousness without losing memory of the experience, so helping to catch the hypnotist. Schneider (2002) notices that the “term [“mind specialist”, is] apparently more meaningful in that era than psychiatrist or alienist”. Finally, in *The Maniac Cook*, as the title suggests, a mad cook attempt to kill the boy of the family she is employed by.

Always in 1909, *Lunatics in Power*, directed by J. Searle Davley, is released by Edison Company. The movie is based on the above mentioned short story by Poe, *The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether*. Edison was the first in the U.S. to follow the inspired guess about the huge potential that fantasy and literature could add to cinema², following the pioneer Georges Méliès. Let us stop for a while on Poe’s tale, interesting to our purpose as it can help us to grasp how the mental hospital institution was perceived at the time. An unnamed narrator, who is travelling in the neighborhood of a private madhouse known to be running an innovative treatment method of inmates, decides to stop and visit it. The mental institution was located in an old castle. The visitor is introduced to the Director of the madhouse by his fellow traveler, who by chance knew him. Indeed, from a previous conversation between the two travelers, we get the idea that, differently from public mental institutions, to be allowed into a private one as a visitor a special authorization was needed. The innovative method adopted in the madhouse consisted in pandering to inpatients, going along with their even more odd wishes, leaving them free to run at large inside the house, even if being attended in secret. That is why it was named the sootherness method. Thus, the visitor at the beginning roams around cautiously, because whoever he will meet he will not know if she is an inmate or a person from the staff. However, the Director dr. Maillard, a full-bodied and distinguished looking person, tells the visitor that one month before the sootherness system had been discontinued, because it was too dangerous; he also informs the visitor that it has been replaced by another new method he also conceived. During this conversation, the speaker alerts the narrator "Believe nothing you hear, and only one half that you see", a quite famous sentence since then. The visitor his invited to join a dinner to which about thirty persons took part. He noticed that the majority of them were ladies, incongruously dressed; moreover, there was a wasteful plenty of food and especially wine. Hence, he kept a cautious attitude, since he could not be sure whether people around him were either insane or sane. During the rest of the dinner, however, his apprehension was relieved upon the quality of the conversations he could entertain with them. A great deal of amusing stories about the lunatics was told, and the teller often lingered on the imitation of the patient’s attitudes he was reporting. At some point, the visitor asks Maillard in what danger sootherness made the system incur, and the Director’s

²He produced the first Frankenstein film, an adaptation from the novel by Mary Shelley.

reply describes what readers already know by now to be just the chronicle of what is going on in the present – the lunatics usurped the functions of the attendants – while dr. Maillard still seemed to make a fool of his host. The conversation was suddenly interrupted just while the narrator was further inquiring Maillard about the new system running, so only toward the end of his adventure the host will uncover that the new system conceived by the lunatics consisted to well tar and then fully feather³ the overpowered keepers and the Superintendent, and lock them in the cells. The narrator will also learn that Maillard had actually been once the Director of the place, but after going mad himself he turned to inpatient, a fact that his fellow traveler didn't know.

Lunatics in Power is seldom cited among adaptations based on Poe's writings⁴. The movie is lost, and it neither was successful. It was conceived without any artistic ambition, with no intent other than to be amusing. Producers avoided even to specify that it had been adapted from Poe's tale; in their intentions the art work seems to have been just a means to make a comedy film, that in the meantime had become the specialty of Edison's production company. As we already mentioned above, at the time films were largely associated with production companies rather than with directors; as a consequence the marketing strategy of competing producers aimed at developing a specific genre, so that their own films could be easily recognized by the public. *Lunatics in Power* features several variations with respect to the tale.

The visitor is an old man; he is not merely a spectator, but he actively takes part to the eventful experience, at least because the lunatics pursue him and confine him into a cell. He himself receives the new treatment, where the tar is replaced by the molasses – possibly to make it less tough. As we already said, the film was not a commercial success; a reviewer for the *Moving Picture World* wrote that the choice of a dramatic state like madness as a starting point to make a custard pie movie displeased the public that was becoming more demanding with respect to the past. Of course, casting together both humours and disturbing features in a comic mould produced a result that Edison himself feared: an unconvincing hybrid. The subsequent adaptations from Poe's tale⁵ will decidedly change course toward the horror genre.

In 1912, in France, Maurice Tourneur, a well known director, father to the even more widespread famous Jacques Tourneur, directed *Le système du docteur Goudron et du professeur Plume* (in english speaking countries released with the title *Lunatics*), the most important among film adaptations from Poe's tale. The present article is titled after Tourneur's film, which is also known as *The Lunatics*, the title used for the

³The method, and the tale's title as well, are clearly named after Tarring and Feathering, a widespread torture practice as of 1191, and still during the Second World War to punish those who collaborated with the Germans. It is also mentioned by Edgar Lee Masters in *Spoon River Anthology*, in the epitaph of Carl Hamblin. The same lyric is also carved on the gravestone of the Italian anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli.

⁴One of which is *Der student von Praga* (roughly inspired from *William Wilson*), which is in the Film List published in the current issue.

⁵Among films on mental illness it is worth reminding the one inspired from the life of Poe himself, released in 1912, screening the mental disease of the great American writer, *Une vengeance d'Edgar Poë*, by Gérard Bourgeois.

version distributed in the United States in 1913. The success that the film recorded derived from the choice to make an horror film of Poe's short story and especially of the context of mental hospital institutions. The relationship between horror, either B movie or not B movie, and mental hospital, will then become recurrent in modern film history. The horror flavour the film has, derived directly from the fact of using the adaptation that André de Lord, in 1903, conceived for the Grand Guignol theatre. The Grand Guignol Theatre – whose name is after a popular French puppet character Guignol, an outspoken social commentator –, opened in 1898 and specialized in horror naturalistic shows based on sexual, sadistic and criminal motives, brutally represented, often involving the insane. Recurrent plays showed doctors, especially psychiatrists, torturing their patients. The aim was to address a social criticism to the contemporaneous medical system. Nowadays, the term Guignol indicates a bloody and brutal event or attitude. André de Lord used to collaborate with Alfred Binet, a psychologist who invented intelligence tests, to write plays about insanity. Among those plays we mention *La Leçon à la Salpêtrière*, a harsh criticism of Charcot's experiments on hysteria. Also the play of *Le Système du docteur Goudron et du professeur Plume* was meant to be a criticism to the care system for the mentally ill. Tourneur's film lasts about 15 minutes. With respect to Poe's tale there is a relevant change: in fact, the new treatment that the former establishment director– Maillard – conceives to substitute the sootherness method, consists in pulling out an eye, and then cut a patient's throat; the same that is illustrated in the picture at the beginning of this article. The film's last scenes are dramatically bloody, so that some newspapers of the time suggested that the movie should not be showed on Sundays. Some of them are as follows: the director is speaking to the visitor, when terrible loud screams come from one of the adjacent rooms; the director leaves, enters that room and when he comes back his hands are bloody and blood starts flowing under the room's door. In the final scene the pretended director urges his fellow inmates to attack the visitor. In André de Lord's adaptation for the Grand Guignol, the body of the actual director was dismembered, and this is what the last scenes of Tourneur's film suggest but don't show: we don't know why Tourneur chose not to, but it was likely to take into account a difference between being exposed to violence in a theatre or watching it on the screen. As films can deliver much more realistic effects⁶, explicit scenes could be upsetting at the times, when even the screening of *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de la Ciotat* frightened most spectators. In Tourneur's film (following the Grand Guignol adaptation) the humour and the grotesque are really marginal, a marked difference with respect to *Lunatics in Power*.

Tourneur's silent short film prompted many remakes. The first one was a spoof horror directed by Jean Duran in France, in 1914, *Le Système du dr. Bitume*, that was intended as an homage but did not resound through at all. In 1932, *Unheimliche Geschichten*, a horror film directed by Richard Oswald, was released in Germany. This time –we are in the '30s by then – it was neither a short film nor a silent one.

⁶C. Musatti (1961).

The film is actually formed by three parts, even if not formally distinct from one another; two of them are inspired by Poe's works, one of which is once again *The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether*; the third part is inspired by Stevenson's works. The same is done in 2004 by Jan Švankmajer in his interesting film *Šilení*, where the Czechoslovakian director replaces Stevenson's with Marquis de Sade's works. As you know, the French artist got acquainted with mental hospitals during his life. In 1973 two more remakes are released: *La mansión de la loucura* and *The Forgotten*. The first one was directed in Mexico by Juan López Moctezuma, in his typical surrealist fashion, and much focused on inmates' mad performances during the visitor's inspection of the asylum. The second one is an American horror directed by S.F. Brownrigg, set in a modern mental hospital. In the same fashion is William A. Levey's *The Committed* (1991), an American film as well. In 1980 Claude Chabrol directed a French TV production, with the same title of Tourneur's film; however, the film's setting is much closer to Poe's tale and the most bloody and horror features are avoided. Hence, we can say, Chabrol's film is indeed a close adaptation of Poe's tale, rather than a remake of Tourneur's film. Chabrol has always been interested to inspect the darkest and most disturbing side of the mind; in some occasions, he also had recourse to the advice of a psychoanalyst to work out the screenplay. In the Film References we further published in this Journal issue, several films by Chabrol are listed indeed.

Drawing our conclusions, Tourneur's *Le système du docteur Goudron et du professeur Plume*, is important in our opinion in the analysis of the relationship between film and mental distress. It fully shapes the reversal of roles between the "insane" and the sound minded, first hinted at in *The Escaped Lunatic*, in the scene where the keepers go back to the cell and find that the lunatic they had been chasing all the time came back on his own: one might ask then who is the most insane among them; a similar situation is screened in *Dr. Dippy's Sanitarium*. The second reason is that, following Tourneur's film, the horror movie's set is often a mental asylum, and mental distress is often associated with both horror and thriller movies. Many authors have already been interested in this issue; it is worth mentioning at least two books here: *Dark Dreams: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film* (1977) by C. Derry, and the one edited by S. J. Schneider, *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud's Worst Nightmare* (2004). In the General Bibliography we further published in this Journal issue, many other items on this topic are contained. Also analyzing the Film References' items, even at a first glance, this connection between mental distress and horror/thriller movies is apparent. And after all Tourneur's film represents an important point in the connection between mental distresses, literature works, theatre plays and famous authors and filmmakers.

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