

Film review of 'Swallow'

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2020 saw the cinematic release of the psychological horror *Swallow*, directed by Carlo Mirabella-Davis. The film follows the life of protagonist Hunter, a young woman who has just moved in with her wealthy but abusive fiancée, Richard. Richard consistently ignores, interrupts, and humiliates Hunter, and keeps her sheltered from society. Craving freedom and productivity, Hunter develops the disorder pica, swallowing increasingly dangerous objects throughout the film including marbles, batteries, and drawing pins.

As a medical student, I had yet to come across pica within my studies when I first watched the film and had very little knowledge of the subject. I felt that the film provided an empathic insight into the condition, with most features – such as risk factors and behaviours – presented correctly upon further research (Hartmann et al. 2012; Munir et al. 2010). The film shows us the sense of control and relief Hunter experiences after swallowing each item, and we witness the power of this positive reinforcement as she attempts to swallow larger and more dangerous objects throughout the film. We grow to hate Richard and his family as they approach Hunter's condition with ignorance, anger, and condescension. The film takes us upon Hunter's emotional journey and provides scenes of graphic discomfort, keeping the audience on the edge of their seats, thus can be considered a cinematic success. But although I was entertained, I could not help but wonder how the film – and how films revolving around mental health in general – may affect the public and clinicians.

As previously stated, many features of the illness are portrayed with sensitivity and realism, demonstrating the power of the arts to educate the public about rare conditions. This is likely to promote a better understanding and awareness of the condition among lay people and may help to eradicate stereotypes against pica and potentially self-harming behaviours in general. It can provide a relatable role model to viewers suffering similar circumstances, helping them to feel less alone and boost their mood, even if only temporarily. These factors may help promote help-seeking behaviours in viewers with mental illnesses, as the film validates the need for psychiatric treatment and shows the potential for recovery, providing hope (Das et al. 2017).

The film may even provide a useful teaching tool to clinicians. Films can sometimes be used to teach medical students or junior members of staff about rare conditions. Alternatively, films such as *Swallow* can be used within cinema therapy, which research estimates has a success rate of up to 70% (Beachum, 2010). Cinema therapy is where a clinician uses a carefully selected film to aid a patient's management; for example aiding a difficult diagnosis, strengthening a therapeutic relationship, or providing a fictional role model to inspire hope or promote reproducible healthy coping behaviours (Beachum, 2010). During the film, Hunter seeks psychiatric therapy and realises that her environment is maladaptive; thereafter making the changes necessary for her to recovery from her condition, potentially inspiring hope to patients in similar scenarios.

Unfortunately, the presentation of pica within the film is not perfect. While Hunter engages with psychiatric treatment that seems to help, her main recovery is clearly due to confronting a figure from her distant past. This use of catharsis as a cure for mental illness is quite infuriating as it undermines evidence-based medical treatment, suggesting that mental illness is easy to cure if you face a long-suppressed emotion or interaction. Many films use a 'cathartic cure' or the similar 'love cure' - where mental illness disappears after falling in love – to ensure that a happy ending is reached; for example *Numb* and *Silver Linings Playbook*, released in 2007 and 2012, respectively. These techniques could potentially discourage vulnerable viewers from seeking psychiatric care, which is presented as less effective and more difficult to comply with (Beachum, 2010).

Furthermore, the psychiatrist in *Swallow* – named Lucy – breaks confidentiality within the film; she is put into a difficult situation by Richard however agrees to his terms with minimal refusal. Admittedly, she is one of the

better Hollywood psychiatrists I have seen; common stereotypes of psychiatrists – as identified by Schneider in 1987 – include 'Dr Evil', 'Dr Dippy', and 'Dr Sexy'; all of which are still highly prevalent within the arts despite society pushing for more positive attitudes towards mental illness (Beachum, 2010). Having said this, Lucy's actions do not represent most competent psychiatrists, hence she conforms to Orchowski's (2006) 'Dr Flawed'. The problems this stereotype presents include discouraging help-seeking (as viewers are led to believe that even the most *sensitive-seeming* psychiatrists are untrustworthy), endangering therapeutic relationships, and consequently harming the ability of practitioners to help those in need effectively (Beachum, 2010).

Personally, my main concern with the film *Swallow* is the issue of viewers copying the behaviours they see on the screen. *Swallow* has not had enough popularity to generate academic interest, but research based on 2017 Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* indicates that this may be a problem (Peel, 2017). *13 Reasons Why* revolves around the suicide of fictional teenager named Hannah. Studies conducted after its release showed increases in suicidal ideation, internet searches, and crisis texts; and ultimately increased suicidal deaths and hospital admissions (Hong et al. 2019; Sinyor et al. 2019; Till et al. 2018). Perhaps viewers who relate to Hunter's lack of control and freedom will observe how she is rewarded by the ingestion of non-edible items and will be motivated to imitate the behaviour. I feel that researchers should use *Swallow* as an opportunity to study the effect of films and similar media on mental health – particularly young adult mental health – in order to recognise the extent of problems such as this, and investigate potential solutions such as content warnings or edited scenes.

Overall, I enjoyed watching the film *Swallow*. It provided a thrilling cinematic experiencing while also teaching me about the disorder pica; instilling me with enough curiosity to conduct further research in my free time. However, while it provides a much better presentation of mental illness and psychiatric care than other films of this genre, its presentation is far from perfect and could potentially discourage vulnerable viewers from seeking care or trusting healthcare professionals. Furthermore, I worry that viewers who relate to Hunter's living situation may feel motivated to copy the behaviours graphically depicted within the film, and I hope to read research confirming that this is not the case within the near future.

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