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Representation of Schizophrenia in *55 Steps* and Consequences for Attitudes towards the Practice of Involuntary Medication

Sofya Dorothea Selmo

1 Introduction

In 1992, Eleanor Riese won a court case in the matter of having been medicated against her will against the St. Mary's Hospital in California. The movie *55 Steps* by Bille August offers a fictionalized account of Eleanor Riese's struggle for autonomy regarding medication as a patient with chronic paranoid schizophrenia.

This paper examines the way the movie represents people with schizophrenia through the character of Eleanor Riese and, consequently, the practice of involuntary medication. While the film positions itself as opposed to involuntary medication via its plot, this stance will be further examined by juxtaposing Eleanor's portrayal with identified reasons for a positive perception of involuntary treatment. By doing so the paper aims to find out whether the ostensible narrative of repudiating mandatory medication correlates with the connotative messaging.

The theoretical framework and methods of the paper will be laid out in section 1. Section 3 will, after a summary and contextualization of the movie, concern itself with the question of representation of Eleanor Riese as a character with schizophrenia, tying the findings to US-American attitudes towards involuntary treatment in 2.2. A reflective conclusion will be offered in the final section.

2 Theory & Methods

In *The Work of Representation* Stuart Hall (1997) introduced the constructionist theory of representation as acknowledging the contextual character of meaning-making. In other words, meaning is not inherent but instead constructed by the

manner in which semiotic systems are employed to represent the material reality (25).

Set up in accordance with this approach, this paper examines the representation of mental illness with a focus on schizophrenia symptoms to ascertain the message the creator produces in relation to societal and cultural beliefs. The paper therefore strives to determine to what degree the film adheres to formerly established stereotypes of schizophrenia but also contextualizes pervasive diverting portrayals of Eleanor's character. To do so effectively, the focus lies on aspects and narrative developments in relation to personality.

Based on these findings, a further objective is to determine how the portrayal impacts the movies' critical stance regarding involuntary medication. A comparison with reasons for a positive attitude towards involuntary treatment as stated by Mossakowski et al. (2011) and Luchins et al. (2004) will be the means to approach this evaluation.

Prior analysis has shown that psychopathologies such as schizophrenia are especially prone to negative portrayals in the media (Owen 2012, 655), particularly in regards to violence and unpredictability. Other notable findings include the lack of treatments other than psychotropic medication, the emphasis on positive over negative symptoms, and, infrequently, the portrayal of love as an effective cure (657). Importantly, Owen also notes the existence of allegedly schizophrenic characters, which do exhibit traits of other conditions instead (658), especially prominent being the split-personality myth (Cross 2004, 198). According to a survey of 300 movies incorporating mental health conditions, struggles are often depicted as linked to comedic relief or as resulting in shame or stigma. While only one-quarter of characters are shown to receive therapy, treatment being even less common, potentially leading to further prejudice in the audience (Pieper et al. 2023, 26).

Finally, it is important to note the limitations of this paper. Most prominent is the fact that Eleanor's character does not merely have Schizophrenia but also certain other complications. While those resulting from her involuntary treatment are stated specifically, other obscurities are not directly addressed. Allusions exist but rather work to obstruct clarification. In one instance, Eleanor tells Colette that prior to having spinal meningitis, resulting in the doctors having to drain the water from her head, she had not shown symptoms of mental illness (August 2017; 1:38:13-1:38:27), leading to the assumption that some symptoms on display are after-effects of childhood meningitis, which have been demonstrated to be tendentially severe (Abraham et al. 2005; Petersen 2014; Meningitis Research Foundation 2025). This often makes it impossible to discern whether a symptom or characteristic is a representation of schizophrenia or a supposed result of another health struggle. Helena Bonham Carter, portraying Eleanor in the movie, has furthermore expressed the possibility of a schizophrenia misdiagnosis for Eleanor Riese (Carter 2017, 0:40), which might have impacted her approach to the character's portrayal. The paper will treat each symptom in the context of schizophrenia since this is also suggested to the audience of the movie.

3 55 Steps

The 2017 movie *55 Steps*, directed by Bille August, retells the true story of Eleanor Riese, who, after voluntary admission for chronic schizophrenia, successfully sued the St. Mary's Hospital in San Francisco in 1985 due to non-consensual and forced medication, resulting in medical issues such as bladder problems (Binder and McNeil 1991, 351-52). The 1992 court decision resulted in the implementation of Riese hearings in the state of California and the right to refuse medication even upon involuntary submission with exceptions in case of emergency (352-53).

The film opens in 1985, depicting Eleanor (Helena Bonham Carter) in distress about the medication she is supposed to receive and consequently being forcefully injected. She manages to contact lawyer Collete Hughes (Hillary Swank), who agrees to represent Eleanor in court and succeeds in arranging the discharge of Riese from the hospital. Initial drawbacks in court, where the hospital argues that Eleanor fundamentally lacks self-control, are countered with a decision in their favor by the appeals court, after the negative side-effects – specifically tardive dyskinesia – caused by antipsychotic medication are highlighted. The opposing party decides to issue a complaint, but the Supreme Court of California finally refuses relitigation. Simultaneously, a friendship develops between both women. They get to know each other more intimately, experiencing each other in vulnerable moments, such as in a moment of psychosis, and learning about their social spheres. By spending time with Eleanor, Colette, who is frequently overworked, gradually realizes that her work does not define her value and that she should take better care of her own needs and desires. Towards the end, Colette is shown as a more appreciative person. Over a phone call, she learns of Eleanor's passing and attends her funeral. After the screen fades to black, a text informs the audience that Eleanor's death resulted from complications due to her wrongful medication (August 2017).

According to screenwriter Mark Bruce Rosin, the process for the movie already started in 1992, but only in 2017 was it finalized. Rosin states that his deep respect for the real Eleanor Riese as well as her lawyers and their collective accomplishment was his main motivation (2018, 73-74). Helena Bonham Carter indicates a similar attitude to the character, stating to have taken care to play a complex character rather than a pure portrayal of Eleanor's mental condition (2017, 01:13-01:44), with detailed research and interviews involved in many steps of the production (Carter 2018; Rosin 2018, 73-74). Carter also voiced her wish for the movie to breach the taboo about mental illness in conversation (2018).

3.1 Portrayal of Mental Illness in the Character of Eleanore Riese in 55 Steps

3.1.1 The Childlike Patient

Throughout the movie, Eleanor Riese is frequently portrayed as childlike. She often appears simpleminded, unaware of obligations, impulsive, overly enthusiastic and honest to a fault. She is sulky when Colette, her lawyer, explains that her schedule

does not allow for the attendance of her spontaneous picnic (August 2017, 00:25:10-00:25:41), frankly informs about Colette losing in court in her presence (00:44:51-00:45:02), forgets her grudges quickly (1:12:39) and, despite their lack of time, stubbornly persists on buying a new dress for the hearing (00:34:10-00:35:55). The emphasis on the deep love for her mother further illustrates this characteristic. While she lives on her own, her motivation is not a desire for independence or autonomy, but rather her aversion to the weather conditions in the area her mother lives in (August 2017, 00:44:20-00:44:35). This depiction may potentially perpetuate the notion that people with mental illness are in need for a custodian, further implying a denial of autonomy (Corrigan and Shah 2017, 7). This quality is further a prevalent feature of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope.

3.1.2 Similarities to the Manic Pixie Dream Girl

Before discussing the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope in relation to the character of Eleanor, it is important to introduce the archetype on its own. The term was coined in a movie review by Nathan Rabin, who described the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG) as existing “solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures”, giving examples of *Elizabethtown*’s Claire Colburn and *Garden State*’s Sam (2007). Subsequently, the description has been adapted into a trope, above all characterized by the character’s charming quirkiness (TV Tropes n.d.).

At the outset, it is noteworthy that there are certain traits that clearly set the protagonist of *55 Steps* apart from the stereotypical MPDG. Firstly, Eleanor Riese is a woman in her 40s, whereas the MPDG rarely exceeds her 20s (Gouck 2023, 534). Secondly, Eleanor’s character overtly deals with mental health struggles, while the MPDG does so only on a subtextual level (534). Thirdly, in opposition to the typical MPDG (TV Tropes n.d.), Eleanor’s close bond is neither of a romantic nature nor formed with a man. Yet, the similarities are distinct enough to impact the audience in a similar way.

Just like the MPDG, Eleanor exhibits a certain childlikeness (see section 2.1.1), manifesting in enthusiasm, vigor and optimism. Her unique way of thinking and moving about in the world portrays her as somewhere on a spectrum between peculiar and original. But even visually, she pays homage to the trope. Her hair is often disheveled, her clothes an unconventional mix. Her arts and crafts hobby as well as her music preferences are echoes of another era. All these characteristics are also to be found in the MPDG (TV Tropes n.d.; Fike 2022, 1; Gouck 2023, 528). Additionally, a rather inexplicable bond exists between the MPDG and her serious and grounded counterpart (TV Tropes n.d.). Notably though, Eleanor’s reason for making Colette’s acquaintance happens on a professional basis, which nevertheless still fails to explain the friendship Eleanor so stubbornly provokes.

While there are more problems attached to the trope of the MPDG, in the context of this analysis a few deserve particular emphasis. Criticisms of infantilizing the female character, potentially romanticizing mental health conditions (Gouck

2023, 534) and helplessness (528), creating idealized – almost mythical – expectations for women (Rodríguez 2017, 171), whose issues are expected to be part of their appeal (190), while devoid of a personality beyond their peculiarities (172-73) are inevitable connotations of the typical MPDG, also holding significance for Eleanor Riese's character. As Harini and Manasvini additionally note, these types of characterization form a common pattern in movies attempting to normalize mental illness even beyond the depiction of female characters (2023, 31).

3.1.3 The Wise Fool

Many of the stereotypical characteristics attributed to various mental illnesses in film and literature coincide with the archetype of the “wise fool”. Both are often considered “dull-witted”, “inarticulate”, childlike and ignorant of societal norms or propriety. These depictions also stand in contrast to the violent maniac and lead to the character gaining freedom of expression and the sympathy of the audience (Kaiser 2005, 516-17). Similarly, Eleanor Riese's character, through occasional serious conversations and unconventional interpretations of reality, appears to reveal a simple, but at the same time deeper truth about the world. Examples of this include the scene where Eleanor demands Colette to sue a religious institution, apparently oblivious to the inherent power dynamics, whereby she unknowingly hints at systemic issues (August 2017, 1:11:35-1:12:20) and the clip, where she leads Colette to admit her own insecurities and guides her towards a realization of self-worth (1:25:57-11:28:43). Depending on cultural context, the wise fool was sometimes thought to have a special relationship with God (Kaiser 2005, 517-19), possibly echoed in Eleanor's religiousness, manifesting in her devotion to crafting rosaries, but just as this sets the archetype apart from ordinary society, Eleanor as well is segregated by the same means.

3.1.4 Responsibility Towards Others

Eleanor's assistance, leading Colette toward an epiphany about a more fulfilling life, is also a testament to society's obsession with the usefulness and productivity of its members (Russell and Malhotra 2002, 223). While toxic productivity is the exact issue Colette is struggling with, the movie ultimately emphasizes Eleanor's value through the portrayal of her usefulness to the lives of others. This places expectations on the Schizophrenic and by extension on the person with mental health struggles in general. Similar to the archetype of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, the character exists as a catalyst for someone else's positive improvement, rather than being examined as an independent individual (Rabin 2014) and focuses her “*kuh-razy* antics [on her rational counterpart] until [they learn] to live freely and love madly” (TV Tropes n.d.). Even within a narrative that critiques the pressures of productivity in a capitalist society, its development implies that all individuals are expected to visibly contribute to the same system if they do not want to become commodities themselves (Russell and Malhotra 2002, 215). Consequently, this depiction further marginalizes those who are unable to correspond with those demands, potentially even rendering

them 'obsolete' within the existing mechanics of society as exemplified by Russell and Malhotra (213; 223).

3.1.5 The Look of Schizophrenia

3.1.5.1 Behaviour

Throughout the movie, Eleanor exhibits signs of motor dysfunction. This is later clarified to result from tardive dyskinesia caused by her medication (August 2017, 01:02:53-01:03:53). In an interview Helena Bonham Carter explained having done extensive research on Eleanor Riese's actual conditions and symptoms, further mentioning her distinctive gait (Carter 2018). Therefore, it seems important to examine the role of visually manifesting mental conditions on screen.

According to Cross, schizophrenics are considered to be easily identifiable due to their "strange" behavior (212), exemplified among others by convulsive movements (208). While for the audience it might be comforting to believe that potentially dangerous people can be distinguished by appearance or behavior (201), such portrayals foster a division, placing people with mental disabilities secluded from the rest of society (212-13). Expectations such as these can be recognized when people doubt someone else's mental health struggles upon entrustment because they are unable to perceive these in behavior or appearance, which constitutes a frequent experience for people with mental conditions (Zenga 2018, 57).

Involuntary contractions can also be linked to historical depictions of mania, which was often associated with tense body language (Karaim 2016, 8). This minor uncontrollable behavior can possibly be further translated into more large-scale societal implications, viewing people with mental conditions as animalistic and in need of restriction to uphold the desired order (Venkatesan and Saji 2019, 531).

A possible explanation for the development of this stereotype is offered by the following context. As has been demonstrated, movements described as characteristic of hysteria and epilepsy have been incorporated into cabaret performance culture in 19th-century France (Karaim 2016, 50; 52), and introduced to the US in 1911 (Vogel 2009, 39). They served a reclamation of labels tied to insanity, while simultaneously increasing awareness of the symptoms, using those to rebel against imposed norms and ideals. As underclass citizens and social outcasts, their activities caused unease among the aristocracy and, through their perception, became associated with madness, perversion, pathology and degeneracy (Karaim 2016, 51-52).

3.1.5.2 Appearance

Eleanor does not only exhibit visual behavioral clues of her condition, but her appearance sometimes conveys similar connotations. This paragraph returns to her, frequently, disheveled look, identified to be a visual cue indicating possible dangerousness of people with mental conditions (Cross 2004, 206), linking back to historical depictions of "insanity" in general (Karaim 2016, 7). These perceptions are also reflected in the creation of a binary of visual archetypes, representing mental illness as ugly and in opposition to the beauty of mental health (Venkatesan and Saji

2019, 530). Assumptions such as these have historically influenced medical research, manifesting in the pseudoscience of phrenology (Beveridge 2018, 281).

3.1.6 Obsessive-Compulsive Symptoms as Non-Standard Representation

In the film, Eleanor occasionally displays obsessive-compulsive symptoms. Multiple times the audience is made aware of the fact that Eleanor counts the steps of every staircase she walks (August 2017, 00:31:28; 00:36:08-00:37:22). Her dedication to the crafting of rosaries might be another manifestation of such symptoms. This obsessive-compulsive symptom stands out as a non-standard portrayal in relation to schizophrenia as it is more commonly associated with other conditions (Beyond OCD n.d.), despite being a possible feature of schizophrenia (Scotti-Muzzi and Saide 2018, 23).

3.1.7 Help-Seeking and Treatment Success

As Eleanor voluntarily admitted herself to the hospital to receive help regarding her mental condition, her character displays an acknowledgment of the situation and shows responsible decision-making. However, over the course of her hospital stay, she is stripped of her autonomy, faces gaslighting and a total disregard in terms of her desires and the detrimental side effects, she experiences (August 2017, 00:13:01-00:13:33). Thus, her search for professional help is not rewarded, but instead resembling punishment. According to another media review from 1999, depictions of efficient drug treatment were found in one of 400 movies (Owen 2012, 656). Pieper et al.'s research considers that negative portrayals such as these could potentially lead to a generalization of treatment as undesirable for people with mental illness and increase the associated stigma (2023, 9-10).

3.1.8 Character Death

In a study of 300 popular films from 2016 to 2022, it has been demonstrated that almost 40 % of people with mental health conditions died during the plot (Pieper et al. 2023, 9). Similarly, the main character of *55 Steps* is also shown to have died at the age of 47 in a scene after the main storyline has concluded (August 2017, 1:42:44-1:43:55), further perpetuating the idea that schizophrenia is not manageable and will inevitably lead to tragedy (Rabbit 2020, 4) and offering a final solution to a problematized mental illness that cannot be cured (Vesere 2020, 16-17), though the reasons for her premature death are clarified to have resulted from her medication in the epigraphical text before the end credits (August 2017, 1:47:49).

3.2 Connotative Representation of Involuntary Medication Practices Through Character Portrayal

As studies, analyzing public attitudes in Americans towards involuntary treatment, have shown, there are several qualities that tendentially cause support for mandatory medication. Importantly, acute psychotic conditions (Corrigan et al. 2003, 166) such

as schizophrenia are associated with a higher level of positive perception of mandatory treatment (Mossakowski et al. 2011, 206), due to notions of associated violent behavior (Corrigan et al. 2003, 166). Most noteworthy characteristics predicting support of involuntary medical interventions are perceived dangerousness and perceived responsibility for the condition (172; Luchins et al. 2004, 1058; Mossakowski et al. 2011, 207). It was further of significance whether a condition could be viewed as linked to bad character or genetics due to association with perceived dangerousness (209). It should be noted that the cited studies tested the impact of specific, pre-selected factors and are therefore inherently limited in their possible outcomes. The following sections will explore those characteristics in relation to their recognizability in the movie's portrayal of Eleanor.

3.2.1 Dangerousness and Violence

Perceived dangerousness was the most prominent feature, determining support of involuntary treatment throughout all three studies. Only a minimal difference could be determined in regards to whether the patients were perceived as dangerous to themselves or towards others (Mossakowski et al. 2011, 207). This finding could potentially be linked to certain media portrayals strongly implying an inevitable progression of harm directed at the self towards harm directed at others if mental conditions (exemplified by schizophrenia) remain untreated (Cross 2004, 209).

The movie *55 Steps* does not equate Eleanor's mental condition to behaviors of violence. While her character does partake in a physical conflict early in the film, showing her resisting medical staff, this is an act of self-protection in relation to her involuntary treatment (August 2017, 00:00:48-00:01:18), thereby portraying her not as a perpetrator but as the victim.

Furthermore, the stereotypical association between psychosis and dangerousness (Corrigan et al. 2003, 166) is challenged by the movie's depiction. The character's psychosis condition leaves Eleanor in need of reassurance and empathy rather than restriction. At one point in the movie, she calls Colette during a moment of psychosis, leading the lawyer to visit her and calm her fears. Eleanor is neither violent to herself nor someone else, she is rather shown in a state of panic and pain (August 2017, 00:55:20-00:58:45).

3.2.2 Condition Responsibility and Bad Character

Corrigan et al. indicate increased support for mandatory treatment if the person is considered responsible for their mental condition (2003, 172). Contextually this was most often specified as relating to substance abuse (Luchins et al. 2004, 1058), but there are other attributions to be considered.

In the narrative of the movie, Eleanor's mental illness is not the result of a controllable incident but is implied to result from childhood meningitis. Yet, the film underscores related stigma and religious attributions within society. After her psychosis, Eleanor tells Colette that in Catholic school she had been told that her seizures were the devil's doing and a sign of her bad character (August 2017;

00:57:34-00:58:03), a notion tendentially resulting in support for involuntary medication (Mossakowski et al. 2011, 209), but its association having marginally decreased between 1996 and 2006 (204). Yet, blaming people for their mental health condition remains a noteworthy microaggression (Barber et al. 2019, 7). The idea of possession or divine dispensation/punishment is a historically established one (Venkatesan 2019, 527), further informing modern-day prejudices (Mossakowski et al. 2011, 207). In the case of *55 Steps*, this consequently leads to self-stigma, which holds the possibility to promote internal distress (Fox et al. 2019, 7) as shown in the movie by Eleanor's fear of dying and not being allowed to enter heaven (August 2017, 00:56:04). By immediately addressing the medical reasons for the character's seizures (00:58:06), the movie dispels the myth of religious immorality as a cause and paints Eleanor as a victim of unjustified social prejudice.

3.2.3 Genetical Cause

Mossakowski et al. were able to conclude a connection between perceived genetically determined mental conditions and support for mandatory medical treatment. This phenomenon appears linked to underlying associations with dangerousness (2011, 209).

While schizophrenia can be linked to genetical factors (Escudero and Johnstone 2014, 1-2), the film suggests childhood meningitis as a cause (August 2017; 1:38:13-1:38:27) and furthermore shows Eleanor's mother as a capable person with good mental health (00:44:03-00:45:04). Thereby the film counteracts assumptions of inheritance or genetic predisposition for the character.

4 Conclusion

55 Steps' complex portrayal of Eleanor Riese as a character with schizophrenia challenges conventional prejudices and consistently critiques the practice of involuntary medication but still reveals reinforcement of certain harmful associations. While the movie does employ tropes and stereotypes surrounding mental illness, it often does so in a non-typical way. In fact, standard features of schizophrenia representations could rarely be determined but oftentimes were found to be subverted. Violence is experienced by Eleanor but does not result from her. Similarly, social stigmatization and victim blaming are portrayed as incorrect and negative. The movie additionally negates all examined characteristics leading to positive attitudes towards involuntary treatment, and by extension to a possibly detrimental effect, portraying treatment overall as undesirable as per section 2.1.7 of the paper. Yet, indirect characterization often indicates immaturity and lack of capability or agency, though such features should partially be understood to intersect with issues of misogyny (see section 2.1.2). This, on the one hand, highlights individual people's special needs but could, on the other hand, justify an overruling of the concerns of people with mental illness. Ultimately, the movie represents

schizophrenia in an empathy-evoking manner and involuntary treatment as detrimental, but under examination still highlights the need to dismantle societal attitudes and their implications.

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