



## Science of the Spirit

# ♥ Hollywood's Misrepresentation of Psychopathy

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Wall Street psychopath Gordan Gekko played by  
Michael Douglas

Conduct a search on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) under the keyword "psychopath" and 1,196 titles are returned. After taking a cursory glance over the list, which includes such titles as *M* (1931), *Peeping Tom* (1960), *Klute* (1971), *The Hitcher* (1986), *Se7en* (1995), *Drive* (2011), and the soon-to-be-released *Seven Psychopaths* (2012), it is obvious that Hollywood, let alone the general public, has any real understanding of what constitutes psychopathic behavior. And if this short list of associated titles fails to prove this point, all one has to do is look at the top keywords, which include murder (798 instances), violence (445), death (348), gore (244), blood spatter (237), knife (233), and corpse (231), for confirmation.

Although it is true that "psychopaths probably commit more non-sanctioned violence than any other members of society" and that they "are more likely than other murderers to commit gratuitous and sadistic violence on their victims during sexual homicide," there exist far more non-violent "successful" psychopaths living in society than violent and incarcerated ones (Porter & Woodworth, 2007, p. 490). As one author explains, "most serial killers are psychopaths or at least exhibit psychopathic characteristics, (and yet) the majority of criminal psychopaths are nonviolent persons" (Hickey, 2010, p. 75). In fact, these "subclinical," white collar psychopaths have "normal" professions. They are lawyers, doctors, psychiatrists, academics, corporate managers, bankers, and more (Hare, 1993).

Psychopaths are relatively rare in modern society: only 1% of the population have this personality disorder. To break it down, it is said that 1 in every 200 persons in the U.K. is psychopathic, and 1 in every 100 Americans is (Purdie, 2000). The media may commonly portray psychopaths as maniacally laughing, mentally deranged people, and yet these people are not legally insane. They know right from wrong, can control their behavior, and are aware of the consequences of their actions, but because they are self-absorbed, impulsive, and callous they choose to do whatever best suits their needs (Hare, 1993). And because they do not empathize with others or experience fear, they are more likely to break the law. "Telling a psychopath that he will go to prison if he acts out only means that he understands the rules of the game and games are meant to be won, not lost" (Hickey, 2010, p. 80).

The term psychopath dates to 1891 and to a monograph written by J.L.A. Koch titled *Die Psychopathischen Minderwertigkeiten* (Hickey, 2010). The word, which comes from the Greek,

translates, literally, to mind (psyche) disease (pathos), and, has often been interchanged with another term, sociopath, however, those with these antisocial disorders are very different individuals. At the risk of oversimplification, the psychopath is born; the sociopath is made. As is evidenced by the IMDB search, the words sociopath and psychopath have entered public consciousness and they are used regularly. That does not, however, mean that they are used correctly. "People often confuse the popular label *psycho* with *psychopath* when actually the terms carry different meanings for practitioners ... Far more appropriate is applying the term psychopath, or from the DSM perspective, the killer is antisocial" (Hickey, 2010, p. 75).

In his tome *The Mask of Sanity* (1976) [Editor's note: Cleckley's work was first published in 1941], Hervey Cleckley outlined 16 characteristics of psychopaths. Drawing upon Cleckley's work, four years later, Dr. Robert D. Hare created his own diagnostic tool, the Psychopathy Checklist, which he then revised in 1985. Renamed the *Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised*, also as *PCL-R*, this industry-standard diagnostic tool uses a 40-point scale to determine how psychopathic an offender who is residing in an institutional or community correctional facility, a forensic psychiatric hospital, or a pre-trial evaluation or detention facility actually is. Factor 1 on the "test" "measures a selfish, callous, and remorseless use of others" while Factor 2 "measures social deviance, as manifest in a chronically unstable and antisocial lifestyle" (Hickey, 2010, p. 78). Some of the traits associated with someone who is deemed psychopathic are: glibness/superficial charm, narcissism, pathological lying, conning and manipulative behavior, lack of remorse or guilt, shallow affect, lack of empathy, failure to accept responsibility for one's actions, impulsivity, irresponsibility, juvenile delinquency, lack of realistic, long-term goals; parasitic lifestyle, proneness to boredom, promiscuous, criminal versatility, and short-lived relationships (Hickey, 2010). Those being assessed earn a point for each characteristic. A "normal" person will score about 5 points; someone deemed psychopathic will score above 26. A score of 40 is very rare.

True crime aficionados can probably name a handful of incarcerated psychopaths - Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, Gary Gilmore, and Dennis Radar (BTK) being the most notorious - but they would probably draw a blank when asked to name a psychopath who was not also a serial killer. (Not surprisingly, the majority of the films and TV shows containing a psychopath are categorized in the thrillers and horror genres.) Experts suspect that many of history's biggest names "had the 'talent' for psychopathy but ... did not develop the full syndrome." Some of the people included on this list include Winston Churchill, Sir Richard Burton, Chuck Yeager, and Lyndon Johnson. Oskar Schindler, the subject of Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List*, can be found on this list (Lykken, 2007, pp. 11-12).<sup>[1]</sup> In addition, O.J. Simpson, who is narcissistic, glib/superficially charming, grandiose, impulsive, anti-social, and abusive, demonstrates many psychopathic characters, and, according to Prof. Adrian Raine, exhibited many of the characteristics that would have pointed to him as becoming a "cold-blooded killer" (Purdie, 2000).

Some might consider Adolf Hitler to be the poster child of psychopathy, and yet, whenever he has been put under the psychiatric microscope, he is rarely, if ever, given that diagnosis. In *The Medical Casebook of Adolf Hitler* (1979), authors Leonard L. Heston and Renate Heston postulated that the Fuhrer could have been suffering from amphetamine toxicity and could also have been manic-depressive or schizoid (Heston, 1979). In a 2007 study, "Understanding Madmen: A DSM-IV Assessment of Adolf Hitler," the authors suggest that Hitler was probably a paranoid schizophrenic (Coolidge, David & Segal, 2007). So if Hitler was not a psychopath, how about his closest associates, men such as his chief architect Albert Speer, his deputy Rudolf Hess, and his Gestapo *meister* Hermann Goring? These individuals and 18 other high-ranking Nazis underwent psychological assessment before the Nuremberg trials. As it is explained in *The Quest for the Nazi Personality: A Psychological Investigation of Nazi War Criminals* (1995), when those involved in Hitler's regime were examined, it was discovered that "most ... were not the swaggering sadists of the 'B' movie genre, but stultifyingly ordinary men who were just doing their jobs or 'following orders.'" The term coined for this

is the "banality of evil." Furthermore, "No contemporary historian of Nazi Germany would argue for the existence of a psychopathic Nazi personality ... the leaders were extremely able, intelligent, high-functioning people" (Zillmer, Harrower, Ritzler, & Archer, 1995, p. 8). In fact, the only real commonality seen amongst those in Hitler's cadre is that most had above average to very superior intelligence. Seventeen of the 21 men awaiting the Nuremberg trials had IQs in the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile and higher.<sup>[2]</sup> The most remarkable of the group: Hjalmar Schacht, Hitler's finance minister, and Arthur Seyss-Inquart, governor to occupied Poland, Austria and the Netherlands, had, respectively, estimated IQs of 143, which is in the 99.8<sup>th</sup> percentile, and 141, which is in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile (Zillmer, Harrower, Ritzler, & Archer, 1995). Without a doubt, Hollywood films depicting caricatured villains will sell more tickets than will ones that are more realistic; portraying history's "bad guys" as ordinary, yet banal, pen-pushing bureaucrats.

The majority of psychopaths are, as it has been said, not moustache-twirling serial killers, but are, at least on the surface, seemingly "normal" people working in the white-collar world.<sup>[3]</sup> What makes them different from their incarcerated counterparts? They simply manage to keep up a better, and more consistent, veneer of normalcy. This is not to say that they are benign. Quite the contrary. "These individuals are every bit as egocentric, callous, and manipulative as the average criminal psychopath; however, their intelligence, family background, social skills, and circumstances permit them to construct a façade of normalcy" (Hare, 1993, p. 113). Consummate actors, they come off as charming, self-assured, knowledgeable, and trustworthy. They are good imposters, and because these professions give them easy access to vulnerable people, they often pose as financial consultants, ministers, counselors, doctors, and psychologists (Hare, 1993). Adept at convincing others to trust them in so many ways, they swindle people out of their pension funds, vacation homes, and stock certificates. It is not surprising to discover that psychologists have labeled former Enron executives and corporate frauds Kenneth Lay and Andrew Fastow (Hall & Benning, 2007), and Bernard Madoff, a man accused of orchestrating a \$50 billion Ponzi scheme, as psychopaths (Kluger, 2008).

Returning to the issue of psychopaths and film and/or TV, Hollywood seems to be more accurate in depicting the white-collar variety. Hall and Benning single out a few "colorful" examples, including Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas), the ruthless corporate raider in Oliver Stone's 1987 film *Wall Street* and its 2010 sequel *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*; J.R. Ewing (Larry Hagman), the Southfork ranch-inhabiting oil magnate of TV's *Dallas*, which was a must-watch staple during the 1970s and 1980s; and even Alan Shore (James Spader), a highly skilled but unethical lawyer on TV's *Boston Legal* (2004-2008) "... Shore, Ewing, and Gekko are all able to achieve great material and professional successes while avoiding (for the most part) serious antisocial behavior" (Hall & Benning, 2007, p. 461).

Another chilling portrait of a corporate psychopath can be found in J.C. Chandor's *Margin Call* (2011). Inspired by the true story of the 2008 financial crisis, it is a tale of greed, narcissism, and unethical business practices at an investment bank, which is loosely modeled on Lehmann Brothers. No one in the film so clearly embodies the ruthless, me-first and callous attitude of a psychopath than the character of John Tuld (Jeremy Irons), the chief executive who must decide how to avert a major financial debacle. At a board room meeting, even after he is apprised of the impending crisis by his long-time manager, Sam Rogers (Kevin Spacey), who warns "if you do this, you will kill the market for years. It's over. And you're selling something that you know has no value." - Tuld's matter-of-fact reply is "We are selling to willing buyers, at a current, fair market price, so that we may survive." "You will never sell anything to any of those people ever again." "I understand." "Do you?" "Do YOU," Tuld asks sharply. "This is it. I'm telling you, this is it." Later, while enjoying his meal in a dining room for senior executives, he, again, downplays the decision he has made: "It's just money. It's made up. Pieces of paper with pictures on it, so we don't have to kill each other just to get something to eat. It's not wrong, and it's certainly no different today than it has ever been" (Chandor, 2011). In these two short scenes,

Tuld demonstrates his willingness to lie and manipulate others, he exhibits an appalling lack of remorse or empathy ("it's just money"), and he downplays his company's responsibility in the impending crisis. Laughing and calmly eating one's dinner while Rome burns, so to speak, are clearly not the actions of a "normal" person.

With so many Hollywood films and TV shows misrepresenting and sensationalizing psychopathy, it is no wonder that the general public simply labels anyone who acts in a violent manner as crazy or, more commonly, psycho. "Good" examples of characters suffering from this personality disorder exist - Hare singles out *The Bad Seed* (1956) and Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) as two examples - but more often than not, they are simply distortions.<sup>[4]</sup> In *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us*, Hare explains that since the Oscar winning film *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) came out, reporters have queried him about whether or not Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), the cultured psychiatrist with a penchant for cannibalism, is representative of a psychopath. His reply could be said of most "psychopathic" characters on the big and small screen:

... portrayals that focus on grotesque and sadistic killers such as Lecter gave the public a distorted view of the disorder. In most instances, it is egocentricity, whim, and the promise of instant gratification for more commonplace needs, not the drooling satisfaction of bizarre power trips and sexual hungers, that motivate the psychopath to break the law (Hare, 1993, p. 74).

*Julien R. Fielding reviews films. Many of the reviews can be read here on Fielding on Film. She has also written a book, Discovering World Religions at 24 Frames Per Second.*

## References

[1] When it comes to presenting a "true" portrait of Schindler, Spielberg's film contains some vital inaccuracies. For instance, when the character breaks down at the end of the film and cries ... he never actually did that. To read more about this, see David Gritten's article, "The 'Schindler' everyone forgot about - until now: A decade ago, Jon Blair's documentary won a British Academy Award," which ran Feb. 27, 1994, in the *Los Angeles Times*. It can be found online [here](#).

[2] Interestingly, in their article Psychopathy and Aggression, which appears in the *Handbook of Psychopathy*, Porter and Woodworth explain that some studies have indicated that the more intelligent a psychopath is, the less likely he is to use violence. Instead he will rely on manipulation to get what he wants. Because he fails to use violence, he is also less likely to find himself in prison.

[3] Even though researchers know about the existence of "noncriminal psychopaths," they have not had much opportunity to study them. As Hall and Benning explain "the identification and recruitment of psychopaths from the general population have presented an ongoing challenge, given the presumably low baserates of the disorder in non-institutional settings." Because most of the psychopaths studied have resided in prison, it is difficult to determine how closely their non-institutionalized counterparts compare.

[4] No one has said whether or not the lead characters, who are based on real people, in the Steven Spielberg directed, Leonardo diCaprio acted *Catch Me If You* (2002) and the Jim Carrey vehicle *I Love You Phillip Morris* (2009) are psychopaths, but they certainly exhibit many of the characteristics of the subclinical type. Frank Abagnale Jr. successfully conned millions of dollars worth of checks posing as a Pan Am pilot, doctor, and legal prosecutor; and Steven Russell, the subject of *I Love You*, had a varied criminal history and, because of his Houdini-like ability to escape from prison is now serving a 114-year sentence in solitary confinement. For more about Russell, see Elizabeth Day's 2009 [profile](#) of

him that ran in *The Observer*. Unlike Russell, Abagdale went legitimate, joining the FBI and now lecturing and consulting on the subject of forgery, embezzlement, and secure documents. His web site is [here](#).

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