

THE REPRESENTATION OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE MEDIA:  
THE USE OF THE NATURE DOCUMENTARY

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Bethany Leach, my oldest and best friend, who inspired the subject matter of this paper and my film. She opened my eyes to mental health issues and the benefits of the outdoors, and started my personal conversation with mental illness.

This is also dedicated to my grandmother Alice Curtis, who inspired me to never, ever give up, under any circumstance. And to both my parents Tim Huetter and Sandy Curtis, who supported and encouraged me during my schooling.

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## ABSTRACT

The misrepresentation of mental illness in the media has been the norm for the last sixty years. Mental illness in film and television is portrayed as dangerous and criminal. The representations shifted to show weakness and vulnerability rather than criminality, yet these depictions still resulted in stigmatization for the mentally ill audience. Documentary filmmakers within the last decade have attempted to tackle the subject of depression and other mental health issues and provided facts and science about the illness. These films were not aimed towards mentally ill audiences; they instead attempted to educate and inform the audiences that had preconceived notions about mental illness. Although good in intention, there was still a lack of representation for authentic and honest characters on screen with mental illness. This paper argues that the form of the nature documentary is the ideal backdrop to represent mental health issues. Nature documentaries demonstrate the science behind why we feel happy while we are outside; what happens in our brain chemistry that makes us feel so good and at peace. My thesis film *Out of the Woods* borrows elements from the nature documentary and showcases real women on screen with mental illness, in order to increase its visibility to the public eye, without triggering the viewer into reacting to a prepossessed stigma of mental illness from earlier media representations.

## INTRODUCTION

Mass media holds the power to shape a person's perspective and understanding of any given subject. The visual medium of film and television wields its cinematic power to influence audiences across the world on significant topics including racial groups and gender roles (Diefenbach and West 118). Today, every possible form of media is at our fingertips, reachable through streaming sites, cable access, and social media applications. The media informs viewers on what products to buy, which politician to support, and what ideals should be practiced. Some of these media persuasions steer audiences in the right direction – other representations grossly mislead its audiences. This paper focuses on one particular subject that is poorly represented in the media.

Mental illness has a historically dark and negative portrayal. The last sixty years of film and television skewed the general public's view of mental illness towards fear, danger, and hate. Hollywood cinema depicts those suffering from mental illnesses (i.e. depression, PTSD, schizophrenia) as a threat to society, often possessing suicidal and/or homicidal tendencies (Diefenbach and West 182). One example is the primetime crime drama (i.e. *Law and Order*, *Criminal Minds*), where the criminal suffers from a mental illness (Diefenbach and West 184). This stigma caused thousands of people suffering from mental illness to keep it hidden, from fear of being judged or punished (Klin and Lemish 434). The fear of the mentally ill does more harm than good, and if there is to be an acceptance and understanding of mental illness, there has to be a change in its media representation.

This paper will outline the history of the representation of mental illness in Hollywood cinema, and discuss present-day representations of mental illness. I will then discuss the history of the documentary form, its evolution through the years, and the nonfiction medium's current efforts to combat the negative representation of mental illness. I will analyze the documentaries *Depression: Out of the Shadows* (2008), *The Truth About Depression* (2013), and *My Depression: The Up and Down and Up of It* (2014), discuss the positive and negative outcomes audiences receive from these films, and how these films are geared towards an audience that generally does not have previous experience with mental illness. I will then explore how one sub-genre of film, the nature documentary, can present a positive representation of mental illness and engage viewers both with and without mental illness.

The goal of this paper is to argue that the nature documentary can create a paradigm shift in how we view mental illness, through the presentation of science in relation to the self and the outdoors. The mode of the nature documentary sets the stage for the discussion of mental illness, which will diminish the negative stereotypes and stigmas and help to generate inclusivity between the general public and those with mental illnesses. This will then ultimately lead to a better understanding on the subject. The documentary films *Happy* (2011), *Nature RX* (2015), and my MFA thesis film, *Out of the Woods* (2019), will serve as case studies to support the claim of the nature fix.

## HOLLYWOOD REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Early representations of mental illness in Hollywood cinema have reflected societal tendencies to stigmatize and shun people with mental illness. Since the 1940s, popular films influenced the public perception of mental illnesses, health care, and mental institutions. The 1975 film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* dramatized the horrors that can occur in mental institutions if one does not conform to the rules and regulations of the administration (Wilkinson 1). Jack Nicholson's R.P. McMurphy is a rebellious patient who tries to overthrow the emasculating head nurse. His attempts are thwarted, and he faces the ultimate punishment: a lobotomy. The film demonizes mental institutions and creates the misconception that patients are akin to prisoners. Psychologists conducted studies to see if there was an attitude shift after viewing the film. On one side, many viewers came to the conclusion that electro-shock therapy is unethical and outdated (Wilkinson 2); on the other, however, viewers adapted a more negative attitude towards the mentally ill, due to their violent portrayal inside the psychiatric ward (Anderson 299).

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a prime example of a poor representation of mental institutions. The film leads viewers to believe that they are harmful for society, when in reality they help keep the mentally ill off the streets, and out of prisons or other federal institutions. According to an article by the National Public Radio, there has been a steady decrease of psychiatric hospitals since the 1960s, which has disrupted the health care system and made it hard for psychiatric patients to receive the help they need (Raphelson, npr.org). The American Medical Association's Journal of Ethics writer Daniel Yohanna, M.D. claims the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric hospitals occurred

for three reasons: a societal belief that they were cruel and inhumane, a rise in pharmaceuticals claiming to effectively treat mental illness, and as a way to save money (886). Media representations have a heavy hand in guiding societal norms, and the portrayals displayed in films such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* played a key part in shaping society's distaste for mental institutions.

The horror genre generates tremendous fear around mental illness. The term "serial killer" was not yet in the vernacular of the common American in the 1960s and early '70s. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) sparked a wave of gruesome portrayals of psychotic killers who killed for no reason and killed repeatedly, controlled by something dark in their mind (Wahl 56). People fear what they do not know, and this serial, maniacal killer was a new concept. The conclusion of *Psycho* features Norman Bates thinking in the voice of his mother, which reveals that he adopted her personality as one of his own. This malevolent portrayal is one of the first cinematic stigmatizations of schizophrenia (Wahl 56). The "slasher" films of the '70s and '80s followed *Psycho* and adopted the motif that the deranged serial killer has a dangerous mental illness. The connection of mental illness and violence far exceeds the actual data on the subject. According to the World Health Organization, one in four people will be affected with a mental disorder in their lifetime. By "slasher" film logic, a quarter of the population is prone to violent crimes, due to their mental illness. The reality, however, is less than fourteen percent of people with mental illness are reported as violent or criminal (Klin and Lemish 438), meaning less than half percent of the population are deemed dangerous.

Representations of mental illness don't begin and end with the mentally ill person. Therapists, psychiatrists, and other medical professionals are represented using largely negative stereotypes. Wedding and Niemiec exemplify these stereotypes as "cold-hearted and authoritarian" (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*), "shrewd and manipulative" (*Basic Instinct*), and "seductive and unethical" (*Mr. Jones*) (209). Psychiatrists can arguably do more evil than the mentally ill in these representations. It is common throughout cinema for a male psychiatrist to have an affair with his patient, and a female psychiatrist to be portrayed as cold and incapable of love (Klin and Lemish 439). The rippling effect of these unsavory portrayals is the audience's unwillingness to seek out professional help. According to Klin and Lemish, only 20-35% of the mentally ill choose to receive professional help (435).

Hollywood cinema is saturated with representations of obscure mental disorders, which provides the false notion that these disorders are more frequent in everyday society than they actually are. For example, Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of an autistic savant in *Rain Man* (1988) is a positive representation of autism, yet less than 10% of those with autism are savants (Wedding and Niemiec 2003). Alternatively, the most common mental disorders are rarely mentioned in popular films. Depression is the most frequently diagnosed disorder in the United States (who.int). The few occurrences of depression in Hollywood cinema often portray these characters as suicidal. Suicide can be a dangerous result of depression, but it can also be avoided. Current narratives in the media neglect to present strategies for therapy and treatment for those with depression. One example is the film *The Hours* (2002).

*The Hours* dramatizes the depression and suicide of Virginia Woolf, and the women who base their lives around Woolf's book, *Mrs. Dalloway*. The narrative weaves through time as it transcends across 1940s England, 1950s America, and modern New York. Woolf's suicide occurs within the film's first three minutes and sets the tone for the rest of the movie. The three main characters are introduced: Laura, a California housewife in the 1950s, Clarissa, a privileged New Yorker in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and Virginia, twenty years before her death at her home in Richmond, England. All three of these women are lying in bed, either asleep or struggling to wake. An overwhelming sense of despair perpetuates through the film as the narrative weaves from one woman to the next, touching on subjects of sickness, suicide, longing, family relations, and depression. It is important to note that depression is never explicitly stated in the film. It is merely implied that these women are depressed.

Reviews for this film were mixed, and one author believes that this is attributed to the discomfort that can occur when discussing suicide and depression (Wiener 161). The criticisms of displeasure were met with reviews of praise for finally representing women with depression (Wiener 161). Near the end of the film, Virginia's husband asks her why someone must die in her books. Virginia, played by Nicole Kidman, responds, "someone has to die in order for the rest of us to value life more. It's contrast." This line comes almost directly after the suicide of Richard, friend and ex lover of Clarissa, and Laura's son whom she abandoned in the '50s. Virginia's statement about death mirrors the feelings of both herself and Richard, in that their suicide will actually help their loved ones, because they assume their depression is holding their loved ones back from living

happy, full lives. Richard, right before he jumps out of the window, says to Clarissa, “I don’t think two people could have been happier than we have been,” which is exactly what Virginia wrote in her suicide note to her husband. This film alludes heavily to depression and mental illness, yet it is never explicitly stated on screen, and therefore does not delve into strategies to cope with depression and alleviate those feelings of despair. It instead poeticizes depression and romanticizes suicide. The poetic qualities of depression are attributed mainly to the camera work in the film. The extreme close ups of the women in almost every scene, as they discuss their feelings of despair or respond to others around them, helps to solidify their troubled state to the audience. Richard and Virginia’s views on life and death produce themes of romanticizing death and suicide, which misrepresents mental illness as weak and vulnerable, instead of something that can be treated or mitigated.

The crime-based dramas in American television gave audiences a consistent representation of mental illness, but with tremendously negative effects. In 2013, eleven of the top-rated twenty-five U.S. television titles were crime-based dramas. Shows such as *Law and Order*, *NCIS*, and *Criminal Minds* all follow the same general formula: someone commits a crime and law enforcement tracks the criminal down. The crime is often sensationalized; for example, the sixth episode of *Criminal Minds: Suspect Behavior* (2011), “Devotion,” follows a man who drives cross-country with a woman, attacks and lynches men along the way, and forces the woman to watch them die. FBI agents, investigating his motel room, notice his poor attempt at concealing the windows, and immediately deem it a symptom of paranoid schizophrenia. Agent Mick Rawson,

played by Matt Ryan, exclaims, “Oh great! His reasons subverted by his own crazy internal agenda.” A few minutes later, it is discovered that the woman he travels with is actually dead, but he acts as if she is still alive. This piece of information solidifies his schizophrenic state to the FBI. Later, the FBI uncovers his identity, and reveals that he lost his job because he heard voices inside his head. The reason for his violent acts against random men is because his father abandoned him and his sister due to his mental illness. His sister committed suicide by hanging, and he brings her corpse to his killings and makes her “watch” his murders, as if he is murdering their father.

It is troubling that the FBI agents immediately jump to the conclusion of schizophrenia based off such little evidence, and Agent Beth Griffith, played by Janeane Garofalo, even mentions that she shouldn't say this without a proper clinical evaluation. This episode's portrayal of schizophrenia is but one example in the crime drama genre. Studies from 1989, 1994, and 2007 all yielded the result that characters with mental illness in television are ten to twenty times more violent than those with mental illness in the U.S. population (Parrott and Parrott 643). However, due to the popularity of the crime drama genre, audiences are consuming this stigmatized representation of the mentally ill in large quantities.

Science communicators Drs. Scott and Caroline Parrott discuss the “cultivation theory,” which claims that there is a correlation between the amount of television consumption and how the real world is viewed (642). This means that the more we see a murderer suffering from a mental disorder, the more we will believe the mentally ill are violent and should be avoided. According to Parrott and Parrott, this will trickle down

into real-life scenarios, such as discrimination when it comes to employment, housing, and social situations (641). Additionally, a person with a mental disorder will view these negative stereotypes and will be unwilling to seek out treatment or help, due to fear of being stigmatized as crazy or manic (641). Although these studies prove that this representation is skewed and misleading, the power of the media is so great that audiences still consume these negative representations.

The increase in networks and content in today's interface allows for more positive representations of mental illness. Online streaming services that produce original content have more freedom to be outspoken because they do not adhere to advertisement spots and censorship boundaries like their cable network predecessors (Auletta 54). Netflix, the pioneer for original streaming content, approaches the subject of mental illness in a few of its original shows — some positive, some not. *Atypical* (2017-), is a show about an eighteen-year-old boy with autism, going through his senior year of high school. The show's first season received backlash because the actor who plays the protagonist, Keir Gilchrist, is not on the spectrum, and neither are any of the show's writers (Rubinoff, 1). However, in his review, Rubinoff defends the show and says that the overall portrayal of Keir's character, Sam, is positive because he has a support system, and the show aims to normalize this frequently diagnosed neurological disorder (1). Rubinoff continues to argue that the show isn't meant for an autistic audience, but is instead for those who don't know much about the disorder, and is a good way to educate and show that those on the spectrum are sympathetic and relatable (2). Rubinoff asserts that the show is a positive

representation because it aims to educate the layman on a disorder he or she might not know much about.

*Atypical* responded to the negative criticism in their second season, which premiered in September 2018. Sam attends a support group for teens on the spectrum, and the show cast real kids on the spectrum in the hopes to showcase different cases of autism and represent the diversity. This helps to prove to the critics that the show does not recognize autism as just Sam's representation of a quirky, smart, yet socially awkward autistic kid. These claims assert that *Atypical* is a step in the right direction for a positive representation of mental illness.

Another standout Netflix original is *13 Reasons Why*, which premiered in 2017 and currently has completed two seasons. The show centers on the suicide of Hannah Baker, who left behind tape recordings explaining her actions. Each tape focuses on one of her classmates and discusses their role in her eventual personal destruction. The show does not shy away from the harsh subject matter of rape and suicide and graphically showcases these scenes on screen. *13 Reasons Why* is extremely successful on an entertainment platform, because it embodies a mystery genre through its suspenseful action and numerous cliffhangers. However, from a critical standpoint, Florida State University's English professor Patrick Osborne argues that the show does more harm than good, and romanticizes suicide (2). Hannah puts blame on everyone but herself for her suicide, and according to Osborne, psychiatrists began to see a rise in suicide attempts in which a real person attempted suicide and claimed to be emulating the fictional character Hannah Baker (2). This led to a media response from Netflix who made sure

that in their second season, they issue a disclaimer at the beginning of the show, followed by a suicide hotline number and the website [13reasonswhy.info](http://13reasonswhy.info). The actors and actresses on the show presented the disclaimer, which reasserted that the content is fiction and their characters aren't real ([nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com)). Both *13 Reasons Why* and *Atypical* showcase mental illness in a realistic manner, yet they still sensationalize these disorders for the sake of entertainment.

## DEPRESSION IN NONFICTION FILM

Since the introduction of cinema, documentary filmmakers worked to inform the public on matters ranging from socio-economic issues at home to exotic cultures afar. These filmmakers from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century presented their films with a “voice of God” narration: an omniscient and all-knowing voice that steered the direction of the film and delivered the alleged truth. Film critic and theoretician Bill Nichols calls this the “expository mode” and it paralleled the mass media’s hegemon to showcase an idealized world (Nichols 107). It wasn’t until the 1960s that filmmakers began exploring a new mode of documentary storytelling, which allowed them to film a subject as if they were a “fly on the wall,” without any direct interference or voice from the filmmaker (Nichols 110). However, this mode did not fully emancipate the filmmaker from the subject as Bill Nichols describes. The filmmaker still claims authorship in the observational mode, because the filmmaker deliberately decides what to show on the screen, and has control over how the scene is edited, which can sway viewers to think one way or the other.

One prominent filmmaker during this movement was Frederick Wiseman, who gave audiences an inside look into various institutions through his films. Wiseman’s *Titicut Follies* (1967) showcases the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Bridgewater, a hospital for the criminally insane. Eight years preceding *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the documentary provides an inside, unaltered look into the goings-on of this facility. In their book, Spence and Navarro mention that none of the scenes seemed to be staged because the people in front of the camera appeared “oblivious to the

presence of the camera, and, by extension, to the spectators as well” (68). This film demonstrates, however, that this “direct cinema,” or observational approach is not free from the filmmaker’s guidance. The use of editing in one particular scene helps instigate a strong critique against this institution. Wiseman cuts between two scenes, one in the present and one in the future. He shows a patient being force-fed food through a tube, and intercuts this scene with shots of his corpse. This scene jars the audience out of the purely observational mode, and the audience realizes that the editing is consciously reinforcing that the film does contain a voice of authority: Frederick Wiseman (Spence and Navarro 68).

The observational mode led to new techniques to present the truth as real and as authentic as possible. Filmmakers began to participate in their documentaries and break down the fourth wall between the audience and the camera, and turned the medium on itself (Nichols 116). This allowed the audience to recognize exactly who is telling the film, and from what point of view the subject is presented. Filmmakers Michael Moore and Werner Herzog are famous for lending their voice to the narration and appearing in front of the camera, to guide the viewers through their own knowledge and expertise. Be it this participatory style, poetic, or expository approach, the best mode and method a filmmaker uses depends highly on the subject at hand. Each subject has its own unique way to visually represent its truth, and filmmakers must uncover the most ethical and effective way to visually tell the story. For example, filmmaker Ari Folman animated his biographical film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) in order to best represent his memory of the

Lebanon War and to revisit places of the past. Animation was the most successful way he could reveal his personal truth to the audience.

The best mode and method for revealing the truth of a subject is not always intuitive, particularly with the subject of mental illness. Documentary filmmakers have broached the subject and have made a wide variety of films that use completely different strategies from one another. The mood disorder depression has increased its visibility in non-fiction films over the last decade. These films not only educated the general public on depression, but also helped to cease the silence that surrounded it. Filmmakers positioned depression center stage for discussion and deliberation, through the outlets of PBS, the BBC, and HBO.

In 2008, the Public Broadcasting Service produced a program called *Depression: Out of the Shadows* (2008) to share real accounts of people with depression. This feature-length presentation begins with dark images of unknown places, and a tearful voice describes her sorrows and personal experiences of depression. The owner of the voice is revealed: she stands in an empty hallway and reads from a journal. She looks off-camera to the assumed filmmaker and says, "I'm scared." A new sequence of dark imagery begins, and a new voice-over describes what it is like to have depression. The narrations from multiple interviews weave together to create a concrete dialogue on depression. This introduces each character in the film: a scientist studying brain activity, an author and a college student experiencing depression, and a psychologist discussing various treatments. Together, they describe what it is like to have depression, the causes, the

treatments, and the science behind brain activity. The film is packed full of information and educates the audience about the illness.

Despite the copious amounts of important information on causes, treatments, and medical science, this documentary still creates a separation between the subject and the viewer. This is due to the extensive use of the objective expository mode. An unknown narrator helps guide the viewer through the film. There are voice-over interviews that help create subjectivity, yet they are often paired with live-action re-enactments. Bill Nichols argues that reenactments in documentary run the risk of losing credibility (2008, 72). This indexical relationship between the image and the historical referent is fractured, because the director is the one creating these scenes, not the subject. This aids in the removal of subjectivity in the film.

The British Broadcasting Corporation produced a similar program in 2013 called *The Truth About Depression*. It is common in BBC productions to use a presenter on screen to guide the viewer through the material, as demonstrated in *Planet Earth* (2006) with Sir David Attenborough. This is their more intimate version of the expository mode. Stephen Nolan presents *The Truth About Depression*, and investigates the mental illness and neuroscience. He guides the audience through the subject matter, and engages in conversation with the camera and asks direct questions. This helps to capture the audience's interest because the audience can attach a face to the narration, and engage in a conversation of sorts with the film. This indexical relationship between the image and the information adds credibility to the film and content. Nolan explores neuroscience and talks with scientists to compare brain scans of those with depression to those without.

The intensely scientific matter is easier to comprehend due to Nolan's presence. He asks the questions the audience is thinking and reiterates the science in a more understandable discourse. This film is one step closer to securing an ethical and effective approach to the subject of depression.

Although more direct and conversational, *The Truth About Depression* is still not as approachable and entertaining for a wide audience. It reads more like a presenter giving a lesson, and its long format can lose the audience's attention. It is, however, a step in the right direction towards a more factual representation for depression.

In 2014, the Home Box Office produced a short, animated documentary called *My Depression: The Up and Down and Up of It*, written and directed by Elizabeth Swados. The film chronicles Swados' personal accounts of depression and her path towards acceptance and communication. The film begins with a redheaded animated character on screen, who says, "I've been wanting to talk about this for a long time. It hasn't been easy, and a lot of people don't really know much about it, but I think it could be helpful to learn what people go through. So let me tell you what I deal with when I experience depression" (Swados 2014). This introduction, delivered in the first person and directly to the audience, immediately begins the conversation of depression. Swados speaks autobiographically, through the voice of Sigourney Weaver, and recounts her depression and her road to wellness. Swados' use of animation allows her to visually represent what depression can actually feel like. A black raincloud constantly follows her character and acts as a visual representation of her depression. In one scene, she lies on her bed, and a massive black hole erupts from the sheets and sucks her down into an abyss. Viewers are

able to immerse themselves into her depression and emulate her feelings of despair, and later in the film, her feelings of acceptance. Swados produced a visually engaging documentary that turned a taboo topic into something more accessible and understandable.

These three documentaries on depression, all different in design, accomplish a similar goal. They provide facts on depression, deliver scientific research, and offer steps on how to cope with depression. The use of animation, a presenter, and interviews are all constructions to address depression and effectively educate the audience on the subject. However, these documentaries are generally geared toward an audience that didn't know much about mental illness before viewing. The stigma starts to break down, and audiences begin to see how much more normal depression and other mental illnesses are, but they don't leave these films wanting more – there's no real call to action. Mental illness must be visually represented in a way that will allow the audience to discuss the subject further, which will lead to complete inclusivity and acceptance amongst the self and the community.

The form of the nature documentary accomplishes this. Nature documentaries expose audiences to awe-inspiring natural landscapes, ecosystems near and far, and communities that live connected to nature. These films work to remind the audience that they are themselves a part of nature, and not merely a voyeur on another world. These documentaries are also beginning to explain the science behind why we may feel happier or healthier while we're outside. All of these elements set the stage for the nature documentary to tackle the subject of mental illness. The format of the nature film blended

with the subject of mental illness will generate a positive environment for an open and honest discussion of mental illness both on and off the screen.

## THE NATURE DOCUMENTARY

The “nature documentary” is an umbrella term that encompasses numerous subgenres. The subgenres include but are not limited to the natural history film, the science film, and “ecocinema,” which is a movement to make audiences more environmentally-minded through film (MacDonald 20). Although different in construct, and developed in separate parts of history, they each center on the natural world and the importance of the human involvement and connection to the ecosystem at large. The earliest of these forms, the natural history film, ran adjacent to British colonialism and American manifest destiny (Scott 30). Filmmakers would journey to a new territory and showcase the land and its inhabitants in a spectacle of the “other,” as exemplified in John Grierson’s production of *The Song of Ceylon* (1934). Karen Scott defines the natural history genre as “the ability to bring the audience privileged glimpses into a world generally inaccessible to the naked eye” (32). The rugged landscapes of the American West, the untouched shores of the West Indies, and the never-ending tundra of the Sahara desert all became visible to the public through the natural history film.

Many natural history films borrow techniques from literary works. They often contain the dramatic devices of the main character, a conflict, and a resolution, and follow a beginning, middle, and end structure (Tobias 173). One modern example of this structure is the BBC’s *Planet Earth* (2006). In the “Jungles” episode, David Attenborough anthropomorphizes the bird of paradise’s mating rituals, exclaiming “he’ll have to do more than flutter his eyelids if he wants to impress her,” and “his female is modestly dressed.” This creates a drama for the audience because the filmmaker is

equating the bird's actions to human actions. Although in structure anthropomorphism aims to make the animal kingdom more relatable to audiences, it actually creates an inverse effect of furthering the content from the audience. Author and film scholar Ronald Tobias argues that this is because the audiences become "tourists rather than citizens of the natural world," and they view these animals as a part of an "ideological netherworld" (179). Natural history film audiences view wildlife and wild areas as an "ideal," a notion of how the world ought to be (Tobias 179). These films generate a sense of longing to be a part of this world – it sparks a need for a reconnection to nature.

The next subgenre of the nature documentary, the science film, is an antithesis to the natural history film in form, but not in function. The science film has a similar goal to re-connect audiences to nature, but they approach the subjects much more scientifically than the anthropomorphic natural history film. One of the earliest science filmmakers, Jean Painlevé, wrote *The Ten Commandments* of documentary in 1948, and claimed, "You will seek reality without aestheticism or ideological apparatus, [...] trickery will be of no use unless the audience is your confidant, [...] [and] you will not substitute words for images in any way" (159). These three commandments illustrate Painlevé's steadfast determination to cinematically represent natural occurrences in the clearest and most accurate fashion. André Bazin argues that science and nature need no special effects, imaginative constructs, or dramatizations of any kind to convey its beauty cinematically (146). The camera itself is the only tool needed to unlock the hidden worlds of microorganisms and underwater creatures.

Painlevé introduced audiences to the underwater lives of seahorses in his 1934 film *The Seahorse (L'Hippocampe)*. He filmed parts of it underwater with a large waterproof camera apparatus, and the rest was filmed in a studio that contained an aquarium. In order to capture a seahorse give birth, he would wait for several days, camera ready, to capture the phenomenon (Berg 25). The film provided scientific facts about the seahorse as well as visual imagery of the seahorse in its natural habitat, which appealed to both the scientific audience and the general public. No one had ever seen a seahorse so intimately, and the film was a huge success (Berg 25). *The Seahorse* was a catalyst for more films about unseen, unknown phenomena, and triggered a demand for an increase of knowledge on the natural world.

The last subgenre of the nature documentary, ecocinema, sits more recently in history than its predecessors. The planet has undergone immense change during the last twenty years. This change is largely attributed to the human population. Climate change due to greenhouse gas emissions is actively warming up the poles and cooling down lower latitudes (climate.nasa.gov). Development and mining are depleting our natural areas, causing habitat displacement for the local flora and fauna. The rise of technology and cityscapes has caused an incredibly large gap between people and nature. This disconnection will continue the destruction of wild areas unless something is done to mend it. The ecocinema film movement aims to address this disconnection and to remind audiences that they are apart of nature.

In his paper “The Ecocinema Experience,” film critic Scott MacDonald defines this experience as one that “models patience and mindfulness,” and elicits a “deep

appreciation of and an ongoing commitment to the natural environment” (19). This is achieved through the absolute immersion of the senses in a nature film. Ecocinema films display nature slowly and deliberately. The film *Sweetgrass* (2009), directed by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, exhibits vast, expansive Montana landscapes; the camera slowly moves through space, so that the audience has enough time to look at every inch of the frame. The sounds of the wind, insects, and sheep in the distance penetrate through the film. The complex sound design mixed with the stunning visuals immerses the audience into the scene. Viewers are reminded of what this landscape smells and feels like; they can conjure up the feeling of the fresh mountain air in their lungs. MacDonald argues that this total immersion will spark environmentalism and conservation for our remaining natural areas (20). Ecocinema serves a second purpose in preserving these natural areas in film (digital or analog), in case they do vanish in the future (19). These films will serve as a memory for what once was, and will be an outlet for audiences to immerse in nature once more.

Scientists have conducted numerous studies on how direct interactions with nature can result in pro-environmental behavior. Outdoor activity makes us feel happy, relaxed, and at peace, due to the release of endorphins in the brain (Dinas et al. 320). Dinas et al. suggest that nature experiences and outdoor activity can even combat depression and generate sustained happiness (323). Another study conducted by Bratman et al. suggests that the positive effects on mental health lead to conservation efforts to ensure that natural areas are still available to the general public (118). There have not been many

studies, however, on if the viewing of a nature film can actively change the attitudes of the viewer to become more connected to nature.

In 2016, science communicators Dr. Florian Arendt and Dr. Jorg Matthes conducted a study that measured connectedness to nature and pro-environmental behavior after watching nature documentaries. They defined connectedness to nature as “the degree to which a person sees himself or herself as part of nature” (456). Arendt and Matthes discovered a shift in both knowledge and attitude after exposure to nature documentaries. They claim that after a classroom lesson on a nature subject, people left more knowledgeable, but there wasn’t a shift in attitude toward the subject. They then delivered the same presentation in the form of a nature documentary, and the audience experienced both an increase in knowledge and an increase in pro-environmental attitude (Arendt and Matthes 455). Feeling connected to nature means feeling connected to the self, and understanding that the self is happier and fuller when nature is present. The next section of this paper discusses three films that blend the nature documentary with the subject of mental health. The first two films serve as examples to prove the above studies’ claims on connectedness to nature, and the third film, my MFA thesis film, shows how the representation of mental illness with a nature backdrop will effectively change the way audiences view and discuss mental health issues.

## CASE STUDIES: MENTAL HEALTH AND THE NATURE FILM

The production of nature documentaries centered on mental health could be a byproduct of the latest decade's political climate. Urban sprawl and natural resource drilling threaten the U.S.'s public lands. One reason these documentaries are in production could be to demonstrate the need for pro-environmental behavior. Audiences will view these films and understand how nature benefits mental health, and they will walk away from these films and want to help protect natural areas. Two films from this last decade aim to achieve just this. *Nature RX* (2015) and *Happy* (2011) serve as prime examples to show the perks of nature to mental wellbeing. My MFA thesis film, *Out of the Woods* (2019), aims to achieve this, as well as to showcase women on screen who struggle with mental illness. They discuss how nature has personally helped each of them, and discuss the myths and stigmas that surround mental illness. I argue that my film will not only start the conversation for environmentalism, but for mental health too, which will lead to inclusivity and acceptance amongst those with and without mental illness.

*Nature RX* is a series of three short satirical films that parody the style of a prescription drug commercial, created by Dream Tree Productions in Boulder, Colorado. The first installment begins with a man sitting at a lake's edge, pondering the meaning of life. He addresses the camera directly and says, "Are you feeling tired, irritable, stressed out? Well, you might consider... Nature." A lower thirds graphic appears on screen that reads "Prescription strength Nature (terra mater)." It mimics popular prescription commercials that feature a happy outdoor outing and lists a plethora of side effects (e.g.

*Lunesta* and *Chantix* commercials). In *Nature RX*, all of the side effects for “Nature” are positive. The man claims, “Nature is suitable for all ages. It is recommended for pets too.” This humorous series entered film festivals across the country and abroad, and reached countless towns and local theaters. Each installment is under two minutes in run time, so viewers at home or on their mobile devices could easily and quickly watch and share the videos. Since 2015, the creators of *Nature RX* gave a Ted talk on the importance of nature to our health and even started a non-profit to promote outreach for U.S. schools. *Nature RX*’s website also contains scientific research to support the claims of this nature fix ([nature-rx.org](http://nature-rx.org)). A simple parody manifested a movement for nature exposure and mental and physical health.

In 2011, director Roko Belic traveled the world in search for the key to happiness and produced his feature-length documentary *Happy* based off his findings. The film begins with a “vox-pop;” the interviewer asks random people on the street what they want out of life. The majority of the answers are “to be happy.” Belic then takes the audience to the slums of Kolkata and follows a man who pulls a rickshaw for a living to support his impoverished family. The man claims he is happy and that he has all he needs in life. Down in the Louisiana bayous, Roy Blanchard exclaims, “nature is good medicine,” as he maneuvers his boat through the swamps. The film then discusses the importance of dopamine levels in the brain, and how dopamine controls the brain’s response to pleasure and happiness. People start to lose dopamine synapses in their teens, so in order to combat this, people must actively seek out aerobic activities to release dopamine in the brain and keep the levels elevated. Belic then journeys down to Brazil

and follows a surfer in his sixties who argues that sports relieve all of life's stress. The underlying theme of this film is that exposure to the outdoors and staying down to earth is the true key to happiness.

These two films are examples of how nature can sustain happiness, but they do not delve deeply into mental illness. My thesis film, *Out of the Woods* (2019) blends this notion of the nature fix with a positive representation of mental illness in order to increase its visibility to the public eye. The main difference between my movie and the other three documentaries on depression previously discussed is that *Out of the Woods* is directed towards an audience with mental health issues, and not just for those that are not yet educated on the subject. I expect my thesis film will have three positive outcomes: one goal is to give those audience members struggling with their mental health a group of characters to whom they can relate. The second goal is to demonstrate to the general audience the frequency and normality of mental illness and how to address it amongst friends and family. The third goal is to provide a common ground for the discussion of mental health, between those with and those without, situated in a natural landscape.

*Out of the Woods* is a vignette of the lives of four women, Heather, Kim, Kelley, and Shaniece, whose ages range from 24 to 31. The film consists of their on-screen interviews mixed with shots of scenic landscapes and outdoor activity. I borrow from the ecocinema mode and utilize natural sounds to build the soundscape and reinforce the feelings of being outside. The women's interviews drive the narrative forward. They discuss their plight with mental illness, how they realized they needed help, their feelings while outside, how the outdoors serve as therapy, and finally, the problems they still face.

The film also features Dr. Neha John-Henderson, a psychology professor at Montana State University, who backs their claims of happiness and relief through her scientific studies in the field of “positive psychology.” Dr. John-Henderson discusses her research of positive emotions, such as the emotion of awe, and how this can decrease inflammation in the immune system and therefore decrease levels of stress, anxiety, and depression in the brain. Her scientific viewpoint provides authority for the women’s claims, and helps to show the audience that they too can experience awe and lesson their personal levels of stress or anxiety.

My interest in this research was sparked by a personal relationship. I wanted to make a film on mental health and the outdoors because I witnessed nature’s positive effects on my best friend Bethany. After college, Bethany experienced a psychotic mental breakdown, and kept it hidden from her friends and family for months. She was ashamed and embarrassed, and didn’t feel comfortable sharing her experience even with those closest to her. I was hurt and saddened that she felt she had to stay in the shadows for fear of being stigmatized. I realized the main reason Bethany finally felt willing to open up about her mental health was because she began to show a sustained, personal happiness. She received a job at an environmental non-profit that leads elementary school students on field trips through the Sacramento vernal pool ecosystem, and working outdoors and engaging with nature everyday has helped to limit her levels of depression. She felt more herself and more confident in the outdoors, and this safe space allowed for her to be more accepting with her mental health.

Heather, Kim, Kelley, and Shaniece's interviews are all filmed outside. I was the sole crewmember for these interviews because I wanted each woman to be open and honest with me, as if we were engaging in a casual, friendly conversation. I situated the interviews in the outdoors to generate feelings of peace and calm between my subjects and myself. I also wanted the audience to notice that all their locations are attainable, so I chose for a very realistic set-up in the interviews. All their locations could easily be right off the trail, or even in a backyard.

I featured all women in my film because I noticed a large disparity in my pre-production research between men and women with mental illness. When I first searched for subjects, only women responded to be apart of the film. Depression is more prevalent in women than in men; approximately five percent of women have depression, compared to three percent of men (Albert 2019). Dr. Paul Albert claims in his paper that this is attributed to higher estrogen levels and hormonal changes in women than in men (219). It is hard, however, to fully agree with these findings, when the data is based off those who have been formally diagnosed. As previously mentioned, the stigmatization of depression in the media has limited the amount of people receiving help for their mental health, which circles back to my wish to create a film that generates the conversation for mental health. If Dr. Albert's findings are indeed accurate, then I have positioned four women and one female psychologist as role models for other women who are struggling with mental illness. It was coincidental, based on our location in Bozeman, Montana, that all the women, sans Dr. Neha John-Henderson, are Caucasian. This does not imply, however, that there is a lack of diversity in the outdoors.

I not only used a natural soundscape to emulate the ecocinema film, but also to limit my influence as the filmmaker. I limited my use of music because music drives the mood in film. It can create feelings of suspense, relief, happiness, and hopefulness, to name a few. Music also has the power to contradict the content in the scene; for example, the use of music in the final scene from *Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) dramatically juxtaposes the nuclear bomb explosion sequence. The love song “We’ll Meet Again” by Vera Lynn croons over the explosions, so instead of viewing these explosions in fear, the audience instead romanticizes the bomb, which plays into director Stanley Kubrick’s overarching theme of political satire. I made sure in my film that the audience’s feelings and moods stem solely from the interviews and natural landscapes, and not from the persuasion of wall-to-wall music.

In the final scene, Heather, Kim, Kelley and Shaniece all agree that if more people begin to open up and talk about mental illness, the stigma will go away, and it will be more accepted in everyday life. This film positions the outdoors as a starting point to begin this conversation. Regardless of whether or not you have a mental illness, a positive and inclusive community is formed in nature. Shaniece and Kim make sure to mention that this positive environment is not solely obtained in the backcountry; it can just as easily be obtained through walks in the neighborhood, or hammocking in the backyard. The resulting peaceful and happy mindset can then help to establish the conversations on mental illness in a more accepting and understanding environment. Kelley ends the film with the line, “I’m not alone in this. There are other people out there struggling, and we can help each other through our stories.” I predict that this will cause

audiences to continue to think about the subject, and will want to start the conversation and open up about their personal stories.

## CONCLUSION

Every subject in film has a unique way to visually represent its truth, and filmmakers must uncover the most ethical and effective method to showcase that truth. Early Hollywood cinema sensationalized mental illness and mental institutions, and American television painted a criminal picture of the mentally ill. This caused audience members suffering from mental health issues to hide their illness, and never speak of it. Television shows within the last decade have discussed mental illness more openly and accurately, particularly through online streaming platforms such as Netflix. However, these programs rely heavily on the entertainment value of mental illnesses, which decreases the educational effect these shows have on audiences.

The subject of mental illness shifted to the non-fiction realm and provided audiences a more concrete and educational perspective. It became clear that the documentary genre was a more accurate method to represent mental illness. These documentaries provided facts, science, and accounts of real people struggling with mental illness. *Depression: Out of the Shadows*, *The Truth About Depression*, and *My Depression: The Up and Down and Up of It* all represent mental illness in a truthful, positive light, yet they are aimed towards an audience that typically did not have previous experience with mental illness before viewing these films.

I argue that the form of the nature documentary is the ideal backdrop to represent mental illness. The documentaries previously mentioned all center on what psychologists call “negative psychology.” They focus on the negative emotions, and discuss the science of depression, despair, and stress. What the nature documentary is able to accomplish is

to situate “positive psychology” as the main thesis, that is, discuss emotions of awe, happiness, and relief, in relation to the outdoors. Studies have proven time and again that we feel better while we’re outside, whether that is a simple walk through the neighborhood, or a hike ten miles into the backcountry. If people with depression, stress, or anxiety view nature documentaries that describe these positive effects, there could be a real, lasting change on their perspective of their mental illness, and an opportunity for increased discussion between those with mental illnesses and those without.

The purpose of this paper is to claim that the key to a positive representation of mental illness is to create a film that has a lasting effect after the credits roll. My thesis film *Out of the Woods* achieves this through its use of the nature documentary blended with the subject of mental illness. The outdoors situate people in a safe, inclusive, and happy environment – a space to discuss depression, stress, and anxiety with peers. The outdoors does not just mean backcountry, rugged nature. The film features a woman in her hammock in her yard, and later mentions that even walking to work is an outdoor experience. *Out of the Woods* borrows elements from the nature documentary to reinforce the connectedness to nature, and it discusses the subject of mental illness from the perspective of actual women who struggle with these issues and from an authoritative psychologist working in the field. The film does not just cite facts on mental illness – we already have examples for those films. *Out of the Woods* instead offers insight to the frequency and normality of mental illness in our communities, through the stories of the four women. My film showcases the union of the nature documentary and mental illness, and acts as an example for communities to bring mental illness out of the shadows.

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