

GLOW – REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Boys dancing in a Heteronormative culture: challenging stigma and discussion of media representation of male dancers and mental health.

In this essay, I will be talking about my practice-based research, the creation of my film *Glow*, intertwined with a thorough textual research on gendered mental health and dance stigma, focused on males and media's play in it, through analysis of positive and negative sides of media representation.

Glow (13-minutes) is a coming of age, independent short film. Coming of age films tend to focus on psychological and moral growth and follow the protagonist's transition from youth to adulthood, as Jule Selbo claims "they are films about a journey of self-discovery". (289) In *Glow*, we follow Philip's journey in overcoming family issues, fear, and mental health struggles, in order to succeed in his dream on becoming a successful dancer. The film's essence is about finding your inner glow, when you are down in the dark, surrounded by your own demons. *Glow* also tries to challenge societal stigma on male dancers and mental health.

Commonly, in coming of age films, the use of dialogue is essential to trigger emotional responses and push the main character forwards. Due to the nature of my topic, I chose to do the opposite – rely solely on body language, mimics, dance, and music. What inspired me, is the discovery of the origin of the word emotion. In Latin emotion is "*emovere*" and it means to move, move out or move through. ("Home – Emovere"). When researching more into it, I discovered a range of psychotherapeutic practices that treat certain mental health conditions through body movement and dance such as movement therapy, dance therapy, authentic movement. This knowledge inspired me to represent mental health struggles through dance, music, and facial expressions only. I chose to portray mental health with a mixed approach of

both abstract “music video” components and a traditional way of following a narrative through film conventions.

The story narrative helps explain a bit more about the character’s background. We become familiar with the character’s background, his upbringing and family relationships. This way, hopefully, he becomes more familiar to the audience, as the story unveils, therefore becomes closer to them.

It is important to note, one cannot fully understand another’s mental health, as it is an entirely a personal experience, but my theory is, if you know someone’s origin story, as well as, if you are able to “look inside” their head (through POV shots) and experience their demons first-hand, maybe you could understand them slightly better. This is what the abstract demon part of the film tries to portray – a metaphor of how intrusive thoughts and inner struggle can feel suffocating at times. I used visual components, inspired by music videos, together with originally produced music to enhance the audiences’ experience.

The story follows specifically Philip’s life and how he fights his mental health struggles – depression and anxiety, combined with low-self-esteem. This is why, what I would discuss in this essay, is strictly related to Philip’s story, as I am aware, that everyone, struggling from mental health disorders, struggles in a different way, and it would not be possible or correct to put everyone under the same equation.

Firstly, the definition of mental health according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) is: “a state of well-being, in which the individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, be productive and is able to make a contribution to their community”. Depression affects all these aspects of one’s life. Combined with anxiety it can lead to misperception of reality, social withdrawal, feeling tense and scared that something awful might happen. Tsocheva explains more about how people with depression can feel “sad,

empty, hopeless, worthless and guilty”. (Tsocheva, 23) According to Gale Encyclopedia of Medicine (2008), “Anxiety is a multisystem response to a perceived threat or danger”. It activates the so called “fight or flight response”, which is a form of the human’s survival instinct but in situations where no real danger is present. People with high level of anxiety “can have ruined lives, forced to stay indoors and out of social situations” (Tsocheva, 22).

Philip is struggling from both high-functioning depression and anxiety. People with high-functioning depression (or in medical terms – persistent depressive disorder) still struggle but manage to maintain their social life and accomplish tasks (school, work etc.), while hiding their sadness from foreign eyes. The fact that the symptoms are less visible, makes it easier to get overlooked and missed. Hiding one’s symptoms is especially more prevalent in males due to stigma as traditional masculinity is sharply outlined against attributes being socially defined as female, including showing weakness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This leads me to my main research questions, related to stigma against mental health and dance, specifically focused on males. I will be analysing how the media reinforces or tries to change these views in film and music videos, and afterwards I will be also discussing my personal approach in *Glow*, when approaching stigma.

My main Research questions are the following:

1. How have mental health disorders in males, specifically depression, been represented in films and music videos?
2. How have male dancers been represented in films and music videos?

I will start with an overview on mental health stigma and its effects on people.

The choice to hide one's symptoms has many reasons, it's main one - fear of rejection and "othering" by society due to stigma, a topic broadly discussed in Erving Goffman's work (1963).

Not that long ago, society's view on mental health struggles was mainly negative and full of prejudice and any discourse on the topic was taboo. Unfortunately, in some places (e.g. Bulgaria) it still is, the main reason being - lack of mental health education mixed with religious myths, fear, and general mistrust in professionals. Mental illness in some religious communities is regarded as "God's punishment" ("Mental Illness In Africa Taboos") and the sufferers are considered untrustworthy, dangerous and to be locked away and avoided.

In their study, Lauber and Rossler (157-178) have confirmed the existence of stigma in several developing countries, where there is a tendency of mistrust in professionals (as mentioned earlier) and medicine due to limited mental health literacy, fear of rejection, becoming a disgrace and being discriminated or seen as less.

These fears are doubled in males due to society's pressure on what masculinity should and shouldn't be. A good example of that is stigma towards male dancers and the common believe that "dancing is for sissies/poofs", as described in Stephen Daldry's film *Billy Eliot*.

Females are more emotional, tender, and fit to dance, where males must be "striving for power, dominance, success, invulnerability and control". (Möller-Leimkuhler, 71 (1) 1-9)

In her research, Möller-Leimkuhler explains how gender-related health concepts lead to "undervaluation and denial of symptoms in young males" (IBID). Yap and Jorm have also confirmed the existence of gender differences in treatments and action towards mental health. Young males receive poorer quality mental health First Aid than females. (Tsocheva, 79).

Unfortunately, delay in professional help could lead to worse health outcomes and chronicity, which is why mental health representation is so important.

Luckily, a lot of influential people have become vocal in sharing their personal struggles and the importance of education on the topic. Musicians have started using their online platforms to portray creatively mental health struggles through music videos, some of which I was analysing in my preparation for *Glow*'s production.

REPRESENTATION IN FILMS AND MUSIC VIDEOS

Mental health media representation has two sides. On the one hand, as Birch (89-91) claims, most audio-visual representations has relied on reestablishing common prejudices, mainly focusing on madness and portrayal of characters who transform into dangerous creatures, which arguably gives little education on the topic and reenforces alienation.

Nowadays, more films and TV shows are trying to provoke dialogue and educate in a friendly way. A good example is *One day at a time*, where depression, anxiety and PTSD stigmas are approached in a humorous and easy to digest way. The show does this by gradually introducing the audience to Penelope and then sharing her struggle with depression and anxiety, which is something I tried to follow in developing Philip's story. The media often portrays mental illness as being untreatable or unrecoverable, which in some cases might be true, but living a healthy life is indeed possible, which is another message both *One day at a time* and *Glow* have in common.

An observation I have made, which is shared by Naveed Saleh, is that usually, mental illnesses' portrayal is oversimplified only based on symptoms, rather than the inner world of the character such as their intrusive thoughts, which cause the symptoms. ("How Mental Health Issues Are Damaged By Mass Media") This comes with the tendency to portray the cure for depression being falling in love or just relying on an outside force to become better.

Example of that can be films like *Veronika decides to die* and *Garden state*. Escapism and love are important but so is representation of the possibility of getting better through reflecting and working with a professional like in *Good Will Hunting*, which is another thing that *Glow* stands for – overcoming mental health struggles needs support but also selfbelief and perseverance. Another positive representation of depression is in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless mind*.

When it comes to prejudice against male dancers, films like *Billy Eliot*, *Yeh Ballet*, *Carmen*, and *Danseur* come to mind. They help raise awareness on how prejudice against male dancers can be dangerous and hurtful but also groundless. They stomp over the assumption that dancing and sexuality are related in any way, another thing I was aiming to hint.

When it comes to the abstract section of *Glow*, films like *Sink or Swim* and *Black Swan* are a good example of professionals using abstract hallucination, dream-like sequences to present disturbances in the feelings of their main character.

Lastly, music videos were also used to inspire and educate me in producing *Glow*. The ones I was interested in, rely mainly on by abstract sequences, contemporary dance, full of semiotic symbols, open to interpretation. The videos that inspired me most are Sia – Big Girls Cry, Billie Eilish – Bury a friend, Veridia - Still Breathing, Stromae - Quand c'est? and Loic nottet -Million Eyes.

With all of this preparation in mind it was time for me to begin the practical part of my project.

FILM PROCESS (REFLECTION):

As part of my task, I had to go through the first four parts of creating an original audio-visual project, in my case, a film: Development, Pre-production, Production and Post-Production stages. (Fig.1)

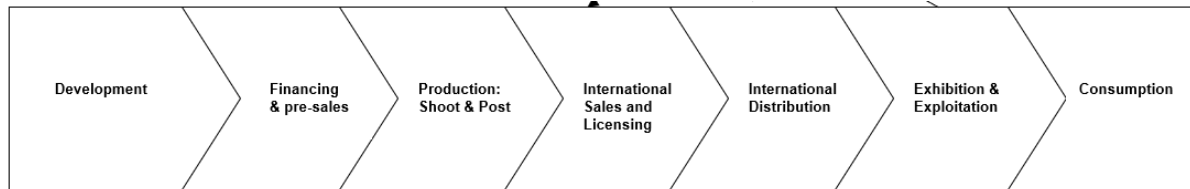


Fig. 1 Film Value chain (Bloore, p.34)

DEVELOPMENT

I started with developing the script, which by the time of shooting, had to be rewritten several times due to changes in location due to COVID-19 lockdown but its main idea and vision managed to be preserved, nevertheless. In order to make sure I was not getting too close to the script, as a director-writer, I made sure a set of “fresh eyes” were there to supervise the script and make comments on it where needed.

Before working on the story, I made certain to educate myself on the topic of mental health struggles and what I found was that mental health can often be hereditary. People struggling, can also share common traits such as - a traumatic childhood or a certain traumatic event that has triggered their symptoms, which is one of the reasons, I decided Philip’s mum to be recently passed away. An important disclaimer should be that one doesn’t need to struggle from bereavement to have depression or anxiety.

As I am discussing the effect on stigma towards male dancers and mental health, I created Philip’s father as a stereotypical symbol of society’s negative view on “effeminate” males. He is conservative and expects Philip to follow the heteronormative expectations on masculinity, therefore, disapproves of his dream. This, combined with his personal unresolved grief due to the passing of his wife, makes their relationship even more complicated.

When Philip loses his mother, he loses his support safety net, which makes him feel unsafe in his home, therefore he struggles from severe anxiety, self-criticism, perfectionism (in dance), and detachment of reality (demons and light metaphors).

According to the article with the short film “Sink or Swim”, most people compare suffering with depression to suffocating (Edmond). I had a similar idea, which I portrayed with Philip’s fight with his demons who suffocate him with nylons.

The anxiety demons are representation of intrusive thoughts that often come from the outside but at the end of the day emerge from within our subconscious when we are weakest. Hence why Philip ends up taking place of one of the demons, suffocating him by the end of the abstract sequence. He is his own enemy. It is not until he reflects on the past childhood trauma and makes peace with it, that he finds his peace and can use his past to empower him with his own glow.

PRE-PRODUCTION

During the Pre-Production stage, I made sure to choose my crew well, based on their skills and previous experience. I also created a Google Drive from the very beginning, to keep me organised and made folders with all the documents needed (Fig. 2). I shared access for the Drive with my crew, so we can all keep track on everything needed, together. This was the stage in which I had to plan my budget for props, costumes and renting locations, which were previously scouted during the beginning of September. Unfortunately, right on the verge of Production stage, Bulgaria entered lockdown and two of my main locations closed, which caused some delays in filming but luckily, we found new locations. What I found quite difficult during this stage was casting actors and interviewing them online. There were moments in which I portrayed myself less confident in the project, which repeated itself in the Production stage when I had to direct blocking and camera decisions.

PRODUCTION STAGE

Filming was the most exciting part of the creation of *Glow*. It took 5 days – 2 in November and 3 in December, each filming day varying between 10 to 12 hours.

Apart from national lockdown slowing the process, the main actors had to take exams in their university - National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts "Krastyo Sarafov", which was another reason why post-production time was cut short. Nevertheless, filming was organised well, the team was working well together and had a sense of unity, which helped the process to pass by faster. In the Production stage I had the opportunity to apply knowledge on use of camera angles (Fig. 3), shot sizes and upgrade my technical knowledge on different lenses and their usage.

I also realized how much knowledge I was missing when it comes to post-production preparation during shooting. In *Glow*, there are several places, where VFX are used, for which there was a need for special preparation like green X-s to be placed on the corridor walls (Fig.3) or on people's chest for their inner glow (Fig.4). Thankfully, our special effects guy was really helpful and explained what will be needed beforehand.

Similarly, for sound recording of room tone, atmosphere and specific scene sounds, there were many occasions in which I felt unprepared to answer specific questions, as I made the realization that when I create a story it is entirely in visuals and I do not hear specific sounds. Through discussion with my Boom operator, I was able to make decisions on terrain, listening to her or my AD's advices at certain moments.

Cinematography

I was focusing mainly on expressing emotion through body movement and facial expressions such as mimics and gaze. This is why, especially in delicate moments such as father-son conflict, demons confrontation and mother-son memories, I aimed at using Close-ups or Extreme close-ups, using the vividly expressed emotion through the actors' eyes and

introducing the audience into Philip's world by immersing them closer to him. I used some POV- shots, when I wanted the audience to see the world through his eyes. He might be struggling but we see him being amazed by the beauty of the fireflies in the beginning of the film. Throughout the story, Philip is searching for outside sources of light to guide him through his struggles until the resolution, where his younger self reminds him that the light, he so desperately is searching for is within him.

POST-PRODUCTION

In post-production, I made the mistake of entrusting the rough cut on someone who I didn't know personally, who unfortunately, didn't start working on time and slowed us down with extra 14 days. As I realise this is something that happens in the film industry quite often, I don't regret it, but I aim to make sure to be more vigilant in the future.

I managed to edit the very first rough cut in about 3 days. From there, I had the task to polish cuts, work on transitions, make a document, explaining where special effects are needed. I also had to work on colour correction, browse through AudioNetwork and other music resources and discuss opening and ending Graphics. We were having regular meetings, in which I could receive feedback throughout each stage of the editing process, as well as support on using the editing software.

I realised how slow and detailed process Post-production is and I am glad that I had the opportunity to experience fully every stage of it. It took us a little over a month to have most things done apart from a few special effects – a broken mirror and glowing sticks, which we aim to finish for a continued look for film festivals.

CONCLUSION

The topic of mental health representation, dance and stigma is wide and can be discussed in more detail. While doing my research, I managed to find new and interesting information to which I wasn't aware of before and I believe there is a lot more knowledge to be obtained and discussed. I believe it was a successful research in which I learned about usage of cinematography techniques to provoke feeling and using a mixed approach between music videos and films, as well as the power of music and visuals combined. I had the opportunity to learn more about a variety of major positions in the film industry - director, writer, producer, editor, location manager, and see my weaknesses and strengths, which would definitely be useful in my future career path. Being a researcher, together with creating art is an enjoyable experience, which taught me of the power of media representation and education. I believe I should work more on my research skills and textual analysis, as well as on my directing skills and confidence but overall, I am happy with the experience.

APPENDICES

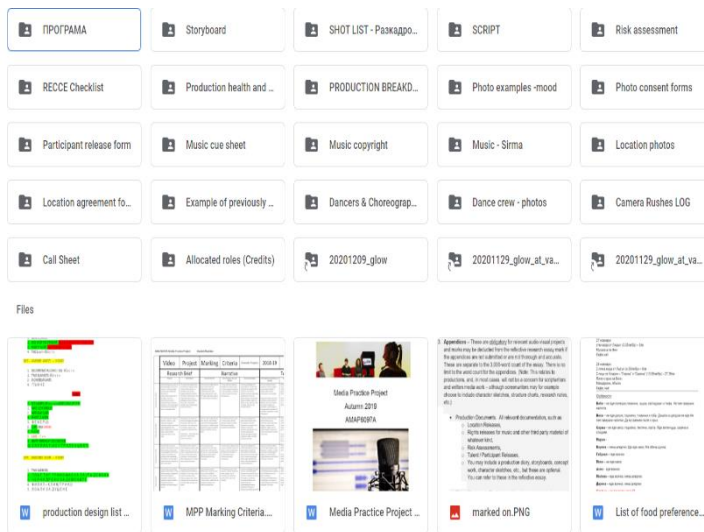


Fig.2 Organised Google Drive



Fig. 4 Special effects – green x-s.



Fig. 3 Camera angles

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