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Celluloid angels: a research study of nurses in feature films 1900–2007

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Abstract

Title. Celluloid angels: a research study of nurses in feature films 1900–2007.

Aim. This paper is a report of a study examining the influence on how nursing and nurses are portrayed in feature films made between 1900 and 2007, with a nurse as their main or a principle character and a story-line related specifically to nursing.

Background. Nurses and the nursing profession are frequently portrayed negatively or stereotypically in the media, with nurses often being portrayed as feminine and caring but not as leaders or professionals capable of autonomous practice.

Methods. A mixed method approach was used to examine feature films made in the Western world. Over 36,000 feature film synopses were reviewed (via CINAHL, ProQuest and relevant movie-specific literature) for the keywords 'nurse'/'nursing'. Identified films were analysed quantitatively to determine their country of production, genre, plot(s) and other relevant data, and qualitatively to identify the emergence of themes related to the image of nurses/nursing in films.

Findings. For the period from 1900 to 2007, 280 relevant feature films were identified. Most films were made in the United States of America or United Kingdom, although in recent years films have been increasingly produced in other countries. Early films portrayed nurses as self-sacrificial heroines, sex objects and romantics. More recent films increasingly portray them as strong and self-confident, professionals.

Conclusion. Nurse-related films offer a unique insight into the image of nurses and how they have been portrayed. Nurses need to be aware of the impact the film industry has on how nurses and nursing are perceived and represented in feature films.

Keywords: film, images, media, mixed methods research, nurses, nursing, self-sacrifice, stereotypes

Introduction

In early 2007, while in the process of developing a lecture for neophyte nursing students about how nurses are conceptualized by the nursing profession, other professions and the public, a paper by Bayer (2007) entitled 'From Angel to Devil: Images of Nurses in Film' prompted consideration of how nurses have been portrayed in feature films. Nurses in film appeared to be represented in stereotypical roles as romantic darlings, doctors' handmaidens, sex objects or self-sacrificial angels (Burech & Gordon 2000, Farella 2001, Bayer 2007) and it is clear that the image of nursing continues to be influenced by the media (Burech & Gordon 2000, Ward *et al.* 2003).

Background

There are numerous publications exploring the impact of various types of media on the image of nurses or on how

stereotypical images of nursing are represented in the media (Sullivan 1999, Burech & Gordon 2000). Few publications, however, consider how nurses are portrayed in the film media and only one represented a systematic review of nurse-related feature films.

In 2007, Bayers reviewed the image of nursing in 15 films and concluded that in early films nurses were portrayed as heroic angels, while in more recent films, nurses are portrayed in less glamorous roles. Similarly, Rasmussen (2001) reviewed 13 film and a small number of TV portrayals, concluding that the film and TV media have offered a warped representation of the image of nurses and that nurses have often 'chafed at the way they are depicted' (on screen) (2001, p. 2). However, the Rasmussen (2001) and Bayer (2007) work was not based on empirical research. Farella (2001) reviewed 30 nurse-related feature films, finding that when it comes to films nurses have been everything to everyone; she summed up her analysis by describing nurses in film as 'Doormats, Devils and Divas'.

Gordon and Johnson (2004) undertook a detailed analysis of how nurses are portrayed in nine 'Hollywood' films, noting that they could be described as 'the good, the bad and the crazy' (2004, p. 16). Their conclusion was that feature films are developing a trend they called the 'vanishing nurse' (2004, p. 18), exemplified by the films (*Living Out Loud*, 1998 and *Something's Gotta Give*, 2003). They suggested that real-life nurses should pay more attention to how Hollywood represents nurses on screen.

The most detailed research located involved a qualitative and quantitative review of 191 motion pictures from 1930 to 1980, focusing on how the motion picture industry depicts nurses as 'sex objects' (Kalisch & Kalisch 1982, Kalisch *et al.* 1982). The authors concluded that in the 1960s and 1970s, the film industry's primary representation of nurses in film was as 'sex objects'.

Kalisch and Kalisch's (1982) view that the film industry offered a negative perception of nurses is supported by Jaeger's (2007, p. 30) summary suggesting that nurses in the media are portrayed as 'domineering battle-axes, sex-obsessed blonds and murderous psychopaths'. However, Jaeger concluded, after a random and very limited review of nurse-related media appearances, that the 'hype' was mainly associated with fiction and that the 'bald fact is that real-life nurses doing their jobs well just aren't that entertaining' (2007, p. 30).

However, the impact of the media image of nursing is profound. While exploring the barriers to and influences on nurse recruitment, Ward *et al.* (2003) in Australia, Meadus and Twomey (2007) in Canada and Hereford (2005) in the United States of America (USA), demonstrated that media representations of nurses had an impact on how nurses (and potential nurses) perceived themselves and how they felt they were perceived by the general public. Nurses also felt that media images reinforced stereotypical images often assigned to nurses. According to Takase *et al.* (2006), the public's stereotypical view of nurses is that they are less intelligent than doctors, dependent on doctors, powerless and underpaid. They add that nurses described themselves as being portrayed in the media as feminine and caring, but not as leaders or professionals capable of independent and autonomous practice.

Apart from the research by Kalisch *et al.* (1982), Kalisch and Kalisch (1982), few studies offer detailed evidence of the extent of nurse-related feature films or insights into the influence that feature films have had on how nurses are portrayed. Darbyshire and Gordon (2005, p. 83) remind us that the media is 'not nursing's public relations machine' and that nurses need to be aware and in tune with the influence media images have on the public's perception of nursing and the nursing profession's view of itself.

The study

Aim

The aim of the study was to examine the influence on how nursing and nurses are portrayed in feature films made between 1900 and 2007, with a nurse as their main or a principle character and a story-line related specifically to nursing. The study had three main objectives:

- To identify the number of feature films made between 1900 and 2007 within the study parameters.
- To identify where each film was produced, their genre and plot(s).
- To identify themes from the films that related to how the image of nurses/nursing was portrayed.

Design

A mixed methodological approach was taken in this research. Quantitative analysis was used to identify the number of films with nurses as their main or principle character and to determine the film's country of production, genre, plot(s) and other descriptive data. A qualitative analysis using theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin 1998) was used to identify themes that related to how the image of nurses/nursing was portrayed in the films identified. Figure 1 summarizes the methodological process undertaken.
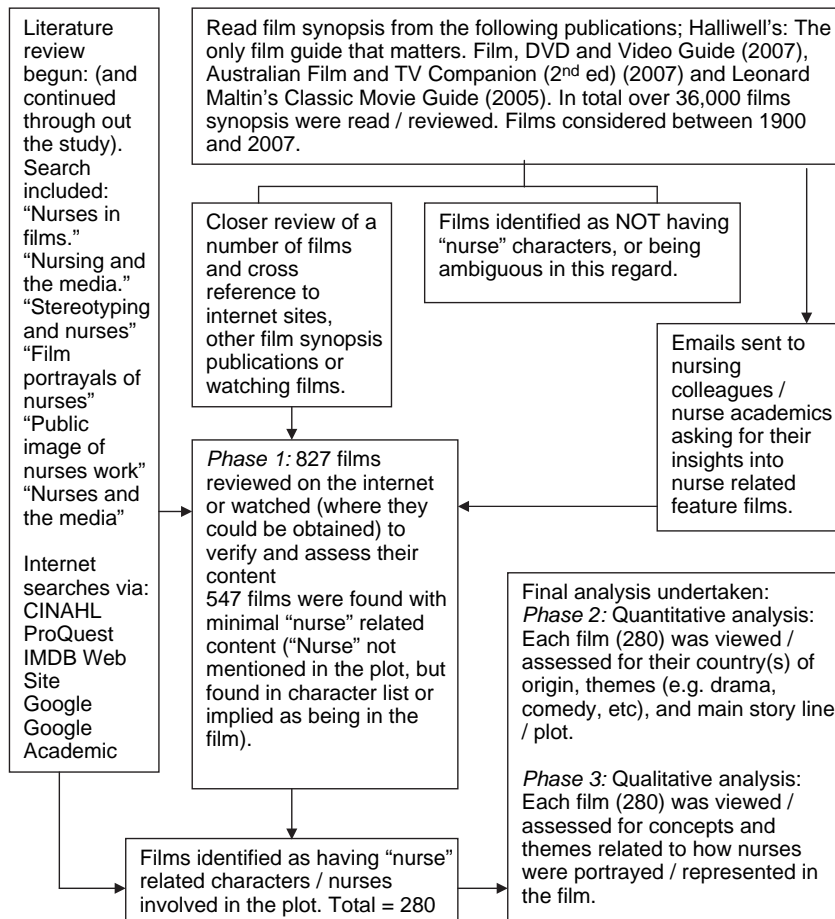
| Literature review begun: (and continued through out the study). Search included: "Nurses in films." "Nursing and the media." "Stereotyping and nurses" "Film portrayals of nurses" "Public image of nurses work" "Nurses and the media"

Internet searches via: CINAHL ProQuest IMDB Web Site Google Google Academic |

Read film synopsis from the following publications; Halliwell's: The only film guide that matters. Film, DVD and Video Guide (2007), Australian Film and TV Companion (2nd ed) (2007) and Leonard Maltin's Classic Movie Guide (2005). In total over 36,000 films synopsis were read / reviewed. Films considered between 1900 and 2007.

Closer review of a number of films and cross reference to internet sites, other film synopsis publications or watching films.

Films identified as NOT having "nurse" characters, or being ambiguous in this regard.

Emails sent to nursing colleagues / nurse academics asking for their insights into nurse related feature films.

Phase 1: 827 films reviewed on the internet or watched (where they could be obtained) to verify and assess their content
547 films were found with minimal "nurse" related content ("Nurse" not mentioned in the plot, but found in character list or implied as being in the film).

Final analysis undertaken:
Phase 2: Quantitative analysis: Each film (280) was viewed / assessed for their country(s) of origin, themes (e.g. drama, comedy, etc), and main story line / plot.

Phase 3: Qualitative analysis: Each film (280) was viewed / assessed for concepts and themes related to how nurses were portrayed / represented in the film.

Films identified as having "nurse" related characters / nurses involved in the plot. Total = 280

Figure 1 The research process.

Sample

A detailed search was conducted through film-related literature to identify feature films that had a nurse as their main or a principal character or with stories that included nurses. Over 36,000 film synopses were reviewed. This was followed by an internet search of general and academic databases such as Google, Google Scholar, ProQuest and CINAHL.

In the initial part of the investigation, the film synopses or summaries were read for the keywords 'nurse'/'nursing', and these were used as the basis for subsequent investigation. The 'nurse' may not have played a nurse in relation to their main role in the film, e.g. 'Betty' in *Nurse Betty* (2000), but the fact that characters were identified as a 'nurse' either in the film synopsis or as a central element of the story line of the film warranted the film's inclusion in the study. The study focused on films made in the USA, Western Europe or countries with strong Western cultural influences (e.g. Australia, Japan and Canada).

Ethical considerations

There were no ethical issues relevant to this research.

Data analysis

Data analysis conducted in three phases. First, each film was either watched or considered after reviewing literature produced about the film. All the literature about the films (even films from non-English speaking countries) was reviewed in English and films made in non-English speaking countries were viewed with English subtitles. From the 827 films initially identified, 280 were considered to support the research aims and were included in subsequent phases of the research (see Table 1).

A review of the film 'Scary Movie 4' (2006) is offered as an example of this process. The synopsis describes the film as, '*a new nurse arrives to care for an elderly woman who lives in a house haunted by the ghost of a child*' (Walker 2006, p. 1015) which would place it within the parameters of the study. However, a review of the film showed that the nurse in the film was not a qualified nurse and participated in minimal nurse related activity. As the links to nursing were tenuous, the film was not included in the later phases of the study.

In the second phase, the 280 films were assessed for data relating to the country of production, genre, plot or story

Table 1 Films with nurses in the main role by year (1900–2007)

Year	Titles (years)
1900–1919 (17)	Wanted: A Nurse (1906) Romance of a War Nurse (1908) Her Crowning Glory (1911) Captain Jenks' Diplomacy; Billy's Nurse; A Hospital Hoax (1912) Doctor Neighbour; Not What the Doctor Ordered; Nursie! Nursie!; The Black Butterfly (1916) A Nurse of an Aching Heart (1917) Red Cross Nurse; The Woman the German's Shot; The Heart of Humanity; Breakers Ahead; The Splendid Sinner (1918) The Great Victory, Wilson or the Kaiser? (1919)
1920–1929 (9)	Nurse Marjory (1920) Through the Back Door; Leap Year (1921) Why Worry? (1923) The New Commandment; Good Morning, Nurse (1925) Tell it to the Marines (1926) There it is; Dawn (1928)
1930–1939 (36)	Three Faces East; War Nurse (1930) Born to Live; Night Nurse (1931) A Farewell to Arms; County Hospital; Life Begins; Miss Pinkerton (1932) I was a Spy; The Mayor of Hell; The White Sister (1933) Once Every Woman; Registered Nurse; The White Parade; Men in White (1934) Thicker Than Water; The Right to Live (1935) While the Patient Slept; The Murder of Dr. Harrigan; Murder by an Aristocrat (1936) The Great Hospital Mystery; The White Angel; The Man who Found Himself; Between Two Women; Wife, Doctor and Nurse; Nobody's Baby (1937) Mystery House; Prison Nurse; The Secret of Treasure Island; The Storm; King of Alcatraz; The Patient in Room 18; Four Girls in White (1938) Nurse Edith Cavell; Pacific Liner; A Child is Born (1939)
1940–1949 (27)	Vigil in the Night; The Girl in the News (1940) Dangerously They Live; The Nurses' Secret (1941) Le Voile Blue; Army Surgeon; Parachute Nurse; I Walked with a Zombie; So Proudly We Hail; Cry Havoc; The Lamp Still Burns (1943) The Story of Dr. Wassell; Lifeboat (1944) They Were Expendable; Sister Kenny; Flight from Folly (1945) Miss Susie Slagle's; Monkey Businessmen; Green for Danger; Paisa (1946) The Story of Shirley Yorke; Homecoming; Kiss the Blood off my Hands (1948) Come to the Stable; Pinky; Shizukukanaru Ketto; The Hasty Heart (1949)
1950–1959 (28)	Saturday Island; Half Angel; The Blue Vail; The Lady with the Lamp; Operation Pacific; Anna; Scrambled Brains (1951) You for Me; Han Glomde Henne Aldrig; Battle Circus (1952) White Witch Doctor (1953) Salgin; Rear Window (1954) The Left Hand of God; Not as a Stranger (1955) X: The Unknown (1956) Seven Waves Away; No Time for Tears; A Farewell to Arms; Operation Mad Ball; Hellcats of the Navy (1957) Nara Livet (Brink of Life); South Pacific; Life in Emergency Ward 10 (1958) Carry on Nurse; Five Gates to Hell; Operation Petticoat; The Nun's Story (1959)
1960–1969 (28)	The Gambler, the Nun and the Radio; Dai-sanji Sekai Taisen: Yonju-ichi jikan no Kyofu (1960) Carry on Regardless; The Sins of Rachel Cade (1961) La Chambre Ardente; Jessica; Hemingway's Adventures of a Young man; Twice Round the Daffodils (1962) Nurses on Wheels; Captain Newman M.D.; The Strangler; Tammy and the Doctor; The Caretakers; A Stitch in Time (1963) The Naked Kiss; Woman of Straw (1964) In Harm's Way (1965) Misconduct; O Gyrismos Tou Stratioti; Akai Tenshi; Georgy Girl; Persona (1966) Csillagosok, Katonak (1967) Lonesome Cowboys (1968) The Honeymoon Killers; Unser Doktor ist der Beste; Naughty Nurse; Change of Habit (1969)
1970–1979 (29)	And Soon the Darkness; M*A*S*H*; Catch 22 (1970) Johnny Got His Gun; Les Males; The Hospital (1971) Oh, Nurse!; Krankenschwester-Report; Die Sister Die!; The Hot Box; Carry on Matron (1972) Coffy; The Mother and the Whore; The National Health (1973) Tender Loving Care (1974) L' Infermiera di mio Parade; L' Infermiera; One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975) Thank you, M'am; Born For Hell (1976) The Ugly Little Boy; High Anxiety (1977); Coma; The Greatest Attack; Patrick; Rosie Dixon, Night Nurse; Nurse Sherri (1978); L' Infermira di notte; Hanover Street (1979)
1980–1989 (33)	Delusion; Nurse; The Elephant Man (1980) An American Werewolf in London; This House is Possessed; Doctors and Nurses; A Matter of Life and Death; The Acorn People; Whose Life is it Anyway (1981) World According to Garp; The Clinic; Hospital Massacre (1982) The Hasty Heart (1983) Why Me?; Birdy (1984) Florence Nightingale; Nurse Lydia's Flight to Happiness; Purple Hearts; An Indecent Obsession (1985) Young Nurses in Love; Alice to Nowhere; Intimate Strangers; Women of Valor (1986) Death Nurse; Enerom; Himmo Melech Yerushalaim; Teas el Cristal; The Lighthorsemen (1987) Death Nurse 2; Not of This Earth; Nightingales (1988) The Tall Guy; The Dead Pit (1989)
1990–1999 (32)	Maniac Nurses; Changing Step; Hard to Kill; Deep Sleep (1990); Which Way Home; Nekromantik 2; Misery (1991); Dying Young; The Best Intentions; Krigerens Hjerte; Passion Fish (1992); Greedy; A Place for Annie; Voices from Within; The Kingdom (Riget) (1994); The Shadowy Third (1995) The English Patient; Deep Crimson (Profundo Carmesi); If These Walls Could Talk; Voice From the Grave; In Love and War (1996); Runaway Car; The Nurse; The last Time I Committed Suicide; Paradise Road (1997); Miss Ever's Boys (1997); My Name is Joe (1998); Pikkusisar; Cotton Mary; Magnolia (1999); El Mar (1999); Girl Interrupted (1999)

Table 1 (*Continued*)

Year	Titles (years)
2000- (41)	The Unbreakable Likeness of Lincoln; Twister: A Musical Catastrophe; If These Walls Could Talk 2; Blood: The Last Vampire; Where the Money Is; Nurse Betty; Meet the Parents; The Princess and the Warrior (2000); Ablaze; Wit; Pearl Harbour; The Officers Ward (La Chamber des Officers); High Heels and Low Lifes; South Pacific (2001); Bubba Ho-Tep; Yes Nurse, No Nurse; Talk to Her (Hable con ella); Catch me if you Can (2002); Persistence; The Singing Detective (2003) Torched; Open Heart; The Grudge; Kansen; Life on Liberty Street; Dawn of the Dead; Meet the Fockers; Angels in America (2004); Morphine; Fragiles; The Skeleton Key; 14 Hours; Graveyard Alive: A Zombie Nurse In Love (2005); Bloody Mary; Candy Stripers; The Living and the Dead; Silent Hill; Sentence Final (2006) Pas Douce; Nazareno; Atonement (2007)
Total films = 280	

lines and other relevant details (e.g. actors, writers and directors names, script influences, information about the films' history and relationship to other films). As the data was mainly text, it was loaded into an Excel file allowing manual, quantitative analysis.

In the third phase, the 280 films were analysed using theoretical sampling for concepts and themes related to how the image of nurses/nursing was portrayed in each of the films. In the process of analysis, a manual (colour code, cut and paste) approach was used. The aim of the coding process was to identify concepts (e.g. Doctor/nurse relationship or zombie nurse films) that were then analysed and cross-referenced, allowing patterns in the data (or themes) to emerge.

Trustworthiness

All primary data and review processes were subsequently analysed by two academic colleagues, who independently tested the content validity of the tools used and trustworthiness of the results. They were sent all the primary data and verified that the tools used were appropriate and that the research processes employed were credible and dependable. They also evaluated and confirmed the results from each phase of the study, including the data analysis.

Ethical considerations

There were no ethical issues relevant to this research.

Findings

Quantitative data: country of production

The majority of films were produced solely in the USA (n = 179/63·9%) (Table 2), with those made solely in the United Kingdom (UK) making up just over a third of the remainder (n = 34/12·1%). French and Australian film industries produced five and seven films respectively and a small number of others were produced in separate countries or by inter-country productions (e.g. Mexico/France/Spain or UK/Germany). As the focus of the study was on films made in the Western world, it is not surprising that the massive Hollywood film industry dominated. The resurgence of the Australian film industry is evident by their major contribution to nurse-related films in the 1980s, and films made in the UK feature more prominently in the middle decades of the 1900s, before decreasing and then reappearing as collaborative productions from the 1990s on. Of the films produced in countries other than the USA and UK, 62·6%, have appeared since the 1980s.

Quantitative data: genre

Table 3 offers an analysis of the nurse-related films by genre. The list of genres represents those suggested in http://www.imdb.com (with Internet Movie Data Base being described as the "Earth's Biggest Movie Database" on the IMDB website). Almost, half of the films were categorized as 'Drama' (n = 133/47·5%), although a further 37 were also described as romantic/drama, comedy/drama, thriller/drama or Sci-Fi/drama, meaning that 60·7% of those featuring nurses or nursing were in the dramatic genre. This is not surprising as nurses' work commonly means they deal with death, injury and emotional issues, placing them squarely in the sphere of dramatic events.

The second most common genre was 'Comedy' (n = 57/20%), although a further 18 films incorporating comedy with either a romantic, thriller or dramatic element meant that just over a quarter were of a comic genre (26·3%). The other genres identified occurred in much smaller numbers and included horror (n = 17), thrillers (n = 10), mystery (n = 10) biopic (n = 5), romance (n = 2) and animation (n = 1). However, in reality many of the genres overlapped so that, while only two films were identified as

Table 2 Feature films with nurses in main roles: by country of production

Year/country	1900–1919	1920–1929	1930–1939	1940–1949	1950–1959	1960–1969	1970–1979	1980–1989	1990–1999	2000–2007	Total number (%)
USA	16	8	35	18	17	14	14	20	17	20	179 (63·9)
UK	1	1	1	6	7	6	5	3	2	2	34 (12·1)
Australia							1	5	1		7 (2·5)
France				1			2			3	6 (2·1)
Italy				1			3			1	5 (1·7)
Japan				1		2				2	5 (1·7)
Canada							2			3	5 (1·7)
Germany						1	1	1		1	4 (1·4)
Spain						1			1	2	4 (1·4)
Sweden					2	1			1		4 (1·4)
Netherland								1		1	2 (0·7)
UK/Germany										2	2 (0·7)
UK/USA									1	1	2 (0·7)
Norway								1			1 (0·3)
Israel								1			1 (0·3)
Finland									1		1 (0·3)
Hungary						1					1 (0·3)
Greece						1					1 (0·3)
Turkey					1						1 (0·3)
Mexico/France/Spain									1		1 (0·3)
France/Italy					1						1 (0·3)
Canada/USA										1	1 (0·3)
Japan/USA/Germany										1	1 (0·3)
Canada/France										1	1 (0·3)
USA/Australia									1		1 (0·3)
Australia/NZ/USA									1		1 (0·3)
Belgium/USA									1		1 (0·3)
Norway/Sweden/Finland/ Denmark/Iceland									1		1 (0·3)
Germany/Sweden/Finland/ Denmark									1		1 (0·3)
France/UK/USA								1			1 (0·3)
France/Italy/Germany							1				1 (0·3)
France/Italy/Germany/Canada									1		1 (0·3)
Spain/Italy/France/UK/ Germany									1		1 (0·3)
French/USA/Italy						1					1 (0·3)
Total	17	9	36	27	28	28	29	33	32	41	280

USA, United States of America; UK, United Kingdom; NZ, New Zealand.
'/' indicates collaborative production between countries.

Table 3 Feature films with nurses in main roles: by genre

Year/genre	1900–1919	1920–1929	1930–1939	1940–1949	1950–1959	1960–1969	1970–1979	1980–1989	1990–1999	2000–2007	Total
Drama	8	2	19	16	16	11	7	16	21	17	133
Comedy	8	5	4	3	6	6	13	3	2	7	57
Horror							3	7	2	5	17
Romantic/drama			4	1	2	2		2	2	1	14
Comedy/drama		2	1			4		1		2	10
Thriller			1	1		2	3		2	1	10
Drama/thriller				2	1	1	1	1	1	3	10
Mystery			4	3	1				2		10
Comedy/thriller			1					1		3	5
Biopic	1		2	1				1			5
Romantic/comedy					1	1		1			3
Sci-Fi drama					1	1	1				3
Romance							1			1	2
Animation										1	1
Total	17	9	36	27	28	28	29	33	32	41	280

'Romance', a further 17 films were listed as either romantic/comedies or romantic/drama. Indeed, romances may have been included under the catch-all 'Dramatic' tag, so that pinning any film down to one genre was difficult. For this reason, films were also analysed for their plot or story line.

Quantitative data: plot and story line

Films often had more than one plot or story line and more than 280 total 'plots' were identified (Table 4). The most common plot-line ($n = 101$) involved nurses who fell in love or who engaged in romantic liaisons (*Half Angel*, 1951 and

Table 4 Feature films with nurses in the main roles: by plot

Year/plot	1900–1919	1920–1929	1930–1939	1940–1949	1950–1959	1960–1969	1970–1979	1980–1989	1990–1999	2000	Total
Romance/love	8	6	12	9	17	14	12	9	8	6	101
A nurse's care (duty)	9	3	17	11	6	9	3	12	12	14	96
Nurse at war	8	4	8	11	10	7	4	9	8	4	73
Sex kitten/object of desire	5	6	7	6	5	8	15	5	2	5	64
Murder/mystery		1	5	6	3	5	11	8	9	13	61
Private nurse	1	3	2	5	1	1	3	4	4	2	26
Crime			5	4	1		3	2	1	7	23
Un-balanced nurse			1	1	1		2	4	7	4	20
Nursing student			3	3	2		4	1	2	2	17
Mental health nursing						4	3	3	4	1	15
Real life	2		2	1	2		1	2	2		12
Children's nurse	1	1	1	1	2	1		2	1	2	12
Community nurse			1	1		1		3	2	3	11
Missionary				1	3	3		1	1		9
Nurse as detective			7	1					1		9
Male nurse						1		1	1	4	7
Maternity			4		1	2					7
Musical nursing				1	1					4	6
Zombie Issues				1						4	5
Total											574

NB: Some of the films had two or more main story lines (e.g. war and spy or war and romance).

In Love and War, 1996). These were commonly accompanied by other plots or occurred as part of wider story lines, most commonly romance and war (*Hanover Street*, 1978) or romance and the conflict between the nurse and her call to duty (*Nurse Marjorie*, 1920 and *An Indecent Obsession*, 1985). Other story lines focused on nurses' call to duty (*n* = 96) (*No Time for Tears*, 1957), nurses at war (*n* = 73) (*War Nurse*, 1930 and *So Proudly We Hail*, 1943) and nurses who played sex kitten or sex object roles (*n* = 64) (*The Hot Box*, 1971 and *Rosie Dixon: Night Nurse*, 1978). Another common plot line revolved around murder and mystery (*n* = 61) (*Miss Pinkerton*, 1932 and *Coffy*, 1973).

Following these dominant story lines were a raft of lesser plot variations, including nurses as private carers (*n* = 26), often linked to romance, sex kitten roles or murder mystery story lines, crime (*n* = 23), missionary roles (*n* = 9), nurses as detectives (*n* = 9) or as unbalanced nurses (*n* = 20). There were other plot lines, but they were represented in a smaller number of films. Some focused on the role of nursing students (*Miss Susie Slagle's*, 1946). A number were based on the lives of famous nurses and offered a biopic view of nursing. A number of films (*The Woman the Germans Shot*, 1918; *Dawn*, 1928 and *Nurse Edith Cavell*, 1939) offered insights into the life and death of Edith Cavell, while *The White Angel* (1936) and *The*

Lady with the Lamp (1951) were about the life of Florence Nightingale. *Miss Ever's Boys* (1997) was about the career of Eunice Evers and her role in the Tuskegee syphilis experiments and the life and work of Elizabeth Kenny, an Australian nurse, was dealt with in the film *Sister Kenny* (1946).

There were seven films featuring male nurses, all made after the 1960s (*Lonesome Cowboy*, 1968 and *Talk to Her*, 2002), and a small group of films featured the work of children's nurses (e.g. *The Blue Veil*, 1951), maternity nursing (*Jessica*, 1962) and community nursing (*Nurse on Wheels*, 1969). Although it seemed a surprising plot device, five films featured nurse-related zombie issues (*I Walked with a Zombie*, 1943, *Dawn of the Dead*, 2004) and nurses also featured in the musicals *South Pacific* (1958/2001) and *Yes Nurse, No Nurse* (2002).

Qualitative data: themes related to how the image of nurses/nursing is portrayed in the feature films

Viewing the films or reviewing literature about each of the films allowed an analysis of concepts describing how nurses or nursing have been portrayed in the films studied. Initially, a long list of concepts was developed and this was re-evaluated as each film was viewed and reviewed. From this review, patterns or themes emerged that represented insights into how nurses have been portrayed on screen (see Table 5). The themes that emerged were: self-sacrifice/care, the 'Heroine', sex object, romantic/feminine, intelligence, strong woman, the 'Dark nurse' and victim.

Different themes appeared more prominently at different times in the century. For example, in the early and middle decade films regularly demonstrated the theme of 'Self-sacrifice.' Although in the 1970s it disappeared almost completely, only to return with vigour in the late 1980s and 1990s in films such as *The English Patient* (1996) and *Talk to Her* (2002).

Themes also differed in their intensity, with self-sacrifice/care, the 'Heroine', sex object and romantic/feminine appearing more commonly and consistently across the decades than the other themes identified (intelligence, strong woman, the 'Dark nurse' and victim). These other themes appeared less often and predominantly in films of the later decades. However, these later themes appeared to represent new insights into how nurses are represented in feature films, with nurses being portrayed as much more than sex kittens, self-sacrificial angels, heroines and romantic darlings. In films, such as *Passion Fish* (1992), *If These Walls Could Talk* (1996), *Angels in America* (2004) and *14 Hours* (2005), nurses were seen to be finding their voice as professionals and as strong women (and men).

Table 5 Concepts and themes

Concepts	Themes	1900–1919	1920–1939	1940–1959	1960–1979	1980–1999	2000→
War nurse Heroine Self-sacrifice Sex kitten Call to duty Object of desire Romance Un-balanced nurse Nursing student Novice nurse Specialist (e.g. community/mental health) Doctor/nurse relationship Zombie nurse Murdering nurse Detective nurse Murder/mystery Missionary Nun Sex object Temptress Strong woman No body's fool Children's nurse Private nurse Wit Male Nurse Humour Mother	Self-sacrifice/Care						
	The 'Heroine'						
	Sex object						
	Romantic/feminine						
	Intelligent						
	Strong woman						
	The 'Dark nurse'						
	The 'Victim'						

Strong trend ▮ Moderate trend ▨ Weak trend ☐

Trends were an indication of the dominance or otherwise of the themes in each decade, e.g. 'The Victim' theme was not noted until the 1960s, while the theme of 'Self-sacrifice' was evident strongly across the century apart from in the 1960s and 1970s.

There also emerged less enlightening representations of nurses in film, with a growing number showing them as victims (*Hospital Massacre*, 1982) or in darker roles, as vengeful killers (*Death Nurse*, 1987; *Misery*, 1990; *The Nurse*, 1997 and *Torched*, 2004) and murdering Zombies (*Graveyard Alive: A Zombie Nurse in Love*, 2005).

Discussion

Study limitations

The research focus did not include the massive film industries established in the Philippines, China and India. While excluding these areas of film production was not the initial intention, accessing them proved beyond the study resources. Most of the films were produced in Pilipino, Chinese/Cantonese or Hindu/Urdu, making access to both written information about the films or understanding the films themselves difficult. Early in the research process, a decision was made to avoid films from Eastern countries (although a few from Japan were identified and included). However, a rich vein of information related to an understanding of nursing through films from Asian cultures may still be waiting to be discovered.

Another area of nurse-related films was pornographic films. It was not the intention in this study to investigate this area of film production, but even the best-intentioned web searches produced accidental discoveries of pornographic titles. Within the pornographic film industry, there appears to be a significant branch of nurse-related titles, but these were not included in the study. However, some general release titles that were included (e.g. *Rosie Dixon Night Nurse*, 1978) could be classified as pornographic.

In the 1970s, a genre of film evolved in the USA called 'exploitation' or 'sexploitation' (Rasmussen 2001), with titles such as *The Student Nurses* (1970), *Candy Stripe Nurses* (1974), *The Young Nurses* (1973), *Night Call Nurses* (1972) and *Private Duty Nurses* (1971). They offer little more than an opportunity for nurses to be viewed as sex objects, where characters dressed as nurses (then undressed) undertake nurse-related activities before the plot regresses to naked titillation. There are also a wide range of nurse-related bondage films and, while the pornographic genre is acknowledged, no attempt has been made to gather research data about them.

Television series that featured nurses or had nursing as a primary element of the story (e.g. M*A*S*H*, ER, China Beach, Nightingales, Gideon's Crossing, Holby City, Angels, No Angels, All Saints, etc.) were also not included in the study. This was because the number of TV series and related episodes would have made gathering data a massive undertaking, again beyond the study resources and, because the type of 'medical' series seen on television commonly included nursing within a medical framework, distilling the nurse-related content was also considered problematic.

Documentary style films featuring nursing were also excluded from the research. This is not to suggest that there are not a number of excellent films in this category, but as they were not 'feature films' they were outside the study parameters (e.g. *Street Nurse*, 2002 and *Sicko*, 2007).

Accessing films was also problematic in some cases. Those made prior to the 1940s proved extremely difficult to locate and watch, and therefore almost all the films for the first half of the century were reviewed via the internet or literature describing them.

Image of nurses in feature films

The image of nurses in feature films is wider than Bayer's (2007) 'Angel to Devil' perspective. Films about nurses do not start by portraying nurses as 'angels' any more than they end by portraying them as 'devils'. Films featuring nurses and nursing have been identified in large numbers and offer a wide range of plot and story lines, although much of the previous work on how nurses have been portrayed in films documents that they have been set in stereotypical or uncomplimentary nursing roles (Kalisch & Kalisch 1982, Kalisch *et al.* 1982, Burech & Gordon 2000, Farella 2001, Rasmussen 2001, Gordon & Johnson 2004, Bayer 2007).

In early films, nurses are seen predominantly as heroines (commonly based on real life events), romantic leads or self-sacrificial carers, often Red Cross nurses, with the First World War offering a common backdrop to many story lines (*Romance of a War Nurse*, 1908 and *War Nurse*, 1930). There are also a number of slapstick 'chase' films that portray nurses as sex objects (*Billy's Nurse*, 1912), although the main sub-plot of self-sacrifice dominates many of the early films about nurses, and in this regard Bayer's (2007) description of nurses as 'angels' is appropriate. The theme appears throughout the century, reinforcing the place of 'self-sacrifice' at the core of a nurse's duty. This is evident in films such as *Dawn* (1928), *So Proudly We Hail* (1943) and *The Lamp Still Burns* (1943) which were produced with the direct intent of motivating young 'women' to become nurses. The implication was that as long as women were nice, kind and feminine they had all that was required to be a nurse.

Numerous films portray nurses as alluring and sexually flirtatious. Seventy-four (26·4%) of those reviewed feature an overtly sexual representation of nurses, although this does not feature as prominently as in Kalisch *et al.*'s (1982) study, where they suggest that 73% of the films they reviewed characterized nurses as 'sex objects'. However, the image of nurses as a 'sex object' has negative implications for nursing professionals. There may be room for interpretation in what constitutes a 'sex object', and it may be that what was considered sexually provocative in the 1980s has shifted, or that different films were reviewed. However, there can be no doubt that representing nurses as sexually provocative or flirtatious can only detract from the aspirations of nursing to achieve recognition as a profession. Films such as *Operation Petticoat* (1959), *Carry on Nurse* (1959), *The Hot Box* (1971), *Carry on Matron* (1972), *Rosie Dixon: Night Nurse* (1978), *Where the Money Is* (2000) and *Yes Nurse, No Nurse* (2002) are examples that show the sexier side of nurses, potentially leading to misrepresentation of the image of nurses by the viewing public.

Bayer (2007) indicates that a 1999 MORI pole in the UK showed that only 6% of those surveyed thought that nurses were seen as sex objects. This suggests that it is more likely that film-makers' use nurses in roles that are sexually alluring to enhance their films' appeal, rather than as a reflection of how the general public or the nursing profession itself sees nurses. Nurses may not be comfortable with this, but it highlights the influence that film-makers have on the image of nursing represented on film. It may be that, for younger people, feature films are their main insight into how nurses and the nursing profession are portrayed and therefore nurses should be conscious of the images used to represent them. Indeed, Takase *et al.* (2000) found that nurses considered that the image of nurses in films reinforced the stereotypical image assigned to nursing.

As nurse education has evolved and nursing has emerged and grown as a profession, these historical, inaccurate and dated images of nursing often clash or grate with the professional and clinical aspirations of today's nurses (Rasmussen 2001). Film-makers have been slow to translate nurses' aspirations or modern professional nursing characteristics into film scripts. Thus, the Western film industry has predominantly followed stereotypical lines when representing nurses in feature films. Burech and Gordon (2000), p. 13) also noted this, and called for 'a more complex and authentic image of the nurse' to 'replace dated or distorted stereotypes'.

However, as more films are produced beyond Hollywood's borders there is evidence of a change away from the stereotypical themes of the past. Nurses are increasingly being represented as professional, capable, intelligent, independent and strong, with films such as *The World According to Garp* (1982), *14 Hours* (2004) and *Angels in America* (2005) offering examples of this more progressive portrayal.

As the nursing profession has grown there has been a corresponding decline in the representation of the 'self-sacrificial' nurse in feature films, with a corresponding growth of the 'Dark Nurse.' The caring and self-sacrificial theme remains but, as nurses develop more power as women and professionals, they are increasingly represented as the 'Dark Nurse' who is able to be both powerful and evil.

The 'darker' side of nursing appeared to emerge from the 1960s as women and nurses began to exercise more authority over their lives and bodies. Nurses had appeared in murder mysteries and sinister roles in previous decades (mainly in the 1930s, e.g. *The Great Hospital Mystery*, 1936), but as the century progressed they appeared more often in psychological thrillers (*Woman of Straw*, 1964 and *Persona*, 1966) or as psychopathic killers (*The Honeymoon Killers*, 1969 and *Misery*, 1991). The 'Dark nurse' need not always play an 'evil' role, and often represented the liberation of a repressed inner self that reflected the development of women's power in the 1990s.

As the century progressed and the role of women in society changed, so too did the image of nursing in film. Films appear with women, and occasionally men (*Birdy*, 1984), who are described as 'nobody's fool' and who appear as independent, witty and possessing inner strength. Nurse 'Jenny' demonstrates this very effectively in *The World According to Garp* (1982) as do the films *Why me?* (1984) and *Intimate Strangers* (1986). The nurses in these films were not represented as caring, but as forceful and strong, indicating that dramatic films with nurses playing strong women and men are increasingly evident (*Magnolia*, 1999 and *The English Patient*, 1996). There is no evidence to support the notion of the 'vanishing nurse' (Gordon & Johnson 2004), and the new century sees the trend for films with strong professional, assertive, self-confident nurses continuing and growing.

Feature films offer only a brief insight into how the image of nurses/nursing has been portrayed. However, the themes identified in this study indicate that there is much more on offer than the previous stereotypical images of the past. Films continue to deal with the themes of romance and heroism (*Pearl Harbour*, 2001), self-sacrifice (*Life on Liberty Street*, 2004), sex objects (*Yes Nurse, No Nurse*, 2002) strong women, (*If these Walls Could Talk 2*, 2000)

What is already known about this topic

- Public perceptions of nurses/nursing are strongly influenced by the media.
- The representation of nurses in feature films is often at odds with the way nurses perceive themselves and their profession.
- Nurses need to be aware of the impact of the film media, has and use the media to increase public knowledge and understanding of the contribution nurses make to the health and wellbeing of the community.

What this paper adds

- In early films, nurses are seen predominantly as heroines, romantic leads or self-sacrificial carers, with the First World War offering a common backdrop to many story lines.
- More recently, there is evidence of a move away from the stereotypical themes of the past, with nurses increasingly being represented as professional, capable, intelligent, independent and strong.
- The nursing profession and nursing students need to be educated to interpret the sub-texts carried by the media and to work with the media to ensure that a realistic and accurate portrayal is given of them and their profession.

and intelligence (Talk to Her, 2002). Nurses are also seen playing either 'Victims' or the 'Dark nurse' (*Blood: The Last Vampire*, 2000 and *Bloody Mary*, 2006).

Conclusion

In more recent films, nurses are represented as much more than angels and devils, doormats and divas, and film-makers are starting to recognize nursing as fertile ground for a wide range of plot devices. Instead, they are seeking intelligent, strong and passionate characters and are increasingly turning to nursing characters who offer a broader, deeper and authentic representation of modern nurses and nursing.

Nurses need to be aware that developing as a profession includes understanding how nurses are perceived and represented in and by the media. The nursing profession and nursing students need to be skilfully educated to interpret the sub-text carried by the media and to work with the media to ensure the public are given a realistic and accurate description or profile of them and their profession.

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