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Falling for the Insane Artist: A Look at Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*

by Christopher Hunton

(Philosophy 1100)

**I**n his book *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Michel Foucault examines how Western society has viewed, defined, and dealt with those who humans have deemed “insane” in recent centuries. Foucault sees the idea of madness as a child of social construction more so than one of precise psychiatric truth. Through the book, Foucault demonstrates how over time the insane have been driven from a realm of empathetic and somewhat esteemed regard to a place of segregation and isolation. For the purposes of this essay, the focus will specifically deal with how society's stance on madness has been reflected in the role it has given and gives to the insane in the arts.

During Renaissance, as Foucault recants, madness was looked upon and dealt with in a fashion unfamiliar to members of modern Western society, for it seems that madness was given a far more passionate place in this society. It was viewed as something that was inherent in human nature and reflected in each individual and furthermore in society as a whole. One could say that it was seen as an extension of one's own nature rather than something *other* than that of nature. Madness was indeed very much a part of fifteenth century life in Europe. Though confinement existed for the mad, they were given the “...privilege of being confined within the city gates” (Foucault 11). Thusly, the insane were isolated, yet were not placed out of reach from the community. There was a certain level of interaction that existed here and came from this proximity. Even when it was felt that the care for particular madmen was deemed too strenuous for the city, their annex from the city was dealt with in a rather poetic way. This above mentioned mentality of seeing madness as an extension of oneself is shown through their actions. If not simply forced out and allowed to roam the countryside, the insane were placed in the care of boatmen who would then place the mad upon a ship filled with other “likeminded” passengers. Embarking on a journey, these passengers were led from one city port to another. In a perpetual state of being loaded, unloaded, and loaded once more, the insane were continuous travelers. The journey lasted until the insane found permanent sanctuary or until their last breath left their lungs. The practicality of such a practice is immediately apparent; it did after all rid the city of a perceived burden. Yet, as stated before, there is a certain underlying mentality in this act that is at once both humane and freeing. The insane themselves are expelled, but insanity itself is not forcefully expelled from the insane. Rather the mad are allowed to explore the world as they are; come what may. As Foucault so eloquently puts it, “...water adds to this the dark mass of its own values: it carries off but it does more: it purifies. Navigation delivers man to the uncertainty of fate; on water each of us is in the hands of his own destiny...” (Foucault 11).

It is with this mindset that “madness by romantic identification” is born (Foucault 28). Within a relatively confined time frame, madness plays an inexplicably major role in the art world. In literature insanity takes center stage in works such as Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* or Jacob Van Oestvoren's *Vander Blauwen Schute*, in which a ship's voyage and insanity are central. Likewise, in more humanist works such as the *Praise of Folly* written by Desiderius Erasmus, all of humanity is viewed as containing madness. Visual works of art such as Hieronymus Bosch's *The Ship of Fools* and Peiter Bruegel's *Dulle Griet*, invoke the societies' interaction and fixation with madness. This “romantic identification” of madness can be seen continuing into the seventeenth century with literary works such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which revolves around the equally heroic and delusional title character. So to, the plays of Shakespeare madness in some form often

steers the work's dramatic course. But, to be fair, these late examples are not representative of their time. For in the very same century in which these works were undertaken, *The Ship of Fools* suddenly transforms into the "Hospital of Madmen" (Foucault 35).

It seems that beginning in the sixteenth century and into the early seventeenth century, according to Foucault, the insane were suddenly driven into confinement alongside "the debauched, spendthrift fathers, prodigal sons, blasphemers," and "libertines" (65). Society during this "Age of Reason" was very much driven by productivity and these perceived malcontents were seen as those who could not contribute to the furthering of their society's achievements. Within these asylums, the "irregulars" of society were put to excruciating work, as to give purpose to the purposeless. Those of the insane who were unable to do so were forced into public whippings and the performing of plays for the amusement of an audience; their purpose was one of entertainment. "Here is madness elevated to spectacle above the silence of the asylums, and becoming public scandal for the general delight," as Foucault states (69). Though they are stripped of the humanity, the insane are not yet treated as sick. They are now seen as a subject of gossip more than anything else. Such is the case of the Marquis de Sade and his works. Though it could be said that he had a following, it came in the form of presenting an opposing mentality to that of the age. He was offered "...as a diversion to the good conscience of a reason sure of itself" (Foucault 70). It is through disgrace that his art is acclimated, reflecting the changed mentality of this age.

In the following century, a division is made between, what we may see as "the criminal" and "the insane". The insane are given their very own spaces of confinement, separated from society. Moreover, madness is seen as something that must be expelled. As Foucault argues, "...it was at the end of the eighteenth century-that is in 1793 in France-that Philippe Pinel freed madmen from their chains, and it was at about the same time in England that Samuel Tuke, a Quaker, created a psychiatric hospital" (Faubion 338). So far is civilization from a "romantic" view of madness, that "...long cures for madness were elaborated whose aim was not so much to care for the soul as to cure the entire individual, his nervous fiber as well as the course of his imagination" (Foucault 159). It is a mass ideal in conjunction with its institutions that creates the stigma of madness as an ailment. As Sigmund Freud writes in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, "By allowing common feeling to be our guide in deciding what features of human life are to be regarded as civilized, we have obtained a clear impression of the general picture of civilization..." (50). No longer is madness seen as something inborn in humankind itself, but it is viewed as an alien force invading the souls of its victims. Once more, it is an alien force that requires the aid of another alien force (psychiatry) in its vanquishing.

With this viewpoint, which has continued by means of a societal mentality into the present, the connection between the artistic world and the world which is now inhabited by insane can be seen as somewhat ambiguous. In the higher steeples of the artistic community madness is once again somewhat rectified (as will be discussed shortly). In the more confined realm, after the inception of psychoanalysis, artistic expression was encouraged in asylum patients in hopes that it "would shed light on the deep and dark recess of the mind" (Porter 181). Such notable figures as Dr. Walter Morgenthaler, for his work with his artistically inclined patient Adolf Wolfi, and scholars such as Jean Dubuffet (an artist himself), who worked on collecting, cataloging, and defining the art of the insane, come into the academic spectrum. A certain prestige is now given to those who through or as a direct result of their insanity produce works of art. Yet, this prestige is limited to the smallest increment of the greater art community. Art as a means of psychotherapy too gains a certain popularity within this time frame as well. But, as Roy Porter points out in his book *Madness: A Brief History*, this practice does not take a firm hold as fears that "...patients would end up being unconsciously coached to produce artworks according to psychiatric expectations". Furthermore, he asserts that the inclination of drug focused therapies may have furthered the decline of this practice, very much illustrating the mindset of the times (181).

In his conclusion to his book, Foucault, points to an interesting trend in which we once again identify with insanity in the high arts. He specifically references the painters Francisco Goya and Vincent Van Gogh, the poet and playwright Antoine Artaud, and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche as artists who are been given tremendous accolade and have transfixed their works into the public imagination. Foucault makes the assertion that madness, in this esteemed artistic form, brings the very question of our reason and civility to light. As he states "...the world that thought to measure and justify madness through psychology must justify itself before madness, since in its struggles and agonies it measures itself by the excess of the works like those of Nietzsche, of Van Gogh, of Artaud. And nothing in itself, especially not what it can know of madness, assures the world that it is justified by such works of madness" (Foucault 289). Thusly, he maintains the notion that it is nothing less than hypocrisy when our society defines itself by the achievements of "madmen" and at the same time condemns madness as an entity and *in itself* as a debilitating force to the modern mode of life.

II: Upon reading the conclusion of *Madness and Civilization*, I found myself at a somewhat conflicted crossroad of thought. On one the side, I wanted to agree whole heartedly with Foucault's proclamation and for that matter thought tremendously of the meticulous method in which he reached it. On a strictly ethical level, it makes seemingly no sense how madness is tolerated and moreover praised in one niche of society and shunned in every other. Yet, I argue that the *very fact* that we allow insanity to show its usefulness in only one aspect of our culture reinforces our societal mindset of confinement. In our search for reason in the mad, we have found their validity in the arts and *only* in the arts. And it is this supposed gateway to legitimacy that suddenly shows itself as the restraint it truly is.

Madness does not walk on its own feet into permissibility in our society: it rides on the shoulders of the artist. Foucault argues that the art is glorified beyond the fact of the artist's insanity; that our vantage on the insane is shifting in the light of realizing our hypocrisy. Yet, I raise the question if more often than not it is the insanity within the artist that causes sensation. In this respect, have we not simply returned to the days were we parade around our insane (through their accomplishments) as a source of entertainment and spectacle? At the very least, one must acknowledge the fact that their insanity serves as additional point of interest in drawing us closer towards their creations. After all, it is a well known fact that Van Gogh's paintings furthered their place in the societal renown after the artist's anguish driven suicide. In this way, insanity can still very much be seen as being scandalized rather than empathized by the public; even if it is in the most subconscious of ways. Thusly, our society does not "...justify itself through madness," because it is too busy gawking at it. True these few artists are used as a standard of accomplishment, but they are the few mad men in a sea of others who are deemed both venerable and sane. They are the few; the exceptional exceptions.

Now, it could be argued that the previous sentiment leans far too much on the idea that humans are mesmerized and attracted to the pain of others; an idea that certainly can be contested. Yet, even if my previous assertion is completely unfounded, the fact still remains that this supposed new esteem afforded to the insane would still only exist in the art community. As is obvious, the art community does not adequately stand as a cross section of humanity. Accordingly, this new vantage would not be accepted to the point of social change. So it is with this conclusion in mind that I must disagree with Foucault's "new triumph of madness" (289). For, the seeds have sprouted, but they are still confined to the planter's pot.

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