ART OF DESPAIR: AN INTROSPECTION OF MADNESS THROUGH 19TH CENTURY POST-IMPRESSIONISM

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By the late 19th century, the Impressionists had already been experimenting with evolving artistic techniques to convey the natural beauty of the world, but it was the visceral response of Post-Impressionists like Vincent Van Gogh and Edvard Munch that transcended the new movement by internalizing the world around them to use it as a window into the souls of the artists themselves. It was the later works of Munch and Van Gogh, however, that would encompass the feelings that much of Europe had been holding onto during this time. The art created by these two artists would express these bubbling emotions and bring to light the hardships felt by the people during such an unstable and uncertain time. Within the grips of madness and despair, both VanGogh and Munch recorded their pain and mental instability through their art, and it was the art that would foreshadow their trauma and tragedy to come.

Despite being a time of great technological advances with a steadily rising middle class, Europe faced many social issues and challenges in the late 19th century. The rise of the Industrial Revolution had created new jobs and a better outlook for the future, but the socioeconomic changes during this time created strain and uncertainty within the population.[1] Stemming from the Napoleonic era, the rising population and decline of village life and farming contributed to this crisis,[2] affecting people in many ways—including their mental health. Once having been cast out by society, the mentally ill were now seen in a new light with the help of

[1]Bergquist, James M. "Social and Political Unrest in Europe: 19th Century." *Daily Life through History*, ABC-CLIO, 2018, dailylife2.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1380908. Accessed 21 Oct. 2018.
[2]Bergquist.

developments in new technology and treatments.[3] Artists of this time, including Munch and Van Gogh, struggled to cope with these changes as they sought to express their perspective of the world through movements like Post-Impressionism. Although differing in context and subject matter, the two artists drew various similarities relating to their own illnesses within the framework of their art. The work of Van Gogh and Munch could be treated as windows into the souls of two damaged and troubled men adjusting to the immense social change during their time and, through their art, we can strive to understand the ways in which they communicated their mental illness to the world.

The asylum, once an institution of abuse and mistreatment, was about to be revamped,[4] allowing patients to not only be seen as individuals, but to also receive treatment with the aim of returning patients back to society as productive citizens. In 1908, Munch was treated for a "psychotic episode",[5] but his recovery allowed him to gain new perspective, leading to some of his more mainstream works while abandoning the morbid subject matter he came to be known for earlier in his career.[6] Van Gogh's hospitalization in 1889, to the same extent, enabled him to produce some of his most manic and expressive work, exploring new depths of the human psyche and experimenting with themes of death and illness.[7] These works, however, would not come without consequence.

Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows* (see Fig. 1) can be seen as his own interpretation of a suicide note, as it is often attributed as his last known work (the likelihood of this, however, is uncertain).[8] Viewing this piece allows one to confront death head on in the vast field with dark skies looming over. The crows themselves taunt the viewer as they sweep across the sky, one after another, reminding us of an inevitable death to come. In the distance, the horizon flows in as if to swallow the viewer, leaving no room for escape.[9] The neon-indigo coloured sky threatens the only possibility to break free, this being the two small clouds, perhaps symbolizing hope in the face of death.[10] The wheat field itself—a symbol of life—battles with the angry sky fighting for room in the limited amount of space available in the frame. In an almost biblical subversion, we get dark from above domineering over light from below. Only one can prevail, but which is it? Perhaps

[3]Goldin, Grace. "Asylum." Grove Art Online, 2003, Oxford Art Online, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao. Accessed 21 Oct. 2018.
[4]Goldin.
[5]Baughman, Marjie L., and McCay Vernon. "Art, Madness, and Human Interaction." *Art Journal*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1972, pp. 413-420. https://www.jstor.org/stable775545. Accessed 21 Oct. 2018, pp. 415.
[6]Baughman & Vernon, pp. 415.
[7]Ibid, pp. 413.
[8]Sund, Judy. *Van Gogh*. Phaidon Press, 2002.
[9]Wallace, Robert. *The World of Van Gogh, 1853-1890*. Time-Life Books, 1969, pp. 165.
[10]Wallace, pp. 166.

the most troubling aspect of the piece is the road to nowhere. The dirt path curving into the field gives one final sense of optimism until we realize that it seemingly cuts off, leading to an empty nothingness—to a dead end.[11] Van Gogh said himself, in a letter to his brother Theo, that he had "no difficulty expressing 'sadness and loneliness' [in the last of his paintings]",[12] which can most evidently be noticed in this particular piece. Although *Wheatfields with Crows* may not have been his final work, it was indeed his final stand, perhaps one final confrontation with death.

As seen in Fig. 2, Munch's *The Scream* evokes feelings of uneasiness, fear, sadness, and empathy for the figure standing on the pier. Munch said that at this time in his life he was hearing the scream all around him. This unbearable "scream" made it difficult to do the slightest of tasks—like crossing the street—as doing so would cause "great dizziness at the slightest height".[13] As a viewer, it is easy to get lost in *The Scream* as it induces a dizziness and sense of unbalance.[14] The deafening sound of the scream causes the figure to hold its ears in an attempt to reserve its last ounce of sanity. As we divert our focus from the psychological experience of this faceless figure,[15] we notice the unorthodox perspective of the surrounding curved space, juxtaposed with the perfectly straight diagonal lines, creating a barrier between the sane and insane mind. The faceless figure, lacking any sense of gender or self-identity gets lost in the encapsulating environment as its twisting and turning body becomes one with the landscape.[16] The figure standing before us, full of despair and anxiety, now becomes part of its environment as it suffers a "loss of identity [and] becomes death".[17]

When comparing and contrasting *The Scream* (Fig. 2) with *Wheatfield with Crows* (Fig. 1), the two works can be approached similarly, both thematically and contextually. Knowing that *Wheatfield with Crows* is considered to be Van Gogh's final goodbye, it is only fitting that shortly after completion of this work, he decided to end his own life in a wheat field under the menacing skies of Arles.[18] The fact that he was most likely suffering from Schizophrenia[19] may help us understand what he was feeling when working on *Wheatfield with Crows*. Van Gogh has distorted the environment in a way that forces us to witness it through the lens of a

[11]Ibid.
[12]Ibid.
[13]Heller, Reinhold. *Munch: The Scream*. Penguin Press, 1973, pp. 67.
[14]Heller, pp. 78.
[15]Ibid.
[16]Heller, pp. 90.
[17]Ibid.
[18]Sund, pp. 302.
[19]Prinzhorn, Hans. "Genius and Madness". *Parnassus*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1930, pp. 19-30+44. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/797739. Accessed 21 Oct. 2018.

man struggling with mental illness.[20] The wheat field functions as a metaphor for life—for hope—and Van Gogh's tormented soul was in a state of angst as he struggled to express his grief and his fears,[21] but to also communicate a feeling of hopefulness. It is as though he feels undecided, much like his botched attempt at suicide by shooting himself directly under the heart.[22] *The Scream*, however, can be seen as a more literal interpretation of its creator's psychological state. When Munch created The Scream, he was manifesting a literal, tangible suffering, conveyed by the expression of fear on the figure's face. *The Scream* becomes a confession of his own personal fears and psychological digression while also attempting to communicate his need to acknowledge and comprehend his condition.[23] He utilizes many of Van Gogh's techniques[24] to inject a meandering and gentle river of crimson throughout the sky and, and in contrast, the piercing blue of the water. The colours blend into one another, interweaving across the canvas, whereas *Wheatfield with Crows* uses colour in a more objective sense to indicate emotions of separation within one's own psyche by using a jarring, horizontal detachment between the sky and the field to contrast the blues and yellows. Munch's figure, in *The Scream*, feels alone in this apprehensive world as two passersby walk along seemingly unaffected by the terrifying landscape, mirroring the reality of most of the people around Munch himself. It is a stark contrast to the isolation he had felt inside of his own mind. The demonic world in front of Munch taunted him with every ounce of fear and sadness,[25] much like the figure who palms their ears in the hopes of stopping the pulsating sounds from rising and falling.[26] These two works, when compared from a psychological standpoint, work to serve and support one another through the lens of the suffering mind. *The Scream* acts as a cry for help in a confusing world much like how *Wheatfield with Crows* does by using the vast landscape and interjecting colours to explore the depths of one's sanity.

The late 19th century was a time of turbulence and instability for the people of France, many of whom had fallen on hard times during the ever-changing world around them. While the economy was unkind to most, it hit the poorer communities the hardest. Among them were farmers and shopkeepers, artisans and countryfolk—individuals struggling with inner turmoil while trying to make ends meet.[27] This struggle can be seen in Van Gogh's *Interior of the Night Café in Arles,*

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[20]"The Turn to Modernism: Art and Architecture." World Eras, edited by James R. Farr, vol. 9: Industrial Revolution in Europe, 1750-1914, Gale, 2003, pp. 70-76. Gale Virtual Reference Library, http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3035400037/GVRL. Accessed 21 Oct. 2018.
[21]Wallace, pp. 166.
[22]Sund, pp. 302.
[23]Heller, pp. 56.
[24]Ibid, pp. 80.
[25]Tojner, Paul E. *Munch: In his Own Words*. Forget Press, 2003, pp. 16.
[26]Tojner, pp. 21.
[27]Bergquist.

evoking a sense of despair in the bar patrons as they hopelessly rest their heads in their arms. Van Gogh's own time spent in the town of Arles was turbulent, as it was the place where his psychosis would peak, leaving him hospitalized and eventually ending his own life,[28] not too far from the Café. He was an outsider himself, and painted a room representing his own feelings of desperation and anguish, with his goal being to express the "terrible passions of humanity"[29] in the form of colour. The walls, almost blood red (mirroring Munch's sky in *The Scream*), strike a harsh contrast with the green billiards table arousing a feeling of dreadfulness. This clash of colours creates a striking acidic-like effect as the tormented and tortured souls of the Café gives the viewer a glimpse into the dark underbelly of the night.[30] As Van Gogh once said of the painting, "the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad or commit a crime,"[31] an appropriate sentiment by a man who was all but immersed in the café society.

Munch's *Anxiety* (Fig. 4), on the other hand, does not rely on the body language of the subjects and the space around them, but more so on the facial expressions of the subjects to relay the inner emotional truth of them to the viewer. Munch, once described people as wearing masks; on the outside they are smiling and composed, but underneath—only suffering.[32] When analyzing *Anxiety*, it forces us to ask the question: what are these people *feeling*? This exploration into the human psyche is what the people of the time were not able to accept within their limited view of the world, and Munch's need to explore the dark corners of the mind to "reveal… the unmentionable"[33] is what separated him from his contemporaries. As an expression of fear and mental instability, *Anxiety* lends itself to this idea. Because of the stark whiteness of the figures against the background, our eye is drawn to the subjects' wide gaze and bland expressions as they attempt to cross the threshold into our reality. Everyone in the crowd shares a similar unnerving leer which *creates* anxiety and unease within us by reaching deep into our own psyche and forcing us to confront our fears. The pale figures march toward us in a tight and claustrophobic trance, suggesting the group to be in some sort of emotionally stoic state.[34] The viewers eye is then forced above to the sky where flowing red and orange colours dance and fuse with tints of green. Munch's use of these colours, spiraling out of control into the abyss, creates a psychedelic experience for the viewer, allowing one to fully give in to the acidic trance of the landscape. It is as if Munch had taken all of the bottled-up trauma that he had experienced throughout his life and offered it to *Anxiety*, giving in fully, just as the viewer does.

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[28]Baughman &Vernon, pp. 413.
[29]Wallace, pp. 93.
[30]Ibid, pp. 113.
[31]Ibid, pp. 93.
[32]Clarke, Jay A. *Becoming Edvard Munch: Influence, Anxiety, and Myth*. Yale University Press, 2009, pp. 88.
[33]Tojner, pp. 12.
[34]Clarke, pp. 88.

Munch felt that he had only two ways to express himself emotionally: either so violently that it could bring on a nervous breakdown, or so empty that he felt only a "soul-searching melancholy".[35] It could be argued that Van Gogh felt much the same way. The colours used in both *Anxiety* and *Night Café* encapsulate the feelings of despair and entrapment. The blood red sky in *Anxiety* comes forth, mocking us, much like the marching figures, backing the viewer into a wall with their own pulsating anxiety. The *Night Café*, to the same effect, reminds us that the bar patrons are hopeless, as the harsh colours of the walls begin to weigh on the people, pushing them down further and further with no escape. When it came to colour in art, Van Gogh's goal was to create something out of the reach of rationality.[36] While Munch's Anxiety reminds us of the ugliness of the world,[37] not allowing us the option of escape, the *Night Café*, we realize upon closer inspection, provides a sense of hope. The doorway to the centre of the room is the escape that the people need, right there in front of them yet they cannot seem to lift their heavy heads to take notice. If they could only get up and walk out, maybe they could be saved—and perhaps Van Gogh with them.

Both artists, blessed with brilliance and afflicted with pain, struggled their entire lives to effectively communicate the inner workings of their suffering minds through the context of their art. Through their art, the world has been given the gift of wonder, of sorrow and sadness, of despair and of hope, and the gift of vicarious exploration. Through their expression of mental illness, we try to understand them not only as artists, but as two men suffering from pain. They lived in a time of great change and hardship, but despite all of the advancements for the mentally ill, it was not enough in the end. Their minds, as brilliant as they were, ended up becoming their own worst enemies and ultimately led them to a life of destruction and despair; they stand in that open field, darkening skies above with no road out; they reluctantly join the crowd, being forcefully backed into the corner of darkness, suffocated by the encroaching faces. Their art provides windows into the souls of brilliance, madness, grief and love; we peer in only to find ourselves, as reflections of the art, empathizing with the subjects and the artists through emotional truth universally shared among one another; their art reflects the fear, sadness, joy, and wonder of the world around us; they reflect the souls of people, of humanity; they reflect the souls of *us*.

[35]Tojner, pp. 63.
[36]Wallace, pp. 39.
[37]Heller, pp. 95.

Figure 1: Vincent van Gogh, Dutch. *Wheatfield with Crows*. 1890.
Artstor, library-artstor-org.ezproxy.langara.bc.ca/asset/AIC_30038

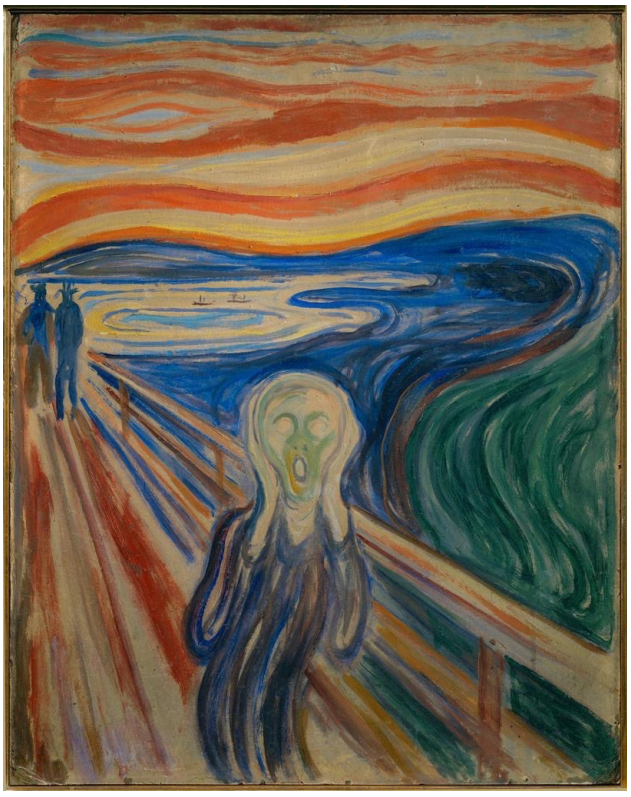

Figure 2: Edvard Munch, (Norwegian painter, printmaker, and draftsman, 1863-1944). *The Scream*. 1910.
Artstor, library.artstor.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_25515088

Fig. 3. Vincent van Gogh, 1853-1890. *Interior of the Night Cafe in Arles*. 1888. *Artstor*, library.artstor.org/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000701449

Figure 4: Edvard Munch, *Anxiety*, 1894. "Google Arts & Culture." *Arts and Culture*, https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/anxiety/JgE_nwHHS7wTPw. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018

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