

Research in Practice

Dissertation Proposal

Proposed Question for Independent Inquiry: Does art romanticise mental health problems?

Student Name: Caitlin Barrow

Student ID: 1900340

Course: Illustration

Module: Practices in Context: Research in Practice (ADAD5004)

Word Count: 2688 (excluding bibliography but including in-texts quotes and titles)

Lecturer: Louise Burston

Three Key Words: Mental Health, Perception and Deception

Dissertation Proposal

This dissertation proposal aims to discuss and dissect three key words: *Deception*, *Perception*, and *Mental Health*. Moreover, these key terms will be supported by three complimentary visuals and suitable art theorists and critics to help emphasise and demonstrate the themes of this proposal. All of which ensures a deeper understanding into the subject matter, and thus will intend to link the three words to formulate a question regarding the independent research document. Subsequently, the three critics are C. D. Herrera for 'Deception', Deng *et al* for 'Mental Health', Winter *et al* for 'Perception'. Taking into consideration the notes and readings of these three philosophers additionally; Japa Pallikkathayil discussing the topic of 'Deception', Matt Bower debating 'Perception', Bogdan Popoveniuc pondering 'Mental Health'. Additional interpretations will be incorporated.

Mental Health

Depression, together with anxiety, is one of the most fundamental emotional states of conscious being. The fall from the paradise of innocence was the fall into knowledge which brings about the freedom of choice and uncertainty of understanding altogether (Popoveniuc, 2014, p.22).

There is a plethora of negative connotations associated with this term; however, it does not negate the power it holds in relation to art. This may either correlate to the healing process in association with generating art or the source of motivation mental health problems forms in means of creation. Thus, the definition of this term brings into focus a series of different concepts and theories. For example, it is said that individuals with depression have increased self-critical tendencies (Deng *et al.*, 2019, p 4). Whether that be in their work or their own self, depressive states can lower one's admiration for themselves. Deng continues to state, 'some of the most powerful sources of stress that contribute to depression occur as a result of social interactions'; therefore, there is a link between declining mental state and art. This image is reinforced by Huang's notion of artist neuropsychology: 'artistic works are said to be created when the artist is acting out under mental conditions' (2019, p.64). The source continues to suggest that under a sociological standpoint, artists are believed to 'hold enhanced social roles to play and social experiences'. Furthermore, Huang treasures those seemingly depressive pieces from artists, while realistically describing an outsider's perspective on such pieces: 'the artist's creative behaviour will be described as a madman's behaviour, and the artist's work will also be said to have been born in an abnormal state of mind'. Although, the Professor speaks in general terms, it can easily be applied to any artist in similar context.



'Saturn Devouring His Son', Francisco Goya, 1819-1823

Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes is one of the major figures of European art. From royal portraits to bizarre, grotesque illustrations, his legacy demonstrates a tortured genius, generating some of the most compelling art ever produced (Cipriani *et al.*, 2018, p 16).

Although, the dramatic twist in the artist's genre of work is said to be originated from his sudden and mysterious deafness, it can also be argued that mental issues may play a sombre role in this symbolic declination of hope and joy (McKiernan, 2013, p 5-6). McKiernan continues to describe this condition as 'a severe, disabling illness, which featured headache, deafness, tinnitus, vertigo and visual disturbance'. The severe condition left the artist permanently deaf in just a couple of months

and infected his sight with 'morbid and bizarre visions'. This fact is particularly interesting when comparing his later works to his earlier paintings. Cipriani *et al* resumes to insist that after the development of his illness, 'his work became more negative, with thick, bold strokes of dark colour', implying the drastic shift from the innocent and optimistic former appearance. Strengthened by McKiernan statement 'he painted several large, dark and disturbing murals known as *las pinturas negras* (including the renowned Saturn Devouring His Son)'. The National Gallery present his earlier work as a range of 'the Rococo style of his early tapestry cartoons for the royal tapestry works to the sombre Romanticism' (2021). Cipriani *et al* suggests there are potential diagnoses of 'schizophrenia' regarding the artist's condition.

Furthermore, it can be said that the artist's The Black Paintings series are his most intriguing pieces, being detailed as the 'self-expression of a tortured mind' (The Artist, 2021). Taking this into account, there is a possibility that society has grown to treasure works generated from a negative state of mind. 'It's sometimes suggested that the necessary burden of an "artistic" mind is mental instability, and even clinical anxiety or depression' (Heardman, 2018). It can be said that we, as a society, 'romanticise and glorify' this stereotype of a mentally struggling artist, as Heardman reinstates. 'You shouldn't take medication because you're an artist, it's important that you feel. If Vincent van Gogh had taken medication, we wouldn't have The Sunflowers' (Muller, 2019). Encouraging deteriorating mental health and promoting the suffering of an artist just so we, as a collective, can gaze upon such tormented beauty is a very selfish mindset to adapt. It suggests how we neglect artists with trying mental health issues for venal gain.

Similarly, Willem De Kooning developed Alzheimer's in his later life as an artist: 'alcohol, prescription drugs, and depression were the companions of his solitude' (Espinel, 1996, p. 1096). Professor Espinel registers the artist's success in abstract expressionism before his later years; however, there was a noticeable shift and explosion of positive responses from critics after his diagnosis was public. 'Yet 1 or 2 years later, de Kooning's new art filled museums and exhibition halls' (Espinel, p. 1097);

the professor describes the public's new love for Kooning's work after his death. Kooning acts as an example to the glorification of artistic struggle and critics' absurd admiration and preference for mentally ill creators.

Perception

Despite common agreement that interaction with art can be based on a compelling, and occasionally profound, psychological experience, the nature of these interactions is still under debate (Pelowski *et al.* 2017, p. 80).

It is clear that personal experiences and insights to life inflict differing attitudes towards art. Art is not only a very subjective matter but also a very accepting one (Reynolds, 2010, p. 135). People and society can comfortably view art in whichever way they please while also are able to create art in an abundance of methods, illustrating whatever they desire and symbolising a range of topics. Many philosophers have their intellectual appreciation of the topic; of which, Philosopher Bower comments on Levinas' knowledge and interpretation: they possess a 'profound insight to offer concerning the debate about the nature of perceptual experience' (2017, p.384). The source resumes to signify that art can be affected by the viewer's personal perspective of a colour, for example, and what that specific shade reminds them of. We can perceive visuals as 'Lockean' suggests, with a thorough representational 'theory of perceptual experience' (p. 386). In context of relating the notion of perception to how we perceive colours, critic Winter *et al* releases a study that helps brings truth to these concepts. When discussing Frank Stella's series of 'Irregular Polygons' paintings, Winter *et al* conditions: 'some critics praised these artworks' flatness, while others described odd depth experiences that they categorised as a new kind of illusion' (2018, p. 116).



'Obliteration Room', Yayoi Kusama, first staged in 2002.

A particular image that evokes this theme is Kusama's interactive installation room titled, 'Obliteration Room'. TATE claims that the room is initially solid white, and visitors and attendees are asked to cover the room, in whichever way they like, in coloured stickers (2021b). 'An entirely white space, furnished as a monochrome living room, is "obliterated" with multi-coloured stickers'; this can change with every interaction and every person that visits the scene. Of which signifies the sense of perception Kusama represents in her art. Professor Oyebode explains how the artist perceives and explains her attraction towards these polka dots: 'she imagined her own life as a single dot in an infinite matrix of other dots' (2012, p. 249). The source persists to clarify this matrix as the 'net that joined the dots together and the net then extending to the infinity of the universe'. To help ratify this concept, the critic, Dumenco says the artist had a similar exhibition in which 'mirrored spaces' are 'strategically placed' with 'lights and objects' (2017, p.1). He registers that this is the artist's 'signature "Infinity Rooms"', leaving the audience to ponder on their own reflection and neglect their surroundings and where they are in that moment in time. This may be due to Kusama having a stable 'interest in self-presentation' (TATE, 2021a). The source continues to suggest

Kusama's interest in self-expression encouraged her to begin wearing her work and art, displaying 'monochrome *Infinity Net* paintings, to the red leotards and catsuits she wore in her red-and-white installation *Infinity Mirror Room*'. The artist teaches the public that art is not confined to one room or one painting, art can be perceived in any way we wish and however the viewer chooses to accept. TATE represents the artist's motivation for this: 'our earth is like one little polka dot, among millions of other celestial bodies, one orb full of hatred and strife amid the peaceful, silent spheres'.

One potential reasoning behind the artist's obsession with this style of work and her fascination with depth and perception could be her 'abnormal visual and auditory phenomena' (Oyebode, 2012, pp.249-250). She says her visions began at age 12 and worsened overtime; the source details this as, 'palinopsia, visual distortions and transformations, and intensely vivid visual hallucination'. The Psychiatry Professor, Oyebode then progresses to insist this mental disturbance must have been a keen source of motivation for the artist, having spent close to 40 years in a psychiatric institution, 'her work undermines the notion that severe mental illness is incompatible with art of the highest standard'. It appears to be a common trend for highly devoted and determined artists to suffer from mental illnesses/conditions. Of which brings forward the question of whether her art is only cherished due to her mental conditions.

Deception

The prohibition on lying is often thought to be very stringent. Some have even been tempted to think that it is absolute. In contrast, the prohibition on other forms of deception seems to be looser... a relationship between the duty not to deceive and the duty not to lie (Pallikkathayil, 2017, p. 147).

There are many critical theories revolving around lying and deception; for example, the theorist and Professor, Levine details about 'Truth Default Theory (TDT)'. A new deception or deception detection theory: 'the key idea is that when humans communicate with other humans, we tend to operate on a default presumption that what the other person says is basically honest' (2014, p. 378). This implies that we naturally trust even strangers with what they claim to be reliable facts. Levine demonstrates how this is likely by asserting common conversations are candid. Thus, it justifies an individual believing another with no indication of their level of consistency. 'However, the presumption of honesty makes humans vulnerable to occasional deceit' (p. 379). Deceit is frequently thought to be damaging and a source of betrayal. Professor Kemmelmeier highlights this statement: 'critics of deception in research allege harm to society'; especially in a professional setting, dishonesty can negatively impact one's perception of emotions and daily interactions (2017, p. 98). Although, critic Herrera argues there are justified reasons to deceive to carry out an experiment or task, 'psychologists argue that they are not using malicious or garden-variety deception, but deception of the 'justified' kind' (2001, p.245). If this mindset is accurate to reflect onto daily conversations, we are in some way justified to conceal certain aspects of our knowing to personally benefit from people: omission is less disastrous and painful than deception. Similarly, the theory of self-deception discussed by Professor Lynch brings into focus shared trends of omission. He portrays

this notion as a form of 'escapism', in which 'the self-deceiver is best interpreted as knowing, but wishing to avoid, the truth' (2012, p. 433). 'Escapism' is an accurate term to best demonstrate this sense of deception.



'Starry Night', Vincent van Gogh, 1889

Escapism in the form of art is often thought to provide some source of therapy to artists. To enhance this aspect, van Gogh's famous 'Starry Night' is provided as an example. This painting was completed when van Gogh was living in the asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence; this is where he was granted access to his own studio to paint (The van Gogh Gallery, 2013). Although, despite being hospitalised on multiple occasions, the artist could not understand his own illness and hallucinations: reclaiming his condition as 'a simple artist's bout of craziness' (Willem *et al*, 2020, p. 2). In this sense it can be said that van Gogh even lived by his own lies, diminishing the severity of his illness in his own mind and self-solidifying this common stereotype for artists. However, this can be understood by his condition, being prone to delusions and hallucinations (Richardson *et al*, 2017, p. 389). Richardson *et al* discusses the neuroanatomical characteristic of 'Starry Night'; they insist that even following a mental breakdown the artist was physically capable of painting which promoted him doing so.

However, evermore he had lost touch with reality and rationality—his mind was evermore deranged. Precipitated by ingestion of intoxicants, his delusions, illusions, and hallucinations grew more vivid daily (Richardson *et al*, 2017, p.389).

The stages in which the paranoia, epileptic fits, and suicidal thoughts grow more frequent is where darker colours are detected within van Gogh's work. The medical Professors continue to say that 'the painting possesses a deliberate coarseness, an unfinished quality, and a telescoped compression of depth' (p. 390). One could suggest that this painting is where the artist released all his insecurities and fears, to live without these features in day-to-day life. He used this painting as a portal of escapism, capturing the world outside the window of the asylum; potentially creating a new one to deceptively live through. Psychologist Sagan presents that numerous studies 'indicate benefits such as cognitive distraction; "derailing" of negative thinking patterns' helps mentally ill artists (2015, p. 73). This can explain van Gogh approach: some may perceive his use of distraction as a form of deception but nevertheless, he produced plentiful pieces with dark and worrisome undertones.

After researching and contextualising the three keywords and their corresponding images there are many common themes that run throughout. Multiple significant questions and sub-genres are revealed that would make meaningful and thought-provoking questions to study within my dissertation. When directly connecting mental health, deception, and perception, it is simple to detect a line of comparisons. All three keywords correlate to the topic of mental illness, it was a frequent subject to discuss in relation to the example images and their selective artists. A discovery revealed that a surplus of artists either use art as a form of therapy, sometimes disclosed to be inefficient, or feel pressured to continue producing; thus, negatively impacting their mental state (Zisser, 2018, p. 2). Therefore, the working research question of 'Does art romanticise mental health problems?' would act as an effective starting point for the Independent Dissertation research document. There are several sub-questions that can be generated from this research question and can be established and examined in more depth. These include: 'Does creation promote a negative and tormented mindset?', 'How can artists take care of their mental state and their work simultaneously?', 'Can art and creation be used as a form of therapy?', 'Why does society tend to praise work from an ill artist?', 'Does the general quality of work correlate with the number of depressive episodes in the average artist?', 'Can this ideology be changed and will it ever change?', 'What extent will an artist go to carry out what they wish?', and 'Does society normalise suffering?'.

As for genres and concepts to study and investigate, there are a list of topics that would successfully link with this research question. Theories of mental health, ideology, identity, death, depression, psychoanalysis, glorification and romanticism, medicine, creativity, pressure and competition, and suffering will be considered and focused on in depth. These will provide more details into answering the research question and will ensure the dissertation reaches an appropriate and justified conclusion.

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