

On Art and Madness in the Capitalist Societies of Control

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The only difference between me and a madman is that I am not mad.
Salvador Dali

Dali positioned both the artist and art outside of reason and logic. Throughout the history of Western thought, artistic creativity has often been associated with divinity and frequently regarded as a source of strangeness and madness. The Western tradition, largely defined through its relationship with reason, perceives madness as a threat to social order, yet in the realm of art, it is met with a tolerance found in no other field. However, the concept of madness has also evolved over time. In his work "Madness and Civilisation," Michel Foucault reads the history of madness within the context of Western thought, extending the concept of madness beyond the discipline of psychiatry and into cultural contexts. Foucault traces the history of madness from its earliest recorded instances to the emergence of the psychiatric institution, demonstrating how perceptions of madness shifted from being seen as a tragic experience to being viewed as a disease, alongside societal changes. By doing so, he not only shows how our thoughts, behaviours, and perceptions are shaped through institutions but also how these power mechanisms play a decisive role in defining and enforcing normalcy, pushing the different into the realm of irrationality and madness.

Deleuze expresses that Foucault showed how societies of sovereignty, which have ruled over life and more so over death since the 18th century, transformed into discipline societies by the early 20th century, bloated with power. This societal model created enclosed spaces such as families, schools, factories, prisons, armies, and mental hospitals to discipline subjects and regulate life, altering both reason and madness in the process.

In medieval Europe, the madman was often a figure sent from one city to another, shipped from one coast to another, chained in asylums, general hospitals, or prisons, helpless, hopeless, and disturbing. The chained madman, sometimes subjected to experimental interventions like cold showers or bloodletting of the era, was usually forgotten in the confinement of his cell. Foucault argues that the voyages of the mad expelled from cities across the sea were a metaphorical depiction of the meaning wrapped around the madman in the European consciousness of the time. Referencing Hieronymus Bosch's Renaissance painting "The Ship of Fools," he reminds us that water brings its own dark symbolic burden. The aesthetic image of this passenger, endlessly transitioning from one world to another, belonging nowhere and heading nowhere, represented a peculiar attribute attributed to the madman in the consciousness of medieval society. The madman was then seen as someone who transcended the limits of the mind and bore witness to what lies beyond the known. He possessed strange, incomprehensible knowledge. Being cursed by God somehow brought him closer to God. Foucault highlights this odd foreigner, doomed to the threshold between the inside and the outside, facilitating the interaction between the two, serving as a sort of mediator between the rational and the irrational in medieval civilisation.

However, in the Classical Age, as prisons proliferated across Europe, the mad were incarcerated along with the era's libertines, those suffering from sexual diseases, prostitutes, atheists, homosexual individuals, excommunicated priests, and impoverished disabled individuals. Following the Reform and the Industrial Revolution, a new work regime dominated European society, and these figures were marginalised by a new moral code entered around work. The boundaries of the social space were delineated by the discourse of reason, and everything considered irrational was excluded from society. The incarceration of the mad alongside the era's deviants, associated with unemployability and an inability to conform to social order, led to a perception of madness linked to moral crime or social problem. After the French Revolution, however, as the social space changed again, the moral standards also shifted, and while other prisoners were mostly released during this period, the mad became the subject of psychiatric discourse and were sent to specialised institutions where madness was redefined yet again and took on the appearance of a disease. Madness, once the opposite language of Reason, now emerged as complete silence, muteness, and mindlessness, and now the objective lack of madness, the official representatives of Reason, i.e., the authorities legitimised by the myth of scientific objectivity, namely psychiatrists, were subject to correction. With the reconceptualisation of madness and the mad starting from the 18th century, new approaches also emerged in psychiatric intervention. Philippe Pinel, one of the first psychiatrists who began communicating with the mad and who freed them from their chains, unfortunately only freed the mad from their moral chains within a new form of confinement. In this period, the mad were freed from their physical chains but were chained to reason as a disease. By the 19th century, as publications on the subject increased and artistic productions seemingly originating from madness by untrained mental patients and exhibitions composed of these productions attracted attention, investigations related to the unconscious, such as hysteria, somnambulism, and hypnosis practice, significantly increased interest in the works created by mental patients. In the first quarter of the 20th century in Europe, psychiatrists like Paul Meunier, Hans Prinzhorn, and Walter Morgenthaler began to speak not only of the healing but also the inspiring dimension and artistic value of the works created by mental patients. In this period, industrialisation led to rapid urbanisation and migration from rural areas to newly established cities, cutting off their feudal roots and undergoing a rapid and shocking transformation in Europe, traditional socio-economic relationships were turned upside down. In response to the desperate attempts of people thrown into the modern world to establish a connection with the land and ancestors they had left behind, spiritualism became widespread, influencing both the thought and aesthetics of the time. As lifestyles radically changed, new mental maladies emerged, and the technological developments that established modern life brought with them the destructive consequences of a world war. Starting from 1915, the anti-war movement known as Dada began to attract attention in Western Europe and North America, aiming to question and overturn both the established values of art and Western culture. The avant-garde artists of the period were also pursuing new values in the sublime savage myth untainted by colonial times, turning to primitivism and exoticism, finding the essence of creativity in the naivety and spontaneity of the creative works of tribal people and children. Born in this socio-political environment and as a critical intellectual movement, surrealism aimed to merge elements of the unconscious such as dreams and madness with everyday life, i.e., to create a different perception of everyday life using irrational elements. Surrealists like Dali, if rationality failed in a world driven to world war instead of abundance and prosperity in the light of knowledge based on reason, then turned to the irrational and madness, were drawn to the personal world of the subconscious and its dreams.

The surrealism that dominated the Western art scene and resonated worldwide served as a critique of reason across a wide range of fields from visual art to philosophy. In addition to valuing the creative works of mental patients, surrealism also contributed to the critique of the psychiatric practice that reduced the ontological indefinability of madness to a disease. Long exposed to controversial psychiatric interventions, surrealist writer Antonin Artaud saw the madman as a victim of the dominant discourse that excluded and marginalised realities incompatible with his own reality and vehemently criticised psychiatric practices that he thought devalued human experience. In his book *A Man Driven to Suicide by Society*, he held the psychiatric institutions and the Western society that created them responsible for Van Gogh's suicide. Artaud, controversially diagnosed with a mental illness and despite doctors' opinions that he did not need to be institutionalised, was forcibly kept in a mental hospital by his family until his death, talked about the victims of the psychiatric institution that wielded power over human life. In the 20th century, the institutional critique of the psychiatric discipline also resonated among psychiatrists. Psychiatrist Thomas Szasz argued that many psychiatric patients were not actually sick, as many of his colleagues claimed, criticising common psychiatric practices. The psychiatric discourse had declared deviant social behaviours a medical problem and then referred to behaviours and thoughts classified as eccentricity as madness. While the goal here is not to discredit the entire psychiatric discipline, it is necessary to problematise the categorising and labelling role of psychiatric institutions that bargain over what is normal and what is not. The ontological ambiguity of madness has often escaped the defining clinical gaze of psychiatry, but many psychiatrists have not hesitated to define madness and classify it within the boundaries of medical discourse. As Foucault pointed out, 'the medical person has been able to encompass madness; not because he knows it, but because he dominates it'.

Foucault had foreseen that the discipline societies of his time would pave the way for new dominance systems by redefining the outside and inventing new forms of alienation. Today, the legacy of discipline societies is eroding, and the dominance mechanisms of our era's control societies are taking their place. Today, the regulation of human thought with drugs has become so widespread in the West that it seems as if the walls of psychiatric institutions have been demolished and their dominance over reason has permeated into society. From narcissism to borderline personality disorder, we incessantly diagnose mental illness by looking at the list of symptoms of some mental illness circulating on the internet or the fact that depression has become as widespread as it is today and perceived as a common and ordinary mental disorder controllable with medication, are indicators of a hyper-medical society conditioned by antidepressants. The World Health Organisation had predicted that depression, defined in the mid-1950s and conceptually developed since then, would become the world's second-largest mental disorder in 2020 as a result of social problems and unrest, a year that began with a global pandemic that placed a heavy burden on world mental health and whose effects are still ongoing. However, the World Health Organisation states that with appropriate intervention, 'most people with mental, brain, or behavioural disorders can become functional and productive members of society and lead normal lives.' In the age of depression, that is, in today's world where the social bonds that enable us to create meaning push us into a meaningless world, we are obliged to be happy. Happiness, invented only a few centuries ago, is now conceptualised as a measurable index and presented as a goal to be achieved despite socio-political conditions, its absence considered a mental illness. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the world consists of perceptions, and experiences that change our perception of the world, called mental illnesses such as madness and substance use, challenge the limits of our thought, offering another way of thinking and another world, and are therefore liberating experiences. Perhaps for this very reason, today States decide which drugs to

use and which not to use. The use of some drugs is subject to deterrent heavy penalties, while drugs that functionalise the individual like antidepressants are distributed like candy. Social problems and unrest-causing conditions are not transformed by political subjects but produce zombies who can get out of bed in the morning and go to work despite social problems and unrest and keep the economy alive by shopping before returning home. The popularity of zombie-themed TV shows and box office films is certainly related to people finding something of themselves in these products of the culture industry.

While the World Health Organization defines depression as a mental disorder controllable with medication, Franco Berardi draws attention to the social dimension of depression, i.e., its source. Berardi reminds us that the depression experienced by the person is trapped in the meaninglessness of the world and argues that the inability to find meaning is primarily related to not being able to create it. The increasing number of mental disorders in the contemporary world are reactions of the human mind to transformations in the social field and indicators of social unrest, and the symptomatic treatment of these diseases through medication further exacerbates the disease. Jean-François Lyotard had pointed out that a society constantly governed by an obsession with productivity would continuously increase the speed of social life. Social time would accelerate so much that it would eventually try to get rid of those who could not keep up with its pace. Berardi claims that the mechanical speed of network-connected productivity in the economy based on time optimisation of late capitalism increasingly accelerates the speed of social time for financial profit, impairing our sensitivity. Berardi argues that the time needed for our sensitivity, which enables us to create and give meaning to the world, to function healthily cannot be increased enough to keep up with and catch the increasingly accelerating economy. As a result, the human eventually breaks down, mentally deteriorates, and causes an epidemic of depression in a world where he cannot make sense. Thus, the increase in the number of people suffering from depression is more of a socio-political phenomenon than a clinical one and stems from the pushing of sensitivity, which enables us to create meaning, out of the social field. According to Berardi, the madness of the age is the inability to functionally suppress the sensitivity that cannot keep up with the speed of social time. However, according to Lyotard, what the capitalist machine tries to leave behind in the social field is actually necessary for the welfare of society, and ignoring it will only bring more social unrest.

And again, according to Lyotard, what is innate to man but suppressed because it is dysfunctional finds an outlet, a space for expression through art. So art provides a space for expression to what is left outside the social norm, i.e., madness, thereby preserving public health.

Deleuze and Guattari claim that the capitalist system's way of coding desire produces its subjects as neurotic. The desire of neurotics is so suppressed that they cannot desire freely and cannot create meaning, only consuming the given meanings. The psychiatric discourse, a product and tool of the social machine that defines what is normal and what is not, normalises neurosis, adding the dysfunctional for the market economy to the mad (mentally ill). It does not leave the mad out either, it turns them into a product, reduces them to money, and puts them into circulation. Because capitalism has no outside. The reason it is almost impossible for us to dream of another world is that capitalism expands by swallowing those who try to stay outside it, thus its boundaries are unimaginably expansive and contagious. And it cannot be expected that art, which organises and transforms what is outside the norm, will not have a share in this.

In discipline societies, art was also confined to its own enclosed spaces such as art schools, galleries, and museums, becoming institutionalised through them and turning into an intellectual profession. However, today art institutions are also in a transition process to find their place within the control society. Deleuze points out that art institutions are also melting in the institutional crisis of control societies. 'Art has left its enclosed spaces to enter the open circuits of the bank. The market is now conquered not by disciplining education but by seizing control.' In an environment where every kind of mood that is not functional is considered a mental illness that needs to be treated, where sensitivity that does not conform to the rhythm of capitalist society is suppressed, art, the purest expression of our capacity to create meaning, namely sensitivity, is also undergoing a radical transformation. And art, which has historically opened a space for expression to madness and what is pushed outside the social, today largely serves as an antidepressant function by somewhat relieving neurotic individuals suppressed sensitivity or appears as intellectual works, almost an extension of philosophy. Andy Warhol's famous statement that everything is art, although it appeared as a liberating discourse that freed art from the institutions it was confined to in the 60s, soon turned into the discourse of capitalist consumption in the art field. As Baudrillard partly foresaw, today it serves the ever-inflating market, becoming an expression filled with money by those whose strings have been cut, going beyond being an expression. The works that a neurotic society applauds in the art market are mostly stocks or consumption products of the entertainment industry rather than art.

Technological developments have opened a new era in art as in every area of life, a cultural revolution era where art, poetry, madness, and even man can be redefined, and life can be reorganised. Today, people all over the world who desire a different life, a new thought, are trying to offer new perspectives that will activate solidified sensitivities within the art market, on its edge, in its corner. People who use art as a sophisticated narrative tool, a political language that can change our perception of things and the world, are trying to reconfigure sensitivity, madness, reason, and man in an increasingly abstract universe despite the increasing market pressure. A meaningless yet meaningful mad endeavor.