

Honours course 2021

The Mad Genius Debate

The Relationship between Creativity and Mental Illness

Number of students:	minimum 15 / maximum 25
Academic year:	3
Semester:	2
Period:	April - June 2021
Day(s):	2x Saturday, 5x Tuesday evenings
Time:	Saturday 10:00 – 17:00, Tuesday 18:00 – 21:00
Number of meetings:	7
Dates:	
Location:	VUmc; 1 excursion: Van Gogh Museum
Room:	t.b.d.
Credits:	6 ECTS
Lecturers:	Laura Prins MPhil, PhD researcher Department of Family Medicine, VU Medical Center, Amsterdam & exhibition curator Museum Panorama Mesdag, The Hague Prof. dr. Arko Oderwald, Department of Family Medicine, VU Medical Center, Amsterdam
Course coordinator:	Laura Prins MPhil, PhD researcher/art historian Department of Family Medicine, VU Medical Center, Amsterdam & exhibition curator Museum Panorama Mesdag, The Hague
Course concept:	Interdisciplinary: history, art, literature, psychiatry, psychology, visual cultures, 1800-2000s
Course description:	Since the nineteenth century a relationship is established between creativity and mental illness: either a disturbed mind generates exceptional creative achievements or creativity leads to mental problems. This idea is not only deeply rooted in the popular view, but also sustained by academic research, especially done by psychiatrists and psychologists. The many examples of artists, writers and other creative figures who suffered from mental problems and chose an untimely death further strengthen this image of the mad genius. However, how valid is this notion? Not only are the conclusions of psychiatric researches often challenged, artists were also aware of this image and they played their audience to strengthen a certain reputation. In this course we will examine what exactly a mad genius is, for whom it serves and how valid this notion is.

We will start with an introduction of the question: is there a relationship between creativity and mental illness? How has this question been researched and what have been the

conclusions and the challenges? Then we will look to the history of the mad genius and the different approaches to it: is the artist an enlightened mind – and suffering inevitable – or is he/she a victim, made ill or pathologized by society? We will look at some specific painters, writers and poets to see how illness (if any) influenced their work and/or their reputation, such as Vincent van Gogh, Gérard de Nerval, Virginia Woolf and Egon Schiele. One session will be held at the Van Gogh Museum, including a visit to the galleries.

Students are encouraged to actively think about this subject and verbalize their opinions. Before the first sessions, the students are asked to think and rethink the concept of the mad genius in a short essay. The course ends with an end paper, with a subject of choice related to one or more themes of the course. One session is dedicated to their end paper with a conference: here, they not only learn to shortly explain their subject (research question, how to answer the research question, and why is it relevant to know?), but also to review the work of their peers: how do you give constructive feedback?

Working formats: Interactive classes with peer interaction;
Reading and analyzing both primary and secondary literature, from novel to empirical research in psychiatry;
Before the session handing in two reading questions on the literature (1 clarifying; 1 critical);
Writing and rewriting a short essay;
Writing an end paper;
Presentations in class, practicing academic skills;
Visit to the Van Gogh Museum.

Relevance of course: The idea of the mad genius has been popular since ages, in the popular media as well as in scientific debates. How we look at artists and writers is colored by these debates. At the same time psychiatric ailments are often romanticized, with the possible result that people refuse treatments. To understand the notion of the mad genius, including the possible influence of illness on art and literature, will give relevant insights into the consequences of mythmaking.

Study materials: Secondary literature from psychiatry/psychology perspective:
Obligatory:

- Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched With Fire, Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, New York et al, 1993 [fragment];
- Albert Rosenberg, *Creativity & Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes*, Baltimore & Londen 1990 [fragment];

- Nancy C. Andreasen, 'Creativity and Mental Illness: Prevalence Rates in Writers and Their First-Degree Relatives', *American Journal of Psychiatry* 144 (1987) 10, p. 1289;
- Dean Keith Simonton, 'More Method in the Mad-Genius Controversy: A Historiometric Study of 204 Historic Creators', *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts*, 8 (2014) 1, pp. 53-61;
- Louis A. Sass, *Madness and modernism: Insanity in the light of modern art, literature, and thought*, New York 1992 [fragment]

Secondary literature from art historical / literature / philosophy perspective:

- Meyer Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Oxford, 1953 [fragment]
- Folke Nordström, *Goya, Saturn and melancholy : studies in the art of Goya*, 1962 [fragment]
- John Hope Mason, *The Value of Creativity*, 2003 [fragment]
- Patricia Mathews, *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, gender, and French symbolist art*, Chicago 1999 [fragment]
- *Van Gogh and his illness*, scientific volume, Van Gogh Museum 2020 [essay Laura Prins forthcoming]
- Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957)
- Griselda Pollock, 'Artists, media and mythologies: Genius, madness and art history', *Screen* 21 (1 October 1980) 3, pp. 57-96
- Gemma Blackshaw, 'The Pathological Body: Modernist Strategising in Egon Schiele's Self-Portraiture', *Oxford Art Journal* 30 (2007) 3, pp. 377-401
- Jos ten Berge, 'Naive and Outsider Art in the Netherlands: A Chronicle of Facts and Views' in: *Solitary Creations: 51 Artists out of De Stadshof Collection*, Eindhoven, 2014 p. 292-320
- James Whitehead, *Madness and the Romantic Poet: A Critical History*, Oxford, 2017 [fragment]

Primary literature:

- Honoré de Balzac, *Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu (Unknown masterpiece)*, 1831)
- Edgar Allan Poe, *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846)
- Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia ou le rêve et la vie (Aurélia)*, 1855)

- Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne (The Painter of Modern Life, 1863)*
- Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway (1925)*
- **Weense schrijver? / of intoxication?**
- Jack Kerouac, *Are writers born or made? (1962)*
- William Styron, *Darkness Visible (1990)*

Literature by choice: tbd.

Assessment: Active participation in courses and during excursion (20%)
 Short presentation as introduction to the session (20%)
 Writing exercises (20%)
 Presentation paper + giving feedback (20%)
 Paper 3000-3500 words (20%)

6 ECTS = 168 hours

Classes = 29 hours

- 2x Saturday à 7 hours = 14 hours
- 5x evening à 3 hours = 15 hours

Preparation before each class = 96

- Saturday = 16
- 5x evenings 12 hours = 60
- Conference 20 hours

Paper = 43 hours

Schedule:

Tuesday 6 April – VU

1. Introduction: What is a mad genius?

- Is there a relationship between creativity and mental illness?
 - Comparing empirical research and analyzing different researches (and approaches) on the relationship
 - preliminary conclusions on the relation
 - Students introduce themselves and formulate their expectations from their study backgrounds
 - Lecture (including discussing the assignments)
 - Dividing the assignments
- ➔ preparation: reading articles/chapter and writing down for each article what its methods are & formulate in 200 words your definition of a mad genius.

Tuesday 13 April – VU

2. A Romantic Ideal

- Enlightenment & Romanticism: changing role of the artist, changing values
- Case-studies: Goya, Gérard de Nerval & Baudelaire
 - Student presentations
 - discussion
 - lecture (including discussing some of the reading questions)
 - ➔ preparation: reading the obliged literature + formulating two reading questions; extend your definition of a mad genius in an essay of 500 words.

Saturday 8 May – Van Gogh Museum

3. Vincent van Gogh: the mad genius *par excellence*

- Mythmaking (Roland Barthes) [- Arko Oderwald]
- How did Van Gogh become the mad genius *par excellence*?
- What was wrong with Van Gogh? How was his illness perceived, in relation to his art?
- The artistic temperament in general
- Van Gogh adopted by the Symbolists: Aurier, Mirbeau (versus Paul Gauguin)
- Van Gogh in the 20th century
 - Student presentations
 - Lecture (including discussing some of the reading questions)
 - Visit to the galleries Van Gogh Museum, where we analyze the story that is provided to the general audience. What do they learn about his illness? What happens to the ‘myth’ of Van Gogh?
 - Discussion
 - ➔ Preparation: reading the obliged literature and formulating your reading questions; prepare discussion points; look again at your short essay on your definition of the mad genius – what would you like to change after reading the literature and the discussions in class? Incorporate Van Gogh in your essay on the mad genius: 750 words.

Tuesday 18 May – VU

4. Victims of society (different approaches to madness)

- Vienna: the expressionists 1910s (Kokoschka, Schiele, Oppenheimer)
- Schrijver in Wenen rond die tijd?
- Antonin Artaud (and the beginnings of antipsychiatry)
- Lifestyle: Alcohol & other intoxications
 - student presentations
 - lecture (including discussing some of the reading questions)
 - discussion
 - ➔ preparation: reading the literature and formulate reading questions; look again at your short essay on your definition of the mad genius – rewrite your essay of 750 words
 - ➔ Hand in a title of your presentation for the conference; a volunteer makes a schedule of the conference.

Tuesday 25 May – VU

5. Modernism, Schizophrenia and Outsider art

- Schizophrenia as symptom of modernism (e.g. Virginia Woolf)
- Outsider art
 - student presentations
 - discussion
 - lecture (including discussing some of the reading questions)
 - ➔ preparation: reading the literature and formulate research questions; rewrite for the last time your short essay on your definition of the mad genius (1000 words)

Saturday 29 May – VU

6. Conference: student presentations + reviews

- short presentation as preparation to the end paper [explaining subject: what, how and why?]
- each session has its own moderator, and each student reviews a presentation, to learn to give feedback
 - ➔ preparation: make a presentation including powerpoint

Tuesday 1 June – VU

7. Concluding session [Laura Prins]

- At the end of these sessions: can we come to an overall conclusion of what a mad genius is? And what can we say about the relationship between creativity and mental illness?
 - preparation: writing down specific questions, formulated from the studied literature and the paper