

*The History of Insanity  
and How it Affects Our Culture*

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## **Author's Note:**

Prior to reading this paper it's important to note why I am intrigued by the topic of madness. My fascination with madness and insanity stemmed from my Grandfather, who's a psychiatrist. At his house he had a "special" room filled with his patient accounts and writings on mental disorders. I was always allowed in the room, but only to use the computer or look at family photo albums. All around the room on locked bookshelves as high as the wall were those fascinating patient accounts. Every chance I got, I would sneak into the "special" room, and try to catch a glimpse at the confidential patient files. However, despite all my attempts to discover more about my grandfather's patients, the gold lock on the door of each cabinet always turned me away. This disappointment left me increasingly intrigued by people suffering with mental disorders. This fascination then grew into my desire to watch TV shows and read newspaper articles that related to insanity or mental disorders. A few years ago I was mindlessly watching the "Today Show," and a segment on the dark side of Serbian Mental Institutions came on and sparked my interest. Ever since watching this segment, I found myself drawn to TV shows that involved to mental institutions. For example, "American Horror Story: Asylum," was very interesting to me because of the way it fantasized mental institutions. My combined fascination with mental disorders and institutions, and how they are portrayed in pop culture, is what led me to explore the reasons behind insanities portrayal in pop culture.

## **The History of Insanity and Its Effects on our Culture**

Throughout time, our society has always been fascinated by the idea of madness and insane asylums. In film, television, art, and literature, one can always find allusions or direct references to madness or passion. But, why is our culture itself so intrigued by the idea of madness? What is it about asylums and mad men that is so fascinating? Through examination of history and past beliefs about insanity, we might be able to understand these essential questions, and origins of our cultures obsession with madness.

Ever since the outbreak of leprosy in Europe during the 1300s, our culture has been obsessed with discovering and confining the diseased. However, why human nature tends towards the mysterious ways of the mad is still in question. Michel Foucault, a French philosopher in the mid 1900s, explores madness' place within our civilization. In his work "Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in The Age of Reason," Foucault explores how madness interacts with moving time and ever changing trends. Through Foucault's work, it is made clear that the fascination with madness stemmed from fear. The reason our society is so inclined to make movies, or write books pertaining to madness is because we fear those who are delirious, and art and culture is the only way we can explore it in a safe way.

One book in particular, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" by Ken Kesey, exemplifies the fascination with insane asylums in a very human way. Kesey's novel touches upon our society's fears, and also excites human emotions, which is something unexpected from a story about asylums. "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," was adapted into a film, which became a quintessential asylum film that delves into many of the ideas Foucault explores in "Madness and Civilization". The topics of confinement, idleness, truth, passion, imagination and religion, all of which Foucault studies, are all present in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." By analyzing this film closely through the lens of madness that Foucault has laid out, one can begin to discover the the true origin of our society's fascination with madness.

During the early 1300s in Europe, specifically France, there were a staggering 19,000 Lepers isolated within society. <sup>1</sup> While by the late 1300s, the disease itself died out, the structure of confinement remained. “What doubtless remained longer than leprosy...were the values and images...as well as the meaning of his exclusion, the social importance of that insistent and fearful figure.” <sup>2</sup> The structure in which Foucault is speaking of is one where there is one group of people that were shunned from the rest of society. The “meaning of his exclusion” is the piece of the structure that continued with the rise of the asylum. The idea that there is a group of people out there, such as lepers, was frightening, so there was a structure put in place to contain them. When the lepers were in confinement, society grew accustomed to having a group of people that excited fear. So, when leprosy died out, the role of the madmen took the place of the leper as the excluded figure. It seems as though people in Europe not suffering with leprosy during the 1300s felt a certain air of superiority and safety in the fact that there was always someone worse off than they. It sounds very wrong, but it is in fact just part of human nature. During the 1300s, there was such a divide within the society that revolved less around economic standing, and more around the fact that peasants could feel a strange sense of comfort. Not only did the structure of leprosy lend itself to the creation of the structure of the asylum, but it also set up the formation of fascination. What occurred in the leper houses was unknown to those on the outside. This created a passion within the surrounding community of the mysteries that occurred behind the leper house walls. The passion to discover what happens when those who are isolated from society come together, continued when the asylum and confinement of madmen came about.

Prior to the end of leprosy, madmen were just left to roam the streets and incite terror in the people. Now that madmen began to be confined, the fear of them harming society lessened. However, while the fear lessened, the intrigue the madmen induced only increased. Madmen also began inciting fear in a new way while confined. This was “truth”: truth about the way madmen really are, and humans’ desire to discover this. In order for society to try and comprehend madness, it needed to be revealed to some extent. “...Madness elevated to spectacle above the silence of the asylum, and becoming a public scandal for the general delight...madness continued to be present on the stage of the world.” <sup>3</sup> In the Middle Ages, madness was seen as entertainment. Compared to the secrecy of the asylums, madness spectacles were compelling because it was as close as the viewers were going to get to experiencing madness. <sup>4</sup> What made these spectacles so popular was the fact that spectators were observing for themselves madness in a closed setting, allowing them to feel as though they had authority over the madmen. In a time where there was not much liberty and opportunities for power, the lower classes that made a spectacle out of madmen could feel superior for once.

Truth also comes about in films when we watch madmen interacting with one another, or with the world. For example, in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”, when the viewers see the patients getting into fights with each other, we become thoroughly entertained. But why do we find the quarrels of madmen more intriguing than those of every day fights? It’s because the argument going on between the characters of Mr. Martini, Mr. Harding, and Mr. Cheswick is extremely humorous to the viewers. And this argument is humorous because of its honesty, which is something that most average humans never experience because honesty can often be an

1 Health Disease and Medicine Between 1300 and 1900, <http://website.lineone.net/~drivekey/Disser49.pdf> (accessed April 20th, 2014)

2 Michel Foucault “*Madness and Civilization*” (New York: Vintage Books, 1965) pg. 6

intimidating thing. However, Martini, Harding and Cheswick are not afraid of honesty because they do not know anything else, and they do not have the filters to watch what they are saying. The arguments that occur between madmen, specifically these three, are fundamentally amplified arguments that the viewers experience every day. The level of honesty portrayed in these arguments between patients in the mental institution is something that the viewers would not be able to experience without watching this film, or films like it.

Other than the revelation of truth, what makes madmen and insanity appealing to viewers is the hope for humanity. In the sense that watching madmen on film leaves the viewer desiring them to display human qualities. The history of how madmen have been viewed with animalistic qualities throughout time lends to the fascination with madmen. In the Renaissance period, when madmen were used as a spectacle, the appeal was in their animalistic qualities. Madness is a result of “chaotic movements of spiritual animals”.<sup>5</sup> Not only did this mean that madness was chaos within a world striving for order, but also that madness is essentially inhuman. These inhuman qualities come about from an excessive amount of passion. This passion drives the mad to do things that seemingly only a beast would partake in. In the film adaptation of “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” the patients are not exactly portrayed doing animalistic things, but some are portrayed as having heightened emotions that are too extreme to be human. For example, when the patients are gathered around discussing their reasons for being in the institution, Cheswick gets so emotional, and almost beastly angry. While watching this scene in the film, Cheswick seemed like a real life beast, and they are enthralling to watch because of their fantastical qualities.<sup>6</sup> Not only are madmen appealing because of their wild actions, but also, watching these “creatures” allows viewers to search for any remnants of human qualities. And when viewers observe human qualities within a beast, they become drawn to these madmen. Part of what makes the seemingly monstrous madman so attractive to the world of film and television is their subtle humanity that pulls the viewer in, inclined to discover more. In movies, for example, “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”, viewers can see madmen acting in human ways and partaking in activities that the viewers themselves do, making a connection between the viewers and the characters.

The 17th Century in Europe was a period of religious revival that did not quite lend itself to the discovery of madness. However, in the 18th Century, the enthusiasm that previously surrounded religion died down, and the Church used madness to fill the void that religion left.<sup>7</sup> Similarly to when leprosy died down, the higher authorities within the church realized how intriguing madness was and used this to their advantage. The Church began using madness in an attempt to show their benevolence as well as a strategy to get the societies attention.<sup>8</sup> Religion is at the basis of madness’ appeal, as “Religious beliefs prepare a kind of landscape of images...favorable to every delirium,” as too much religion can sometimes lead to madness.<sup>9</sup> However, religion relates to madness on another level, and this is not explicitly said in Foucault’s work, but is evident in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.” In the film, when we see the patients decorating a tree and listening to Christmas music, we instantly feel our hearts warming. Yes, because it is endearing watch anyone celebrate Christmas, but also because it is something we as viewers would not expect from madmen.

3 Foucault “*Madness and Civilization*” pg. 69 4 Ibid, 80

5 Foucault “*Madness and Civilization*” pg. 43

6 Ibid pg. 70 7 Ibid 8 Ibid 9 Foucault “*Madness and Civilization*” pg. 215

During the classical era in Europe, there was much economic strife, as many people were idle and refused to work. As a solution to this lack of employees, European governments realized that confinement of the mad would ensure labor. While this new influx of labor aided the economic issues that Europe was facing, it did not help madmen's place in the world.<sup>10</sup> Now that the mad were being exploited for their labor, they lost their liberty that they may have previously had. This loss of liberty, along with their confinement, further dehumanized the madmen in Europe in the classical era. This structure of having the mad work, or occupying them with jobs continues now, and can be seen in "One Flew Over Cuckoo's Nest". Each character in the film gets assigned a work place and follows that schedule strictly. The doctors at the institution to keep the patients occupied and under control have put this structure in place. It is fascinating how watching something as mundane as mopping the floor can be so interesting, just because someone who is supposed to be insane and incapable is performing the task. Watching the patients go fishing is exciting for viewers, as the patients performing seemingly simple tasks excite us. It is curious how the patients go about fishing, something that most people find relaxing, but the patients are confused and seemingly frightened by the activity. However, when the patients end up catching a huge fish, we as viewers are so happy for them. This is because of the stigma of incapability built up around madmen throughout time. As a result of this stigma, watching madmen successfully complete very common activities sparks the viewer's interest, surprising us, and giving us the inclination to continue watching the movie. Part of the intrigue behind movies like "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" is the way that they keep viewers on their feet, not knowing what to expect next from the madmen.

At the turn of the 19th century, treatment of madmen officially shifted from confinement to the asylum.<sup>11</sup> One Quaker man in particular, Samuel Tuke, designed the "retreat" approach to aiding the mad. Instead of abusing and chaining down the patients, they were reasoned with and treated more humanely.<sup>12</sup> Not only did this new "retreat" style asylum involve better patient treatment, but it also included a family aspect.<sup>13</sup> Tuke felt that the sense of family and child-like spirit found in the patients was very important in their treatment. This same family-clan mentality that Tuke included in his asylum carries over into "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest". In the film, it gives the viewers pleasure and joy to see madmen who are so removed from society have some semblance of humanity in the form of family. Instantly, viewers can understand the sense of community that has been built up in the ward that patients like Mr. Martini, Cheswick, Billy and MacMurphy make up. The growing love the patients have for each other throughout the story warms the hearts of viewers and readers. Family is such a central part of humanity that is so engrained in who everyone is that we do not even think about it. However, because of the monstrous reputation given to madmen throughout history, viewers could never imagine them engaging in something as innately human as family. To see these people who we once believed were anything but human interact as a family is heart warming and brings the viewer comfort. Seeing Billy, Martini, MacMurphy, Cheswick, Chief, and all the other patients, in a family setting allows the viewer to disregard their previous conceptions of madness, and allows us to see the patients as living, caring human beings.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault "Madness and Civilization" pg. 21

<sup>11</sup> Foucault "Madness and Civilization" pg. 258 <sup>12</sup> Samuel Tuke's Description of the Retreat <http://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/article.aspx?articleid=102395>

(accessed April 22, 2014 <sup>13</sup> Foucault "Madness and Civilization" pg.275

According to Foucault, there are four distinct types of madness; melancholy, mania, hysteria, and hypochondria. <sup>14</sup> In “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”, hysteria and melancholy are the most clearly depicted aspects of madness. According to 18th century psychology, hysteria and melancholy are both results of being overly “sympathetic.” By sympathetic, the doctors of the 18th century did not mean “compassionate,” but they essentially meant “emotional”. 18th century medical studies led doctors to believe that sympathy was the degree of sensitivity of ones nervous system, making madmen more prone to imbalance in their emotions. When one is exposed to too much emotion, or worldly stimulation, it leads to madness. When one felt too much, or reacted too extremely to a situation, they were considered mad in the 18th century. <sup>15</sup> These guidelines continue to this day, and drive viewer’s passion while watching movies involving madmen. In “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”, seeing the characters smile, reminding us that they are human, makes us want to keep watching or reading. However, when the characters in the film show emotion, it is so extreme, and can often times get frightening. So why do we continue watching these so-called madmen portray such extreme emotions? When Billy Bibbit claims that he is in love with Candy, we feel nervous and electrified for him. Knowing Billy’s overly fragile state, we do not know what to expect from him, and the suspense when he and Candy go missing is something that sparks our interest as viewers. The desire to find out what happens to Billy because we are unsure of how he is able to handle himself, is what draws us to keep watching. Also, fact that someone who is expected to be so inhuman is experiencing such an overt human emotion such as love, draws readers in viewers in to the story. In a strange way, it is comforting to see the characters in “One For the Cuckoo’s Nest” endure familiar feelings to such an extreme extent. The familiarity of the emotions the characters are feeling in comparison to the way viewers may have initially perceived insane asylum patients is what is so appealing about movies concerning mental institutions.

Things within our culture, specifically movies, are madness in themselves, as they tackle ideas and questions that are too intimidating to tackle in reality. Movies and novels such as “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” that are about madness are especially appealing for this reason. Madness is something that cannot be understood in reality, so in order to explore this concept, movies are created. Madness is one thing that is real, and part of every human’s life, but for the most part, it is never understood as a reality, just as a source of curiosity. “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” and other movies grappling with similar ideas are the only way viewers on the outside of madness can fulfill their desire to know more on the subject of insanity. However, what is more fascinating is how madmen are portrayed so differently in every film pertaining to them. Specifically in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” the patients’ emotions are depicted as being extreme versions of every day experiences. In this way, the film reminds the viewers of the so called madmen’s “humanity,” allowing us to realize that these patients are just as human as we are. But maybe, these patients are even more human than we are, by feeling such amplified emotions. “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” raises this idea, as well as providing a new and positive view on people inside mental institutions, which is something good for our society and its previously narrow and negative view on institutionalized patients. Art and culture, specifically films, are exceptional for this reason, as they have such a strong power to change the observers’ outlook on a specific topic. In the case of madness, art has the capability to set it free. In a society where throughout time madness has been so confined and isolated from reality, art and film are great ways to explore madness in a safe way. However, by exploring madness and insanity only through a fantasy, are we as a society truly understanding anything about

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 276

the phenomenon? Another question this film and other films involving madmen and asylums raise for the viewers is; is it wrong of us to enjoy watching madmen? It seems to be that much of the entertainment we get from these films is when the characters do something wrong or get into trouble. But then again that is inherently a part of human nature, that we are amused when we see other people dealing with real life troubles. What Foucault has helped us to realize through the history of insanity's place in our culture is that although there are so many movies and t.v. shows about the topic, we as viewers will never be able to comprehend the complexity of insanity.

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