

How Thin Is the Partition? Where Does It Reside?

A review of the video

Between Madness and Art: The Prinzhorn Collection

with Christian Beetz (Director)

Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films, 2007. \$440.00

Hidden Gifts: The Mystery of Angus MacPhee

with Nick Higgins (Director)

Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films, 2005. \$225.00

Reviewed by

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Any serious discussion of genius is likely to bring up three core questions. First, is genius born or made? Second, does a high IQ a genius make? And third, is genius mad? Of those three questions, the last has the longest history. Thus, Aristotle is reputed to have claimed, “Those who have become eminent in philosophy, politics, poetry, and the arts have all had tendencies toward melancholia” (quoted in Andreasen & Canter, 1974, p. 123). Moreover, the madness–genius linkage has long been most strongly associated with artistic creativity. “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet/Are of imagination all compact,” said Shakespeare (quoted in Browning, 1986, p. 77).

Even so, not everyone agrees that creative genius and mental illness are absolutely equivalent. According to William James (1902),

The nature of genius has been illuminated by the attempts . . . to class it with psychopathological phenomena. Borderline insanity, crankiness, insane temperament, less of mental balance, psychopathic degeneration (to use a few of the many synonyms by which it has been called), has certain peculiarities and liabilities which, when combined with a superior quality of intellect in an individual, make it more probable that he will make his mark and affect his age, than if his temperament were less neurotic. (pp. 22–23)

Hence, some kind of borderline separates creativity from psychopathology. Dryden (1681) put it more succinctly: “Great Wits are sure to Madness near ally’d,/And thin Partitions do their Bounds divide” (p. 6).

If one wanted to stimulate serious debate about this age-old question, the two films under review are well suited for the task. But the films would do so in two divergent ways.

On the one hand, *Hidden Gifts: The Mystery of Angus MacPhee* is a concise, 25-min documentary focused on a single Scotsman named Angus MacPhee. Having been diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1946, he was sent to a psychiatric hospital, where he stayed for a half century. As a kind of protest, he adopted elective mutism, refusing to speak to any of the staff. Yet MacPhee seemed to express himself in a strikingly different way: He would go out to the nearby fields and use grass to weave various articles of clothing, such as boots, coats, and gloves. These ephemeral products of his imagination were destroyed each year by the hospital staff without his registering any complaint.

However, an art therapist came across one year’s output and obtained permission to have the grass sculptures displayed in a gallery devoted to “art extraordinary.” Interviews with MacPhee’s sister, the therapist, and members of the hospital staff provide perspective on this silent but creative man. Although the interviews are all conducted in English, the Scottish dialect of some speakers is not always easy to make out.

On the other hand, *Between Madness and Art: The Prinzhorn Collection* is a much more sprawling 75-min documentary devoted to the Prinzhorn Collection of drawings, paintings, and sculptures by schizophrenic patients. Dr. Hans Prinzhorn had begun collecting these works in the 1920s while he was director of the Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic. Besides ample images taken from the collection, the documentary includes interviews with psychotherapists, artists, the current collection director, and two contemporary outpatient artists.

Although the film contains extended profiles of the patients who had contributed to the collection, it also treats at length Prinzhorn himself, a person who (a) had earned a doctorate in art history prior to entering medicine, (b) wrote a seminal study, *Artistry and the Mentally Ill*, and (c) experienced his own struggles with severe depression. I called the documentary “sprawling” not because it is three times longer than the previous film but because it often ventures a bit beyond the confines of the main topic, addressing such matters as the Nazi extermination of the mentally ill and the contemporary uses of art therapy. Except for the narration, the film is largely in German, with English subtitles.

Taken together, the two films raise many fascinating issues. The first and most obvious is whether there is any relation between creativity and psychopathology. The art therapist interviewed for *Hidden Gifts* articulates the affirmative view: Because creativity requires access to unconscious thought and because MacPhee lived in a dreamworld permitting him direct access to the unconscious, the man was intuitively creative. This explanation appears even more plausible when looking at the art in the Prinzhorn Collection. Many pieces have a surrealistic quality strongly reminiscent of our most vivid dreams, and especially our worst nightmares—the ones that wake us in the middle of the night. In psychoanalytic terms, secondary process has completely yielded to primary process.

Yet one must wonder whether naked intuition alone suffices. Doesn't the creator also have to acquire some minimal amount of artistic expertise? It seems so. Although MacPhee's "hidden gift" seems remarkable, it is essential to point out that as a farm boy in the Hebrides he had already learned how to weave rope and netting from the region's abundant grass. The need for some expertise is even more conspicuous in the Prinzhorn artist-patients. The bulk of the art seems like the kind of representations novices might create if asked to depict the dreams they had the night before—decidedly crude and not particularly convincing as real art. Yet a conspicuous exception is a patient who had already been a successful artisan before succumbing to psychotic paranoia. In his case we can expect that he expressed exactly what he experienced, and with some genuine aesthetic effect.

Indeed, we must ask to what degree the objects we see in either film can be considered exemplars of artistic creativity. An art therapist interviewed for *Between Madness and Art* suggests that 99.9 percent of patient productions do not constitute true art. Even so, the same film narrates the notorious 1937 exhibit of "degenerate art" that the Nazis put on to discredit modernist movements. Artistic geniuses like Max Beckmann, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Wassily Kandinsky, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, Oskar Kokoschka, and Piet Mondrian had their notable creations placed alongside "symptomatic" items borrowed from the Prinzhorn Collection. The goal was to prove that both sets of compositions were cut from the same mental cloth. Although the Nazis believed they were discrediting the works of genius, might we not conclude instead that they were inadvertently providing Prinzhorn's artist-patients with greater creative credibility? Did so-called outsider art thereby become insider art?

A vast amount of psychological research has been devoted to the relation between creativity and psychopathology (for a review, see Simonton, in press). According to this literature, the two contrary manifestations of human behavior—one positive and the other negative—do seem to share some cognitive tendencies and personality traits (e.g., reduced latent inhibition and elevated psychoticism).

Yet the research also makes it clear that creativity and psychopathology are not equivalent, albeit the overlap may increase somewhat as we go from everyday to genius-level creativity. For example, higher intelligence and ego strength appear to convert psychopathological proclivities into creative activities. At present, it is still hard to predict

the exact placement and properties of the line separating the two. Watching these two films can provide the raw material for discussing how to make this assessment. I have my own answers, but other viewers of the same documentaries may have very different responses. The possibility of disagreement is what makes the films worth watching.

Nevertheless, I do offer one personal observation. I found the *Between Madness and Art* episodes regarding the two outpatient artists to be especially powerful and poignant. These two human beings were clearly struggling to use their creativity to make sense of their lives and their art. If only MacPhee had chosen to provide a third voice!

References

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