

Madness and Its Enigmatic Origins

By *Samuel Bendeck Sotillos*

“[T]o define true madness,
What is't but to be nothing else but mad?”¹

- *Shakespeare*

What if suddenly you experienced an overwhelming sense of great emotional and psychological turmoil to the degree where your very frame of reference that aids in your ability to navigate the world was compromised to the point where you no longer knew what anything was or understood how anything operated and your very existence felt unreal and the world itself was also experienced as illusory, what would you do? And where would you go or who could you speak to, to help guide you back to the familiar world that you once knew and inhabited? It seems that very few ever contemplate such a frightening and distressing scenario unless faced with this very predicament, yet it forces us to examine in the most profound way, how do we know what we know and what does it mean to be? And what if through this examination, we realized that everything that we initially perceived and held to be true was not what it appears?

Madness has and continues to captivate and occupy a unique space in the collective imagination, perhaps like no other phenomenon of the human condition. For many it is a taboo subject, one that is better not broached for the fear of provoking madness itself, yet without question psychosis or extreme states of mind dually frighten and fascinate the human psyche. Millions of people are today impacted by mental

¹ William Shakespeare, “Hamlet - Act 2, Scene 2,” in *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, Vol. 3: Hamlet*, ed. Horace Howard Furness (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1877), p. 137.

illness, so much so that very few have been unscathed by its impact whether personally or through a family member, friend, colleague or acquaintance. The World Health Organization estimates that some 450 million people around the world are currently suffering from mental illness and one in four people will at some point during their lifetime suffer from a mental health issue.

There are myriad examples of the epidemic of mental illness that has become a global crisis, as it is part and parcel of the contemporary world exhibited in the internet, popular films, music and the media. So visible and dominant are these depictions in the present-day that the phenomenon of madness has become a telling *sign of the times*. As contemporary life becomes ever more complex and unsustainable, with the acceleration of time, time itself becomes the scarcest commodity. People are estranged from themselves and others to the point where virtual spaces replace *in vivo* human contact, where the planetary ecosystem and all lifeforms are in a state of emergency, not to mention the myriad forms of violence that are proliferating by the day; madness appears as a means of coping to survive these radically divisive and disturbing times. While technological utopianism embraces the rise of virtual reality and artificial intelligence to construct the superhuman condition, others view this as dystopic or apocalyptic in that it will further fuel escapism, alienation and dehumanization. With posthuman embodiment it is difficult to determine where the human ends and the machine begins. It appears that what it means to be human in its truest sense is steadily vanishing before our eyes, in anticipation of what may be called the end of the human era. Perhaps more than ever, we need to question our so-called sanity as it appears more like insanity, just as insanity appears to be an understandable response to coping with a world plunging ever further into chaos. From this point of view we can make sense of the provocative observation about the consensus reality by Scottish psychiatrist, R.D. Laing (1927-1989): “socially shared hallucinations is what we call reality, and our collusive madness is what we call sanity”² or what he terms our “appalling state of alienation called normality”.³ Very few would disagree that we are experiencing what

² R.D. Laing, “The Mystification of Experience,” in *The Politics of the Family and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), p. 73.

³ R.D. Laing, “A Ten-Day Voyage,” in *The Politics of Experience* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 167.

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