

Pathographic analysis of Vincent Van Gogh and its significance

Toshiko SUZUKI and Takeshi MATSUISHI

Yokohama National University, Faculty of Education and Human Sciences,
Department of Disability Studies

Introduction

Pathography is a type of study that analyzes the link between “historical greats” who have accomplished extraordinary feats in human history and psychological illness. Conventionally, pathography is applied to various fields such as art, literature, and politics. In our research, we focus on the pathography of Vincent Van Gogh, who is often considered a genius.

What sort of image do we have of Vincent Van Gogh and his works? Some may directly make the connection with the working class spirit as portrayed in ‘Les Mangeurs de pommes de terre’ (Potato Eaters) while others simply imagine the bright daylight in Arles as portrayed in ‘Les Tournesols’ (sunflower).

However, the prevailing image most of us hold towards Van Gogh’s works, particularly his later works, is related to his mental condition under which he cut his ear off and was sent to an institution. These events motivated some scholars to analyze Van Gogh’s mental state by studying his art works with pathographic approaches while others tried to understand the impact his mental condition had to his works.

However, there are those who remain more cautious, rejecting “diagnostic approaches” in evaluating Van Gogh’s works. They apply more a positivistic analysis, drawing from Van Gogh’s own words for support and working from the premise that Van Gogh’s works only represent his unique art theory.

The initial step of this analytical research is to examine two of the most well known pathographic studies held by psychiatrist. In the first study, Karl Jaspers, who was also a philosopher, diagnosed Van Gogh as schizophrenic. The latter study was conducted by Manfred in der Beeck, who concluded, through clinical research on his own patients, that Van Gogh was epileptic. Additionally, we will explore the non-pathographic perspectives of Kurt Badt about Van Gogh’s unique coloring concept, that draws support from Van Gogh’s writings. Finally, based on the views of the abovementioned scholars, we will evaluate the significance of applying pathographic approaches in understanding Van Gogh’s works.

Chapter 1

Karl Jaspers attempts to identify the effects of Van Gogh’s mental condition on his paintings by observing

how aspects of his lifestyle, writings, and paintings have changed with time, specifically comparing his conditions before and after the 'ear incident' on December 23, 1888. According to Jaspers, the changes in Van Gogh's works are most apparent in technical aspects, as forms used in the paintings after 1888 are more fragmented and his utilization of color became lifeless but garish. A distorted perspective is also employed. Jaspers points out that the timeline of these shifts coincide with the development of his illness. Jaspers does not make an effort to find evidence of psychotic elements in Van Gogh's writings but only suggests that the drastic change can be found in his writing after the time of his illness.

Regarding the mental condition that brought dramatic change in Van Gogh's life during and after 1888, Jaspers rejects the assessments of psychiatrists who diagnosed Van Gogh at the time, claiming that the diagnosis completely lacked evidence that would suggest Van Gogh had epilepsy, epileptic fit, or epileptic dementia. Jaspers suggests the possibility of Van Gogh having general paresis, as illustrated by slight barrenness seen in his last painting and Van Gogh's personal testimony that revealed he felt his hands were not under full control. However, he believes it was more likely that Van Gogh had schizophrenia rather than general paresis considering that Van Gogh maintained sufficient decision-making ability and self-control over a long period time in spite of psychotic mental conditions.

Chapter 2

Manfred in der Beeck rejects Jaspers' schizophrenic diagnosis of Van Gogh highlighting that at the time the notion of schizophrenia was still new and biased and

that the foundation of Jaspers' conclusion lacked clarity. Instead, Beeck, after studying the drawings of his own epileptic patients, which contain the identical structural elements with the later works of Van Gogh, diagnosed Van Gogh with ictal symptom brought on by epileptoid character.

Beeck takes three steps in studying Van Gogh's mental condition. The first step is hypothetically diagnosing Van Gogh with epileptoid character with the support provided from 'Körperbau und Character' (Physique and Character) of Ernst Kretschmer. Subsequently, Beeck relates Van Gogh's 1889 work with the "visual aura" associated with early symptoms of epilepsy, which are characterized by blurriness or flame-like imaginary objects crossing the visual field, or hallucinatory visions resembling glitter-like images in a kaleidoscope. Beeck claims that the pictures drawn by one of his epileptic patients in expressing her visual aura have identical features with Van Gogh's later works, suggesting Van Gogh also had epilepsy. The third step was distinguishing the characteristics of pictures drawn by schizophrenic patients and epileptic patients. Pictures drawn by patients with schizophrenia are typically characterized with lack of spatial concept, distortion of forms, vague spatial distribution, and color use that creates a cold ambiance. The objects of the drawings tend to represent the end of the world or the next world. On the other hand, patients with epilepsy are inclined to draw to the details in any available space, recognizing that space is finite. The objects that are drawn tend to be more realistic compared to the schizophrenic patients. From these observations, Beeck concludes that Van Gogh's paintings represent epileptic characters.

Chapter 3

Having discussed the pathographic analysis conducted by the two previously mentioned psychiatrists, we will now look at a perspective that stands in opposition to the pathographic approach, namely Kurt Badt's theory of Van Gogh's color usage. Badt divided Van Gogh's painting career into four separate phases based on the transitions in his color usage; the phases were identified as: Holland period, Paris period, Arles period, and the Later Years. We will only examine Van Gogh's color usage during his later years here, as this is the time period considered significant by the two abovementioned psychiatrists. Van Gogh's color usage during his later years indicates the strong influence from Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), who revolutionized color concept in the art world with his famous "Delacroix's color" creating a tremendous impact on many painters. Badt points out that the application of complementary color contrast theorized by Delacroix (ie. Placing two complimentary colors, such as orange and blue, next to each other stimulates colorfulness) is ubiquitously seen throughout Van Gogh's works in his later days. This analysis of Badt suggests that "lifeless but garish" color usage emphasized by Jaspers was in actuality the complementary color contrast intentionally employed by Van Gogh. It is difficult to deny Badt's claim in this regard.

Conclusion

Jaspers claims that the transitions in the characteristics of Van Gogh's works coincide with the temporal progression of his illness; however, there is nothing to prove that these transitions were always the result of internal changes occurred within Van Gogh, as it could well be the result of external influence (from other painters, for instance). A similar criticism can be

delivered to Manfred in der Beeck's analysis as well. Beeck's work is more credible than Jaspers' as he applies a multi-dimensional analysis of Gogh's paintings through three different perspectives (ie. examination of Gogh's illness based on Kretschmer, relation between visual aura and Gogh's paintings, and comparison with the paintings drawn by schizophrenic patients). Beeck's observation also provides strong support for the view that the illness Van Gogh suffered from was nothing but epilepsy. Yet, Beeck's claim based on the association of Gogh's paintings with the visual aura is not very strong because there is no evidence to indicate that Van Gogh actually experienced visual aura or that he portrayed his hallucinatory vision on canvas, even if he did have such experience. Therefore, it is hasty to simply correlate the art creation of Gogh, in part or the whole, with epilepsy at this time. For the above stated reasons, the significance and validity of applying pathographic approaches for the purpose of studying Van Gogh and his works need to be reassessed with further research from multiple perspectives.

Reference

- Karl Jaspers : Strindberg und Van Gogh Versuch einer pathographischen Analyse unter vergleichender Heranziehung von Swedenborg und Hölderlin R. Piper & Co. Verlag München 1949
- Karl Jaspers: Strindberg and Van Gogh. Univ. Arizona P, 1982.
- Manfred in Der Beeck: Merkmale Epileptischer Bildnerie mit Pathographie Van Gogh. Verlag Hans Huber, 1982.
- Kurt Badt: Die Farbenlehre Von Gogh. Verlags M.DuMont Schauberg Kön, 1961.