2
Illustrations of Madness: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Insanity

Reading historical images of madness

Why should we read images of madness historically? What value can be derived from this and what would a developed historical perspective provide that is not available from other positions and approaches? Is it not the case that any delving into the past is simply a distraction from analysing and assessing contemporary media representations of madness? Surely it is only those representations that should command our attention.

In this chapter, I want to argue that looking at images of madness historically is indispensable. One of the major benefits of doing so resides in enabling us to negotiate patterns of continuity and change without falling prey to the pitfalls of relativism and presentism. It is these two pitfalls that, more than any others, lie in wait for the unwary cultural analyst (see Pickering, 2009).

The standard view is that there is a straightforward historical continuity in the stereotypical portrayal of the insane. This encourages a presentist view backwards over the centuries, with what we have now being the same as what went before. I want to argue against this by showing that we can only understand continuities in the ‘othering’ of the insane in relation to changing perceptions of madness. Stereotypes do indeed persist, sometimes quite remarkably over considerable stretches of time. These continuities prevent us from indulging in the temporal solace of relativism and feeling proud of any progress made since then, back in the benighted past. But such continuities are not perceived in the same way from one period to another.
They appear to embody sameness from one time to another but they are always understood within a particular present, which is always historically defined. What appears directly continuous has therefore to be seen against what is historically different. Change becomes the key to unlocking continuity. It is only in this way that apparent continuities across broad swathes of time make any sense at all.

I want to say just a little more about why change is the key to unlocking continuity, and what this means for historical cultural analysis. The early modern period for example is often portrayed as a period of relative continuity compared with the period of turbulent change that followed the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. How then does the speed of historical change affect our perceptions of and attitudes to continuity? It is not just a matter of using change to understand continuity because if change were the only temporal coordinate, we would not have any conception of continuity whatsoever. There is always a two-way relation between continuity and change, with that relation being historically contingent and historically variable, which is of course the emphasis we have come to take in modernity and through history itself as a discipline of modernity. This two-way relation between continuity and change is easy to miss when contemporary images of madness are our sole preoccupation.

In Chapter 1 I noted how media images of the mentally distressed as dangerous have become a campaigning issue for psychiatric service users and their advocates. Otto Wahl, a leading American mental health advocate is an example of this. He has been influential both in the US and internationally for documenting the persistence of disparaging and socially harmful images of the mentally distressed, which he argues are consistent across the whole spectrum of the US mass media: from children’s cartoons to film and TV drama. Wahl suggests a historical explanation for why disparaging media images persist:

The images of mental illness that appear in today’s mass media reflect conceptualizations and representations of people with mental illnesses that have been around for centuries. The creative professionals of today’s media are, in some ways, just carrying on traditional depictions of the past. Many of today’s images are repetitions or residuals of long-standing popular beliefs.

(Wahl, 1995, p.114)