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Essay II Draft II

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Schizophrenic Creativity

In Ron Howard's (2001) *A Beautiful Mind*, Russell Crowe gives life to Sylvia Nasar's depiction of the schizophrenic genius John Nash in her novel of the same title. Both Nasar and Howard try to depict Nash's creative genius in an effort to unlock understanding of the creative process. The underlying reality of Nash's psychological creative process may never fully be realized due to the extreme difficulty of coherently portraying the mind of a schizophrenic, however the relationships between the portrayals of Nash through each medium shed light on Howard's own view of the creative process. Howard's decision to depict a rather coherent case of schizophrenia directly relates to the overall depiction of the creative process as something at once logical and irrational, fantastic and grounded in reality.

Although there are some inconsistencies between Nasar's novel and Howard's movie and even between Nasar's book and what some reviews have claimed to be the truth of Nash's life, these inconsistencies can be analyzed and understood to be intentional enlightening hints as to both Nasar's and Howard's views of what the creative process exactly was for John Nash. Ron Howard takes a very interesting diversion from Nasar's text right from the beginning of the movie in an effort to project a fairly

consistent portrayal of Nash's creative process from the very beginning of his signs of genius. Howard decides to initiate Nash's case of schizophrenia from the very outset of Nash's ability to think creatively. Nasar clearly presents Nash as a strong intellectual student who, however asocial, is not insane up through the age of thirty. Howard does arguably portray a coherent and rather sane picture of John Nash while he is at Princeton, but Howard makes the connection quite clear between Nash's creative process and his schizophrenia. Charles Herman, Nash's imagined roommate, appears as soon as Nash begins his graduate life at Princeton. During this time, Nash comes up with his non-cooperative Game Theory for which he later receives the Nobel Prize. Howard portrays Nasar's sane but stressed Nash throughout this time, but lays the foundations for his final conclusion that Nash's schizophrenia is directly linked to his creative process. The fact that Charlie is a result of Nash's insanity is Howard's link between Nash's creative process and his schizophrenia.

Although Howard deviates from Sylvia Nasar's novel and the truth of Nash's illness with his introduction of Charlie, Howard does depict a very strong and driven John Nash right from the beginning. Both Nasar and Howard show just how much John Nash wanted to be known amongst his peers. His asocial attitude toward his peers has led some to conclude that his reclusive behavior was one of the factors that led to his schizophrenia, and thus his creative mind. Howard definitely makes this link with Charlie. Schizophrenia was Nash's reaction to his solitude. However, Nash's drive to create something profound was, in a sense, schizophrenic in and of itself. Both Nasar's book and Howard's movie show a Nash who is very arrogant about his intellectual ability. Nasar writes: "Nash was very interested that everyone would recognize how smart he was, not because he needed this admiration, but anybody who didn't recognize it

wasn't on top of things. If anyone wasn't aware, he would take a little trouble to make sure he found out." Nash does go on to come up with his Game Theory, however, before that, he does appear to be slightly out of touch with reality. Although it is accepted that Nash didn't go insane until around the age of thirty, Charlie may well be Howard's attempt to portray Nash's desire to be known amongst his peers and his slightly off base assumption of his intellectual prowess before the completion of his Game Theory.

Howard thus makes the case that John Nash's creativity spawned from both his schizophrenia and his obsessive desire to be known. However, there is a very important part of Nash's life that has been left out from the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. After coming up with the Game Theory, Nash went on to work for RAND. *Fortune Magazine* described RAND as "the Air Force's big-brain-buying venture." The movie does try to touch upon such a military recognition when Nash visits the Pentagon, but the movie, again, falsely relates his successes at the Pentagon to his schizophrenia. Howard's addition of Parcher to the end of the scene is his way of making that connection. However, Nasar's version of the story clearly emphasizes a break between Nash's release from RAND and the onslaught of his mental disease. Like Howard's use of Charlie, his use of Parcher in the Pentagon could be his way of depicting a neurological phenomenon in Nash that was slightly schizophrenic in and of itself or that would lead eventually to the disease. Charlie was Howard's way of showing Nash's imagined self importance that would eventually lead to schizophrenia. His early introduction of Parcher could be his way of illustrating yet another avenue that led Nash into his mental disease. Nasar touches upon a study that was done relating the onset of schizophrenia to individuals who underwent military training during times of peace: "several studies have since shown that basic military training during peacetime can precipitate schizophrenia in men with a

hitherto unsuspected vulnerability to the illness.” Nash’s view of his own self worth is arguably evidence of his vulnerability to schizophrenia, and Parcher represents Nash’s confusion resulting from his contacts with the military during peacetime. Nash deciphers codes in the movie after the Korean War, a time of peace. To understand why his services are required, he invents Parcher to tell him what exactly is going on. Howard does work the time well between Nash’s first vision of Parcher and when Parcher becomes a main character in Nash’s life. Up until Parcher recruits John Nash, Howard portrays these schizophrenic characters in such ways that do not lead John Nash to go insane. After Parcher becomes a main force in Nash’s life, Howard shows Nash leaving the world of reality, in chronological accordance with Nasar’s novel. Thus, before Parcher, Howard uses schizophrenic characters to portray what led to Nash’s insanity, and after Parcher, Howard uses these same characters to show just how bad the disease got for Nash.

Another discontinuity between Howard’s directing of the movie and Nasar’s novel is in the essence of the portrayal of Nash’s schizophrenia. Marilyn describes how hard it is to depict schizophrenia on the screen. “At times we also find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of being unable to discriminate the fine line between truth and fiction, reality and distortion; a dilemma that can be particularly problematic when dealing with highly creative individuals.” Howard chooses to concentrate primarily on Charlie, Charlie’s niece Marcee, and Parcher, while in all reality Nash’s schizophrenia included many other characters, not all from this world. Howard’s decision to concentrate on only a select few manifestations of Nash’s schizophrenia are his way of trying to portray the reality into which Nash thought he lived. Nash was a brilliant man, and his theories are very logical when applied to modern economics. Howard tries to

portray a fairly level headed individual that is simply living in a world that does not exist. However, if that is true, it makes little sense for Nash's ability to create to diminish simply because his schizophrenia is controlled by the pink pills. Howard doesn't portray the insane Nash after his schizophrenia got quite severe. Thus, when Nash claims he cannot see the solutions because of the pink pills, the affect is diminished from what it must have been like for John Nash. Part of Nash's schizophrenia included such things as extraterrestrials. To fully understand Nash's creative process, one must include Nash's schizophrenic belief in aliens. Marilyn continues to describe the intensity of schizophrenia. "When asked by Harvard Professor George Mackey how a man of science could have believed in such fantasies as extraterrestrial messengers, Nash replied quite simply: "Because . . . the ideas I had about supernatural beings came to me the same way that my mathematical ideas did. So I took them seriously." If such instances as extraterrestrials had been added to the movie, people may have taken John Nash less serious. Howard leaves out the more extreme cases to promote a more grounded view of Nash than the actual mental state of Nash during his bouts of schizophrenia.

Howard paints a picture of Nash that both emphasizes and diminishes the affects of his schizophrenia on his creativity. Throughout the movie, Howard travels in and out of Nash's physical and metaphysical worlds. Although there are many discontinuities between the Nash of *A Beautiful Mind* and the Nash of reality, through these discontinuities, Howard portrays a fairly strong image of the creative process. Howard ends the movie with a conclusion that logic springs from the concept of love, which is ultimately a relative principle. Here, Howard is giving logic a creative and relative aspect. Although many may disagree with this seemingly ungrounded approach, it fits in concluding Howard's portrayal of the life of Nash. Howard portrays a creative process

that is not grounded perfectly in reality, but somehow reaches reality in some form or another. Nash did have a similar view of the creative process. Howard depicts Nash desiring to audit a class, saying that “this will be my first class.” Nash never attended class or read the material through Graduate School. This seemingly arrogant mind set may have stemmed from his schizophrenic view of his own self importance, but Nasar explains that he “defended not reading, taking the attitude that learning too much secondhand would stifle creativity and originality. It was a dislike of passivity and giving up control.” Thus, Howard’s view of the creative process as one not hindered by accepted ways of thinking. Howard’s view of the artist is one who can see the world from a mysterious view point.

The view that Nash ultimately was led to, as Marilyn claims, “misapplications of his gifts” can be used to finalize director Ron Howard’s view of the creative process. Ron Howard emphasizes a very level headed John Nash throughout his movie who invents a theory that revolutionizes the world: “Nash’s theories have influenced global trade negotiations, national labor relations, and even breakthroughs in evolutionary biology.” The fact of the matter, to others, is that John Nash was simply a brilliant man who wasn’t grounded in reality enough to actually test his theories. Marilyn explains why Nash’s schizophrenia ultimately weakened his creativity. “The factor that seems to have made Nash so intensely vulnerable in this way seems to have been his narcissism, which required him to produce something grand enough to win recognition and admiration at a very high level but also made him disdainful of the types of experiences that might have provided greater reality testing.” Nash’s schizophrenic narcissism led him to come up with a theory that falls short of its full potential in the real world.

Ron Howard uses the life of John Nash to display one of the many ways the creative process manifests itself amongst artists. Howard creates a very idealized John Nash who is both a brilliant and a logical man who is a victim to his disease. Yet, Howard also idealizes the extent to which John Nash's Game Theory was applicable to the real world. Thus, Howard defines the creative process of John Nash as basically very idealized and, to some extent, mild version of schizophrenia. Although Nash did win the Nobel Prize, Howard overlooks the opinions held by many that the Game Theory didn't, in fact, merit the Nobel Prize. Thus, to Howard, the creative process has very little connection, if any, to any art that is subsequently produced. To Howard, the creative process is a journey to learn knowledge firsthand, pioneering through the mind no matter how grounded in reality.

Works Cited

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