

Is Artistic Genius a Myth?

Abstract:

Where do new ideas come from? What is the inception point for innovative ideas and how and why do some change in order to become valuable and influential works? Can one trace the antecedents of creative discoveries in order to understand how their authors came to make them? Can these questions be answered or artistic genius is an unexplainable myth? This paper will start with the generally accepted definition of the term *genius*, and then give an overview of the major theories attempting to explain it in order to move on to a few considerations on what happens with the myth of genius nowadays. Attempts to explain the nature of genius date since the time of Plato, whose doctrine was centered on the artist-demiurge endowed with divine reason, able to bring order into chaos. The Renaissance view opposed this stance with the artist as God, a creator that makes something out of nothing. Romanticism linked genius to notions of pain and suffering, melancholy, madness and death, ideas that are often accepted by popular belief as being related to the nature of tormented contemporary geniuses such as Kurt Cobain or Amy Winehouse. From Eureka moments to manic-depression, from favourable context to beneficial influence of family and education, from simple chance to divergent or lateral thinking, each theory of creativity adds little pieces to the puzzle of what we think we know about genius. This paper inclines towards narrowing down the essence of genius at the level of the work of art, suggesting the creative product as the key to our understanding of culture.

Keywords: creativity, genius, artist, myth.

“1 Where do new ideas come from? Can one trace the antecedents of novel works? Are new ideas conceived whole, or do they undergo changes from the original conception to the final form?”

2. Why might one individual make a creative discovery, while another individual, seemingly just as knowledgeable and motivated, does not do so?”

3. Why are some works broadly valued and influential, while others are not?”

Robert Weisberg’s (252) “central questions of creativity” are the echo of a mystery as old

Raluca Mihaela PARASCHIV

Bucharest National University of Arts

Email: raluca.m.ionescu@gmail.com

EKPHRASIS, 1/2015

CREATIVE BOYCOTT

pp. 36-46

as civilization. Can his questions be answered? Is artistic genius a myth in whose "unintelligibility is its splendour"? (Boden, 4)

Defining Genius

What does genius mean? The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines it as a "natural ability or capacity; quality of mind; the special endowments which fit a man for his peculiar work" or "native intellectual power of an exalted type, such as is attributed to those who are esteemed greatest in any department of art, speculation, or practice; instinctive and extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation, original thought, invention, or discovery. Often contrasted with talent". The keywords of this definition do make it sound mythical: quality, special, native, intellectual, exalted, greatest, extraordinary, imaginative, creation, original, and invention.

"In fact, genius is always explained according to the mythologies of a given age" (Rothstein, *n.p.*) for, "in each age and in each art, genius is that which defies analysis" (Murray, 1).

Theories of Genius

The Genius View

Robert Weisberg has considered two fundamental orientations towards creativity: the "genius view" and the "ordinary thinking view". The former states that creative thinking is the result of extraordinary thinking processes, different in quality than our usual way of thinking, while the latter considers that creative persons are extraordinary because of their products and not because of the processes by which these products are brought about (3).

The 'genius view', as it was called by Weisberg, encompasses a number of theories that led to the myth surrounding artistic genius.

Attempts of explaining the nature of genius date since the time of Plato. His doctrine was centered on the artist-demiurge endowed with divine reason. While the Christian belief is based on the creation of something out of nothing, Plato's idea of creation was about bringing order into the preexistent chaos in order to turn it into the cosmos.

"A poet is holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself and reason is no longer in him... for not by art does he utter these, but by power divine." (Plato qtd. in Boden, 4)

In the Renaissance, along with the birth of some 'super-artists' (Kemp, 4), there rose the conception of the artist as God, who created images of things that did not exist. This belief in the divine capabilities of the artist was not yet reflected in the word 'genius' (Leonardo da Vinci was one of the firsts to use it, with the meaning of novel and creative (Nahm, 128) but "in the use of the epithet '*divino*' [...] most memorably in connection with Michelangelo" (Murray, 4)

The today meaning of the word 'genius' was established in the 18th century, when it "became a Romantic obsession" (Bate, 167), a special power which "carries in itself a principle of destruction, of death, of madness, as the fruit carries in itself the worm" (Lamartine qtd. in Kessel, 197).

The artistic genius was characterized by moments of inspiration coming from the unconscious and it came to be linked with notions of melancholy, suffering (embodied, as Penelope Murray (6) notices, by the legend of Faustus) and madness.

These sudden moments of insight have been called the "bed, bus, bath" syndrome by R.E. Ochse and are defined as "states of low cortical arousal during which multiple streams of thought can be activated" (Weisberg, 45). The name came from geniuses' own accounts of how their ideas came about. Such accounts include Coleridge's description of his dreaming of the poem *Kubla Kahn* under the influence of opium or a letter attributed to Mozart that reads: "All this inventing, this producing, takes place in a pleasingly lively dream" (W.A. Mozart qtd. in Weisberg, 44).

The British scientist Graham Wallace proposed four stages of creative acts. The first is 'preparation' which is a period of intense effort without success. This is followed by a period of 'incubation' when the problem is set aside, leaving time for the previously thought upon ideas to develop in the unconscious. Then, we have the long awaited moment of 'illumination', followed by a stage of 'verification'. Mathematician Henri Poincaré's writings based on his own creative processes support this division of creativity in different stages.

The Ordinary Thinking View

Robert Weisberg considered those self-reports not to be very credible and probably embellished. The Romantic poets claimed to have dreamt their poems but their notebooks showed extensive rewriting. He characterized "ordinary" thought processes as "continuity of thinking as well as discontinuity brought about through feedback and through external triggers" (Weisberg, 22). These processes consist of analogical thinking, namely the establishment of analogies between a present, new situation and a past, familiar one, as well as of discontinuous thinking caused by an external trigger or by self-criticism. In order to prove his point, he then proceeded to describe these processes with regard to famous creative people and their works. As an example, he used Leonardo's lack of constancy and very human mistake of using oil paint for "The Last Supper" which eventually proved harmful to the fresco. He also analysed two of Picasso's most famous works, "Les demoiselles d'Avignon" and "Guernica" as examples for the use of past experiences and symbols in an artist's work. In 1785, Mozart dedicated six string quartets to Haydn calling them the result of a long and intense effort (Mellers, 169). Weisberg used this as a counterargument for the alleged dreaming of entire works.

Moreover, he also described the "10 years rule" which is based on case studies of composers, painters and poets that show an average of ten years before they develop up to the level of their first masterpiece.

Importance of family, friends and context

Weisberg's findings were supported by Michael J. Howe's study on musical prodigies and creativity:

"We shall never know how Mozart would have progressed in the absence of the intense regime of instruction and practice imposed by his father, but prodigious musical skills in the absence of strong parental encouragement are at best extremely rare." (435).

However, Howe admitted that the importance of professional education was relevant mostly for musicians and also referred to cases of famous creators who were not fortunate enough to benefit from a supportive familiar environment, using Michael Faraday and George Stephenson as examples.

The influence of childhood and early adolescence on the achievements of extraordinary individuals attracted attention on the influence of context on creativity. T.I. Lubart and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi have conducted research on this matter.

Lubart has described the importance of culture both on what is produced at the level of cultural products as well as on what will be accepted. He found differences between Western, "product-oriented, originality-based" creativity and more traditional, inner-focused, Eastern one. He also wrote about the fact that "culture provides a set of facilitating and inhibiting conditions for creativity that influence the general level of creativity", concluding firmly that "the analysis of creativity in diverse cultures shows that it is context-dependent" (Lubart, 347).

Lubart's resolute conclusion bears resemblance to Csikszentmihalyi's almost shocking affirmation that "while the mind has quite a lot to do with genius and creativity, it is not the place where these phenomena can be found; [...] creativity is not the product of single individuals, but of social systems making judgments about individuals' products" (Csikszentmihalyi, 39-41). Csikszentmihalyi described creativity as "a product of interaction between three components: a person who makes changes in the contents of a domain that are acceptable to a field" (Csikszentmihalyi qtd. in Williams and Yang, 379). Moreover, he identified four characteristics of domain enhancing creativity. The first one is represented by the "stage of development that the domain has attained". The second is the "historical period", meaning that at a given time some domains seem more attractive to gifted young people. The third characteristic is the "accessibility" to enter the domain. Finally, the fourth is represented by the possibility to change that domain depending on how autonomous it is and on the social system that supports it (Csikszentmihalyi, 47).

In one of his essays from *Art and Literature*, entitled 'On Transience', Freud made an interesting point with regards to the context-related value of the work of art. His opinion on the work of art's independence of a temporal dimension was based on the fact that its value was determined only by our emotional response to it:

"A time may indeed come when the pictures and statues which we admire today will crumble to dust, or a race of men may follow us who no longer understand the works of our

poets and thinkers, or a geological epoch may even arrive when all animate life upon the earth ceases; but since the value of all this beauty and perfection is determined only by its significance for our own emotional lives, it has no need to survive us and is therefore independent of absolute duration" (288).

Another theory arisen from the relation between creativity and context is Jack Stillinger's thesis regarding "multiple authorship in a variety of forms" (182). Stillinger's analysis of a number of literary works was meant to prove them as a product of the social, historical and cultural circumstances surrounding their author as well as the result of one person's endeavouring.

In his description of analogical and discontinuous thinking, Weisberg also made the point that strange analogies, the "perceiving of familiarity between two things that could look entirely different to somebody else" (22) are a powerful trait of creative people. This capacity to make unusual associations between two previously unrelated streams in order to produce a new idea was named by Arthur Koestler 'bisociative' thinking. Unlike Weisberg, Koestler considered unusual associations as a proof of the extraordinary thinking processes involved in creativity and he also placed emphasis on the unconscious.

Employment of extraordinary thinking processes

Similar to Weisberg's distinction between extraordinary and ordinary thinking processes, although he obviously inclined in favour of the latter, are distinctions between "divergent" and "convergent" thinking or "primary" versus "secondary-process" thinking.

J.P. Guilford's term of 'divergent' thinking is almost similar to what Edward de Bono called 'lateral' thinking. In Guilford's opinion, this type of thinking uses fluency, flexibility, and originality to 'diverge' from what we know, to produce many original ideas; convergent thinking, the logical mode of thought, uses information to 'converge' on a single solution or idea" (60).

The other aforementioned distinction, between "primary" and "secondary-process" thinking, belongs to Sigmund Freud. According to him, all humans are born with a set of primary instincts related to the survival of the species. These instincts are triggered by the needs for food, warmth and sex, and they form the *id*, which is concerned with survival and pleasure and associated with the unconscious. At this moment, there develops the *ego* whose role is to satisfy those needs in the real world through logical and rational thinking. The *ego* is also responsible for producing defense mechanisms that prevent unacceptable (from a social or moral point of view) *id* needs from expression and action.

In Freud's view, creative work is motivated by primary, instinctual, unfulfilled wishes brought about by the encounter of the creative writer with a strong experience in the presence that awakens the memory of a childhood experience "from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work" (139).

He links creative work with the child's play, in that they both are disinterested and they both create a world of phantasy. As we grow up, the child's play turns into phantasies or day-dreams that we keep most secret and are ashamed of. The artist, just like the child, is not ashamed to show his phantasies. For Freud, "the essential *ars poetica* lies in the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us which is undoubtedly connected with the barriers that rise between each ego and the others" (140).

Relation between genius and mental illness

A variation of Freud's emphasis on neurosis and primary process thought is the familiar association between genius and madness.

"The lunatic, the lover and the poet

Are of imagination all compact" (W. Shakespeare qtd. in Kessel, 196)

In his essay, "Genius and Mental Disorder: A History of Ideas Concerning Their Conjunction", Neil Kessel describes the rationale behind the long-time comparison between genius and madness. One of the main reasons for this association is the fact that they both have in common the idea of passion and frenzy and also of differentiation from the ordinary man. Because novel ideas point to change, geniuses are seen as misfit, as a disturbance to society, just like the madmen. Another reason for linking genius with madness is, simply, envy since "by calling geniuses mad, by, so to speak, salting their exalting position with stigma, we somehow reduce them so that petty people like us can more comfortably accept their existence" (203).

Although Kessel's explanations make a point, there is also evidence of a high rate of mental disorders amongst highly creative people.

In her book, "Touched with Fire: Manic-depressive illness and the artistic temperament", Kay Jamison, herself a manic-depressive, uses biographical sources linking manic-depressive illness and the artistic temperament. Her sources include letters and other autobiographical excerpts of Robert Schumann, Edgar Allen Poe, Vincent Van Gogh, Lord Byron, and others, making a point of proving the hereditary transmission of mental illnesses. Apart from this, Jamison also analyses the work of these artists, identifying the emotional highs and lows characteristic of mania and depression. She also includes numerical data, based on literary history as well as on a study done by Nancy Andreasen, which indicate that writers, in particular, have a much higher rate of manic-depressive illness as compared to the general population or to the other artists for that matter.

Moreover, Jamison discusses the way changes in mood are also highly characteristic of creative thought, noting that „fluency, rapidity, and flexibility of thought on the one hand, and the ability to combine ideas or categories of thought in order to form new and original connection on the other" (105) seem to show up in both creative and hypomanic thought.

However, creativity has also been linked with qualities opposite of madness such as discipline and tenacity, strong motivation, organisation and self-confidence.

Furthermore, it was proved to have a positive effect in the treatment of mental disorders, especially in the case of children. Anthony Storr's findings also support the idea that people undertake creative activities as a mechanism of defense against anxiety, accomplished "by portraying one's inner world in a work of art and then persuading other people to accept it, if not as real at least as highly significant" (Storr, 58).

As convincing as the link between genius and madness might appear, especially in light of the Romantic description of genius, there is not enough scientific evidence that could establish a definite connection between pathology and creativity. There is, though, a connection between certain characteristics of psychological disorders (characteristics that can be met in general population as well) and creativity, the common root of strong imagination, as Daniel Nettle puts it. In his opinion, "there is madness in the human species because it is an extreme form of normal human cognition, and the extreme forms have stayed around in the population because they produce both good and bad outcomes. The good outcome is unusual creativity, the bad one psychosis. The sword is double-edged" (Nettle, 158).

Why do we believe in Genius?

It has also been argued that the myth of genius exists for educational purposes, based on the people's need for role models. Milton Nahm has focused on the projected image of extraordinary men and women and has made the point that the absolute truth behind that image is of no importance. The reasons for believing in any myth are of psychological nature, the function of myths being to "express the values, assuage the fears and endorse the practices of the community that celebrates them" (Nahm, 174).

In Margaret Boden's view, the reason why people worship "images of personages, of heroes, of saints, and of geniuses in art" is the fact that "psychologically, such images inspire men in moments of frustration, despair or discouragement"(4).

Contemporary geniuses and the star-system

Strongly influenced by some of the theories mentioned above, the 'popular' belief on the matter, as illustrated by online comments, appears to lean on the mythology side. Many commenters seem passionate about the issue of artistic genius, and debates on the subject are no longer to be met only in academic books but in newspapers or online forums as well. One such online forum of discussion is called *Artistic genius versus no talent* and there one can encounter opinions that cover a wide range. Some visitors feel very 'context-oriented' about this topic as can be seen from a comment such as "'artistic genius' vs. 'no talent' is truly all in the eye of the beholder, what some people see as genius others see as no talent, it just seems to be the way it is..." (Kerr, *Artistic genius versus no talent*, n.p.). Others seem to have already found the answer to the question asked in the title of this paper: "Of course artistic genius isn't a myth. Every time I get involved in discussions like this I only have to think of Beethoven, Manet, Mozart, Velazquez, Hendrix etc. and then the fog lifts" (Kim, *Artistic genius versus no talent*, n.p.).

In the comment pages of online forums it is still common to link genius with notions of melancholy, difference, divine sparkle, madness or substance abuse. There appears to be a fascination with famous people's lives and that is further proven by the fact that the next best-selling category of books after fiction is biography.

This inclination that people seem to have towards the Romantic notion of genius has been exploited by the show business through the so-called 'star system'. If an artistic product's market value does not find support in itself (which can be due to a number of reasons, low market value is not the same with low aesthetic value), a clever strategy for selling the product is to make it interesting by using the life of its author. A few of the twentieth century's artistic leading figures are in a large part remembered because of their short wild life and tragic end. This gallery of tragic figures includes artists such as James Dean, Elvis Presley, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain or Amy Winehouse, young artists whose short life has stood under the sign of alcohol and substance abuse. Also, their destinies show strange similarities. Charles Cross, one of Cobain's biographers, said in an interview that: „there are many similarities between the story of Kurt Cobain and the story of Elvis Presley – they both grew up poor and went on to become the most popular performers of their generation, and yet died young” (Cross, *n.p.*). Winehouse, Cobain and Morrison died at the same age of 27 and they would have made an interesting Freudian case study based on their own descriptions of early childhood trauma. All of them had manifold capacities as writers, painters, composers and actors.

“I'm not like them/ But I can pretend/ The sun is gone/ But I have a light/ The day is done/ But I'm having fun” (Cobain, *n.p.*)

Instruments used for labeling genius

The product versus the creator and the importance of the field of judgment

There seems to be something special about extraordinary creative people, something connected to their personality, education, way of thinking, entourage, etc. However, in the end, that which survives them is their work, so that, even if in years to come nobody would know who the author of that work has been, the true work of genius would still preserve its value. In the course of their lives, or at the moment of their becoming famous, attention is drawn to them primarily through their products. In time, the relationship between the creator and her work becomes one of interdependence, and the value of all the products belonging to an author that came to be known through a few extraordinary works, increases.

Thus, a real product of genius still 'stands' if we separate it from its creator. The Sistine Chapel is still beautiful without Michelangelo. The life and personality of a creator are interesting to us because we first got interested in what he or she has created.

Theories on genius mainly focus on the person or the process, but, going back to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's point about novelties in a domain being assessed by a field,

the field of art focuses on the works of art. Contrary to popular belief, artists are usually pragmatic when it comes to their work and, in their world, the result is what counts. An artist without work does not exist.

Csikszentmihalyi has also noticed that “for mass market products the field includes the public at large” (49). This paper supports the opinion that the ‘field’ of judgment is the main difference between what has come to be accepted universally as genius, which might also be called ‘academic’ genius and contemporary creative products, or ‘popular’ genius. The commercial factor decreases, on a symbolic level, the value of a creative work while the perceived ‘use’ of a work of art also has an influence with regards to its added value. In science, this is a factor that ‘increases’ the value of an invention and is an important criterion by which this value is measured. In art, the utilitarian reason of a work is seen differently and assigned a more ‘special’ role.

“Enduring art has an element of originality and innovation, of going beyond existing genres and traditions, of putting a personal stamp, of varying the theme, of throwing an inexhaustible and enduring bit of surprise into a general comprehensibility. Enduring culture fills the mental bucket of its audience, and overflows a bit.” (Nettle, 179)

Nowadays, it has become increasingly obvious that there are no absolute standards by which to call an artist better than the other one and even more difficult to decide on whom is a genius and who is just talented. We are bombarded with an enormous quantity of cultural information at an unprecedented speed. As with so many other things, it takes time to decide and take sides. The cultural gatekeepers who are responsible for moulding our tastes seem to be reluctant to tie their reputation to that of an artist by labeling him a ‘genius’. It is somehow easier to call Leonardo a genius than to assert the same thing about last year’s winner of the Turner Prize. Besides cultural critics, postmodern cynicism makes itself felt in artists, their works, and their audiences.

“Genius and taste no longer mean for us what they meant to the poets and critics of the Romantic period. Their halo, their mystery, their power are gone. By genius is now merely meant the creative faculty, the power of self-expression, which we all share in varying degrees. By taste is meant the power to see and understand and enjoy the self-expression of others, a power which all of us must in some measure share, or no art would be intelligible.... We are all geniuses; we are all possessed of taste.” (J.E. Spingarn qtd. in Nahm, 211)

When attempting to catch a glimpse of the immensity of the concept of genius, the product-oriented approach is a reliable instrument, trustworthy regardless of the mythical dimension of the creator. Considering works of genius and the way they have come to be appreciated and reflected upon by artists’ peers as well as by the general public, there is an association between influential works of art and attributes of divinity such as wholeness, durability, absolute beauty and love. Thus, the object of our admiration as mere mortals is the work of art, and it is the knowledge that we get from them that will be cherished and passed on.

The aforementioned theories contradict each other at times (disagreement with someone else's findings has been the starting point for a new theory of genius in many cases), or add little pieces to the puzzle of what we *know* about genius. All in all, neither neurology nor psychology or the history of arts can pretend to have a definite answer for the enigma of genius, be it seen in the person, the process or the product. As Margaret Boden summarized it: "Until we know a lot more about how the brain enables ordinary thinking and remembering to happen, we shall not be in a position to ask sensibly how Mozart's brain might have been different" (260).

References:

1. *Artistic Genius vs. No Talent*. <http://glyphs.gardenweb.com/forums/load/cafe/msg041006204610.html>.
2. BATE, Jonathan. "Shakespeare and Original Genius". *Genius: The History of an Idea*. Ed. Penelope Murray. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 167.
3. BODEN, Margaret. *The Creative Mind*. London: Abacus, 1992.
4. COBAIN, Kurt. "Dumb". *In Utero Lyrics*. <http://www.cobain.com/inutero.html>.
5. CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, Mihaly. "Creativity and genius: a systems perspective". *Genius and the Mind: Studies of Creativity and Temperament*. Ed. Andrew Steptoe. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 39-49.
6. FREUD, Sigmund. *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo da Vinci and other Works*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.
7. HOWE, Michael J.A. "Prodigies and Creativity". *Handbook of Creativity*. Ed. Robert J. Sternberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 435.
8. JAMISON, Kay R. *Touched with Fire: Manic – depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. New York: Free Press, 1994.
9. KEMP, Martin. "The Super-artist as Genius: The Sixteenth-Century View". *Genius: The History of an Idea*. Ed. Penelope Murray. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 4.
10. KESSEL, Neil. "Genius and Mental Disorder: A History of Ideas Concerning their Conjunction". *Genius: The History of an Idea*. Ed. Penelope Murray. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 196-197.
11. LUBART, Todd I. "Creativity Across Cultures". *Handbook of Creativity*. Ed. Robert J. Sternberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 347.
12. MELLERS, Wilfrid. "What is Musical Genius?". *Genius: The History of an Idea*. Ed. Penelope Murray. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 169.
13. MURRAY, Penelope, ed. *Genius: The History of an Idea*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.
14. NAHM, Milton C. *Genius and Creativity: An Essay in the History of Ideas*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965.
15. NETTLE, Daniel. *Strong Imagination: Madness, Creativity and Human Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
16. NICHOLLS, John G. "Creativity in the person who will never producer anything original and useful: the concept of creativity as a normally distributed trait". *American Psychologist*, August 1972: 17-727.
17. *Oxford Dictionary of English*. <http://dictionary.oed.com>.
18. ROTHSTEIN, Edward. *Myths About Genius*. <http://talentdevelop.com/mythsabout.html>.

19. STEPTOE, Andrew, ed. *Genius and the Mind: Studies of Creativity and Temperament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
20. STERNBERG, Robert J., ed. *Handbook of Creativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
21. STILLINGER, Jack. *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
22. STORR, Anthony. *The Dynamics of Creation*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1972.
23. *The Official Page ONE Literary Newsletter Website*. Interview with Charles Cross regarding his new book „Heavier than Heaven - A Kurt Cobain Biography”. <http://pageonelit.com/interviews/Cross.html>.
24. WEISBERG, Robert W. *Creativity: Beyond the Myth of Genius*. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1993.
25. WILLIAMS, Wendy M. and YANG, Lana T. “Organizational Creativity”. *Handbook of Creativity*. Ed. Robert J. Sternberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 379.