FRAMING MADNESS
ANTONIN ARTAUD AND ALAIN RESNAIS ON VINCENT VAN GOGH

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In the years 1947 and 1948, Paris, France, experienced a contemporaneous interest in Vincent Van Gogh’s art and the relationship of art and madness. Two major figures of the avant-garde theatrical, written, and filmic arts – Antonin Artaud and Alain Resnais – each produced works within these two years that centered on Van Gogh and intervened in the debate on art and madness. After spending his own time in psychiatric institutions, Artaud penned a short book *Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society* in which he argued against Van Gogh’s madness as related to his artistic genius, the conformity of institutions, and the nature of suicide (among other things). His theories are quite different from other cultural thinking of the era, as evidenced through art historical scholarship, popular commentary, and works of art, such as Alain Resnais’s film *Van Gogh*. In his first film, Resnais produced a biopic-cum-art film about Van Gogh’s biography, constructed entirely of Van Gogh’s paintings. Influenced by both art historians and film theorists, his ambitious film sought to tell the history of Van Gogh, including his madness, through his art works. However, through specific filmic choices Resnais made (such as the editing) his film re-inscribed Van Gogh’s art with madness, presenting it in a way that mirrored contemporary notions of artistic genius and madness. Ultimately what can be learned from studying these two artists and their works in depth is that the framing of madness is essential to consider when discussing its relationship with art. It requires a nuanced reflection, one that does not necessarily result in definitive statements.
Introduction: Les suicidés?

Everyone knows Vincent Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* (figure 1); even those who know little about the rest of the vast art historical canon can recognize the painting as an important work of modernist art. Millions of visitors from around the world visit the Museum of Modern Art in New York City every year, and the famous painting by Van Gogh (one of only three in their collection) draws crowds of viewers looking to see it in person or take a selfie with it.\(^1\) The obsession with *The Starry Night* is not a singular fascination in regards to Van Gogh’s œuvre; in 2014 alone there were around 50 exhibits worldwide that included his works.\(^2\) Alongside his paintings, however, curators and critics often remark on the fact that he suffered from psychological afflictions, resulting in his stay in a psychiatric hospital. In fact, some museums use his madness as a starting point for their exhibitions, such as that of the 2014 exhibit at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris, France. This exhibition, *Van Gogh / Artaud Le Suicidé de la Société*, considered the poet and playwright Antonin Artaud’s small volume from 1947 *Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society* as a way to understand Van Gogh’s art and madness. In putting on such a show, the museum effectively re-inscribed the association of the painter with madness as well as took Artaud’s drawings, created during his own time spent in psychiatric institutions, out of their original context to further the show’s argument of presenting madness as an integral part of the artists’ œuvres.

Using passages from Artaud’s writing about Van Gogh as different themes of the exhibition, the Musée d’Orsay made an attempt to align the artists as both artistic and mad

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geniuses. As an example of the attempts to draw comparisons where they might not organically exist, the chief curator of the museum Isabelle Cahn actually questioned in her catalogue essay the nature of Artaud’s death – which in reality was due to an overdose of chloral hydrate while suffering from rectal cancer – to suggest a potential suicide, like Van Gogh.\(^3\) In fact, I find the title of the exhibition itself contentious, as it implies an equivalence between Van Gogh and Artaud that is not entirely accurate (i.e. that as mad artists, Van Gogh and Artaud were both suicided in some way). It also demonstrates the continued discussion within the art world of madness and its relationship to both artists and their œuvres. For these reasons, I focus on this debate in the years 1947 and 1948, when Paris experienced a contemporaneous interest in Van Gogh’s art and the relationship of art and madness. In so doing, I turn to the work of two artists – Antonin Artaud and Alain Resnais – and their respective mediums of writing and film to consider how they intervened in this debate.

Artaud penned *Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society* in 1947 on the occasion of an exhibition of Van Gogh’s paintings at the Musée de l’Orangerie. Less than a year later, a then unknown filmmaker Alain Resnais made his first film called *Van Gogh* in conjunction with the growing interest in Van Gogh at this time. With two different works by two major figures of avant-garde theatrical, written, and filmic arts coming out within a year of one another, this thesis examines how each approaches the figure of Van Gogh in their respective works and how they also comment on madness itself. My argument hinges on the two different mediums that Artaud and Resnais use in their approach to consider Van Gogh, his art, and his relationship to madness as well as how their works functioned within the broader discourses about art in 1947.

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and 1948. I will therefore closely examine Artaud’s *Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society*, and Resnais’ film *Van Gogh*.

Artaud: A Man Mischaracterized by Society

A brief consideration of Artaud in 1947 is necessary for understanding the position he takes in *Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society*. For almost a decade, he had stayed in various psychiatric institutions throughout France, finally being released from a hospital in Rodez in 1946. Following the conclusion of his internment, the gallerist Pierre Loeb urged Artaud to write about Van Gogh, on occasion of the forthcoming exhibition at the Musée de l’Orangerie. Artaud was uninterested until learning that the French press used extracts of François-Joachim Beer’s 1945 book *Du démon de Van Gogh* (Van Gogh’s demon), which positioned Van Gogh as mad, in promotion of the exhibition. It opened in January 1947, and after visiting it the following month, Artaud wrote the book, in addition to an unrelated radio play titled *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*.

While he was hospitalized, Artaud created dozens of visual and written drawings; they were exhibited only once during Artaud’s lifetime but have been included in both solo and group exhibitions on more than twenty occasions since his death.\(^4\) However, the drawings that are usually included in shows are not regarded by Artaud as “Academic” works of Art. Because of his artistic and psychiatric histories, his psychiatrist Gaston Ferdière tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade him to show his works as part of an exhibition of other patients’ work at the Centre Psychiatrique Sainte-Anne in 1946. However, Artaud also refused to have his works shown in a clinical context, as doing such could allow his works to be pathologized. He thus refused both an Academic and clinical reading of his works. In 1947, the artist and friend of Artaud Jean Margit Rowell, ed, *Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 163.
Dubuffet sponsored an exhibit of his drawings, which, while not presenting them under a clinical premise, remained at odds with how Artaud viewed his work. Artaud wrote the preface to the exhibition catalogue, and in it specifically states that he had “définitivement brisé avec l’art, le style, ou le talent dans tous les dessins que l’on verra ici” (definitively broken with the art, the style, or the talent in all the drawings that one will see here). He also rejected the realism of Academic art under the supposition that it had been unable to find the human visage. In doing such, Artaud effectively created a challenge for scholars and curators in exhibiting his works, as they should not be read through a clinical nor Academic lens. What is more, Artaud’s ideas regarding the human face in art formed part of his argument concerning Van Gogh’s lucidity in the production of his paintings.

*Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society* begins with a critique of psychiatric practice as Artaud, and most likely Van Gogh, experienced it. Artaud remarks that “vicious society has invented psychiatry to defend itself from the investigations of certain superior lucid minds.” Following this reasoning, Artaud asks of the reader what is a lunatic, which he defines as “a man whom society has not wished to listen to, and whom it is determined to prevent from uttering unbearable truths.” In this statement, Artaud argues that society relegates those to whom it does not want to listen to as “lunatics” so as to provide an excuse for its refusal of their acknowledgement. This is similar to what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues with his

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7 Antonin Artaud, *Dessins et Portraits*.
9 Artaud, “Van Gogh,” (EN), 47.
idea of the *homo sacer* as a person whom society has cast out and bares no blame for in killing.\textsuperscript{10} *Homo sacer* comes from the Latin meaning “sacred man,” however, there is much contradiction and ambiguity in the figure of a *homo sacer*. As Agamben posits in his texts, there is a two-sided character to this man that is both sacred and able to be killed without consequence to the killer. The *homo sacer* may be defined by his identity of “double exclusion,” – that is, not human but not divine – as well as by the “violence to which he finds himself exposed.”\textsuperscript{11} He can be killed without being sacrificed, as he is outside “human jurisdiction” without being in the “realm of the divine.”\textsuperscript{12} Artaud’s definition of a lunatic is congruent with the *homo sacer*, and the example of Van Gogh may be used to understand how one may be suicided by an individual or group.

Because French society branded Van Gogh as mad, the possibility to understand his artistic project solely in terms of aesthetic and thematic interests is always already impossible, and his suicide was therefore, for Artaud, the result of society ostracizing him.

The aesthetic and formal qualities of Van Gogh’s paintings that were misread and underappreciated at the time include his expressive brushstrokes and liberal uses of color; these were crucial to Artaud’s defense of Van Gogh’s work as a painter independent of any clinical diagnosis. He argued that it was not madness that gave the paintings their expression but the reassembling of nature that Van Gogh undertook in the works.\textsuperscript{13} In Artaud’s original French writing, he says of Van Gogh, “*Van Gogh est peintre parce qu’il a recollecté la nature,*” (Van

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\textsuperscript{10} I use Giorgio Agamben here as opposed to the more commonly cited Michel Foucault to argue for the adherence to Artaud’s language regarding his characterization of Van Gogh, as well as of Artaud himself. With his definition of a lunatic, this may also be applied to him; one may also consider Artaud to be a *homo sacer*. Giorgio Agamben, “Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,” in *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 61.

\textsuperscript{11} Giorgio Agamben, 70.

\textsuperscript{12} Giorgio Agamben, 69.

\textsuperscript{13} Artaud, “Van Gogh,” (EN), 48.
Gogh is a painter because he re-assembled nature). The more commonly used words in French for assemble are assembler or rassembler, yet Artaud uses collector, adding the prefix re-. The standard definition of collector is to collect, which changes the meaning of how Artaud is describing Van Gogh’s painting practice. By thinking of Van Gogh as collecting nature, Artaud evokes a more orderly and deliberate rendering of nature than a potentially different composition on canvas without rationale; though, there remains a difference in Van Gogh’s collection of nature from the realistic collection of nature that photography is able to produce (as I discuss below). Artaud therefore specifically uses this word to strengthen his argument that Van Gogh took the reality he saw and re-interpreted it to how he saw fit. He looked to nature as a starting point for his works, often retaining most of the original formal qualities of reality but trying to convey the liveliness of the world on the painted canvas. The choice to add the prefix re- to collector may be understood then as the attempt to account for Van Gogh’s expressive brushstrokes and colors; it is the collection of emotions layered with the collection of subject matter. He therefore did not paint nature in an imaginative way but instead pieced together different aspects of nature while allowing his emotions to inform the liveliness and intensity of his compositions. For this reason, Artaud called Van Gogh “le plus vraiment peintre de tous les peintres,” (the most truly painter of all painters) because he was able to exceed the passivity of representing reality sans emotion and imbue in the paintings a sense of the elemental forces of nature.

In recent decades, art historical and astronomical research has examined the scientific accuracy of Van Gogh’s paintings, specifically the ones featuring the night sky (e.g. The Starry

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16 Collins French Concise Dictionary, s.v. “collector.”
17 Artaud, Van Gogh, (FR), 70.
Night and Starry Night over the Rhône, figures 1, 2). Where there has been an association with Van Gogh as a “hallucinating genius,” this approach to analysis seeks to ground his renderings in science.18 The astronomer Charles Whitney explains how principles of astronomy and historical meteorological records from France in the 1890s demonstrate the realism of the night sky as Van Gogh painted it. Through the use of scientific instruments as well as visual analysis of the paintings and literary analysis of Van Gogh’s letters with his brother Theo, Whitney argues that Van Gogh most likely painted the pre-dawn sky, with elements of the night sky mixed in to better suit the composition.19 Whitney implicitly suggests that while Van Gogh might have suffered from a mental illness, his decision of what to paint from each sky was not influenced by any sort of psychic imbalance and instead had to do with what could be physically seen in the sky when he painted. Therefore, for Whitney, Van Gogh painted the portion of the sky that was the most visually stimulating.20

Such a celestial reading of Van Gogh’s paintings lends itself to comparison with Artaud’s notion of re-collecting. As opposed to a hyper-realistic depiction of the sky that captured it exactly as it appeared at the specific moment that he painted it, Van Gogh took elements of different, but real, skies and created a new one in his compositions. While Whitney’s new methodology for understanding Van Gogh’s paintings is admirable in that he, like Artaud, seems to argue against reading Van Gogh’s paintings through the lens of madness, he tries to do so through positivist, scientific evidence. Where Artaud advocates against Van Gogh’s madness precisely through the acts that others use as evidence of it, Whitney remains caught in the binary

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20 Whitney cites differences in which stars would have been present between the northern and southwestern skies to make the claim that while Van Gogh was looking at the southwestern sky, the northern sky contained more stars and therefore would have been more interesting.
of sane/insane. Instead of allowing for any nuance in Van Gogh’s character, he uses astronomical data to argue against Van Gogh’s insanity.

Prior to his death in 1890, Van Gogh’s art was not well-received by critics; the pejorative attitude towards his work continued for years after he died. In a brief review from 1895, one critic claims that the bourgeois audiences would never like his work because Van Gogh somehow made fun of the very bourgeois audiences themselves (this today is ironic, as Van Gogh’s work is exactly the kind of art that bourgeois audiences love). In 1912, despite the fact that his work was starting to be collected by museums, art historians continued to speak of his mental illness as seen in visual analysis of his art. Jens Thiis, a Norwegian scholar and curator, wrote of one self-portrait that Van Gogh’s eyes were “awaiting madness,” and that he was a “sick man,” (figure 3).

By 1947, critics reviewing the Musée de l’Orangerie show were somewhat more sympathetic to his painting project but often still characterized his life as one of ostracization, depression, and poverty. It is apparent a shift existed, from a belief that his painting style and subsequent aesthetic made visible his madness to the association of madness with artistic genius – madness made visible through painting became genius, assisted by madness, in painting. The French women’s magazine Elle exemplifies this shift in a short article about the 1947 exhibition. The writer celebrates Van Gogh’s artistic genius, using such descriptors as “printemps lumineux aux vergers fleuris … découverte enfin par cet homme du Nord de la lumière du Midi, du soleil, de la couleur, de cet univers éblouissant avec lequel il s’est mesuré,” (bright springs of

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22 Jens Thiis, “Betrætninger og karakteristiker av moderne franske maleri,” Kunst og Kultur 3 (1912-1913), 18. Interestingly, there has been much debate between scholars over the authenticity of the portrait which Thiis analyzes. However, recent findings have confirmed that it was indeed painted by Van Gogh. See my engagement with a recently published article that centers on this portrait and its contemporary relationship to madness in Conclusion: Art and Madness Re-Collected.
decorated orchards, ... finally discovered by this man of the North in the light of the midday, of the color, of this dazzling universe with which he measured himself). Yet, the short review ends by reminding the reader Van Gogh “n’a jamais pu s’adapter à la société,” (never could adapt to society). The writer lauds Van Gogh’s paintings, which no longer signify madness but instead artistic genius, while still remaining mired in his biography.

The association of Van Gogh with madness continued posthumously through the discussion of such facts like his failed artistic career (while he was alive) and his cut-off ear. To this day, the ear remains a distinguishing part of Van Gogh’s history and has become emblematic of him. While his motives for cutting off his ear are unclear, one possible reason could be a disagreement between Van Gogh and painter Paul Gauguin. Artaud outlines that their painting projects originated from two disparate point of views: Gauguin believed in myth as the starting point for painting life and Van Gogh utilized the everyday to eventually become myth. Artaud therefore frames the ear incident as a disagreement between conceptions of myth and reality. Where most see it as a damning act of madness, Artaud argues the cut-off ear was instead the result of “straight-forward logic,” a symptom of living in a world that did not recognize the artistry of Van Gogh’s paintings.

Artaud concludes the essay with the question of suicide and how one can be driven to it. He argues that “an army of wicked people is necessary” to bring one to commit suicide. One therefore does not need to be mad to take his own life, and it is instead society who causes one to suicide himself. Hence, returning to Agamben, one could say that the one who is suicided is the

25 See Blandine Joret’s reference to David Lynch’s Blue Velvet. Blandine Joret, “Film and the Other Arts,” in Studying Film with André Bazin (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 123.
26 Blandine Joret, 118.
27 Artaud, “Van Gogh,” (EN), 47.
homo sacer, for society is responsible for the death but is not held accountable. In the case of suicide specifically, society has neither physically killed the individual who committed suicide nor brought death onto that person who was already cast out of normal life, for any number of reasons which may include but are not limited to madness. In the case of Van Gogh, his suicide, like his cut-off ear, is unclear; most scholars agree that he shot himself in the chest, but there are other studies that suggest it was an accidental homicide.\textsuperscript{29} The Norwegian scholar Thiis also said of a painting (figure 3) that Van Gogh was a man who would “soon fall prey to death.”\textsuperscript{30} While it was obviously known when Van Gogh died by the time of Thiis’ writings, his comment continues to suicide Van Gogh—that is, he is suicided over and over again—through the use of his paintings as evidence of his imminent death. Therefore, regardless of who actually fired the gun into Van Gogh, he remains a homo sacer, and the result echoes Artaud’s claim that it was society that stands accountable for his suicide.

Resnais: The Framing of Van Gogh

Artaud was just one of many prominent French thinkers and scholars with an interest in Van Gogh. Younger culturati such as Alain Resnais would have had access to information about him and his art through various means (e.g. art exhibitions, literature, Artaud’s publications and public performances not to mention his role as an actor in early cinema). Van Gogh, Resnais’ first film, is a seventeen-minute film, originally shot in black and white on 16mm film and later re-shot in 35mm.\textsuperscript{31} Completely composed of shots of Van Gogh’s paintings, actor Claude Dauphin narrates Van Gogh’s biography, and there is non-diegetic music throughout the film as

\textsuperscript{30} Jens Thiis, 18.
the camera meanders around dozens of paintings from the artist’s œuvre. Given that it is black and white, the film is a great change from Van Gogh’s original vibrant paintings, but the camera seems to compensate for the lack of color by exploring the canvases through tracking shots and close-ups of their surfaces. As this was his first film, Resnais consulted multiple well-established figures of art history and film theory for assistance with the production and execution of the film.32

Resnais’ cinematography and particularly his editing choices are in debt to the canonical Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein’s theories of montage where an idea “derives from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another.”33 For example, there is a shot of a landscape of the provincial countryside that cuts to a close-up of a self-portrait of Van Gogh in which he’s painted himself walking on a road carrying his painting accoutrements; the camera then cuts to another landscape of farming fields with mountains in the distance (figures 4-6). These three shots do not originate from the same painting but shown one right after another, convey the message that Van Gogh painted en plein air in the French countryside. Some of the other quick cuts between details of different paintings similarly act in an Eisensteinian mode of montage, which “fragment[s] the artist’s work in order to reconstitute it within a narrative of social and psychological alienation,” (figures 7-9).34 Through this type of editing, Resnais creates a film that is more similar to a narrative biopic than a documentary.35 Despite the absence of real human figures in the film, it tells the story of Van Gogh by reconstructing his life through his artworks. While there is narration, the images alone might suffice in recounting Van

32 J. Dudley Andrew, 155.
Gogh’s life, as the way Resnais edits the images of the paintings together results in a specific telling of the painter’s life. The film reiterates some parts of Van Gogh’s life that continue to be discussed, such as his cut-off ear, and offers to the viewer the already prevailing discourse. That is, where Artaud argues that Van Gogh was rational in cutting off his ear, Resnais reinforces the more popular opinion that it was an act of madness through a series of quick cuts from Van Gogh’s *Self-portrait with Bandage* (figure 12), which clearly shows his bandaged ear, to his forehead area, suggesting the brain and potentially the presence of madness (figures 10, 11). Furthermore, the narration during this editing actually calls the ear-cut “an act of madness.”\(^{36}\) In fact Resnais goes on to use Eisenstinian montage in later films such as *Hiroshima, mon amour*, as critics writing in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* discuss; like Eisenstein, Resnais uses montage in his films to create a sense of unity from fragmentation without disregarding the fragmentation itself, instead “emphasizing the autonomy of the shot.”\(^ {37}\)

The idea of an autonomous shot requires further analysis of Resnais’s specific editing choices for *Van Gogh* and in relation to semiotic theory for understanding the work as a whole. In the film, the camera wanders from painting to painting as if the painted world of Van Gogh is real.\(^ {38}\) Rather than showing the works in full, Resnais focuses on specific details of the pieces, cutting from one to the next, while the camera moves closer or further away from the paintings. Often, the camera movement frames the paintings in such a way it would a real landscape. An example of this can be seen early in the film when the camera moves across a painting by Van Gogh, which depicts a peasant working the land and two figures walking in the foreground and a row of thin trees that divides the canvas to reveal a church and other nondescript trees in the

\(^{36}\) *Van Gogh*, directed by Alain Resnais (1948; Paris, France).


\(^{38}\) Blandine Joret, 112.
background. In this shot, the camera moves across the painting as it would pan around a set (figures 9-11) or across a landscape. However, the camera also focuses repeatedly on specific parts of other paintings and on a number of occasions moves further away from the painting completely, evoking a key-hole shot in which the camera moves away from the surface of the painting to a black background, leaving the painting to be ostensibly viewed through a small rectangular opening.\footnote{The original aspect ratio of Van Gogh was 1.37:1, close to the aspect ratio used by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (1.33:1) in 1948. There would not have been areas of black on screen during most of the film, as there are when viewing it on a digital monitor today. “Aspect Ratio,” The Columbia Film Language Glossary, accessed March 23, 2020, https://filmglossary.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/term/aspect-ratio/} The edges of the painting are never shown though; even when the camera moves away from the painting, and the area being shown diminishes and blurs, the viewer does not see the frame or boundary of the painting. Such a technique, for example, occurs when the film focuses on the instance of Van Gogh’s ear cutting. The shot begins with a still image of his bedroom in Arles, cuts to the close-up of an image of woman wildly waving her hands, and then returns to the bedroom and moves farther from the image while also blurring the transition between shots (figures 16-19). This editing has implications in so far as it reinforces certain assumptions about Van Gogh’s character, as does the non-diegetic music that plays during these shots. The music becomes quite dissonant and atonal, accelerating and pausing intermittently before hurriedly descending as the painting fades out of focus; it supplements the editing and begins before the narration’s suggestion of madness. Also important to the entire film and evident in these shots is the framing, or lack thereof, of the paintings. Resnais is not concerned with the physical frame of the painting so much as the framing of the film to allow for an exploration of a world beyond oneself (figures 20, 21).\footnote{J. Dudley Andrew, 157.} By removing the paintings’ frames from the shots, he forces the viewer to confront them as if they were the real sets of a film.
Along with the editing of the film and framing of the paintings, the narration is important to Resnais’ project of telling Van Gogh’s biography. Art historian Gaston Diehl was instrumental in *Van Gogh*, as he produced it and wrote the text for the narration which consists entirely of a non-diegetic voice-over. Diehl was a well-respected scholar who wrote on numerous painters such as Francisco Goya and Johannes Vermeer as well as Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, and Van Gogh. Diehl wrote a slim book about Van Gogh in 1966, a biography with accompanying examples of his work, similar to Resnais’ film. The book, not unlike the film, does not explicitly discuss the nature of Van Gogh’s madness except to say that he suffered from psychological and physical afflictions that resulted in his stay at psychiatric hospitals. Diehl is very complimentary of Van Gogh in terms of his painterly style, even stating “his use of color gave birth to a new sense of pictorial space, while his wide appeal springing from a profound understanding and his vibrant, infectious vitality together mark the beginning of an art fully conscious of the essential community of the human spirit.”\(^{41}\) This statement conveys the contemporary sentiment that Van Gogh was in fact a brilliant painter and that his art did not inherently reveal madness. Diehl, like Resnais, does not condemn Van Gogh for his suffering, as people of his own time did, but he implicitly acknowledges through the telling of his biography that madness was present and affected his artistic practice.

Aside from providing the art historical background for the film, Diehl also may have been the one to introduce Resnais to the theorist and critic André Bazin, who advised Resnais during the making of the film.\(^{42}\) What is more, Diehl helped Bazin to publish his seminal essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” One of Bazin’s principal ideas in the essay was that

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\(^{42}\) J. Dudley Andrew, 155.
of an “integral realism,” which characterized all film and photography.\textsuperscript{43} Realism is not a matter of aesthetics but rather concerns the imprint of reality upon the viewer, an imprint transferred through the camera itself.\textsuperscript{44} Scholars have understood Bazin’s argument as related to semiotics; photographs are primarily regarded as indexical signs, as they refer to an antecedent reality that produces an image.\textsuperscript{45} An ontological distance thus occurs between the object and the image, even when the latter is an imprint of the former. Bazin believed a painter could never be fully objective because “his work was always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{46} Under this premise, signs in painting are not indexical, and there is no direct relation to reality, or the external world, due to the intervention of the human subject.\textsuperscript{47} This notion of the semiotic difference between painting and photography for Bazin bears importance when turning to the paintings of Van Gogh and Resnais’ film.

Film scholar Daniel Morgan argues that the essence of Bazin’s thesis about the photographic image in fact resists the indexical argument, as the image is seen as an object and therefore does not need to rely on an antecedent object for meaning.\textsuperscript{48} However, I think the semiotic reading of Bazin is useful for understanding Resnais’ film – which is composed entirely of images of paintings – and its difference from Artaud’s writing on the paintings. In the understanding of the semiotic difference between painting and photography (or film), it would follow that Van Gogh’s paintings are not indexical whereas Resnais’ film of the paintings is indexical, as it captures the objective reality of the paintings. This is important for my argument: there is an inherently different meaning to the artworks and subsequent understanding of Van

\textsuperscript{43} Blandine Joret, 119.
\textsuperscript{45} Daniel Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics,” \textit{Critical Inquiry} 32 no. 3 (Spring 2006), 447.
\textsuperscript{46} André Bazin, 161.
\textsuperscript{47} Daniel Morgan, 448.
\textsuperscript{48} Daniel Morgan, 449.
Gogh the person that Artaud argues for in contrast to Resnais (more on this below). Under this semiotic premise, Van Gogh’s paintings are icons that refer to the real world but are not meant to represent the real world or be an imprint of it in perfect accuracy (as photography was conceived). Here, one might therefore recall Artaud’s theory of the re-collecting done by Van Gogh in his paintings to understand their iconicity. Bazin argues in his essay that painting can never be free from an artist’s hand, therefore never functioning as an index in the way that photography does, yet this inability to escape the artist’s hand is an integral part of Artaud’s argument for understanding Van Gogh’s paintings. Here, the difference in indexicality between photography or film and painting is necessary for realizing the effect Resnais’ film produces for the viewer. Each shot of a painting in the film acts as an index in a photographic sense, its subject matter is imprinted on the film through Resnais’ camera. The aspect of painting that is indexical, the artist’s hand, is ignored, and instead the iconic subject matter becomes the indicator of photography’s indexicality. Because Resnais treats the paintings as photographic indexes in Van Gogh, they act for the viewer as objects of reality meant to convey the artist’s biography and illuminate his madness (rather than focus on his artistic process); this is then reinforced through the filmic elements already discussed like the editing and narration. Artaud relied on Van Gogh’s (indexical) painterly hand as evidence of his lucidity, while Resnais used the paintings’ subject matter as the (indexical) substance of his biographical film.

Crucial to seeing Van Gogh’s artistic hand are the colors he used. Yet Van Gogh is black and white. Bazin has written on the impact of color in film as it relates to realism, positing that color is not part of true realism; instead, he believes that color may “make a film look more like painting than reality.” Following Bazin’s reasoning, Resnais’ film effectively removes Van

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Gogh’s works from the realm of painting to a different medium – one that film determines as reality. If these works are no longer painting and instead a reality to be captured by film, how can Van Gogh’s works properly be represented in it?

As Artaud argues, Van Gogh did not ignore nature but also did not render it in perfect realism; instead, he found through re-collecting reality that “fiction and myth may become flesh.” If, as Bazin believes, the camera conveys the transference of reality from a thing to that of its reproduction, there is a double reproduction of reality created in Resnais’ film: Van Gogh’s interpretation of reality in his paintings and Resnais’s subsequent portrayal of the paintings in film. However, in choosing to film the paintings in black and white and focusing on details of the paintings, Resnais treats them as objects of reality instead of representations of reality – indexes instead of icons as seen through the lens of Bazin’s contemporary theory. Resnais does not take into account the idea that Van Gogh painted his interpretation of the world, instead prioritizing the physicality of the paintings themselves to form the substance of the film and, when turning to subject matter like the cut off ear, reinforcing the prevalent narrative surrounding Van Gogh through his biography. The fact that the paintings exist in the world take precedence over what they depict as reality: Van Gogh’s interpretation of it. Resnais himself stated that his goal in the film was to “find out whether painted trees, painted houses, painted people could, through editing, play the part of real objects in a narrative and if so, whether it was possible to replace the world as revealed by photography, for the spectator, by the interior world of the artist.”

I want to focus on Resnais’ choice of language from the previous quotation: “interior world of the artist.” While Resnais was interested in portraying Van Gogh through his paintings and subsequently through the film, the question arises of what information regarding Van Gogh’s

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50 Blandine Joret, 119.
51 Douglas Smith, 167.
life was available to Resnais. As mentioned above, by the time of the 1947 exhibition of Van Gogh’s works at the Musée de l’Orangerie, public appreciation for his work had grown but his characterization as “mad” still haunted him. It is difficult to know definitively whether Resnais would have had access to Artaud’s publications from 1947 before he completed his film. However, given the people he surrounded himself with (e.g. Bazin and filmmaker Chris Marker), there must have been discussion around the figure of Van Gogh, madness, and even Artaud. As the film scholar Dudley Andrew has discussed, Fernand Deligny, a friend of Bazin and a specialist for “autistic children,” had been planning a book that would imagine a dialogue between Van Gogh and Artaud through their letters and essays, prompted by Artaud’s death in 1948.53 Where Deligny and Bazin shared an interest in the development of children and animals, modernist artists like Jean Dubuffet (among many others) turned to children, the Primitive, and the mentally ill as inspiration for avant-garde artistic creativity and freedom. Deligny and Bazin approached these groups from pedagogical and filmic standpoints, but they were part of a greater school of French intellectuals interested in finding inspiration from marginalized groups.

Resnais did not necessarily mimic Bazin in terms of pedagogical interest, but this concern with art and madness surely was present in Van Gogh (as seen in Diehl’s influence and writing of the script). This leads to the crux of the difference between Artaud’s and Resnais’ commentaries on madness vis-à-vis Van Gogh, as well as the question of what is implied through contemporary art historical scholarship regarding the link between art and madness. Artaud argued against Van Gogh’s madness, citing his paintings specifically as demonstrations of his lucidity, in opposition to historical arguments that tried to prove his madness through his paintings. Moreover, Artaud critiqued the institutions, both psychiatric and artistic, that actively worked against Van Gogh during his life and continued to do so posthumously, as I also argue.

53 J. Dudley Andrew, 162.
above. Born from his own experience and positionality within psychiatric institutions and the art world’s reception of his works, Artaud’s defense of Van Gogh comes in direct opposition to the prevailing discourse in art historical circles of the time. Modernist interest in the artistic works of the mentally ill, evidenced in Dubuffet’s collection of Art Brut as well as the exhibition of patients’ work at the Centre Psychiatrique Saint-Anne, was seen manifested in the positive aesthetic reception of Van Gogh’s paintings in 1947 coupled with the unavoidable footnote that marked him as mad.

Resnais, while perhaps not purposefully meaning to reinforce the perception of Van Gogh as mad, does so through the aesthetic choices he made for his film. His treatment of Van Gogh’s art “violates the integrity of the individual paintings in two ways: by concentrating on isolated details and by ranging across the painter’s œuvre without distinguishing between individual works.”

Where Van Gogh re-collected nature in his paintings through the brushstrokes and colors according to Artaud, Resnais similarly does so on a formal level through the camera movement and editing in *Van Gogh*. However, Resnais re-collects Van Gogh’s reality to tell his biography through the paintings without the nuance for which Artaud’s argument allows. Bazin argued that the camera can remain objective through its mechanical nature, but Resnais challenges this; his camerawork is more experimental and actually functions more similarly to an Eisensteinian form of montage through the creation of new relationships between different paintings. He reassembles the nature he has to work with, Van Gogh’s paintings, to create what is not a documentary film, but a narrative and experimental biopic-cum-art film. He has said of the film that “*Van Gogh* is less a film about Van Gogh than an attempt to narrate the imaginary life of a painter through his paintings.”

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54 Douglas Smith, 167.
55 Emma Wilson, 18.
indexes of Van Gogh’s reality in conjunction with the biographical narrative given to the viewer through the voice-over, both of which supported the predominant discussions of art and mental health in late 1940s France.

Conclusion: Art and Madness Re-Collected

Van Gogh continues to be written about in today’s art historical scholarship and surprisingly (or perhaps unsurprisingly), much of the discourse concerning his mental illness has not been updated since Resnais’ film in 1948. In fact, an article that was just recently published in February 2020 concerns a somewhat obscure self-portrait by Van Gogh (figure 3) with a debated history and provenance. While the fact of Van Gogh’s stay at the psychiatric hospital of Saint-Remy is part of his personal chronology and helps to chart the provenance of this particular portrait, the authors of the article read into the aesthetic and formal qualities of the painting to make judgments specifically about Van Gogh’s mental instability. They make the claim that he was struggling “to survive as a patient,” and that this can be understood through how he painted himself in the portrait. Furthermore, Artaud and Van Gogh continue to be paired together due to a shared “madness,” as seen in the 2014 exhibit at the Musée d’Orsay. While it surely had the intention of framing Van Gogh’s œuvre in a never-before-done way through the juxtaposition with *Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society*, the Musée also reinforced the tired association of Van Gogh with madness. This was aided as well by the inclusion of Artaud’s drawings; as he did not view his drawings as works of Academic art, the museum then created further problems by including them in the exhibit.

These contemporary examples beg the questions of the role of both art historians and art institutions in diagnosing an artist’s illness based on his artistic style, and what is at stake in still doing this today in 2020. Artaud wrote that Van Gogh’s paintings do not attack the conformity of convention so much as the conformity of institutions.57 While he most likely was focused on the psychiatric institution, this could also apply to the art institutions in regards to the context of how they often portray Van Gogh, as well as his own works.58 The Musée d’Orsay exhibition had an opportunity to update the narrative surrounding art and madness, specifically in relation to both Van Gogh and Artaud. Instead, the exhibition fell into the same trap that other scholars and institutions have in discussing the paintings and madness as interdependent; it also misunderstood the context and background of Artaud’s own works. Discussing the relationship between art and madness can be challenging and nuanced; scholars continue to engage with topics related to it today because of questions like those posed in this thesis. The figure of Van Gogh can then be used as an example of how easy it is to remain caught in the binary of sanity/insanity while making an attempt to reach beyond it. The framing – of a person, of his art, or of a medium – is therefore crucial to consider, as it has an immense impact on discussions about art, madness, and the relationship of art and madness.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Vincent Van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889.

Figure 2. Vincent Van Gogh, *Starry Night over the Rhône*, 1888.
Figure 3. Vincent Van Gogh, *Self-portrait*, 1889.
Figure 4. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 8:13.

Figure 5. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 8:16.

Figure 6. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 8:20.
Figure 7. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 10:25.

Figure 8. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 10:27.

Figure 9. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 10:29.
Figure 10. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 11:08.

Figure 11. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 11:15.
Figure 12. Vincent Van Gogh, *Self-portrait with Bandage*, 1889.
Figure 13. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 2:39.

Figure 14. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 2:44.

Figure 15. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 2:47.
Figure 16. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 10:58.

Figure 17. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 10:59.

Figure 18. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 11:00.
Figure 19. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 11:01.
Figure 20. Vincent Van Gogh, *Bedroom in Arles*, 1888.

Figure 21. Alain Resnais, *Van Gogh*, 1948, 10:58.
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