

Anti-Mimetic Scapegoating: Mental Illness's Unaesthetic Pain

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In a society governed by production and efficiency, pain and suffering can become commodities; insofar as they necessitate rest and evoke sympathy and compassion, pain and suffering are, ironically, rare guarantors of our humanity even as they simultaneously threaten our personal integrity on bodily and emotional levels. For the mentally ill, however, whose suffering is less visible than that of the abused, the oppressed, or the physically ill, the experience of suffering often fails to elicit compassion or create a humanizing bond with other persons. Rather than being recognized as true and legitimate suffering, moreover, their pain is often dismissed as being “all in their head” or somehow their own fault.

This paper explores the marginalization of the mentally ill and suggests that they are one of society's overlooked scapegoats. Their suffering alienates them from others; additionally, because society mitigates the seriousness of their suffering, it alienates them from their own experience by denying them their very right to suffer. This paper suggests that the scapegoating of the mentally ill may be understood as a variation of Girard's mimetic violence: in this case, however, the mentally ill are treated as scapegoats precisely *because* their suffering does not fit neatly into commonly accepted models for suffering. The mentally ill may be said to defy an “aesthetic of suffering” that our culture accepts. The stereotypes that have come to identify mental illness reinforce this kind of suffering as outside of the realm of genuine human suffering. This dehumanizing of the mentally ill and their pain is a violence, the overcoming of which can lead to healing not only of the mentally ill, but of some of the pain that plagues larger society, as well.