

## **The Beauty of the Bothered Brain: A Study on the Neuroaesthetics of the Abreactive Iconography Created by the Morose as in Ruby Elliot's *It's All Absolutely Fine***

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### **Abstract**

A sizeable number of adolescents and adults of the present day suffer from mental health issues and depression. When instances contributing to the worsening of mental health occur, they are encoded as painful traumatic memories and they interfere with any fresh distracting events that try to form new neural pathways of neuroplasticity to mitigate the agony. Under such a juncture, the suffering individuals in order to tangibly abreact and externalize their abstract pain may actively take up iconographic narration of the agony. Now, it happens that the art created with involvement by bothered brains makes the individuals feel cathartic, as they are able to artistically and therapeutically perform without any confinement, and get a reconfiguration of their derailed selves via their graphically manifested afflicted alteregos. With this, the healing output got through the active production of art could be understood but then it is equally important to examine the neuroplastic process involved that neuroaesthetically promotes feel-good therapy. So on this line, neuroplasticity happens in distressed individuals who undertake graphic narration, through the visually stimulated aesthetic experiences processed by the neuronal maps of the disturbed brains, via taking in the physical characteristics of the art created. Therefore, this research paper appreciates the intersection of neuroaesthetics and therapeutic iconography through the analysis of the aesthetics and plasticity produced by bothered brains, when they try to actively involve in iconographic narration for the concrete abreaction and externalization of their abstract agony, by taking into account Ruby Elliot's representative memoir *It's All Absolutely Fine* (2017).

**Keywords:** neurological disturbance, encoding of traumatic memories, graphic narration, neuroaesthetics, neuroplasticity, therapeutic iconography

### **Therapeutic Iconography**

A considerable number of adolescents and adults in today's world suffer from depression, mental health issues, and other neurological disturbances. When events contributing to the deterioration of mental health take place, they are encoded as agony-causing traumatic memories pushing the individuals towards insanity. They face a lot of stress and then the deeply encoded torturous chain of events interfere with any new distracting events aiming to create new neural pathways for neuroplasticity and alleviation of trauma. Amidst this state of affairs, the vulnerable individuals in order to concretely abreact and externalize their intangible pain may actively involve in iconographic narration of the suffering, as suggested by Ad A Kaptein et al (2018). Now, it happens that the art produced with engagement by bothered brains makes the individuals

feel cathartic, as they are able to perform something productive and therapeutic, which felt impossible under the confinement of the neurological disturbances. Also, a purgative thrust of the disturbing alteregos into concretion through drawing, leaves the reconfigured selves onto the individuals making them clearly comprehend their deranged self and the realigned metamorphosed self. So then, the healing output of the active production of art gets accomplished but it is equally important to understand the neuroplastic proceedings involved that neuroaesthetically promotes therapy.

### **The Plasticity and Aesthetics of a Troubled Brain**

Talking about neuroplasticity, it is defined by the Mosby's Medical Dictionary (2009) as the lifelong capacity of the brain to change, adapt, and regenerate itself by creating new neural pathways in response to a fresh experience, after being battered by a strongly stimulated affliction. And, this neuroplasticity occurs in depressed individuals who undertake graphic narration, through visual stimulation of the aesthetic art produced by the troubled brains. In other words, as explained by Colleen Smith (2023), the visually triggered aesthetic experiences are processed by the neuronal maps of the unsettled brains via absorbing the physical properties of the art developed, which leads to appreciating the beauty of the bothered brains. This acknowledgment of the aesthetic art produced by the neuronal functioning of the brain is called neuroaesthetics. To be more precise, the word "neuroaesthetics" was coined by Semir Zeki in the late 1990's, a neuroscientist and professor from the University College of London, and the word later saw better definitions by Antonio Damasio, a noted neurologist at the Brain and Creativity Institute, University of Southern California like - it being a field which examines the neuronal functioning of the brain acting as a basis for the (therapeutic) production of aesthetic art. So, as far as traumatised individuals who take up graphic narration are concerned, the aesthetic experiences provoked visually along the neuronal maps of the brain from their actively produced art bring about catharsis, which intersects the areas of neuroaesthetics and therapeutic iconography, opines Meera Rastogi et al (2022). Therefore, this research paper deals with analyzing the aesthetics and plasticity produced by bothered brains, when they try to actively involve in iconographic narration for the tangible abreaction and externalization of their abstract agony – which is actually, a convergence of neuroaesthetics and therapeutic iconography - by taking into account Ruby Elliot's representative memoir *It's All Absolutely Fine* (2017).

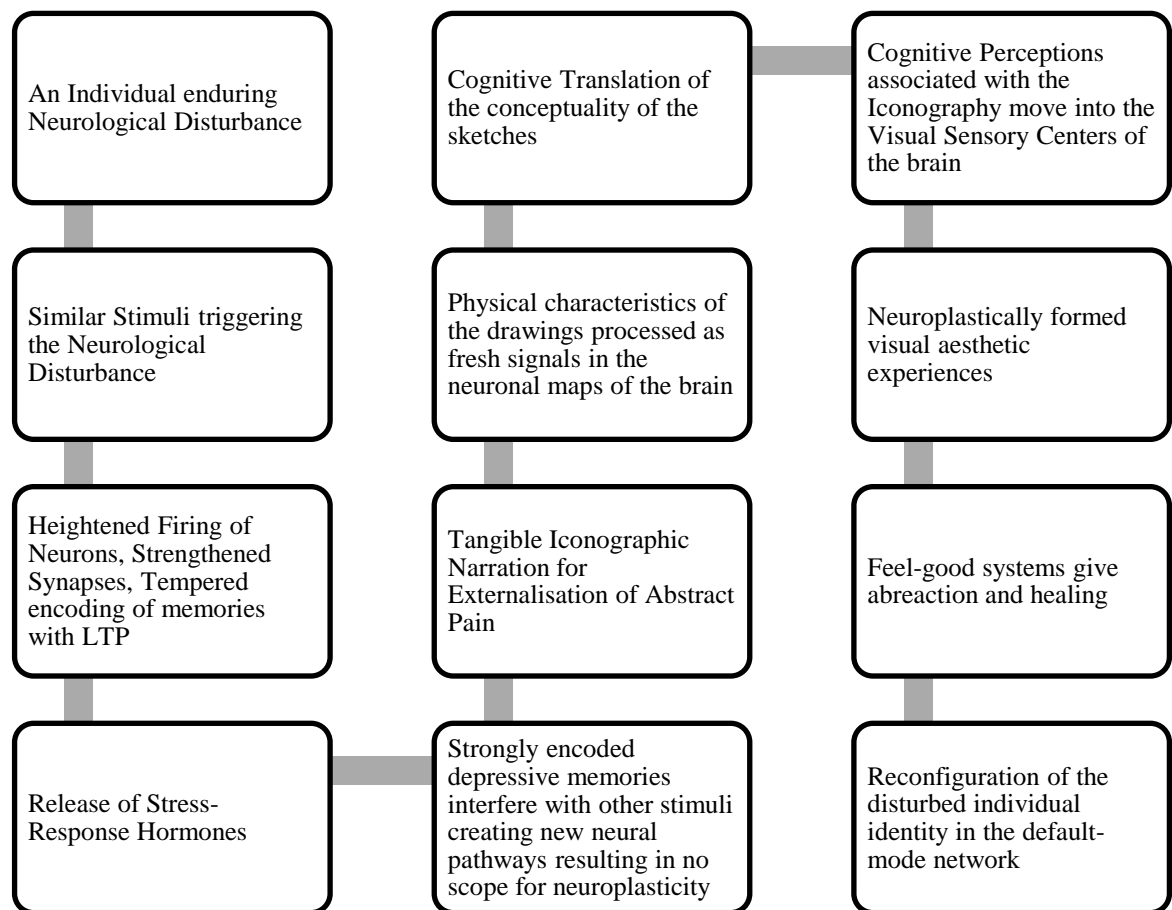
### **It's All Absolutely Fine**

Ruby Elliot is a self-taught illustrator from London. Being in her twenties, she has been working with the creation of cartoons and illustrated drawings for a few years now. Her artistry finds an exhibition in her Tumblr virtual space by name 'Rubyetc' and many of her works have been widely shared by a handful of people from different places on platforms like The BBC, Mind, Buzzfeed, The Huffington Post, etc. Her first book *It's All Absolutely Fine* (2017) is an illustrated graphic memoir where she describes with dark wit, the struggles of having to lead a crazy life around psychological issues, neurological disturbances, personality disorders, mood swings, anxiety problems, and body image hitches. Her drawings might look so simple but the complexity they carry is unfathomable as they portray the humour, pathos, and melancholy of a depressing life, which in fact has been self-therapeutic to maneuver her derailed self to catharsis and clarity. This creation stands good as a raw and honest representative account of every single maniacal being's dissatisfaction over life, with traumatizing instances surging in from different

dimensions making life absolutely not fine. Yet, this production is motivating, empowering, and rejuvenating, with plenty of hope, drive, and hilarity sprinkled to arrive at goodness.

## From Neuroaesthetics to Neuroplasticity

The following flowchart drawing from the Common Sense Model of Self-Regulation given by Hagger et al (2017) provides the movement of a depressed individual undertaking graphic narration, where he/she experiences visual aesthetics through the art produced, resulting in neuroplasticity and cathartic healing of the suffering:



### *The Model from Neuroaesthetics to Neuroplasticity*

## Tempered Encoding of Traumatic Memories

In her memoir *It's All Absolutely Fine*, Ruby Elliot exhibits herself as a vulnerable person undergoing depression alongside other neurological and personality disorders like mood

disturbances, anxiety issues, and body image intolerances. It could be seen that there are a number of disastrous events contributing to her mania that are strongly encoded as memories. So then, every time some stimuli similar to the ones that caused the depressing events is triggered, the chain of instances related to the events is run resulting in a heightened firing of her neurons. This, in turn, effects strengthened synapses and tempered encoding of memories with a Long-Term Potentiation (LTP). Now, a strong encoding of memories causes a chasmic depression for her with the release of stress inducing hormones and stress-response hormones like cortisol. With her brain being more occupied with the strongly encoded traumatic memories which fire strong synapses, there happens to be no place for other stimuli to interfere and fire the neurons corresponding to them. In other words, the encoded agonizing memories fire stronger synapses, leaving no place for new neural pathways to be formed in her with other distracting stimuli. To be precise, there is no scope, firstly, for neuroplasticity to happen - with the same depression-triggering stimuli obstructing any distractedly occurring alternative stimuli to create new neural pathways in her; secondly, to obscure the existing depression-causing neural pathways in her; and, thirdly, to neuroplastically deal with the neural pathways of the depression-causing stimuli in her. Under this juncture, she tries to actively engage in graphic narrativisation to externalise the depressing events, as outwardly manifesting them iconographically seems easier, spontaneous, and unstructured than struggling with the right vocabulary helpful in the abreaction of her affliction. To elaborate, taking Alessandra Olivia's (2023) perspective, she externalises her pressing pain through lines, strokes, shades, colours, figures, and speech balloons, and her abstract agony in concept finds tangible representation in her drawings, which resultantly helps in her reconfiguration of her dissociated being.

### **A Turbulent Cesspit**

One could see this in the course of her graphic narration. In the initial portion of her narrative, she introduces herself through the drawings of an emotional cesspit, a big bag of tears, and a broken couch potato, comparing herself with all these, which brings out her inferior troubled state of mind (Elliot Introduction Bit). Through the course of her externalized writings, she compares her depressive state of mind to various concrete stuff like - to an oven which always keeps her insanity under simmer, to a coffee machine which keeps brewing fresh traumatizing thoughts, to a bubble on the waves of the beach which is lonely and useless, and to a sad crying dolphin whose tears are glamour beads for the less blessed (Elliot ch. 1). She mentions how she swears at inanimate objects and holds conversations with an insight fairy to feel adequate and capable and her expression of all this through the flexible stick figures brings out her existing instability (Elliot ch. 1). Many a time, she feels a fear of teetering on the edge of something, knowing that a little carelessness would send her searching for her life. And if it happens, she draws how she will require her buried self to wade through the soil and its accompanying darkness to match with the baseline functioning of her peers (Elliot ch. 1). She feels maniacal to the extent that she understands her shortcomings with a microscope paying attention to very little things and considers herself as a garbage can (Elliot ch. 2). Sometimes, she feels so big that the entire world can be contained within her, and certain other times, she feels so normal that she is a part of a larger world which has got the capacity of devouring her. And then, she pleads to the imaginary dragon, which actually happens to be the world's pleasures, to not devour her, as she is quite tiny (Elliot ch. 3).

### **A Knotted Movement Towards Therapy**

Under a particular instance, one could see how she draws a knotted confusion coming out from her existing self and enwrapping her entire self into immobility. This makes her existing-self fall into complete bewilderment, perplexity, and vulnerability bringing out a battle between the split personalities – the well-meaning ‘her’ and the despondent ‘her’, with the former being tattered by the later (Elliot ch. 2). She draws to show how she has felt so crazy at this point that she has punctured holes into her body to let the tangled knot out and additionally says, “How on earth do I have my feelings without them having me? (Elliot ch. 2). She tries to indulge in therapy to get rid of the knottiness but fears talking about “going to talk to someone,” and the very word ‘therapist’ irritates her to the extent she starts calling it “therapest”, “therapssht”, and “therapiss off” (Elliot ch. 3). After weeks and months of laborious processing to detangle the knotted confusion, she is somehow partially successful in doing it, which she denotes by her sketch of kicking off the tangled perplexity with her legs. She tries to bring her functioning under routine by telling her confused, anxious, and fear-filled self that “You can do this” and “You cannot do this (Elliot ch. 3).”

### **Balancing the Battle**

As the narrative moves on, one could see that she relapses with full force into experiencing bipolar disorder, which makes her battle with her self upon extremities and dualisms and forces her to take mood stabilisers to keep herself sane (Elliot ch. 2). She draws this scenario as like she balancing herself on a cycle trying to traverse through an endless motorway of depression in a sleep deprived maniacal state, which makes her fall flat on the ground (Elliot ch. 3). This is obvious when she says, “Oh no, oh no, dear, I’m a complicated one finding a balance,” and such continuous toppling down makes her feel repulsive about herself and she draws a lizard to compare herself with it, referring to a loss of the self – where she does not feel human anymore but like waste paper bits held together by a tape in complete chaos, which do not know where they fit or belong to (Elliot ch. 3 & 4). She clearly shows all the typical features of depression worrying that something bigger would overshadow her current life and devour her, alongside having phases of herself – regular, tired, lovely, beautiful, chaotic and broken (Elliot ch. 3). She puts all of these in her curriculum vitae that she draws, expressing herself as a depressed and maniacal person, in the one concrete document that explains her life’s various dimensions (Elliot ch. 4). But being pulled down by her craziness, she again actively takes to indulgence in activities like travelling, meditating, playing with pets, learning new things, etc. But she finds it greatly difficult to put herself under a sane control and draws a crab that is so slow and does not make any progression, likening herself to it (Elliot ch. 4).

### **Bulimarexia and Body Image Satisfaction**

Besides neurological disturbances, she also suffers from the eating disorder of bulimarexia, which she uses as a metaphor to talk about the fluctuation of emotions she experiences from the distressing events. She compares her bulimarexically-affected intestinal digestion to her maniacally-affected emotional digestion, where she points out that when junk is thrown in the intestine, digestion of food becomes hard, and so is digestion of hard emotions, when the mind is in a state of overwork (Elliot ch. 5). She goes on to draw how the large monster of depression, along with the troublesome monster of bulimarexia await to swallow her, having her on their tongues. Being bothered by the bulimarexic monster, she worries too much about her body image and its fitness and feels very dissatisfied about her toes, nails, skin, and breasts, thereby, aggravating her already existing vulnerability (Elliot ch. 5). She also sketches how all



the important dimensions of her life are scattered in a chaotic manner on a board and how she arranges as well as struggles to achieve them by negatively troubling her body (Elliot ch. 5). These differently sized corporeal drawings where she troubles her body, makes her understand that body images differ with various types of bodies and helps her consider it normal to have imperfections and incapacabilities with her body (Elliot ch. 6). She realizes that what matters is the acceptance of the given corporeality and the revelation hits upon her while being actively involved in art. Gradually, in this way, she tries to make progress by clearing up her obscured depressive life with art, despite being faced by tidal waves of madness and devoured by piles of responsibilities (Elliot ch. 7).

### **Metamorphosis**

She compares her betterment to a butterfly trying to re-emerge from a cocoon of metamorphosis and draws it in the course of her narrative (Elliot ch. 7). She gets into a balancing phase, after this, where she is met with dualisms of productivity/unproductivity and success/failure. She paints an instance where she tries to seize the day by working but is gripped with laziness half way through the planned productivity, slouching on the couch with caffeine and arranging old ornaments which are of no use. She artistically narrates another instance, where she tries to be happy but gets ridiculous thoughts and worries (Elliot ch. 7). But eventually, with the help of art, she moves out of this phase of dualism by meeting and fulfilling responsibilities, having a good social life, and managing every single day of her life without mania (Elliot ch. 8). In conclusion, she is of the opinion that the performativity with her life that she was unable to execute with her neurological disturbance and trauma interference found a way out for expression through her actively involved performativity of graphic narration.

### **The Beauty of the Bothered Brain**

Her own creation filled with fragmented turbulence now acts as a stimuli – rather a visual stimuli with all the physical properties of her art, say, sketches, tints, and hues, entering her brain. These physical characteristics of her art are processed as different fresh signals in the neuronal maps of her brain. Now, it happens that the cognition and underlying conceptuality of her sketches find their translation from the physical features of her art along with her physiological involvement required for the creation and her social engagement demanded by the production. Followed by this, the fresh signals from the physical properties of her drawing that have got a cognitive adorning move into the somatosensory centers of her brain or the pathways of sensoriness. More precisely, since her sketches appeal to her visual senses, the visual pathways are through which the cognition framed would travel. Thereby, the cognition attained would be amalgamated with the visual sensoriness that the sensory pathways give. This, consequently, as opined by Jair Huerta (2023) makes the perceptions about the externalized traumatizing events that are cognitively processed and sensorily amalgamated, get translated into aesthetic experiences via new neural pathways neuroplastically formed. These visually aesthetic experiences happen to be feel-good for the depressed Ruby and give her reflections about her being in the default-mode network. Now in her feel-good reward systems as a result of her aesthetic experience, abreaction and healing shoot up due to hormonal changes and her psychological health gets better. Additionally, in the default-mode network a personal response from her happens towards the art she has put together, as given by Susan Magsamen (2019). In other words, the sense of her identity tarnished through depression along with other neurological and personality disorders gets aligned, and the conceptuality of the torturous events detangled in

the abstract state with their meaninglessness get their clearance through her active involvement with the tangibly manifestable art. Thus, a more clear and fresh picture of who Ruby Elliot is, is got by the individual herself.

### Performativity through Iconography

A significant number of adolescents and adults in the present scenario suffer from depression, mental health concerns and other neurological turbulences. When incidents adding up to the weakening of mental health happen, they get encoded as aching traumatic memories, cause immense stress to the individuals, disturb their sanity, and intervene with any newfangled diverting events trying to channelize fresh neural pathways for neuroplastic reduction of trauma. Under such a juncture, the agonized individuals may resort to graphic narration of their suffering to visibly abreact and externalize their abstract pain. Now, it happens that the actively created art by bothered brains makes the individuals feel purgative, as they are able to productively and therapeutically perform without any detention, and get a reconfiguration of their frenzied selves via their graphically evinced tormented alteregos. With this, the healing resultant achieved through the active production of art could be seen, and in concomitance, it is important to understand the neuroplastic steps involved that neuroaesthetically produces feel-good emotions. With neuroaesthetics of a therapeutic iconography leading to neuroplasticity which results in abreactive healing of trauma, the physical characteristics of the art produced is what has the ontology towards the neuroplastically cathartic healing. It happens that the physical characteristics of the drawings are processed as fresh signals in the neuronal maps of the bothered brains, which get cognitive translation around the conceptuality of the sketches. These cognitive perceptions associated with the iconography travel into the visual sensory centers of the bothered brains, that enable neuroplastically formed visual aesthetic experiences. As a result the feel-good systems of the troubled individuals give abreaction and healing, simultaneously providing a reconfiguration of the disturbed individual identities in the default-mode networks. Therefore, this research paper by taking into account Ruby Elliot's representative memoir *It's All Absolutely Fine* (2017) has addressed the therapeutic intersection between aesthetics and plasticity brought about by bothered brains (a convergence of neuroaesthetics, neuroplasticity and therapeutic iconography), when they indulge in an iconographic narration to get an abreaction and externalization of their abstract agony.

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