

THE SICK BODY
FROM BACTERIA TO VIRUSES.
HOW MUNCH AND MEELGARD
EXPRESS DISEAS IN THEIR ART

THURID VOLD

Both artists Edvard Munch (1863-1944) and Bjarne Melgaard (b. 1967) each influenced by the times in which they live, through their works express human experiences such as sexuality, love, gender, loneliness, melancholy, alienation, anguish, disease and death. Both artists use their art to criticize society. Often certain ambiguities surface in their works. The theme for this seminar is the sick body in art. I will start with a painting by Munch – whose title even includes the word ‘sick’ – whose explosive force was found revolutionary at that time but even today it has not lost its topicality. I will illustrate some examples on the theme of sickness in contemporary works by the artist Bjarne Melgaard. I will then discuss the artistic affinity between the two artists from a strictly artistic point of view and their relevance to our times. How can sickness be used as a metaphor for both physical and mental states? The term ‘auto fiction’ is particularly interesting when we speak of Munch and Melgaard. *Auto fiction* or *autofinzione* is used in literary critique for the auto-

biographical genre with fictional elements.¹ In fact, Melgaard calls his works ‘auto fiction’ - a mixture of his private life and fantasy or fiction. Such mixture of autobiography and fiction fits very well into a large part of Munch’s art. In my opinion, art historians tend to give too much weight to the autobiographical aspect in Munch’s art. As mentioned before, in both Munch’s and Melgaard’s works we can find a certain ambiguity. For example, when Melgaard describes the subcultures he frequented, it’s never clear whether he himself is part of them or if he is a mere observer. In his art works we find both fiction and biographical aspects – thus we can safely say that his art belongs to the auto fiction genre. Pondering on his life’s events and on how they influenced and were reflected in his art, Munch wrote: «In my art I have tried to explain life and its meaning to myself- and to help others understand their own life». Of his *The Sick Child*, he wrote «In *the Sick Child* I traced new paths, it is with this work that I asserted myself as an artist. Most part of what I did afterward had this painting as a point of departure. No other painting has created as much scorn in Norway as this painting did».²

Edvard Munch, the greatest Norwegian painter (1863-1944), painted the first version of *The Sick Child* in 1885/86. – Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo. What do we see? A young red-haired girl sits, her profile turned towards an adult woman who holds her head down.

The girl is propped on a large white pillow, her legs covered by a blanket; she looks towards the curtain, whose draping suggests that the window is open to filter an opaque light. In the foreground, the shape of a drawer chest and a table are barely visible, a bottle and a half-full glass are on the table.

The two women in the center of the painting hold hands. The white pillow and the red hair contrast the muted blue gray greenish colors on the canvas.

Munch worked on various versions of this painting for one year

¹ LOMAS 2015.

² MUNCH 1929.

and a half. He would remove layers of brush strokes and paint new ones, changing lines, colors and shapes as he worked.

The girl's pale face almost transparent on the pillow and the mother's head bent down express illness, pain and desperation but at the same time the girl's stare and the holding of hands show intimacy, comfort and love.

Who was the sick girl? Munch used Betzy Nilsen as a model for the girl, whom he had met during a visit his father, a physician, had paid to a patient; for the mourning woman Munch used his aunt Karen, the sister of his mother, who died of tuberculosis in 1868 when Munch was only 5 years old.

Munch's sister Sofie died of tuberculosis in 1877, at 15, when Edvard was 14 years old.

The interpretation of this painting as his memory of his sister's death came much later in Munch's career, when in the interwar period it was particularly frequent to psychoanalyze the role of the artist and connect his artistic work to his mind and socio-cultural background. But Munch himself, even considering significant his childhood exposure to sickness, tuberculosis and death, never connected this painting to those experiences.³

Nevertheless, Munch's viewpoint about tuberculosis and disease heredity had a certain influence on his perception of himself as an artist. In his diary, he wrote: «Illness, Madness, Death were the black angels standing around my cradle».

Even though in 1929 Munch admitted that his written works «were partially lived experiences, partially poetic inventions»⁴.

Considering the experts' conclusions and the words by the artist himself, I believe that *The Sick Child* is a very good example of *auto fiction* in Munch's art.

As mentioned before, the Munch family was profoundly hit by tuberculosis, the most diffused and dangerous disease in Munch's times often lethal since there was no cure for it. The Prussian physician Robert Koch was the first one in 1882 to find the cause of the disease: The *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*

³ WOLL 2008 p.86.

⁴ From the sketchbook MM T 2759, Munchmuseet

or Bacillus Koch, but it remained cureless. In fact, the cure was found only after WWI1 with the BSG vaccine, the discovery of antibiotics and other medicines. Thus, Munch painted *The Sick Girl* at a time when the understanding of the disease was changing profoundly, when people's awareness was at a cross point between a fatalistic conception and a more scientific and rational approach to the disease. The painting still stands in art history as a significant expression of the devastating effects of the disease. Until 1882, tuberculosis was conceived as an individual and hereditary disease which made the patient wilt slowly. In addition, the disease was socially stigmatizing like a fate which would select only a few. The sick person would be marginalized in his/her desperation, shame and withdrawal. It would be interesting to better understand the reasons why *The Sick Child* was subjected to so much negative criticism at that time. Following are some press reviews after the autumn exhibition «Høstutstillingen» of 1886:

But the execution of this theme so beautiful despite the artist's spiritual concept of the theme itself, is saturated with terrifying violations of everything that we would call 'painting technique'. The artist has not even followed the most elementary technical rules and there are errors all over. It would make us burst into laughter if we should carefully study each detail.⁵

The most important and competent art critic of the time, Andreas Aubert (1851-1913), in the newspaper «Morgenbladet of 9.11.1886» wrote: «This 'Study' (!) –this is what it is- is a sketch jotted down, then partially scraped away. The artist must have gotten tired during his work. It's an abortion, one of those Zola so splendidly described in *l'oeuvre*».

Aubert was nevertheless a supporter of Munch's art of which he spoke about in a positive way. Thus we must insert his review of *The Sick Child* in a vaster context, where Aubert criticizes more than anything else the unfinished quality of the work

⁵ 25.10.1886, *Christiania Intelligenssedler* «Fra Kunstutstillingen.II» («From the Art exhibition»), signed H.S.

and Munch's desire to provoke which, according to Aubert, was the artist's intention with this painting. In 1920, Munch's words themselves at this regard seem to reinforce this idea:

It was the period of realism and impressionism. At times it would happen that, if I was in a good mood, I would paint a landscape –in a naturalistic way. The results were good, but it wasn't what I really had in mind. This would happen often, therefore I would start scraping away what I had painted searching in my memory the first impression and trying to evoke it...I painted *The Sick Child* a number of times, scraped it away, then let the image dissolve in the paint, then tried again to paint the first impression, that transparent pale skin, the trembling mouth, the trembling hands, those tired eyes, but the color of the painting was still not right, that hue of pale gray. I started again to paint it in 1895 and in 1906 – finally I could achieve that strong color that I had tried so many times, three different colors, all different one from the other and each one contributing to evoke what I had felt that time of the first impression.⁶ I do not believe, then, my art to be sick (...) On the contrary, painting diseases and vices is a rather healthy way of venting out.⁷

In order to evoke the true nature of the disease, Munch utilized the handle of the brush to scratch the lines, letting the paint drip down on the canvas thus creating other lines which gave the effect of a detailed unfinished work. It was this technique, truly revolutionary at that time, that unleashed the debate.

The work was deemed scandalous from the beginning but it was also considered a great success, the negative base of most art criticism was the controversial and rebellious personality of Munch. But despite much negativity the painting was also considered a masterpiece, though art history presents the painting as if it were despised at the time and only later re-evaluated and appreciated. *The Sick Child* remains a work of art much mythologized in Norwegian art history.⁸

⁶ MUNCH 1929, p.19.

⁷ From the sketchbook MM N 46, Munchmuseet

⁸ USTVEDT, ASLAKSBY 2009, p.12.

The work became the turning point in Munch's art and assured him a place among the major and Avant guard Norwegian painters. The *Sick Child* was exposed in the exhibition which caused such a big scandal in Berlin in 1892. Neither critics nor the public accepted the painting technique utilized in the exposed works and the show was immediately closed. 16 of Munch's works were shown in the exhibition titled «Degenerate Art» organized by the Nazis in Munich in 1937.

The purpose was to show the so called 'sick art', the modern 'pseudo-art' as an example of what art should not be.

On the other hand, the German art historian Uwe Schneede exalts the work in a wider context and affords it an important role in the development of art history of the XX century.⁹ Thus, it was not the theme that was scandalous. Painting sick children was in fact a well-known theme among the artists of the 1880's, as we can see in the work of the realist painter Christian Krohg.

Sick Girl, 1880/81 by Christian Krohg (1852-1925)

The sick girl is in the very foreground and she looks straight at the viewer. Krohg's painting is realistic and individualistic; it shows the correct reproduction of the various materials, the white color the of the blanket, of the shirt and the pillow. Realist painters gave much importance to the naturalistic reproduction of reality –their credo was 'I paint what I see'. In Munch's *the Sick Child* the visual impression becomes of secondary importance, whereas much emphasis is given to the atmosphere and the expression. Munch transformed the realist painters' credo into his own personal one: «I do not paint what I see, but that which I saw».¹⁰

In *Inheritance* (1897-99) we find another much-feared disease of the time. A mother sits with her dying child on her lap. Munch

⁹ SCHNEEDE 2001, ch.1

¹⁰ MUNCH 1929, 1. Utsagnet er datert 1889-1890.

painted this work in Paris in the 1890's after a visit to a hospital with patients affected by syphilis. We know the child is affected by the disease by the red spots on his chest, typical of the illness - a taboo in those days since the disease was believed to be the result of the 'sins of the fathers' and not the bacterial disease that it is. The wilted leaves on the mother's skirt symbolize death. Munch called this painting an example of his 'syphilis art' a symbolic representation of the disease.

For this reason, the painting is also a work of social concern expressing human pain and humiliation. The woman with the child reminds of the Madonna with Baby Jesus. When the painting was exhibited in Paris it provoked strong emotional reactions. It's evident that with this work Munch went way beyond what legitimate art was then allowed to depict on a canvas. Of this painting, Munch said:

The child stares with big deep eyes at the world he has entered unwillingly. Sick and fearful he questions the room where pain reigns and asks: 'Why? Why?' I was trying to represent the common sensation of ghosts and the parents' duty.¹¹

What did Munch mean by this 'common sensation of ghosts'? The internationally known Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) wrote the drama 'Ghosts' in Sorrento where he stayed in the La Rosa Magra pension (The Meager Rose) during his second stay in Italy (1878-1885). The work published in 1881 deals with syphilis and had a horrible reception. Literary critics believed the work about that unmentionable disease to be an insult to good moral principles. The work was banished for many years from theaters around the world. As it was for tuberculosis, the understanding of syphilis and its cure was very limited. What's of interest to us is that Ibsen and Munch wanted to underline how biological and cultural inheritance can influence the lives of people.¹²

¹¹ From the sketchbook MM T 2730, Munchmuseet.

¹² VESTERHUS 2007, p.1814-6.

Exhibition at Munchmuseet, Oslo -31.12.2014 – 12.04.2015
Melgaard + Munch
«The end of it has already happened»

This year, 129 years after the scandal of «Høstutstillingen» another exhibition in the Norwegian capital has stirred an uproar of both anger and enthusiasm.

This time, though, Munch plays the role of the victim while it's the contemporary Norwegian artist Bjarne Melgaard who unchains the disdain of the public. Both the Munch family and various art critics believe that Munch, the sublime genius, is desecrated by Melgaard's crude highly provoking and sexualized art. Have they forgotten that it was Munch, in his times, who created a 'crude highly provoking sexualized' art? Both artists' works have been in exhibitions that were closed due to their 'obscene' art. We have seen that Munch initiated a reflection around the socio-psychological problems connected to human experiences such as desire, sexuality, sex, disease and death and raised critical questions regarding the role of the individual in each society, a theme as current now as it was back then. Such theme recurs in Melgaard's work.

UNTITLED 1997 – Bjarne Melgaard

On the left, a couple is embracing, there are black and bluish spots over their bodies. On the right, a naked man shows the same black and bluish spots, his trousers have fallen to the floor, his left hand holds the torso of another person towards him. The color of the pants and of the outline of the torso is a yellowish brown. Is this man transmitting something to the other person? Is it something positive or negative? On the white background there are sentences and words written in pencil.

In this painting Melgaard was highly influenced by Munch's *the Kiss* (1897), where two lovers, in front of a window, create one

unique figure. Their faces are united to suggest a concrete image of strong love. Of this painting, the Swedish writer August Strinberg wrote: «The kiss is a fusion of two people, of which the smaller one, in the shape of a carp, seems to be ready to devour the bigger one».¹³

Does Melgaard's work mean to remind us that such fusion through kiss and sexuality, can have devastating effects on both body and soul?

The writing «Black Pearl» in the work *Untitled* 1997 refers to the skin disease Kaposi Sarcoma, an HIV symptom.¹⁴ Melgaard did not copy Munch's work, he expanded on it by transporting its meaning to a situation of his times, exactly one hundred years later. What do those blackish spots mean? Which taboo sexually transmittable lethal disease has the same symptoms? The HIV/AIDS appeared for the first time in 1981. The spots refer to the Kaposi Sarcoma, the viral disease often a symptom of HIV (human immune deficiency) – if untreated it develops into AIDS (acquired immune deficiency).

At the beginning, there was no cure for AIDS which was as lethal as tuberculosis and syphilis were back then. The powerful mix of sex and death that AIDS represents is similar enough to last century's syphilis mix, though AIDS is more discriminatory for its victims. At its inception, it was called «the homosexuals' plague» thus reinforcing in people's imagination the connection between homosexuality and disease. As with syphilis in the XIX century, it was believed that AIDS was a self-inflicted disease. In certain homophobic religious circles, it was believed that AIDS was a symptom of 'God's ire' towards immoral behaviors.¹⁵

¹³ STRINDBERG 1896.

¹⁴ Kaposi's Sarcoma. Maritz Kaposi, Hungarian physician who described the disease already in 1872.

¹⁵ LOMAS 2015

What does Melgaard's work represent? Melgaard states: «Art must express emotions that in some ways are universal and special». Melgaard's homosexuality is strongly explicit in his works. He does not hide having being part of rather extremist environments and subcultures. He has been censored and denounced for his statements «which may make Tracy Emin, the British artists' *badgirl* blush» according to an English newspaper.¹⁶

In 2011, Melgaard represented Norway at the Venice Biennale where he exhibited his project «Beyond Death: Viral Discontents and Contemporary Notions about AIDS» at the IAUV University in Venice, whose theme was in fact AIDS and the possibility that art can change the world.

Mr. Black Pearl – Bjarne Melgaard, 1998

The title refers to the 'black pearls' i.e. the blackish spots that appear in the work of the embracing couple. The obtuse small figure has a big head and two very small feet, two holes instead of eyes, a sad questioning expression.

As already mentioned, art critics have tended to give an autobiographical interpretation to Munch's works, but according to Ina Blom it's a mistake to do the same with Melgaard's art.¹⁷ His art is not as much a reproduction of his personal experiences as it is a kind of abstraction from reality. *Auto fiction* is such a mixture: personal life experiences and interpretation of the world around the artist, i.e. reality and fantasy/ fiction.

Light Bulb Man – Bjarne Melgaard, 1987

In this stout perforated male figure the artist is easily identifiable. Are the holes symbols of the black spots of people affected by AIDS? Was he fearing to be affected? To what does the

¹⁶ *London Evening Standard*, 23. january 2014.

¹⁷ INA BLOM: «Working Class Abstractions», *Afterall. Art, Context, Enquiry* #17, 2008.

title 'Bulb' refer? Perhaps the perforations are symbols of light running through the body and life? Both interpretations could be right. The body is the abode of both matter and psyche of human beings' life, thus the interpretation can be either positive or negative. In conclusion, I believe that both Munch's and Melgaard's genre called *auto fiction* renders their art more provoking. Through this approach the two artists place themselves in the very foreground with their works. Perhaps we are spectators of their real and lived life which in turn makes us face existential human phenomenon we know exist despite our reluctance to admit it.

Bibliography

- LOMAS 2015 = D. LOMAS, *Sick Art. Melgaard+Munch. The End of It All Has Already Happened*, Oslo, 2015.
- MUNCH 1929 = E. MUNCH, *Edvard Munch 189-1929. Diary*, Oslo, 1929.
- MUNCH 1929 = E. MUNCH, *Livsfrisens tilblivels*, Oslo, 1929
- RØD 2015 = A. RØD, *Malernes materialitet (The materiality of the painters)*, Oslo, 2015.
- SCHNEEDE 2001 = U. SCHNEEDE, *Die Geschichte der Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert: von den Avantgarden bis zur Gegenwart* Oslo, 2001.
- STENSETH 2004= B. STENSETH, *Pakten. Munch-en familiehistorie.*) Oslo, 2004.
- STRINDBERG 1896= A. STRINDBERG, *Poetry: La Revue Blanche*, Bruxelles, 1896.
- USTVEDT, ASLAKSHY 2009 = O. USTVEDT, T. ASLAKSHY, *Edvard Munch. The Sick Child. The Story of a Masterpiece*, Oslo, 2009.
- VESTERHUS 2007 = P. VESTERHUS, *Hvordan ble Osvald syk?*, in «Tidskrift for Den norske legeforening», 127, 2007, pp.1814-6.
- WOLL 2008 = G. WOLL, *Bruk og gjenbruk i Munchs tidligste malerier*, in «Når Munch blir Munch», Catalog from the exhibition Rickhard/Melgaard. Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, 2008.