

# Monism and Synaesthesia;

Two metaphysical concepts in the Art of Edvard Munch



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Dedicated to the memory of my mother  
Paula Flittmann, nee Segal

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## Preface

”Et eventuelt forord handler om oppgavens tilblivelse og angivelse av opplysninger som forfatteren ikke finner plass til andre steder i teksten. ...takksigelser og opplysninger om kontaktpersoner kan samles her.....Forordet kan videre inneholde opplysninger som presiserer ...forfatterens bakgrunn (for eksempel utdannelse, yrkeserfaring)... ”<sup>1</sup>

I shall try to follow these instructions to the best of my abilities.

In august 1983, when I first came to Norway, I had a M.A.-degree in art history from Johns Hopkins University. Since this degree was not considered as good as a degree from the University of Oslo, I decided to try to take a degree from Oslo University as well.

First, however, I had to learn Norwegian. I enrolled therefore in the Norwegian language classes for foreign students (Norsk for utlendinger). After 4 semesters (there was not any opportunity to study more Norwegian than that), I applied to the department of art history of the University of Oslo. I was then told that I must first take an examination in Norwegian art history (“mellomfagstillegg i norsk kunsthistorie”), in order to be able to come up to the level of my Norwegian fellow students. To take this exam I had to read Norway’s Art History (“Norges Kunsthistorie”), 7 vols., and also Leif Østby’s Norwegian Art History, and a few other books, all in Norwegian. And I, who had only 4 semesters of study of the Norwegian language... . Therefore the preparation for this exam took some time, especially since I could not study full time, I had to work, too. In the end, however, I dared to take this exam, which I passed.

As far as work is concerned, nobody gave me credit for my art history education abroad, therefore I had to work as cleaning woman, private English teacher and Oslo guide, all part time jobs that, together, amounted to little over one full-time job.

After some time I began to have also personal problems in my Norwegian family. Emotional personal problems, combined with lack of a job that I could feel comfortable with professionally and economically, slowed me down in my art history studies. (I feel obliged to tell all this, because some of the teachers in the art history department kept on asking me, ironically, why do I not finish my studies – with the implication that I am not intellectually able to do so... .)

I tried to get a NAVF scholarship, that just became available, but I had nobody to vouch for my intellectual capacity. I also had no advisor, since I was told that there is none available

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Mørstad, *Vår 2003 Hovedfag kunsthistorie håndbok*, Oslo 2003, p. 32.

for me at that time; I was therefore told to wait for one who will have time for me. Nobody did.

So I dropped out from my studies *de facto*, yet I continued to pay the semester registration fees, because this enabled me to train aerobics at the university – the cheapest training place in Oslo.

In the autumn 2002 I decided to resume my studies. I participated in the student exhibition organized by the Munch museum, that opened in February 2003. I was now studying full-time art history and at the same time I was taking a part-time education in practical pedagogy (PPU), with specialisation in the teaching of English and art, in order to extend my future job opportunities. The pedagogical education took 3 semesters, and, with its practical teaching in schools (some of them outside Oslo) and exams (and much more...), it was actually a full time enterprise. While studying pedagogy, I fulfilled the compulsory exam and seminar work for art history and I started to prepare for writing my thesis.

To do this I had to do some research in the library of the Munch museum. The time in that library was a waking nightmare that cannot be fully explained in this preface. So I'll try to summarise: When I came to Norway, in 1983, I tried to get a scholarship given by the Munch museum, and, since nobody knew me in Norway, I submitted together with my application an unpublished paper that I wrote in the USA, called *Metaphysical Content in Edvard Munch's Painting*. I did not get that scholarship; neither did I get back my paper, and, after waiting c. 4-5 months, I went to the Munch museum and I talked with Arne Eggum. I asked him to give me back my paper. He said that he did not have time to read it (alas, and I, who hoped that the paper would help me get the scholarship...). He also asked me to allow him to take a copy of it, in order to read it and tell me his opinion about it. I let him copy it, to get his professional opinion. I never got his opinion about it. In fact, I never heard anything from him anymore. I thought that my paper was SO BAD that he probably does not want to tell me how bad it was, in order not to offend me! I was made to feel so shy about my paper, that I avoided to discuss it with anybody else. I was disappointed and hurt.

Friday July 8, 2005, I discovered accidentally that the library of the Munch museum had a copy of this paper. I found it in the card catalogue. I was very shocked because **I never gave my permission to the library to get a copy of this paper!** On July 13, 2005, I wrote a letter to the Munch museum library and I asked to get back my paper. At the same time I asked to get a written statement that the library does not have any other copy of this paper. I got finally my paper back, without any such statement, but with a very rude letter from the main librarian instead. I quote the last paragraph of this letter: “ Når det gjelder åpningstider, regler og andre

bestemmelser i biblioteket, vil vi fra nå av ha oss frabedt flere klager og mas fra din side. Her er det vi som bestemmer, og disse bestemmelser og regler har du ingenting med. Hvis dette skjer en eneste gang til, så ser jeg meg tvunget til å svarteliste deg, hvilket vil si at du er uønsket her og vil ikke lenger få adgang.”

I never went back to the Munch museum library after this letter. The space does not permit to discuss it more. A copy of it is available upon request.

I took than contact with my advisor in the art history department. It was a difficult contact. I would like to summarise it by quoting from an E-mail (copy available upon request) from Eirik Utstumo, from “Forskerforbundet”:

“Din veileder sa at han er en av de fremste eksperter på Munch i Norge. Det er vel også derfor han er veileder for deg. Han sa at han har skrevet flere avhandlinger og artikler, og at han da har brukt biblioteket på Munch-museet i veldig liten grad. Kildene finnes i stor grad ved andre biblioteker. Han mente at det derfor ikke burde være prekärt å ha direkte tilgang til dette biblioteket for at du skulle kunne ferdigstille din oppgave. Ettersom det er en hovedfagsoppgave du skriver, mente han at det ikke var krav om at oppgaven skulle være en nypløyende forskningsoppgave.....”

Therefore I had to do without an advisor.

I tried to contact other teachers in the art history department, and the nicest of them gave me to understand that they cannot help me, because they do not want to get involved... . I would like, however, to quote from one of the teachers, who wrote something else:

“ ... Dropp saken om ditt manus fra 1983. ...Du bør være glad for at manuset er registrert på deg i Munch-museets bibliotek. Slutt å klage og mistenke alle og enhver for å være slemme mot deg. Det er din egen oppførsel som fører til avvisingene du stadig opplever. Folk oppfatter deg som urimelig og sytende. Skaff deg profesjonell psykoterapi... Konsentrer deg om å gjøre ferdig hovedoppgaven, eller dropp prosjektet. Du kan ikke vente mer tålmodighet fra våre lærere når du har holdt på så urimelig lenge og klager på alle du kommer i kontakt med. ... øv deg på å se glad og hyggelig ut, og tenk mer på andre enn deg selv. ...”

Copy of E-mail available upon request.

Another instance of being indirectly advised to drop out from the university came from another person from the staff: “... Ønsker du ... å frafalle studieplassen ved kunsthistorie?...”

Copy of E-mail available upon request.

I am aware that my case may seem confusing, because I am unable to discuss it entirely in this preface, for obvious reasons.

I started to work for this thesis on monism and synaesthesia from the spring semester 2003 on – with pauses due to problems with the Munch museum and with studying pedagogy at the same time. The writing process itself started in February 2007. It is not a miracle that I am now able to finish my thesis; the miracle is that I am still alive, considering the humiliations and the tribulations that I had to endure up till now. I have asked myself what have I ever done to deserve all this, and I am compelled to think that my problems are not due to anything that I have done, but rather to what I am (not): indeed I must admit that my biggest crime is that I am not a descendant of Harald Hårfagre.

I would like, however, to end on a happy note:

I was fortunate to have my chapter on monism read by the philosophy Professor Eyjolfur Kjalar Emilsson. In spite of a very tight schedule, he made time to read it and gave me his precious comments.

Finally: how can one express thanks to one's guardian angel? From March 2007 this angel bore the name of Marit Ingeborg Lange. Like professor Emilsson, she read my thesis in spite of her very busy timetable. Not only this, but professionally she functioned as the advisor that I never had. Moreover, she has done this in an extremely gracious manner. She is a perfect advisor! May "the powers" – as Munch would say - bless her.

Sophia Oftedahl

Oslo, April 2007.



## Summary

This thesis attempts to discuss two metaphysical aspects that appear in Edvard Munch's art: monism and synaesthesia. These two topics have been previously discussed by other art historians and critics; however it is this writer's opinion that the concepts in themselves were not properly understood in the first place. This, in turn, influenced their interpretation within the context of Munch's work.

Monism and synaesthesia have been considered here in connection with their metaphysical background. Therefore this thesis discusses the topics first of all from an art historical perspective, then from a philosophical point of view. A certain knowledge of neurology as well as of history of religions has also contributed to the elucidation of the themes here discussed.

The reasons for Munch's concern with metaphysical topics have been acknowledged here as well. These reasons were both general as well as private. The *Weltanschauung* at the end of the nineteenth century had a definite predilection for metaphysics and Munch was certainly influenced by it. In addition, he had very clear personal reasons to be concerned with such topics: death in his family as well as death threatening him in his childhood were serious grounds that were conducive to Munch's interest in metaphysics – and therefore, in monism and synaesthesia.

## Introduction

The present thesis attempts to explore two metaphysical concepts that are to be found in the art of Edvard Munch: monism and synaesthesia. Much of Munch's art is concerned with the metaphysical aspects of existence. They appear in his art as an effort to explain perennial questions regarding life and its purpose, death and immortality and the role of the artist, as an elect spirit,<sup>2</sup> in the elevation of human consciousness.

### **Background**

Munch's art was influenced both by German and French mysticism. The situation in Germany and its influence upon Munch's art and thought was extensively discussed by Carla Lathe, *op.cit.*. Through his repeated trips to Paris Munch encountered also the mysticism of Symbolism and saw the pictures of Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon and Felicien Rops.<sup>3</sup> Integrated in the Symbolist theory of art were speculations regarding theosophy, esoteric doctrines, alchemy and astrology.<sup>4</sup> He could hear them discussed at the home of Mallarmé in Paris, at 87 rue de Rome, where he was sometimes a guest. There he could meet such artists and writers as Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, J.-K. Huysmans, Catulle Mendès, Felicien Rops, Redon, Gauguin, Verlaine, Teodor de Wyzewa, Emile Verhaeren, Gustave Kahn and others of the same bent.<sup>5</sup> The macabre, the esoteric, the occult – as part of that kindred trend called “decadence” – were in the air.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For the artist seen as *homme supérieur*, as *l'exprimeur des Êtres absolus* and contrasted to the average person, who is unaware of the *realité idéale*, of the revelation of the infinite that is Art, see A. Aurier, “Les symbolistes”, *Revue encyclopédique*, 1, 1892, pp. 161-2, quoted in H. R. Rookmaaker, *Gauguin and Nineteenth Century Art Theory*, Amsterdam, 1972, p. 155, and C. Morice, *Litterature*, pp. 34 and 35, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 158. The same kind of ideas were circulating in Germany, as can be seen in Carla Anna Lathe, *The Group Zum schwarzen Ferkel; A Study in Early Modernism*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of East Anglia, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> *Edvard Munch; Lithographien, Holzschnitte, Radierungen*, exhibition catalogue, Esslingen, 1974, p.21.

<sup>4</sup> Margaretha Rossholm, “Bilden som mikrokosmos eller bilden som sjalsspegel; En studie i fransk och germansk symbolism”, *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, 41, December 1972, p. 96.

<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Delevoy, *Symbolists and Symbolism*, Geneva, 1978, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 51.

Teodor de Wyzewa recommended a “spiritual naturalism”<sup>7</sup> concerned with a precise description of supernatural and/or spiritual phenomena. This position has been investigated by J.-K. Huysmans in his novel *La-Bas* of 1891.<sup>8</sup> In the same year, Josephin Peladan wrote, in connection with the forthcoming first Salon de la Rose-Croix, that those wishing to contribute were to uphold “ first the Catholic Ideal and Mysticism. After Legend, Myth, Allegory, the Dream ... .”<sup>9</sup> He held Eliphas Levi in high esteem<sup>10</sup> and tried to combine religion and occultism in one comprehensive theory, which he called “decadent”. He had a special penchant for the concept of hermaphroditism, which he extolled in *L’androgynie* (1891), one of a series of novels called *La decadence latine*, that he was writing at the time.<sup>11</sup> Munch assimilated the ideal of the androgynie as can be seen in his *Sphinx*, *Human Mountain* and *The Scream* – see the relevant discussion of the androgynie with Munch further on in this thesis.

One of the theorists of Symbolism was Charles Morice, who, in his *La littérature de toute a l’heure* (1889), advocated, like Peladan, a return to religion. That religion was to be of a definite Neoplatonic kind, for which works of art would be the perfect medium: “Souls which are the externalization of God, seek to return, through a book, Art, a musical phrase, a pure thought, to the metaphysical realm of Ideas, to God... .”<sup>12</sup> Another leader of Symbolism was Jean Moreas, who wrote in 1886 a manifesto pleading for the new school. In *Le symbolisme* he wrote: “...in order to trace the exact descent of the new school, we have to return to... the mystics... Charles Baudelaire is to be regarded as the real precursor of the present movement;... M. Stéphane Mallarme imparted to it a sense of mystery and ineffability ... . Thus, in this art, neither scenes from nature nor human actions nor any other physical phenomena can

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<sup>7</sup> *Post-Impressionism; Cross-Currents in European Painting*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Art, London, 1979-80, p. 24; a related concept was introduced in 1894 in Berlin by Stanislaw Przybyszewski to describe Munch’s painting: see his *Das Werk des Edvard Munch*, cited in Carla Lathe, “Edvard Munch and the concept of ‘psychic naturalism’”, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, March 1979, p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> *Post-Impressionism...*, exhibition catalogue, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France; Josephin Peladan and the Salons de la Rose-Croix*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1968, new edition: Garland, New York and London, 1976, p. 212. In 1892, early in the year, when Josephin Peladan opened his first Salon de la Rose-Croix, Munch was in Paris. Also August Strindberg was acquainted with Peladan’s theories. In his *Occult Diary* Strindberg wrote that he was reading Peladan (notice for February 11, 1901).

<sup>10</sup> Delevoy, op.cit., p.89. On Eliphas Levi see Christopher McIntosh, *Eliphas Levi and the French Occult Revival*, London, 1972 and T. A. Williams, *Eliphas Levi, Master of Occultism*, 1975.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles et l’androgynie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1962, p. 122: ”L’oeuvre du Sar Peladan ... semble dominee par le motif de l’androgynie”.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in *Post-Impressionism ...*, exhibition catalogue, p. 24.

be present in themselves:<sup>13</sup> what we have instead are perceptible appearances designed to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial ideas.”<sup>14</sup>

In 1891, at the banquet held at the Hotel des Societes Savantes in honour of Moreas and the Symbolism, came once again together those who took part in the movement: Mallarme, Redon, Rops, Gauguin, Octave Mirbeau, Edouard Schure, Catulle Mendes, Maurice Maeterlink, Andre Gide, Emile Verhaeren, Charles Morice and others. One of the guests was Edvard Munch.<sup>15</sup>

The two precursors of Symbolism about whom Moreas wrote, Baudelaire and Mallarme, were no strangers to Munch. It was Gauguin who mediated the relationship between Mallarme and Munch<sup>16</sup> and in 1896 the painter produced a lithographic portrait of the poet.<sup>17</sup> Also in 1896 Munch illustrated two poems from Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal*: “Une charogne” and “Le mort joyeux” (about these illustrations see further on in this thesis).

Munch was also directly aware of the symbolism that dominated the work of the artists of *Les vingt* group in Brussels. He exhibited there at the “Salon Libre Esthetique”, the exhibiting body of this group, from February 25 to April 1, 1897. Thus, he could know the work and thought of artists that were exhibiting together with him: Ensor, Gauguin, Rops, Toorop, Knopff and Bonnard.

During the 1890s, the emphasis on spiritual and metaphysical matters became widespread: more than ever before, books were published that treated such subjects as theosophy, occultism and Satanism; plays that dealt with the same kind of topics were playing in Paris, and the exhibitions showed the work of similarly minded artists.<sup>18</sup> The interest in esoteric doctrines mingled at the time with interests in magic and psychology (Freud published most of his works between 1885 and 1902, and Bergson was elaborating his theories on intuition in the same period).<sup>19</sup>

Metaphysical content in the art of Edvard Munch is an extensive topic that cannot be entirely elucidated in the present thesis. Therefore, only two main subjects have

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<sup>13</sup> Compare with Munch’s “St. Cloud Manifesto” and his decision to abandon sheer descriptive painting (Edvard Munch, *Livsfrisens tilblivelse*, Oslo, n.d., p. 17. Quoted in Heller, “Edvard Munch’s ‘Night’, the Aesthetics of decadence, and the content of Biography”, *Arts Magazine*, October 1978, p. 101).

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Delevoy, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>17</sup> Reproduced in Werner Timm, *The Graphic Art of Edvard Munch*, translated from the German by Ruth Michaelis-Jena and Patrick Murray, Great Britain, 1969, plate 48.

<sup>18</sup> *Post-Impressionism ...*, p.25.

<sup>19</sup> Delevoy, p. 179.

been chosen for detailed examination in the present work: the philosophic concept of monism and the neurological one of synaesthesia. Both monism and synaesthesia could be connected with other topics, such the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, other alternate contemporary religious movements such as Spiritualism and the notion of vitalism.

### **Delimitation of the topic:**

This thesis will not deal with the following subjects:

1. Nietzsche.

Friedrich Nietzsche was much discussed within Munch's milieu in Germany and Munch was certainly aware of the philosopher's ideas. One of the first art historians to deal with the influence of Nietzsche's ideas on Munch's work was Gøsta Svenæus. In his *Edvard Munch; Das Universum der melancholie*<sup>20</sup> as well as in his *Ide och innehåll i Edvard Munchs konst; en analys av aulamålningarna*<sup>21</sup> he analyses Munch's art in connection with Nietzsche's philosophy.

2. Theosophy / Spiritualism.

The topic is discussed by Arne Eggum in his *Munch and Photography*<sup>22</sup> as well as by Shelley Wood Cordulack in her Ph.D. thesis *Edvard Munch's "Frieze of Life" in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century Physiology*.<sup>23</sup> It has been first mentioned in an unpublished paper in the library of the Munch museum, entitled *Metaphysical Content in Edvard Munch's Painting*.<sup>24</sup>

3. Vitalism.

Subjects connecting Munch's work with vitalist concepts have been discussed especially in two exhibition catalogues: *Livskraft; Vitalismen som kunstnerisk impuls 1900 - 1930*<sup>25</sup> and *Munch og Warnemunde 1907 – 1908*.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Publications of the New Society of Letters at Lund, Lund, 1968.

<sup>21</sup> Gyldendal, Oslo, 1953.

<sup>22</sup> Gyldendal, Oslo, 1987.

<sup>23</sup> University of Illinois at Urbana – Champaign, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Sophia Oftedahl, at the time of writing this paper, called Sophia C. Joffe. The paper was first written in 1981-82, and read by Reinhold Heller in 1982. From 1983 the paper was to be found in the library of the Munch museum. Theosophy is mentioned on p. 6 of this paper. (Monism and synaesthesia have not been discussed at all in this Ms.).

<sup>25</sup> Munch museum, Oslo, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Munch museum, Oslo, 1999.

## **The main focus of the thesis:**

### Monism

Philosophy was an obvious topic in Munch's search for a *raison d'être* for himself and his surroundings. He could joke about it, as when he declared that he will write a book called *Maleri, Filosofi og Dilla*;<sup>27</sup> he was also extremely serious about it when he wanted to find a justification for his ever having been born: "Barnet [ here: Munch's *alter ego*] stirrer... ind i den Verden/ det ufrivillig er/ kommen ind i - / og/ spørgende... - allerede/ et Hvorfor – Hvorfor - ... det [var] mit Liv/ *Mine spøl*/ Mit Hvorfor..."<sup>28</sup> . Generally existential is Munch's question: " Hvorfor er vi til..."<sup>29</sup> .

As a philosophic concept monism was discussed within Munch's circle at *Zum schwarzen Ferkel* in Berlin. It attempted an explanation of existential questions as well as a possible hope for a continuation of existence in the hereafter.

That is not to say that Munch was an absolute believer in monism; he was interested in many other possible alternate hypotheses that extended from philosophy to religion(s), from psychology to psychoanalysis, from a belief in a kind of "unconscious astral condition" (*ubevidst astraltilstand*)<sup>30</sup> to a more conventional (and imaginary) contact with the dead – see his story about "Monsieur Piat".<sup>31</sup>

He himself defined his lack of conventional belief when he called himself a "doubter / sceptic": "jeg er tvivler"<sup>32</sup>. Probably a more correct term would be "agnostic". Be it as it may, monism is much reflected in Munch's art, and this is the reason for the inclusion of this topic in the present thesis.

### Synaesthesia

Synaesthesia is a concept that reflects perceptual modes that are influenced by the physiological/neurological conditions of the subject/synaesthete. It is included here because of its traditional association with metaphysical insight.<sup>33</sup> This association, when connected with synaesthesia, was both inaccurate and inappropriate - when seen from a

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<sup>27</sup> In Atle Næss, *Munch; en biografi*, Gyldendal, 2004, p. 375.

<sup>28</sup> T 2730, p. 10 r – p. 11. Cursive letters mine, to indicate words that Munch crossed out but which are here relevant.

<sup>29</sup> T 2782 – ad, (T 2905), p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> T 2734.

<sup>31</sup> T 130.

<sup>32</sup> T 2734

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Kevin T. Dann, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen; Synaesthesia and the Search for Transcendental Knowledge*. Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1998.

purely contemporary (with us) scientific viewpoint, yet it has influenced both Munch's art as well as some attempts to understand it.

As a supposed manifestation of an invisible world, synaesthesia was considered a highly desirable state, experienced by superior individuals.<sup>34</sup> Misunderstood, it dealt with the idea of a union between the arts (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) as somehow mirroring a union between the senses. As an alternative to (orthodox) Christianity, it searched for a deeper unity of the cosmos, and as such, it functioned as an important religious impulse in a time of change and scientific discovery.

Even though it is probable that Munch himself was not a synaesthete<sup>35</sup>, he used synaesthesia in his art for expressive purposes – cf., for example, the discussion of *The Scream* further on in this thesis. Moreover, the consideration of synaesthetic sensory perceptions as some kind of states of grace and proximity to the divine, linked to Munch's wish to be seen as an artistic personality in touch with “the beyond”, caused the concept to be clearly present in his art – and therefore it is discussed in this thesis.

### **What has been done before:**

Both monism and synaesthesia have been mentioned before in connection with Munch's art – and some such instances are briefly mentioned and discussed in the present work. In doing this, the aim was to avoid getting credit for being the first to mention them as being present in Munch's art. At the same time it is only fair to show also the shortcomings of these mentions, as it seemed that the concepts were not quite understood in themselves – and therefore not used appropriately in the analysis of Munch's works. Moreover, not all the instances of mentioning monism and synaesthesia in previous criticism are discussed here; due to the size and aim of this thesis, only the most representative ones have been taken into account.

### **Method:**

The main method used here is iconographical, aided by stylistic observations. In addition, when it seemed appropriate, a connection has been made to biographical instances that seemed relevant for the elucidation of the work of art under discussion. Like most artists, Munch's wish to express himself had often to do with his own personal life

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.VIII.

<sup>35</sup> Actually synaesthesia is both involuntary and quite unpleasant an experience that real synaesthetes would gladly do without: cf. the description of such a state by a patient of the physician Emilien Benoit – in *ibid.*, pp. 43 ff..

experience. It seems quite preposterous to ignore the many autobiographical allusions present in Munch's art for fear of having Munch called "narcissistic". On the contrary, it is both normal and desirable that an artist makes use of his/her own life experiences in order to express truths universally valid. In addition, one has to keep in mind an important influence upon Munch's art and thought in his formative years: the milieu of the Kristiania Bohemen. The first of its nine commandments was quite explicit: "Du skal skrive ditt liv." Munch obeyed this commandment to his own, and our, benefit. In the spirit of Freud, he explained why:

"Min kunst er en selvbekjennelse – Jeg søger i den / at klargjøre mig mit forhold til verden – Altså en slags egoismus – Dog har jeg altid samtidig tænkt og følt at min kunst vil kunne osså klargjøre andre menneskers i deres søgen mot sandheden – "36

### **The size:**

The chapter on monism is about twice as long as the chapter on synaesthesia. This is a normal consequence of the nature of the two topics: one is philosophical – and as such, it is generally extensive in scope and importance in Munch's work; the other deals with a specific way of perception of external reality – and as such, it is limited to that particular manner of rendition of such subjective impressions. Even though both subjects are ultimately metaphysical in content, and as such, they both belong to this thesis, they have not been treated by Munch equally (quantitatively) in his art: he simply made more pictures that deal with monism than with synaesthesia. Therefore, the one topic is dealt with on more pages than the other, though both are regarded with the same attention and wish for understanding.

### **Misogyny:**

In all fairness, it must be stated that Munch was not perfect – and who can say that some – any – human being ever is? He certainly was a genius; in many ways, in his art as well as politically and socially, he was prophetic and deserves admiration, yet as a human being he had certain faults – and one of them was misogyny. Munch's misogyny has been discussed by Frank Høifødt in some of his articles in *Kunst og Kultur* as well as in his

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<sup>36</sup> T 2734 (?), pp. ? – 124.



dissertation *Kvinnen, Kunsten, Korset*.<sup>37</sup> The same topic has been dealt with in the exhibition catalogue entitled *Munch og kvinnen*.<sup>38</sup>

Munch's misogyny has been mentioned in this thesis as part of the elucidation of certain iconographic traits that deal with the relationship between man and woman. The mention of misogyny with Munch does not diminish in any way the appreciation of the artistic quality of his works.

## **What? – Why? – How?:**

### **I - What is the general content of Munch's art?**

Here it is useful to try to understand what exactly did Munch wish to express in his art, seen in connection with the two main subjects of this thesis.

Inger Alver Gløersen mentions a visit that Munch made once in her home.<sup>39</sup> With that occasion Munch said: "En kunster må ha noe å fare med." With another occasion, Munch said: "Jeg uttaler mig ikke om unge malere – de er gode nesten alle sammen – dårlige malere er der svært få av. Men det er det om de har noe å fare med..."<sup>40</sup>

It seems that for Munch it was important that an artist had something to say in his/her art. Sheer descriptive painting that did not convey a (new) idea was not relevant for him.

Moreover, the thought expressed was supposed to be related to the artist's inner – spiritual - life. The description of an encounter with Henrik Lund is representative for the values that Munch considered worth while expressing in art:

"Henrik Lund hørte en dag at Munch var nede og så på hans utstilling. Det var etter stengetid og Munch var ensom i salen. Henrik Lund tok en bil og kom ned tidsnok til å treffe Munch.

- Nå, hva syns du?

Munch svarte ikke.

- Vær så snill å si hva du syns.

^Du er flink. Det er merkelig hva du har drevet det til. Du eier jo ikke gnist.^

- Har jeg ikke gnist?

^Nei, gnist har du ikke, men du har smak. Litt lærer du her og litt lærer du der og friskt og flott setter du det sammen.^

-Har jeg ikke gnist?

Munch så på ham og sa:

^Si meg, Henrik. Eier du ikke sjelsliv?^"<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Frank Høifødt, *Kvinnen, kunsten, korset; Edvard Munch anno 1900*, Dr. dissertation, University of Oslo, 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Bergen, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Inger Alver Gløersen. *Den Munch jeg møtte*, Oslo, Gyldendal, 1964, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>41</sup> Underlining mine. "En resepsjonshistorie", in *Agora: Journal for metafysisk spekulasjon*, no. 3-4 / 95, Norway, p. 44.

It is less relevant whether this is one of the legends told about Munch or a true story: it describes quite well Munch's values, which he sought in art – be it his own, or that of others.

- “Art is the daughter of the divine”<sup>42</sup>

Gustave Courbet ( 1819 – 1877 ) expressed Realism's point of view when he stated that his aim in art was to render “...the representation of objects visible and tangible to the painter....painting is an essentially concrete art, and can consist only of the representation of things both *real* and *existing*.... An *abstract* object, invisible or nonexistent, does not belong to the domain of painting.... Show me an angel, and I'll paint one.”<sup>43</sup>

Gustav Wentzel, Munch's contemporary – who could well be called a kind of Norwegian “Courbet” as far as his art views are concerned – was considered by Munch a leading naturalist painter.<sup>44</sup> With the occasion of the exhibition of Munch's *Sick Girl (Syk pike)*<sup>45</sup> Wentzel expressed his (and others') opinion about Munch's work: he called Munch a “humbugmaler”.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike the art of Courbet and Wentzel, Munch's art aims to show, in a concrete manner, with the visual means of painting, something that belongs to the invisible world. Be it feelings or metaphysical ideas, much of Munch's art is concerned with that which cannot be seen.

- Painting the unseen

Munch's *Syk pike* arose Wentzel's anger because of its lack of formal “finish”. Munch, on the other hand, considered this painting his first innovative work: “ I det syke barn brød jeg mig nye veie – det var et gjennombrud i min kunst – Det meste af hva jeg senere har gjort fik sin fødsel i dette billede.”<sup>47</sup>

In what way was this painting a “break-through” in Munch's art? The answer lies perhaps first of all in Munch's intent: he wanted to render visible his own feelings about,

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<sup>42</sup> Rudolf Steiner, in Pamela Schaeffer, *Spirituality in Abstract Art*, in: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1065>.

<sup>43</sup> Underlining mine. In Gardner's *ART through the Ages*, 10<sup>th</sup> edition, Richard G. Tansey and Fred S. Kleiner, eds., Harcourt Brace College Publishers, New York, 1996, p. 966.

<sup>44</sup> N 78.

<sup>45</sup> Called *Det syke barn*, 1885-86, and reproduced in *Norges Kunsthistorie*, vol. 5, Oslo, Gyldendal, p. 231.

<sup>46</sup> N 78.

<sup>47</sup> N 76.

and involvement with, the subject of this painting rather than a sheer description of its topic. He succeeded in expressing his intent.

Modestly called *En studie*<sup>48</sup> when first exhibited (in 1886), the picture was intended to express Munch's feelings at the death of his sister Sophie. For this painting Munch used a model but he actually painted a memory – his memory and his feelings, rather than the model in front of him, i.e., he invested the model with his own memories instead of plainly painting the model *per se*. He described the creative process in terms that ought to be understood from a psychological perspective:

“Da jeg så først det syge barn – det bleke hode med det stærkt røde hår mot den hvide pude – gav det mig et indtryk som under arbeidet forsvant –

- Jeg fik et godt men annet billede frem på lærredet – Billedet malte jeg da mangfoldi gange om i løbet af et år – kradset det ut – lod det flyde ud i malermidlet – og forsøgte atter og atter at få det første intryk – den gjennemsigtige – bleke hud – mod lærredet – den skjælvende mund – de skjælvende hænder –
- Jeg ...holdt så endeli op, udtrættet – Jeg havde opnået - meget af det første intryk – den skjælvende mund – den gjennemsigtige hud – de trætte øine – Men billedet var ikke færdi i farven – den var blit grå – Billedet var da tungt som bly –

Jeg tog det op to år senere – da fik jeg noe af den stærke farve jeg havde villet gi det – Jeg malte 3 forskjellige Disse er alle forskjellige og gir hver sit bidrag til at få frem det jeg følte ved det første intryk - .... Jeg skrabbte omgivelserne halvt ud og lod alt stå i masser - ...

Jeg opdaget osså at mine egne øienhår havde virket med billedintrykket – Jeg antydede dem derfor som skygger over billedet - ... Der kom frem bølgelinier i billedet – periferier – med hodet som centrum – Disse bølgelinier ... benyttede jeg oftere senere. ...”<sup>49</sup>

He intended to paint what he felt (“det jeg følte”) rather than what he saw, i.e., his intent was to paint a feeling – something that cannot be concretely seen. In order to do this, he intended to render visible elements that, in turn, cannot be rendered in painting: trembling mouth and hands (“den skjælvende mund – de skjælvende hænder – “). The movement of trembling, like feelings, cannot be concretely painted. Similarly, it is not easy (though it is possible) to paint something that is transparent, yet Munch wanted to paint “den gjennemsigtige hud”. Transparency in itself is an element close to the concept of the invisible: one can see through something, as if that something – scarcely visible - does not exist.

On the other hand, he writes that he painted some shadows representing his own eyelashes (“mine egne øienhår”). To introduce in the painting a representation of a physical part of himself, even though only as shadows, is to show directly his personal

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<sup>48</sup> Discussed in *Norges kunsthistorie*, vol.5, Oslo, Gyldendal, 1981, p. 232.

<sup>49</sup> Underlinings mine. N 70 – N 71 – N 75 – probably written in the beginning of the 1930'ies. The text appears to be somewhat different from the actual picture here discussed; for example, the shadows of Munch's own eyelashes, mentioned in the text, do not appear in the painting. This would indicate that Munch wished to communicate in the written text something beyond the scope and appearance of the painting itself. Cf. also Leif Einar Plahter, “Det syke barn og Vår; en Røntgenundersøkelse av to Munch bilder”, *Kunst og Kultur*, 57, Oslo 1974, pp. 103 – 115.

involvement with the subject of the painting. This personal involvement is his memory and his own feelings about this memory. These feelings resulted probably in Munch crying – therefore the eyelashes were painted, rather than some other part of the painter’s anatomy.

Furthermore, he writes that wavy lines (“bølgelinier”) appeared in the painting, as if by themselves, irrespective of his direct volition: “Der kom frem bølgelinier i billedet...” – as if he was painting in a kind of trance, immersed in his own feelings and memories, remote from the concrete, material, existence.

The process of repeatedly scraping out and dissolving the paint in turpentine (“...jeg... -kradset det ut – lod det flyde ud i malermidlet - ...”) and repainting back the same picture several times over, indicates the struggle with the expression of the subject matter of the painting. Considering Munch’s considerable technical dexterity at the time that he painted this painting, it is probably justified to understand this struggle as being caused by the expression of the topic rather than by actual technical/painting difficulties.

The composition itself is revealing the painter’s intent: a medicine bottle is painted on the left middle ground; a glass with medicine in it (?) is painted in the right foreground. Thus the viewer has to connect the two mentally, and thus the idea of medication and disease comes obviously to mind as the invisible compositional line crosses diagonally the painting.

The very pale face is almost the same colour as the pillow and the delicate profile line scarcely separates the two. The red hair functions as a strong contrast enhancing the whiteness of the skin. Thus is practically rendered clear the idea of the transparency of the skin – and therefore the other-worldliness of the girl (close to death as she is), as white is usually connected with the idea of purity and spirituality.

Moreover, she looks above and beyond the head of the figure representing the mother; she seems unaware of her immediate surroundings as she looks towards the window, as if towards the next world, as if she already feels closer to that world than to this one. Above her head there is the round shape of the chair that could function as a halo, adding thus another divine/spiritual dimension to the figure of the girl.

All these elements indicate Munch’s intent to paint feelings, i.e., to paint the unseen.

## II - Why did Munch choose to deal with metaphysical topics in his art?

In addition to the general fashion for treating metaphysical topics in art, Munch had very personal reasons to deal with this topic. Munch’s childhood was marked by the

sickness and death of beloved members of his family (see above). Moreover, he himself was often sick and sometimes even close to death. While in Saint Cloud, he wrote: “When I suffer most, ... an urge arises in me: Kill yourself. Then it’ll all be over. Why live? It’s cowardice to live a life like this. After all, you won’t live much longer anyhow. And so, release yourself unto the earth. This miserable body, this messing around with medicines, and this constant fearful caution: That is no life!”<sup>50</sup>

- *Death at the Helm (Med døden til rørs)*

*Death at the helm*, 1893,<sup>51</sup> is the title of one of Munch’s paintings. This title is intended as a pun that may be explained as follows: Munch is quoted as having said: “... jeg må følge [min vei] til jeg styrter i dypet. Livsangsten har fulgt meg siden min tanke vektet. Min kunst har vært en selvbekjennelse. Den har vært som radiotelegrafistens varselstelegrammer fra det synkende skip. Jeg har likevel følelsen av at livsangsten er en nødvendighet for meg liksom sykdommen. Uten livsangst og sykdom ville jeg har vært som et skip uten rør.”<sup>52</sup>

The painting shows Death personified, himself leading the boat in which the old man sits powerless. On one level the picture is meant to represent Man’s fate that is inexorably moving toward death, it is “led by death.” On another, it shows that – in Munch’s case – it was Death that determined the course of his life - and art.

Munch admired Bøcklin’s painting, and it can be assumed that he did know that painter’s famous work *Isle of the Dead* (which was also much admired by August Strindberg).<sup>53</sup> Bøcklin’s *Isle of the Dead* shows the dead approaching the isle in a boat led by an enigmatic figure who is surely not of this world. Like Bøcklin, Munch painted a journey by boat; unlike in Bøcklin, with Munch the journey is done by the living, moving towards death, and Death himself if the ferryman. On a general level, Munch expressed here the “journey of life” through the metaphor of travelling. On the personal level, he alludes here to the particular circumstances of his life with its constant anguish and fear of death. Munch declared that it was exactly this fear of

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Reinhold Heller, “Edvard Munch and the Clarification of Life”, *Oberlin College Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin*, Spring 1972, p. 128.

<sup>51</sup> Reproduced in Arne Eggum, *Edvard Munch; malerier – skisser og studier*, Oslo, 1983, p. 105.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted by Schreiner, K.E., in “Minner fra Ekely”, *Edvard Munch som vi kjente ham; Vennene forteller*, 1946, p. 21, in Iris Mueller-Westermann, *Edvard Munch; die Selbstbildnisse*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hamburg, 1997, p. 196, note 6.

<sup>53</sup> J. B. Smith, “Strindberg’s Visual Imagination”, *Apollo*, October 1970, p. 290.

death that was an important impulse behind his art. It caused Munch's search for what is hidden beyond death, beyond the visible world, beyond concrete existence.

Disease that leads to death has had its importance for the course of Munch's art and life. Moreover, it seems that Munch felt that disease was refining his artistic sensibility: "Er det ikke rart, ..., idag er jeg så slap og dårlig at jeg nesten ikke kan stå på benene – da er jeg så sensibel at jeg kan lage de fineste ting."<sup>54</sup>

Munch considered disease essential for his artistic creativity: "Jeg har hatt ganske meget sykdom å trekkes med, og jeg har hatt min nervøsitet. Men disse svakheter vil jeg beholde, de er jo en del av mig selv. Når noen har sagt at de vil helbrede min nervøsitet, har jeg svart at det er der ikke tale om. Det vilde være som å amputere noe på mig. Nei, den vil jeg beholde. Den gir mig evnen til å opfatte og forstå ting som jeg ellers ikke kunde trenge inn i. Jeg vil ikke ha sykdommen vekk, hvor meget skylder jeg ikke sykdommen i min kunst?"<sup>55</sup>

Proximity to death has been determinant for the orientation of Munch's art and served as catalyst for Munch's search for an understanding of life, death and the hereafter – in whatever form that may occur.

On a personal level - and Munch's art was personal - that is the reason why Munch chose to deal with metaphysical topics in his art.

### III - How did Munch paint that which cannot be seen?

"Det at en i maleriet kan gi uttrykk for det uutsigelige – det undefinerbare – det er det det gjelder – ikke sant?"<sup>56</sup>

"Naturen er ikke alene det for øyet synlige – den er også sjelens indre bilder – bilder på øyets bakside."<sup>57</sup>

#### - Feelings and the Spirit

##### 1) Hair.

Munch used long woman hair to convey feelings of connection, pain of separation or woman's power over the man.

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<sup>54</sup> Edvard Munch, in Erik Pedersen, "Det siste arbeide", *Kunst og Kultur*, 29, 1946, p. 201.

<sup>55</sup> In N. Rygg, "Noen timer med Edvard Munch", *Kunst og Kultur*, 29, 1946, pp. 179-180.

<sup>56</sup> Edvard Munch, in Inger Alver Gløersen, *Den Munch jeg møtte*, Oslo, Gyldendal, 1964, p. 100.

<sup>57</sup> Edvard Munch, in Johan H. Langaard and Reidar Revold, *Edvard Munch; Aula-dekorasjonene; et Billedverk*, Oslo, Stenersen, 1960, p. 18.

In *Separation (Løsrivelse)*, 1893<sup>58</sup> her hair simply serves as physical connection between man and woman. She looks towards the sea and the moon, he is the one ignored and left behind. Writing in the third person singular, Munch describes the feelings of pain caused by separation: "... selv da hun er forsvundet over havet føler han / hvordan enkelte fine tråde sidder fast i hans hjerte / - det bløder – og smerter som et evigt åbent sår."<sup>59</sup> Therefore: threads ("tråde") "of feeling", connection, are represented in the painting through threads of hair.

On the contrary, in *Attraction II (Tiltrekning II)*, 1896,<sup>60</sup> the hair serves to show the power of woman over the man caught in her hair: "Da vi stod mot hverandre / og dine øine så ind i mine øine / Da følte jeg som usynlige traade / gikk fra dine øine ind i mine øine / og bandt vore hjerter sammen".<sup>61</sup> Since it would have been quite weird to show some threads connecting the two through the eyes, Munch used the hair as connecting link. Ingeniously - since the hair can be easier accepted as connecting the two, while at the same time it symbolises her power of attraction over him.

*Vampire (Vampyr)*, 1893<sup>62</sup> was exhibited in Berlin under the title *Liebe und Schmerz*. In Paris it was known as *Cheveux rouges*.<sup>63</sup> The woman has here the dominant position above the man. Her red hair surrounds the man – who seems to be helpless, entirely in her power - the power of her red hair. With the occasion of Munch's exhibition at Siegfried Bing in Paris, August Strindberg wrote a review of it in *La Revue blanche* on June 1, 1896. About *Vampire* he wrote: "*Cheveux rouge*. – Pluie d'or qui tombe sur le malheureux a genoux devant son pire moi implorant la grace d'etre acheve a coups d'epingle. Cordes dorees qui lient a la terre et aux souffrances. Pluie de sang versee en torrent sur l'insense qui cherche le malheur, le divin malheur d'etre aime, c'est dire d'aimer."<sup>64</sup>

Even though it was Strindberg and not Munch who wrote about the red hair as a "rain of blood" – *pluie de sang* – and as "golden cords connecting to earth and sufferings" – *Cordes dorees qui lient a la terre et aux souffrances* – it may safely

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<sup>58</sup> Reproduced in Arne Eggum, *Edvard Munch; Livsfrisen fra maleri til grafikk*, Oslo, 1990, p. 86.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>60</sup> Lithograph, reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>62</sup> Reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>63</sup> *Munch et la France*, exhibition catalogue, Paris and Oslo, 1991, p. 194.

<sup>64</sup> In *ibid.*, p. 201.

be assumed that Munch did not disagree to these implied comparisons: otherwise he would have said so.

*Salome*, 1903<sup>65</sup> clearly shows Munch's own emblematic self-portrait head hanging in her hair. Thus her dominating position is presented under the guise of the metaphor of the title: Salome, the ruthless woman who had the head of John the Baptist served her on a platter in response to her unrequited love (see also Oscar Wilde's play with the same title). On a personal level the picture presents the relationship between Munch and the violinist Eva Mudocci - a complicated relationship that was supposedly based upon the friendship between the two. In fact, it shows the power of woman's beauty – represented by her hair – as being the cause of man's loss of personal freedom. It cannot be said that Munch's own position was very different from that of August Strindberg as far as women are concerned.

## 2) Shadows.

Munch's use of shadows for expressing feelings is extensively treated by Erik Mørstad in his article "Edvard Munchs bruk av slagskygger".<sup>66</sup>

## 3) Smoke.

In *Self-Portrait with Cigarette (Selvportrett med sigarett)*, 1895<sup>67</sup> the smoke originates in the cigarette and extends around the picture and the figure such as to become a kind of aura ( see the discussion of auras further on in this thesis). One of the functions of the aura was to indicate the – supposed – feelings of the person it surrounds. In this case, the blue smoke aura accentuates the figure's visionary look, a displacement in time and place, as if the artist is actually elsewhere, in a remote – spiritual –realm. It has been shown that this self-portrait is supposed to present the painter as artist – a spiritual being, remote from his immediate surroundings.

## 4) Blood.

"Schreibe mit Blut; und du wirst erfahren dass Blut Geist ist"<sup>68</sup>

Zarathustra's equating blood with Spirit was a commonplace in Munch's milieu in Berlin. With Munch it resulted in equating art with blood (i.e., suffering), while art

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<sup>65</sup> Lithograph reproduced in Ragna Stang, *Mennesket og kunstneren Edvard Munch*, Copenhagen, 1978, p. 178.

<sup>66</sup> In *Kunst og Kultur*, 2, 2003, pp. 66 – 97.

<sup>67</sup> Reproduced in Reinhold Heller, *Munch; his Life and Work*, London, 1984, p. 145.

<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche's Zarathustra, in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Stuttgart, 1975, p. 41, quoted in Iris Mueller – Westermann, *Edvard Munch; die Selbstbildnisse*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hamburg, 1997, p. 53.



was seen as having a spiritual origin. Therefore Munch wrote: “Jeg tror ikke på den kunst som ikke er tvungen sig frem ved menneskets trang til at åbne sit hjerte / Al kunst litteratur som musik må være frembragt med ens hjerteblod / Kunsten er ens hjerteblod”<sup>69</sup>

*The Flower of Pain (Smertens blomst)*,<sup>70</sup> (fig. 69) shows the artist bleeding. From this blood that falls on the ground, grows a flower – of art and pain. The metaphor of artistic creation as originating in the artist’s suffering fits entirely Munch’s art view: the art is brought forth with/by one’s heart blood (“[kunsten] ...må være frembragt med ens hjerteblod”).

- Jugendstil / Art nouveau

In a letter that Edvard Munch wrote to his friend the composer Frederick Delius, Munch reminds Delius how they once talked about the “wonderful waves which connect the whole world and the whole stellar system with us – “<sup>71</sup>

In writing about the process of artistic creation of his *Sick Girl*, Munch once again wrote about the wavy lines: “ Der kom frem bølgelinier i billedet ... Disse bølgelinier benyttede jeg ofte senere ... ” (see above).

Indeed, Munch made much use of “wavy lines” in his art, lines that clearly can be recognised as Jugendstil (Art Nouveau) type of lines. Munch was in contact with Siegfried Bing’s *La Maison de l’Art Nouveau* in Paris, where he also exhibited in 1896 (see above). This firm, as its name indicates, was in the forefront of propagating this style. Connected with Bing’s gallery was also Henri van de Velde, the Belgian Art Nouveau architect.

Henri van de Velde and Munch knew each other quite well, as can be seen from a letter that the architect wrote to Herbert Esche’s wife: “ Munch est un peintre de premier ordre ... . Je le connais bien; ... . ”<sup>72</sup>

In Munch’s art the Jugendstil/Art Nouveau lines appear in the rendition of women’s flowing hair (see above), in such paintings as *The Scream*, in his graphic works, and in many more pictures. With Munch Art Nouveau was more than just a fashionable style: in his paintings, Art Nouveau expresses content. When he painted

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<sup>69</sup> N 29.

<sup>70</sup> T 2451.

<sup>71</sup> In Lionel Carley, *Delius; A Life in Letters*, London, Scolar Press, 1983, letter no. 528.

<sup>72</sup> In Reinhold A Heller, ”Strømpefabrikanten, van de Velde og Edvard Munch”, *Kunst og Kultur*, 51, Oslo 1968, p. 90.

women's hair he showed with the help of these lines connection and (power) relationships between the different characters involved. When he painted *The Scream* the wavy lines made visible sound waves. Whether he painted smoke or the abstract notion of emotion expressed through aura (*Lovers in waves, The Kiss, Madonna*) the same type of lines were used.

Moreover, when considering the notion of monism (see the chapter on monism), Ernst Haeckel's theory of vibration must be taken into account – and what better way of making visible the invisible vibrations than Jugendstil wavy lines? Haeckel writes about the existence of "...one common original force; ... This fundamental force is generally conceived as a vibratory motion of the smallest particles of matter – a vibration of atoms."<sup>73</sup> Munch both wrote about this topic as well as painted it; moreover, he connected synaesthesia's light and sound vibrations with each other as well as with the concept of monism - however this is too extensive a matter to be treated in this introduction.

It is obvious that Munch used Jugendstil/Art Nouveau to express content rather than for sheer decorative purposes. Thus his art is a clear instance of style expressing iconography in itself.

### **Was Munch Christian?**

When discussing Munch's metaphysical *Weltanschauung* a question has arisen sometimes: was Munch a Christian?

Munch grew up in a religious home. That religion was Christian, Lutheran, pietistic. The great majority of art historians who wrote about the art of Edvard Munch agree that Munch himself was not of Christian persuasion. Moreover, some – like Einar Petterson – see his art as qualitatively diminished because of this very reason (cf. further on in this thesis).

Others, like Frank Høifødt, on the contrary, see "en positiv identifikasjon med kristendommen som [går som] en rød tråd gjennom Munchs kunst og nedtegnelser."<sup>74</sup> One of Høifødt's main arguments is a notice Munch wrote on June 8, 1934:

"Min trosbekjennelse" – 8 juni 1934:

"Jeg bøier mig for noget man

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<sup>73</sup> Ernst Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe*, translated by Joseph McCabe, London, 1925, p. 177.

<sup>74</sup> Frank Høifødt, *Kvinnen, kunsten, korset; Edvard Munch anno 1900*, Dr. dissertation, University of Oslo, 1995, p. 91. Nevertheless, in his "Edvard Munchs *Stoffveksling* – Frisens 'beltespenne', *Kunst og Kultur*, 3,2001,84, p. 129, Høifødt writes about Munch's monistic world view.

om man vil kan kalde gud –  
Jeg finder Kristi lære den sjønneste  
og Kristi person står  
det gudommelige nær –  
om man vil bruge dette udtryk”<sup>75</sup>

To affirm that Munch was Christian because of his polite comment on the estetical value of this religion and Christ’s relative closeness to God, however, is somewhat exaggerated. Munch did not have a precise conception of God: for him God was “...noget man om man vil kan kalde gud - ....” That Munch wrote that Christ was close to the divine does not mean that he believed that Christ was “the Son of God”. Others – saints, mystics, etc. - could be considered “close to God/the divine” as well. Finally, one may consider the possibility that a certain amount of pressure was applied upon Munch, the famous painter (he wrote this statement in 1934, when he certainly was well known and admired), in order to make him confess his supposed Christianity.

A reason for wanting Munch to appear Christian can be understood when reading Paul Nome’s commentary: “ Når han (i.e. Munch) kom inn på troen og sitt syn på livet og døden, universet og Gud, var det noe som ga gjenklang i min egen religiøse erfaringsverden, som gjorde at jeg fikk lyst til å undersøke dette nærmere... . Som teolog må jeg ... .”<sup>76</sup> As a theologian, Paul Nome certainly would like to have Munch appear as Christian. Nome admits himself that “...teologen leter naturlig nok mest etter Gud og de bibelske motiver i Munchs kunst.”<sup>77</sup>

Nome himself quotes Munch as saying that ” hvor han (i.e. Munch’s father) led for min skyld for mit liv om nätterne fordi jeg kunne ikke dele hans tro.”<sup>78</sup> Therefore, Munch himself wrote that he did not share his father’s Christian faith, yet Nome is still convinced that Munch was Christian.

Twice in his dissertation does Nome cite Munch with the same quotation: “ De hjemme min tante min bror og mine søstre tror at døden blot er en søvn – at min fader ser og hører at han i herlighet og glæde ferdes der oppe. At de skal træffe ham igjen om en tid.”<sup>79</sup> And twice does Nome omit the sentence that comes right afterwards: ”Jeg

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<sup>75</sup> T 2744, in *Kvinnen, kunsten, korset...*, p. 26.

<sup>76</sup> Underlining mine. In Paul Nome, *Kunst som ”Krystallisasjon”*; *En studie i Edvard Munchs notater om hans tro, livssyn og kunstforståelse, relatert til hans bilder*, theology dissertation, University of Oslo, Oslo, 2000, pp. 4-5.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>78</sup> Underlining mine. In T 2770, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>79</sup> N 18, in *ibid.*, p. 74 and p. 223, note 646.

kan ikke andet end at lade min sorg løbe ud i den dagen som grur og dagen som skumrer.”<sup>80</sup> This sentence implies that, unlike his family, Munch did not, could not, believe the same as his aunt, brother and sisters – namely that they all shall meet again in Heaven, and so on... . (Especially Munch’s aunt was very religious, yet Munch “ kunne ... ikke komme tanten virkelig i møte på det området som tross alt betydde mest for henne: religionen.”<sup>81</sup>)

In spite of his lack of Christian faith at an adult age, Munch did use Christian imagery in his art.

- Christian imagery in Munch’s art

Numerous are the instances when Munch used Biblical and/or specifically Christian imagery in his art. This Christian imagery, however, was used metaphorically rather than in order to express Christian ideas in themselves. Moreover, sometimes Biblical – but not necessarily Christian – imagery was used, again, in order to express something else.

Carla Lathe has shown that in Munch’s circle at *Zum schwarzen Ferkel* in Berlin the use of Biblical imagery was both common and extensive: “ The Bible offered a standard lyrical approach to the language of mysticism and suggestive symbolism. It was Nietzsche ... who revived this style. Many writers applied the idiom of the Old Testament ... Strindberg and Hamsun among them, and Przybyszewski ... .

When dealing with the suffering of the modern individual it seemed that the vocabulary of religion was the surest way of evoking response... .”<sup>82</sup>

In *The Crucified (Golgotha)* 1900,<sup>83</sup> the cross rises in the midst of an anonymous mob. In the foreground, however, there are some six-seven figures that can be identified. Among them, in front of the cross, there is a bearded and moustachioed figure of an old man who stares vacantly out of the picture. This figure has been identified as portraying Munch’s deeply religious father. His devout Christian belief is obviously rendered not only through the solemn and almost other-worldly glance ( which, moreover, strongly contrasts with that of the laughing figures surrounding

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<sup>80</sup> N 18.

<sup>81</sup> Atle Næss, *Munch; En biografi*, Gyldendal, 2004, p. 492.

<sup>82</sup> Carla Lathe, *The group Zum schwarzen Ferkel: a study in early modernism*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of East Anglia, 1972, p. 207.

<sup>83</sup> Reproduced in Reinhold Heller, *Munch; his Life and Work*, London, 1984, p. 172.

him), but also from his position with respect to that of the cross: due to space manipulation, the cross seems, so to speak, to emerge right out of his head.

To the right there is the profile representation of young Edvard himself. He ignores the cross as if to show that he does not believe in it and what it represents. Instead, he looks at the father figure under the cross with a conciliating attitude. “Hvor han led for min skyld, for mit liv – om nætterne – fordi jeg ikke kunde dele hans tro.”<sup>84</sup> Munch loved his father in spite of the difference of opinions between them – and it is this father – son troubled relationship that is the main topic of the painting. The Crucified has Munch’s representative features as well, to show the artist’s suffering caused by this situation.

Gustav Schiefler wrote that Munch’s father “plaget barna med sin sterke religiøsitet.” Atle Næss continues: ” Det var i og for seg riktig, sier Munch, men han ber likevel vennen mildne den formuleringen.”<sup>85</sup>

Around the turn of the century Munch made a series of drawings and watercolours entitled *The Empty Cross (Det tome kors)*, 1898 (1901?).<sup>86</sup> The title in itself is bearing the message of lack of Christian faith. As the title declares, the cross is presented remotely in the background and no Christ is seen on it. In the foreground, echoing the position of the father figure in *Golgotha* (but, due to the great distance, unrelated to the cross) can be seen the standard representation of Munch himself. Not only does he ignore the cross, he seems a stranger to his surroundings as well. At the right there is a marsh in which some people are drowning; at the left there is an allusion to Munch’s picture entitled *Young man and whore (Ung mann og hore)*, 1895. Dissipated couples and desolation are shown all around. Above, a red sun shines apocalyptically. The artist’s loneliness contrasts with his background. This picture has been interpreted as showing Munch’s break with his friends, whom he no longer trusted, and his resulting loneliness.<sup>87</sup> About this picture Munch wrote: “It was me here. A blood-red sun shines over the whole scene, and the cross is empty”.<sup>88</sup>

In *The empty Cross*, T 2547 54, the artist appears dressed up in a monk’s habit, thus stressing the autobiographical content of the picture through the pun on his family

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<sup>84</sup> T 2770, St. Cloud, 4.2.1890, in Iris Mueller-Westermann, *Edvard Munch; die Selbstbildnisse*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hamburg, 1997, p. 127, note 73.

<sup>85</sup> Atle Næss, *Munch; en biografi*, Gyldendal, 2004, p. 337.

<sup>86</sup> One of them is reproduced in Heller, op.cit., p. 153. Unlike Heller, Ragna Stang, *Mennesket og kunstneren Edvard Munch*, Copenhagen, 1978, p. 156, dates this watercolour to 1901.

<sup>87</sup> Ragna Stang, ”The aging Munch: new creative power”, in *Edvard Munch; Symbols and Images*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1978, p. 78.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid..

name. He wrote: “In the midst of the chaos there stands a Munch [i.e. a monk] and stares helpless and with a child’s frightened eyes at all this, and says: Why? Why?”<sup>89</sup>

Traces of Christian and/or Biblical metaphors are numerous in Munch’s art. They extend from titles (*Ashes [Aske]* was originally called *Adam and Eve after the original Sin [Adam og Eva etter syndefallet]*<sup>90</sup>, *Salome, Madonna*, a.s.o.), to typical Christian representations bearing other titles (*Metabolism* is presenting the couple of Adam and Eve, with a monist intent – see further on in this thesis), to hidden Christian imagery in order to show something else (in *The Flower of Pain/Art* the blood streams out from a Christ-like wound, to allude to the suffering of the artist-creator as paralleling that of Christ), and so on. Some of this type of imagery caused Paul Nome to understand Munch’s art as prominently Christian, since he was not aware of the metaphorical content of these pictures.

- Eclectic metaphysical ideas influencing Munch’s art

If Munch was not Christian it does not mean that he was atheist. If he did not believe in a Christian afterlife, he did believe in a “hemmelig energi som fortsætter...”.<sup>91</sup> He connected this belief with his original theory of crystallisation<sup>92</sup> – see also further on in this thesis. “Man må tro på udødelighet” wrote Munch.<sup>93</sup> The immortality he believed in was monist rather than Christian.

He observed that there was a sacred feeling in contemporary art and life – both his and others: “man sier før var der Religion i kunsten. Det er altid Religion blandt menneskene”<sup>94</sup>. Since the feeling of a spiritual realm always existed, it is normal that it was reflected in art.

Also Munch’s contemporaries recognised in Munch’s art and personality a spiritual inclination. Karl Scheffler (1869-1951), editor of *Kunst og Kultur* describes Munch as a “spiritual leader”.<sup>95</sup> Curt Glaser designates Munch as a “spiritual hero”.<sup>96</sup> Franz

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<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Heller, “Edvard Munch’s `Night`, the Aesthetics of decadence, and the content of Biography”, *Arts Magazine*, October 1978, p. 101.

<sup>90</sup> Frank Høifødt, “Kvinnen – Kjærlighet og død – Dommedag”, in *Edvard Munchs livsfrise; en rekonstruksjon av utstillingen hos Blomqvist 1918*, exhibition catalogue, Munch museum, Oslo, 2002, p. 103.

<sup>91</sup> Christian Gierløff, “Munch selv”, *Kunst og Kultur*, IV, 1914, p. 112.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid..

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in *Smertens blomster; Fin de siecle – ideer i Munchs kunst*, Munch museum exhibition catalogue, Oslo, 1999-2000, n.p. no..

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Lathe, op.cit., p. 344.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Bessie Rainsford (Tina) Yarborough, *Exhibition Strategies and Wartime Politics in the art and career of Edvard Munch, 1914-1921*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1995, p. 279.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

Servaes wrote that Munch's "artistic goal seems to be a pictorial phenomenology of the soul".<sup>97</sup> Munch's friend Stanislaw Przybyszewski coined Munch's art "psychic naturalism" and explained that Munch was a "naturalist of the phenomena of soul".<sup>98</sup> These type of statements are often encountered in connection with Munch and his art. Therefore a search for metaphysical content in his art is both legitimate and desirable.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, this is an extensive subject matter and as such, impossible to elucidate entirely within the framework of the present thesis. As a consequence, only two metaphysical aspects of Munch's art have been dealt with here: monism and synaesthesia.

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<sup>97</sup> In Øivind Storm Bjerke, *Edvard Munch-Harald Sohlberg; Landscapes of the Mind*, National Academy of Design, New York, 1995, p. 35.

<sup>98</sup> *The Spiritual in Art; Abstract Painting 1890 – 1985*, exhibition catalogue, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986, p. 33.

<sup>99</sup> I hope to be able to continue my research of this subject at a later date.

## Monism

”Jeg gikk deroppe på høiden og nød den bløde  
luft og solen -  
Solen varmede og kun af og til *noen*  
*kjølige pust – som fra en gravkjælder,*  
det dampede af den fugtige jord – det lugted  
af råddent løv – og hvor stille det var omkring  
meg – og dog følte jeg hvor det gjærede og  
levede – i denne dampende jord med det rådnende løv –  
i disse nøgne kviste – det skulde snart igjen spire og  
leve... og solen skulde skinne på de grønne blade og  
blomsterne og vinden skulde bøie dem i ... den lumre sommer  
Jeg følte det som en vellyst at skulde  
gå over - *forenes med [...] bli*  
*denne jord der alltid alltid gjærede*  
*alltid beskinnes af solen*  
*[...]*  
*og levede – levede –*  
*Jeg skulde blive et med den – og der skulde*  
*Voxe op af mit rådnende legeme planter og trær*  
*... og planter og blomster*  
*og solen skulde varme dem og jeg skulde være i*  
*den og intet skulde forgå det er evigheden”<sup>100</sup>*

Edvard Munch’s monism is here expressed in a direct<sup>101</sup> and poetical manner, through a metaphorically Biblical style.<sup>102</sup> This allusion to the Bible – in style if not in content – stresses the importance that Munch attributed to these ideas. They are monist in content, personal in attitude and far from making any scholastic claim to philosophical precision. Moreover, the monistic view expressed here seems to replace any potential Biblical/Christian belief.

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<sup>100</sup> Edvard Munch, T 365 B, p.1. Cursive printing mine. Underlining mine, to show a fragment crossed out by Munch himself but which is to be seen as essential to the understanding of his personal involvement with, and view of, monism.

<sup>101</sup> ”Jeg skulde blive et med den” i.e. with the earth that fermented and lived (“...gjærede... og levede...”). Generally Munch had a distinctively close approach to his art, be it written or plastic. Here is to be noticed a mode of obvious sadness expressed through the allusion to a grave (“...noen kjølige pust – som fra en gravkjælder...”) and through the uttered wish that he himself passed away as well (“Jeg følte det som en vellyst at skulde gå over – forenes med... denne jord...”).

<sup>102</sup> The Biblical style can be recognised here both semantically in the attempt to describe Eternity (“...det er evigheten”), as well as in the tone of the whole passage rendered, for example, through such details as the typical repetition of the conjunction “and”: “...det skulde...spire ... og solen skulde skinne... og vinden skulde bøie dem ... og der skulde voxer op af mit rådnende legeme planter...og solen skulde varme dem og jeg skulde være i den og intet skulde forgå...” (underlining mine).



Carla Lathe was among the first to point out Munch`s interest in monism.<sup>103</sup> He shared this interest with Knut Hamsun,<sup>104</sup> August Strindberg,<sup>105</sup> Max Dauthendey,<sup>106</sup> and other members of the group *Zum Schwarzen Ferkel*.<sup>107</sup>

Atle Næss pointed out that Strindberg`s monism derived from that of Ernst Haeckel.<sup>108</sup> Gunnar Sørensen<sup>109</sup> however, connects the vitalist concept – to whose influence he attributes some of Munch`s paintings – with the monism of Gottfried Leibnitz: “...til...begrepet [vitalisme]...anes forbindelser tilbake til 1700-tallets forestillinger om monisme, og ikke minst til Gottfried W. Leibnitz` (1646 – 1716) monadbegrep. I alle henseender gjaldt det forestillinger om noe enhetlig og udelelig, noe i retning av åndelige krefter som både var opphavet til alt og opprettholder av det.” In this context he presents Munch`s *Badende piker*, 1897 – 1901 (catalogue no. 22), p. 21 and his *Badende gutter*, 1897 – 1901 (catalogue no. 21), p. 22.

Patricia Gray Berman, on the other hand, connects the doctrine of vitalism with that of Ernst Haeckel`s monism.<sup>110</sup> Likewise Timo Huusko,<sup>111</sup> who moreover presents a “nietzscheansk – monistisk treenighet mellom lys, kjød og jord”.<sup>112</sup>

Like Carla Lathe<sup>113</sup> et al., Frank Høifødt connects the monism within Munch`s milieu with that of Ernst Haeckel.<sup>114</sup>

It seems obvious that:

- 1) A major aspect of Munch`s *Weltanschauung* is provided by the concept of monism (see also the further discussion in this thesis).
- 2) Munch shared this concept with many of his friends that were part of the group *Zum Schwarzen Ferkel* in Berlin.

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<sup>103</sup> Carla Anna Lathe, *The Group Zum Schwarzen Ferkel; A Study in Early Modernism*, Ph.D dissertation, University of East Anglia, Great Britain, 1972, p. 339.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p.125.

<sup>105</sup> ”Jeg gjør mig till ett lik, begravet under røtterna av ett tred, som skjuter upp och suger sin nering ur de i uppløsning stadda lemmingarna”, August Strindberg, *Inferno*, quoted in Lathe, op.cit., p. 261. This imagery is simmilar to Munch`s in the above quoted fragment and is echoed by many of Munch`s drawings and by some of his paintings as well.

<sup>106</sup> Lathe, op. cit., p.338.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p.377.

<sup>9</sup>*Munch; En biografi*, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2004, pp. 137 – 138.

<sup>109</sup> ”Vitalismens år” in *Livskraft; Vitalismen som kunstnerisk impuls 1900 – 1930*, exhibition catalogue, Munch museum, Oslo, 2006, p. 14.

<sup>110</sup> *Monumentality and historicism in Edvard Munch`s University of Oslo Festival Hall paintings*, Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1989, p. 149.

<sup>111</sup> ”I spenningsfeltet mellom kunst og kjød; Edvard Munch, *Badende menn og Finland*”, in *Munch og Warnemunde 1907 – 1908*, exhibition catalogue, Munch museum, 1999, p. 113

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>113</sup> Lathe,op.cit., p.338

<sup>114</sup> ”Edvard Munchs Stoffveksling – Frisens `beltespenne””, in *Kunst og Kultur* nr.3, 2001, årgang 84, p. 129.

- 3) Within this milieu monism was presented through the intermediary of Ernst Haeckel.
- 4) As with Strindberg, so with Munch, monism was presented in a personal and poetic manner.

On the other hand, none of the authors/art historians mentioned above provides a discussion of monism, as it was perceived within Munch`s milieu. This monism has been postulated as deriving from Leibnitz ( Gunnar Sørensen) and related to Nietzsche<sup>115</sup> (Timo Huusko), and vitalism<sup>116</sup>(Patricia Berman and Gunnar Sørensen).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the connection between vitalism, Nietzsche`s philosophy and monism. That it was Leibnitz`s monism that was influential within this milieu is doubtful, however, not only because of the monad theory, that does not seem to have been mentioned within this milieu, but also because it was the contemporary Haeckel (1834 – 1919) rather than Leibnitz, that was popular in Munch`s Berlin circle.<sup>117</sup>

If 17<sup>th</sup> c. monism was present at all with these 19<sup>th</sup> c. artists it must have been, indirectly, that of Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677), who did influence Ernst Haeckel.<sup>118</sup> In addition was Spinoza, like Haeckel,<sup>119</sup> a pantheist – and pantheism is a trait to be encountered in many of Edvard Munch`s paintings and drawings.

### **The concept of monism as it was perceived within Munch`s milieu in Germany**

Monism - from the Greek word *monos*, meaning single – is a philosophical doctrine that has precursors in many systems of thought belonging to both Eastern and Western religions. It assumes the existence of one, single, underlying principle. The term itself was first used by the German philosopher Christian Wolff (1679 – 1754). Even though monism was not used during his lifetime in connection with Baruch Spinoza, he is now considered one of its most influential representatives in European philosophy.<sup>120</sup> His monism (called the *dual-aspect theory*) maintains that both the mental and the physical are two distinct modes of one single substance, and this single substance is actually God.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, he contended

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<sup>115</sup> Cf. discussion of this topic elsewhere in this thesis.

<sup>116</sup> Same as above.

<sup>117</sup> Shelley Wood Cordulack, *Edvard Munch`s “Frieze of Life” in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> c. physiology*, Ph.D dissertation, U. of Illinois at Urbana – Champaign, USA, 1996, p. 26.

<sup>118</sup> David H. DeGrood, *Haeckel`s theory of the unity of nature; a monograph in the history of philosophy*, Amsterdam, 1982, p. 15.

<sup>119</sup> For the pantheism of Haeckel see *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>120</sup> <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txn/monism.htm>

<sup>121</sup> The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Second edition, 1999, p. 686.

that “God” and “Nature” (*Deus sive Natura*, i.e. “God or Nature”)<sup>122</sup> were two terms referring to the same reality, the single substance.<sup>123</sup>

As mentioned above, Ernst Haeckel was influenced by Spinoza. In his *Die Weltraetsel* (*The Riddle of the Universe*), 1899, he writes: “The first thinker to introduce the purely monistic conception of substance into science and appreciate its profound importance was the great philosopher Baruch Spinoza... . In his stately pantheistic system the notion of the *world* (the universe, or the cosmos) is identical with the all-pervading notion of *God*; it is at one and the same time the purest and most rational *monism* and the clearest and most abstract *monotheism*.”<sup>124</sup>

Haeckel studied in Jena, where he also subsequently taught.<sup>125</sup> It was in Jena that he founded the *Monistic League* which had as its main goal to promote his ideas.<sup>126</sup> (Munch had many ties with the community of the Jena university: for example, he knew Eberhard Grisebach, who belonged to the philosophy department<sup>127</sup> of that university, and he painted in 1906 a portrait of the physics professor Felix Auerbach, of the same university<sup>128</sup>). Haeckel’s monistic philosophy asserts the fundamental unity of organic and inorganic nature, and, like Spinoza, he argues for a form of pantheism.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, Haeckel writes about the “material basis of the soul..., the `soul-substance`, in the monistic sense..., the `soul` [being] merely a physiological abstraction.”<sup>130</sup> Like Spinoza, he argues that “... matter (space-filling substance) and energy (moving force) are but two inseparable attributes of the one underlying substance.”<sup>131</sup> Unlike Leibnitz and his *monads*, Haeckel defines the “smallest particles of matter” as “atoms”<sup>132</sup>, or “atoms with souls”<sup>133</sup>.

Not only does Haeckel argue for the basic unity of organic and inorganic matter, but he also presents an interchange between them, which he defines as “metabolism”: “Once modern physics had established the law of substance as far as the simpler relations of inorganic bodies are concerned, physiology...proved its application to the entire province of the organic world.

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<sup>122</sup> From here - his pantheism.

<sup>123</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baruch\\_Spinoza](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baruch_Spinoza)

<sup>124</sup> Ernst Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe*, translated by Joseph McCabe, London (Watts and Co.), 1925, p. 176.

<sup>125</sup> <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/history/haeckel.html>

<sup>126</sup> Berman, *op.cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>128</sup> *Munch und Deutschland*, exhibition catalogue, 1995, pp. 95 and 169. Cf. also Volker Wahl, *Jena als kunst-Stadt 1900 – 1933*, Leipzig 1988, p.198, fig.23.

<sup>129</sup> The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, p.360.

<sup>130</sup> *The Riddle of the Universe*, pp. 88 – 89.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

It showed that all the vital activities of the organism – without exception – are based on a constant `reciprocity of force` and a correlative change of material, or metabolism<sup>134</sup> (underlining mine), just as much as the simplest processes in `lifeless` bodies. Not only the growth and the nutrition of plants and animals, but even their functions of sensation and movement, their sense-action and psychic life, depend on the conversion of potential into kinetic energy, and *vice versa*. This supreme law dominates also those elaborate performances of the nervous system which we call, in the higher animals and man, `the action of the mind`.”<sup>135</sup>

In the discussion above an attempt was made to clarify the concept of monism - as it is mentioned in (some) previously published Munch literature – and possibly render a more precise definition of it as it was perceived within Munch`s milieu in Jena and Berlin. At the same time – and as demonstrated by Munch`s quotation at the beginning of this chapter – one must realise that the artist Munch, like the playwright Strindberg, et al., were not concerned with the precise details of the concept of monism, seen from a professionally philosophical point of view. For Munch the notion of monism provided an alternative to the traditional Christian view of life and immortality.

### **Monism in Munch`s Art**

The monistic concept of transformation from one aspect of substance to another appears in Munch`s art in many – often interrelated - variations.

#### **I. Death – Life – Love**

When in Paris in 1896, Munch was asked to illustrate Charles Baudelaire`s *The Flowers of Evil (Les Fleurs du Mal)*. The project was interrupted, however, due to the death of the editor. Munch had time to illustrate only two of the poems: *A Carrion (Une Charogne)*, and *The Gladly Dead (Le Mort Joyeux)*.

Arne Eggum<sup>136</sup> writes that Munch presents here a life philosophy whereby life and death are regarded as connecting points in a perpetual metamorphosis. He does not connect this metamorphosis with the concept of monism, yet it is the underlying monistic idea of one single substance that has resulted in Munch`s drawings of transformation.

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<sup>134</sup> Cf. the discussion of Munch`s painting called *Metabolism (Stoffveksling)*, as well as some of his many other works that deal with the same theme, further on in this chapter.

<sup>135</sup> Haeckel, op.cit., p. 190.

<sup>136</sup> *Edvard Munch; malerier – skisser og studier*, Oslo (J.M. Stenersen), 1983, p. 150: ”Munchs utkast formidler en organisk livsfilosofi hvor kjærlighet og død sees som ledd i en evig metamorfose, ... ” (English edition: *Edvard Munch; Paintings, sketches, and studies*, translated from the Norwegian by Ragnar Christophersen, Oslo, 1984, pp. 150-151: “Munch`s design conveys an organic philosophy of life in which love and death are regarded as stages in an eternal process of metamorphosis, ... .”)

Gøsta Svenæus<sup>137</sup> has identified the stanza of Baudelaire's poem *Une charogne*, that served as immediate source for Munch's drawing (fig. 1): "Les jambes en l'air, comme une femme lubrique, / Brulante et suant les poisons, / Ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique/ Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons." Actually Munch made use only of the first line of this stanza to portray the dead woman as "lascivious" (lubrique), with legs up in the air "les jambes en l'air"; beyond this stanza Munch's drawing and Baudelaire's poem by and large part ways. Baudelaire's poem does not mention any tree at all, yet with Munch a tree appears as deriving from the corpse. The idea of death being transformed into life is Munch's own. Neither is any kiss present in Baudelaire's poem, yet with Munch the couple by the side of the path<sup>138</sup> does kiss. Munch shows here that death is a source of life (the tree) and love (the kissing couple). (One could further draw the logical conclusion that the couple's love will result in new life that will, of course, end up in death... .)

In the exhibition catalogue *Munch et la France*<sup>139</sup> this drawing is entitled "The Kiss" (*Le Baiser*), to show – probably - that this is Munch's contribution, since Baudelaire does not mention any kiss at all in his poem (cf. appendix A). Moreover, in the same catalogue<sup>140</sup> another drawing appears, entitled "A Carrion" (*Une charogne*). This drawing (fig. 2) presents the couple engaged in even more of a passionate kiss than the one that appears in fig. 1. This drawing, on which Munch himself wrote the title in French, departs from Baudelaire's description of the corpse of a lascivious woman: here only a skull is alluding to the corpse – which is absent from the drawing. On the other hand there are present here the flies mentioned by Baudelaire ("Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride,...") (underlining mine). These flies do not "hum on the rotting belly" but form a partial decorative frame to the skull in the ground. The couple seems to rise out of the ground level with only their torsos actually visible: they ( i.e. Love) literally rise(s) out of death. Vegetation appears here both over and under the ground level, that is, moreover, only slightly suggested by the border that separates the dark from the lighter area above the skull. The distinction between the realms of life/love and death is not clearly rendered, as if to suggest their close connection, their sameness of substance.

<sup>137</sup> "Strindberg och Munch i Inferno", in *Kunst og Kultur*, Oslo, 1967, p. 2,

<sup>138</sup> With respect to location, however, Munch does follow Baudelaire: the couple passed by a path, where they saw the corpse: " Au detour d'un sentier ..." (underlining mine).

<sup>139</sup> Paris, 1991, p. 327, cat. no. 100.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., cat. no. 101.

Unlike in the drawing shown in fig. 1, the connection with Baudelaire's poem is here somewhat closer in two respects: 1) the synesthetic<sup>141</sup> allusion to sound (the buzzing of the flies, present both with Baudelaire and Munch), and 2) the allusion to a *memento mori*. In the poem the lover reminds his beloved of her future death: “ –Et pourtant vous serez semblable a cette ordure, / A cette horrible infection,.../ ...Oui! telle que vous serez, o la reine des graces, / Apres les derniers sacrements, / Quand vous irez, sous l’herbe et les floraisons grasses, / Moisir parmi les ossements... .” With Munch the skull is present as a traditional representation of a *memento mori* in itself.

The other poem from *Les Fleurs du mal* that Munch illustrated is called *Le Mort joyeux* (fig. 3 and appendix B). Like Baudelaire, Munch presents the dead one as very much active: he is about to stand up placed as he is above the ground, rather than under it, since he hates tombs (“... je hais les tombeaux;...”). He is free to move – since he is above ground – and glad to be able to do so; he is “...un mort libre et joyeux;...”. With Baudelaire, soul and body are two separate entities “...dites-moi s’il est encore quelque torture/ Pour ce vieux corps sans ame et mort parmi les morts!” That would contradict the monist view of the unity of substance (soul being considered substance as well).

With Munch the monist idea is primarily rendered through the plants and flowers that appear both above the ground as well as in the area that would suggest – though somewhat ambiguously<sup>142</sup> - the underground. The dead one is sitting upon his own tombstone (on it is written that he is “Le mort joyeux”), above the ground. Together with the flowers, he obliterates thus the difference between “above” and “under” the ground – since the universal substance is present everywhere. Here lies the basic difference between Baudelaire and Munch: while Baudelaire wonders whether there is still a life after death, where there is still some punishment/torture awaiting the dead “...dites-moi s’il est encore quelque torture/...Pour ce...mort parmi les morts!”, Munch shows that there is no essential difference between life and death, as it is symbolised by the sameness of matter above as well as under the ground.

Matter that is under the ground (dead) is related to the live matter above the ground. This appears obvious in fig. 4, ( T 291 A) where the man is sitting by the fireplace and, like Rodin's *Thinker*, supports his head in his hand, presumably meditating on death.

<sup>141</sup> Cf. the chapter on synesthesia in this theses.

<sup>142</sup> The shape of these drawings was conditioned by their purpose: they were meant to illustrate poems, therefore Munch left space in the centre for the text. This, in turn, influenced the inner form, and thus, indirectly, the iconography of the drawings. Therefore the area of above – and under - the ground acquired a certain ambiguity. This ambiguity, in turn, was used by Munch to reinforce the monist message inherent in the drawings, even though monism was not an issue with Baudelaire.

Underneath lays the dead woman with the dead/unborn foetus still inside her. Nevertheless, substance (i.e. matter/soul) aspires upwards, towards the world above. This idea is suggested by the area and the lines that derive from the dead woman's body and rise diagonally toward the surface. The two worlds, the one above and the one below, though formally separated by the surface line, interrelate and tend to communicate: the man thinks about death and the dead woman with her foetus "aspires" towards life.<sup>143</sup>

Gøsta Svenæus dates, plausibly, the drawing called *Metabolism* (fig. 5) to c. 1896<sup>144</sup>, i.e. the same year that Munch worked with the illustrations to Baudelaire's poems. The theme is essentially monistic as well: from the corpse underground (death) springs up a plant (life), as matter appears to continue, and be transformed, from death into life. Various other plants, as well as the tree at right, reinforce the same idea. On the central plant rests a little white bird - a dove? - as a possible allusion to spiritual life/matter embodied by the condensed metaphorical allusion to the Holy Spirit. A little to the right there are two more birds, one white, the other black. ( Besides the contrast to the white bird - with all the dichotomy of ideas implicit in this contrast - the black one might also allude to E. A. Poe's famous poem *The Raven*, which was translated into French by Charles Baudelaire. Edgar Poe is also mentioned in *Samtiden*, 5. Bergen, 1894, p. 49). At left, slightly sketched, there are two figures, presumably a seated man and a woman that comes towards him.

There are in this drawing ideas concerning two iconographically related motives in Munch's art: the flower of pain motif and the theme of metabolism. The delicate plant in the centre reminds of the *Flower of Pain* (1898) motif; the tree at right and the man and woman at left allude to the theme of metabolism.

## II Life – Suffering - Art

In 1898 Munch was asked to provide illustrations to a special edition of a review called *Quickborn*, where the text would be provided by August Strindberg.<sup>145</sup> On the cover appears an image, *The Flower of Pain* (fig. 6) that was interpreted as representing the

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<sup>143</sup> Perhaps this is a reminiscence of Baudelaire's poem *Une charogne*, where the man - poet, who thinks and creates art ("... j'ai garde la forme et l'essence divine..."), will stay "alive" through his art, while he reminds his beloved woman that she will die one day (with Munch, presumably after she will accomplish her biological task of producing life. In this particular instance, however, this task is not successfully accomplished, since she died before she gave birth, yet there is hope as long as death may aspire towards life...).

<sup>144</sup> Svenæus, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>145</sup> Ingrid Langaard, *Edvard Munch: modningsår; En studie i tidlig ekspresjonisme og symbolisme*, Oslo (Gyldendal), 1960, pp. 373 ff.

relationship between the artist and his art.<sup>146</sup> Art is symbolised by a flower which is nourished by the blood that streams from the heart of the suffering artist.

Within the present discussion Art is to be understood as the end-result of a process of transformation (like metabolism): in this case blood, the substance of life, becomes a symbol of the artist's suffering and is transformed into Art. The idea that blood is meant to allude to the suffering of the artist is moreover rendered through the image of its source in the heart of the artist, who bleeds – like Christ on the cross – to nourish his creation. Therefore the creator (the artist) echoes the Creator (Christ), and both suffer to accomplish/fulfil their creation/Creation. Art is thus metaphorically provided with a divine dimension: it is composed of the same substance as God/Spirit. Here the monism is symbolically rendered through the idea of life that is transformed into art, through suffering.

### **III Death – Life/Suffering – Bliss**

In a lithography of 1897 called *Life and Death (Liv og død)*, (fig. 7), Munch presents an image that is clearly related to the idea of metabolism. The picture is divided into two parts, the bigger, darker, area in the bottom being separated from the top by two parallel lines with vegetation-like shapes between them. The bottom area, representing the underground, contains a decomposing female corpse whose position echoes that of the “lascivious” corpse present in fig.1. Above this figure some lines suggest tree and other plant roots, as well as at least two spermatozoa. The two spermatozoa are provided with facial features – eyes and mouths - as if to stress their personalised living quality: there is life under the ground - which is the traditional dominion of death.<sup>147</sup> In the upper part of the lithograph, to the left, there is a tree and a pregnant woman near it. She seems to emerge from a roundish shape, with “ eyes”, (a head/skull?) that is placed by the tree root, partly under the ground level and partly above it, relating to both. Together with the rest of the sunny landscape, this area belongs to life. It is connected with the death region not only by roots but also through the lines that start in the sky at right and continue down to the underworld. Thus the upper and nether worlds are connected circularly starting upwards from the head-like shape under the tree (left-up-right-down, and so on). The flowing, oval, direction suggests continuity, connection, and ultimately sameness of

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 375. I. Langaard calls this image *The Flower of Blood (Blodblomst)* - ibid., p. 371.

<sup>147</sup> These personalised spermatozoa, with their suggested facial features, do not lack a certain humorous quality, in spite of the absolutely serious idea of monism that is dealt with here.



substance.<sup>148</sup> The “lascivious” corpse (which appears pregnant as well), the spermatozoa, and the pregnant woman above the ground suggest fertility and the continuation of the life principle both above and under the ground. Death is not absolute, finite, annihilation, it is just transformation.

A pen drawing called *Metabolism (Stoffveksling)*, c. 1898,<sup>149</sup> (fig.8) combines two motives: 1) the Adam and Eve by the tree of life motif and 2) the metabolism related idea of life deriving out of, and being connected with, death.

Underground there is a corpse that serves as nourishment for the tree roots and the tree above the ground. The tree divides the space above into two parts: at left stands the woman (Eve), and at right, cross armed, stands the man (Adam). On the ground on Eve`s side lies a stylised animal skull, to allude to woman`s animal nature. From the eye opening of this skull a leafy plant arises – a plant that is abundant, suggesting plenitude/fertility. Eve`s feet are partially embedded in the ground: she is closely connected with the soil from which – like the tree – she seems to emerge. On the right, slightly disconnected from, and above, the ground, stands Adam with his arms crossed as if to form a kind of barrier between him and his surroundings<sup>150</sup>. On his side grows a flower (of art and pain).<sup>151</sup>

In the background there is a landscape where Høifødt sees “kuple til *Den gyldne by*,...”.<sup>152</sup> The two round shapes could indeed be alluding to the domes of the Heavenly Jerusalem; they could also indicate just stylised tree vegetation.

The drawing has a frame of leaves that seem to derive/fall off of the tree. This frame has a stylistic, decorative, function: it centres the picture and establishes its boundaries. It has also an iconographical function as it connects the upper and lower worlds alluding to sameness of matter.

About the painting called *Metabolism (Stoffveksling)*, c. 1898 – c.1918, (fig. 9), Munch wrote that it has a key position in his series of paintings called *The Frieze of Life*

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<sup>148</sup> This circular mode echoes the notion of the wheel of life – an oriental (Indian) concept – that was present also with Munch`s contemporary Gustav Vigeland – cf. Vigeland`s relief decorations around the fountain in the Oslo Frogner Park.

<sup>149</sup> T 2447

<sup>150</sup> According to Høifødt (op.cit., p. 132) there is an animal skull present also on Adam`s side. If so, this skull could allude to Adam/Christ`s Golgotha, the place of the skull. Nevertheless, if there is a skull by Adam`s feet, it is stylised so much as to be only very slightly, if at all, discernible.

<sup>151</sup> This flower is connected with the *Flower of Pain/Art* motif – cf. Høifødt, op.cit., p. 145, note 51.

<sup>152</sup> Høifødt, op.cit., p.133. This is an *a posteriori* observation, based upon the analysis of the painting *Metabolism* of c.1898/1918, where there is general agreement that the frame above the couple describes the Heavenly Jerusalem.

(*Livsfrisen*): it is as necessary to it as the buckle is for the belt ( “...nødvendig for den hele frise som spænden er det for beltet.”)<sup>153</sup>

Frank Høifødt<sup>154</sup> presents a thorough analysis of this painting, which is both informative and by and large correct. Therefore no such analysis will be repeated here. Nevertheless one must notice the author’s somewhat biased attitude in favour of an iconography based upon the story of the love affair between Munch and Tulla Larsen. That Munch may have thought of Tulla Larsen when painting this picture is possible; that the figure of Eve is Tulla Larsen’s portrait in disguise is, however, somewhat less plausible. A portrait, by definition, resembles, more or less, its model. If, as Høifødt himself writes, “Munch har sørget for å gjøre modellen ugjenkjennelig...”, it follows that the figure of Eve is not meant to be Tulla Larsen’s portrait, or her representation. Munch might have thought of her, yet he may have thought of somebody else just as well, or of Woman – as – Eve in general. In the year when he started to paint *Metabolism* Munch had just made Tulla Larsen’s acquaintance. The pessimistic view of women that is embedded in the story of Adam and Eve, with all its misogynistic attitude, was not likely to be provoked by a woman Munch had just met. One must bear in mind that Munch had many love affairs both before and after Tulla Larsen’s period, and misogyny is an iconographic theme in Munch’s art in general.<sup>155</sup>

As Ragna Stang pointed out,<sup>156</sup> Munch rendered the Adam and Eve theme in many paintings, for example in the painting *Eye in Eye (Øje i Øie)* painted in 1893, five years before he ever met Tulla Larsen.<sup>157</sup> In the context of the concept of metabolism the theme of Adam and Eve alludes to the idea of fertility<sup>158</sup> and the continuation of life. That this life was seen by Munch as full of sorrow and suffering could well be expressed through the metaphor of the story of Adam and Eve: the troubles started with Eve’s transgression of the divine law in the Garden of Eden. The couple in Munch’s painting, however, is not placed in the Garden of Eden, in spite of the painted tree.

As the frame of the picture shows, the couple is present in this world, between heaven (represented by the city above) and hell (represented by the root of the tree and the skulls).

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<sup>153</sup> Edvard Munch, “Livsfrisen”, *Tidens Tegn* 15, October 1918, quoted in Høifødt, *ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>154</sup> In *op.cit.*, pp. 124-147.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. Per Buvik, “Munch og kvinnen”, in *Munch og kvinnen*, exhibition catalogue, Bergen museum of Art, Bergen 2002.

<sup>156</sup> *Mennesket og kunstneren Edvard Munch*, Copenhagen, 1978, pp. 122-124.

<sup>157</sup> A colour reproduction of this painting appears in Ragna Stang, *ibid.*, p. 123; a black and white reproduction appears with Høifødt, *op. cit.*, p. 133. Unlike Ragna Stang, Høifødt dates this painting one year later, to 1894.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. Munch’s painting called *Fertility (Frugtbarhed)* of 1898, reproduced in Ragna Stang, *ibid.*, p. 124. The theme of Adam and Eve is present here as well.

This tree could be a reference to the Biblical tree flanked, as it is, by the first people ever to exist, yet the tree of the Garden of Eden does not have its roots in the underworld and its trunk in this world.

The tree that is to be found in all the three realms –heaven, hell and our world in-between, is Yggdrasil, the ash tree which binds together heaven, earth and hell. This is further corroborated by a drawing<sup>159</sup>(fig. 10) that shows the tree not stopping below the upper frame, like in the painting, but rather continuing right through it with its crown above the picture's frame.

Yggdrasil, rather than the tree of knowledge of good and evil, is a fit symbol to embody the monistic concept of the unity of the universe. This unity pervades the underworld (represented in the painting by the frame with its roots and skulls), this world with all its suffering (represented by the couple of Adam and Eve), and the next/upper/heavenly world – that, according to the Bible, will be blissful to the deserving (represented here by the frame that shows the Heavenly Jerusalem). Two metaphorical representations are combined in this painting, the Biblical and the Norse - mythological. Munch understood, however, that the monist idea is best rendered here through the mythological tree rather than the Biblical one. Perhaps this is the reason why Munch attached such a great importance to this painting as to compare it to the “buckle of the belt”: it carries in its iconography a major part of his world view: the monist idea.

#### **IV Survival of the Fittest**

Ernst Haeckel was influenced by Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882) and his theory of evolution.<sup>160</sup> The idea of evolution and its mechanism was described by Darwin himself as *descent with modifications*, yet the term soon became known as “evolution”<sup>161</sup>. In the philosophy of biology the ideas connected with evolution implied the concept of the survival of the fittest.<sup>162</sup> This concept, in turn, was associated with the idea of monism. For example, August Strindberg writes in a letter about his “ teorier i kemien, hvilka de endast finna vara rena konsekvenser af Darwinism, transformism och Monism,…”<sup>163</sup>

The quotation from Strindberg's *Inferno* that Carla Lathe cites on op. cit., p. 261 (cf. my note 6 in this chapter) relates to the relationship between Strindberg and “den

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<sup>159</sup> T 2412. This is a project for the *Frieze of Life* in *plein-air*.

<sup>160</sup> The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, p. 360.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., pp.204 ff.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., pp. 668 – 669.

<sup>163</sup> *August Strindbergs brev, 10 Februari 1894 – April 1895*, Torsten Eklund, ed., Stockholm ( Albert Bonniers), 1968, letter no. 2776, p. 57.

amerikanske målaren”. Before Lathe`s quotation starts, Strindberg wrote: “På så sett förnedras jag så småningom och omerkligt, under det han, som har en framtid för sig, åter resar sig i höjden på min bekostnad (underlining mine). Jeg gør mig till ett lik, begravet under...”<sup>164</sup> Implied here is the idea that the one (aspiring) above – be it biologically or socially – has to step upon the one bellow, in order to arrive on top. This is done by an ascendant “evolution”, regarded as an inevitable law of nature. Those on top arrived there by fighting, and defeating, those under them. Thus – Strindberg’s “...Darwinism, transformism och Monism...”.

In 1909 Munch took part in the competition for the decoration of the festivity hall (Aula) of Oslo University. With this occasion he made use of several previous drawings (see for example fig 19, dated to 1897) and projects, as well as created some new ones, that ultimately resulted in the great painting called the *Human mountain (Menneskeberget)* and its precursor entitled *Towards the Light (Mot lyset)*. Even though these paintings and drawings were not ultimately used in the “Aula”, Munch continued to work on these ideas, producing several variations on the same theme even after the end of the competition.

Munch’s drawing T 2547 – 105 (fig. 11), shows some people that are placed under the ground level, as a compact group facing the background. In front and above them there is a river (Lethe?) and across it on the other side grow trees [a landscape of the “promised land” (?)/ life after this one(?)/ “heaven”(?)]: the aim of the ascending movement of the group of people bellow.

The drawing T 2547 – 83 (fig. 12) also presents people grouped together; unlike those of fig.11, however, these people are shown to be aggressive and inconsiderate. They literally step upon each other in their strife towards the top. Even though the object of their effort is not shown in the drawing, these people fight to get there. At the bottom, parallel to the foreground, there lays the corpse of a woman. By her feet, ignoring her, there is a man facing the background. Actively, with the right arm up in air, he aims, like everybody else, to get up on top. A little higher up, to the right, one can distinguish the torso of a woman with arms up in the air, as if in the process of sinking into a marsh. Her effort does not aim upwards, she only wants to survive – yet she seems to loose the battle. Around and above her there are other people who ignore her and fight to get on top. Those who survive and arrive on top are the fittest of them all. Implied here is the Darwinist idea

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<sup>164</sup> Gøsta Svenæus, op. cit., p. 4

of social or biological survival at the expense of those who are weaker than themselves. Lurking behind still there is the idea that substance gets transformed yet remains the same in its essence: if those on the bottom do not arrive on top, others (related to them or not) do, at their expense.

a) *Towards the Light (Mot lyset)* and *The Human Mountain (Menneskeberget)*

*Towards the Light (Mot lyset)*<sup>165</sup> 1909 (fig 13), is a lithograph closely related to the images presented in figs. 11 and 12, as well as to the paintings of *The Human Mountain (Menneskeberget)*. Nevertheless, a new thought seems to emerge here: substance may stay the same in death as well as in life, yet it is endowed with the capacity of variation of its different components: from the homogeneous mass of people, all the same, there are some who, by modified evolution (cf. Darwin), rise above the mass, mentally and/or physically. With Munch, as expected, such an individual would be an artist, a genius.

In fig. 11 people are presented as a group of impersonal figures; in fig. 12 these figures form a compact mass that aspires upwards in an aggressive manner. Fig. 13 shows the upwards aspiring mass of people/substance formally organised into a mountain shape. At left, there is a vaguely naturalistic landscape with a winding path directed towards the background. By contrast, this mountain, directed upwards, originates in the dead skulls and corpses below and aspires towards the sun, its aim. Personality is here obliterated, with one exception: the lonely figure on top.

The river present in fig. 11 became in fig. 13 two quasi parallel abstract lines that separate this figure on top from the aspiring (see their upward outstretched arms) mass of people below. The figure on top stands, therefore, closer to the sun and opens up to it with outstretched arms. This figure has been identified in the Munch criticism with Zarathustra – Friedrich Nietzsche's hero. Nevertheless, in *Also Sprach Zarathustra* the prophet's position is not described in this manner. All that is said is that "when Zarathustra was thirty years old, he...went into the mountains... . Rising one morning with the rosy dawn, he went before the sun, and spake... unto it... ." <sup>166</sup> With Munch, however, the position of the person on top is presented "with outstretched arms". This pose is closer to the one described by S. Przybyszewski in his *Zur Psychologie des Individuums*, I, *Chopin und Nietzsche*, p. 42.<sup>167</sup> "...mit in die Ferne gestreckten Handen steht Zarathustra auf seinem Berge" (underlining

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<sup>165</sup> T 390.

<sup>166</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus spake Zarathustra*, translated by Thomas Common, New York, 1960, p. 3.

<sup>167</sup> Quoted in Gøsta Svenæus, *Edvard Munch; Im mannlichen Gehirn*, I, Lund, 1973, p. 116.

mine). In this case, matter became endowed with personality, and this personality represents a hero, a prophet (and/or an artist, a genius).

M 441 (fig. 14) goes one step further: not only is the figure on top individualised by its pose and position, there are other figures at the bottom of the mountain that are personalised as well. In the centre there is recognizable a sketch of Rodin's *Thinker*. In the foreground to the right there are two kneeling figures and near them lies outstretched diagonally another one that indicates the intended direction of perception: towards the centre. On the left there are three women and in the centre, below "Rodin's *Thinker*", there is a figure that has been identified with Edvard Munch himself.

This figure, with long hair and female breasts, has been called *Sphinx*; it is better seen in *The Human Mountain (Menneskeberget)*, fig. 15, and detail, fig. 16 ( M 801). The facial features are, indeed, Munch's own – compare with Munch's self-portrait in *By the Window*, 1942, fig. 17: the same wide forehead, emaciated cheeks and lips with the corners prominently down bent in an expression of suffering and sadness. The female hair and breasts turn this self- portrait into an androgynous figure. It has been explained as showing Munch's desire for self-perpetuation through his art.<sup>168</sup>

### Androgynous

Munch had no other progeny than his art and he called his paintings his "children". To produce these "children" he had to be, symbolically, both their mother and father. This could be best represented through an androgynous self-portrait.

Androgyny was a subject much discussed in the circles in which Munch moved, be it in Germany or in France. In France there was Josephin (Sar) Peladan, a literary figure influential in the artistic milieu of the *fin-de-siecle* Paris<sup>169</sup>: "l'oeuvre du Sar Peladan ... semble dominee par le motif de l'androgyn", writes Mircea Eliade.<sup>170</sup>

August Strindberg was influenced by this concept as well. His article on Munch that appeared in *La revue blanche* on June 1, 1896, starts with a quotation from Balzac's *Seraphita*. Seraphita-Seraphitus was an androgynous character introduced by Balzac as the

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<sup>168</sup> Reinhold Heller, "Love as a Series of Paintings", in *Edvard Munch; Symbols & Images*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1978, p. 106.

<sup>169</sup> Cf. Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France; Josephin Peladan and the Salons de la Rose-Croix*, New York and London (Garland), 1976.

<sup>170</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles et l'Androgyne*, Gallimard, Paris, 1962, p. 122

child of Swedenborg's cousin.<sup>171</sup> Moreover the action of Balzac's novel takes place in Norway, a country described in the novel in very positive terms.

Also Munch's friend Stanislaw Przybyszewski, wrote in 1892 about the ideal of a complete fusion of male and female into an androgynous being that is the artist: "I love in the woman my self, my own ego raised to its greatest intensity; ... . And the woman that I love, that is I, my most intimate and inner ego, my ego as *arriere-fond*, as ... myself..., me,..." (underlining mine).<sup>172</sup>

Since it combined the two sexes, androgyny was extolled as an ideal of perfection, much like Heraclitus's definition of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum*. The artist, creator, was seen as a superior being, perfect, one of the elect, compared to the Creator. The artist must be independent in order to produce innovative art. Such an artist would not depend on somebody else even for love and procreation. Munch's androgynous self-portrait is presented as such a being. Standing, as it does, at the base of the *Human Mountain*, he seems to support it upon his shoulders. He has a noble and elevating function in society. As he wrote: "I min kunst har jeg forsøgt at få forklart mig livet og dets mening. Jeg har osså ment at hjelpe andre til at klarlægge sig livet"<sup>173</sup> (underlining mine). He helps by supporting humanity; at the same time, as shown in fig. 14, it is the artist and not the mob, who actually reaches the top, the light, the Sun.

## b) Crystallisation

### The semantic confusion

Munch used the word "crystallisation" in two different contexts:

1- In connection with Art. He wrote: "Kunst er menneskets trang til krystallisation."<sup>174</sup>

From here Paul Nome<sup>175</sup> in his *Kunst som "krystallisation"* drew the conclusion that Munch, the Christian, saw art itself as crystallisation.

Munch, however, also wrote: "I kunsten ligger menneskets trang til krystallisation....

Medens impressionismen nærmest er en opløsende kraftutfoldelse – søger den samtidig at

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<sup>171</sup> Balzac exposed in this novel many of the concepts of Swedenborg, the Swedish mystic. Moreover, Strindberg himself was influenced by Swedenborg. Strindberg used the character of Seraphita-Seraphitus as a model for the characters of Eleanora (*Easter*) and Indra's daughter (*A Dream Play*). For Balzac's influence on Strindberg see Gustaf Freden, "Balzac dans la litterature suedoise", in *Homage a Balzac*, Paris (UNESCO), 1950, pp. 239 – 265.

<sup>172</sup> Stanislaw Przybyszewski, *Zur Psychologie des Individuums, II: Ola Hanson*, Berlin 1892, pp. 12-14, quoted in R. Heller, op. cit., p.106.

<sup>173</sup> Quoted in Poul Erik Tøjner, *Munch; Med egne ord*, Oslo and Copenhagen, 2000, p. 134.

<sup>174</sup> Quoted in Tøjner, *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>175</sup> Cf. Paul Nome, *Kunst som "krystallisasjon"*; *En studie i Edvard Munchs notater om hans tro, livssyn og kunstforståelse, relatert til hans bilder*, dissertation in theology, University of Oslo, 2000.

fæste sig i formens stil.”<sup>176</sup> Munch uses here the concept of crystallisation metaphorically. He might have arrived to this idea through the knowledge about Strindberg’s alchemical work with crystal formations.<sup>177</sup> Strindberg was probably following one of the basic percepts of alchemy, that of *solve et coagula* (dissolve and coagulate).<sup>178</sup> Moreover, Strindberg took photographs of crystal flowerlike forms which he called “photograms”. These “photograms” became for him a proof of the truth of the monistic idea: “He (i.e. Strindberg) found evidence of his monistic ideas... , a mysterious microcosm... (and) similarities with the plant world”.<sup>179</sup> Munch in his turn writes about Impressionism and its colour as dissolving in the light to “coagulate”/crystallise again in the eye of the beholder.

2 – in the monistic sense: ”Stoffene opløser sig i naturen for atter at forme sig”<sup>180</sup> (underlining mine). Here it is the substance itself that changes aspect as it has the property of dissolving and than (re)coagulating/crystallising. It may change form, yet it stays the same in its essence. This would apply also to people – as – matter: “I do believe that there is a mysterious force that continues, so that we repeat ourselves like crystals that are dissolved and then recrystallize again.”<sup>181</sup>

### Monistic crystallisation

The idea that the organic and the inorganic are part of a continuous mode of substance was introduced by Haeckel already in his 1866 *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*. Here he tried to show the basic correspondence of the cell and the crystal. The illustrations presented the crystalline forms of organic structures such as protozoa. In 1904 Haeckel published a book called *Art Forms* that further deals with the same topic.<sup>182</sup>

In Munch’s library could be found a copy of Wilhelm Bolsche’s book *Ernst Haeckel: His Life and Work*, London, Unwin, 1906. Bolsche was Haeckel’s early biographer<sup>183</sup> and one of the writers that frequented the tavern *Zum schwarzen Ferkel*.<sup>184</sup> In his Haeckel book Bolsche wrote: “ Haeckel himself had discovered the *monera*, the living particles of

<sup>176</sup> Quoted in Tøjner, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>177</sup> Tore Håkansson, ”Strindberg and the Arts”, *Studio International*, vol. 181, no. 930, February 1971, p. 63.

<sup>178</sup> For this percept see Eugene Canseliet, *Alchemie; Etudes diverses de Symbolisme hermetique et de pratique philosophale*, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, Switzerland, 1964, pp. 45 and 115 and the plate facing p. 182.

<sup>179</sup> Per Hemmingsson, *August Strindberg som fotograf*, Aarhus, Kalejdoskop, 1989, p. 163, quoted in Cordulack, op. cit., p. 239, note 43.

<sup>180</sup> Quoted in Tøjner, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>181</sup> Quoted in Josef Paul Hodin, *Edvard Munch*, New York, 1972, p. 92.

<sup>182</sup> Cordulack, op. cit., p. 239.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid..

<sup>184</sup> Lathe, op.cit., p. 30.



plasm that did not seem to have reached the stage of the true cell... the lowest level of the living. At the same time we reach the most complex specimen of the inorganic from the morphological point of view... the crystal (underlining mine). The differences begin to give way. What marvellously similar functions! From the dead mother-water is built up, purely by chemico – physical laws, the beautiful structure of the crystal... . Is it more than a hair's breadth to pass from one to the other? The deeper we go in the study of living things, the slighter become the differences that separate them from `dead matter`. On the other hand, the higher we go in the structure of crystals, the more striking is the resemblance to the living thing... . The solution is found in complete Monism... . Nature is one though we see it in different stages of development. We call one of them the crystal, another the cell, or the moneron or the protozoon; another the plant, another the animal... . The insistent statement that not only does the living approach the inorganic, but the inorganic approaches the living, is quite `Haeckelian`... . When I say that life arose one day out of the inorganic, or that a crystal was turned into a cell, my statement really involves the complementary truth that the inorganic potentially contains life in itself.”<sup>185</sup>

Munch was convinced that life continues after death, in another modus: not in a Christian manner, but rather in a monist way. This fact gave rise to a certain misunderstanding among Munch scholars. For instance, in the context of a discussion of the *Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil*, Gerd Woll introduces the notion of transubstantiation: “...Munch considered *transubstantiation* (italics mine) as a possible solution to the problem of life and death,... .”<sup>186</sup> Transubstantiation is indeed considered to be a change of one substance into another - in a Christian context: it attempts to explain the actual presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist after the consecration (in Roman Catholic and in Eastern Orthodox churches). In the Lutheran church this, modified, concept came to be known as “consubstantiation”.<sup>187</sup>

With Munch, however, a Christian context was not of much actuality. He told Christian Gierløff<sup>188</sup> that “Naa, ... jeg har vanskelig for at tænke mig at livet efter dette er slik som de kristne ... forestiller sig det...” Munch's understanding of the continuity of life after death implied the existence of “... en hemmelig energi som fortsætter...”<sup>189</sup> In the context of a discussion of crystallisation one Munch quote is appropriate: “...At vi

<sup>185</sup> Wilhelm Bolsche, *Ernst Haeckel: His Life and Work*, London, Unwin, 1906, pp. 203 – 205, quoted in Cordulack, op. cit., pp. 239 – 240.

<sup>186</sup> Gerd Woll, “The Tree of knowledge of Good and Evil”, in *Edvard Munch; Symbols & Images*, p. 241.

<sup>187</sup> The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, p. 928.

<sup>188</sup> Christian Gierløff, “Munch selv”, in *Kunst og Kultur*, IV, 1914, p. 112.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid..

gjentar os selv, slik som krystaller oppløser sig til vand og igjen krystalliserer sig paa same maaten. Jeg har altid været tilbøielig til at hylde den mening at intet gaar tapt. Vi er krystaller, vi opløser os, og vi blir andre krystaller.”<sup>190</sup>

In a letter to Gustav Schiefler Munch mentions Willy Pastor’s book *Das Land des Krystalls* and writes about his own convictions: “ Sie kennen die Blatter “Das Land des Krystal”... . Die Blatter sind interessant deswegen das die geben Ideer whelchen jetzt anerkannt sind -

-Ich habe angedeutet wollen das der Tot ist Uebergang zu Leben –

Das tote Korper geht ueber in neue Krystalformen - ... (underlining mine)

So geht er hin im Lande des Krystalls - ...”<sup>191</sup>

Munch repeated these ideas orally to Schiefler with the occasion of the latter’s visit to Norway. Atle Næss writes about it.<sup>192</sup> With that occasion Munch told Schiefler that “... ikke bare alt levende hørte sammen og var av same natur, men også den anorganiske materien” (these are A. Næss’s words, not Munch’s). Compare this with Ernst Haeckel’s philosophy that “ is distinguished by passionate arguments for the fundamental unity of organic and inorganic nature...”.<sup>193</sup> With Munch this idea is expressed through such statements as “ Ogsaa stenens haarde masse lever” (“Den gales optegnelser”) written in the drawing of fig. 18. Here the hard mountain rock is shown literally to contain life in the form of a human head that is open- eyed and very much alive.

*Funeral March (Sørgemarsj)*, 1897, T 2547 – 73 (fig. 19) is related to the lithograph *Towards the Light (Mot lyset)*, fig.13. Both present the idea of life emerging out of death. Both share a number of figures: the woman’s head at the bottom left corner, the female figure that rises up out of the dead mass in the centre, the corpulent figure above her, the woman at left with arms outstretched upwards and most of the others. Even the backgrounds, with their respective paths directed inwards, are similar. Different here are the tops, the aim of the upward movement of the figures: while in fig. 13 the top is reached by the character of the genius/prophet/artist, in fig. 19 the upwards effort ends up in death – the coffin with its dead one inside.

This lithograph (fig. 19) presents the cycle of transformation rendering the notion that death is not a finite process of annihilation but rather one of change. Read vertically from

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid..

<sup>191</sup> *Edvard Munch/Gustav Schiefler; Briefwechsel*, Vol. 1, 1902 – 1914, Arne Eggum, ed., Hamburg, 1987, p. 167.

<sup>192</sup> Næss, op. cit., p 340.

<sup>193</sup> The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, p. 360.

bottom towards the top, as its form suggests, this human mass bears the idea that death becomes life, which, in turn, ends up in death... . There is here repeated the inherent monist/Indian idea of a wheel of life<sup>194</sup> (cf. also my note 49 in this chapter); with Munch, however, the concept is rendered here through a vertical form, since it is also combined with the idea of evolution.

Writing about Schiefler's visit to Munch, Atle Næss continues the description of Munch's *Weltanschauung*: "Krystallisering var et eksempel på ...formviljen i det tilsynelatende `døde`. Munch nevnte sitt eget ti år gamle litografi *I krystallenes rike* som en slags illustrasjon av disse tankene: En skikkelse reiser seg halvt opp i en åpen likkiste som "løftes" inn mot en skinnende himmelby. Det må forstås slik at døden ikke representerer noe radikalt brudd med livet, men snarere en overgang til en annen form for organisering av materien"<sup>195</sup> (underlining mine).

The lithograph Næss is referring to is probably the one called *In the Land of Crystal*, 1897 (fig. 20),<sup>196</sup> on which Munch himself wrote as a title: *Krystallernes land*. It shows the coffin being borne/floating/being pushed above some fluid lines that could suggest upwards aspiring arms. This lithograph could in fact be seen as a close-up of the top of the lithograph shown in fig. 19, the *Funeral March*. The person inside clearly raises his/her head and looks ahead to the landscape in the background. Far from being bare and desolate, the background landscape is alive with trees lighted by the sun. A dividing line forms the border between "this world" (the bottom part of the picture) and the next (the top). The coffin happens to be on this line, at the border between the two realms, just about to enter the sunny side of the picture. This sunny side is called by Munch the "land of crystals". Death is here represented as an arrival into this "land of crystals" – a "crystallization", i.e. a transformation.

Munch was concerned with this theme long after the competition for the Aula ended. In c. 1923 he made another variant of the same topic: *Crystallization II*, fig. 21. In this lithograph the dead in the coffin is awakened by the sound of the bell, and starts to raise his/her head. A bell tolls when somebody dies; here the dead is awakened by the sound as

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<sup>194</sup> The concept of the wheel of life seems to appear time and again in Munch's art. I intend to deal with this topic at a later date.

<sup>195</sup> Næss, op.cit., p. 340. Cf. Sophia Oftedahl, *Metaphysical Content in Edvard Munch's Painting, 1981-1982*, unpublished manuscript in the library of the Munch museum from 1983 till 14.7. 2005, pp.15ff. (Copies of this manuscript may still exist in this library). With Næss these ideas are very similar to those of Oftedahl.

<sup>196</sup> T 2547 – 75.

he arrived in another “land of the crystals”, as it is shown by the crystals in the background. Munch wrote: “ Døden er begynnelsen til livet – til ny krystallisation”.<sup>197</sup>

*The Crystalline Death*, 1910 – 1911 (fig. 22),<sup>198</sup> presents a traditional personification of death, represented by the skeleton. From it luminous crystals are seen to emerge . They reflect and refract the rays of the sun. A few leaflike shapes emerge in the right part of the picture, to symbolize new life as a contrast to the death (represented by the skeleton) confined to the left side. The main ray of light divides the left side from the right, death from life. On the other hand, the crystal shapes are to be found on both sides, uniting thus life and death, as two variant states of the same condition. Moreover, some of the leaflike shapes are not completely organic: with their straight, angular lines, they seem to be in a transitory condition, between the organic (leaf) and the inorganic (crystal) – see especially the lower right side of the picture.

#### V *The Urn / Hope*

With Munch monism replaced the Christian belief in an afterlife, a belief that accounted for the basic human desire for a personal continuation of existence after death.<sup>199</sup> Monism postulated an “afterexistence”, since nothing gets lost: “Jeg har altid været tilbøielig til at hylde den mening at intet gaar tapt” (underlining mine), as Munch told Christian Gierløff (cf. also note 90 in this chapter). Nevertheless, this existence was not seen as a personal one: “Vi er krystaller, vi opløser os, og vi blir andre krystaller” (underlining mine) said Munch.

Einar Petterson wrote in “Astrazione dell’esperienza. La costante attualità del `Fregio della vita` di Munch”<sup>200</sup> that the *Frieze of Life* was not successful due to Munch’s rendering of personal feelings that limited his vision of humanity - by comparison to the Christian descriptions of the cycles of the human life to be seen in Western churches: “*Il fregio della vita* non fu un successo, ... . Era radicato nella sua esperienza e dunque fortemente personale, addirittura narcisistico... . Se si confrontano i cicli della vita, prevalentemente cristiani, visibili in qualsiasi chiesa dell’occidente, con *Il fregio della vita* di Munch, immediatamente si evidenziano le insufficienze della visione profondamente personale e limitata che Munch aveva dell’umanità. Per queste ragioni, il *Fregio della vita*

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<sup>197</sup> Quoted in Tøjner, op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>198</sup> M 459 B

<sup>199</sup> The personal continuation of existence *post-mortem* is a concept belonging to all three main monotheistic religions.

<sup>200</sup> In *Munch 1863 – 1944*, exhibition catalogue, Øivind Storm Bjerke, ed., Milano (Skira), 2005, p. 64.

di Munch era condannato sin dall'inizio: per il suo orizzonte limitato, per la mancanza di speranza (underlining mine) e alla fine... - per il suo profondo narcisismo.”<sup>201</sup>

This statement is debatable indeed, yet this thesis is not an appropriate occasion for such a debate. To continue the discussion already in progress here, only one idea will be taken into consideration: that Munch's *Frieze of Life* was doomed to failure, among other reasons, because of its lack of hope (“per la mancanza di speranza”).

Actually, Munch's view of existence, reflected in his art, was full of hope; it just was not the personal, Christian hope that pervaded it; the arguments that lead Munch to embrace the monist view of life were rational, rather than emotional.

Munch's lithograph *The Urn (Urnen)*,<sup>202</sup> 1896, (fig. 23) is a case in point. About it Munch wrote: “Urnen / Gjenfødselen / op av smudset steg et ansikt / fuld av sorg og skjønhed”.<sup>203</sup>

It has been noticed that the figures of the dead women at the base of the *Urn* resemble the figure of the “lascivious” woman in Munch's illustrations for Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*.<sup>204</sup> Cordulack sees in the urn a vase that “functions as the womb that transforms the rotting corpses below, giving birth to the new form of life above, . . .”<sup>205</sup>

In the catalogue of the exhibition *Smertens blomster; Fin de siecle – ideer i Munchs kunst*<sup>206</sup> Arne Eggum writes in the introduction that this exhibition is a continuation of the exhibition *Kosmos og Kaos* of the previous year. He discusses *The Urn* in connection with the group called *Smertens blomster (4) – kiste – likvogn – urne*. With this occasion he mentions the Dutch (sic) physiologist Jakob Moleschott<sup>207</sup> that maintained that “asken inneholder et stoff som gjør plantene i stand til å skape dyr og mennesker av luftens bestanddeler”. Eggum does not say whether Munch was or was not aware of Moleschott's ideas.

Furthermore Eggum writes that perhaps Gustav Schiefler was right to assume – after a conversation with Munch – that this motif has to do with Munch's view of women: “Ideen

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<sup>201</sup> “*The Frieze of Life* was not a success, . . . It was rooted in his experience and therefore strongly personal, downright narcissistic. . . . If one compares the life cycles, prevalingly Christian, visible in any Western church, with Munch's *The Frieze of Life*, the deficiencies of Munch's profoundly personal and limited view of humanity appear evident. For these reasons, Munch's *Frieze of Life* was doomed from the beginning: for its limited horizon, for its lack of hope (underlining mine) and in the end . . . - for its profound narcissism.” (translation mine).

<sup>202</sup> T 2547 – 49.

<sup>203</sup> Quoted in Tøjner, op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>204</sup> *Munch et la France*, p. 270 as well as Bente Torjusen, “The Mirror”, in *Symbols & Images*, p. 202.

<sup>205</sup> Shelley Wood Cordulack, op. cit., p. 238.

<sup>206</sup> Munch museum, November 14, 1999 – March 12, 2000.

<sup>207</sup> German-Italian physiologist (1822-1893).

hans var egentlig lutringen av det kvinnelige vesen etter å ha kvittet seg med alt slagg”; that the Woman was too much immersed in her own feelings and desires yet she could “... ved bevisst å kultivere sitt intellect, nå et høyere åndelig stadium.” Eggum connects this – very plausible attitude from Munch’s part – with Munch’s relationship with Tulla Larsen. In this context he cites from a letter to Tulla Larsen: “... og jeg skulde skaffe Dig bøger – og Du kunde uddanne Din Aand der absolute ikke er udviklet. Du må få videre syner og interesser – Mangelen herpå har gjort din kjærlighetsfølelse tankeløs og hensynsløs”.

a) The Urn as womb

*The Urn*, T 395 (fig. 24), is connected with the idea of woman rather than with the idea of womb: the woman looks into the urn, that here is rendered as a male head, adorned with a moustache and, possibly, a beard. The woman seems to try to find out / spy on (?) Man’s thoughts. The male head seems to suffer as it looks downwards / or has eyes closed; however, there is no confusion here: this is not a womb. The woman tries, perhaps, to understand the man, yet, to judge from his suffering (?) and lack of connection with the woman (the closed eyes), it seems that she is unable to do so.

To connect the better known *Urn* of fig. 23 with a womb is even more speculative, in spite of the “lascivious” corpses underneath: these corpses are outside the urn, they are the material to be transformed, they are no womb and neither is the urn itself rendered as such.

b) Purifying the Woman

That Munch thought that Woman needs to be purified is completely in accord with what is known about Munch’s idea of women (see earlier in this chapter, as well as note 55); that he thought that Tulla Larsen in particular would benefit from such a purification is even more plausible. Moreover, the *Urn* in fig. 25, T 332 A, – right foreground – is connected both with the idea of death (through the representation of the motif of the coffin being taken out of the house, *Kisten bæres ut*, above), as well as with the idea of women – left foreground – (*Badende kvinner*).

This *Urn* itself is flanked by two womanly figures, and out of the urn appears a head that could be that of a woman; however, this head could also be that of a man. Actually, this is an androgynous head, much like the head above the urn in fig. 23. One could draw the conclusion that with Munch a transformation, for the better, of the Woman would

imply a loss of her womanhood: she would be pure “etter å ha kvittet seg med alt slagg”, this “slagg” referring to her sexuality.

Nevertheless, Munch does not write this in his formal statement about the *Urn*. What he wrote is that the urn is a means of rebirth, “gjenfødelsen” ( with the implied idea of hope in the continuation of existence), and that the face above the urn would be sorrowful and (therefore?) beautiful. One idea is certain: Munch saw the urn as a purifying vessel.

c) *The Urn as a purifying vessel*<sup>208</sup>

Torjusen translates the word “smudset” from Munch’s description of his lithograph as “impure substance”.<sup>209</sup> This word is not to be found in W.A. Kirkeby’s *Norsk – Engelsk ordbok*, enlarged edition, Kunnskapsforlaget, Aschehoug – Gyldendal, 1996. In McKay’s modern Danish – English / English – Danish dictionary by Johs. Magnussen, Otto Madsen and Hermann Vinterberg, New York and Copenhagen (Gyldendal), 1953 – 1954, at page 301, the word *smudsig* is to be found. It is translated as “dirty”, or “filthy”. The word *smudset* is not to be found here as well. It may be assumed that Munch in his literary *riksmål*, close as it was to the Danish language, referred to the content of the urn as “the dirt”. Translated as “impure substance”, however, the word would imply that the urn functioned as a purifying vessel, a crucible.<sup>210</sup> Within the context discussed here, this meaning may therefore be the one intended by Munch.

An alchemical crucible, such as Strindberg probably used in his alchemical experiments (when trying to make gold), is a vessel in which impure substances are purified by fire in the same way as corpses, after being burned, supposedly are “reborn” purified.

The purifying quality of fire was alluded to by Balzac’s character Seraphita when she said to God at the moment of her death: “Si je ne suis pas assez pure, replonge-moi dans la

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<sup>208</sup> The idea of the *Urn* seen as a purifying vessel appears in Sophia Oftedahl, op.cit., pp.14 ff.: “[Munch] connected the idea of death and burning with that of the purification through fire. ... .”

<sup>209</sup> Bente Torjusen, *Words and Images of Edvard Munch*, Chelsea, Vermont, 1986. Torjusen’s translation: “The Urn. / Rebirth - / Out of the impure substance / Rose a face / Full of sorrow and beauty – “

<sup>210</sup> Purification through fire is a basic alchemical percept. It is discussed, for exemple, in Eugene Canseliet, *Alchemie; Etudes diverses de symbolisme hermetique et de pratique philosophale*, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, ed., Switzerland, 1964, pp. 121 – 122: “ D’apres l’interpretation presque unanime des peres de l’Eglise, `le signe du Fils de l’Home`, qui apparaitra dans le ciel, a la fin des temps, sera la croix sur laquell Jesus est mort. N’est pas la croix, en effet, qui donne a l’abreviation INRI, mis par Pilate sur l’instrument de supplice du Sauveur, sa signification secrete? Ces quatre sigles ordinairement interpretes par `Jesus Nazareus Rex Iudeorum` - Jesus Nazareen Roi des Juifs – les sont esoteriquement par `Igne Natura Renovatur Integra` - la Nature entiere se renouvelle par le feu (underlining mine). Ce n’est donc pas sans raison que les vieux alchimistes ont choisi la croix en symbole graphique du creuset ( anciennement `croiset`), dans lequel leur matiere subit les purifications ignees... . “

fournaise!”<sup>211</sup> That only fire can purify is shown also by Strindberg in the end of his *Dream Play*: in order to return to the ethereal spheres of Indra, his daughter must first burn the mortal body that she assumed when coming on earth to verify the truth of Man’s complaints to God. Strindberg’s stage directions are clearly meant to symbolize that:

“ She goes into the castle. Music is heard. The backdrop is lighted by the burning castle and shows a wall of human faces, asking, sorrowing, despairing... When the castle burns, the flower bud on the roof bursts into a gigantic chrysanthemum.”<sup>212</sup>

As for Balzac and Strindberg, so for Munch, the rebirth to another world is preceded by death to this world and by fire purification. Munch’s picture of the urn (fig. 23) shows just that: at the base of the urn there are corpses in various stages of decomposition. The black, funeral, urn is presented against a background of smoke and vapours that testify to its function of purifying vessel. Out of the urn, among flames, appears a living human head. The eyes are widely open and the features are pure and calm. This disembodied, spiritualized, head belongs surely to another world.

#### d) The Hope of *The Urn*

As discussed above, the idea of rebirth is implied in the motif of the urn. Rebirth is in itself a hopeful concept. Munch used further this hopeful concept in some of his lithographic versions of the *Urn* dated to 1915 (1916).<sup>213</sup> Here the hope takes on a political aspect.

*The Urn* (fig. 26), presents the vessel in the middle of a battle field/cemetery. It is surrounded by dead or dying bodies and by crosses marking tombs. In the background there are the city buildings in smoke – a desolate view of war destruction. In the middle of this picture of destruction, however, rises the urn and out of it, a human figure that is surely meant to represent the hope of the future. This interpretation is rendered explicit by the inscriptions above and below the picture.<sup>214</sup> Above it is written: “ Kan jeg ikke snart komme? ... ( and further illegible ...)”. Below it is written: “ Est ce que je peu venir? Letats reuini Europa” (sic). This picture presents the hope of a future peace, embodied in the figure rising out of the urn. With its inscription of the “United States of Europe”, logically patterned on the United

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<sup>211</sup> Quoted in Francis Bull, “Balzac et la Norvege”, in *Homage a Balzac*, Paris (UNESCO), 1950, p. 258. There are reasons to believe that Munch was acquainted with Balzac’s *Seraphita* (see above as well as note 71 in this chapter).

<sup>212</sup> The chrysanthemum, a symbol of deliverance, is a flower with funeral connotations (in France, for example, it is offered to the mourning family).

<sup>213</sup> 1916 appears in the exhibition catalogue *Munch et la France*, at p. 275.

<sup>214</sup> Cf. *Munch et la France*, *ibid.*.



States of America, it is also amazingly prophetic – taken into consideration the political development of contemporary European community.

## VI Pantheism

Pantheism (from the Greek *pan*, meaning everything, and *theos*, meaning god) is the view that God is everything. This view is therefore profoundly monistic. It is to be found both in Eastern as well as in Western philosophy. Pantheism exists in Hindu philosophy as a lead to a monistic view of reality.<sup>215</sup> It maintains that everything that exists is one single substance and that the soul is part of it. Kabbalah provides a pantheistic view as well, designing God as “the place” – “ha makom,” in that God is /encloses the Universe.<sup>216</sup>

Spinoza is considered the pantheist *par excellence* in Western philosophy. He was of the opinion that substance is absolutely self-sufficient and so is God, therefore God is identical with everything there is.<sup>217</sup> Haeckel, influenced by Spinoza as he was (see the beginning of this chapter), was a pantheist as well.<sup>218</sup> Moreover, one of Haeckel’s professors was Johannes Mueller, a biologist interested in pantheism. For him, if one was “examining the larva of an echinoderm or the light of a distant star, God is there.”<sup>219</sup>

*Pantheism* is often used in an inexact manner – from a philosophical perspective: it implies the notion that nature “has soul”, since God is in everything;<sup>220</sup> it identifies thus God with nature. The idea that there is a soul/life/spirit in nature can be recognised in many cultures, from the animism (see Lat. *anima* – soul) of many “nature peoples” religions to the Scandinavian idea of *trolls* which personify/embody the forces of nature.

During his stay in Dr. Jacobsen’s clinic in Copenhagen Munch often expressed his intention to return to Norway because of the importance of the Norwegian nature for his art: “Norway, where one day I must return since nature certainly is important for my art.”<sup>221</sup> This importance was alluded to by Munch – who was in the habit of calling his paintings his “children” – when he called his landscapes his “children with nature”.<sup>222</sup> Munch’s landscapes

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<sup>215</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, p. 9, in: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10226a.htm> . Cf. also note 49 in this chapter.

<sup>216</sup> Encyclopedia article about Kabbalah, p. 2, in <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/kabbalah> .

<sup>217</sup> The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, p. 640.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

<sup>219</sup> Wilhelm Bolsche, “Haeckel”, trans. Joseph McCabe (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs, n. d.), p. 67, quoted in David H. DeGroot, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>220</sup> Filosoflexikonet, Stockholm (Forum), 1991, p. 412.

<sup>221</sup> Letter to Jappe Nilssen of February 3, 1909, quoted in Reinhold Heller, *Munch; his Life and Work*, London, 1984, p. 204.

<sup>222</sup> Arne Eggum, *Edvard Munch; Paintings, Sketches, and Studies*, trans. Ragnar Christpphersen, Oslo (J. M. Stenersen), 1984, p. 240.

are to be seen within the context of the romantic tradition of seeing nature and its grandeur as a metaphor for God's grandeur.<sup>223</sup>

Nature was seen in the Northern romantic tradition as a generalised metaphor of the supernatural.<sup>224</sup> Divinity inherent in nature was a well known theme that in Norway acquired a definite nationalistic flavour in the poetry of Peter Dass ( 1647 – 1707 ). This poet was mentioned in connection with the inauguration of the festivity Hall (Aula) of Oslo University in 1911, this same festivity hall that Munch decorated between 1909 and 1916.<sup>225</sup> Especially was the theme of the forest appropriate as a setting for rendering of a certain supernatural presence [see Munch's paintings of the *Fairy Tale Forest (Eventyrskogen)*]. Writing in 1911, Jappe Nilssen referred to these forest paintings as having a mystical quality that he could also detect in the poetry of Henrik Wergeland.<sup>226</sup> *The Sun* of the Aula of Oslo University was also connected with pantheistic ideas.<sup>227</sup>

Without naming it as such, Sigbjørn Obsfelder spoke about Munch's pantheism when he mentioned "Munchs blikk for mystikken i alt det som faller ham i øynene – trær, strandlinjer...og skjelvende legemer... ." <sup>228</sup> A certain pantheism was recognised with Munch<sup>229</sup> already in 1963. In 1966 Leif Østby wrote about the "eyes" to be seen in Munch's depiction of the forest in *White Night (Hvit natt)* in the Oslo National Gallery: " Nede i skogtykningen, inne i de dypeste skyggene, har han så malt noen merkelige "øyne", runde, lysende, hvite flekker,... med ringer rundt. Vi forstår jo at det er snøen som lyser fram gjennom små åpninger i det tette baret, men vi fornemmer det likevel som "øyne", det er som også skogen har fått blikk, den stirrer på oss. Dette er det magiske i Munchs naturopplevelse,... ." <sup>230</sup> Like Obsfelder, Leif Østby does not call this "magical" feeling in Munch's art *pantheism*, yet it is implied in the description of the impression of seeing the "eyes" of the forest.

Many Munch writings as well as much of his art are pervaded by the notion of pantheism. For example, pantheistic monism is reflected by his statement that " Gud er i alt alt er i os".<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Katherine E. Anderson, *The Landscapes of Edvard Munch. A Medium of Communication and the Continuation of a Tradition*, M.A. thesis, Michigan State University, 1985, p. 81.

<sup>224</sup> Robert Rosenbloom, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, p. 118, cited in Anderson, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>225</sup> P. G. Berman, op. cit., p. 135 ff.

<sup>226</sup> Arne Eggum, *Der Linde-Fries. Edvard Munch und sein erster deutscher Mezen, Dr. Max Linde*, Lubeck, 1982, pp. 20-21, in Berman, *ibid.*, p. 29, note 25.

<sup>227</sup> Berman, *ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>228</sup> In Atle Næss, op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>229</sup> Otto Benesch, " Edvard Munchs tro", in *Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Årbok*, 1963, p. 16.

<sup>230</sup> Leif Østby, "Et Edvard Munch-motiv", in *Kunst og Kultur*, Oslo, 1966, p. 153.

<sup>231</sup> T 2782 – y, p. 109 ( N 627).

Munch saw divinity in Arnold Bøcklin's painting: “`Den hellige ild`.../ Her er guddommen –<sup>232</sup> His own motif of *Alma Mater* was called by Munch “Moder Jord”<sup>233</sup> – a pantheistic way of seeing the Earth. Munch equalled life with nature and God.<sup>234</sup> With suggestive ambivalence, however, Munch also wrote that Nature is influenced by the beholder's state of mind: “...Naturen formes efter ens Sindstemning.”<sup>235</sup> Not that nature is in itself animated, but rather that it may appear so, according to one's mood. Sometimes there is a certain ambiguity in Munch's statements *vis-a-vis* his art, ambiguity that did not stop him from giving his pictures a pantheistic character. Be it stones, trees, the sea, the moon and the sun – Munch often depicted them endowed with suggestive traits that indicate their animate condition, portraying them thus as part of the living nature: herein is to be found the pantheism in his art.

a) Stones by the shore

Stones in Munch's art seem often to take on the mood of the people that happen to be nearby. In the painting of his sister Inger (*Inger on the Beach*, also called *Ved Stranden*<sup>236</sup> and exhibited first under the title *Aften*<sup>237</sup>) 1889 (fig. 27), the stones appeared to a contemporary public as composed of a soft and formless matter.<sup>238</sup> Inger was perceived as “et legemlig Væsen uden Spor af Liv og Udtryk, lige usandt i Form som Farve. Samme Indvendig kan gjøres mod Behandlingen af de henkastede Stene...(underlining mine)”.<sup>239</sup> One can agree with the critic's observation that the stones seem to have been treated in the same manner as the figure of Inger in as much as both seem to be composed of a soft (i. e. alive) matter; therefore both Inger and the stones are portrayed as being animated or, as Ingrid Langaard also observed, “...den hvitkledte unge pikeskikkelse,... synes å være en del av den omgivende atmosfære og fullstendig oppslukt av den.”<sup>240</sup>

Arne Eggum also connects – if somewhat ambiguously - the figure of Inger with the surrounding landscape: “The slumped, seated female figure is, in itself, quite lacking in

<sup>232</sup> T 128, p. 22, r.

<sup>233</sup> Quoted in Rolf Stenersen's *Edvard Munch*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1945, no page, cited in Ida L. Sherman, “Edvard Munchs `Alma Mater`; tretti år i kamp med et motiv”, in *Kunst og Kultur*, Oslo 1975, p. 137.

<sup>234</sup> Inger Alver Gløersen, *Den Munch jeg møtte*, Oslo (Gyldendal), 1964, p. 88.

<sup>235</sup> T 127, quoted in Trygve Nergaard, “En ny Munch bok”, *Kunst og Kultur*, Oslo, 1984, p. 69.

<sup>236</sup> In Ingrid Langaard, *Edvard Munch; modningsår*, Oslo, 1960, p. 51.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>238</sup> *Aftenposten* no. 582, October 5, 1889, in *ibid.*, p. 50 and note 39.

<sup>239</sup> I. Langaard, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*.

expression; *the quality of soul we read into her* (sic)<sup>241</sup> is caused by the essential quality of the landscape around her, which becomes an image of her mood.”<sup>242</sup> Somewhat awkwardly put, this statement, nevertheless, rightly points out that the landscape echoes the mood of the seated figure. As about her “quality of soul” – it is reflected in the surrounding stones: while the girl seems petrified (of some grief?), the stones seem “alive” and soft. An exchange of mood has taken place with the result that the stones seem to have become animated. As Munch wrote, “Stenerne fik liv – og bevæget sig - ...”<sup>243</sup>

The same may be said about *Melancholy, Yellow Boat (Melankoli)* 1891/92, (fig. 28).<sup>244</sup> This painting was first exhibited under the title *Jealousy*.<sup>245</sup> It is said to depict the jealousy feelings of the figure in the foreground.<sup>246</sup> Behind this figure’s head there is a stone that is bigger than the head, seems ambiguously placed above it (though logically behind) – and is thus made to seem potentially dangerous to the figure underneath. There are other stones both in the water by the beach as well as on the shore. The figure’s head itself seems to resemble the stones that surround it, both by its size, colour scheme, as well as by its placement: as a “stone” among the others. The head seems heavy (with pain?) and the stones seem to echo this feeling as they echo the shape and colour of the head.

The position of the male figure in *Ashes (Aske)* 1894 (fig. 29) resembles the pose of the figure in *Melancholy, Yellow Boat*: down bent, with the head in his hands, expressing sadness and despair. *Ashes* was originally called *Adam and Eve after the Fall (Adam og Eva etter syndefallet)*.<sup>247</sup> It presents desolate feelings at the end of love. In the foreground there is a partially burnt log – to hint to the love that has burnt out. Munch wrote: “Jeg følte vor kjærlighed ligge på jorden som en askehop.”<sup>248</sup> The dead love is echoed by the stone at the right foreground that resembles a skull. The other stones echo partially the woman’s colours (white with a touch of pink) and partially the man’s dark/black tones. In this context, the stones seem alive with grief.

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<sup>241</sup> Cursive print mine. It seems somewhat unclear to refer to someone’s “quality of soul” and, by the same token, it is not quite possible to “read [this quality of soul] into her”. Did the author mean to refer to her animate condition? Or to something else?

<sup>242</sup> Arne Eggum, in *Symbols & Images*, p. 33.

<sup>243</sup> T 2782 – ah p. 120 (T 2906).

<sup>244</sup> Dated by I. Langaard: “probably 1892-1893”, in I. Langaard, op. cit., colour plate between pages 136 and 137.

<sup>245</sup> Arne Eggum, op.cit., p. 36.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid..

<sup>247</sup> F.Høifødt, ”Kvinnen – kjærlighet og død – dommedag” in *Edvard Munchs livsfrise; en rekonstruksjon av utstillingen hos Blomqvist 1918*, exhibition catalogue, Munch museum, Oslo, 2002, p. 103.

<sup>248</sup> Tøjner, op. cit., p. 126.

The stony shore at Åsgårdstrand provided the inspiration for the location of the three paintings discussed above. Nearby the shore there is a forest that appears in *A warm Summer Day in a Pine Forest (Varm soldag i en furuskog)*, 1892 (fig. 30). This painting resembles the background of *Ashes*. The stones here seem to be placed circularly around an empty space. In the left middleground there is a stone bigger than the rest: it seems to be depicted with eyes, nose and a mouth and some hair/grass on top. It is thus anthropomorphically rendered, to resemble a troll: “– De underlige Stenene der mystisk/ hæver sig... og tar/ former af forunderlige væsener/ der lignet trold...”,<sup>249</sup> wrote Munch.

b) Cathedral in the Forest

Trees, be it in the forest or by the nearby beach, offered an adequate topic for pantheistic expression. *Beach Mystique (Strandmystikk)* 1892 (fig. 31) was first called *Det mystiske i en nat*.<sup>250</sup> It shows a tree root and near it - a smiling stone/head endowed with eyes, nose and mouth. “Ser Du ikke et Dyr derinde – er det en sten – eller et hoved...”<sup>251</sup> asks Munch. The tree root, as I. Langaard has noticed,<sup>252</sup> resembles an underworld creature and/or a troll; according to *Aftenposten*, it is endowed with octopus-like<sup>253</sup> tentacles/arms. The tree root, like the stone, seem alive; both are rendered as “mystical” creatures, part of nature, they are the life in the apparently dead landscape.

“Mennesket er et/ Træ der har/ revet sine Rødder/ Løs fra Jorden – “<sup>254</sup> The human being, rootless, can move on the surface of the Earth; the tree, on the other hand is bound to stay put. Nevertheless, the tree, like the human being, is physiologically aware of its “body”: “Et Træ føler/ hvor en Gren/ voxer ud – “<sup>255</sup> Moreover, the tree – like humans - has premonitions: “...Træet føler/ Hvor en Gren, et/ Blad en Frugt skal/ voxe ud...”<sup>256</sup> The tree is thus endowed by Munch with anthropomorphic characteristics. It is therefore tempting to see in *The Yellow Log (Den gule tømmerstokken)* 1911/1912 (fig. 32), with its dead tree trunk, an anthropomorphic reference to mortality. By the tree trunk, especially near the part that was cut, there are some red-brown spots, as if the tree was bleeding. This yellow, cut down, log contrasts

<sup>249</sup> T 2782 – j (N 613).

<sup>250</sup> I. Langaard, op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>251</sup> T 2782-al page 123 (N 637).

<sup>252</sup> I. Langaard, ibid..

<sup>253</sup> *Aftenposten* no. 533, September 14, 1892, in ibid..

<sup>254</sup> E.Munch, T 2737, p. 92.

<sup>255</sup> T 2737, p. 93.

<sup>256</sup> T 2783, p. 40.

with the violet, standing, trees around; the colours themselves contrast with each other, as life contrasts with death.

The two trees in *Norwegian Landscape (Norsk Landskap)* 1908 – 09 (fig. 33) have their crowns outlined in such a manner as to appear leaf like; in these “leaves” the branches, analogically, resemble vessels full of sap – like human veins. These two trees, with their crowns united, seem an “old couple”, alone at the end of their (life) road. In the background is (their?) lonely home. The human – tree analogy is here quite unavoidable.<sup>257</sup>

Munch exhibited in 1911, in the *Diorama exhibition hall (Dioramalokalet)*, a group of paintings of spruce trees. A connection has been made between these paintings and the Gothic style of mediaeval cathedrals. *Aftenposten* related this “granskovens gotik” to a poem by H. Wergeland.<sup>258</sup> Arne Eggum has identified this poem as *Til en Gran*, written between 1825 and 1833.<sup>259</sup> The poem explains that the Goths created the Gothic cathedrals (sic)<sup>260</sup> because of an inherent experience of the mystique of the spruce forest: “en tilgrundliggende oplevelse af granskovens mystic.”<sup>261</sup> This “nature’s cathedral” is seen by Wergeland as being more holy than peoples’ buildings.

Also Jappe Nilssen wrote in *Dagbladet* about the Gothic character of these pictures: “Læg mærke til den række billeder af granskov ... Munch har følt sig slået af den arkitektoniske karakter i en sådan granskov, af dens gotik.”<sup>262</sup>

Wilhelm Worringer, in *Formprobleme der Gotikk*, 1912, was the first to make a connection between the “Gothic”, Gothic architecture and the German Romantic adoration of nature. As Arne Eggum wrote, “Det gotiske lå i luften...”<sup>263</sup>

Munch wrote: I ...Naaleskoven/ sees mest i den levende/ Natur Hovedlinjerne/ den lodrette og den/ vertikale - / Grenerne danner her/ de sprængende bevægede/ Linier – som opadstræbende/ gothiske Skraalinier – ”<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> *Troll trees in a Fairytale Forest (Trolltrær i eventyrskog)*, 1899, M 339 is the name of a painting that would have been appropriate to show and discuss here. It is not possible to do so, however, due to lack of access to the library of the Munch museum.

<sup>258</sup> *Aftenposten*, April 1, 1911, in *Kastrupgårdsamlingen; Edvard Munch – Malerier fra eventyrskoven*. exhibition catalogue, 1979.

<sup>259</sup> Article in *Kastrupgårdsamlingen* exhibition catalogue, no page no..

<sup>260</sup> The Goths were a Teutonic people active between 3rd and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries; Gothic cathedrals were first built in France and than in other parts of the Western Europe, between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>261</sup> Arne Eggum in *Kastrupgårdsamlingen* exhibition catalogue, no page no..

<sup>262</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>264</sup> T 157, p. 110, r..

T 162 – 45r (fig.34) is a drawing that shows such spruce trees in a forest. Some of the forms are ambiguously drawn as to make the viewer uncertain of their identity: are they trees or are they “Gothic” towers (right, middleground)? Moreover, some of these “towers” are connected into a whole “wall” in the background.

Pantheistic may be considered also the idea that people belong to/ are part of nature. *The Cathedral in the Forest (Katedralen i skogen)*, T 1703 (fig. 35), shows just that: trees that form a “cathedral”, complete with the “rose window” of the sun, enclose a group of people. Arne Eggum wrote that Munch placed himself and his whole family in the nave of this “cathedral”.<sup>265</sup> Munch’s own profile appears here, facing right; his parents are possibly drawn in the right foreground. The other figures are more difficult to identify. Nevertheless, such an identification is secondary to the main idea, namely that Nature has a spiritual aspect and that the people partake of this spirituality. “An Stelle der Landschaft tritt die Natur als geistige Totalitet”.<sup>266</sup> T 1694 (fig. 36) departs from any human presence: here there are only the trees that acquired an architectural character and the sun that became a “rose window” in the context. On this drawing Munch wrote: “Solen skinner gjennom i Granskov.”

c) The sea and the mermaid

Reinhold Heller wrote about “Munch’s identification of the sea as both the Cabbalistic source of life and a simile for artistic creation.”<sup>267</sup> Munch himself wrote that “Havet blev Dødens Bolig - ...”<sup>268</sup> Writing about himself in literary notes of autobiographical intent, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, Munch imagined himself under the water, among the creatures of the sea: “Han dukket under – i Dypet/ - han lå blandt Havets Krabber/ og Wæsener – ”<sup>269</sup> It seems that the sea was not a happy place with Munch.

The sea separates the lovers: “Da Du gik fra/ mig – følte jeg/ som det sled/ i mit Hjerte og/ selv da Du var / langt over Havet/ følte jeg som et / åbent Sår ... ”<sup>270</sup> *Two people (To mennesker)* 1895 (fig. 37) shows woman’s longing for something far away, across the sea, something that does not include the man. With the back to him, she looks over the sea completely disconnected from the man she leaves behind. It is probable that this picture is

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<sup>265</sup> A. Eggum, op. cit.. Eggum does not specify which drawing he is referring to, he only writes about “... en monumentalt udført tegning...”. The drawing of fig. 35 seems to fit Eggum’s description.

<sup>266</sup> Fritz Burger, ” Die Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts”, 1917, in Eggum, ibid..

<sup>267</sup> Reinhold Heller, *Munch; his Life and Work*, London, 1984, p. 137.

<sup>268</sup> T 2704, p. 29.

<sup>269</sup> T 2704, p. 27.

<sup>270</sup> T 2783 p. 43.

connected with Munch's first love – whom he called “Mrs. Heiberg” in his memoirs – who went to Vienna to become a *chansonette* singer.

### Mermaid

John Zarobell writing about Munch's *Mermaid (Havfrue)* 1896 (fig. 38), maintains that the mermaid is a “traditional Nordic mythological subject”.<sup>271</sup> Actually, mermaids (also called *sirens*) in the Greco – Roman mythology, were said to live on an island in the sea. They used their charming voices to lure the men who heard them to their death.<sup>272</sup> Most known is the story of Odysseus who passed by their island, heard them and escaped death only by being bound to the mast of the ship and thus unable to follow them in the sea – and die.<sup>273</sup> Munch's *Mermaid* alludes to “Mrs. Heiberg”, the singer.

*Mermaid* was a commission from Axel Heiberg for his house at Lysaker. For Munch it surely made sense to associate the name of Axel Heiberg with “Mrs. Heiberg”, as he called his first love. Munch remembers a walk by the seashore together with “Mrs. Heiberg”. The stones by the shore seemed “sea people”: “Stenene raget opover det grunde vand De så ud som en hær af havmennesker store og bitte små – De strakte sig og skar ansigter”<sup>274</sup> “Mrs Heiberg” saw a head in a stone: ”Se hvor den stenen ligner et hode sa fru Heiberg... - det bevæger sig... ”<sup>275</sup> With this occasion Brandt (Munch's *alter ego*) tells ”Mrs Heiberg” that she looks like a mermaid: “De ser ut som en havfrue sa han... Havfrue – gjentok hun og lo - ... ”<sup>276</sup>

### The moon in the sea

Numerous are the art historians and art critics who have referred to the reflection of the moon in the sea in Munch's paintings as alluding to the male reproductive organ. Alf Bøe wrote that in *The Voice (Stemmen)* c. 1893, there is “en fallosformet månerefleks”.<sup>277</sup> About the picture called *Attraction II (Anziehung II)* it has been written that “ die Lichtsaule...als Phallussymbol beschreibt sie... die Erotik der Begegnung...”<sup>278</sup> Iris Mueller-Westermann wrote about the moon pillar reflected in the water as giving the

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<sup>271</sup> John Zarobell, ”A Year in Paris: Edvard Munch's `Mermaid'”, in John Zarobell et al., *Edvard Munch's Mermaid*, exhibition catalogue, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2003, p.7.

<sup>272</sup> Edith Hamilton, *Mythology*, USA, 1969, p. 43.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>274</sup> T 2781 – N, (4), between pages 52 – 53.

<sup>275</sup> T 2781 ( 578), (p. 5).

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>277</sup> Alf Bøe, *Edvard Munch*, Oslo (Aschehoug), 1992, p. 23.

<sup>278</sup> In *Munch und Deutschland*, p.31.



viewer an erotic hint as an attribute associated with the Man/Artist: “Die Mondsaul...begegnet uns in Munchs Bilderen als erotische Anspielung immer wieder.... Im *Tanz des Lebens*...erscheint [sie] in der Bildkomposition als dem Mann/Kuenstler zugeordnetes Attribut....”<sup>279</sup> Erik Mørstad writes that “La forma data al riflesso della luna e spesso paragonata a un fallo e viene ripetuta in una serie di altri soggetti, tra cui *La voce*. Si tratta di un’interpretazione plausibile, dato che appare solo nei quadri dove l’uomo e assente....”<sup>280</sup> (underlining mine).<sup>281</sup> Also Johan H. Langaard and Reidar Revold wrote about “Livsfrisens erotiske symbol, månen”.<sup>282</sup> In the context of this thesis such an interpretation would be most appropriate, as the phallus could symbolize, as it does in certain religious systems, the generative power in nature.

Munch himself wrote quite ambiguously about the moon in the water: “En guldsøile stod i vandet – og rocket – den smeltet af sin egen glands – og guld flød udover vandet –”<sup>283</sup> The sexual overtones here present are further reinforced by Munch’s description of the mermaid in connection with the moon in the water: “Der er en havfrue der i månesøilen der ser på månen der stor og rund står over horisonten - / hun vugger sig i månesøilen og har guldhår - / Lægger sig mat og træt tilbage og guldhåret flyder på vandet”<sup>284</sup> There is here a possible hint to a sexual encounter between the mermaid and the moon pillar.

Nevertheless, the reflex of the moon in the water appears indeed in nature as Munch has painted it – cf. a photograph of such a reflex of the moon in fig. 39. Therefore it is quite possible that Munch originally just painted a naturalistic reflex of the moon in the water and then, in some pictures, he styled it. Styled or not, the representation acquired subsequently a phallic interpretation probably due to the development of, and fashion with, psychoanalytic interpretations. Nevertheless, as Sigmund Freud himself is supposed to have said: “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”<sup>285</sup>

<sup>279</sup> Iris Mueller-Westermann, *Edvard Munch; die Selbstbildnisse*, Ph.D. dissertation, Hamburg University, 1997, p. 69. She gives here as example the painting entitled *The Dance of Life (Livets dans)*.

<sup>280</sup> Erik Mørstad, “Il linguaggio formale di Edvard Munch: formule e caricature”, in *Munch 1863 – 1944*, Øivind Storm Bjerke, ed., Milano, 2005, p.47: “The form given to the reflection of the moon is often compared with a phallus and came to be repeated in a series of other scenarios, among them [in] *The Voice*. It is a plausible interpretation, given that [it] appears only in the pictures where the man is absent” (underlining and translation mine).

<sup>281</sup> Actually the moon shaft in the water appears also in paintings where the man is very much present, such as, for example, in *The Dance of Life*, 1899.

<sup>282</sup> In *Edvard Munch; Aula-dekorasjonene: et Billedverk*, Oslo (Stenersen), 1960, p. 26.

<sup>283</sup> T 2782 – ah p.120 (T 2906).

<sup>284</sup> T. 2782 – ab p. 112 (N 630).

<sup>285</sup> Attributed to Sigmund Freud – cf.: [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Sigmund\\_Freud](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Sigmund_Freud)

d) The Sun

*The Sun (Solen)* 1911-16 (fig.40) was selected for the main wall of the Aula of the downtown Oslo University. It was a main topic in the exhibition organized in 2006 by the Munch museum, called *LIVSKRAFT; vitalismen som kunsterisk impuls 1900-1930*. In the exhibition catalogue<sup>286</sup> Munch's *Sun* is discussed from two points of view: 1) as the physical source of light and heat – leading to its “vitalist” interpretation, and 2) as a metaphysical topic in itself.<sup>287</sup>

The source of light and heat

In her contribution to the catalogue, “Mens sana in corpore sano: Munch's vitale kropper”, Patricia G. Berman mentions contemporary (with Munch) medical attitude towards the sunlight: “...sollys styrker kroppens evne til å helbrede seg selv,...”.<sup>288</sup> Further on she writes about “...tidens solterapi omtalt som `moderne soltilbedelse` ...”.<sup>289</sup> Finally she writes about “...Munch's fremstilling av solen og dens stråler av energi i Aula-maleriene ...”.<sup>290</sup> (underlining mine).

Physical well-being caused by the sun was accompanied by an awareness of sun's metaphysical connotations. This holds true both for Munch and his contemporaries as well as for the authors of the exhibition catalogue here discussed. If sun therapy (“solterapi”) was seen as sun adoration (“soltilbedelse”) than sun exposure acquires a double significance: one directly physical and the other metaphysical. These two perspectives seem often superimposed: “Lys- og sol- metaphoreer ble brukt for å beskrive kilder til erkjennelse, visdom og sunnhet, og slik blir *Solen*...i Edvard Munchs aulautsmykking et

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<sup>286</sup> *LIVSKRAFT; vitalismen som kunsterisk impuls 1900-1930*, Karen E. Lerheim and Ingebjørg Ydstie, eds., Munch museum, Oslo, 2006.

<sup>287</sup> Cf. Sophia Oftedahl, op. cit., and especially pp.20 ff., where *The Sun* is discussed exactly from these two perspectives.

<sup>288</sup> *LIVSKRAFT*..., exhibition catalogue, p. 57. Cf. Oftedahl, op. cit., p. 22: “...Munch ...wrote (about the *Sick Girl*) that “In the same chair in which I painted the sick one I and all my dear ones, from my mother on, have been sitting, longing for the sun” (underlining mine). This longing is a very physical one, best understood by Norway's inhabitants faced with the long Norwegian winter.

<sup>289</sup> In *LIVSKRAFT*..., p.57.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.. Cf. Oftedahl, p. 20: “Rising out of the sea and reflecting itself in it, Munch's sun sends away from its incandescent (white) centre rays in all the colours of the rainbow. These rays are rendered with almost a solid consistency. They reach everywhere, in all corners of the painting and penetrate not only the rarefied medium of the air and water but also the solid earth and the rocks of the mountain. Thus the rays became vehicles for the transmission of life-giving energy of the sun. The concentric expanding circles of yellow light that surround the centre serve to accentuate both its explosive luminosity and the arrow-like rays that, passing through them, shoot in all possible directions – as if to reach everywhere in the universe....”

sentralt motiv i mer enn en betydning.”<sup>291</sup> Sources of physical health (“sunnhet”) on one hand and mental/spiritual knowledge/cognition (“erkjennelse”) and wisdom (“visdom”) on the other, are here said to be described by the same metaphors of light and the sun.

Although the formulation is here somewhat confusing, it reflects the idea expressed by the Latin proverb used by Berman in the title of her contribution: a healthy mind is to be found in a healthy body. In other words, there is a connection between mind and body, connection that is expressed best by a monistic *Weltanschauung*.

In his contribution<sup>292</sup> Erik Mørstad discusses Sven Halse’s reference to one of E. Haeckel’s pupils, Hans Driesch. “... Driesch ...ut fra et empirisk grunnlag postulerte...at det finnes en immateriell livskraft som er uavhengig av materiens kjemiske sammensetning og prosesser. Prosjektet var å oppheve skillet mellom fysikk og metafysikk, og i religiøs forstand mellom ånd og materie. Ifølge teorien er livskraften ikke en transcendent størrelse, men er til stede i materien....”<sup>293</sup> (underlining mine). Therefore, it is to be understood that, as a monist, Driesch agreed with the idea of a unity of spirit and substance. In that case, the vital life force (“livskraften”) and the substance (“materien”) are united (as the vital force = spirit), and thus the vitalist element does get a transcendent aspect. It follows that Mørstad’s statement that “ifølge teorien er livskraften ikke en transcendent størrelse, men er til stede i materien” is not quite accurate. In addition Mørstad does not show that Munch was aware of Driesch’s theories – while we know that he was aware of Haeckel’s point of view.

### The metaphysical sun

Even though a connection between the physical aspects of the sun and its metaphysical connotations is established, the metaphysical point of view seems to be placed in the background in the exhibition catalogue here discussed. On the other hand, as its title says, this catalogue favours a vitalist-physical interpretation of the sun motif in Munch’s art.

The sun seen from a monist/pantheistic perspective appears in Munch’s drawings T 2547 – 135 (fig. 41) and T 410 (fig. 42). Both drawings show trees that grow out of the disintegrating corpses at their roots. Behind each of the trees there is a sun whose rays are superimposed upon the tree motif. Thus the tree with the corpses at its roots (cf.

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<sup>291</sup> Gunnar Sørensen, “Vitalismens år”, in *LIVSKRAFT...*, p. 14.

<sup>292</sup> Erik Mørstad, “Badende menn: kroppspolitikk, kroppsteknikk og kroppspølse”, in *LIVSKRAFT...*, p. 72.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid..

metabolism motifs earlier in this chapter) and the sun behind it are connected to form a monist emblem of the continuity of life after death – in each of the two drawings.

Further pantheistic drawings of the sun are present in the group called “from the fairy tale forest” (cf. Kastrupgårdsamlingen, *Malerier fra eventyrskoven*): T 152 – 14 (fig. 43) and T 1685 (fig. 44). Here sun’s metaphysics is rendered through its connection with the cathedral in the forest, seen as a building with spiritual connotations. The sun is here, like in T 1694 (fig. 45), made to function simultaneously as a rose window in a cathedral as well as the celestial body itself.

The sun as the source of light, and the light as a metaphor for cognition and wisdom lead Munch and his contemporaries to see the light itself (as well as the sun) as divine. Munch wrote: “Man vender sin tanke opad mod lysets rike – det ufattelige - ...”<sup>294</sup> If one substitutes “lysets rike” with “the Heaven”, and “det ufattelige” with “God”, a clear idea emerges: Munch compared Heaven with a kingdom of light and thought about God as inconceivable. The importance that Munch gave to his art is well known. Through his art Munch hoped to arrive at an understanding of the divine: “Jeg søgte lyset igjennem den [i.e. his art – `min kunst`]”<sup>295</sup>

Nevertheless, equating the sun and the light with the divine was not a new idea in Munch’s time. This concept can be traced back to Plato: “... Och ner han [i.e. the Man] kom ut i dagsljuset och fick solen i øgonen, ... Han skulle behøva venja sig... till sist skulle han vara i stånd att se på solen...”<sup>296</sup> “Att se på solen” – i.e. to arrive at an understanding of the divine.

The neoplatonism continued in the same vein. Moreover, it borrowed a lot from many eastern religions and the various qualities attributable to light were no exception. Eastern philosophies were in vogue during Munch’s creative years.<sup>297</sup> Strindberg noted in his diary that in November 1901 he was reading about Indian religions.<sup>298</sup> These were fashionable both in Paris and Berlin, as well as in Oslo. The periodical *Samtiden* began to be published in Bergen early in 1890s. Editors were Jørgen Brunchorst and Gerhard Gran, both associated with the “Kristiania bohemen”. In an article published in *Samtiden*<sup>299</sup> called “Litteratur: Den yngste generation”, Gerhard Gran wrote: “...den yngste slægt...styrter

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<sup>294</sup> T 2748, p. 24.

<sup>295</sup> T 2748 – c, between pp. 72-73 ( N 539).

<sup>296</sup> Plato, the State dialogue, about The Sun, Swedish translation, in Gøsta Svenæus, *Ide och innehåll i Edvard Munchs konst*, Oslo, 1953, p.121, note 2.

<sup>297</sup> Gunnar Sørensen, op.cit., pp.13-14. Cf. Oftedahl, op.cit., pp.20 ff..

<sup>298</sup> August Strindberg, *From an Occult Diary; marriage with Harriet Bosse*, ed. with an introduction by Torsten Eklund, translated by Mary Sandbach, London, 1965, p. 55.

<sup>299</sup> *Samtiden*, 5, Bergen, 1894, p.42.

...sig selv ind i mysteriernes verden, raadspørger psykografer, underholder sig med medier, flygter for bevidstvirkeligheden til fremmede og fjerne steder og tider, til den oldkristelige middelalder, til Østerlandene, østenfor sol og vestenfor måne; ...”.

As Strindberg knew when he wrote the *Dream Play*, one of the qualities of light in Indian religions is that light is creative.<sup>300</sup> Munch’s *Sun in the Aula*, therefore, being the source of light symbolises also the source of creativity – and is thus a fit picture for a festivity hall of a university. Moreover, in the same Indian religions light symbolises existence itself, as well as immortality: “`du non-etre (*asat*) conduis-moi a l’etre (*sat*), de l’obscurite conduis-moi a la lumiere (*tamaso ma jyotir gamaya*), de la mort conduis-moi a l’immortalite.` / La lumiere est donc identique a l’etre et a l’immortalite.”<sup>301</sup>

Light can symbolize wisdom and spirituality (see also above): “La sagesse, la saintete, bref, la spiritualite pure sont symbolisee ... [in] l’Inde – par la plus intense luminosite.”<sup>302</sup> Light can also (cf. above) symbolise a personal divine presence (for Munch – “det ufattelige”): “... la divinite... etant Lumiere ou emanant de la lumiere...”<sup>303</sup>

Finally, by extension, light can symbolise mental/spiritual sanity. In Norwegian literature the concept of Light had a similar universal significance: in Ibsen’s *Ghosts*,<sup>304</sup> Oswald asks his mother to “give [him] the sun” at the moment when his mind darkened with disease and madness (see the end of the play).

“...quelles que soient la nature et l’intensite de l’experience de la Lumiere, elle evolue toujours en experience religieuse. Entre tous les types d’experience de lumiere... il y a ce denominateur commun: elle font sortir l’homme de son Univers profane ou de sa situation historique, et le projetent dans un Univers qualitativement different, qui est un tout autre monde, transcendent et sacre. La structure de cet Univers sacre et transcendent varie d’une culture a l’autre, d’une religion a l’autre... Mais il y a pourtant cet element commun: l’Univers que l’on decouvre par la rancontre avec la Lumiere s’oppose a l’Univers profane – ou le transcende – du fait qu’il est d’essence spirituelle, c’est-a-dire qu’il est uniquement accessible a ceux pour qui l’Esprit existe... Chacun decouvre [in the meaning of Light] ce qu’il etait spirituellement et culturellement prepare a decouvrir. Mais il reste ce fait...[that] la Lumiere lui revele... le monde de l’Esprit, du sacre, de la liberte, en un mot...le monde sanctifie par la presence de Dieu.”<sup>305</sup>

Munch’s *Sun in the Aula* developed as a concept out of the pictures shown in figs. 13, 14, 15 as well as out of many more preparatory sketches. It is not a naturalistic rendering of the sun – with its rays that penetrate the solid earth and its concentrating circles suggesting vibrations – but rather a symbolic one. It appears as the aim of

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<sup>300</sup> A. Strindberg, op. cit., pp.55 ff. Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles et l’androgyn*e, France (Gallimard), 1962, p. 27.

<sup>301</sup> M. Eliade, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>304</sup> Munch designed the sets for this play for Max Reinhard’s *Kammerspiele* – see Thomas M. Messer, *Edvard Munch*, New York, 1971, p. 43.

<sup>305</sup> M. Eliade, op. cit., pp. 93 – 94.

humanity's aspirations. In the *Human Mountain* and the pictures related to it, people strive to arrive on top of the mountain, where the sun is to be found: they aspire towards the light – see figs 13 and 14. This aspiration goes beyond the purely vitalist wish for a healthy body. To humanity's struggle towards the light has been substituted in *The Sun* the source of light itself

## Synaesthesia

”En frise mener jeg kan godt ha virkningen av en symfoni.  
Den kan hæve sig i lyset og sænke sig i dybden. Den kan stige og  
falde i styrke. Likeledes kan dens toner lyde og gjenlyde igjennem  
dem, skingrende toner og trommelydene kan falde spredt ind./ Likefuldt  
kan der være rytme. / Selv nu hos Blomquist har livsfrisen virkning  
av en symfoni, av rytme.”<sup>306</sup>

Thus wrote Munch about his *Frieze of Life (Livsfrisen)* with the occasion of an exhibition at the Blomquist art gallery in 1918. The music-related comparison refers to an aspect of his art that has often been pointed out but seldom analysed: this aspect has been - incorrectly – called “synaesthesia”.

Henning Alsvik wrote that “...Munch...er inne på synesthesien....og med sin synestetiske legning var han en beundrer av Wagner.”<sup>307</sup> Shelley Wood Cordulack wrote that “Perhaps for Munch the artist’s heightened sense of hearing paralleled that of sight in its synaesthetic qualities. The artist could transform sounds heard into lines and colors seen... .”<sup>308</sup>

Ingrid Langaard wrote about Munch that “Med sin uhyre fintmerkende synsnerve og overutviklede sensibilitet oppfatter han fargen som om den hadde personlig liv. Han kunne si om en bestemt farge: `Den er saa vellystig, at den næsten blir liderlig`. Fargene er bevisst tatt i uttrykkets tjeneste for å meddele hans subjektive opplevelse av motivet. Det viser hvor tidlig Munchs forestillingsverden var synestetisk betonet... .”<sup>309</sup>

Therefore Munch’s postulated synesthetic qualities have been connected with his admiration for Wagner (Henning Alsvik), a developed sense of sight and hearing (Shelley Wood Cordulack) and a generally heightened sensitivity (Ingrid Langaard). These statements reflect common misconceptions about synaesthesia. These misconceptions were *in vogue* both during Munch’s lifetime as well as now – even though at present much has been done to correct them.

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<sup>306</sup> Edvard Munch, “ I anledning kritikken “, in *Livs-Frisen*, 1918, pp. 5-6.

<sup>307</sup> Henning Alsvik, ”Edvard Munchs modningsår”, in *Kunst og Kultur*, 44, Oslo 1961, pp. 113-114.

<sup>308</sup> Shelley Wood Cordulack, op.cit., p. 97.

<sup>309</sup> Ingrid Langaard, op.cit., p. 25.

## Synesthesia in Oslo, Berlin and Paris

In Oslo synaesthesia was discussed by Gerhard Gran in his article in *Samtiden* mentioned in the previous chapter. In this article he reflects the contemporary view of the subject, especially as it developed in France and at the same time he acknowledges its antecedents in old sensory observations: "...man har ...fremdraget den ældgamle iagttagelse, at en fornemmelse af den ene sans har en tilsvarende fornemmelse i de andre sanser; de unge franske digtere har det saaledes meget travelt med, hvad de kalder *audition coloree*, ...: at der til en bestemt lydforneemmelse stadig svarer en bestemt synsforneemmelse, og Rimbaud har opstillet en hel farveskala for vokalerne, en skala, der dog ikke paa nogen maade antages af hans digterkollegaer, men har givet anledning til en heftig polemik, - en alvorlig discussion, om hvorvidt vokalen a er rød eller grøn (sic – about the colour of the vowel a with Rimbaud see further on in this chapter)... ”<sup>310</sup>

With this occasion Gran mentions a little book which came out that Christmas, entitled *The Universe (Verdensaltet)*.<sup>311</sup> This booklet was originally written in German under the title *Weltall, Die Kunst der Erhabenen*, but published only in Danish translation in Copenhagen in 1893. Its authors were C.G. Uddgren and Max Dauthendey, members of the group *Zum Schwarzen Ferkel* in Berlin.<sup>312</sup> Its complete Danish title was *Verdensaltet; det nye sublime i kunsten* and was dedicated to poets and artists: "Digtere og Kunstnere tilegnet".

Synaesthesia is here described in terms of physiological sense impressions: "Hver eneste Sands har i enhver Grad af sin Bevægelse hos hver enkelt af de andre Sandser en tilsvarende Grad, som fuldstændigt falder sammen med den;..."<sup>313</sup> These impressions are quite subjectively made to correspond to each other, for example: "Indtrykket af det svagt himmelblaa ejer blant Tonerne sit tilsvarende i:

- en Harpeakkord –

blandt Lugtene i:

- Duften af Mandelblomster –

blandt Smags-Fornemmelserne i:

- Mælkens Sødme –

blandt Følelses-Indtrykkene i:

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<sup>310</sup> Gerhard Gran, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.. I am indebted to Mr. Øivind Storm Bjerke for having a copy of *Verdensaltet* sent to me.

<sup>312</sup> Carla Lathe, op.cit., p. 340, note 2.

<sup>313</sup> C.G. Uddgren and M. Dauthendey, *Verdensaltet; det nye sublime i kunsten*, Copenhagen, 1893, p. 14.



- den lune Fugtighed i en Grotte.”<sup>314</sup>

According to the authors, not only does one sense correspond to another, but also their degree of sensory perception (mild or strong) corresponds as well – cf. the above mentioned example.

In the chapter called *Den intime kunst*<sup>315</sup> the authors extol the rendering of intimate impressions as typical for artists as contrasted to those who do not have an artistic bent.<sup>316</sup> Edvard Munch is here mentioned as an example of the typical painter personality.<sup>317</sup> Therefore it is quite safe to assume that Munch was acquainted with the ideas expressed in this booklet.

In Germany it was Richard Wagner who advocated a synthesis of the arts in a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Some historians have even thought that he himself had such an interest due to his – supposed - colour hearing.<sup>318</sup> The members of the group *Zum Schwarzen Ferkel* were Wagner enthusiasts, interested in the connections between various art forms – and so was Edvard Munch.<sup>319</sup> In a letter, from Aasgaardstrand, to Frederick Delius, dated 24/6 99, Munch expresses his wish to accomplish a planned union between graphic arts, music and literature, represented respectively by himself, Delius and I.P.Jakobsen: “ Om vi kunde få arangeret den planen med raderinger og musik – og I.P. Jakobsen?”<sup>320</sup>

Gerhard Gran refers – but does not name it - in his article in *Samtiden* to Arthur Rimbaud’s 1883 poem *Voyelles*, which starts with a description of the colours of the vowels:

“ A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue:...”<sup>321</sup>

(Already in 1854 Georg Brandes wrote a poem called *The Color of the Vowels* as well).<sup>322</sup> Nevertheless, the most famous poet to deal with an idea that was to be subsequently associated with synaesthesia, was Charles Pierre Baudelaire. His poem

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid..

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., pp. 25 ff.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., pp. 35 ff..

<sup>318</sup> Kevin T. Dann, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen; Synaesthesia and the Search for Transcendental Knowledge*, New Haven and London (Yale University Press), 1998, p. 68.

<sup>319</sup> Lathe, op.cit., p. 231.

<sup>320</sup> In *Letters from Edvard Munch to foreign persons (Brev fra Edvard Munch til utenlandske personer)*, file in the library of the Munch museum, Oslo.

<sup>321</sup> The poem is translated into English in Kevin T. Dann, op.cit., p. 22.

<sup>322</sup> Mentioned in Kevin T. Dann, ibid., p. 10.

*Correspondences* (*Correspondances*), 1857, was published in *Les fleurs du mal*. The second stanza ends with a line that was to become famous:

“ Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se respondent.”

It was supposed to deal with Emanuel Swedenborg’s doctrine of *Entsprechungen* (*correspondences*). This doctrine, in turn, repeated the medieval alchemists’ principle of correspondences. This principle assumed a correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm. Hermes Trismegistus is supposed to have stated that “That which is above is like that which is below,...”<sup>323</sup> This is best explained by Baudelaire’s essay on Victor Hugo: “ Swedenborg has taught us that everything, form, movement, number, color, scent, in the spiritual as in the natural order, is significant, reciprocal, related, correspondent... .”<sup>324</sup> Moreover, such ideas are in accord also with Spinoza’s philosophy regarding the unity of substance<sup>325</sup> (cf. also previous chapter on monism).

To summarise:

Synaesthesia – often referred to, but not always mentioned by name as such – assumed, empirically and quite subjectively, the existence of a connection/correspondence between disparate elements. Thus Wagner’s concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, with its implied connection between the arts, was, wrongly, amalgamated with the idea of a physiological correspondence between the senses. This reference to the senses (Baudelaire), in turn, was connected with the Romantic idea of the superiority of the artist compared to the man in the street – cf. the dedication of *Verdensaltet* to poets and artists. The artist’s senses were considered more developed than those of the common man, therefore he was seen as a person with a more developed sensitivity. This sensitivity was often associated with music/sound/vowels as well as with colours (Rimbaud) – though all the senses were taken into consideration as a matter of principle. The correspondence of the senses was ultimately considered a proof of the unity of substance and thus was synaesthesia connected with the concept of monism.

Synaesthesia was – and sometimes still is - therefore perceived from a subjective and emotional perspective that is contradicted by the general contemporary view of the phenomenon.

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<sup>323</sup> Kevin T. Dann, *ibid.*, pp. 37 ff..

<sup>324</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*.

### What is synaesthesia?

Synaesthesia<sup>326</sup> (Greek *syn* meaning together and *aisthesis* meaning perception) means “joined sensation”. In medicine, especially in neuroscience, the term describes an involuntary perceptual experience, whereby the stimulation of one sense results in an (additional) perception in another sense. This perceptual experience is quite seldom – it occurs in c. 1 out of 25000 persons and is a function of the left-hemisphere of the brain. Even though all the five senses may combine (two and two) to result in synaesthetic experiences, the most common is the combination of sight with sound. Within this combination, the perception of colour as sound, and vice versa, is most frequently reported.<sup>327</sup>

### “ I heard the sound of colors.”

Synaesthets were considered – by nonsynaesthets – as evolutionary more advanced than themselves, from a cognitive point of view. They were considered superior beings possessing superior faculties.<sup>328</sup> As “gifted” individuals, endowed with a privileged perceptual capacity<sup>329</sup>, they were supposed to have access to the transcendental world, unseen and unapproachable to nonsynaesthetes.<sup>330</sup> Often such individuals were supposed to be found among artists, poets and painters.

Without naming synaesthesia as such, some critics extolled certain painters for their “musical” qualities. Writing about Munch’s painting *Evening ( Aften/Melankoli)* in 1891, Christian Krohg wrote that the shore line is as harmonious as pure music (“Det er Musikk”).<sup>331</sup> He continues: “Det siste slagord nu er `klang` i farven. Har noen hørt slik klang i farven som i dette bilde. ... Det kan nok hende at dette nærmest grenser til musikk og ikke til maleri, men det er da iallfall briljant musikk, Munch burde ha komponistgasje. ... han er den eneste, den første som vender seg til idealismen, ... ”<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Unless in quotes, Kevin T. Dann’s spelling of this word is followed here because it uses the vowel “a” – like in Greek, wherefrom the word was coined, in addition to the vowel “e”. Thus: “synaesthesia”, rather than “synesthesia”.

<sup>327</sup> [http://wearcam.org/synesthesia/synesthesia\\_long.html](http://wearcam.org/synesthesia/synesthesia_long.html)

<sup>328</sup> Kevin T. Dann, op.cit., p. 15.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>331</sup> In Knut Berg, “Om dateringen av et Munch-maleri”, *Kunst og Kultur*, 76, 1993, p. 217.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., pp.217-218.

On the other hand, the poets and artists in question often claimed possession of synaesthetic faculties. Thus the French poet Theophile Gautier wrote in 1843: “My hearing was inordinately developed; I heard the sound of colors. Green, red, blue, yellow sounds came to me perfectly distinctly.”<sup>333</sup>

### Synaesthetic imagery

Paradoxically, even though a phenomenon connected with the senses, synaesthesia was seen as transcending them. Due to the doctrine of correspondences of Baudelaire – and through him, of Swedenborg – synaesthesia acquired a spiritual, “supersensory”, interpretation. The writer Victor Segalen wrote in his *Les synesthesies et l’ecole symboliste* about the supposed occult sides of the phenomenon.<sup>334</sup> In illustrations of occult imagery synaesthesia appears as one of its five main qualities.<sup>335</sup> In the art of Edvard Munch, however, synaesthesia appears both connected with the senses as well as superseding them.

#### - **Aura**

The ability to see the aura around people was connected with a synaesthetic/mystic power.<sup>336</sup> People possessing this ability were called “adepts”<sup>337</sup> who were “spiritually in-tune.”<sup>338</sup> Gustav Schiefler noted in his diary in July 1907 that Munch told him about his (i.e. Munch’s) ability to see the aura around people: “Er sprach davon, wie er die Menschen sehe und welche Vorstellung er sich von ihrem Wesen mache. Die Gestalten erscheinen ihm oft von einer “Aura” umgeben, ... .”<sup>339</sup>

Nevertheless, in his diary Munch wrote about human perception as being somewhat limited: “Vi ser det vi ser – fordi vi har/ således beskafne Øine - / Hvad er vi?.../en usynlig Flammering - / Havde vi annerledes beskafne Øine – vilde vi... - Kunde vi se vore/ ydre Flammeringe - ... .”<sup>340</sup> From here it may be possible to deduce that Munch was aware of the elevated position in which were set those having abilities connected with the supernatural, synaesthesia and the capacity to see auras, yet that he himself did not possess such powers. That he told Schiefler that he could see auras may be explained

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<sup>333</sup> Quoted in Kevin T. Dann, p. 15.

<sup>334</sup> In *ibid.*, pp.40 ff.

<sup>335</sup> *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, exhibition catalogue, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, New York (Abbeville Press), 1986, p. 22.

<sup>336</sup> [http://www.forskning.no/Artikler/2004/oktober/1098265902.76/artikkel\\_print](http://www.forskning.no/Artikler/2004/oktober/1098265902.76/artikkel_print)

<sup>337</sup> <http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/a/aura.html>

<sup>338</sup> <http://www.bioedonline.org/news/news.cfm?art=1314>

<sup>339</sup> *Edvard Munch / Gustav Schiefler; Briefwechsel*, vol. 1, 1902-1914, Arne Eggum, ed., Hamburg, 1987, p. 250.

<sup>340</sup> T 2704, p. 42.

through a certain posing attitude, connected with his wish to be seen in a certain way by his admirers.

What is aura?

### I - Aura around people

In Christian art a glow was often depicted around the heads of saints – it is called a “halo” or “gloria”.<sup>341</sup> It was also depicted surrounding the heads of deities and mystics. Sometimes it has been connected with the notion of “charkas”.<sup>342</sup> It is said that the seventh charka, “the crown- (*sahasrara*) whirls above the top of the head. Its 972 spokes radiate a glowing purple, the most spiritual of all the colors. It...reveals the person’s conscious evolution. ...when activated it brings supreme enlightenment...[It]...whirls in a dome....”<sup>343</sup>

Auras, however, are often depicted surrounding the whole person, not only the head. They are, in these cases, considered to be coloured emanations (of energy)<sup>344</sup>, an energy field<sup>345</sup> or energy patterns<sup>346</sup>. Baron Carl von Reichenbach (1788-1869) considered them to be a reflection of the universal life force, which he called “Odic force” (from the Norse god Odin). Individuals could – and did - supposedly emanate their own auras.<sup>347</sup> Also called “biofields”, they are supposedly photographed by a process called “Kirlian photography”.<sup>348</sup>

### II - Aura in the eye/brain of the beholder

There exists also another explanation of the aura phenomenon: according to a study made at the University College London by Dr. Jamie Ward, a form of synaesthesia enabled the synaesthetes to see auras. “A popular notion is that some people have a magical ability to detect the hidden emotions of others by seeing a colourful *aura* or energy field that they give off. Our study suggests a different interpretation. These colours do not reflect hidden energies being given off by other people, rather they are created entirely in the brain of the beholder... . The ability of some people to see the coloured auras of others has held an important place in folklore and mysticism throughout the ages. Although many people claiming to have such

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<sup>341</sup> Cf. Munch’s *Madonna*, 1893-94, where such a “halo” appears around the head of the subject depicted in the painting.

<sup>342</sup> “Chakra” means wheel in Sanskrit. The concept exists in Hindu yogic literature. It supposes the existence of seven major *charkas* or energy fields that are connected to each other and to the human body. Cf.

<http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/c/chakras.html>

<sup>343</sup> Ibid..

<sup>344</sup> <http://www.bioedonline.org/news/news.cfm?art=1314>

<sup>345</sup> [http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub\\_releases/2004-10/ucl-mfa101804.php](http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2004-10/ucl-mfa101804.php)

<sup>346</sup> <http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/a/aura.html>

<sup>347</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odic\\_force](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odic_force)

<sup>348</sup> [http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/k/kirlian\\_photography.html](http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/k/kirlian_photography.html)

powers could be charlatans, it is also conceivable that others are born with a gift of synaesthesia.”<sup>349</sup>

Whether he did see them or not, however, Munch did paint auras around people.

### *Madonna's aura*

The above-mentioned *Madonna* (fig. 46) was painted in the same year as *Verdensaltet* was published in Copenhagen. Not only does she have a halo around her head, she has also several (at least three) layers of colour painted parallel with her entire figure and separated from each other by brownish outlines. The layer closest to her body is lighter in tone than the others and yellowish in colour. It is best seen in the upper right side of the painting. These colour layers change in the lower part of the painting, though they never lose entirely their shape and intent: they surround the body as if they emanated from it. “It is suggested that three different auras in layers surround the body.... The inner layer is said to be yellowish in hue and is supposed to indicate the state of the nervous system....”<sup>350</sup>

Arne Eggum characterises this motif of the *Madonna* as “pseudo-sakral”<sup>351</sup> implying thus a comparison with the traditional representations of the Madonna - which are to be seen as “really sacred”(?) That the figure is naked, yet has a halo and is still called “Madonna”, probably made him disregard the metaphysic implications of the aura around the figure.

He rightly mentions that some art historians have stressed the sexual aspect of the motif, while others have connected it with the phenomenon of giving birth. It seems that he himself holds with the opinion of those art historians who connected the motif with the idea of death. To justify this last view, he quotes Munch himself:

“Pausen da al verden standset sin gang – Dit ansigt rummer al jorderiks skjønhed – Dine læber karmosinrøde som den kommende frugt glider fra hinanden som i smerte – Et ligs smil – Nu rækker livet døden hånden – Kjæden knyttes der binder de tusind slægter der er døde til de tusind slægter der kommer.”<sup>352</sup>

It is, however, possible to understand this motif as referring to the moment of conception itself. Metaphorically, as Munch often wrote, at that moment “...rækker livet døden hånden - ...”. In a hand-coloured lithograph of 1895-1898? (fig. 47) the

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<sup>349</sup> [http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub\\_releases/2004-10/ucl-mfa101804.php](http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2004-10/ucl-mfa101804.php)

<sup>350</sup> <http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/a/aura.html>

<sup>351</sup> In *Edvard Munch; malerier – skisser og studier*, Oslo, 1983, p. 116. English edition: *Edvard Munch; Paintings, sketches and studies*, Oslo, 1986, p. 116.

<sup>352</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*.

frame presents spermatozoa that surround the motif moving all in the same direction, from lower left upwards, to the right and then down again on the right side. In the lower left corner, below the starting point of the spermatozoa, there is a little foetus with a dead-like skull. Elements referring to the life to come – the spermatozoa and the foetus – are here combined with death allusions – the skull of the foetus and the closed eyes of the main figure (“Et ligs smil”). The moment of conception is the one when “Kjæden knyttet der binder de tusind slægter der er døde til de tusind slægter der kommer”. Such an emotional state is here rendered by the surrounding aura, since one of its functions is to express the emotions of the figure it surrounds.<sup>353</sup> The figure of the *Madonna*, in her life-creating function, can be understood as divine, just as the mother of Jesus was considered holy by Christians. Munch’s *Madonna* is to be understood as a Christian metaphor, used by the painter to express his thoughts about the function of woman in human society. Friedrich Nietzsche’s ideas about woman’s role (compared to that of the man) can be heard in the background: “Thus would I have man and woman: the one fit for warfare, the other fit for giving birth... (underlining mine)”<sup>354</sup>

Fig. 48<sup>355</sup> is a drawing that combines several motives of Munch’s art: 1) the Adam and Eve motif, 2) the metabolism motif, 3) the man with the hammer (Thor?<sup>356</sup>) – as the fighting man “fit for warfare” (see the Nietzsche quote above), and 4) the Madonna motif.

The figure of Eve/Madonna has her arms placed in the same position as the arms of the Madonnas of figs. 46 and 47. A snake/spermatozoon arises from the underground up on her right. She appears scared of it (see the expression of her eyes that look at the snake/spermatozoon, combined with an indication of retreat movement in the opposite direction). Therefore, in this context, the position of her raised right arm seems justified beyond being just an echo of the Madonna motif. It seems that this Eve/Madonna is unwilling to fulfil her “duty” of conceiving/giving birth: in spite of the fertility symbols (the abundant apples of the tree) around her, and the metabolism motif of the tree that seems to grow out of a figure/foetus partly under the ground level, she retreats from the spermatozoon/snake. Would this explain the figure of Adam/Thor(?), with his angry

<sup>353</sup> Aura is said to show emotional states – cf. <http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/a/aura.html>

<sup>354</sup> *Zarathustra* III, 56, “Old and New Tables”, sect.23, quoted in

<http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Friedrich.Nietzsche> Cf. also Nietzsche’s Zarathustra saying: “Alt som angår kvinnen er en gate og alt som angår kvinnen har en løsning, det er kalt graviditet” – quoted in *Munch og kvinnen*, exhibition catalogue, Bergen Art Museum, Bergen, 2002, p. 19.

<sup>355</sup> T 412

<sup>356</sup> Seldom used in Munch’s art

fists holding the hammer? Munch wrote: “Jeg har levet i overgangstiden mit i kvinneemancipationen. Da blev kvinnen der forfører og lokker og bedrager mannen – Carmens tid – I overgangstiden blev manden den svagere.”<sup>357</sup> Adam/Thor’s figure is here expressing Munch’s misogynistic anger towards “Carmen”, the liberated woman.

Unlike the man, the woman is here, like the other Madonnas, surrounded by her - protective - “aura”.

#### “Mrs. Heiberg’s” aura

Aura that protects and/or includes – probably Munch’s own contribution to the aura concept – appears sometimes in drawings that present two persons emotionally connected to each other. It is a Munch characteristic to employ natural/logical elements in order to express a metaphysical idea. *Loving couple in waves (Elskende par i bølger)* 1894/95, (fig. 49) presents a couple surrounded by waves that function as aura; if the waves were made of water, the couple would drown. The waves referred to here are emotion waves, feelings, that are rendered visible through the metaphoric use of wavy ( Jugendstil/Art Nouveau) lines. (Thus style and content are here inextricably linked to each other).

In a detail of T 282 (fig. 50) hair fulfils the same function. The man and woman are both surrounded by her long, inclusive, hair. It could also be seen as emotion waves – i.e. aura. The male figure appears smaller – therefore younger – than the female. It is a probable allusion to Munch’s first love, “Mrs Heiberg”, who was a married woman, c. two (or four?) years older than himself. In a drawing of the kiss motif<sup>358</sup> (fig. 51) the wavy lines may refer, again, to hair as well as to the window curtain folds; they could also function as emotion aura.

Fig. 52 presents a couple surrounded by quasi parallel (aura) lines. They themselves are made of the same kind of lines, separated from their surroundings by some thicker outlines. These two people belong together, they are married. As Mr. and Mrs. “Heiberg” they form one group, surrounded by their aura – which, moreover, does not extend to the younger man/ boy on the right. Around him the lines subtly become straightened up: in relation to them, he is an outsider. With his hat in his hand he seems to beg something from them: love perhaps? Probably the young man/boy refers to Munch himself.

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<sup>357</sup> T 2744.

<sup>358</sup> T 278



Mr. and Mrs. “Heiberg” as bride and bridegroom are shown in fig. 53, a detail of T 360. The bride and groom seem to float (no feet are shown) in their aura, one for the two of them – their individual auras melted together, as the two members of the couple become one through marriage. She is dressed in white (innocent), he – in black.

Fig. 54, T 2432, presents the couple in which the woman is elegantly dressed in black, while the man, in white, has been reduced to exist only as a part of her aura; he has lost his personal individuality. In the background there are other couples engaged in a “dance of life” – cf. Munch’s painting with the same title.<sup>359</sup> Fig. 55, is a detail of T 1380. It presents the same couple, with the woman surrounded by her aura and the man as part of it. Here he is also endowed with a pair of horns, to point out his role of cuckold, the husband of an unfaithful wife.

### **Denying the senses**

With Munch it appears evident that any attempt to deny the senses is doomed to failure. The senses win always as long as one lives. When the senses cease to function, death becomes apparent. Synaesthesia is therefore justified as survival strategy: if one sense does not function, another may take over in its stead.

Moreover, sound can be made to “awaken” the dead – see “The Sound of Life” further on. Munch rendered such sound visible in the drawing T 386 (fig.21).

### **- Tactility as sight**

*The Lane (Smuget / Carmen)*, 1895 (fig. 64), is related to Munch’s first love, “Mrs. Heiberg”. While in St. Cloud Munch heard that she went to Vienna to become a *chansonette* singer. Such a singer was not considered far from being a prostitute (at least by Munch?): “Vi ...så udover Paris... Der gle for mit blik noen billeder – Jeg så hende i sin bebehø – og sin lyse tynde sommerkjole - ... Jeg tænkte mig hende som sangerinde – gennem den tykke tobaksrøg og alle floshatterne ... Hun smilte ... med sit vellystige smil – mysende med øinene ned til herrerne – Vuggende sig i hofterne ... Og jeg hørte hendes stemme – imellem dyb og imellem kildrende – fin og kjælende Såendnu – by sit lægeme for pønger for 10 kr – ”<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> *The Dance of Life (Livets Dans)*, 1899, reproduced in Arne Eggum, *Edvard Munch; malerier-skisser og studier*, Oslo, 1983, p. 168.

<sup>360</sup> T 2771.

*The hands (Hendene)*, c. 1893 (fig. 59), renders visible the tactile sense with an erotic intent. Different hands, blue, red and green attempt to touch the exposed female half nude. That the hands are differently coloured indicates that they belong to different persons. That the female figure voluntarily offers herself to the erotic touch of these hands is a commentary on her (lack of) virtue.

#### - **Smell as sight**

*The smell of corpse (Liklukt)*, 1898/1901 (fig. 56) renders visible the impression of the smell of death. The dead one is not the subject of the painting; the deathbed is placed in the background. To render visible the impression of smell, Munch has grouped diagonally from it, in the foreground, the mourners who hold their hands to their noses (at least some of them). Some other mourners face the foreground and those who do not, avoid to look at the deathbed. The living attempt to avoid any contact with the dead by not looking at him/her. Nevertheless, they cannot escape the awareness of death: to stay alive, they must breathe – and when they do, they become aware of death.

#### - **Sight as sound**

An image indirectly connected with the concept of synaesthesia appears in *The Voice (Stemmen)*, 1893, T 2373 (fig. 57). The focus here is upon the relationship between sight and sound, when the sound organ is out of sight.

“Stemmebåndene / og Mundhulen – Station / for Afsendelse – Øiet / Modtagelsesstationen – “<sup>361</sup> In this drawing the vocal expression instrument – the mouth - is completely obliterated in favour of the eyes. The huge eyes, therefore, acquire the expressive function of the mouth. Thus this drawing functions as a metaphor for the uselessness of speech in an emotionally charged – erotic - situation.

#### - **Sound as sight**

*A Carrion (Une charogne)*, 1896 (fig 2) is an illustration to Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* (see also the first chapter in this thesis). The buzzing flies partly surround the skull in the ground. They themselves are alive, but they literally feed on death – in

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<sup>361</sup> T 2785, p. 17.

order to live. As an element of the process of decomposition, they are a metaphor for the sound of death.

### - **The Sound of Death**

*The dead Mother and the Child* ( *Den døde mor og barnet*), 1897/99 (fig. 58), is an allusion to the death of Munch's own mother. Some members of the Munch family are present in the picture: the father – as the bearded old man, Munch's brother - seated by the bed, two of Munch's sisters – behind the old man, and Munch himself – in *profil perdu* , between his father and his brother. All are presented older than they were when the death took place (Munch himself was five years old at the time).

In the foreground there is a child dressed in red (while the other members of the family are dressed either in dark colours or in white). She could be representing Munch's older sister Sophie, who died when she was 15 years old. In that case an age discrepancy is here present, since she is portrayed as the youngest of the siblings, while in fact, she was the eldest of them all (yet she was the first to die).

She covers her ears as if she is – unwillingly - hearing a sound of which the others are not aware. Her red dress is “screaming” not only because red is generally considered a “loud” colour, but also because this colour does not fit the circumstances described in the picture. Since she was to die next after the mother, it is possible that she is the only one to hear “the sound of death” – and she tries to fight off her fate: she both “screams” (through the red colour of her dress) and covers her ears in order not to “hear”, not to become aware of, death – her mother's, as well as her own coming death. In this picture one becomes aware of the silent “scream” of death. The sense of hearing is thus rendered visible.

Sound may be a premonition of death; it may also awake the dead to the life to come.

### - **The Sound of Life**

T 386 (fig. 21) – also called *Crystallization II* - presents an awakening of the dead in the “land of crystals”<sup>362</sup>:

“Jeg drømte om Natten - / En kiste stod midt på / en Hau – og i Kisten lå en / ung Mand midt[?] ved Siden / af Kisten stod en sort Moor / og ringet på en Klokke - ... / i

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<sup>362</sup> See also the discussion of this drawing in the previous chapter.

Krystallernes Land - .../ ...Baggrunden oplystes med engang / et stort Rige såes spillende / i alle Regnbuens / Farver – Stråler der brødes / mod diamantklare krystaller / store og små – og nogle dannede / Slotte og andre underli Træer – ”<sup>363</sup>

In this case, the sound that is seen (represented by the tolling bell) is the sound of life – the life after this life... .

### - The Sound of Music

Munch’s association with music dated from his childhood home, where a piano was part of the furniture: fig. 60, T 2604. Later on in life he associated himself with many musicians, both amateurs (like Strindberg – who played the guitar, and Przybyszewski – whose Chopin piano concertos were famous with the group *Zum Schwarzen Ferkel*), and professionals [like Frederick Delius and Eva Mudocci – cf. the lithograph called *Violin concerto (Fiolinkonsert)*, 1903, fig. 61, representing Eva Mudocci and Bella Edwards].

Music was connected with the concept of synaesthesia, from Wagner to Debussy,<sup>364</sup> Scriabin and Messiaen. For instance, Claude Debussy’s *Nocturnes* (1897- 99) led him to say that they are “una ricerca nei diversi arrangiamenti che puo dare lo stesso colore, come per esempio, sarebbe in pittura uno studio nei grigi.”<sup>365</sup> He actually connected his compositions to some of James Abbot Whistler’s paintings – also entitled *Nocturne*, which, moreover, could be defined as “studies in grey.”<sup>366</sup> An exchange between composers and painters – as that between Debussy and Whistler – was very much in fashion.

Munch’s *Military Music is coming (Militærmusikken kommer)*, 1889, (fig. 62) should be understood on this background. Munch described his feelings at the sight and sound of the military music on Karl Johan street one sunny day:

“Jeg gjorde den Iagttagelse/ at når jeg gik på/ Gaden en Solskinsdag/ på Karl Johan - / og så de hvide Huse/ mod den vaarblå/ Luft – de Rader af/ Mennesker der drev/ i en hinanden/ krydsende Strøm som/ et Baand drog sig/ langs Husvæggene - / - da kommer Musikken nedover/ spiller en Marsch/ - da ser jeg Farvene/ med engang annerledes/ - det dirrede i/ Luften – det dirrede/ i de gul-hvide/ Facader – Farverne/ dansede i den/ Menneskestrømmen/ - i hørøde Para/ soller – og hvide/ Parasoller – gule -/ lyseblå Vårdragter/ - mod de sortblåe/ Vinterdragter/ det flimrede i / de gyldne Trompeter/ der strålede i

<sup>363</sup> T 2782 ao (N 640, p. 3).

<sup>364</sup> See Dina Ricco, “Sinestesia della Musica; Interscambi fra immaginazione sonora e rappresentazione visiva”, *Hortus Musicus*, vol. 14, April-June: 24-29, 2003, in <http://home.comcast.net/~sean.day/Ricco2003.pdf>

<sup>365</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*: ”an investigation into various arrangements that may give the same colour, as [would be] for instance, in painting a study in [the colour] grey” (translation mine).

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*.

Solen -/ - det dirrede i/ Blåt og rødt og gult/ Jeg så annerledes/ under Musikkens/ Indflydelse - / Musikken delte Farverne/ - Jeg fik en Glædes Skrig/ fornemmelse – ”<sup>367</sup>

This passage could well function as a description of this painting: mentioned are “the white houses”, “the blue air”, “the rows of people”, the playing military music, the “light blue spring costumes” and the “dark blue winter costumes”; especially obvious is the mention of “høirøde Parasoller” – a little one on the left near the houses, and a big one in the right corner, in the foreground.

Aware of the general contemporary view of synaesthesia, Munch states here that he “saw differently under the influence of music” and that he got “a feeling/impression of joy”. Especially significant is the crossed-out word “Skrig” – see further on in this chapter the discussion of the painting entitled *The Scream (Skrik)*.

Just as important is Munch’s mention of vibrations: “det dirrede i Luften – det dirrede i de gul-hvide Facader...”. The experience of vibrations as sound (and sound as vibration) is said to be typical of synaesthetic perception.<sup>368</sup> Wassily Kandinsky wrote that “... colours ...produce a ...spiritual vibration...”<sup>369</sup> of psychic origin, a “catalyst of [his] response to colour”.<sup>370</sup> Attempts have been made to translate the vibrational frequency of the sound waves into the corresponding wavelength of light, but such attempts resulted in failure.<sup>371</sup> In spite of this, vibrations were said to be an ingredient of synaesthetic perception. It is obvious that Munch was aware of these synaesthetic concepts, irrespective of his personal experience.

Metaphorical synaesthetic translation of feelings into colour and sound appears in a watercolour of 1897/98 called *Self-Portrait with Lyre (Selvportrett med lyre)*, T 2460 (fig. 63). As in the previously discussed painting, so here, the colour red plays a key role in the picture. It is clearly associated with sound (it is a “loud” colour): here it is both part of the musical instrument as well as the symbolical colour of Munch’s hair (it is known that he was not red-haired). Moreover, the green colour of the background stresses the red by sheer contrast. The painter presents himself as playing passionately

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<sup>367</sup> T 2785, p. 73, p. 74, p. 75. Cursive script mine – to indicate words that Munch crossed out, yet are relevant in the context; underlining mine – to indicate Munch’s expressing a synaesthesia-like impression ( which is not to be understood as actual synaesthesia).

<sup>368</sup> Shem Booth, *Synaesthesia and the Unification of Art; From past, present to future*, p. 5, in <http://medialab.freaknet.org/shem/research/SYNESTHESIA%20AND%20THE%20U...> 19.08.2006.

<sup>369</sup> *Concerning the spiritual in art*, p. 24, in *ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>370</sup> Shem Booth, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12. Nevertheless, in 1725 Erasmus Darwin (Charles Darwin’s grandfather) invented the *clavecin oculaire*, which played simultaneously light and sound. (*Ibid.*).

and his profile expresses suffering. He is actually shown to be one with his instrument, as if he is part of it. Red colour areas on the neck and arm enhance his identification with his instrument. As a modern Orpheus, the artist is here rendering his feelings most directly. He has the music expressed through colour, which in turn, expresses his feelings: “Trangen til/ at meddele sig”<sup>372</sup> fulfils his role as artist.

- *The Scream (Skrik)*

Munch's most famous picture, *The Scream*, 1893 (pastel, The National Gallery, Oslo), (fig. 66) made Przybyszewski write that it is “ slutt-tablået for en fryktelig kamp mellom hjerne og kjønn, som det siste har gått seirende ut av.”<sup>373</sup> One reason for Przybyszewski's statement is that the picture was exhibited as the last in a series of seven paintings entitled *Love (Kjærlighet)*; another is that Przybyszewski connected the picture with his own sex-oriented *Totenmesse*, which it supposedly illustrated.<sup>374</sup>

Like Przybyszewski, Patricia Berman writes that *The Scream* embodies a representation of “ psychological unbalance ...associated with sexuality,...the power of eroticism – [and] its inevitable and overpowering destructiveness... ”<sup>375</sup>

Helge Haugerud psychoanalyses Munch. About *The Scream* he has a somewhat different opinion: “Bildet *Skrik* dirrer av angsten for å tape seg selv, bli innestengt, kvalt og samtidig oppsugd og forsvinne i landskapet. Linjene symboliserer altså både en trussel om oppløsning og beskyttelse mot det samme.”<sup>376</sup>

Martin Nag wrote that “En av de mest essensielle forutsetninger for ett av Munchs mest kjente verk, *Skrik* ... ligger i Dostojevskijs verden.” Nag justifies his statement by explaining that bowler hats are present both with Dostojevskij and in Munch's *Scream* – in the background, on the heads of the two men: “ En nøkkel til Dostojevskij-momentet i *Skrik* finner vi i de høye hattene til de to herrer i bakgrunnen... . Når

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<sup>372</sup> T 2785, p. 14.

<sup>373</sup> Quoted in Atle Næss, op. cit., p. 145. Perel Wilgowicz writes about *The Scream* that “Sur un pont, ou quelque chose de ce genre, peu importe ce qui est depeint, se tient un creature fantastique, bouche beante. Le heros de l'amour ne doit plus exister; sa sexualite s'est glissee hors de lui et maintenant elle pousse un cri qui emplit la nature, en quete d'un nouveau moyen de se manifester, afin de reviver le meme combat. Il y a quelque chose d'atrocement macroscopique: c'est la scene finale d'une effroyable bataille entre l'esprit et le sexe, d'ou ce dernier a triomphe. L'esprit est aneanti et le sexe primitive et eternel hurle en quete de nouvelles victims.” – in “Les baisers de vampyr tel qu'en son art Edvard Munch les sublime”, *La Sublimation*, Marc Babonneau and Kati Varga, eds., Editions in Press, Collection Monde Interne, n.d., p. 110.

<sup>374</sup> *Erinnerungen an das literarische Berlin*, Munchen, 1963, p. 222, in Carla Lathe, op. cit., p. 312.

<sup>375</sup> Patricia Gray Berman, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>376</sup> Helge Haugerud, *Edvard Munch; årene 1902- 09*, paper in psychiatry, faculty of medicine, University of Oslo, 1985, p. 56.

Raskolnikow vandrer gjennom St. Petersburg underveis til generalprøve på mordet, roper en full mann med ett: `Hej din tyske hattemand!`... .”<sup>377</sup>

*The Scream* was seen as illustrating a word from *Also sprach Zarathustra*<sup>378</sup>, as “inconceivable” (“ufattelig”)<sup>379</sup> and as a caricature of the Doomsday, “...eller underavdeling av Dantes helvede”.<sup>380</sup> Also *Morgenposten* saw in this picture “... - en gutt (eller kvinne?)<sup>381</sup> som brøler dommedag ute på Ljabroveien, mens himmel og fjord står i luer”.<sup>382</sup>

Closer to a possible elucidation of Munch’s picture, Rasmus Steinsvik asks:

”`Skrik` - kor ser eit skrik ut? Eit slikt du høyrer ei fælsleg natt, eit våderop so det raudnar og svartnar for augo, og jord og himmel bever i underleg fargeglans? Kvar ser det vel på *sin* måte: Munch hev måla det som *han* har sett det. Det er ikkje urimelegare å måle eit skrik enn å måle draugar og troll.”<sup>383</sup>

Steinsvik rightly explains therefore that *The Scream* renders visible something that does not belong to the visible world but to the world of sounds.

Steinsvik was further asked whether the sound had colour, to which he answered, in

Henning Gran’s words, that “...hver lydbølge hadde sin farve, ja hver bokstav tok farve etter den lyd den representerte (jfr. symbolisten Rene Ghil). Men Steinsvik visste naturligvis ikke om alle mennesker oppfattet samme bokstav i samme farve.”<sup>384</sup>

#### “Kor ser eit skrik ut?”

Munch thought that nature may (and should) be changed in favour of the communication of the artistic idea:

“I maleriet som i litteraturen forveksler man ofte midlet med målet. Naturen er midlet – ikke målet. Hvis man kan oppnå noe ved å forandre naturen – må man gjøre det. I en sterk sinnsstemning vil et landskap gjøre en viss virkning på en – ved å fremstille dette landskap vil man komme i et bilde av ens egen stemning. Det er denne stemning der er hovedsaken – naturen er blott midlet. Hvorvidt bildet da ligner naturen har intet å si...”<sup>385</sup>

Both formally and iconographically *The Scream* was rightly associated with his

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<sup>377</sup> Martin Nag, “Dostojevskij og Edvard Munch”, *Kunst og Kultur*, 76, 1993, p. 41.

<sup>378</sup> *Bergens Tidende*, quoted in Henning Gran, “Edvard Munchs møte med norsk kritikk 1895”, *Kunst og Kultur*, 46, Oslo, 1963, p. 222.

<sup>379</sup> One critic in *Stavanger Aftenblad*, quoted in *ibid.*.

<sup>380</sup> *Stavanger Avis*, quoted in *ibid.*.

<sup>381</sup> Rightly observed, this figure has an androgynous character.

<sup>382</sup> In *ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>383</sup> Rasmus Steinsvik, *Den 17de Mai*, quoted in Henning Gran, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>385</sup> Quoted in Ragna Stang, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

other pictures of anxiety (*Angst*) and despair (*Fortvivelse*). In a literary description of the circumstances in which he painted *The Scream* Munch wrote about this time of his life as “en Tid hvor Livet havde revet min Sjæl op – “<sup>386</sup>

Nevertheless, the exact circumstances and reasons for Munch’s despair and anxiety as connected with *The Scream* are less relevant for its understanding than its general unsettling impression it gives off to the viewer. That is why the picture lends itself to various interpretations, according to the viewer’s frame of mind and/or *Weltanschauung*. Therefore *The Scream* has become an emblematic picture expressing – in a symbolic manner – the fears and anguishes besetting the modern individual.

One aspect of the picture, however, seems to be more relevant than the others simply due to its obviously synaesthetic content. Rasmus Steinvik was the one to ask the right and obvious question: “how does a scream look like?” (“kor ser eit skrik ut?”). He could just as well have asked : “how does sound look like?”, or: “how can a painter, working with his visual means, render visible a sound?”

Scientific studies have demonstrated that, for a synaesthete, colours could correspond to letters. Unlike with Rimbaud, however, these correspondences are actually highly idiosyncratic,<sup>387</sup> different from person to person (i.e., from one synaesthete to another). Each letter corresponds to a sound, and *vice versa*.

One indication that Munch was not synaesthete is his use of the same colour for different letters; for example in one of his descriptions of the experience that ultimately resulted in his famous picture of *The Scream*, the use of coloured letters is often associative rather than synaesthetic. Thus, the word “solen” is entirely composed of yellow letters, “himlen” (sic) is, expectantly, written in blue, while “blod” is written entirely in red letters (fig. 65).<sup>388</sup>

The entire text is to be found in T 2785, pp. 77 -80:<sup>389</sup>

“En Aften går jeg/ udover en Bjergvei/ nær Kristiania - / sammen med to/ Kammerater Det/ var en Tid hvor Livet/ havde revet min/ Sjæl op - / Solen gikk ned – havde/ dukket sig ilsomt/ under Horisonten - / - Da var det som/ et Flammesværd/ af Blod skar over/ Himmelhvælvingen - / Luften blev som/ Blod – med skjærende/ Ildstrenger - / - Aaserne blev/ dybbå – Van/ Fjorden – skar i/ Koldblå – gule og/ røde Farver - / Det skingrede/ blodig rødt – på/ Veien – og Gelænderet/ - Mine kammeraters/ Ansikter blev/ skjærende gulhvide - / - Jeg følte som/ et stort Skrig/ - og jeg hørte/ virkelig et stort/ Skrig - / Farverne i/

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<sup>386</sup> T 2785, p. 77.

<sup>387</sup> Kevin T. Dann, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>388</sup> T 2547 – 53. A coloured reproduction is to be found in Poul Erik Tøjner, *Munch med egne ord*, Oslo and Copenhagen, 2000. p. 123.

<sup>389</sup> This is but one of several descriptions of the same event. These descriptions differ from each other in some details, yet are quite similar as far as the main idea is concerned.



Naturen – brød/ Linierne i Naturen/ - Linierne og Farverne/ dirrede i Bevægelse/ - Disse Lyssvingninger / bragte ikke allene/ mit Øie i Svingninger/ det bragte osså mit/ Øre i Svingninger - / så jeg faktisk hørte/ et Skrig - / Jeg malte da/ Billedet Skrig – ”<sup>390</sup>

The underlined sentence mentions again vibrations (“svingninger”) that are supposedly correspondent. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, it was demonstrated that light and sound wavelengths – and therefore, vibrations – do not correspond with each other. Munch, however, claims a vibrating correspondence between sight and sound. Therefore Munch himself points out the synaesthetic content of *The Scream* as well as its theoretical intent.

The sexual interpretations (Przybyszewski and Berman) of the picture need support that so far has not been provided. That the main figure has an androgynous aspect (cf. also the footnote no. 76 in this chapter) may, on the contrary, indicate that the figure is meant to have a universal significance, irrespective of a sexual adherence. In fact, the figure has ceased to represent Munch (as connected to the text of T 2785): with its non-human aspect, it became the personification of a tormented state of mind that results in a scream.

The gesture of holding hands to own ears – to avoid hearing the sound – was to be repeated in *The dead Mother and the Child*. Unlike the little child, however, this figure does not “hear” a sound caused by external circumstances (the death of the mother): this figure itself is the source of the sound that it tries to avoid hearing – see the mouth of the figure. This oval mouth is made to express the idea of a scream as loud as any. Obviously, there is inner turmoil expressed here through the idea of doing something (screaming) against own volition (thus the attempt to avoid hearing the sound of the scream). To try to explain the particular, detailed, biographical circumstances, however, (appropriate as this method may be with other paintings) would only diminish the universal intent of this image. “Der kom en mand til og spurte hva vil de med denne luft – det ligner et blodigt dække - / *Jeg fortalte ham det* / Det var for at gjengi en oprevet sindsstemning et menneske følte i et øieblik – ”<sup>391</sup>

A scream is a sound, and as such, it is expressed through the image of sound waves. These sound waves, expressed through the wavy (Jugendstil) lines, exist both in nature (the sky, and the fjord) and in the – symbolic – figure of the scream itself. Unlike the

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<sup>390</sup> The word “van” is written in cursive letters to show that it was crossed out in Munch’s text (my line no. 4). Underlining mine from “Lyssvingninger” to “Svingninger”.

<sup>391</sup> T 2782 ag p. 120 (N 634). Cursive letters indicate words crossed out by Munch himself, but relevant in the context.

two figures in the background and the straight lines of the road and rail, the scream figure vibrates in sympathy with the whole of nature: it is as wavy as the sky and the fjord: “ Trangen til / at meddele sig... I Lydens / Vibrering ligger en / anden Magt skjult / ...denne / forunderlige Magt - / - det er Sympathiens /... Magt – i hvertfald / Rythmisk Magt / - En liden / Lydvibrering kan / når den træffer en tilsvarende stemt / Lydinstrument / frembringe Klange på / lang Afstand - ...”<sup>392</sup>

The figure of the scream became part of nature’s sound waves. A certain loss of personality, a disintegration (cf. Helge Haugerud’s commentary earlier in this chapter) of the self is hereby expressed through the fearful image of the scream, the red ”doomsday” appearance of the sky and the wavy (unstable) sight of the entire nature.

With the help of synaesthetic imagery Munch succeeded in this picture to render visible that which cannot be seen: a scream and through it, a feeling.

#### Was Munch synaesthetic?

Probably not.

It is not possible to affirm or deny with certainty a physiological/neurological condition of a person whom one has never met. Nevertheless, there are clues which indicate that Munch was aware of the elevated status of synaesthetic persons – see above – yet that he himself was not one of them.

According to Helge Haugerud it is probable that Munch had sporadic visual and auditory hallucinations<sup>393</sup> - which, however, are not to be confused with a synaesthetic condition.

That he himself was not synaesthete did not stop Munch from employing synaesthetic imagery in his art. Sometimes, as with *The Scream*, this imagery resulted in masterpieces, as moving as they are genial.

Subsequently, Munch used – and reused – some of his most successful imagery in order to express other ideas. The figure of the scream, for instance was (re)used in his 1909 lithographical series of *Alpha and Omega (Alfa og Omega)*. Fig. 67 shows the scream figure as one of the two masks of a theatrical-like presentation of the content of the satirical “play” with the same name. Fig 68 presents not only the entire figure with its hands at its ears but also the wavy lines of sky and sea. Moreover, the lithograph is to be seen in connection with a relevant part of *Alpha and Omega* that sounds like an

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<sup>392</sup> T 2785, pp. 14-15-16.

<sup>393</sup> Helge Haugerud, op. cit., p. 21.

echo of *The Scream*: “ Han løb langs Havet; Himlen og Havet farvedes med Blod; han hørte Skrig i Luften og holdt sig for sine Øren; Jorden, Himlen og Havet skalv, og han følte en stor Angst.”<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> In *Edvard Munch / Carl Fredrik Hill*, exhibition catalogue, Stockholm, 1987, p. 141.

## Conclusion

Monism is important in Munch's art, though it is not the only metaphysical topic encountered in his paintings. Munch treated monism in his own poetical and personal manner, with a "poetical licence", rather than from a professionally philosophical viewpoint. Therefore the concept of monism as well as that of its derivative, pantheism, when connected with Munch's art, may differ somewhat from the way these concepts are employed in standard philosophical usage. Thus Spinoza's tenet that there is only one substance, after passing through Haeckel's thought, has been represented in Munch's art as a continuity/sameness between living and lifeless matter. Likewise, pantheism was treated by Munch in a somewhat inexact manner: rather than stressing the idea that "God is everything", it shows nature as "animated". This is only part of the pantheistic/monist point of view; it does not exhaust the topic philosophically. Nevertheless, this was actually the popular (and Munch's) manner of understanding pantheism. Therefore, the chapter on monism follows Munch's actual treatment of this concept, rather than its strictly philosophic perspective.

Munch took ideas deriving from Haeckel and adapted them to his own purposes. Metabolism was such a concept. Likewise the idea of potential energy – that Munch showed in his *Aula Sun* with its vibrant, concentric circles ready to expand everywhere in the universe. Through Wilhelm Bolsche, Haeckel's idea of inorganic life makes also an appearance in Munch's art.

A combination of monism and Romantic ideas lead Munch (as well as his contemporaries) to the idea regarding the divinity of Art. With Munch this developed into a kind of metaphorical monism: by inference, art is seen as composed of the same substance as God. Munch also created, in a highly original manner, his own concepts, for example, the idea of crystallisation – which Munch used in a double meaning, about art as well as about people.

Finally, monism provided Munch with hope in the continuation of existence after death, if not a personal – Christian – existence, at least, a transformed existence (see his concept of crystallisation) rather than absolute annihilation.

Synaesthesia as a concept was not used in a precise manner in Munch art criticism. Some confusion about it is still present in certain *milieus*. At present the scientific (neurophysiologic) interpretation of the word is predominant. In the past, however,

synaesthesia was endowed with a mystical aura pointing to the elevated position of the synaesthete.

From Wagner to the present, synaesthesia was often associated with music and its magic ability to transcend time and place. Artists were considered endowed with a superior sensitivity that allowed them to express themselves in their respective works of art. This sensitivity was seen as being rooted in a synaesthetic condition.

The artistic sensibility was seen as based upon a correspondence between the senses. This sense correspondence was considered due to supersensory/mystical insight. The synaesthetes were considered privileged beings to be respected and admired. That is why artists who were not synaesthetes themselves often claimed synaesthetic abilities.

In Munch's case, it is highly probable that he was not physiologically/neurologically synaesthetic. It is just as probable that he was acquainted with the elevated, mythical, status of the synaesthetes and therefore he posed as one of the "elect".

Irrespective of the actual physical conditions, however, Munch used synaesthetic imagery in his art, and this resulted often in highly successful images – like that of the emblematic *Scream*.

Even though much has been written about the art of Edvard Munch, much still remains to be done. This is especially true as far as his metaphysical *Weltanschauung* is concerned. For example, the idea of the cross in his painting *Night in Saint Cloud (Natt i Saint Cloud)* 1890,<sup>395</sup> has not been entirely elucidated; as Marit Lange asks: "har et dobbeltkors egentlig noen bestemte assosiasjoner innen vår protestantiske tradisjon?"<sup>396</sup> And one may ask: was it intended as a cross at all? As Marit Lange has observed, the idea that it was a cross seems to have originated with Jens Thiis, continued with Ingrid Langaard, Knut Berg, Arne Eggum and Reinhold Heller; however, as she is asking, if it was meant as a cross at all, what did a double cross actually signify within a protestant tradition? Furthermore, one can ask: was this a tradition that Munch cared for at all in the first place?

Another issue is that of the "evil powers" (*onde makter*) that Munch mentions in a project for a letter to Eva Mudocci.<sup>397</sup> What was actually Munch's belief as far as these "powers" are

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<sup>395</sup> Reproduced in Ingrid Langaard, *Edvard Munch; modningsår*, Oslo, 1960, between pp.104 and 105. Discussed by Marit Lange in "Edvard Munchs `Natt i Saint Cloud`; fortolkninger og forvrengninger", *Fra Romersk Barokk til Norsk Nyromantikk; utvalgte artikler*, Oslo (Ortiz), 2003, pp.79-91.

<sup>396</sup> Marit Lange in op.cit., p. 87.

<sup>397</sup> In Atle Næss, op.cit., p.269.

concerned? How does this belief fit in with Munch's metaphysical world view? Or was this just a metaphor? If so, what did it signify?

Hypnotism, the supernatural, astrology and much more, are issues that have not been yet elucidated within the research of Munch's art. Much of Munch's painting can be regarded as bearing a metaphysical content. Munch's use of mysticism and the occult, together with ideas drawn from natural sciences and philosophy, testify to his continuous search for an answer to the questions regarding life and its purpose, death and immortality and the role of the artist, as an elect spirit, in the elevation of human consciousness.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I intend to work with these topics in the context of my future research on Edvard Munch.

## Appendix A:

### **Une charogne**

Rappelez-vous l'objet que vous vimes, mon ame,  
Ce beau matin d'ete si doux:  
Au detour d'un sentier une charogne infame  
Sur un lit seme de cailloux,

Les jams en l'air, comme une femme lubrique,  
Brulante et suant les poisons,  
Ouvrait d'une facon nonchalante et cynique  
Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons.

Le soleil rayonnait sur cette pourriture,  
Comme afin de la cuire a point,  
Et rendre au centuple a la grande Nature  
Tout ce qu'ensemble elle avait joint;

Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe  
Comme une fleur s'epanouir.  
La puanteur etait si forte, que sur l'herbe  
Vous crutes vous evanouir.

Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride,  
D'ou sortaient de noirs bataillons  
De larves, qui coulaient comme un epais liquide  
Le long de ces vivants haillons.

Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague,  
Ou s'elancait en petillant;  
On eut dit que le corps, enfle d'un soufflé vague,  
Vivait en se multipliant.

Charles Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal*

## Appendix B:

### **Le mort joyeux**

Dans une terre grasse et pleine d'escargots  
Je veux creuser moi-meme une fosse profonde,  
Ou je puisse a loisir etaler mes vieux os  
Et dormir dans l'oubli comme un requin dans l'onde.

Je hais les testaments et je hais les tombeaux;  
Plutot que d'implorer une larme du monde,  
Vivant, j'aimerais mieux inviter les corbeaux  
A saigner tous les bouts de ma carcasse immonde.

O vers ! noirs compagnons sans oreille et sans yeux,  
Voyez venire a vous un mort libre et joyeux;  
Philosophes viveurs, fils de la pourriture,

A travers ma ruine allez donc sans remords,  
Et dites-moi s'it est encor quelque torture  
Pour ce vieux corps sans ame et mort parmi les morts !

Charles Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal*



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## **Illustrations**