Peter Watkins' Edvard Munch: Diagnosing panic and dread

Joanne Laurier
25 March 2006

Edvard Munch, *written and directed by Peter Watkins*

In 1890 the great Norwegian Expressionist painter Edvard Munch (1863-1944) wrote: "When seen as a whole, art derives from a person's desire to communicate himself to another. I do not believe in an art which is not forced into existence by a human being's desire to open his heart. All art, literature, and music must be born in your heart's blood. Art is your heart's blood."

The painter is the subject of left-wing British director Peter Watkins' 1974 film, *Edvard Munch*, recently released on DVD by New Yorker Video. Relying on a fragmented narrative derived from Munch's diaries, including recurring (and sometimes repetitious) images from the painter's trauma-filled childhood, the film primarily covers a 10-year period from 1884 to 1894, when Munch was age 21 to 31.

Although flawed, Watkins' film is a serious effort, visually and intellectually. It represents a definite and deeply felt attempt to come to terms with a remarkable artist and the social and psychological processes at work in his life and painting.

As the film establishes, late nineteenth century Kristiania, the Norwegian capital (later renamed Oslo), was a growing industrial city populated by some 135,000 inhabitants and ruled by a Protestant middle class stratum called the *borgerskap*. In its first moments, the film cuts between images of the city and shots of factory workers talking about their conditions of life as they face the camera—a technique Watkins calls removing the "fourth wall" (the latter is considered by the director to be an "elitist barrier" that separates actor and filmmaker from the viewer).

Munch (Geir Westby in Watkins' film) begins his painting career in 1879, at a time when Norway has long been influenced by German art and aesthetics. He is a member of the "Kristiania Bohème," a group in revolt against bourgeois morality during the 1880s led by the anarchist Hans Jaeger. Discussions range from nihilism, anarchism and the works of Marx and Darwin to the role of art, the purpose of existence and free love. The film points to these polemics as catalytic in the art of the painter.

Munich's personal history is tragic. A stern, moralizing physician father dominates. Munch's emotional isolation reaches a crisis point with the loss of his beloved mother and sister to tuberculosis. He is scarred by his father's inability to cure the disease, disgusted that the latter can only impotently resort to prayer. Munch's own near-fatal bouts of illness prompt him to write: "Illness, insanity and death were the black angels that kept watch over my cradle and accompanied me all my life."

The film contends that a tumultuous love affair Munch had in his youth with a married woman, known as 'Mrs. Heiberg' (this was not her real name), is a monumentally defining event for the artist. The manner in which Watkins emphasizes the relationship's importance, however, is somewhat weakened by its theatrics.

After a brief visit to Paris in 1885 to study classical painting, Munch begins his breakthrough work, *The Sick Child*. The painting's deeply scored surface, according to the film, transcends a mere recording of external reality to become the first expressionist painting of "feeling" in the history of Western art. It represents a departure from the realistic approach to similar themes employed by the leading Norwegian painter, Christian Krohg.

Munch is driven to bring out what cannot be physically measured. The painting's innovative technique is viciously attacked by the press and the public in Kristiania who view it as the product of mental derangement. This is the year that Munch's political mentor, Jaeger, is jailed following the confiscation of a newly published book.

In 1889, Munch exhibits all of his creations in Kristiania—110 canvasses and innumerable drawings. His work manifests a desire to probe the tensions between the inner world of essence and the outer world of appearance. In Paris, Symbolist painters, such as Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon, who emphasize the role played by the unconscious and dreamlike in an artist's work, are in rebellion against naturalism. This proves to be immensely liberating for Munch. He writes: "The camera cannot compete with a brush and canvas, as long as it can't be used in heaven and hell."

Munch pens his "St. Cloud Manifesto," in which he affirms: "No longer shall I paint interiors with men reading and women knitting. I will paint living people who breathe and feel and suffer and love."

The artist is invited to exhibit at the Berlin Art Association in 1892. His work creates a scandal, prompting the Swedish playwright August Strindberg to comment: "He is virtually a tourist attraction for the intelligentsia." Soon afterward, Munch relocates to Berlin and spends time among the German capital's literary and artistic avant-garde in "The Black Piglet" circle. Its members include Strindberg, the Polish poet and novelist Stanislaw Przybyszewski and the painter Krohg.

In this period, a version of Munch's work, *Melancholy*, characteristically depicts people isolated although in direct physical contact—facial features disappear, hands become clubs or curved hooks. Munch fears "his own ego dissolving into the psyche and body of another," according to Watkins. The camera scans an inscription written at the top of Munch's most recognizable painting, *The Scream*, which reads: "Could only have been painted by a madman."

Munch is perpetually seeking an artistic form that will allow him to investigate, according to the Watkins film, "a new and revolutionary understanding of the human psyche." Seeing the world as he does in wave-lines, "Munch seeks to make our innermost tremble." He organizes a large show in Kristiania in 1895, generating the most negative criticism by the media to date. "Fighting against what he sees as the suppression of his personality, Munch turns more and more to the graphic arts with its multiple prints," asserts the film.

Watkins' work ends with the narrator explaining that Munch's alcohol and mental disabilities reach a critical point in 1908 and he spends eight months in a sanatorium in Denmark. From 1909 onward, the painter resided in Norway.

The relationship between the objective and subjective in art is obviously a complex one. Watkins' film succeeds in demonstrating that Munch's

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ability to penetrate deeply into the subjective, an ability itself that had an objective component, generated an immense internal and external tension.

Watkins indicates that Munch's psychological self-examination was not merely an individual endeavor, but reflected something significant about the growing self-awareness of a new age. His representation of the relationship between the painter's words and his life-cycle motifs in *The Frieze of Life* lends insight into the deeply human content of Munch's work—his remarkable ability to lift daily life out of deadening routine.

As a master of the graphic arts, suggests Watkins, Munch had a unique command of media that inevitably required the artist to leave out naturalistic detail, allowing him to deepen his rebellion against what he considered to be the limitations of realism, naturalism and Impressionism.

It would have added dimension to the film if Watkins had paid more attention to Munch's extraordinary self-portraits. In that case, the artist (played by a nearly mute and expressionless young actor) would have come across as less enigmatic and more grounded and lifelike.

The director's effort to provide social and cultural context through the use of a timeline is not successful. Brief references to historical and cultural events ('Famine in Russia,' 'General strike in Belgium,' 'Dreyfus arrested,' 'Freud invents psychoanalysis'), without making the reality and impact of those events live in the drama, fail to add much perspective. Historical context, however, is vital to an understanding of Munch's artistic trajectory.

If, as historian Eric Hobsbawm suggests, the high arts in the late nineteenth century "were ill at ease in society," then surely Munch's work must be considered among the most 'uneasy.' The last two decades of the century witnessed extraordinary changes, combining to create the foundations of modern capitalist society and culture: the growth and unprecedented concentration of industry and finance, the 'scramble' for colonies, remarkable scientific and technological innovation, the appearance of the modern working class and its first great political party, German Social Democracy (which emerged from illegality in triumph precisely during the years Watkins' film treats, when Munch spent much of his time in Berlin). And all of this social complexity refracted in various ways, in artistic work, in the writing of history, in the birth of psychoanalysis.

Hobsbawm argues that in the 1880s there was not yet a divergence between the public and "the more adventurous arts." On the contrary, the gap appeared to be narrowing. "This was partly because, especially in the decades of economic depression and social tension, 'advanced' ideas on society and culture appeared to combine naturally, and partly because ... important sectors of middle-class society became distinctly more flexible" (*The Age of Empire*)

He further notes that it did not "seem strange that artists should express their passionate commitment to suffering humanity in ways which went beyond the 'realism' whose model was a dispassionate scientific recording," and he refers to Van Gogh, the Belgian James Ensor, "the Norwegian Munch, a socialist" and "the German proto-expressionist Käthe Kollwitz," as a group. It is impossible to make sense of this qualitative growth in the commitment of artists to the fate of 'suffering humanity' without taking into account the emergence of a socialist labor movement, which both exposed the suffering and proposed a means of ending it.

Suffering had somewhat less of a social connotation for Munch than it did for someone like Kollwitz, whose brother was a leading member of the German Social Democrats. He interpreted it in more 'universal' terms, as an inevitable part of the human condition. Referring to the urban instability depicted in the 1894 work, *Angst*, Munch wrote: "I saw all the people behind their masks—smiling, phlegmatic—composed faces—I saw through them and there was suffering—in all of them—pale corpses—who without a rest ran around—along a twisted road—at the end of which was the grave." However, he also created extraordinarily concrete images of working class life, such as *Workers on Their Way Home*.

Norway, the land of the midnight sun, inspired Munch to use light-in-darkness as part of the representation of universal melancholia and loneliness. In 1891 (and treated in the film), Munch began his first studies for the series of paintings that would comprise *The Frieze of Life* and wrote a version of the text that forms the background to his famed *The Scream*, recounting an experience in which the sky suddenly appeared blood red and the artist felt "a loud, unending scream piercing nature." During the 1990s, Munch's *The Frieze of Life* project would record ever-mutating images of Angst, Love, Sex and Death, focusing on the interplay of the parts of the mind. The artist is chronically recycling and reworking his imagery, suppressing detail and artifice, always looking to uncover the inner—the "soul." This he opposes to painting that which is superficially transmitted through the eye.

An essay by Patricia G. Berman in the Museum of Modern Art's catalogue for its current Munch exhibition, entitled "Edvard Munch's 'Modern Life of the Soul,'" contends that "[v]ariously representing chemical, physiological, sexual, and pathological identities, the modern soul was a place of resistance and site of regeneration for vanguard intellectuals at the fin de siècle. Spirituality and social aberrancy were not considered antithetical within this culture, nor within Munch's work.... [T]he 'modern' soul became a catchphrase in Scandinavia for the 'breakthrough generation,' the writers of the 1880s and 1890s who rejected naturalist description and embraced interior subjective experience as the foundation of literary investigation."

Berman maintains that Munch saw mental and physical disintegration as a way of distancing himself from mainstream culture. Munch writes: "My whole life has been spent walking by the side of a bottomless chasm, jumping from stone to stone. Sometimes I try to leave my narrow path and join the swirling mainstream of life, but I always find myself drawn inexorably back towards the chasm's edge, and there I shall walk until the day I finally fall into the abyss. For as long as I can remember, I have suffered from a deep feeling of anxiety which I have tried to express in my art. Without anxiety and illness, I would have been like a ship without a rudder."

Something in his life and circumstances and the condition of the 'universe' pressed itself so forcefully on Munch, and he was so driven to communicate it, that he disdained an obsession with any particular artistic style of approach. "When seen as a whole, art derives from a person's desire to communicate with another. All means are equally good," argued the artist.

No doubt Munch suffered at the hands of narrow-minded critics, but one has the impression he took a somewhat Olympian view of these immediate trials and tribulations. Watkins, on the other hand, feels obliged to concentrate on such matters. This may have more to do with Watkins than with Munch. In general, the latter appeared bemused by the entire fracas caused by his art, particularly the shock and indignation of his detractors, who, in Germany, called his work "anarchist smears," and charged him with "brutality, crudity and baseness of expression." After his first exhibition in Berlin in 1892 was closed down on its second day, Munch wrote: "It's incredible that something as innocent as painting should have created such a stir."

On the other hand, Watkins tends to focus on his treatment or mistreatment at the hands of the mass media. The DVD's notes state defensively that with "the advancement of globalization, this professional marginalization [by the media] of Peter Watkins' work" has increased. Watkins saw in Munch a similar marginalization and "quickly came to understand that in making a film about Edvard Munch, I was also making a film about myself." Watkins projects onto Munch certain real and imagined problems, including something of his own martyrdom complex.

More serious is Watkins' moralizing, static view of history. Too much of *Munch* is devoted to pointless musings about the marital bondage of

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women, recurring and bloody images of illness in his family, and the film's constant replay of visual and verbal banalities regarding his love affair with Mrs. Heiberg. All this is to substitute for locating the real, objective processes reflected in Munch's genius. The film is at its best when it is straightforward.

In dramatically bringing to life Munch's psychological urgency, his uncompromising quest to uncover deeper, hidden truths, Watkins has accomplished a considerable amount. His film argues convincingly that Munch was an internationalist artist who consciously explored personal pain and trauma in order to bring them into the universal arena. (Munch: "How difficult it is to determine what is unauthentic, what is concealed deceit, self-deception, or the fear of showing myself in my true light.") In the main, it can be said that with *Edvard Munch*, Peter Watkins has worked towards making real the insightful words of Oskar Kokoschka, the Austrian expressionist painter: "It was given to Edvard Munch's deeply probing mind to diagnose panic and dread in what was apparently social progress."

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