

Confluences Between Theater and Visual Arts: Van Gogh and Edvard Munch or From Tragedy to Dramaturgy

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Abstract: Between the performing arts and visual arts, for example between theater and painting or graphics, there are multiple interferences, which are not limited to scenography and costume. Cultural references and visual quotes are just two directions of development of modern and contemporary theater. Artists can support plays through images, but they can just as well inspire dramaturgical texts, either through life and professional activity, or through their creation, in itself. From books such as *“The Lives of Painters, Sculptors and Architects”* signed by Giorgio Vasari or Giovanni Pietro Bellori¹, or from various works and biographical studies dedicated to artists, we can find out a lot of information that explains or completes what we know or what we can deduce directly from their work, but most of the time those aspects are conjunctural, explaining only the context of the professional training, the orders or the game of chance that led to the realization of their works, as they came to be known. About artists such as Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Claude Monet, Toulouse Lautrec, or more recently about Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali one can say that they have put themselves in their work, in addition to unparalleled mastery and personality.² Rarely, however, there is such a continuity between life and artistic work, as in the case of Van Gogh and Edvard Munch.

Keywords: Van Gogh, Edvard Munch, visual arts, theater, scenography

Introduction

This essay propose a synoptic analysis of the multivalent relations between Van Gogh and Edvard Munch and the performing arts, especially with theater. Given that the two great artists, pioneers (the first in Modern Art,

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1 The title of Bellori's book, inspired by that of Vasari, is *“The Lives of Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects”*.

2 Of course, the proposed series is not exhaustive, there are many arguments for its completion, but this direction of development does not fall within the debated topic in the assumed context of the relations between theater and visual arts. Consistent with this idea, Leonardo da Vinci created scenographic sketches, but his life was not marked by anxiety or tragedy.

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generally the second, more applied, in Expressionism) expressed themselves in the field of painting and graphics, not in that of the theater (scenography or dramaturgy), we can assume that the life marked by tragedy, partially transposed into opera, is the one that led them directly or indirectly to the world of the scene.

Synoptic analysis: Van Gogh came to Paris in 1886, with the idea of joining the group of Impressionists. The paradox is that exactly in that year, the eighth and last Impressionist exhibition took place, given that Manet had died at the age of 83, and Monet and Renoir had declined to attend. Instead, the dominant role was played by the younger neo-impressionists Georges Seurat, Paul Signac and Paul Gauguin. In fact, the movement had entered a crisis six years earlier, which determined the special relationship between the Dutch painter and the most active French painter of the moment (on the social scene), Gauguin. Thus, Van Gogh's initial plans collapsed from the beginning, to which would be added the financial failure caused by the disinterest of contemporaries in his painting. This was the context in which the artist created the most consistent part of his work, which contains over 2000 artworks, drawings and oil paintings, most of which were made in France, during four years of the ten in which he worked, between 1880 and 1890 (from 27 to 37 years).³

Supported by his brother, Theo, Vincent faced, like most Impressionists, material difficulties and conditions due to lack of material resources. Those biographical aspects intensified the artist's disease, which at the time was still in functional forms. To these can be added another pre-monitoring experience: Emile Zola, whom Van Gogh greatly admired, published in the same year, 1886, the novel "*L'Ouvre*", whose main character was a failed Impressionist painter, who committed suicide after going crazy under the pressure of artistic, social and material failures. According to John Rewald, exeget of the artistic period, several contemporaries identified with the character of the novel, being upset or offended, among them being Cezanne, Monet and of course, Van Gogh.⁴

3 Beth Gersh-Nesic, "*The Eight Impressionist Exhibitions From 1874-1886*", in Thought.Co, nr. 17.06.2019 <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-eight-impressionist-exhibitions-183266>

4 John Rewald, *Postimpresionismul*, vol. 1, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1978, p.19

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The artist's suicide in 1890 in Auvers, preceded by psychotic episodes in Arles, when he tried to stab Gauguin in his sleep and cut off his ear, or stay in the sanatorium in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, has no direct connection with reading Zola's book, being related rather to the aggravation of mental illness and financial dependence on his brother, respectively to the fear that he had recently become a father, and so he could no longer support him, at least not at the same odds, already on the subsistence limit. In connection with the disease, it was most likely, if not determined, at least accelerated by excessive absinthe consumption, of possible inhalation of toxic substances from pigments used for painting and of untreated venereal diseases (in principle a syphilis acquired in 1882).⁵

Comparing Van Gogh's artworks with the period in which he worked, we find that he did, on average, an artwork every 36 hours. Thus, it can be said that he created a true diary in images of his life, both inner and objective, based on people and places where he passed, (including the room from the hospice where he was voluntarily hospitalized). To this can be added the impressive fund of letters to his brother and other documents that have him as protagonist, including that of misdemeanor complaints to the police (from the period spent at Arles).

Talent, work capacity, illness, non-recognition during his life and full recognition after his death, make Vincent Van Gogh one of the most important cultural personalities of all time. The fact that his image is iconic today and that the artist has become a character of novels,⁶ films⁷ and plays,⁸ an aspect that interests us especially in the present analysis, it is a logical consequence of Van Gogh's dramatic life, twinned with his creation.

5 Steven Naifeh; Gregory White Smith, Van Gogh: The Life, Ed. Random House Trade Paperbacks, New York, 2012, capitolul 43, e-book, eISBN: 978-1-58836-047-2

6 "Lust For Life" by Irving Stone; "Sunflowers" by Sheramy Bundrick, "Leaving Van Gogh" by Carol Wallace; "Finding Vincent" by Les Furnanz or "Vincent" by Barbara Stok.

7 "At Eternity's Gate" directed by Julian Schnabel; "Vincent & Theo" directed by Robert Altman; "Van Gogh" directed by Maurice Pialat or "Painted with Words" directed by Andrew Hutton.

8 "Vincent" written by Phillip Stephens and directed by Leonard Nimoy; "Van Gogh and Me" written by Matthew Gutschick and directed by John Hardy or even a pop rock song, "Starry" staged several times, or "Starry Night: A Play About Vincent van Gogh" written by Joe Moody in 2021 and not yet staged (until 2023).

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Among the plays inspired by the great Dutch painter, I chose as a case study the play *“Inventing Van Gogh”*⁹ written by Steven Dietz and directed by Steven Carpenter. The subject is concentrated around an alleged / possibly Van Gogh's last self-portrait, painted just before his suicide, and disappeared, a conspiracy idea about which, obviously, it is not known what it might have looked like, if would have been or would have been done. A fictional contemporary painter (Patrick Stone), is committed to falsifying the alleged canvas, ending by identifying himself, over the years, with Van Gogh. The action passes synoptically from Van Gogh's workshop (from the 19th century) and that of the forger (from the 21st century). The two plans end up interfering in the end, culminating in the physical encounter between the two protagonists, which creates an extremely complex bivalent situation, related to the obsession with creating and especially to the fragile border that sometimes separates truth from myth, the madness from art and subjective reality from the objective one.¹⁰

Despite the fact that Edvard Munch's *“The Scream”* competes in popularity with *“Starry Night”* and that his life was known, like Van Gogh's, to be tragic, being dominated by mental anxiety, we can say that Munch somehow remained behind his work, his biography arousing to a lesser extent the interest of the general public than the canvases left a cultural heritage. Apart from biographical films¹¹ and specialty books, no romantic films, fiction books and even less, plays inspired by the artist's life now have been created, at least not until now. Instead, the images he created strongly influenced the performing arts (both theater and film), through their incredible ability to determine extreme moods. The film *“The Scream”*, inspired by the painting with the same name and directed by Wes Craven is considered one of the most iconic horror films in the history of cinema.¹²

9 Steven Dietz, *Inventing Van Gogh - Acting Edition* (Acting Edition for Theater Productions), Ed. Dramatists Play Service, Inc., New York, 2004, pp. 5-72

10 About this play, Phoenix New Times wrote: *“Like a painting by Van Gogh, Dietz's story is a superb example of excess, an analog one with the reality of wide and well-chosen brushstrokes. At the end of the evening, I was left with the author's resounding views on art and artifice, provoked by his constant question about the supremacy of art or violent myth as far as the great painter is concerned.”* <https://www.dramatists.com/cgi-bin/db/single.asp?key=3212>

11 Of which is a single feature film, *“Edvard Munch”*, directed by Peter Watkins in 1974.

12 The mask inspired by Munch's work, once “imported” into the world of film, made a career even in Halloween parties (and implicitly in films exploring this theme).

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Orphaned at the age of five, tyrannized by an abusive father,¹³ asthmatic with chronic bronchitis, alcoholic, Munch suffered two severe nervous breakdowns and had many complicated cohabitations, painfully broken. An ex-girlfriend even blackmailed him with suicide. After numerous trips and changes of residence, the artist, single until the end of his life, settled in his old age in the village of Ekely near Oslo, where he died at the age of 80 in 1944, with fear that his paintings could have caused him problems during the Nazi occupation of Norway (being interpreted as “decadent art”).¹⁴

Munch was very interested in contemporary theater, knowing and attending a series of playwrights, especially during his travels in Berlin. One of his friends was the well-known playwright, novelist, poet, essayist and Swedish painter August Strindberg (to whom he made an engraved portrait).¹⁵

In 1896, Munch collaborated with Aurélien Lugné-Poe, director of the new Théâtre in Oeuvre in Paris, making two-track programs, *Peer Gynt* and *John Gabriel Borkman*, both written by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, one of his favorite authors. The collaboration started in 1906 with the German director Max Reinhardt, the founder of *Kammerspiele* in Berlin, a theater that successfully experienced a new relationship between stage and public, it was the one in which the Norwegian artist spoke in full. Here he made the scenography of two other plays signed by Ibsen: *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabler*.¹⁶

The collaborations in the world of theater had a major influence, including on his later work, in which not only the scenographic dimension began to prevail, but also his dramaturgical vision. The suite of works “*The Green Room*” is an eloquent example. In this series, Munch creates an articulated space, in the shape of a room from which a wall has been removed, placing objects in the foreground of the paintings to cancel the flatness and feeling of the insurmountable distance between the image and the spectators.¹⁷

13 Arne Eggum, *Edvard Munch: Paintings, Sketches, and Studies* Ed. Clarkson Potter, New York, 1984, p. 16. According to biographical sources, his father forced him to attend the agony and death of his severely tuberculosis-sick sister at the age of fourteen at midnight.

14 Karl Ove Knausgaard, “*Edvard Munch: Scandi Novelists on the Master of Misery and Menace*” in *The Guardian* Sun 24 Mar 2019

15 <https://www.munchmuseet.no/en/edvard-munch/august-strindberg-18491912/>

16 Claire Bernardi; Estelle Begué, *Edvard Munch. A Poem of Life, Love and Death* (Catalog de expoziție - 20 September 2022 – 22 January 2023), Ed. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2022, p.5

17 Claire Bernardi, *ibid.*, p.5

Conclusions

Vincent Van Gogh's work is a faithful mirror of his life, marked by an intense mental anxiety, which has reached pathological levels in its last part, without any ambiguity. In this article we did not take into account the medical aspects, which was of particular interest to us being the fact that the images created by the Dutch artist evade both the exhibition side, as well as the dramatic one, unlike, for example, those of his contemporary, Edvard Munch, a true artist of anxiety, who has often exalted both paroxysm in his artistic work, as well as the scenographic.

What brings them closer is the suffering they have managed to transfigure through their artistic work, an act of purification with magical connotations, of course, in the figurative sense, which brought everyone closer to the world of theater, each in his own way. In fact, the phrase “the magic of shows” is consecrated. Taking some distance from the metaphorical aspects, about the magic of art and also about the artist-master and the artist-histrion, Răzvan-Constantin Caratănase stated that: *“art is magic only for those who believe in the magic of art. For them, the potential of the work of art is as real as that of the electric current or of the healing act operated by the shaman. The artist understood this since he broke away from the craftsman and oscillating between recognition and anonymity, he somehow put himself in the position of the priest.”*¹⁸

The invisible connections between the two are therefore related to anxiety, somewhat similar moods, yet radically different in their sails. In Van Gogh's case, painting was a way or at least an attempt to balance, while for the Norwegian painter, the expressionist manner adopted meant the deliberate release and cultivation of an imbalance between the normal hypostases of the topics addressed, as we would expect to see and those represented, atypical, exceptional.

According to the previous observation, if in Munch's case only the work can be part or source of dramatic inspiration, as far as Van Gogh is concerned, life and not its actual artistic work is what can become (and has even become) theatrical subject, its artistical work indirectly influencing the performing arts, as a free association, speculative or cultural reference.

18 Răzvan-Constantin Caratănase, *Explorări creative în grafică*, Ed. Eurostampa, Timișoara, 2022, p.25

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