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The appropriation of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* in popular culture

ABSTRACT

Edvard Munch's famous painting The Scream is a deeply personal expression of an explosive intensity of emotion. The Scream exposes the artist's psychological state in reaction to traumatic events in his troubled life and directly confronts the lived experience of pain and horror. Given the confessional nature of this painting, it is somewhat paradoxical that The Scream has become one of the most widely appropriated works of art. From Andy Warhol's appropriation of the image, to birthday cards and inflatable toys, from cartoons and graffiti to television commercials and advertising, and from Homer Simpson's 'scream' to the mask of the killers in the Scream series of movies, Munch's scream has been disseminated in a plethora of forms within popular culture. This paper explores to what extent Munch's personal scream becomes undermined or is conversely given more weight when the work is appropriated. Is Munch's scream drained of integrity, reduced to commodity and transformed into kitsch? Or does the repeated appropriation of Munch's scream in popular culture reveal the universality of Munch's original expression? Does the real horror that Munch's scream expresses touch a deep psychological nerve in the popular imagination- so much so that the image is compulsively repeated and transformed?

Edvard Munch's *The Scream* has become one of the most instantly recognizable works of art. This evocation of extreme psychological angst has been subjected to decades of appropriation, dissemination and reproduction in popular culture. Although innumerable artworks in the canon of Western art history have been appropriated in popular culture, I have chosen to discuss Munch's *The Scream* for two main reasons. Firstly, it extends my own Ph.D. research into the representation of anguish in art, literature and philosophy and secondly to question whether an image of such striking intensity can prevail against the

forces of popular culture that dilute. This paper will demonstrate how these forces radically alter our perception of *The Scream*. I argue that it is impossible to view Munch's scream from an autonomous standpoint. We cannot perceive its inherent value as a powerful art object. We are unmoved by Munch's raw expression. Our faculties of vision and sense-perception are clouded by the filters of the popular culture industry. It follows that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's claim that 'the whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry' remains a pertinent description of the effect of the culture industry on individual perception in the contemporary context of late capitalism (Adorno and Horkheimer 1999: 33).

My argument will be developed across three main sections in this paper. The first section discusses Munch's original versions of *The Scream* and provides examples of its subsequent reproduction; the second considers the effect of reproduction on the original artworks(s) in reference to Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'loss of aura'; the third draws upon the writings of Adorno and Horkheimer to examine how the culture industry affects both the concept of the artwork and our perception of it. Due to the brevity of this discussion I have limited my focus to those theorists who are, in my view, most pertinent to my argument. Others, who are relevant, such as Jameson and Lyotard will not be discussed here. Baudrillard will be mentioned but not discussed in depth. Žižek's analysis of *The Scream* after Lacan will not be addressed here, as a psychoanalytical reading of the work is beyond the scope of this paper. A more comprehensive examination of the work of these theorists in regard to *The Scream* will be provided in a subsequent longer article.

The Scream is autobiographical. Munch describes the angst-ridden, terrifying moment that generated this artwork as follows (Munch quoted in Prideaux 2005: 151):

I went along the road with two friends –
The sun set
Suddenly the sky became blood – and I felt the breath of sadness
In my breast I heard a huge extraordinary scream pass through nature

Munch publicly acknowledged the autobiographical content of this work by inscribing this text onto the frame of the 1895 pastel version of *The Scream*. Other statements related to the image further identify personal experience as the force fuelling this work: 'You know my picture, *The Scream*? I was being stretched to the limit-nature was screaming in my blood-I was at breaking point...you know I felt it all' (Prideaux 2005: vi-viii; 152). Through the use

of a dissonant palette and forms that are molten like, amorphous and distorted by the intensity of Munch's feelings, *The Scream* encapsulates horror visually, where aurally we might expect the sound of a scream. Moreover, the choice of colour is evocative of Munch's extreme, hallucinogenic state of mind at this time. *The Scream* forms part of Munch's autobiographical series of paintings *The Frieze of life*. It was one of the key motifs in this suite along with other works such as *The Voice, The Kiss, The Vampire, Madonna* and *Jealousy. The Frieze of life* originally included these 6 key works but expanded to 22 in its first exhibition at the Berlin Secession 1902 (Prideaux 2005: 211). As a whole, the series is a highly charged investigation of the themes of unrequited love, death and angst. However, *The Scream* became of particular importance in Munch's oeuvre as the most raw and direct expression of overwhelming feeling.

Given that this paper deals appropriation it is important to note that *The Scream* became a deeply psychologically charged motif or totem that Munch repeated multiple times. The repetition of the scream motif throughout Munch's oeuvre mirrors the recurring pain, trauma, and physical sickness that constantly marred Munch's life: Munch's mother and two siblings died when he was a child, his father became insane and violent, and another sibling was incarcerated in a mental asylum. Moreover, Munch endured poverty and awful living conditions, unhappy relationships and public accusations that his art was the work of an insane person. He constantly questioned his own sanity and suffered from depression and frequent anxiety attacks (Prideaux, 2005). *The Scream* reflects these biographical details not only through the intense horror that morphs the screaming figure into a formless mass but also geographically. The background of the image depicts a hill called Eckerberg above Oslo near the mental asylum and animal slaughterhouse. From this location one could apparently hear a cacophony of human and animal screams.

Munch created four principal versions of *The Scream*. In 1893 Munch painted two versions: one tempura on cardboard, and the other crayon on cardboard; in 1895 he completed a pastel on cardboard version and finally in 1910 a version using tempura on board. For Munch, the manual reproduction of the image within his own oeuvre (and by his own hand) strengthened, rather than diluted its expressivity. At the same time however, Munch was one of the pioneers of the lithographical reproduction process and made hundreds of lithographs of this image. Munch was a prolific printmaker, creating around 30,000 prints in his lifetime. The purpose of these prints was to disseminate his most notorious images to a wider audience and to supplement the meagre income he was able make from painting (Wall

2012: 8-12). Unlike the subsequent technological appropriation of the work in popular culture, these lithographs arguable retain the artist's original intentionality, and authorship.

The major channels of capitalism including advertising and the media have produced countless derivative reproductions and appropriations of *The Scream*. In its reproduced form, *The Scream* is torn completely from its artistic origins as a confessional, silent cry. Munch's screaming figure is reduced to an empty signifier on to which the popular culture industry can project any kind of emotion, and sell any kind of product. *The Scream* becomes completely transformed and is subjected to complete erasure (or silencing). The following examples demonstrate this grotesque distortion. In popular entertainment, it was used as the inspiration behind Macaulay Culkin's famous expression on posters for the movie *Home Alone* (1990); it was the inspiration for the famous mask of the killers in Wes Craven's popular slasher films titled *Scream,* moreover, the homunculus figure in the original *The Scream* was appropriated and animated in an episode of the popular TV series *The Simpsons*. The Scream is also a popular fixture in news media, with a media flurry following the sale and/or theft of its various versions. Moreover, the work also featured famously in 1961 as the cover of *TIME* magazine's special edition on anxiety. *The Scream* has been widely disseminated in a range of kitsch everyday merchandise and products ranging from cuddly children's toys to T-shirts, mugs, aprons, birthday cards and other miscellanea. It has most recently entered the world of popular smartphone communication becoming an emoji used to enhance and animate everyday text messaging. Finally *The Scream* has been widely used in advertising for a huge range of products, most interestingly perhaps in the promotion of dark chocolate M&Ms. In 2006, following the theft of a version of *The Scream* from the Munch museum in Oslo, M&M's candy started an ad campaign for Dark Chocolate M&M's using an appropriated image of the stolen work to promote dark flavoured chocolate (and Munch's Scream) as 'fun' (see Figure 1). In a seemingly preposterous gesture, M&M's candy offered a reward of two million dark chocolate M&Ms for the safe return of *The Scream* (Esterow, M, 2008). I will return to this particular advertisement for further analysis later in this paper.

Artists have also appropriated *The Scream*, most famously Andy Warhol whose appropriation draws attention to the problematic repetition of the work in a variety of forms in popular culture. Warhol's lurid 1960 appropriation of *The Scream* is an ironic response to the transformation of this artwork into kitsch commodity. When read in the context of corresponding works such as '*Thirty are better than one'* (1963) (in which the *Mona Lisa* is repeated thirty times in a grid), Warhol's appropriation satirizes the proliferation of the image

in popular culture by consciously reflecting the kitsch quality of the popularized image of repetition back to the consuming public.

The former examples epitomize the ways in which the reproduction and appropriation of *The Scream* serves economic imperatives. In order to sell products it is transformed into an image that is entertaining, faintly ridiculous and even 'cute.' Any capacity of *The Scream* to evoke an intellectual and real emotional response is negated. *The Scream* becomes an everyday image that we can access in the comfort of our lounge room, on the Internet; in our kitchen- we can even cuddle *The Scream* in its toy versions. As Walter Benjamin argues (1970: 218):

> Technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. ….

In *'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility'* (1935: 9) Benjamin discusses the transformation in both the perception of art and the concept of art bought about by 'technological reproducibility. ' One of the consequences of technical reproduction is the 'loss of aura' of the artwork. Benjamin defines aura as the 'uniqueness' of an artwork. The advances of technological reproduction destroy the aura in two ways: firstly, the authoritative status of the 'original artwork' is challenged and it can no longer be considered authentic. Secondly, with the advent of technological reproduction the ritualistic function of a work of art is no longer necessary. When confronted with technical reproduction the original does not maintain its authority (Benjamin 1970: 218). According to Benjamin, photography and film can enhance the quality of the images beyond what is possible with the naked eye. Moreover, reproduction enables many more people to access to artworks. Thus, the need to experience the art object for real is redundant. The real geographical location of the work becomes irrelevant to the viewer/consumer (Benjamin 1970: 220). From Benjamin's perspective this is a more socially equitable situation. However, the flip side of this is that any control artists might have over the reproduction of the image is undermined. Moreover, knowledge of the works historical context and significance in art-historical terms become silenced.

Benjamin argues that the value of an artwork was originally grounded in magical/religious ritual. This ritualistic function began to decline in the Renaissance, and was further challenged in Modernism, giving rise to the notion of *'l'art pour l'art'*. The destruction of aura by the developments of Modernism and technological reproducibility emancipates 'the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual' and creates new

334

conditions for its perception and reception. Because the principles of authenticity and aura can no longer be applied to art works the function of art is radically altered. According to Benjamin, 'art is no longer based on ritual, but begins to be based on politics' (Benjamin 1970: 220). Writing in the context of the rise of Nazism in Europe, Benjamin was acutely aware of the ways in which technological advances could be used for political purposes. Technology could stimulate a total crisis (fascism) or could positively transform culture (communism). Benjamin saw the emancipation of art from aura and ritual as anti-fascist as it provided new possibilities for the perception of artworks. The danger of aura was its cult quality- a symptom of fascism. In fascism, Benjamin saw what he described as the 'false restoration' of the aura (Osborne& Charles 2012).

Within Benjamin's framework, Munch's *The Scream* could be understood as '*l'art pour l'art'*; the work originally had no function in society other than to serve Munch's artistic intentions. The subsequent age of technical reproduction did not, however, facilitate a new political function for the work. Decades of reproduction have not provided the general public with a transformative understanding of its potentially political/social dimension as a universal expression of angst and subversive feeling. Contrary to Benjamin's proposition, the function of *The Scream* became purely economic. In post-capitalist Western societies the ritualistic function of artwork is not replaced by political function. It is replaced by an exchange value in the commodity market. Even politically motivated artworks eventually become subsumed in economic exchange. Moreover, today's processes of technological reproduction are so multifarious and refined that not only reproduction is enacted on artwork, but complete appropriation and overhaul.

Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of The Culture Industry is constructive in elucidating the contemporary situation. In their essay *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (1944), Adorno and Horkheimer describe the ways in which the culture industry absorbs *everything,* including art into the system of commodity exchange. Society becomes structured according to a rational, economic model based on industry. The system of commodity exchange (or commodity fetishization) shapes every aspect of society including art and our private lives (Zuidervaart 2011). Moreover, this system necessitates a stultification of difference and variety, causing a homogenization of culture and cultural production (Berendzen 2013). Complex artistic expressions represented by works of 'high art' such as *The Scream* are diluted and rendered exoteric. *The Scream* is used to serve the desires of the happy automaton necessary for the culture industry to function. Culture in fact becomes culture industry, and artworks are subsumed within the culture industry as

commodities. As a result, art is no longer 'autonomous.' The inherent 'purposelessness' of an artwork once ensured its autonomy, but within the culture industry, artworks (in real, reproduced and appropriated forms) are no longer purposeless. They have an exchange value (Adorno & Horkeimer, 1999). Furthermore, *The Scream's* stupendous monetary value in the commercial art market correspondingly fuels its notoriety and fame in the popular imagination. As such, *The Scream's* reproduced and appropriated forms become all the more valuable in the larger system of commodity exchange. In May 2012, for example the 1893 version of *The Scream* sold for just under $120 million US dollars (Sotheby's 2012, 'Sotheby's Impressionist and Modern Art Evening Sale 2 May 2012' para. 1).

The powerful exchange value of the *The Scream* is demonstrated in the way in which it is unashamedly used to sell products and to promote a materialistic lifestyle of fun and pleasure, as illustrated most brazenly in the aforementioned M&M's advertisement (see Figure 1). The red M&M's character laughingly plays hopscotch, and smilingly corrupts the surface of the image. Fun in the form of junk food is the antidote to the dark horror represented by the scream- as the slogan says – 'dark just got fun'. Thus, Munch's expressive and aesthetic intent is hijacked. As Adorno and Horkheimer point out, 'Fun is a medicinal bath. The pleasure industry never fails to prescribe it' (Adorno & Horkheimer, p. 39, 1999). In the face of the evocation of the 'real' angst/paranoia evoked by the scream, the popular culture industry would have us laugh, or be entertained. Horror itself becomes a genre of entertainment, and kitsch.

The question as to whether or not art and genuine aesthetic and intellectual expression is possible within the culture industry is central to Adorno and Horkheimer's critique (Adorno & Horkheimer 1999; During 1999: 29-30; Zuidervaart 2011). My own questioning if *The scream* can survive the forces of popular culture is an extension of their enquiry. This paper has demonstrated that *The Scream* has not survived. It has been symbolically erased and transformed into a shallow image for exchange within the popular culture industry. Baudrillard argues that in late capitalism, reality is replaced by simulation and everything becomes an aestheticized image or a 'trans aesthetic' commodity. Through this investigation I have come to follow Baudrillard in my opinion that the real scream, and any authentic expression equated with this artwork has been replaced with simulation (Baudrillard c.1994; Baudrillard 1993).

To conclude, I would like to speculate on what an authentic response (if you can use that term) in front of the real *Scream* could be. Will it be similar to Baudrillard viewing the

Mona Lisa, which has been distorted by decades of indiscriminate reproduction to the point where we view it 'no longer as a work of art but a planetary simulacrum' (Baudrillard, c. 1994). Is this once powerful object reduced to grotesque caricature, or indeed is the image still relevant as a symbol of the most harrowing psychological discord? As Žižek has proposed, does the ongoing repetition and appropriation of *The Scream* divulge a horrified fascination with the image in the popular psyche? Given our eyes are oversaturated with this image are we still able to perceive this 'glimmer of the real?' (Žižek 1991). Our inability to view the image 'for the first time,' and without the inculcation of the culture industry, has created a situation in which our vision is made redundant. Perhaps, we should not use our eyes to view this work at all. Perhaps we should close our eyes. Perhaps, using our imagination and intellect we might be able to invoke the power and intensity of Munch's original *Scream*. This may be the only resistance we have within the overwhelming proliferation of empty images in popular culture.

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Figure 1. Esterow, M. (2008), 'The Scream,' the Thief, and the 2 Million M&M's', *ARTnews*, viewed 25 May 2013, http://www.artnews.com/2008/04/01/the-scream-the-thief-and-the-2-million-mms/

Image link: http://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/article-2486.jpg.

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