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Discovering repetition

2013

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15089>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pitassio, Francesco: Discovering repetition. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 2 (2013), Nr. 1, S. 292–302. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15089>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2013.1.PITA>

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Exhibition/Website/Conference Reviews

Exhibition: Edvard Munch: The modern eye, Tate Modern, London (28 June 2012–14 October 2012)

Catalogue: *Edvard Munch: The modern eye*, edited by Angela Lampe and Clément Chéroux (London: Tate, 2012)

Discovering repetition

Francesco Pitassio

What makes this picture successful everywhere whether it is a canvas or a print? – Edvard Munch, 1933

Apparently, in the work of the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (1863–1944) it is barely conceivable to discover, describe, or re-frame anything but that which is already known. It is not a minor quality of the recent exhibition and related catalogue to achieve unexpected results by overlapping theoretical frameworks and comparing acknowledged and obscure archival sources. The exhibition *Edvard Munch: The Modern Eye*, curated by Clément Chéroux and Angela Lampe, opened at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in January 2011 and then moved to the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt am Main in February 2012, finally reaching the Tate Modern in London in June 2012. Profiting from the enormous collection preserved at the Munch-Museet in Oslo, which hosts about half of Munch's pictures and his estate, the exhibition thus circulated throughout Europe, offering new insights in what appeared to be an artistic personality confined to an iconic presence. Munch's work often played a stereotypical function in orthodox art history: symbolist, pre-expressionist, purveyor of angst and malaise, and so forth. A cursory look at Warhol's reading of the Norwegian artist could ratify this crystallised conception.¹

The exhibition and its related catalogue thus have two main assets: they struggle to provide a more complex and real image of the artist by placing him beyond the conventional formula of the wasteful bohemian; and, to reach this goal, the chosen pathways overcome the boundaries of art history, plunging us into media archeology, visual culture, and sociology of culture. Chéroux, Lampe,

and the various international scholars contributing to the volume shed light on Munch's neglected dimensions. The background of both curators contribute to this tectonic shift by implicating non-conventional standpoints, enabling both the exhibition and catalogue to depict the expressive, medial, and individual richness in Munch's work. Chéroux is currently curator of photography at the Centre Pompidou and comes from a research background intermingling both art history and photography – a pathway that already gave birth to relevant contributions and exhibitions² and takes into account the ever-shifting mediascape.³ Lampe is in charge of modern art collections at the same institution and the exhibitions she directed in recent times reveal an attitude towards art history that takes its recent anthropological turn into account.⁴

The aim of the exhibition is clearly stated: despite his date of birth Munch belongs to both the 19th and 20th century and, most of all, to the paradigms of modernity. From this standpoint his modernity is less expressed in terms of newness than of *intensity*: 'more than being new, it is the cumulative effect of this intensity that ultimately pushes the boundaries. At the point in art history when it is generally considered that the transition from modernity to modernism could take place only through a formal break, a policy of tabula rasa, the establishment of radically different aesthetic principles bringing about a generational shift, Munch accomplishes the equivalent of a Copernican revolution all on his own.'⁵ In order to investigate and trace this modernity the curators place the artist within a set of articulated aesthetic, medial, and cultural practices, detecting the dialogue between the paintings and their contemporary context. In this respect the exhibition contemplates the twofold sense of visual culture as a background that gives meaning to Munch: the multiplication of images in modern culture, implying the progressive breakdown of aesthetic hierarchies between them,⁶ and an overall inquiry of visual epistemology.⁷

Both the exhibition and the catalogue divide Munch's position within modernity into 11 sections: Medium as Muse, Reworkings, Autobiography, Optical Space, On Stage, Compulsion, Dematerialisation, Amateur Filmmaker, The Outside World, Drawing and Photography, The Averted Eye. Each section examines in what way Munch faced, shaped, and was molded by modernity. The notion obviously implies a composite set of features. For instance, when considering Munch's tendency to repeat specific motifs throughout his career as was the case with masterpieces from the early years such as *The Sick Child* (1885-1886), *Vampire* (1893), or *Kiss by the Window* (1891) (Figures 1-3), the analysis examines this strategy under different lenses. Indeed repetition is at the same time a politics of memory that the artist pursues, whereas memory corresponds to subjectivity's affirmation by reproducing a personal iconography. This is an artistic practice, since 'many painters did not hesitate to repeat and rework their most popular motifs'⁸ but also an aesthetic

policy, and finally building a brand out of changing stylistic options by iterating the same motifs. Therefore, iteration in Munch's work has to do with artistic ideology, market conditions, and practices as much as with personality branding throughout the years and frameworks.

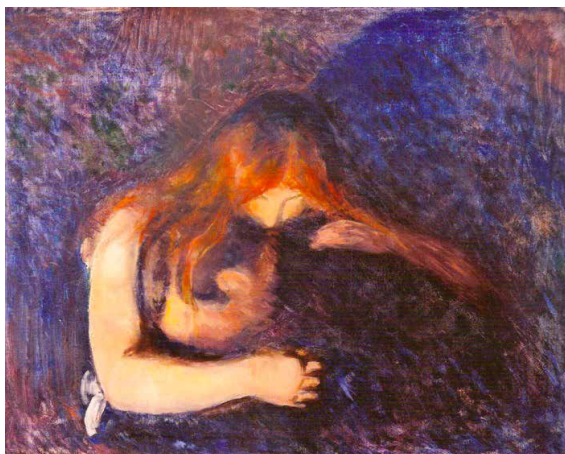


Fig. 1: Vampire, 1893, Oil on canvas

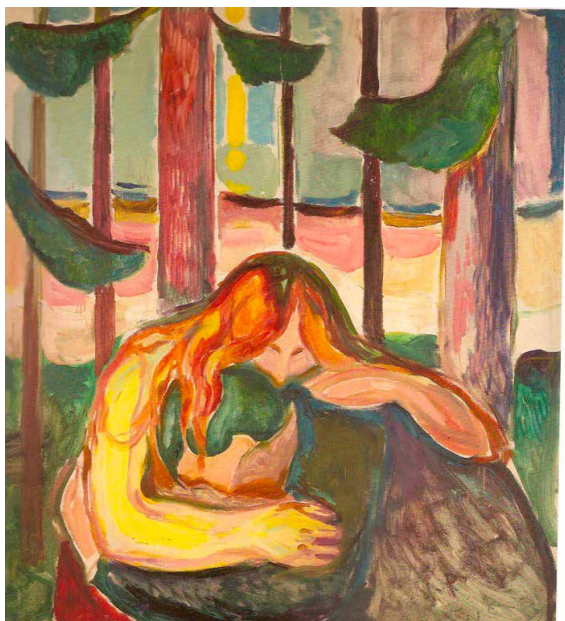


Fig. 2: Vampire in the Forest, 1916-18, Oil on canvas

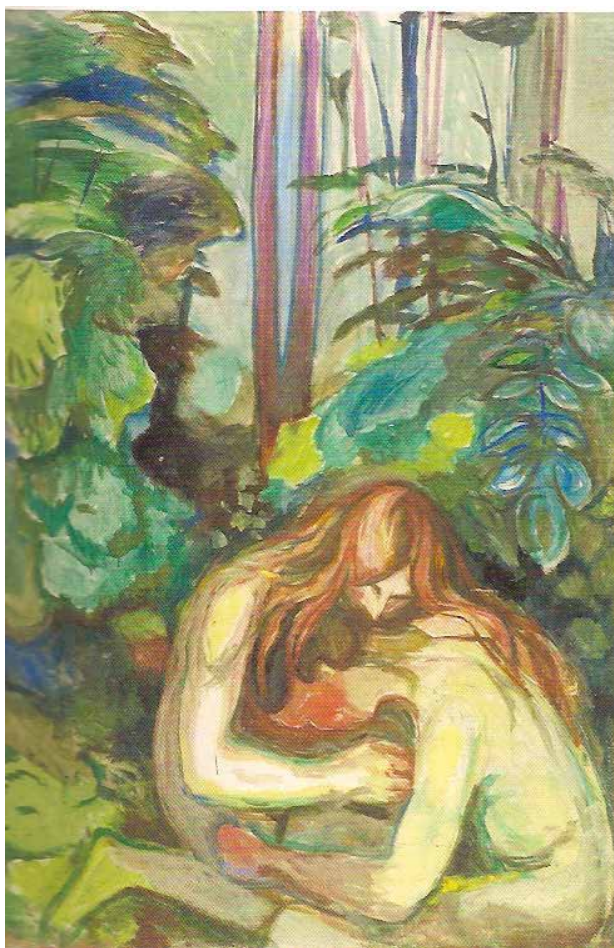


Fig. 3: Vampire in the Forest, 1924-25, Oil on canvas

The exhibition's most significant achievement is the revelation of Munch's proficiency and connection with media emerging at the turn of the century (photography and cinema) as well as other expressive forms (e.g. theatre). What strikes the visitor in the first hall of the exhibition is the enormous amount of stills that the painter shot during two periods of his life (1902-1910 and 1926-1932). The photos preserved in Munch-Museet prove a consistent interest in the medium, neither identified with a documentary function nor with a family use – as a matter of fact, Munch did not revert to photography to depict portrait models or scenery as aids to his painting and he did not even practice photography as a means to depict his family life. The Norwegian painter rather employed photography as a new visual means.



Fig. 4: Metabolism with Shadow Effects and Reflection, Ekely, 1931-32

Photography implied a set of representational questions previously belonging to painting such as figure/background, point of view, and portraiture. As Chérourx remarks, 'what fundamentally distinguishes Munch from the other painters who practiced photography at the same time is the quantity of self-portraits he produced'.⁹ Photography affects modern painting by introducing new conceptions of the subject, space, and perspective. Therefore, the relationship of the artist with photography is evaluated both in his direct use of it and in its consequences on Munch's painting. Munch resorted to photography to write himself into his works – by overexposing his body surrounded by his paintings, the stills survive the human form which is doomed to dissolve its consistency into more permanent aesthetic matter (Figure 4). In this respect Munch's photography often looks for the invisible, as spiritualistic photography did at the passage between the 19th and 20th centuries.

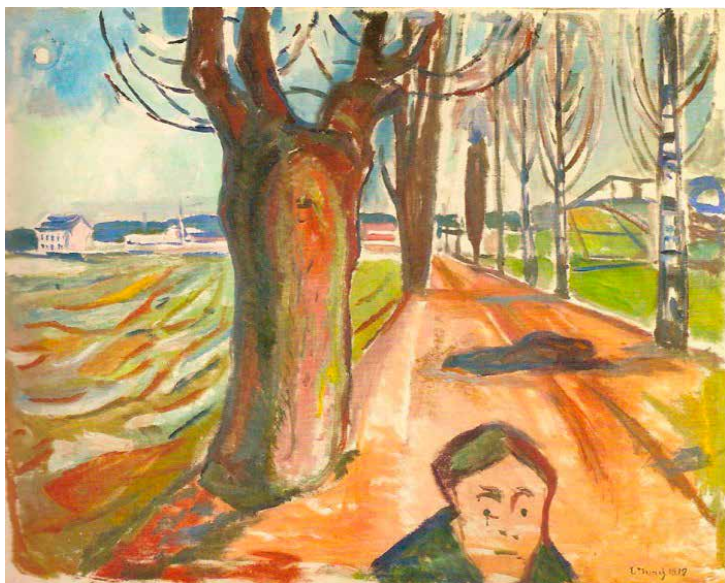


Fig. 5: Murder on the Road, 1919, Oil on canvas

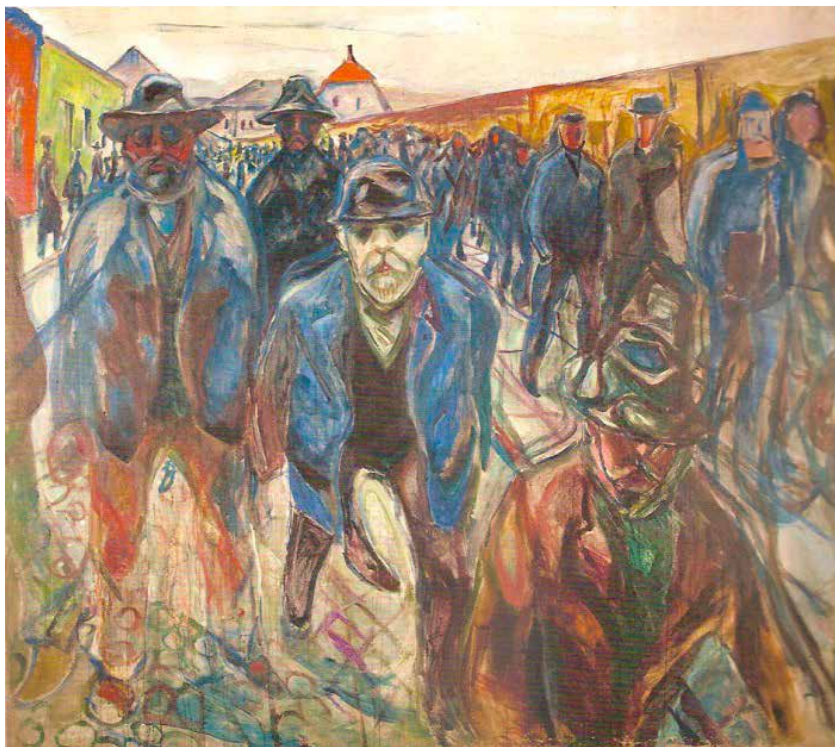


Fig. 6: Workers on Their Way Home, 1913-14, Oil on canvas

Munch's confrontation with photography and cinema as a spectator and amateur filmmaker affected his canvases, particularly their spatial structuring. Under the contemporary influences of Japonisme, impressionism, and photography, Munch's paintings include radically diagonal perspectives, dissolve the bodily unit of their subjects, infringe on the bottom line of the composition, and very often address the viewer – as is the case with the celebrated *The Scream* (1893) and also many other canvases such as *Red Virginia Creeper* (1898-1900) or *Murder on the Road* (1919) (Figures 5-6). These compositional strategies share with photography and cinema a new conception of the representational space, one that is much more uncertain and submitted to the occasional meeting of a look and a fleeting subject (Figures 7-8); this look along with the physicality of the spectator are placed within the depicted scene.



Fig. 7: *The Octave's Final Procession*
Anonymous filmmaker, 1911



Fig. 8: Mercier Champagne? Factory
Anonymous filmmaker, 1907

The exhibition and catalogue examine Munch's entanglements with a certain visual landscape and artistic practice and its effect on his painting; also, episodes that might at first appear to be marginal or short-lived (as was the collaboration with Max Reinhardt's *Kammerspiele*) disclose their long-term effects on the paintings' conception, often relying on a spatial structure derived from a stage where 'intimacy' was heralded as a modern and unprecedented option (Figures 9-10). The overall conception of the exhibition should be praised for its double perspective since what is at stake is not solely the influence of the contemporary mediascape on Munch's activity but also the opposite, as for instance postcards from Munch's residence in Norway seem to be composed according to his celebrated motifs (Figures 11-12). Therefore, what is examined and described is less the prevalence of a genius – may it be the original artist or the power of a medium – and much more an intricate cultural and expressive matrix.

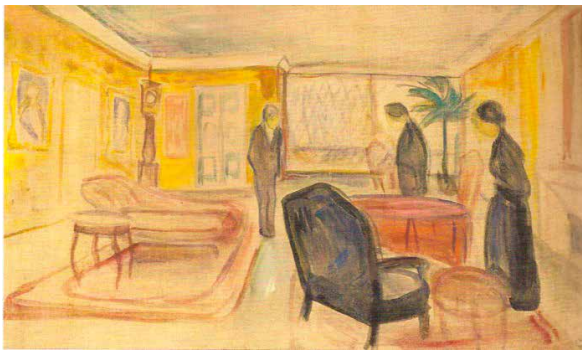


Fig. 9: Set Design for Henrik Ibsen's Ghosts, 1906, Tempera on canvas

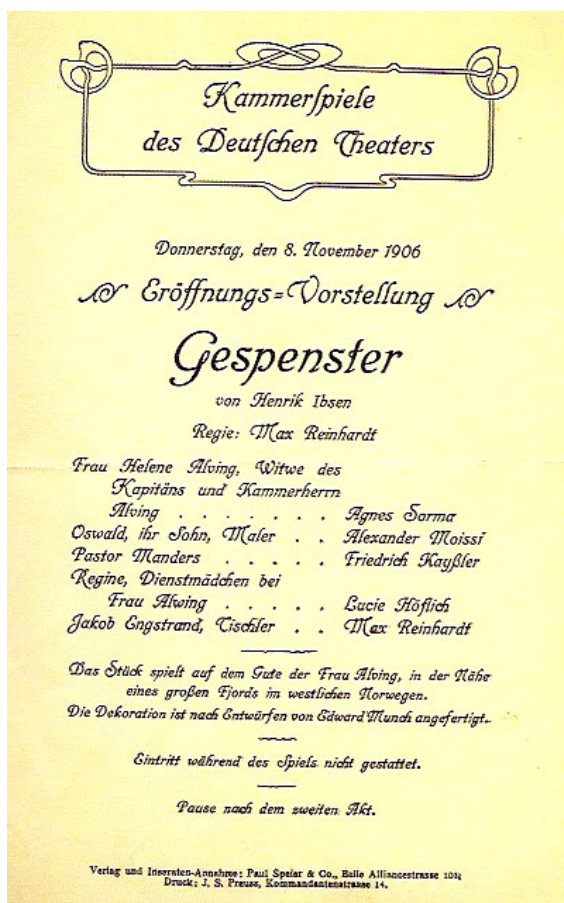


Fig. 10: Programme for Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, 1906

Some components are no doubt surprising since barely known, as is the case with a few amateur films that Munch shot in 1927. These films testify to a quite peculiar practice – the four brief fragments are displayed in a small dark room and depict aleatory moving bodies and urban landscapes. Even while occasionally filming Munch reveals more of an interest for the apparatus' figural potential and a quest for a modern eye than observation of the rules for a well-composed image.¹⁰ Also quite telling is Munch's connection to Norwegian film production and exhibition.¹¹ In the previous decade in Kristiania a rich art collector (among the painter's supporters) opened a series of movie theatres also conceived as art galleries. These new spaces of vision exhibited Munch's paintings and seem to illustrate the relationship between the changing status of artworks and the rising of a new visual culture by including both in the same venue.



Fig. 11: Postcard from Munch to Curt Glaser

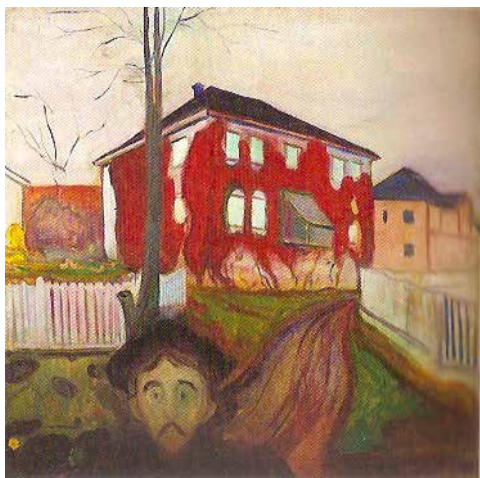


Fig. 12: Red Virginia Creeper, 1898-1900, Oil on Canvas

Other spaces enable the visitor to grasp the rich vividness of the connections forming an artistic practice overlapping aesthetic expression, scientific and philosophical knowledge, and common sense (as is the case with the interest in radiation and the invisible that was widespread at the beginning of 20th century). If one objection might be raised about the overall exhibition conception it regards the proliferation of sections, some of which eventually merge into one another. But this brief feeling of iteration might just be a deceptive side-effect of a remarkable attempt to bring Edvard Munch back to his and our times. As the painter declared

at the end of the 1920s: '[b]ut there is always an evolution and it is never the same – I construct one picture based on another.'

Notes

1. See the exhibition recently hosted at the Danish museum Louisiana – Museum of Modern Art (June 2010) titled Warhol after Munch and the related catalogue *Warhol after Munch* (Humblebæk: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2010).
2. Among the first see, for instance, *Fautographie: petite histoire de l'erreur photographique* by C. Chéroux (Crisnée: Yellow Now, 2003). Among the second consider the very influential *Mémoire des camps. Photographie des camps de concentration et d'extermination nazis* edited by C. Chéroux (Paris: Marval, 2001) and *Le Troisième oeil. La photographie et l'occulte* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), with its English translation *The perfect medium. Photography and the occult* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2005).
3. See *Diplopies: l'image photographique à l'ère des médias globalisés. Essai sur le 11 septembre 2001* by C. Chéroux (Cherbourg-Octeville: Le Point du Jour, 2009).
4. Consider *Traces du sacré*, the exhibition Angela Lampe curated with Jean de Loisy at the Centre Pompidou (May 2008).
5. A. Lampe and C. Chéroux. 'Edvard Munch: The Modern Eye' in *Edvard Munch: The modern eye*, edited by A. Lampe and C. Chéroux (London: Tate, 2012), p. 13.
6. See *An introduction to visual culture* by Nicholas Mirzoeff (London-New York: Routledge, 2000).
7. As Mitchell states: '[i]f visual culture is to mean anything, it has to be generalized as the study of all the social practices of human visuality, and not confined to modernity or the West. To live in any culture whatsoever is to live in a visual culture, except perhaps for those rare instances of societies of the blind, which for that very reason deserve special attention in any theory of visual culture.' See 'Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture' by W.J.T. Mitchell in *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 1 (2), 2002: 171.
8. A. Lampe. 'Dislocated Motifs: Munch's Tendency towards Repetition' in *Edvard Munch: The modern eye*, p. 34.
9. C. Chéroux. "'Write Your Life!': Photography and Autobiography' in *Edvard Munch: The modern eye*, p. 58. A previous important contribution on Munch and photography is *Munch and Photography* by E. Eggum (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1989).
10. See the contribution 'Munch the Filmmaker, a Recalcitrant Amateur' by Fr. Albera in *Edvard Munch: The modern eye*, pp. 189-195. Albera speaks of 'a method of filming that is above all gestural, in contrast with the advocated stillness...He grapples with the prescribed standards, not just in term of stability, but also clarity, distance and luminosity.'
11. See 'The Cinema Art-Galleries of Halfdan Nobel Roede' by I. Ydstie in *Edvard Munch: The modern eye*, pp. 180-187.

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