Empathy and Aesthetics: Edvard Munch and the Paradox of Pictorial Thinking

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ABSTRACT
The article investigates the relationship between empathy and aesthetics from a dual perspective. First, I discuss a painting by the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, Weeping Nude [Gråtende akt] (1913–14), through the lens of 19th century theories on aesthetic empathy, primarily as formulated by Theodor Lipps and Robert Vischer. And second, I reverse the point of view in order to discuss empathy and aesthetics through the lens of what I call the paradoxical pictorial thought of Munch's paintings. In contrast to the 19th century theories on aesthetic empathy, which I argue presuppose the distinct separation between subjectivity (interiority) and objectivity (exteriority), I contend that Munch's paintings articulate how the affective dimension of our being is not private, and interior, but something that is sharable prior to the subject–object division.

Keywords:
Empathy, aesthetics, Edvard Munch, affect, Einfühlung

Sammendrag

Nøkkelord
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‘Empathy’ and ‘aesthetics’ are a conceptual pair that might first appear to have little to do with each other. In everyday language, to be ‘empathic’ means to be an understanding person, to be caring and thoughtful; and it is not immediately obvious what this has to do with philosophical theories concerning the nature of sensuous experience, of art and the beautiful – that is, aesthetics. In psychology (here in the words of Simon Baron-Cohen), empathy is “our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling, and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion.” And in philosophy, empathy can be seen as a response to the question of how we can have knowledge of other people’s minds. That is, given that we only have perceptual access to another person’s visible “exterior,” we can only know what the other subject feels “inside” due to our empathic capacities. According to this view, then, empathy is a kind of bridge between two subjects.

But what, then, has empathy to do with aesthetics? And why is this question placed in relation to “Edvard Munch and the Paradox of Pictorial Thinking”? Although ‘empathy’ is a familiar concept to most, it is maybe less common knowledge that the concept originated within the field of German aesthetic theory in the late 19th century. At the turn of the century, it was a debated and influential concept in art theory. Only second to emerging as an aesthetic concept did empathy get its everyday, psychological, and philosophical meanings that we attribute to it today. In contrast to these meanings, the aesthetic notion of empathy concerns the question of how we experience works of art as animated and affective. By taking a closer look at the interrelation between aesthetics and empathy, the article sheds light on the interpretative strategy of seeking synchronism between work and theory. For what can these 19th century theories of aesthetic empathy really teach us about modernist art in general, and Munch’s art in particular? Or could it be more fruitful to ask what Munch’s art can teach us about aesthetics and empathy?

In this article, I will explore the topic of empathy and aesthetics from two different perspectives. In the first part, I will introduce, by way of history, the aesthetic concept of empathy, and ask what the concept can teach us about Munch’s seldom discussed painting Weeping Nude (Gråtende akt) (1913–14) (ill. 1). In the final part, I will invert the perspective and ask what we can learn about empathy from a selection of Munch’s artworks. Bridging the two parts is a brief discussion on how works of art can inform the discourse on empathy, concluding that some works of art engage in what I will call the paradox of pictorial thinking.
Let us first take a look at an oil painting by Munch, painted around 1913–14, entitled Weeping Nude. The work shows a female figure, in the midst of three distinct color fields. Behind her, there is a wall in nuances of purple and pink; she is sitting on something that might be a red bed; and to her right there is a blue-green field that might be seen as pillows. Upon close inspection, the work appears to be an extraordinary and strange composition, which despite bordering towards abstraction in its individual parts retains the distinctiveness of the figure of the weeping girl.

The painting presents us with a girl lost in sickening grief. What this implies, however, is that we do not merely see the visual representation of a girl who covers her face with her hands, but that we see this representation of gestures as an expression of grief or sorrow. We recognize that she undergoes an experience of intense emotional turmoil. She is not merely sitting there, but the way in which she sits there shows us how she feels. Thus, the painting moves us; it is as if it reaches out towards us and touches us. The expressivity of the girl is something that we do not only see immediately, it is something that we feel. Or rather, it is something that we recognize through feeling.

III. 1
Edvard Munch: Gråtende akt [Weeping Nude], 1913–14.
Oil on canvas, 110.5 x 135 cm. The Munch Museum. Photo: Sidsel de Jong.
In this way, the work exemplifies – rather forcefully, I think – a core question of aesthetic theory. The painting, despite “really” being nothing but strokes of paint on a canvas, affects us. And thus, we see the pictorial representation of a human body as expressive of emotional experience, of grief, or sorrow. But how can it be so, that something that is “just” a thing, an assemblage of materials, can be expressive? How can we sense something that belongs to the realm of feeling? How can we see emotions?

The representation of affective states is one of the central themes of Munch’s œuvre. Especially in many of his most well-known works from the 1890s, it is obvious through the titles alone that moods and affectivity plays a central role in Munch’s art: Anxiety, Sick Mood at Sunset, Despair, Jealousy, and Melancholy. And also, in works such as Death in the Sick Room, Ashes, Evening on Karl Johan, Separation, and of course, The Scream the works are primarily concerned with the emotional or psychological aspects of existence, rather than realistically representing every minor detail of the observable world. But before turning to what Munch’s art tells us about affectivity and sensuousness – and, moreover, about empathy – a brief historical introduction to the relation between empathy and aesthetics is in place. And in continuation of this, I will discuss how Munch’s Weeping Nude can be understood from the perspective of a concept of empathy.

The concept of empathy arose from the context of philosophical aesthetics and the question of how we experience works of art. But in order to understand what motivated the emergence of the concept, we first have to take a step back to the rise of aesthetics as a field of modern philosophy.

For although discussions concerning art, sensuousness and experience have been themes for philosophers since classical Antiquity, aesthetics first came about as a distinct philosophical field in the middle of the 18th century. Usually, the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten is seen as the founding father of the discipline with his definition of aesthetics as the science of sensual cognition, in his main work Aesthetica from 1750. Baumgarten’s concept of aesthetics eventually became important for what arguably is the most decisive contribution to philosophical aesthetics to this day, namely Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgment from 1790. In this work, Kant describes and analyzes the aesthetic judgment of taste, which is the process of how we judge forms to be aesthetically pleasing or displeasing. Briefly put, Kant claims that when we judge something to be beautiful for instance, it is not so that we factually attribute beauty to the thing we experience. Although we say so when we pronounce our judgment (“this thing is beautiful”), he contends that beauty is actually not a characteristic of the thing we experience – be it an artwork, a landscape, or the human body. In fact, Kant claims, the judgment that something is beautiful concerns our subjective, affective response to this thing. The judgment of taste is in this way a judgment concerning the feeling of pleasure or displeasure that forms provoke.

What I would like to highlight, in this context, are merely two things: First, according to Kant, aesthetic experience is something that primarily (which is not to say exclusively) relates to form and not content. And second, aesthetic experience is a subjective, affective state, which in the case of the aesthetic category of beauty is the feeling of what he calls disinterested pleasure – arising from the free play of the cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding. In other words, we can see that aesthetic experience is already here related
to affectivity, broadly conceived. Moreover, Kant’s emphasis on form in relation to aesthetics is significant, for it is within the context of formalist approaches to art and aesthetic theory that the concept of empathy shows up for the first time.

Although empathy sounds similar to the old concept of sympathy, which derives from Ancient Greek ἰμπαθεία [sympátheia] and means to feel with someone – to act in accordance with other people’s needs – the word empathy is of a comparably recent date. It was coined in 1909 by Edward B. Titchener as a Greek-sounding English translation of the German word Einfühlung, which literally means in-feeling, or something like feeling-in or feeling-into. Note that the apparently similar Ancient Greek word εμπάθεια [empátheia] does not translate into ‘empathy’ but ‘malevolence.’

The first explicit treatment of the notion of Einfühlung surfaced in the doctoral thesis of Robert Vischer, Über das optische Formgefühl: Ein Beitrag zur Ästhetik, which was completed in 1873. The point of departure for Vischer’s dissertation is a critique of the notion of pure form in aesthetic experience. It is not so, Vischer claims, that aesthetic experience can be understood as merely our subjective affective response to an external form. Instead, he claims that our experience of artworks and natural phenomena always includes a certain animism or liveliness. We experience the works of art themselves as sad or joyous, graceful or noble, comic or melodramatic, pretty or pathetic. And in our experience of the works, this is not simply something that is inside of us, but something we experience in the works themselves.

Vischer’s significant contribution to the intellectual life of the 19th century was this: the reason that we aesthetically experience works of art as expressive is due to the fact that we project our own minds into the works. We actively – yet unconsciously – feel ourselves into the works. And since we are so intently focused on the work, we experience these feelings as coming from the object. And this is what he calls Einfühlung, empathy. The philosophical argumentation Vischer gives of this, however, is grounded in a pantheistic and spiritual philosophy – where our immaterial ego (our mind or consciousness) literally travels into the work of art, and experiences the work as if it was our own body. We fill out the work with our own ego, with its affective and bodily modes of experience. As Vischer writes, “I am mysteriously transplanted and magically transformed into this Other.”

Vischer’s theory only slowly slipped into the intellectual landscape during the following decade, but the theory of empathy eventually became one of the most fashionable concepts of aesthetic theory. First, and most prominently, in the works by Theodor Lipps, writing

in the late 1880s until the turn of the century, did empathy extend to the broader meaning that includes our understanding and recognition of other humans’ interior emotional states. But the relation to aesthetic experience remained important, also for Lipps. Rejecting Vischer’s pantheistic philosophy, Lipps claims that we understand both artworks, and other human beings’ expressive behavior due to our own projection of mental states into them; we feel-in our own mental states.

As Moritz Geiger argues, the philosophical basis of this is found in Kant’s philosophy, according to which we passively receive sensuous impressions through our sense organs, which subsequently are actively shaped into unified forms by our faculty of imagination. We experience the world only in accordance with the conditions of possibilities of experience, which in turn structures our ability to shape the world into a coherent image. In continuation of Kant, Lipps claims that when we shape sensuous impressions into a coherent view of the world, something of our own subjective states seeps, as it were, into the image we form. Thus, it is a characteristic of our phenomenal experience of the world in general that it is animated and anthropomorphic, since we experience a part of ourselves in the world that we see. This is what Lipps means by empathy: that we feel ourselves into the world; we project our own emotions into the world.

Among the several details of this account, the question concerning the exact nature of how we experience this projection provoked enormous debate around the turn of the century. Notably, one of the most important ways the question of how we experience the projection of emotions was explained through what has come to be called the “argument of analogy.” We empathize by drawing an analogy between ourselves and our own affective experiences, and our impression of the other. So, finally arriving at the argument of analogy – how can we understand the expressivity of Munch’s W eeping Nude from such an understanding of (aesthetic) empathy?

The question relates to the fact that when we see the girl on the canvas, we do not merely see a girl sitting there neutrally, as it were, on her bed. We see her bodily pose and her gestures as “expressions” of something “more” than just a visible “exterior.” And it is clear that it does not seem appropriate to attribute happiness, joyfulness or some other, random affective category to the girl. We can see that she is crying – and in this crying, we recognize sadness, not joy, nor anger.

Crying is one of the most central examples discussed in debates on empathy. For really – when we see someone cry, how do we actually come to see the crying as an expression of grief? This is of course seldom an issue in everyday life, but it is a question that keeps troubling philosophers and psychologists to this day. According to the argument of analogy, which among others is held by Lipps – we attribute emotional states to someone

8. The debate was summarized by Geiger (a student of Lipps, and later Edmund Husserl) already in his 1910 lecture “Über das Wesen und die Bedeutung der Einfühlung.” Ibid.
else because we draw an analogy between the other person’s bodily gestures and our own experiences.

In the case of Weeping Nude, we can see that her head is slightly tilted forward, and she holds her hands up to her face so that both her hands and face disappear into each other, merging with the hair. Understood from the perspective of empathy and the argument of analogy, we first perceive the representation of the visible gestures of the girl in Munch’s Weeping Nude and then identify these as the act of crying. Then we relate the bodily gestures of the girl to our own experiences, as if asking: “how do I feel when I cry in this way?” And the answer might be that when I cry in a similarly intense fashion as this girl I am usually undergoing severe emotional uproar. And thus, based on my own experiences, I project my own feelings into the weeping girl – I am empathic; I feel into the girl – and in this way I see and recognize her gestures as an expression of sorrow.

But we have to be careful here, because this needs more accuracy. What we see is not a person crying, but a painting. It is a representation of someone crying, and this is portrayed in a very particular fashion: Her skin is shown through many different colors and strokes; indeed, light flesh tones and brighter highlights, but also yellow, orange, green and red. Her face and hands are indicated by a few strokes of paint amidst the blackness of the hair. And what about her surroundings? The chaotic strokes of reds, the textures of the wall, the powerful outlines around the forms? If seen from the perspective of Lipps’ theory, it seems to me that we cannot take this into account – on the contrary, the painterly execution of the work would rather appear to obscure and diffuse our ability to feel-into the work. But recall that from Lipps’ Kantian perspective, we passively receive sensuous impressions of the world, which are shaped through our imagination. And this process is the same, regardless of whether we see an inanimate or animate being; it is an object, in any case. Thus, it is something fundamentally other in itself, despite appearing expressive for us.

The animism and expressivity that we experience in the object – be it a human being or a thing – is in other words not something that actually belongs to the object, but something we project through empathy. So although this understanding of the work of art recognizes that we indeed experience the work as expressive, we are in reality still confined to the limits of our own emotional life. Thus, it is dubious whether empathy actually gives us insight into the other person’s inner life at all; and it is certain that the empathic encounter with a work of art has little cognitive value. The painting simply needs to present to us the sufficient sensuous material to enable us to shape a gesturing human figure through our imagination, which then allows us to project our own mental states into it. From this perspective, works of art do not expand our horizon – we do not encounter something new in the work of art, we learn nothing from it. We only see ourselves through the echoes of our own memories and experiences.

In the second part, I will contest this view by inverting the perspective of the discussion, and ask: what can we learn about empathy from Munch’s artworks? But in order to do so, I will first briefly touch upon the question of how we can learn anything about empathy from a work of art.

II: THE PARADOX OF PICTORIAL THINKING

Let me first draw your attention to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. This is from *Philosophical Fragments* [Philosohiske Smuler], written in 1844:

> But one must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow. But the ultimate potentiation of every passion is always to will its own downfall, and so it is also the ultimate passion of the understanding to will the *collision*, although in one way or another, the collision must become its downfall.

This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: *to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.*

It seems to me that few artists have been as forcefully shaped by the paradox of thought as Munch. That is, few artists have been as forcefully guided by the want to discover that which thought itself cannot think; to strive to challenge the conventional limits of how we understand the world, and to offer new horizons to explain “life and its meaning” – as Munch once described his artistic endeavor. But contrary to Kierkegaard, the paradoxical thinking of Munch does not take place in philosophical fragments or treatises, but in pictorial works of art. This thinking is not philosophical thinking, but what I elsewhere have called pictorial thinking. This is the point of departure for the second part of this article, where I can say that the ultimate paradox of *pictorial thinking* – from classical Antiquity until today – is this: to want to show something that is beyond the visible: to want to make the invisible visible; to want to paint what cannot be seen.

Since classical Antiquity, artists have struggled with the paradoxical attempt to paint that which cannot be seen; to show the highest ideals – the good, the true, and the beautiful – to express these in material form; in color and line on canvas. Artists have wanted to express the divine, to let God’s light shine through stained glass. To let the divine will come to appearance in book illuminations of ink and gold leaf, in painted wood and carved stone. Artists have wanted to reveal the rational superstructure of the world, its proportions and harmonies. Indeed, for centuries, Western art has sought to express something that is

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12. [I min kunst har jeg forsøgt at få forklart mig livet og dets mening – jeg har osså ment at hjælpe andre til at klarlegge sig livet] MM N 46 (Oslo: The Munch Museum, 1930–34), 3. Translation mine. See also, for instance, MM N 62 and MM T 2748.

beyond the visible world of sin and animality – and thus to secure and express our relationship with the supra-sensuous world of Ideas, to God, and to Reason. That is, the attempt to paint what cannot be seen.

It is in this perspective that the emergence of pictorial Modernism, in the mid-19th century, appears most radical. For when Gustave Courbet said that “painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist of the presentation of real and existing things. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is abstract, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting,”14 he contested the metaphysical constitution of Western art.15 In Norway, French Realism was interpreted as Naturalism, which saw it as its duty to faithfully and truthfully represent modern life and society as it can be observed visually, without religious and metaphysical connotations.

And this, then, is the historical backdrop of what has come to be called Munch’s St. Cloud manifesto. First drafted around 1889–1890, it has – with the aid of Munch himself – come to be seen as a programmatic statement of much of Munch’s later art. In opposition to the art of Realism and Naturalism, Munch writes: “One shall no longer paint interiors, people reading and women knitting. They will be people who are alive, who breathe, and suffer and love.”16 Contrary to the fashions of Naturalism, Munch claimed that the representation of reality could not be delimited to that which can be observed visually. And so he returns to the old paradox that characterizes pictorial thinking: to want to paint something that cannot be seen. But when Munch does this, it is not in order to return to depictions of classical ideals, the divinity of God or Reason, but to the psychic and emotional realities of human life – to suffering and to love.

III: BEYOND THE INSIDE

Let us first return to Weeping Nude. Indeed, the girl – with her legs stretching across almost the entire canvas – seems almost to wrap her surroundings around herself, as if the pink and purple of the wall; the blood red of the bed, and the blue-green field to the right is drawn towards her. She is the center of gravity in the picture: a grave darkness in the middle of three, fervent fields of color.

Indeed, the painting seems animated, feverish, and agitated. The red bed is shown through a chaos of strokes heading in different directions; some places rather thick, other places barely covering the canvas, if at all. The bulging, wavery disorder of the red field is emphasized by the collisions of different shades of red, from bright signal red and rust, to dark, clogged blood. We can see several lines of watery, dark paint running down the canvas. As if dripping or running down from the girl.

The visual unrest is continued in the wall, which appears to be a cloudy pink and purple animated haze. Indeed, even the shadow seems to creep over the weeping girl’s shoulders. And to the right, the blue-green shape towers up, as if forming a dominating and threatening presence, seemingly imposing itself on the girl. The girl appears to fold into herself, and when we look closely, it becomes difficult to see where the hair ends, and the face and hands begin.

If we contrast this picture of grief with a few examples from the history of art, it immediately becomes clear that Munch’s approach to the theme is different: First, van der Weyden’s Descent from the Cross (ill. 2), painted around 1435, is one of numerous depictions of the descent that also includes lamentation. I simply want to draw attention to the way in which grief is represented by the work. It is done by accurately representing the facial expressions, tears and gestures that are associated with lamentation.

Likewise, in Peale’s Rachel Weeping (ill. 3), Mrs. Peale’s sorrow is represented by her facial expression and tears. Or in Barker’s The Bride of Death, we can see a man covering his face, lamenting the death of his bride.
In contrast, *Weeping Nude* does not merely represent the gestures of a crying girl, but activates the entire pictorial surface to further qualify the emotional turmoil of the girl. While the previous paintings are confined to representing the visible exterior of someone in grief, there is no clear distinction between the “inner” and “outer” life of the weeping nude. Her emotions seem to color the canvas. The painting indeed steps away from the Naturalist tradition in order to depict “psychological realities,”\(^\text{17}\) to use Arne Eggum’s words. But this is something that we find in many works by Munch, not only here. And the statement that Munch painted “psychological realities,” is arguably the most broadly recognized, general characterization of Munch’s art as such – although then with a clear emphasis on works from the 1890s.

Yet this interpretation should not be a conclusion, as it so often has been, but an occasion for the *commencement* of questioning. For if Munch addresses the psychic and emotional life of the modern human being, this implies that his art engages exactly with the core questions addressed in the first part of this article: When we see someone cry, how do we come to see the crying as an expression of grief? How do we come to recognize the behavior of

other human beings as expressive of an “inner” emotional life, as it were? Indeed, how does Munch’s art depict “psychological realities”? And what does this even mean? What does it mean if not to attempt to bring something into view that “in fact” cannot be seen?

This, I contend to be Munch’s take on the paradox of pictorial thinking. For centuries, artists have accepted the limits of pictorial representation and approached the “inner,” psychological life of human beings by representing our visible “exterior.” Tears running down the cheeks, and distorted facial expressions and gestures; this has been the conventional means of indicating what goes on in our “inside.” But Munch contests this limit of pictorial intelligibility; this limit of what is possible to represent in paint; he seems to want to make visible that which cannot be seen – namely the intensity of emotional experience, the way in which sorrow, grief, fear, anxiety, despair, melancholy, and jealousy are not something that merely belong to our “inner” life – but something that fundamentally belong to the way we experience the world; that our moods somehow structure the way in which the world appears to us.

If we take a look at Munch’s *The Scream*, for instance, there is no inside. There is no separation between the visible “exterior” and an emotional “interior.” It seems to me to be impossible to uphold a clear-cut distinction between inside and outside in the face of the blood-red sunset, the exaggerated perspective, the intense, bulging waves of lines and

**III. 4**

Edvard Munch: *Løsrivelse [Separation]*, 1896.
Oil on canvas, 96.5 x 127 cm. The Munch Museum. Photo: Ove Kvavik.

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strokes that reveal the cityscape below the hill. The entire world of the painting, including the screaming figure, is spread out over the canvas, with inside out and outside in, as it were. Like we saw in the case of Weeping Nude, the affective state of the central person in Scream is not confined to the person’s interior. The painting seems to insist that intense anxiety or fear is to be seen as an experience of the world and not something that stays on our “insides” as it were. It colors the openness “between” us and our surroundings, the openness in which we stand, in which we are.

In The Scream, however, we can nevertheless see two figures, walking in the background, seemingly unaffected by the existential drama of the painting. This is a returning theme in Munch’s art from these years, where the affectivity of the painting is focused around one person in particular. In Separation (ill. 4), for instance, we can see this again – the overtly explicit symbolism of the man that bleeds from his heart while his beloved, seemingly unaffected by the lovesickness of the man, walks out of his life. Indeed, she appears to be unaffected, but the entire world of the man, his surroundings, face and skin, are not.

If we now for a moment return to the 19th century interpretation of aesthetic empathy, we could indeed interpret this by saying that what Munch depicts are different subjects’ projections of their emotional life into their exterior surroundings. So that in the case of Weeping Nude, we see a representation of the world according to her “eyes” (had they been open), and in the case of The Scream, what we see is somehow a visual approximation of how the world might feel like for the screaming person who faces dread or anxiety; and in the case of The Separation, we see the world according to the lovesick man, in the eyes of whom the girl walks steadily, unaffected out of his life – ripping his heart out. From this perspective, what we see are representations of the depicted subjects’ projections of their interior states into the visible world.

But in my view, this produces more questions than it solves. For the interpretation entails that we project our subjectivity into the inner life of the experiencing subject of/in the work. But how can we do this when we only have visible “access” to its objective exteriority – which now, supposedly, depicts the interior state of the subject? How are we supposed to somehow come to recognize the world as if seen through the eyes of the other subject by means of their visible exteriority, if this exteriority now does not represent the objective world but the subject’s projection of its inner states? In my view, the interpretation appears to break down due to its premises, for the language on which the concept of empathy is based, is structured around the idea of interiority and exteriority. The entire idea and concept of empathy is based on a clear distinction between inner and outer – between subject and object. Indeed, empathy is, as we have seen, thought to be what bridges two subjects, mediated by objectivity. But if Munch’s art challenges this distinction, I contend that the theory of empathy can no longer explain what we see (if it ever has).

What comes to light, then, is this: the view that affectivity is something that merely belongs to our inner, private, subjective life, is what is questionable. And equally so: that the only way we see and experience other people is through their exteriority. For it is this distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, between “inner” and “outer” that creates the need for the bridge of empathy. But the bridge of empathy does not reach the other shore, as it were. And in this way, it appears to be related to what Kant claimed to be the greatest “scandal of philosophy,” namely that philosophers have yet to give definite proof.
of the existence of the external world – which, of course, includes other human beings. It is worth recalling, however, Martin Heidegger’s words from *Sein und Zeit*: “The ‘scandal of philosophy’ is not that this proof has yet to be given, but that such proofs are expected and attempted again and again.”

Indeed, what Munch’s paintings show us is that when we are undergoing intense emotional upheaval, we don’t experience this as something that merely comes from our inside. As if our experience of our surroundings is merely colored by a translucent layer that results from the projection of our “psychological reality” into the world. Rather, they show us affective states as something that structures our way of being. Instead of projecting our affectivity, we are claimed by it. This, I contend is even more prominently visible when Munch brings into view the emotional relation that is shared by human beings. In *Amor and Psyche* (ill. 5), for instance, it is impossible to ascribe the density and tenseness of the moment as belonging to the interiority of any of the two persons. Despite arising through different combinations of color – they both seem to be claimed by the same agitated stillness exactly through the fact that both inhabit the same painterly texture. In *Death in the Sickroom*, the mood that is represented by the painting appears as a heavy stillness. An atmosphere that is shared by everyone in the room – and thus not as an emotional, psychological state that remains on the “inside” of each of the subjects as if they merely happen to be situated in the same space.

This, I would say is remarkable, indeed. For while the traditional depictions of human affectivity have had to operate within limits of what could be represented that were confined to representing visible exteriority, tears and gestures, Munch’s art makes visible that which previously could not be seen. Indeed paradoxically, it brings into view the invisible, and thus reconfigures the limits of what is possible to paint. The pictorial showing of this reconfiguration is what I call pictorial thinking. And in the case of Munch’s art, there is one work, more than any other, which must be seen and thus held accountable for this reconfiguration, and that is *The Sick Child* (ill. 6). Here, in the work that, in Eggum’s words, “seems to burst open the limits of what could be expressed in Naturalistic pictorial idiom,” we see for the first time a fundamental transgression in how paintings can bring into view death’s affective presence, as something that belongs not only to the sick girl, to the mother-figure, or to Munch – who is often claimed to somehow “project” his emotional state into this work – nor even to us, who behold the work. The work shows that the grief and sorrow of the world of the work is not contained in either interiority or exteriority, and thus not in need of the bridge of empathy. Grief is something that grips us, something that inhabits our bodies, and thus structures our way of being in the world. Thus, the painting claims us, if we dare expose ourselves for what it shows. This, however, is not a new conclusion on Munch’s art and *The Sick Child* – it is far from the final word, but merely a new turn in the path of questioning, which again raises new question. But these, I will let lie for now.


In concluding this article, let us recall the beginning. The title of the article is “Empathy and Aesthetics: Edvard Munch and the Paradox of Pictorial Thinking.” First, I discussed how empathy arose in the context of philosophical aesthetics, as a response to the question of how it can be that we experience works of art as animated and expressive. But through my attempt at interpreting Munch’s *Weeping Nude* through this 19th century concept of aesthetic empathy, I arrived at the conclusion that empathic experience of works of art is confined to a closed circle – a circle through which we can only see what we already know. The concept did not allow for the work to speak to us, it could not offer any new horizons concerning the relation between sensuousness and affectivity, because what we experience in the work is merely our own projections into the work – it is merely a result of our *feeling-in*, empathy, *Einfühlung*, into the work.
Contrasting this, I have argued that Munch’s artworks – here in the case of *Weeping Nude, The Scream, and Separation* – can be seen as contesting the very premise that the concept of empathy is based upon; namely the clear distinction between inside and outside, between subjectivity and objectivity. In the case of *Amor and Psyche, Death in the Sickroom* and finally *The Sick Child*, I contended that these paintings aim to show how the affective dimension of our being is not something private, and interior, but something that we fundamentally share. *Amor and Psyche* does not portray two individuals with their own separate feelings and emotions: it portrays how affectivity and moods structure them as a couple. It is something third, to which the two belong. But to the question of what this third element is, the painting remains silent. It seems simply to suggest that although a Naturalistic rendering of a man and woman standing in front of each other would appear to be more “accurate,” this would overlook something central – maybe exactly that which is central when it comes to the meeting between love and the soul, between *Amor and Psyche*. This meeting, however, which we all recognize, but do not know – which is impossible to put into words, and invisible to the eyes – seems to be what the painting addresses. As such, the work seems to be an attempt at letting the invisible arise from the visible – to paint that which cannot be seen.

![Ill. 6](image)

*Edvard Munch: Det syke barn [The Sick Child], 1885–86.*

Oil on canvas, 120 x 118.5 cm. The National Museum, Oslo. Photo: Børre Høstland.