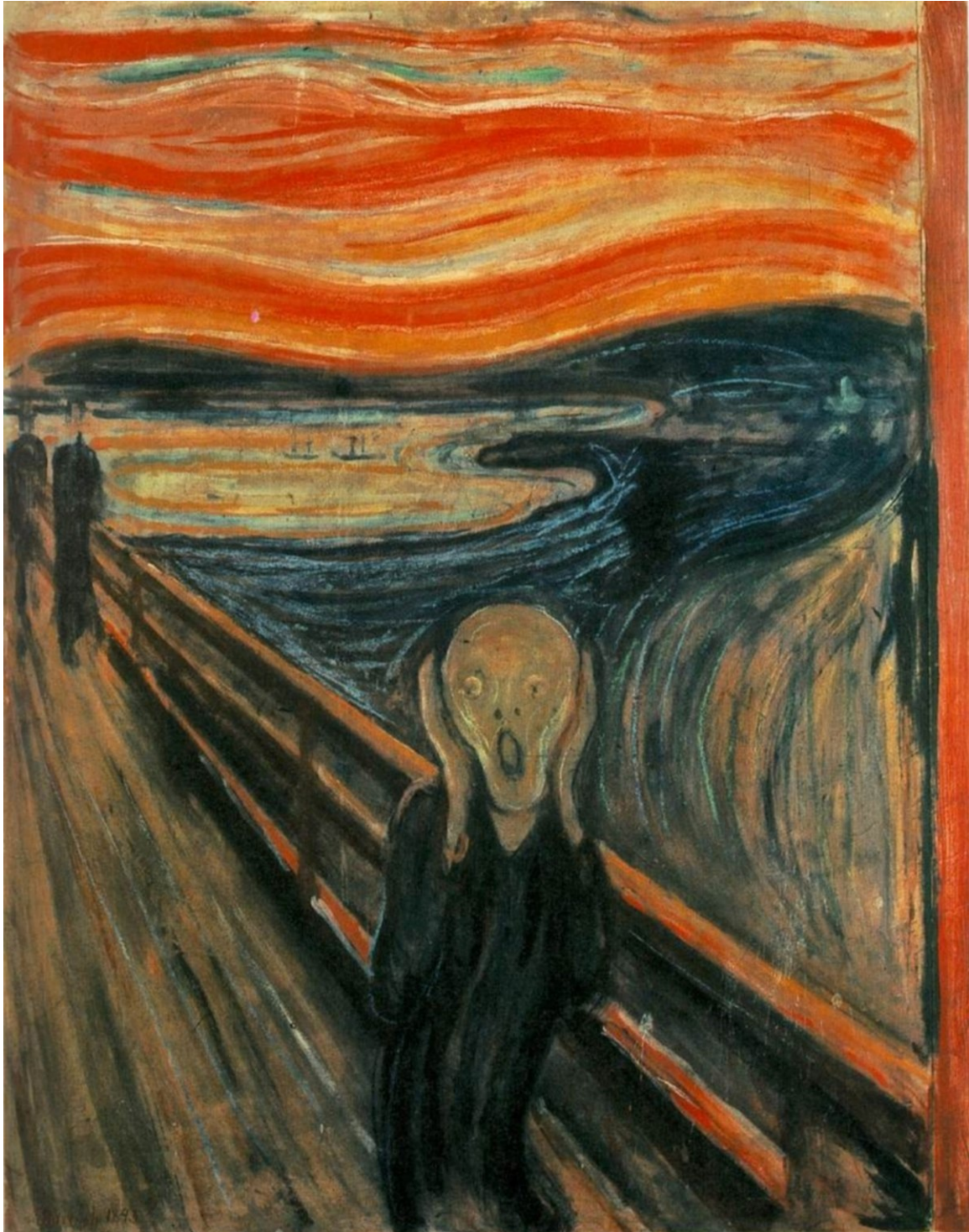


Expressionism and Expressionist Theatre: An Introduction



(The Scream by Norwegian Artist – Edward Munch)

What are the origins of the term ‘Expressionism’?

Expressionism is the name given to a very broad artistic movement which flourished at the end of the nineteenth century and during the first quarter of the twentieth century. We’re concerned with its manifestation in the theatre, but it was initially a movement in painting. In the book *German Expressionist Painting*, Peter Selz introduces his subject by stating:

‘Twentieth-century art and aesthetics are characterised by a growing disbelief in an objective reality. Emphasis has shifted from the outer world of empirical experience to the inner world that a man can test only against himself. As the subjective personality of the artist has assumed control, it has demanded, in place of the old passive contemplation, an active participation from the observer. This is perhaps the most important single factor in the development of the expressionist movement.’

Although it is an incredibly difficult phenomenon to trace – it had many offshoots and was very widespread – it is also, to my mind, quite straightforward to recognise and understand.

It is probably best to gain an idea through looking at the painting of Edward Munch and Paul Klee. You’ll see what I mean about the difficulty of tracing Expressionism when you realise that, although Munch is regarded as an excellent example of the concern, he was painting before the term itself was invented.

Munch (1863-1944) is famous for a spate of grotesque, tortured painting done around 1895. These paintings, and this example from his diary, demonstrate why he is regarded as quintessentially Expressionistic:

‘..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 always I 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 should have been like a ship without a rudder.’

What are the basic historical circumstances from which it arises?

It is a phenomenon strongly connected with Germany before, and directly after, the First World War. It spans the early years of Brecht's (1898-1956) and the end (1917) of Wedekind's, a writer who was strongly connected to it through his early plays.

Before the First World War, towards the end of the nineteenth century, Germany became an increasingly powerful industrial nation. Eve Rosenshaft, in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, suggests that, by the end of the century, Germany had become Europe's principal industrial power. This led to many rapid changes in German society, comparable with the industrial revolution in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century. A huge population growth, coupled with a migration into industrialised cities created many new crises and, while many industries flourished, the growth of an increasingly aggressive and vocal workforce led to the development of powerful trade unions. This led, in 1912, to the Social Democratic Party gaining the largest share of the vote in the general election, thus transforming the political landscape of the nation.

In addition to this Rosenshaft tells us:

'From the turn of the century onwards, successive German governments pursued policies of international confrontation and armaments investment. They encouraged patriotic and imperialist propaganda in the hope of winning back both elite and popular support for the imperial system, while avoiding genuine social and political reform'.

This increasing sense of Germany's predominant status in Europe, coupled with a fear of some of the growing tensions within Europe, not least Russia, led to a sense that Germany needed to defend itself from external threats. These tensions built to a climax which culminated in the First World War.

The war brought physical and financial devastation to Europe in general and Germany in particular. It was no surprise; therefore, that in its aftermath, and following the abdication of the Kaiser, there was an even greater vote in favour of the populist Social Democratic Party, and calls for the rejection of Germany's imperialist past. The sense of devastation, coupled with frustration at the traditional values of the past, strengthened the emerging Expressionist movement.

The Weimar Republic (1918-33) promised, in Rosenshaft's words, 'an access of real power to the democratic forces at large and to the labour movement in particular'. In reality, however, the aftermath of the war had left Germany financially crippled to the extent that by the time of the Wall Street Crash in 1929, it was already suffering severe economic strife. As a result, artistic forms that had flourished in cinema, art and theatre in the early part of the 1920's had become parodies of themselves by the time of the Crash.

The major imperative for Expressionism’?

Its major impulse was a concept known as *aufbruch*: the need for a new start. Amongst many artists and politically-minded people a break with the ‘old’ was felt to be vital. Life was seen to be an unbearable restriction at every turn. When war came it was generally welcomed since, felt the Expressionists, from destruction would come a new order. Naturally enough, such enthusiasm turned to disillusion when dreamers and visionaries were confronted by the reality of modern warfare.

The Hugeness of Expressionist Ideas

‘The greatest dramatic work to emerge from the war was clearly Karl Kraus’s *The Last Days of Mankind* which dealt with the course of the war by quoting the actual words used by the newspapers, official communiqués, statesmen, soldiers and black marketeers of the time. This monumental work is therefore completely realistic, but at the same time it becomes Expressionistic by its sheer cosmic scope, especially in the apocalyptic vision of the epilogue entitled ‘*The Last Night*’ which ends with the total destruction of the world through an invasion from Mars. Unfortunately, the size of this Martian drama (1000 pages approx.) makes its inclusion in this volume impossible, and Kraus himself realised that no theatre on earth could ever play it in full’.

The war was very important to the Expressionists since it enabled them, first of all, to glory in the idea of the destruction of the world, and then to denounce the old world for its savagery and take an evangelical visionary stance: how shall we build the new world out of this slaughter? Inevitably, with the latter view becoming predominant, Expressionism was more overtly radical and political.

In what ways was it a reaction against other theatrical ‘-isms’

It rebels against the straitjacket of Naturalism in the theatre, seeking destruction of the old and the ordered. It wanted to smash the traditional three-act play with its sequence of well-developed, overtly natural scenes set in genteel surroundings. It wanted to express **EVERYTHING**, not miniature portraits of tiny areas of society, however realistically they might be represented. So *A Doll’s House* or *Hedda Gabler*, for example, were equally objectionable to them. Firstly, because the form (three act, small-scale story etc.) was unsatisfactory, and, secondly, because it was representative of the old order: bourgeois, superficial, silly and, above all, an insult to the soldiers in the trenches.