



Noir and Plus Noir

Sombre Siblings

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Noir and plus noir – sombre siblings

'Create your own period and your own art! Let all ideas live and thrive. Nothing is forbidden or too strange to be the subject of a work of art. Follow your chosen path wherever it leads. If you wish to change your way or style of painting, do so, but if not, don't'.

The encounter of symbolism and contemporary art gains new dimensions with the exhibition *Nordic Noir* which is also a meeting of Norwegian and Finnish artists. The artists of the exhibition are in chronological order: Louis Moe (1857–1845), Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), Hugo Simberg (1873–1917), Odd Nerdrum (1944 –), Jarmo Mäkilä (1952–) and Sverre Malling (1977–). With their combinations of classical and modern phenomena, the works of the exhibition's artists establish connections between the present and the historical by addressing childhood experiences, death and the meaning of the unconscious both in the late 19th century and now.

The art and intellectual currents of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the so-called *fin de siècle*, may be closer to our present age than we can imagine. Both periods are marked by an interest in the personal, with individuality and one's own self as the most important things for the individual.¹ New dimensions for the artists and works of the exhibition come from the opportunity to consider them within a period that begins with Romantic thought and makes even the terrifying a new area of art. For example, the so-called black paintings (*pinturas negras*) of the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) find admirers and followers from one generation to another. In these works we can see Saturn devouring his child and a witches' sabbath. The horrible becomes fascinating and not just something terrible and forbidden. The literary term 'romanticism of horror' (*Schauerromantik*) aptly describes the merging of the abhorrent and the fascinating.

What turn did imagery take once the terrifying and the horrible were understood as fascinating subjects? Such motifs had already appeared in art, but only as reminders of how moral failings were punishable or as linked to comic aspects. Following Mary Shelley (1797–1851), Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) and others, the fascination of the horrible and the ghastly began to gain form. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is familiar to most people even today and Poe's stories make the blood run faster, because the 19th century's great contemporary fear of being buried alive still makes the flesh crawl today.²

¹ Tihinen 2008, passim.

² See e.g. Bondeson 2001.



Francisco de Goya: Saturn Devouring His Son, 1819–1823, oil on canvas, Museo del Prado.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

The power and personal nature of fantasy

When the unconscious became a subject of interest, artists also began to be increasingly fascinated by the depiction of something of which one had no definite knowledge. The unconscious, which Sigmund Freud later made famous, is also an invention of the era of Romanticism.³ The operations of the unconscious mind and the surprising and even threatening things that arise from there merged in a natural way with what increasingly became an area of expression for artists during the 19th century: creativity and individual fantasy. Akseli Gallen-Kallela's famous description of his private pupil Hugo Simberg summarises something of considerable importance: '... His talent is quite extraordinary; he reminds me of the 14th and 15th century masters. A naivist in a real (and not artificial) sense. His works are like sermons that everyone should hear and bear in mind.'⁴ Akseli Gallen-Kallela himself was curious about various kinds of phenomena, which meant that rural folk, mythological motifs and dreams were all suitable subjects for him. He discussed his ideas in correspondence with the author Adolf Paul (1863–1943). *Conceptio artis*, which Gallen-Kallela later cut into pieces was based on these discussions.⁵



The individuality of the artist and the personal nature of his or her work gained importance in the post-Romantic world. The ideal of the personal opened up new ways to address different realities and their depiction in the arts. The symbolist generation did not feel it was important to depict the world in its present form but instead to seek something else. In Hugo Simberg's *Death Asking for a Picture for His Scythe*, it is obvious that the artist will engrave a picture on the scythe



Akseli Gallen-Kallela: *Conceptio artis*, 1895, oil on canvas, private collection. Photo: GKM / Hannu Aaltonen.

³ Gay 2004, 170–171.

⁴ Translated quote from a letter from Axel Gallén to Louis Sparre, 10 December 1895. 'Hans konst kommer engång betyda mycket om han går fram på den väg han nu har. En alldeles underbar begåfning alldeles i karakteren af gammal mästare från 13 å 1400 talet. Och det är sann (icke konstlad) naivitet. Hans saker verka som predikningar som alla måste höra på och borra sig in i minnet. Det är för att de äro gjorda med sådan sanning och intensitet i känslan.' (Lahelma 2017, 14).

⁵ Turttainen 2011, passim; see also Sarajas-Korte 1981, 278–281.



Hugo Simberg: Death Asking for a Picture for His Scythe, 1897, etching. Finnish National Gallery, Ateneum Art Museum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery.

when asked to do so by the skeleton figure. In Simberg's visual world, death is not unfathomable impermanence but an everyday companion whose presence is a precondition of being alive. The appearance of a double, a *doppelgänger*, in the artwork alters its degree of reality, and the audience will no longer know automatically what is true and what is not.⁶ Simberg's death and devils make the mythical something quotidian. At the same time, the artist created his own reality, the originality of which has been more widely recognised only posthumously.⁷

In the world of the late 19th century, there was a considerable temptation to be somewhere else. Artists found their way to various mythical or otherwise distant places or sought new worlds in their own imagination. When Akseli Gallen-Kallela depicted the abode of dreams or the island of the fortunate in *The Island of Dreams* (1897), he created a recognisable reference to Arnold Böcklin's (1827–1901) *Isle of the Dead*, the five different versions of which became iconic works of art. Böcklin's art later became a 'guilty pleasure', something that should not be liked. The works of this Swiss artist were either too literary or strange, or both, which made them unsuitable for art history conformed to the mainstream.⁸

6 Envall 1988, 28.

7 Stewen 2004, 151–152.

8 Tihinen 2011, *passim*.

Despite his varying appreciation, Arnold Böcklin maintained his position as 'the artists' artist', as a large number of modernists were impressed by him.⁹ His influence can still be understood, for only Böcklin managed to make his mythical figures so real and corporeal. Even the present-day viewer of his works is like someone watching the most vulgar reality TV show. In the *fin-de-siècle* world, works of art in small format or ones that needed to be viewed at close range, such as book illustrations, can be thought to have a function similar to present-day reality fiction. In both categories, the boundary of fact and fiction is fluid and it involves



Louis Moe: The Bear and Death, 1900, etching, Private Collection. Photo: Thomas Widerberg.

a personal aspect. Louis Moe's art displays the whole range of fantasy, for it is not soporifically safe, even though Moe made a particularly large number of illustrations for children's books. These illustrations instead demonstrate why the world of fairytales is also so fascinating for adults, because it makes it possible to approach things that are terrifying and precisely for this reason so fascinating. As Kai Flor points out, the widest range of different figures – from the devil to cupids – meet in Moe's drawings.¹⁰

⁹ See e.g. Brummer 1993.

¹⁰ Flor 1949, 64.

Another example of a meeting of different worlds is the idea of the similarity between the visual arts and music that formed in the 19th century and went on to become highly influential.¹¹ When and if the visual arts can approach music in their abstract nature and become the image of a less visible reality, they can discover new worlds and forms of expression. A classic example of the above is abstract art. As music and the visual art approach each other, they can be regarded as different aspects of the world, as posited by occultists, who interpreted the world as divided into hidden esoteric reality and exoteric reality that can be perceived by everyone. A third aspect of the different facets of the same reality can be seen, for example, in the relationship of literature and life, which has interested people in both the 19th century and today.¹² It is also possible to consider all the above pairs as twins or doubles, resembling each other, yet different.

The mixing of genres and worlds

In the era of the modern, one of the main features of art has been its interest in anti-art, with the latter often making its way to become part of art while expanding the area specific to art itself. A variant of this is the blending of different things, whereby references are neither automatic nor unequivocal. In Sverre Malling's works the Gothic appears to be related to both the dark-spirited imagery of the 19th century and the British horror films of Hammer Productions. The latter are toned by swinging London, or British 1960s pop culture in general, mixing both good and poor taste. The 1960s also marked a re-evaluation of symbolist art and its slowly increasing appreciation. At the same time, there was a renaissance of neo-religiosity when the hippie movement and other new groups that held spirituality in high esteem began to show interest in the same questions as those who had developed esoteric ideas in the late 19th and early 20th century.¹³

The mixing of different worlds is also related to the notions of the modern era regarding the mind and how it is structured. This is reflected in an interest in the unconscious and its various aspects, of which more information is sought with different methods. Depending on one's perspective, the unconscious is both a threat and an opportunity. According to historian Alex Owen, many modern occultists were interested in breaking down the barriers that had prevented the disclosure of all the dimensions of the self.¹⁴ The allure of all these dimensions is excellently suited to all the artists of *Nordic Noir*, for their works continuously give the impression that something hidden or forgotten, and possibly even forbidden, is about to be revealed.

¹¹ Rapetti 2004, 175-177.

¹² Johansson 2010.

¹³ Churton 2016, 456.

¹⁴ Owen 2006, 233.

Rodolphe Rapetti, a researcher of symbolism, notes that the ideas of the author Marquis de Sade (1740–1814) were already important for the symbolists, though not to the same degree as for the surrealists.¹⁵ The imagination of artists found cruel and terrifying ideas fascinating, because they were regarded as connected with the darker sides of the mind, bringing forth aspects of which society or the individual concerned would really not have wanted to know. Subversive elements also began to interest artists to an increasing degree.¹⁶

The Belgian artist Felicien Rops's (1833–1898) series *Les Sataniques* and *Les Diaboliques* are good examples of how satanism appealed to audiences of the late 19th century who were interested in reversed morals, the encounter of death and sexuality and something exceptional that we could call, for example, magical.¹⁷ The discovery of alternative models is something common to the artists of the exhibition, for each one of them is interested in creating his own world. In 2011 critic Joakim Borda wrote of the duality of Malling's works – of how the idyllic in them is combined with something completely the opposite.¹⁸ The ambivalence expressed in Malling's works is in fact related to the way complex issues are articulated, for instance, in the art of Moe or Simberg. It is not easy to decide what kinds of feelings are aroused by, for example *Je est un autre* (2011) by Malling. It remains for the viewer to decide whether it has to do with passion or a crime of passion.

¹⁵ Rapetti 2004, 74.

¹⁶ Rapetti 2004, 54–84.

¹⁷ Churton 2016, 35–38.

¹⁸ Borda 2011.



Odd Nerdrum: Icelandic Bath, 2012, oil on canvas. © Odd Nerdrum.

Childhood, death, music

Odd Nerdrum achieved international renown with his works *The Murder of Andreas Baader* (1977–78) and *Refugees at Sea* (1979).¹⁹ According to Ebbestad Hansen, these works combine topical subjects with a classical idiom.

In this respect, Nerdrum operates in the same way as the French painter Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) did in *The Death of Marat* (1793), depicting the hero of the French Revolution in a manner familiar to everyone from the *Descent from the Cross* motif – a disputed contemporary figure was given a memorial of high style following his violent death. This memorial connected him with tradition and made a visual hero of him. In Nerdrum's later works, such as *Icelandic Bath* (2012) and *Tourette* (2011), his style has changed, but the works still reflect the joint effect and non-locatedness of various classical allusions. By the latter I mean how the paintings elude questions of modernism and non-modernism by introducing modern (transgressive) features into a manner of painting that appears to be traditional but is nonetheless like a collage.

¹⁹ Ebbestad Hansen 1999, 9.



Jarmo Mäkilä: The Boy Who Wanted to Have Wings, 2019, oil on canvas, owned by the artist. Photo: Jouko Vatanen.

Eclecticism is a style that has been difficult for modernism. Unity of style has been an important concept in modernism and therefore the multidimensionality of modernism has not always emerged. An example could well be how the contemporaneous figurative work of artists best known for their abstract paintings has remained unnoticed.²⁰ In connection with modernism, the combination of genres, such as the tragicomic or unresolved contradiction, has become a favourite of many artists, as noted by Susan Sontag.²¹ In these situations, artworks contain elements that grate against each other in ways that do not follow the classic idea of something whole and sublime. Instead, the experience is more complex and polyphonic.

Although the art of Jarmo Mäkilä has undergone many changes from the early 1970s to the present day, a few of its main tendencies or features appear to display kinship with some ideas launched by the symbolists. The first of these features could be called striking a balance between the general and the personal, in which a dialogue between, for example, art history, press imagery, comic strips and the artist's own form of expression becomes a central artistic strategy. Mäkilä has recurrently made installations in which his own childhood home has a presence as a photograph and a scale model. He is not the only artist of the present exhibition who has done so. Akseli Gallen-Kallela, for example, shaped his personal history down to his own name.

Another aspect of Mäkilä's oeuvre is the strange world of childhood, which he has addressed in his paintings of boys since the end of the first decade of the 21st century, as pointed out by art historian Altti Kuusamo in his study on Mäkilä.²² The artist creates imagery related to his own childhood, in which the past seems to open up in a mythical and melancholy way that avoids the sentimental aspects of reminiscing and highlights the universality of childhood. In this respect, his approach resembles the interest of the *Nordic Noir* artists of the symbolist generation in the mysteries of childhood.²³

There is often more freedom in the choice of style with regard to the world of childhood and its matters. In the Soviet Union, for example, an avant-garde fantasist like Daniil Harms (1905–1942) could publish his absurd texts in children's literature when he was already barred from the field of literature for adults.²⁴ The relationship of the visual arts and music can also be imagined to represent a certain idea of total freedom, because their connection is not obvious even though present-day sound art or the 19th-century idea of a total work of art in the form of opera have provided concrete examples. Music was also a background to the mystical rites performed in the 19th-century salons of Paris and, as noted by Tobias Churton, the music of Claude Debussy or Eric Satie should be called symbolist rather than impressionist.²⁵

20 Potts 2013, *passim*.

21 Sontag 2002, 61.

22 Kuusamo 2017, 30.

23 Stewen 2004, 110–111.

24 Tumanov 1993, *passim*.

25 Churton 2016, 322–326.

In Mäkilä's works, music is included in a seemingly unnoticeable ways and only when the viewer hears of how the Finnish musician Ville Valo (born 1976) sat as a model for the artist will he or she begin to perceive certain features lying beneath the surface in the artist's latest imagery. Tattoos have to a considerable degree become everyday phenomena in recent years and pictures on the skin no longer point automatically to time spent in prison or at sea. Nonetheless, skin with illustrations has considerable symbolic value. Signs on the skin can be a kind of journal or a project for a work of art in which the person concerned has been involved in creating his own story. In Mäkilä's case, different realities are mixed to create new worlds that have connections with existing reality but are nonetheless primarily works of art. This has more to do with Mäkilä's creative fantasy that resembles, for example, August Strindberg's (1849 –1912) dramatised 'autobiographical' works, which could be called autofiction in present-day terms.²⁶

The experiences of individuality, and solitude, that can be understood as the dilemma of the artist aiming at original and personal expression are the undercurrent of the works in *Nordic Noir*. This is a modern variant of the historical notion of the relationship between melancholy and creativity. Central to this is the idea that pessimism is the price of creativity. In other words, pessimism always underlies creativeness, like a background mood. Researcher Amelia Ishmael writes that the musical and visual development of Black Metal was a contemporary orientation. According to her, Black Metal was a kind of factor that created a background mood (*Stimmung*).²⁷ This is like a modern variation of the Vinteuil sonata of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, which lays the background for the main character's love throughout the whole work. I would claim that a dark and melancholy, and northern, dimension is in the background of *Nordic Noir* to a greater or lesser degree.

26 Johansson 2010, passim.

27 Ishmael 2014, 122.

Concluding remarks

– A suggestion for an artistic manifesto

Could the mixing of different worlds be a way based on personal fantasy and experience to create works that do not try to follow their own times but instead form a period and reality of their own? In that case, an artistic manifesto for the artists of *Nordic Noir* could be summed up as something like the following: 'Create your own period and your own art! Let all ideas live and thrive. Nothing is forbidden or too strange to be the subject of a work of art. Follow your chosen path wherever it leads. If you wish to change your way or style of painting, do so, but if not, don't'. This suggestion is something that I feel is shared by these highly different artists. It may be a romantically individualistic idea, but radical in the way that it breaks the bounds of Nordic communality following the famous Law of Jante.*

*Formulated by the Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose (1899–1965), the Law of Jante or Jante Law (Janteloven) is an ironically worded Nordic code of conduct condemning non-conformism, unordinary behaviour and excess individual ambition.

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NORDIC NOIR

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