

## Painting Pain as Antecedent to Dystopian World

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| Abstract ;(not more than 10 Lines)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Article info                                                                                                                                                                  |
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| <p>This paper explores the role of artists in conveying the aura of their epoch. The initial theme of the portraits responds vividly to the scientific and philosophical experimentations including Freudian psychoanalysis and Jungian analytical psychology. This paper discusses the paintings of some artists who belong to different time periods. Each in their attitude and manner but the subject remains the focal point. One of the findings of this research demonstrates that artists created brio pieces studded with loss, nostalgia, pain, and the uncanny to provoke a response.</p> | <p>Received<br/>03 March 2024<br/>Accepted<br/>11 March 2024</p>                                                                                                              |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <p><b><u>Keyword:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ art</li><li>✓ paintings</li><li>✓ psycho-analysis</li><li>✓ Modernism</li><li>✓ Postmodernism</li></ul> |

### 1. Introduction

Art is a contemplated expression; gentle, yet assertive. It can be a response under the guise of aesthetics, a salutary reminder of the current, a mitigation to some rigor in life, and many a time; it is a thought-provoking piece for the moral and intellectual sense. In other terms, art speaks on behalf of maimed souls and fatigued minds. In the twentieth century, the roaring decades of chaos and alienation were echoed artistically in the easels of artists who executed the complexity of life by developing various techniques, shapes, and forms.

Movements like Goya's Romanticism, Constable's Naturalism, and Monet's Impressionism were jolted by Modern Art. The arrival of a new century brought about different visions the majority of which charted the roads to waste lands and attempted to convey the feelings of fragmented personae. The preliminary indications of pessimism are rooted back to the late nineteenth century with post-

impressionist and Neo-impressionist artists. Henri Rousseau (1844–1910), Paul Signac (1848–1903), Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), Georges Seurat (1859–1891), Edvard Munch (1863–1944), and Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) gave birth to different techniques such as Pointillism, Divisionism, and Color Theory which reflected the scientific evolution of the epoch, and the shift from tradition.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, artists manifested movements like Expressionism and Symbolism, Fauvism, and Cubism in an attempt to fathom the complexity of life that was mainly due to wars, technological development, and the new ideologies that went astray.

## **2. *Delusive Epoch***

The history of art records various portraits of artists as young men. the presentation of the self, however, interprets the psychology of these artists including their temper, mood, feelings, and attitudes. the opposing philosophies decimated the world by the beginning of the twentieth century. The duty of art is to resurrect whatever is hidden or dead, and to decipher ambiguities or appreciate certainties, respectively.

Artists in late-nineteenth century onwards were more keen to deal with the mental process and how it effects human experience. Movements and techniques may vary, but the gist of the work conveyed the same contemporary society turning to dystopia. In the twentieth century, however, artists turned away from the cycle of tradition and religion to experiment new modes of truth, and re-evaluate deep-rooted beliefs. Expressionism is one of the instruments that echoed different emotions, with close attention to the individual. The movement was initiated by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch. Other styles appeared successively including Fauvism, Dadaism, and Surrealism as part of the experssionist response. Sadness, pain, fear, and anxiety were the most prevailing emotions which become the omnipresent theme in art.

Freud's investigation of the unconsciousness and Jung's emphasis on the individual experience influenced painters to echo the psyche with some brio. The figurative painting of the Belgian artist René Magritte (1898–1967) *Le Double Secret* (1927)(Fig.1) is part of the cultural movement of Surrealism during “les anneesfolles”; the period of interwar. The portrait is thought-provoking as it pictures a human face detached partly allowing the viewer to linger on the bisected parts which reflects the uncanny and defeats traditional assumptions. Genevieve Richardson argues that “the double here becomes a mode to challenge existing assumptions regarding perceptions of reality. As the subject's face remains hidden, Magritte here equally alludes to the inaccessibility of the unconscious self.” (2022).



Fig. 1 René Magritte , *The Double Secret* (1927), Oil on canvass, 114 x 162 cm, France, Paris, Centre Pompidou - Musée national d'art moderne © ADAGP, Paris 2018

Notwithstanding, some artists focused more on the theme of memory, loss, and solitude as did Salvador Dali (1904-1989) in different canvas. *The persistence of Memory* (1931)(Fig.2) is the century's chef-d'oeuvre in which Dali reflected the flow of time with melting clocks in a deserted area of Port Lligat; symbolizing various topics on the top of which lies the subconscious. in the terms of Paul Moorehouse, the work “fuses the banal and the fantastic, the symbolic and the irrational, inviting yet resisting explanation.” (49).

Some critics suggest that Dali reflected Einstein's Theory of Relativity as the picture likely calls attention to the relativity of time but Dali refuted the idea. Others argued that it alludes to his traumatic birth which “refers to Dali's professed memories of intrauterine life and suggests the trauma of birth. A watch sagging across the foetus and another hanging from a plinth evoke the feelings of timelessness associated with the experience of pre-birth” whereas the title “ refers to prenatal memories and its subject is ‘the horrible traumatism of birth by which we are expunged from paradise’”(Moorehouse 49). Dali relies on symbolism to create a quasi-self-portrait. The object on the left part of the picture appears to be a bizarre reference to Dali with a long eyelash in a foetus laid down in the middle of nowhere. The portrait persists indeed in the memory but redolent of solitude and mystery.



Fig. 2 Salvador Dali, La persistencia de la memoria (1931), Oil canvass, 24.1 x 33 cm, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York City, NY, US.

## 2.1 Mirroring the Self

Samuel Butler in *The Way of all Flesh* (1903) declared that “Every man’s work, whether it be literature, or music, or pictures, or architecture, or anything else, is always a portrait of himself, and the more he tries to conceal himself the more clearly will his character appear in spite of him” (Chapter 14). In fact, the motivation beyond self-portraits varies from a painter to another. Those who prefer to portray themselves are the “solitary souls, prone to introspection, who have really grappled with their existence. And they know such introspection, though painful, is secretly exhilarating”(Kim 07). Frida Kahlo, for instance, asserts that “I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best.” (qtd. in Paul 92), but to James Abbott McNeill Whistler “[i]t takes a long time for a man to look like his portrait.” (qtd. in Paul 21).



Fig. 3 Edvard Munch, Self-Portrait with Cigarette (1895), Oil canvas, 110.5 cm × 85.5 cm, National Gallery, Oslo

Fig.3 is the *Self-Portrait with Cigarette* (1895) by the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch. He is among the renowned figures whose mental degeneration licensed his dissociation and alienation that were embedded in his art. Like “A genie from a bottle”, described by Sue Prideaux, the Norwegian artist painted himself in an oil canvas in the middle of a room. Uncommonly, though, Munch is holding a lit cigarette staring fixedly as if a torch is set alight on him from the bottom of darkness which “clearly delineates the bohemian excesses of this period. The smoke from his cigarette drifts up past a pale, staring face which looms at us out of the shadows” (Ingles, 152). The cigarette is considered “a nexus for marginal social identities in the 1890s” or a mark of disintegration through which rebellion against social norms is exposed. In fact, his hallucination and disorder have grown more acute, but the more his despair intensified, the more violent his art became.

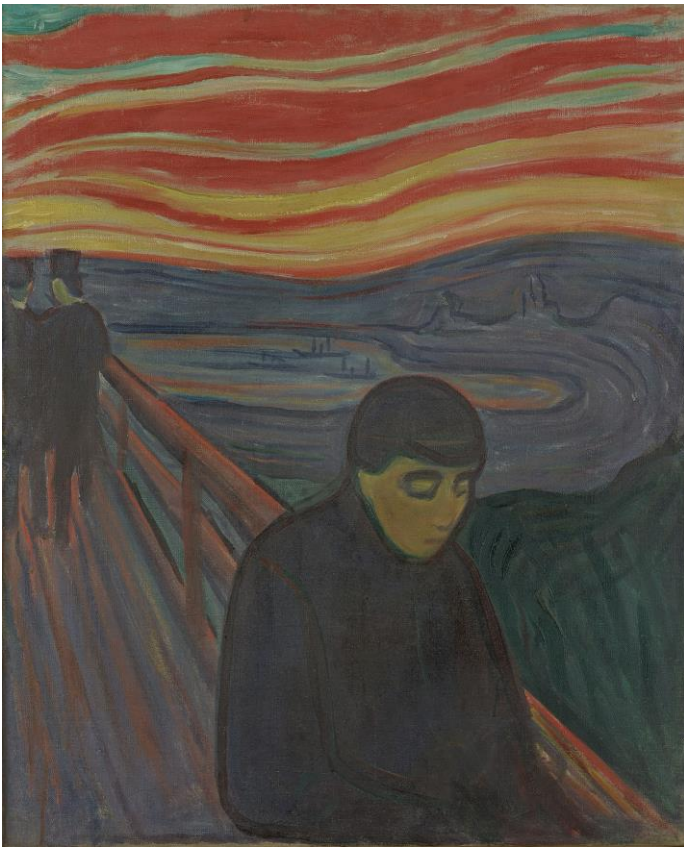


Fig. 1 Ed. Munch, *Despair* (1893), Oil canvas, 51cm x 71cm, Munch Museum, Oslo.

In 1894, one year before the *Self-Portrait with Cigarette*, Munch exhibited his BPD (Borderline Personality Disorder) in the portrait of *Despair* (1893); another witness of Munch’s suffering and deterioration. According to Rob Boddice, *Despair* is a “response to pain ... a form of expression... a way of getting things out”(07), noting that the painting followed the death of his father, poverty, and the threat of tuberculosis. ‘My first scream’ as Munch called later is set at the bay of Kristiania (Oslo today), the figure portrays the melancholy of a sky turning bloodily red and a man walking in solitude. Shelley Wood Cor regards that Munch “allowed blood to course through the veins of his landscape, thus applying the physiological process of circulation to much the same effect in this [*Despair*] work” (30). In Munch’s ‘Violet Diary’,

he claimed that the portrait describes one of his experiences in Oslo, the city in which he suffered the most when he was walking with two of his friends before the anxiety of the bloody sky caught him. As he stopped at the fence alone, his friends carried walking without noticing his absence. his feeling was like an “infinite scream through nature”, then the portrait became known as “Sick mood at Sunset” ( Team Artsapien, 2022).

In fact, the portrait is an expression of bipolar disorder. The abrupt condition of the Mixed States in Munch’s mood and activity includes “depressive or anxious mania (marked by anxious despair, overactivity, and flight of ideas); excited or agitated depression (marked by anxious depression, overactivity, and inhibition of thought); and depression with flight of ideas (marked by depression, motor retardation, and flight of ideas)” (Laj 14).

Munch's use of symbolism to utter various emotions and states of mind offered a different and new reading in art. Giulia Bartram, in this vein, argues "Symbolism in art was really redolent at the time, so people were used to reading something else, something other into the work" (qtd. In Luke, 2019). *Despair* was the precursor of *The Scream*, and probably Munch anticipated the terror of the coming century. The Cave Man's Century (Claeys, 2017). The magnum opus of Munch is *The Scream* (1893), *Skrik* in Norwegian. First exhibited under the German title *Der Schrei der Natur*, meaning 'scream in nature', *The Scream* gives a direct impression of anxiety, terror, and a coming of the apocalypse. Sue Prideaux argues that "it has come to be seen as a painting of the dilemma of modern man" (151) and to Strindberg, it is "a scream of fear just as nature, turning red from wrath, prepares to speak before the storm and thunder, to

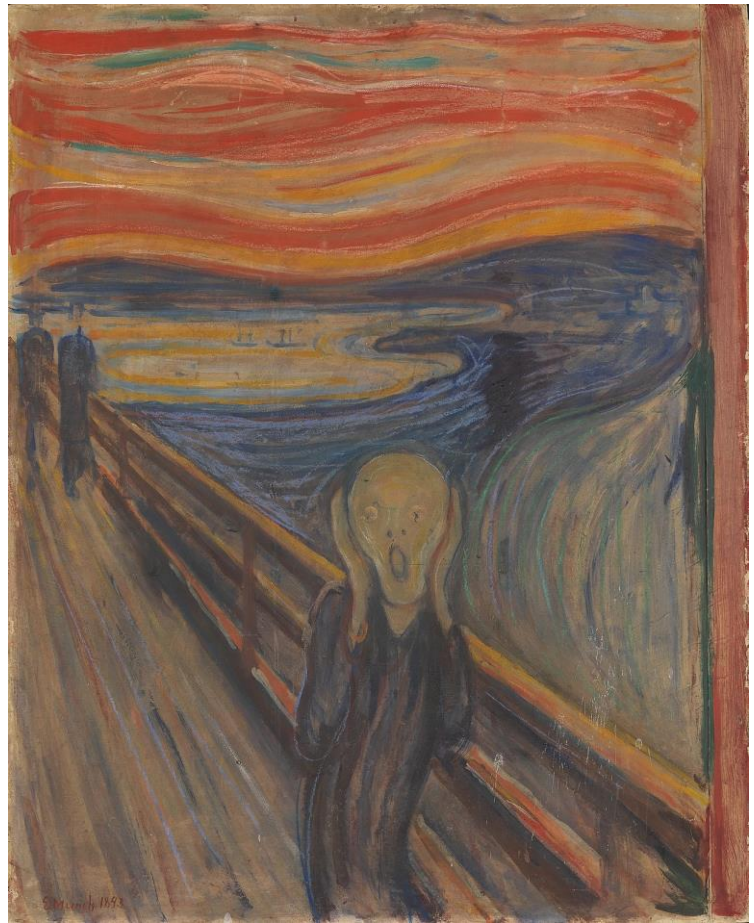


Fig. 5 E. Munch, *The Scream* (1893), Oil, tempera, pastel and crayon on cardboard, 91 cm × 73.5 cm, National Museum and Munch Museum, Oslo.

be bewildered little creatures who, without resembling them in the least, imagine themselves to be gods" (qtd. In Prideaux 151). The painting shows Munch in the same setting with the same people as in *Despair*. However, Munch's delusion is brutally exhibited with the unusual orange sunset like an eruption of a volcano and a man with a mummy face screaming. In this regard, Munch put "[f]or several years I was almost mad- that was the time when the terror of insanity reared up its twisted head. You know my picture, *The Scream*?- I was being stretched to the limits- nature was screaming my blood- I was at breaking point... You know my pictures, you know it all- and know I felt it all. After that I gave up hope ever of being able to love again" (qtd. In Prideaux 152). Eggum also added a crucial note by Munch, written on the upper red area of the painting that reads "Can only have been painted by a madman" (39)

Munch proclaimed the major influence behind *The Scream* as follows: "walked one evening on a road -on the one side was the town and the fjord below me. I was tired and ill -I stood looking out across the fjord -the sun was setting the clouds were colored red -like blood I felt as though a scream went through nature -I thought I heard a scream. -I painted this picture -painted the clouds like real blood. The colors were screaming-" (qtd. In Eggum 39)

Christian Skredsvig, Munch's friend who accompanied him on his travel to Nice described Munch in his memoir and put a comment on *Despair* and *The Scream*: "For a long time, he [Munch] wanted to paint a sunset he remembered. Red like blood. No, it was clotted blood. But no one would experience it like he did. Everyone would think about clouds. This had made him sad and filled him with fear. Sad because the painter's humble means were never sufficient. "He is yearning for the impossible, and despair is his religion," I thought, but I advised him to paint it.—And he painted his remarkable "The Scream"" (Nergaard 122). Overall, from the *Self-Portrait with Cigarette* to *Despair* and *The Scream*, Munch's deterioration is gradually visible; estimating, meanwhile, a dark vision of a century deluged with atrocity.

## 2.2 Down the Abyss

In 1903, Munch who was accused of insanity and madness, adopted a dystopian vision of darkness and pessimism to portray the self. *Self-Portrait in Hell* is one of the most assertive portraits of the chaotic (hellish) life of Munch.

Besides the artistic techniques and playfulness that modernized the canvas, the painting is an interpretation of his destabilized psyche. Paul James in *Painting Self-Portraits* (2015) argues that Munch is standing in the middle of hell, naked, still, and alone. The picture "displays the aftershock and scars of Munch's tormented and failed relationship to his lover, Julia Larsen" (70)

Munch, from darkness in the *Self-Portrait with Cigarette* to *Self-Portrait in Hell*, charts the extreme degradation to the abyss. Munch's surroundings had become hellish, "the flames of hell licking his body and purifying it with their flowing fire." (Collins 325). John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667) asserted that "the mind is its own place, and can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" (254). Munch experienced internal suffering. The background of the portrait is black, red, yellow, and orange to reflect the flames, while a remarkable red mark surrounds his neck as if he had been long tethered.

In this vein, Munch combined Symbolism and Expressionism with new artistic techniques to produce intense emotions and a tart interpretation of the image. The painting may reflect the situation of

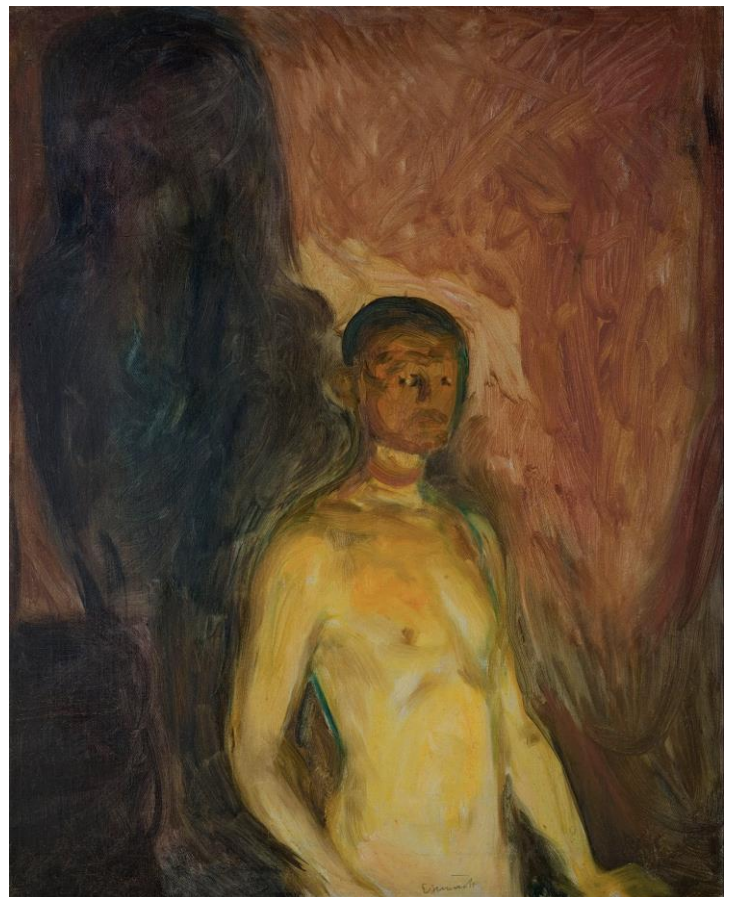


Fig. 6 Ed. Munch, *Self-Portrait in Hell* (1903), Oil canvas, 62 × 66 cm, Munch Museum, Oslo.

individuality in the twentieth century. In different terms, there is no adequate metaphor that fits the rise of infernal states in contemporary societies, which delivered too much fear and pain, than Hell. Munch, like writers of dystopia, imagined such a place to position his state of mind.

Hell had become a vivid art in the twentieth century. Artists moved away from oil canvases to try new ways to modernize art. Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972), the Dutch artist whose talent lurked with scientific passion produced the best version of the inferno in visual art. Escher's vision was different, yet it could not escape the impact of the era of war and technology. One of his best pieces of woodcut is *Hell and Heaven* (1960).

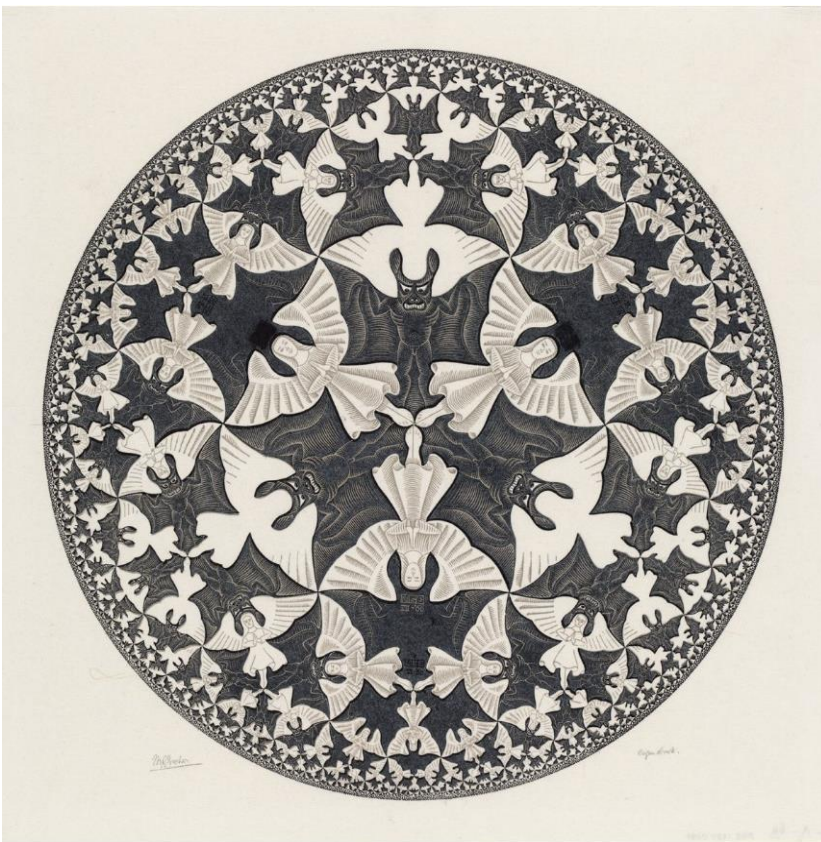


Fig.7 M.C. Escher. Circle Limit IV (Heaven and Hell), woodcut in ochre and black, printed from two blocks, July 1960

Ambiguity and surrealism are the theme of the portrait which is woodcut in ochre and black, giving an optical allusion to the ambiguous figures on the print (fig.7). Marianne L. Teuber argues that “In Escher's art there is the ambiguity of figure and ground; the ambiguity of two and three dimensions on the Hat surface; the ambiguity of the reversible cube; the ambiguous limits of the infinitely small and the infinitely large.” (90). In fact, Escher was also concerned with the spirit of the epoch. Art had become an agent through which the tantrum of the twentieth century is visually perceived. *Heaven and Hell* is

another optical allusion of two intertwined motifs: angels and demons. However, we cannot recognize one without the other because one

determines the meaning of the other.

Escher intentionally used the technique of opposition and dichotomy to visualize pessimism and optimism, good and evil, compassion and hostility in a *Circle Limit IV* which is “a hyperbolic tessellation”. Critics debated about the religious vision of mathematical artists. The “*Fall of Man*” (1920), “*Tower of Babel*” (1928), or “*The Drowned Cathedral*” (1929) are no more than a work of art. Escher found it important to portray the things that are beyond our understanding; the emptiness

that we cannot avoid. In a turbulent time, Escher asserts: “Since the time when man came to lie, sit, and stand on this earth of ours, to creep and walk on it, to sail, ride, and fly over it (and now fly away from it), we have clung to illusions—to a hereafter, a purgatory, a heaven and a hell, a rebirth or a nirvana, all existing eternally in time and endlessly in space.” (15) and thus, a work like *Heaven and Hell* appeared.

Postmodern art reverberated Dadaism and Surrealism but moved even farther from the utopian visions to overtly celebrate the establishment of dystopia. Portraits which are already “a complex semiotic structure” based on signs, symbols, and icons (Steiner 173) have become more intricate, especially with the interference of technology. photographs, silkscreen ink, and acrylic replaced oil canvas. In 1962, Andy Warhol (1928-1987) used the picture of Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) from the film *Niagara* (1953) in a piece of screensilk named *Marilyn Diptych* (1962) which performs postmodern art.



Fig.8 Marilyn Diptych, 1962. Acrylic paint, silkscreen ink, graphite on linen (1928-1987) Tate London. SFMOMA

The move from self-portraiture to picture familiar figures and icons of the dominant culture of the time is the focus of postmodernism. Warhol started the series of Monroe's paintings after her death. the actress was the symbol of American pop culture. However, the aim of repetition is not merely redundancy and banality but to emphasize the essence of the picture. Warhol regards that “repetition adds up to reputation” (qtd in Steiner 174), adding more admiration, respectively. In Fig.8 the photo

of Monroe is represented fifty times which is a potent technique by Warhol to extricate its verisimilitude as observes Stein “[b]y repeating these images in single works and in series and variations, Warhol forced the brilliance of her self-presentation and the banality of her public formula into a head-on confrontation” (174).

Be it as it may, Postmodern art delivered more ‘photographic’ than ‘psychological information’ (Steiner 175) to lampoon at the same time mass production by crafting a consumed image into art.

### **3. Conclusion**

Art manifests its ability to provoke thoughts and emotions behind the solemn and the mockery. The mentioned works of Munch, Magritte, Dali, Escher, and Warhol demonstrated tartly the observant life of modernism and its aftermath. Their works were labeled intentionally to reflect a unique period that marred individuality which galvanized public awareness later in the century. Munch who was influenced by the gothic works of Edgar Allan Poe, exerted himself to evoke his delusions and malaise, and to chart his own position in the world. Nevertheless, his self-portraits bear deep layers of meaning, an epitome of Expressionism, and an affirmation of human soul. Magritte and Dali used Surrealism to bid farewell to Romanticism. The playfulness of their art is instilled with symbols and signs to provide a concealed version of ‘les anneesfolles’. Whereas the center of experimentalism is heaped by the works of Escher and Warhol which were more about the ambiguity, sometimes banality in Warhol’s case, of their turbulent time. This research aimed at revealing the power of art in anticipating the challenges of contemporary society that was slithering away into dystopia.

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